



The Orc's Unexpected Wife (Bloodfire Orcs #2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: They call him The Keeper, so why isn't my mysterious new captor more interested in keeping me?

My father always told me I was too impetuous, but when I see a chance to escape my horrible life—being forced to work on my back for the tavern-keeper who owns my brother's debt—I take it. And some valuables on the way out. Is it any wonder I'm chased into the snowstorm...and right into the single arm of a seven-foot-tall, wounded and grumpy recluse?

The Keeper might be terrifying, but he saves my hotheaded arse from certain death, then takes me back to his cozy little cottage. I can tell he wants naught to do with me, but the fierce blizzard means he's stuck with me...and a single bed.

Determined to be useful, I'm hopeful I can wear him down. After all, I have plenty of experience with males and their pleasure. But when I learn what it is I've actually stolen, I become determined to set things right. Will he help me, or has he had enough of my chatter?

Total Pages (Source): 18

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:20 am

CHAPTER ONE

Verna

It wasn't currently snowing, so I couldn't blame the weather for what I was seeing. And the full moon was bright above, meaning the strangeness couldn't be explained by darkness and shadows.

The horses' hoofprints, which I had been following for the last two hours, crossed the valley and ended abruptly at the edge of the stone circle. I nudged my own animal closer, squinting in amazement.

The prints stopped. Disappeared. 'Twas as if the animals had been just...scooped up.

And inside the stone circle...

I blew out a breath which frosted the air before me and pulled the hood of my red cloak closer around my face.

I wasn't mistaken.

Inside the stone circle, which should just be more of the same unending snow-covered ground, I saw mist. A silvery gray mist that sparkled in the moonlight like some kind of magic.

Magic it may be, but you cannot deny poor Isadora and her new owner went into it.

And didn't come out.

Taking a deep breath, I glanced over my shoulder. If Alred already sought me he wouldn't be far behind. If the mist could hide a huge orc, a wee lass, and two horses, then it could hide me.

Remembering my father's long-ago lessons, I nudged my animal toward one of the small burns which tumbled down to the valley floor. My climb out of the saddle wasn't graceful, but my knees and toes were damn near frozen in the midwinter cold. I clutched the stirrup to remain upright, then nudged the horse to turn north. Away from the valley and the stone circle.

Then, carefully, I picked my way across the barren rocks, being certain not to leave footprints.

"Go on," I said as firmly as I could, smacking the horse's flank. "Go!"

As I'd hoped, the animal took off northerly. Alred would likely follow its tracks and hopefully not notice I'd climbed down here. All I had to do was walk along the burn and the snow wouldn't reveal my passing. I gathered my skirts in my stiff fingers, did my best to step on the rocks and not the ice, and began to pick my way down the valley.

Within minutes, I decided I was an idiot.

Mayhap I should have set the horse free much closer to the stone circle?

I was no longer picking my way along the burn, but stumbling, each rock a boulder to my wayward steps. I was shivering uncontrollably, and my gown was damp from the times I fell.

Just keep going. The mist is ahead.

Aye.

Aye, I could do this.

I would make it to the circle, and the mist, and I would be hidden.

So cold. So cold .

I bit the inside of my lip hard enough to taste blood and focused on that sharp pain as I stumbled forward. The strap of the satchel dug into my shoulder, and I wondered if I might have been better off leaving it.

Alred will not allow you to escape him. You will have to find safety and a protector.

Well, if there was one thing I knew, it was how to give men what they wanted. I would find a male, and he would protect me.

The same way Isadora's new owner had saved her from the men at the tavern.

I forced myself onward, each step agonizing.

Each step bringing me closer to the circle I prayed meant my safety.

Isadora's new master saved her. Mayhap he could save me?

I was almost there when I heard a shout, far behind and above me. I twisted.

My ploy hadn't worked; Alred sat on a horse of his own atop the rise, waving a weapon angrily.

Nay .

Whimpering with fear, I scooped up my heavy skirts and began to run, an ungainly stumbling gait that took me out of the burn's waters and across the valley. Was it my imagination, or was that the sound of Alred's animal's hooves thundering toward me?

The stone circle was only yards away, then feet, then...

Then I threw myself between two of the stones, praying it was the haven I needed, my eyes squeezed tight in dread.

Warmth.

Panting, I stumbled to a stop against one of the stones and slowly opened my eyes.

The mist enveloped me, so much warmer than I expected, seeping into my bones and allowing me to breathe without the icy sharp needles of pain. My fingers uncurled, and my clothing, still wet, no longer seemed quite so miserable.

I was alone. I could see naught but the silvery gray clouds around me.

Except...suddenly I could. The mist began to fade and I pressed my shoulder blades into the stone, praying I was hidden.

I couldn't hear Alred or his horse.

After a long moment, I peeked around the stone. There was the valley, the rise. I could even see the burn. But where was Alred?

Confused, I twisted about, looking for an explanation...then sucked in a gasp when I saw the cottage.

Because that most certainly hadn't been there before.

But aye, there was a byre-cottage, with smoke coming from the chimney, and a big male in a heavy fur cloak just stepping inside.

His skin was green.

Orc .

An orc had bought Isadora at the tavern. Was this the same male? A different one?

I followed the orc to his home.

It made sense. I had tracked the hoofprints to the stones.

My eyes wide with wonder, I studied the landscape around me and now noticed the differences. There were more trees here, but the land around the stones was tended, unlike the dead grass and rocky field I stumbled across to get here. Small snow-draped shrubs, as round as Alred's bald head, lined a pathway to the cottage. The walkway had been swept clear of snow and low stone walls created a paddock on the byre's side of the small house.

Very quaint.

Very different.

Somehow, the mist had moved me to a different...world?

The mist also kept you warm. It is gone now, mayhap you might have noticed ?

Shivering—in cold and confusion—I admitted my subconscious was right. I needed

to get out of this weather, out of these wet clothes. And there was only one shelter in sight.

I picked my way around the tall stones, careful to step only in the footprints of someone much larger than myself who had made several passes around the outside of the stones. Was it the male I'd seen? Was Isadora inside?

Approaching the byre side of the cottage, I risked leaving a track to slip inside. 'Twas warmer here with the animals, their grunts and farts a comforting—if slightly malodorous—cacophony, despite the darkness. The byre-barn, which was connected to the cottage via the long stone wall which housed the hearth, would stay warm enough with all the windows and doors shut.

I tucked myself up against the backside of the hearth, grateful for the weak warmth of the stones, and listened.

The voices of two males, low and rumbling. I heard one rise, as if in teasing, and the other snap something, perhaps not happy with the banter. They obviously knew one another, but who were they? If one was Isadora's new master, I might risk making myself known.

But if these males had no experience with human women, what would they do?

Eat your porridge, wee Verna, or the orcs will eat your liver!

Do not sass me, girl, or I'll leave you out for the orcs to steal!

You should be grateful to me for giving you a bed, slut. Women who wander are scooped up by the orcs to be raped and eaten!

I'd heard it for years.

Now, though? Now I was trapped in their world. I pressed the back of my hand to my lips to smother my whimper, suddenly realizing what the lack of mist in the circle had meant. I'd been transported here, and without the mist, there was no way to return.

Buck up. It also means there is no way for Alred to get to you.

I had no idea how often the mist appeared and linked our worlds. Surely not often, or I would have heard about it. But perhaps I would be unlucky, and 'twas something that happened each night. Which meant Alred would follow me by tomorrow.

By the time he does, you must find yourself a protector, as Isadora did.

Aye.

Aye, I could do that. But...one of the males on the other side of the wall?

Better to watch and wait .

Once I knew who to approach, I would.

Glad to have a plan, and one that didn't involve me revealing myself too early, I hurried to the back of the cow byre and shuffled the piles of hay out of the way. Pressing my shoulders against the cold wood of the outer wall, I pulled the hay over me, hoping no one would shove a pitchfork into the pile while I was in it.

You should likely hope that the cow does not get too hungry as well .

Aye, that too.

I wasn't exactly warm, but the hay both trapped my own body heat in and kept the cold air out. I wrapped my arms around my knees and pressed my forehead to my

forearms, huddling in my damp skirts. Hopefully I would dry out a bit.

I must have fallen asleep, because I jolted awake when a male entered the byre and began to care for the horses. He was muttering angrily beneath his breath, and I was surprised to realize I could understand some of his words.

Risking myself, I tipped my head slightly so I could peek at him.

A cow's arse was in the way, but the male was towering and dark haired and green-skinned. An orc, definitely. I wished I could see more details, but suddenly I was quite glad to be hidden.

I'm not sure how long he worked, but my eyes grew heavy again. I figured I would remain still if I slept, so I allowed myself to drift off.

When I awoke the second time, my skirts felt dry but my legs and feet tingled from the cold and inactivity.

Two males were in the stable, readying a horse. I couldn't risk a peek, so I strained to hear their conversation.

"If ye leave now, ye'll make it to Bloodfire Village afore the snow." This voice was a mere murmur.

"Aye," the other male grunted. "They'll welcome her there."

A pause, and the sound of a harness creaking. Then the first male said, "Torvolk, I would no' ask yer Mate to stay here with?—"

"She's no' my— Fook ." This last part was growled. "I'll leave her in the village with the other women."

“She’ll be happy there.” A pause. “And I wouldnae want her here anyhow.”

The other voice drawled, “Dinnae fash, Keeper. Nae female would want to live alone with a grumpy auld bastard like ye.”

There was the sound of flesh meeting flesh, and the second male grunted what might have been a laugh.

“I’m no’ grumpy, I just...like my solitude.”

“And defend it staunchly. Yer cold, lonely existence and yer arcane and mystical hobbies.”

“Says the man who doesnae read,” the Keeper scoffed. “’Tis no’ some mystical arcane undertaking, merely?—”

“Terrifying, I tell ye.”

“Oh for fook’s sake,” the first man muttered. “I would be angry, except ye’re right. But I wish ye the best of luck, my friend. Both with yer mission, and with yer new female. Now get the fook out of my space and leave me be.”

As I wondered what his cryptic remarks meant, they stepped out of the byre. I heard the door close, then cautiously straightened, pushing the insulating hay away from myself and working the stiffness and prickles from my limbs.

What to do?

The conversation I’d just overheard told me that one of the males lived in this cottage, while the other was the one who had bought Isadora. The one who lived here was unknown, but he himself admitted to being a recluse with strange, possibly

dangerous habits.

But the other one—Torvolk—had Isadora, and they were going to a village. The lass had seemed like someone who needed a friend...and more importantly, if I was going to be stuck in a strange world, I'd like to do it with another woman. We could watch out for one another.

My mind was made up.

I would follow Isadora and her new master to this village and hope I could find some work and protection there.

My father's long-ago lessons served me well as I slipped from the byre. My red cloak wasn't exactly camouflage in this land of ice and snow, but I made certain the male called Keeper couldn't see me before following the horse tracks which headed east.

The sun was rising, and after last night's adventure, I was glad for the light...and the meager warmth. The snow was deep and although I did my best to keep to the horse's tracks, I still struggled.

As the morning lengthened, the sun disappeared. Clouds, heavy with snow, rolled in from the west, chasing me. I picked up my pace, my thighs and calves burning from the exertion of laboring through the deep drifts. Although the air was frigid and I pulled my cloak tightly around my shoulders and neck, I felt sweat beading at the small of my back.

My breathing was becoming labored, and I realized I was spending too much time with my head twisted backward, watching the clouds instead of paying attention to the horse's tracks.

Mayhap this was a foolish idea.

Mayhap?

It definitely had been a foolish idea.

You left the safety of the byre-cottage to chase after a trotting horse. There is no way you could catch up with it.

I saw that now.

Idiot .

My arms ached from holding the cloak around myself. My stomach cramped in hunger since I had not eaten since last night's supper. Each breath I sucked in stung my lungs, and the edges of my vision were starting to go black.

As I reached the dubious shelter of a copse of fir, I stumbled to a stop.

The snow was starting again and I'd lost the horse's tracks.

I tipped my head back, wincing as the first fat snowflake landed on my cheek.

I was not a quitter.

If I had been, I would have died long ago.

But now?

I wasn't sure if the moisture on my cheek was from the melting flakes or my tears. Pain, hunger, exhaustion.

You should have stayed in the cottage.

I made my decision based on which male I thought would protect me, and I knew naught of the Keeper, other than the forbidding habits his friend mentioned and his own admission that his home wasn't fit for a female. I thought I'd made the right decision in leaving, but now...

Now, there was a very real chance I was going to die.

Those were definitely tears.

Shuddering, I adjusted the cloak and tried to remember the woodlore my father had taught me all those years ago. The firs . There would be shelter under them where the snow was not so deep.

I stumbled toward the trees, and aye...if I could avoid the lower branches, I could dig myself into the hollow lined with fir needles and mayhap avoid the worst of the storm.

As I curled into a ball, my cloak shielding my face from the flakes, I did my best to ignore the cramping of my stomach and the way I couldn't feel my feet.

All I had to do was survive the storm.

Forcing my breathing to even out, I tried to convince myself this was possible. A few hours. Then you can continue your journey .

Except...

A few hours of snow meant the horse's tracks would be obliterated. I would have no way of knowing where I was, or how to get somewhere safe. I would freeze to death before I would starve, and then animals would eat my carcass.

Better to be eaten by wolves than raped and eaten by orcs, aye ?

But the males I'd heard hadn't sounded so horrifying. Isadora hadn't been crying. I might have been able to tempt one into keeping me as a pet, or proving my worth the way I had to the men in the tavern.

Now you will not have the opportunity.

Nay, I wouldn't.

I was going to die here.

It wasn't until I sniffed that I realized I was truly crying.

I wasn't a quitter, and I wasn't weak, but now? Now I had no other choice.

'Twas likely this helpless mindset that caused me to scream when I felt something grab the back of my cloak and rip it away from me. I wasn't strong enough to fight, but I did my best to clutch my satchel and flop over on my back to meet my attacker head-on.

But when I saw him, I screamed again.

He was huge .

Huge and green, scowling down at me, the snow already pooling on the heavy cloak he wore. He dropped his hold on me to grip the hilt of his sword.

Oh God, he is going to strike!

I tried to scuttle backward, but my limbs wouldn't obey me. My body had betrayed

me. My vision was going black. I couldn't breathe, and every part of me felt as if it had turned to ice.

I wasn't a quitter, and I'd never begged before in my life.

But I'd never before seen someone as terrifying as this male.

"Please," I whimpered.

His scowl only deepened as he growled, "Why did ye run, foolish female?"

And then everything went dark.

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CHAPTER TWO

Jorak

Well, fook me with a rusty hammer. What was I supposed to do with an unconscious female in the middle of a blizzard?

Leave her. Serves her right for running out into the middle of said blizzard .

Sighing, I scrubbed my hand over my face and tipped my head back to glare up at the sky. I couldn't leave the human here to die, no matter how much easier it might be.

Shite .

I stomped back through the snow to fetch my horse. I'd left him at the edge of the copse of trees because I thought it would be difficult to wedge the gelding's mass through the branches...and I was right. So, I was breathing hard and well past cursing by the time I stood over the female again.

Squatting down, I nudged her on what I thought might be a safe part of her anatomy.

"Lass."

It didn't work, so I nudged her harder, pushing against her shoulder—I thought that was her shoulder—with two fingers.

"Lass , wake up."

Her face—too pale—didn't twitch, and I scowled. Why in all the hells did she think it was a good idea to hie out after Torvolk's horse? By the time I found her tracks, I'd almost considered leaving her to him to deal with since I had work to do around the stones.

But on my third pass around the circle, looking for abnormalities, I realized that if she was following the Ranger on foot, and he didn't realize it—as the tracks indicated—she'd never catch up. And the clouds were full of snow.

Which is why I'd saddled the gelding and followed.

Just in time too. The lass looked half-dead already, afore she fainted from fright.

I didn't think I was that ugly.

With a sigh, I lowered my shoulder to reach my arm under her and pick her—and that outrageously bright cloak—out of the snow.

“Lass,” I said again, but to no avail.

She was going to be useless during her own rescue, wasn't she? Have to do everything myself.

With a grunt, I straightened, pulling her with me. She didn't weigh much, but then, I wasn't a whole male either. Luckily the horse was well-trained and didn't move as I hoisted her across the saddle, using the stump of my right arm to lift while my left did the maneuvering.

And the lass still didn't move.

She didn't move as I managed to back the gelding out of the fir copse, nor when I

swung up onto his back behind her. I wrapped the reins around my wrist and pressed my palm to her back to hold her in place.

Too cold. Too still.

Scowling, I kicked the horse into as close to a gallop as he could manage in this snow.

By the time we reached the stones and my cottage, I was afraid the lass had died. Well, what had she expected? She'd arrived at the circle on foot, which meant she'd been traveling a long time even afore the foolish move to follow a rider across country.

Telling myself it was her fault didn't dissipate the knot of anger and sorrow in my chest.

Why did it matter? Why did she matter? She wasn't my responsibility—her husband should be here caring for her. She was naught more than a distraction from my carefully balanced life. I didn't need a female in my home, with her distracting red curls and sweet scent?—

Ye're noticing her scent?

Nay! I wasn't!

The gelding obediently stood by his stall while I swung down then reached for the lass. As I pulled her over my shoulder she groaned, and I told myself that wasn't the reason for the spike of relief which eased my chest. I was likely just pleased to be home.

Aye.

So mayhap I stomped into the byre-cottage too loudly, and dropped her on my bed none too gently. Served her right for interrupting my life.

That bright red cloak of hers was dripping snow all over my blankets. Muttering a few choice curses, I bent and managed to get it unclasped, although 'twas difficult getting it off her, with the strap to the satchel she carried bunched around her hip.

I hung the offensive red garment on the peg by the door.

Scowling, I turned my back on the heap of female in my bed and went to tend to the horse. The animal had been the hero of the day and deserved my attention more than she.

But when I returned to the cottage, the lass had curled up on her side. Her eyes were still closed, and her breathing steady, but she was clearly cold. I glanced at the hearth and frowned to see the fire had burnt down. Well, that was an easy fix.

By the time it was roaring again, the lass still hadn't moved. I planted one hand on my hip and nudged the mattress with my knee.

"Lass."

Naught.

Only a few hours ago, Torvolk's Mate-whom-he-refused-to-acknowledge-was-his-Mate had sat on this bed, frightened and hurt. I'd watched the other male care for her and vowed I'd never become so weak. I couldn't afford to.

But seeing this lass in such misery... Blowing out a curse with my breath, I knelt and reached for her feet.

Her boots were wet, which didn't bode well for the toes beneath. And 'twas damnably difficult getting the half-frozen leather off her with only one hand, but I managed.

Her feet were icy.

I rolled her onto her back, reached my hand up her skirt, and made quick work of her stockings, telling myself there was no need to be blushing like a lad on his first midsummer's eve. Once her stockings were off, I shifted to sit on the edge of the mattress and placed her feet against the planes of my stomach.

"Palton's Spear, lass, these things are frigid," I muttered, but her face remained still in sleep.

Sleep? Aye, it looked that way. At some point, her faint—fear of me—had turned to sleep, and she looked as if she could use it.

My own yawn caught me by surprise.

Well, what did ye expect ?

The night of the full moon was always my busiest. I had not slept, instead focusing on readying the stones for the arrival of the veil. Midnight was when the travelers arrived or departed, so I usually had my home ready for them, as much as it irked me to have others in my space.

And then in the hours after midnight and the closing of the veil, I had my usual rounds, ensuring naught else had passed through without my knowing. It was on one of these studies—after dawn, when Torvolk and his female departed—that I found the small set of tracks cleverly hidden atop my own. I followed them to the byre, then out when she chased after Torvolk.

Who was she?

Who did she belong to?

I stared down at her pale face, half-hidden by that riot of curls. Her hair was a red unknown among my people, and made me want to gather it in my hand and tip her head back to...

Easy .

Deep in my chest, my Kteer stirred, and I swallowed, struggling to control it. That part of me—the primal, instinctive part of me—had almost gotten me killed long ago. I didn't need its input now.

I was in control now. Perfectly balanced, perfectly in control. My life had to be that way. Now.

Deeming her feet warm enough, I forced myself to put them aside without admiring the turn of her ankle or curve of her naked calf. Instead, I tucked them under one of the furs on the bed, and hoped by hiding them away, my Kteer would forget there was a female in my space.

The pottage I'd made last night was mostly gone, and the remains were sticking to the bowl in a way that made my nose curl. I should have added more water and vegetables to it to simmer this morning, had I not gone on an errand to save a foolish female.

My stomach growled, so I pulled out my modified cooking implements and began to chop carrots and onions and venison for a soup. A hearty soup would be just what the lass needed to warm herself inside and out— Not that I was thinking of the lass. I was just hungry.

Aye.

She's no' yers to care for.

When it was simmering, I checked on her again. Still sleeping.

This time, I risked pressing the back of my hand to her cheek. Her skin was cold, but not frigid. Mayhap she'd live after all.

I pulled another fur over her and straightened, surprising myself with another yawn.

Luckily, 'twas almost midwinter, which meant darkness would come early tonight. I could sleep all I wanted in a few hours.

I trudged into the byre through the door set near the hearth. The animals' body heat kept the place warm enough, so I shoveled in some more feed for all of them, using the stump of my arm to steady the pitchfork as I worked.

It had been seven years since the battle that cost me my arm, and I'd developed ways to live...well, mayhap not happily, but contented. I knew my own limits and I had everything arranged the way I liked. The way I could manage.

I didn't need anyone else in my living space, bringing chaos. Unfortunately...

The blizzard still raged outside.

I sent a quick prayer to Malla the Beginner that Torvolk and his human had made it to the safety of Bloodfire Village before the snow hit. But that same storm meant that I couldn't leave to follow him.

Assuming the female in my bed lived, I was stuck with her until the snow cleared and

I could deposit her in the village with her kind.

There's naught ye can do about it now. Just keep her alive until then, aye?

I forced myself to breathe deep, to stretch the tension from my neck.

Likely 'twas just the lack of sleep and hunger that was making me so irritable, aye?
I'd better go check on the soup.

'Twas ready, and I checked on the sleeping lass before spooning some into a bowl for myself. I ate it sitting on the stool at my table, watching her. Willing her to open her eyes.

She didn't.

Palton's Spear, if she didn't wake soon, I was going to have to try something drastic, like taking her into my arms again and spoon-feeding her the broth. I scowled at the thought of that sweet-smelling hair brushing against my scars, and beneath my kilt, my cock stirred.

Fook .

I needed a distraction.

Something to get the scent of her off my tongue.

Ye might bathe. Yer sweat stench is overpowering enough to frighten the hardest soul .

Aught to distract my Kteer , which was stirring again at the thought of a female in my bed.

Melted snow made a shite bath, but 'twas not like I could visit the hot springs in the middle of a blizzard. I set the pail beside the fire to warm while I cleaned up from the meal, then I stomped out to the byre to check on the animals once more.

'Twas already mid-afternoon, although with the storm raging outside the shutters, 'twas difficult to tell. I shoved more rags in the cracks of the windows while I waited for my water to boil.

Deciding 'twas ready at long last, I shrugged out of my cloak. The heavy fur not only kept me warm but hid my...hid me from the world. Here in my home, there was no need to hide.

Usually.

I hung the cloak on the peg by the door, smothering her red one. The lass's cloak was gaudy, aye, but...I glanced over at her. It seemed to fit her. Bright to the point of offense, not caring what anyone thought, with that wanton hair and tempting mouth.

Tempting? 'Tis yer Kteer thinking .

Aye, I didn't need any temptation in my carefully ordered life.

Pulling my kilt from my shoulder, I crossed back to the wooden chest and dug out my soap and rag. The water was hot enough to be a comfort rather than a shock, and I couldn't help my groan of satisfaction as I squeezed it from the rag onto my tight shoulder.

Facing the fire, my back to the bed, I washed myself, dragging the soap and rag across my torso, my shoulders, my armpits. I scrubbed the dirt and the sweat from my skin, and as the water dried, I felt the prickles across the back of my neck.

Nay, wait. I froze.

That was not the water.

‘Twas someone’s gaze.

I twisted my head to glare back at the bed, and sure enough...

The lass was awake.

Awake and staring at me with wide eyes the color of spring grass. As I watched, those eyes dropped from mine to the stump of my right arm, and the fear I saw slowly ebbed away...to be replaced by pity.

Fook .

I slammed the rag back into the basin with a snarl. I didn’t need her pity.

I didn’t need her .

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CHAPTER THREE

Verna

I woke slowly, and I think was surprised to find myself waking at all.

The second surprise was that I was warm. Not hot, but the bone-deep, teeth-shaking cold was gone. This wasn't snow that surrounded me. I was someplace...someplace else .

My stomach twisted in hunger, and it was only then that I noticed the smell. There was something delicious being cooked nearby, and I recognized the fur draped over me by the prickle against my legs.

My bare legs.

I'd been saved? But who...?

The orc .

I stiffened.

There'd been cold, and snow, and wind, and pain. So much pain. And then he had been there, threatening me, angry and huge. Had he taken me? Was he the male from the byre-cottage?

He'd said something about me running from him, so he must be. With his arcane

habits and dangerous mien.

I swallowed down my whimper of fear.

You can escape. You did it before.

But...the wind howled outside. I could hear it. Was the snow still falling? If so, 'twas a blizzard and I was lucky to be alive. There was food cooking and I was hungry.

Why was I saved?

What did he want from me?

I took a deep breath. Whatever 'twas that he wanted, I would give it to him. God knew it wasn't something I hadn't already given up. I would stay safe. I would survive. Alred would not win.

Slowly, I opened one eye. Then, when all I could see was the inside of the fur which covered me, I opened the other and took stock with all of my senses. I was in a bed. The orc's bed?

I was no stranger to beds.

Growing up, I'd slept in the same bed as my brothers, until Jer got too handsy...then I slept near the hearth with a stout stick. After I was sold to Alred, I got my own bed—with a hard mattress and a thin blanket—but I had to welcome men into it. Sometimes several in a night.

On those nights, I often slept on the floor to avoid the sour stench of the blankets.

But this? This bed?

‘Twas like naught I’d ever felt before. Large and squishy and comfortable, it swallowed me up. I was lying atop a quilt, and the furs were clearly another layer of warmth. He’d put me on the bed and covered me with furs...

And removed my shoes?

I wiggled my toes, then rotated my ankles. My feet were still cold, but I told myself ‘twas a good thing I could feel the prickles of pain running up my calves. It meant I would not lose any extremities to the black bite of the ice.

You cannot stay under here forever. Not with the scent of food so close.

Slowly—oh so slowly—I crept my fingers along the fur, inching it down until I could see over the top of it. Only my eyes moved, darting about the room.

From where I lay, curled on my side, I could see most of the room. But ‘twas empty. Where was my mysterious captor?

Not here. Take it as a blessed reprieve.

I inhaled deeply, my stomach cramping at the scent of—was that soup, simmering near the fire? This time I didn’t bother hiding my whimper. Could I climb out of the bed and feed myself?

Better to understand the landscape first. My father always said that, and it applied in many cases. Without moving, I spread my gaze around the room.

So this was an orc’s home, was it?

There were no piles of bones, or buckets of blood. It looked quite normal, truth be told: table, bed, trunk, pegs, screen for privacy... There were a few implements I

didn't recognize, which might have been for disemboweling naughty wenches, as my father always claimed...

The truly surprising difference between this cottage and any of the ones I'd seen in my village was the row of cubbyholes behind a large table which had been pushed beneath the window. In the summer, the sunshine would illuminate the desk...and the many scrolls tucked into the cubbies.

Scrolls!

My fingers scrambled at my chest, and I breathed a sigh of relief to feel the strap for the satchel I'd stolen. Would this male accept my scrolls as trade for his protection? Would he expect more? Lord knew I'd given more over the years.

As I was contemplating, I heard a sound at the door near the hearth. This would be the door to the animal byre, where I'd tried to eavesdrop...had it been last night? Had it only been last night I'd followed Isadora through the mist in the middle of the stones and found myself in the orc's world?

When the door opened, I slammed my eyes shut like a coward.

The orc was in the room with me.

I could hear him moving around, occasionally muttering a curse under his breath. Then, quiet. And the sound of...water?

One of my traitorous eyes peeked open.

I didn't scream, but 'twas close.

Instead, I sucked in a loud gasp and resisted the urge to scuttle backward on the

mattress, trying to wedge myself in the corner to escape him .

The male was an orc, aye. He would tower over anyone I'd met, well over seven feet tall, with shaggy dark hair. His eyes were dark pools, his skin the color of oak leaves in the late summer...

His shoulder was to me, and I could see him in profile as he lifted the rag to the back of his neck. His teeth curled from his lower jaw up past his lips. They were tusks, really, made for ripping into flesh, made for pain .

I swallowed.

The hand which held the wet rag had four fingers and a thumb, just like mine...but each was easily twice the size of one of mine, and each ended in a claw. A claw . I shuddered to think what damage he could do with those.

I found myself praying he wouldn't consider me a threat. Wouldn't see the need to rip into me with those horrible tusks and claws.

Look somewhere else, you idiot !

His back seemed like a good choice.

As I watched, he squeezed that rag, and water dribbled onto the taut skin of his shoulder. He rolled his head, stretched the neck muscles, and my gaze followed the rivulet of water that ran down his back.

When he groaned—a faint sound of pleasure—my eyes skipped back up to his face, which was lax in ease, and I watched him bend to soak the rag again.

Orcs did something as innocuous as bathing?

Actually... I watched him scrub sweat and dirt from his skin and wondered if any of the human males I knew bathed this meticulously. None of Alred's patrons did, for certes.

The orc scrubbed and wiped, and I felt myself relaxing as I watched him care for himself. The water dripped off him, making my fingers itch to...what? To touch him?

Do not be ridiculous .

But...his back and shoulders were quite nice. Were he not so terrifying, I wouldn't mind admiring his body for an hour or two. His muscles were defined, his shoulders wide, just as I preferred, and his arms...

The orc turned slightly, and I inhaled sharply.

He only had one arm.

The one holding the bathing rag, and the other...the other ended above his elbow. The stump was scarred, the injury old, and the skin a darker green and puckered.

But somehow, the sight made him slightly less terrifying.

I glanced back up at his face in time to see him staring right at me, a scowl marring his features.

I suppose he didn't appreciate my perusal.

When he snarled and slapped the rag back into the basin, splashing water onto the table, I jumped in both surprise and fear. His lips curled back from those terrifying tusks, and I shrank back into the furs.

“I am sorry,” I blurted, although I wasn’t sure what I was apologizing for.

“Aye, ye should be,” he growled, turning his back to me to clean up from his bathing. “Yer foolish actions nearly resulted in yer death.”

Because I’d looked at him? He would have killed me for that? I dropped my gaze to the quilt beneath me as I struggled to sit upright, my skirts tangling about my legs. My hair stuck to my cheeks and lips.

“I am sorry,” I whispered again, watching from the corner of my eyes as he jerked part of his plaid up and over his shoulder, partially hiding the missing arm. When he turned back to me, I slammed my gaze back to the floor.

His booted feet came closer. I tried to straighten, to meet my doom with pride, but the terror was too much. I hunched over, my arms around my middle, praying he would kill me quickly.

“Can ye get up?”

My throat was closed in fear. I couldn’t respond.

He reached down, his large hand closing around my upper arm. “Are ye well, lass?”

Mute, I nodded frantically, trying not to let my gaze rise above his knees.

He used his hold on my arm to lift me. It was far gentler than I expected, and when I swayed and tripped—my legs trapped in my chemise—he straightened me with a low mutter.

The result was that I stood upright beside the bed, my bare toes curling into the fur on the floor, my chin tucked against my chest.

He released me and planted his fist on his hip.

“What’s yer name?”

“Verna, milord,” I whispered.

He snorted, mayhap at the honorific I’d thrown in there.

“Why will ye no’ look at me, Verna? Ye looked yer fill already?”

My breath caught at the way he said my name, the R and the N rolling together. He... wanted me to look at him?

Slowly, I lifted my eyes, and when I saw the scowl he wore, I winced.

“Aye, I’m ugly,” he growled. “Get used to it.”

I opened my mouth, wanting to tell him he wasn’t ugly. But...he was like no male I’d seen before. He didn’t even look like Torvolk, his friend. This male’s hair was cut choppy around his head—although if he’d had to do it with one hand, that would make sense—and did little to hide his permanent scowl.

Still, he seemed to be waiting for me to say something, even if ‘twas to lie. So I took a deep breath.

“You are...The Keeper?”

“So ye were listening, eh?” He shook his head and blew out a little breath that sounded disappointed. “Ye came through the veil, ye snuck into my byre, ye eavesdropped...” His voice rose with each of my transgressions, until he roared, “and then instead of doing the sensible thing and making yerself known and asking for

respite, ye followed a trotting horse off into a blizzard?”

Mayhap ‘twas the result of being raised with brothers, or spending the last years working off a debt to Alred in the worst way possible. Whatever ‘twas, I had gained a backbone, and my instinctive response to being yelled at was to yell right back.

“I did not know it was going to blizzard!” I stuck my hands on my hips and my chin out. “I heard him say he was taking Isadora to the village. That seemed...safer.”

He blinked. “Ye ken Torvolk’s Mate?”

“Mate? He just met her toni—last night.” Despicable Alred had been in the process of auctioning off her virginity when the huge orc had purchased her and ridden off toward the stones. “I followed them.”

“On foot,” he snorted.

“I set my horse loose at the top of the rise to try to fool Alred—my pursuer. I saw the mist and the footprints went into it...”

“And didnae come out,” the Keeper growled, shaking his head as he turned away. “Och, well, ye’re here now. The village would’ve been better for ye, if ye’d been polite enough to present yerself.”

My fingers curled into fists at my sides. I didn’t want to apologize again. “You said...Torvolk said you did not want company, and you had...strange habits.”

“Aye.”

He didn’t elaborate, but instead crossed over to the hearth.

I felt the conversation slipping away.

“Please,” I breathed, taking a shuffling step toward him, my feet hitting the cold stone of the floor and causing me to wince. “Do not...”

“Dinnae what?” he snapped, without looking up from whatever he was doing.

“Do not send me away.”

Somewhere out there Alred was waiting for me. And once he found me, he would punish me for running. I needed to find someplace safe, some one safe. Had I?

The Keeper turned an inscrutable gaze my way as he straightened, holding a steaming bowl.

“Did ye no’ hear me about the blizzard? Are ye truly daft?”

I swallowed, my attention caught between his scowl and the delicious smelling bowl he held. “I mean...after. Do not send me away. I—I can be useful.”

Something like rage flickered across his face, and I wondered how I’d offended him.

“Useful, how?” he growled, low and dangerously. “I might be an invalid, but I can take care of myself.”

Obviously. I glanced around the cottage once, knowing ‘twas the truth. If he lived here alone, he did so without help.

“I did not mean...” I took a deep breath, my hunger causing my brain to stutter. “You are no invalid, but I can offer...”

What could I offer?

My eyelids fluttered closed on a disheartening realization. The only thing you have been able to offer in the past .

“What, Verna?” He sounded closer, his words lower, the way he said my name reaching into my chest and caressing something I didn’t recognize. “What can ye offer that I cannae do myself?”

“My cunny,” I blurted as I opened my eyes, knowing it was what any male wanted.

I saw him rear back, splashing the soup against his plaid, surprise in his eyes.

“What?”

Desperate to make the bargain, I lifted my skirts and began to kneel. “My mouth then? I can use it well, and ye can?—”

“Malla the Beginner!” Disgust crossed his features as he turned away, causing me to pause. “Ye have a warped sense of purpose, lass.”

Sense of purpose? Nay. ‘Twas...just as things had always been?

Just as I was about to tell him that, he placed the soup on the table and gestured me toward the chair that faced the fire.

“Torvolk and his female finished the bread last night. I’ll make more tomorrow.”

It was...was it an offer of peace? For not having bread? I could not bring myself to care about the bread, or the strange interaction we’d just had, or the scowl on his face. Because food .

I could no longer control my hunger, and threw myself into the chair, curling around the bowl of soup and reaching for the hand-carved wooden spoon.

I am fairly certain I moaned as the first taste of the broth passed my lips. The vegetables were soft, the meat was tender... I practically inhaled it.

“Easy, lass.”

I heard something I hadn’t expected to hear in the orc’s voice: humor. I glanced up while chewing to see him watching me from where he stood by the mantel, his stump propped behind him. His dark eyes...weren’t as menacing as they had been.

I swallowed and carefully offered a quiet, “Thank you.”

He nodded and bent to lift the cauldron. “There’s more, but eat slower. Yer stomach will cramp.” He placed it on the table and ladled another large helping into the bowl.

Another helping? My gaze darted between my full bowl, the cauldron, and his face. I was allowed to eat my fill?

“Thank you, again.”

How unlike Alred’s tavern where he controlled supplies with a tight fist.

Another single nod, and I bent over the bowl again, trying to follow his advice and eat more slowly. Already I could feel the knot of fear in my chest and the hunger pains in my stomach easing.

Then a mug landed in front of me. I hesitantly picked it up and was surprised to find a weak tea. When I sipped, I couldn’t stop the pleased hum; ‘twas sweetened with honey, and I adored sweet things.

I glanced up to thank him for a third time, to see him sipping from another mug. Of sweetened tea? I wasn't sure about thanking him yet again, so I offered him a little smile.

He froze and turned away, moving toward the desk beneath the window.

Slowly, I ate and watched him pull out a scroll from one of the cubbies, frown at it, and shove it into a different one. He did this a few times, as if he wasn't sure what to do with his space, and I finally grew the courage to engage him in conversation. Or attempt to, at least.

“Are those—you read those scrolls?”

He paused, but didn't turn. I continued. “I have always wondered what it must be like, to be able to read any— oh !” I gasped and plunked the mug down. “That is your arcane hobby! The one Torvolk teased you about!”

The Keeper turned back to me, scowl in place. “Where were you eavesdropping?”

“Um...” I fiddled with the spoon. “Inside the cow's stall. The brown one's.”

“And ye heard everything we said?”

“I heard your friend?—”

“He's no' my friend. Torvolk is the Ranger of the Bloodfire Clan. He comes through the stones frequently.”

Hmm . The Keeper had been quick to deny that friendship, but Torvolk had called him my friend and teased him about...

“You do read,” I breathed. “Torvolk called it mystical and arcane?—”

“Reading is a skill anyone can learn,” he snapped out, turning back to his scrolls. “And ye talk too much.”

I likely did, but if he was talking to me, he wasn’t threatening me. I scooped up another big bite of venison, and as I chewed, I fumbled to pull my satchel over my head.

Rising to my feet, I crossed to him, and as I swallowed, thrust the bag out to him.

“Here,” I blurted.

He twisted his head just far enough to glare at me, one brow raised in question.

I wagged the satchel. “When I escaped, I stole these scrolls. One is my contract, I think—at least, Alred was waving it around when he told me I would have to work another pair of years. The rest...” I shrugged. “I do not know. But mayhap you will.”

“Ye want me to store these with mine?” he asked slowly, reaching for the leather strap.

When he did, his fingers glanced over mine, and a shock ran up my arm so suddenly I almost gasped. Instead, I managed to get my response under control and dropped my gaze.

“I—I am offering them to you. Payment for allowing me to stay.”

They’d been Alred’s and I’d stolen them. I’d stolen to survive before, and gifting stolen goods in exchange for safety was simple logic.

The Keeper grunted and plopped the bag on the desk. He pulled out the scrolls and slotted them into the cubbies.

“Just until the blizzard is past.”

“What?” I asked distracted by the sure movements of his hand, the way the muscles bunched along his forearm...

“Ye can stay until the snow stops. Then ye’ll go to Bloodfire Village where ye belong.”

Bloodfire Village. Was that where Torvolk had taken Isadora? It must be. He was the Bloodfire Ranger, right?

“I will be able to see Isadora?”

“And the other women,” he grunted. “They’ll be glad to welcome ye and yer chattering.”

For some reason, his disgruntled tone tugged one corner of my lips upward into a smile. Unfortunately, he glanced up at me at that moment, his gaze landing on my mouth...and he scowled. Again.

“When will the snow be over?” I blurted. “Will you draw me a map so I do not get lost this time?”

The Keeper just shook his head and turned back to the scrolls. “Are ye no’ tired, lass? Surely yer voice must tire sometime.”

I pressed my lips together to keep from smirking. “I am weary.” I had no idea what time ‘twas. “Mayhap it is all the food...”

“Aye, and the tea. Go, eat yer fill,” he commanded without looking up. “There’s a piss bucket in the byre, and more furs in that chest.”

I glanced in the direction he’d jerked his thumb. Furs...

“To sleep? Where...”

I wasn’t sure how to ask where he would have me sleep. Judging from the look of disgust when I’d suggested pleasuring him, he wasn’t interested in me sexually, which was a remarkable change. Did he want me to share his bed?

“I dinnae care,” he bit out. “Just perform yer ablutions, go to sleep, and leave me in silence .”

Oh, so this was more about my talking? Well, fine then.

I ate the second bowl of soup, and then a third just because I could, while watching the way the muscles in his back moved and stretched as he poured over the scrolls I’d given him.

I wanted to ask him what they were...but I also didn’t want to raise his ire.

After I ate, I washed my bowl—and the one he’d used—in the basin, and left them on the mantel to dry. Then I ducked into the byre to relive myself, and said hello to the cow I’d hidden behind earlier. I grimaced at how my gown and bodice were still damp from my near-death adventure.

He does not care .

He said that.

I did not have to wrap myself in a fur and sleep in the byre or in front of the hearth. I did not have to sleep on the stone floor. There was a perfectly lovely bed in that room, and he did not care .

I marched back inside.

Setting my jaw, I set to work untying my bodice strings. 'Twas difficult to wriggle out of without help, but the skirts were easier. I pulled both off and hung them from a peg I found behind the table.

When I turned back to the room, 'twas to find the orc watching me. His brows were lowered and I couldn't read his expression from here.

But I lifted my chin, marched to the bed, and pulled back the quilt.

I crawled toward the wall and curled up, facing the wattle-and-daub interior, my back to him.

And as I closed my eyes, I could still feel his gaze on me.

Watching.

CHAPTER FOUR

Jorak

The female was in my bed.

Verna. She has a name.

Aye, but 'twas easier to think of her as just female . A visitor. Someone who would be gone as soon as the snow ended.

Ye're going to draw her a map and send her off on foot through waist-high drifts, will ye?

Obviously not. But...I'd had a lot of time to consider it.

Because despite being bone-tired and having a second helping of the soup, I avoided climbing into my bed. I puttered around, cleaning up—although there wasn't much she hadn't done already. I read and re-read the scrolls she'd brought, unable to understand their meaning.

And afraid of what would happen when I climbed into that bed.

Could I resist her curves? Would I spend all night staring at the ceiling, thinking of how she'd almost dropped to her knees when she'd offered to use her mouth on me?

She knew what a male would want, then. She must be Mated—nay, humans called it

marriage , although 'twas a faint approximation of our customs. She was someone's wife, and I was fantasizing over her.

Groaning, I dropped my head.

'Twas going to be a long night.

I stripped out of my boots and kilt and climbed onto the bed, rolling to my side with my back to her, hoping I would be strong enough not to take her in my arms.

Apparently, I needn't have worried.

Because I slept like the dead.

I woke in the morning in the same position, with a small, hot body pressed against my back. Sometime during the night—the dreamless, nightmare-less night— she'd put her arm around me.

I could feel her tits pressed against my back; those heavy, round tits I'd glimpsed through the shadows of her chemise as she'd changed last night. One of her arms hung over my hip, her hand inches from my hard, aching cock. How easy would it be to roll to my back to allow her to touch me?

Nay.

Nay, ye've come this far on yer own. Ye dinnae need her in yer space. Ye dinnae want her in yer space.

And then she exhaled, murmuring in her sleep, and her breath caressed the skin of my upper back. I could feel her cheek pressed there and knew if she twitched, her mouth would brush against me, and my cock wouldn't be able to resist that.

With a groan of effort, I pulled away.

Verna immediately sat up with a gasp. I turned in time to see her looking about frantically, pulling the quilt to her, and so I saw the moment she remembered where she was and what she was doing here.

She cocked her head, listening to the storm still raging outside, and shivered.

“Ye are cold?” I asked gruffly, more to distract myself than to hear her talk.

She pulled the blanket closer.

“Nay.”

Her whisper, and the fact she wouldn’t look at me, made her denial difficult to believe.

But I merely grunted and rolled from the bed. “Of course no’. Ye were a little furnace.”

“I am sorry.”

I hadn’t minded her warmth. I hadn’t minded her hold on me, or her breath against my skin, or the way she felt pressed against me. And that was why she couldn’t stay.

Frowning, I padded toward the byre door, knowing I was flashing her my arse, and wondering if I should care. I grabbed my kilt on the way out, and took my time wrapping it, waiting for my cock to get itself under control.

My Kteer was another matter.

For the first time in seven years, the damnable thing wouldn't shut up. 'Twas a mere whisper now, but constant. Urging me to do, to say things that would not maintain my life's careful control.

It wanted me to take the female as my own, and no matter how often I told myself she wasn't mine, I remembered the casual way she'd offered her cunny yesterday.

She'd been desperate, thinking ye were going to throw her into the snow. She would've offered aught to stay safe.

Aye. And I had no need for pity. Or pity fooks.

By the time I returned, she was dressed again, although still barefoot, and had built the fire back up again. Her bare toes curled against the cold stone of the hearth, and I wondered if that was why she'd turned to me for warmth last night.

"Good morning," she said quietly, not quite meeting my eyes. "I have pushed the soup back to warm, but if you would like me to make you porridge, I can do that."

I preferred porridge in the morning, aye. I grunted an acknowledgement, then pointed to the chest where I kept the dry supplies the villagers paid me in, then crossed to my personal chest.

I'd hung her stockings here yesterday and they were dry enough. I also pulled out a pair of my own thicker ones I wore under my boots on the worst days of winter, and thrust them all out at her.

"Here. For yer feet."

Ye dobber, of course they're for her feet!

Verna's eyes were wide, and her lips parted as she took them from me. Just like last night, when she'd handed me that satchel and our hands brushed, a shock of something ran up my arm and settled in my chest.

Stupid fooking Kteer willnae leave me be.

Determined to ignore the female in my home, I sat at my desk and pulled over my stylus to begin the complex process of sharpening the damn thing with only one hand.

Mayhap it took longer than I thought, because the next thing I heard was Verna—the female—say softly,

“Yer porridge is ready. Would ye like it at yer desk?”

I glanced about and was surprised to see she'd set the table for two. Two bowls, two mugs, two spoons. 'Twould be churlish of me to demand she serve me at my desk, so I pushed away to join her.

The porridge was...good.

“Honey?” I grunted, not usually bothering with it myself. But she'd drunk my tea and known I preferred sweet things.

“Aye.” Her voice was soft, her gaze on my chin. “Keeper, I know you do not like my chattering, but can I ask something?”

I sighed. “As long as 'tis no' about my arm.”

Her surprised gaze slammed upward into mine, then to the stump I'd rested on the table, then back up to my face, and I realized that hadn't been her intention at all.

“I just...I just wondered...”

By Torvar’s Hammer, she was enticing when she blushed like that, was she not?

“Where am I? I mean, this place? There was a mist in the stone circle, and this is where orcs live?”

Frowning, I wondered how to explain it to her. “Do yer people no’ speak of these things?”

“My people do not believe in you. Orcs are just...fairy tales—Nay, horror stories parents use to scare their children with.” She shook her head in what almost looked like bemusement, her spring-green gaze skipping across my features, caressing my tusks, making me hard again beneath my kilt.

“I never imagined you were real.”

Sighing, I put down my spoon and lifted my fist, pushing it across the table.

“Put out yer fist.”

When she did so, I knocked our knuckles against one another, trying to ignore the spark that made my skin tingle. ‘Twas just seven years of celibacy, ‘twas all.

“The human world and the orcs’ sit side-by-side, aye? Identical, except who inhabits them. Once a moon’s cycle, when it is at its fullest, the veil opens between our worlds...”

I opened my hand so the palm faced her, and without having to be prompted, Verna did the same. Her eyes were wide and interested, her lower lip tucked between her teeth as she listened.

I moved my palm forward to press against hers, and the shock was no longer a spark, but a full-fledged fire, rushing up my arm and causing my Kteer , for the first time since I'd gained complete regulation, to burst free and howl in my chest.

Swallowing, I struggled for control, struggled to hide my body's response to her touch.

“So this is the veil?” She was staring at our hands. “Where our worlds meet?”

Focus .

I yanked my hand back, afraid I was a heartbeat away from curling my fingers around hers.

“I dinnae ken how long ago our ancestors put up the stones to mark the crossings, but aye, they are natural places. My people have been raiding yers for generations. Bloodfire Village is full of human females who have chosen to make their home here.”

“Chosen ?” her words were sharp.

I glanced at her, wondering at that tone. Ah, mayhap she was thinking of the conversation she'd overheard about the village being more suitable for her.

“Aye, ye will be welcomed there.”

“Torvolk bought Isadora. Are those women all slaves?”

Frowning, I finished off my porridge, eyeing her. Finally, I said, “Nay, orcs keep nae slaves. The women who live in the village are, by and large, cherished Mates of orc males.”

Her eyes had widened further. “They marry orcs?”

“Nay, they Mate—” My lips snapped shut into a scowl. How to explain Mating to a human who didn’t believe we existed?

How to explain Mating when ye’ve never experienced it ?

Abruptly, I pushed away from the table.

“The porridge was good. As was the tea.” I cleared my throat. “Thank ye.”

I stomped for the byre, desperate for escape, but her next question stopped me.

“Do you think—I mean, if it is not too much trouble...”

Reluctantly, I turned my glower her way, but she merely raised her chin.

“I would like to wash, Keeper. May I?”

“Aye,” I barked, gesturing toward the fire. “I’ll get ye some clean water.” Any excuse to slip away.

By the time I returned, she was finishing the dishes. Although I was used to being alone, I had to admit that there was something to be said for having someone willing to make food and clean up after. Some days I skipped meals because I couldn’t be bothered to go through the trouble, especially since the chickens had finished laying for the winter.

“Here,” I grunted, plopping the pail of half-melted snow on the table. Hopefully she’d figure out how to heat it, because I didn’t want to be involved in this any more than necessary.

There was naught for me to do at my desk, but I sat there anyway, pretending. Because...all of my senses were attuned to Verna— the female —behind me. I listened to the sound of splashing water and imagined her preparing. I scented her skin as she undressed, and heard the swish of the clothing she laid out over the table. I closed my eyes, swallowing a groan, and shifted slightly so I could see her from the corner of my eye.

She was nude.

She was nude, standing in my home, washing herself.

I knew she had to be chilled, but that didn't seem to bother her. Or mayhap she wouldn't allow it to bother her. I'd noticed this female of mine was bold and brave and— wait .

Verna was not my female. She was too bonny not to belong to another male.

I must have made a sound, or shifted on my chair, because her gaze flew to mine.

And I was unable to look away.

Unable to look away as she dragged my washrag across her shoulders. Down her breasts. Between her legs.

Oh, Palton's Spear, between her legs .

My cock throbbed in time with my Kteer to see that thatch of auburn curls, shades darker than the hair on her head. I wanted to run my fingers through them. I wanted to press my nose, my tongue against those curls.

I wanted to know if she tasted as muskily sweet as she smelled.

‘Twas difficult to resist the urge to reach for my cock, to squeeze it through the wool of my kilt, but I did. She was merely a visitor and would be gone soon from my carefully ordered life.

But Verna held my gaze as she washed herself. Daring me to say something? Do something?

What could I do that wouldn’t disrupt what I’d spent so long building?

When she finally dropped the rag back into the pail, I told myself the torture was done and I could finally look away. But I didn’t.

And so when she began to walk toward me, that glorious red hair falling around her shoulders and those hips swaying, I still couldn’t.

Och , Torvar’s Hammer, look away .

But then she was there, standing beside me, close enough to touch, and I couldn’t resist rotating on my stool to face her, like a moth drawn to a flame. My throat was dry, my chest was itchy, and still I couldn’t look away .

“Keeper...” Her murmur was husky, deep. “Do you have another name? A name I should call you? After all, you are not my Keeper, yet.”

At that moment, I very much wanted to keep her. But my tongue darted out to brush against my tusk, grounding myself.

“Jorak,” I rasped, surprised to hear my answer.

How long since I’d thought of myself by that name? How long since I’d heard it?

For seven years I'd been the Bloodfire Keeper, protector of the stones. I expected to grow old and die here, surrounded by the carefully kept order that she was now ruining.

Her smile bloomed. "Jorak."

Oh, fuck . Had I thought her enticing, standing there naked and tempting? 'Twas worse with the way her voice reached down through my chest and wrapped around my cock. Hearing my name on her lips...

I tried to shake my head.

"Jorak, I told you I could be useful. You could let me stay here with you. You could be my Keeper."

Inside my chest, my traitorous Kteer tried to howl in gleeful agreement.

"I can cook. I can clean." And then, horror of horrors, Verna cupped her breasts. Her delicious breasts, capped with full, pink nipples that begged for a male's mouth. She cupped her tits and lifted them, offering them. To me .

"I can be useful."

She was offering her body to me, and Malla the Beginner knew how much I wanted to take her offer.

"Jorak," she whispered again, coaxingly. "I can make you feel so good."

Could she? So she did have experience pleasuring a male. But why would she want to pleasure someone like me ?

Me, whom no female had looked at twice in seven years?

“So good,” she whispered again, and I gave in.

With a groan of surrender, I lifted my hand, hesitating only slightly before I pressed the palm to her stomach. She was warm and soft, her curves just as enticing as I’d known they would be.

I watched my hand move around to her side, watched it slide up her skin. Her hands fell away, and then my palm was there, cupping her breast. I willed my claws to retract, so I wouldn’t dimple her softness, wouldn’t hurt her.

My breathing was too quick. I had lost control, but I couldn’t stop. She felt so damnably perfect in my hold. I wanted to lift her tit to my mouth, to taste her the way my Kteer demanded.

But before I did, I glanced up at her face.

And froze.

Because she wasn’t looking at me.

Verna was staring over my head, her gaze distant and locked on the back wall of my house, where there was naught interesting to examine. She wasn’t looking at me...because she wasn’t enjoying this.

She’d offered her body to me because she thought that’s what she had of value, but she didn’t want this .

Wherever Verna was at this moment, it wasn’t here with me, being caressed. She was allowing me to take pleasure from her body, which is the opposite of how it should

be. She was made to be given pleasure, not pawed at the way a human male would, interested only in himself.

And I'd fallen for it.

Squeezing her tit because my throbbing cockstand wouldn't allow me to think of her , only myself.

That realization and comparison was enough to have me jerking my hand away, a curse on my lips. She blinked and shifted her gaze to me. I saw only confusion there, which somehow made it worse.

She'd expected me to act like that.

Fook .

Cursing again—my Kteer's selfishness—I pushed myself away from her and stood.

She was bonny and brave and bold...and stuck here with me. A one-armed monster she only allowed to touch her out of pity. A male whom she had to offer herself to in order to stay alive.

“Ye dinnae have to do that,” I snarled. “No’ for me, no’ out of pity or guilt. I am no’ one of yer human males who would be satisfied with a quick fook anyway. I might no’ have two arms, but I am no’ so despicable as that.”

And right before I turned to stomp toward the byre, to spend the day pretending the animals needed me, I saw confusion cross her face.

CHAPTER FIVE

Verna

I wondered how I'd offended him. The Keeper—nay, Jorak —avoided me for the rest of the day, which was a remarkable feat considering we were stuck together in a small cottage with a blizzard raging outside.

Occasionally, I peeked through the door to the animals' byre to see him bent over one of the cow's hooves, or fixing part of the daub of the wall, muttering to himself.

Aye, he was avoiding me.

'Twas in a thoughtful frame of mind that I began to mix dough for bread.

I hadn't felt guilty about poking through his stores of supplies, because I told myself I was doing it for him . Trying to make his life easier so he'd allow me to stay.

Protect me.

Because he'd rejected the easiest thing I had to offer.

He thought you offered sex out of...pity. Guilt? That is what he said.

Had I?

I'd offered him my body because that's what I was used to offering. That's what I'd

always been told had the most value. Besides, despite his terrifying appearance, Jorak had been naught but kind to me. I should be repelled by him—those tusks, those claws—but when we touched...

Well, I hadn't imagined the warmth which had spread up my arm when he'd pressed his palm to mine. Last night, I'd curled against him because he had felt so delicious.

And when I'd stood there naked in front of him and he'd finally reached out to press his skin against me? When he'd cupped my breast? I punched the bread dough a little harder than necessary, thinking of the way I'd had to tamp down on my shudder of...of desire? Need?

It hadn't been fear, which had surprised me.

I'd never loved the way males pawed at my body, as if 'twas put in front of them for their amusement. But when Jorak had touched me...

This is not a helpful thread of thought, because he made it clear he does not want your body .

Nay, that wasn't exactly true. I'd seen his erection, the massive bulge in his kilt. I knew what that meant. But...

He thought I'd only offered my body out of pity. I might no' have two arms, but I am no' so despicable as that.

It had only been a day since I'd first woken up in Jorak's bed, but I didn't pity him, and I didn't think him despicable. I thought him... fascinating .

As I set the bread to rise, I used the supplies to make a quick batch of biscuits. I'd noticed he ate far more than I did—well, that made sense, considering how much

bigger he was. So I doubled the batch, thinking we might have leftovers, and chopped up some apples to simmer in a bit of wine I found in a cask.

The biscuits finished pan-frying by the time I deemed the apple spread thick enough, and I smeared a few of them with the spiced, fragrant mash. Then I scooped the rest into an empty crock and set it next to the remainder of the biscuits, poured a flask of ale, took a deep breath, and picked up the whole tray to head for the byre.

The scent of hay and animals was heavy and reminded me not only of my hiding spot two nights ago, but my childhood. Da's stables always smelled like this.

But none of my brothers were ever as intriguing as the kilted orc who was now turning a scowl my way as he rested a forked implement against the horse's stall.

"What now?" he barked. "Ye've come to mock me some more?"

I raised a brow at him, an instinctive response to his bad mood. I should likely cower, but a lifetime of standing up to males bigger than me had left me with a hefty dose of sass.

Mayhap my response was unexpected, because I swear his cheeks darkened slightly and he looked away with a snarl.

Nodding in determination, I marched toward the water barrel and placed the tray beside it.

"You must be hungry. Supper will not be ready for several hours and you must eat."

"Och, I must, must I?" he muttered...but since he was drifting toward me and the tray, I didn't respond.

Instead, I stepped back, placed my hands on my hips, and glanced around the byre. From the corner of my eye I watched him scoop up one of the biscuits and take a big bite of it. The noise of appreciation—part hum, part grunt—made my lips curl, but I turned so he wouldn't see them.

“These are good,” he finally said. “Ye fried them? How do ye get them so fluffy?”

My smile grew as I pretended to focus on the chickens hunting and pecking at the hay on the floor.

“I would be happy to teach you...tomorrow.” At least he'd let me stay one more day.

As he ate, I kicked at the straw, turning it so it wouldn't become ground into the floor, and releasing more of the grains for the chickens. When one particularly foul-tempered hen tried to attack my ankle, I scooped her up, told her, “Nay,” sternly, and placed her in one of the nesting boxes.

I was fairly certain I wasn't imagining the feel of his gaze on the back of my neck.

As I scooped out a handful of grains for the better-behaved fowl, I heard him grunt in what I hoped was approval.

“Ye ken chickens?”

It had been approval.

“Well, not these chickens.” I risked a teasing grin over my shoulder. “These chickens are as standoffish as their master.”

Jorak merely cocked a brow and glanced significantly at the group pecking excitedly at my offering.

“I’ve eaten the standoffish ones.”

“The foul fowls, you mean?”

He didn’t respond, but I thought mayhap I saw his lips twitch as he bent to scoop up another biscuit.

The hen I’d placed up in the box squawked in irritation and half-hopped, half-fell from her perch to push the others out of the way. I clucked in exasperation and nudged her to the side.

“I have a nomination for the next time you want a roast chicken supper.”

“Noted,” he said dryly, and I spun in surprise. The male did have a sense of humor, albeit drier than a withered husk.

He had finished off the buttered biscuits and now was using the remainder, the ones I thought of as extras, to scoop the apple butter from the crock as he watched me.

“Do ye have a farm?” He gestured with one of the biscuits. “Or does yer husband?”

I reared back in surprise, but judging from the way Jorak watched me, this wasn’t a casual question.

So I considered my words. “I grew up on a farm. My father understood woodlore and kept many animals.”

“And now?” he grunted.

I didn’t want to tell him how I survived, so I shrugged and focused on keeping Bitchy Chicken from attacking my ankles.

“My eldest brother inherited the farm when my father passed. I am not married.” Before he could ask further questions, I turned the topic. “You said that the human women in your village were not married to the males?”

He grunted, and I imagined him chewing. “Mating is... When a male and a female care about one another...”

“I know what sex is, Jorak,” I announced, meeting his eyes with a bit of teasing. I’d offered it to him earlier, after all.

But he flushed again, and now ‘twas his turn to look away. “Mating is more than sex, lass. ‘Tis...a kenning . When two people are made for each other, they just...” He shrugged then shifted his shoulders as if uncomfortable.

“They are connected. Forever.”

“So, like marriage?”

To my surprise, he seemed...frustrated as he shook his head, shoving the last of the biscuit into his mouth.

“‘Tis...” He swallowed, scowling. “In yer world, marriage is a contract. Females are bought and sold, aye?”

I’d never considered marriage that way. In my mind, after the life I’d lived for the last few years, marriage—the opportunity to only have to service one male—had seemed like an unobtainable dream. But I propped my hip against a feed barrel and considered his words.

“Marriage is a contract, aye. And I suppose the wife has few chances to make things right if ‘tis not an advantageous contract.”

Jorak nodded. “In yer world, females arenae valued the way they are in ours. Mating is no’ a contract, ‘tis...a kenning . No’ just an announcement to the clan and the gods, but something certain shared between a female and her Mate.”

I stared, trying to understand the picture he painted.

“The humans in the village...”

“Aye,” he agreed gruffly. “Mated. Like Isadora is—or will be—to Torvak, the male ye tried to follow. The other human females are cherished Mates. Ye...” He wiped his palm against his kilt and turned away. “Ye will be happy there. Find yerself a male who can treat ye well.”

I didn’t want a different male. The thought sprung into my head before I fully understood it. I just knew...despite my foolhardy attempts upon my arrival, I didn’t want to go to the village. Not yet.

So I blurted out a desperate attempt to get him to continue the conversation.

“How do you know so much?”

Jorak paused and I pushed on.

“You understand the way humans and the human world works. Yet I know naught about your world.”

“Our world is just like yers,” he said, slowly easing back into a position to face me. “Same trees, same animals. No’ as populated, no’ as deforested because of it. We dinnae value gold and minerals the same way ye do, and have nae need of building wealth beyond what the clan needs to survive.”

“There are no greedy orcs?” I asked in surprise.

The question gave him pause, and he shrugged his right shoulder. “I suppose there are. Greedy for power, greedy for food. But greedy for wealth?” He shrugged again. “We are content with our clans.”

‘Twas not the first time I’d heard him speak fondly of his clan. “And your clan is...Bloodfire?” Torvolk had been the Bloodfire Ranger, Jorak had said. And the village was Bloodfire Village. “Yet you do not live with them?”

His expression shuttered. “I am the Bloodfire Keeper. These stones are the only ones within a day’s journey, and many use them to cross to the human world and back. ‘Tis my responsibility to guard and care for the pathway. As for why I ken so much about yer world...” He seemed eager to change the subject and now shrugged as if it wasn’t a grand plan. “I read. The human language and orcs’ are no’ so different, and we never saw a need to develop written word when we could just borrow yers.”

I wanted to know more about his past and why he’d chosen to live here alone, but my imagination had been caught.

“You can read? Truly?” I’d seen his collection of scrolls, seen him pouring over the ones I’d brought, so I wasn’t surprised. “Could you teach—I mean, I have always wished I could.”

When he blinked, he only partly managed to hide his surprise. “Ye cannae read? Humans produce scrolls and treatises and contracts at a prodigious rate.”

I shrugged. “And only a select few, like scribes and monks, can read them. I do not know of a single female who knows more than her letters.”

“For fook’s sake, ‘tis criminal ,” he spat, shaking his head and pushing himself away

from the stall where he'd been leaning. "Do ye ken yer letters?"

Nodding, I eagerly crouched, pushing the hay out of the way with one hand as I held back the ill-tempered hen with the other.

"V-E-R," I read as I slowly, painstakingly drew the letters in the dirt. "N. A. Verna ." I glanced up at him. "'Tis my name."

His hand was on his hip as he watched me, his expression carefully neutral. I thought I could see uncertainty there. Slowly, he sank to a crouch across from me, his elbow balanced on his knee.

"Aye. Can ye spell mine?"

With him closer now, I didn't have to tip my head back as far, but I still bit my lower lip as I considered. It had been many, many years since Da taught my brothers and me our letters, and I rarely had need of them.

"Jor... " I sounded out his name, then scratched in the dirt. "J. R? Ack . A. C?"

His eyes flickered with something I couldn't identify, but he nodded. "Good."

I couldn't help the way I lit up, my chest feeling lighter at his praise.

Jorak leaned forward and used his finger to draw his letters—neat, precise—in the dirt beside my attempts. "J-O-R-A-K. Joorak ," he sounded out, pointing at the "O" I'd missed. "Orc spelling is different from human."

I looked at my name in the dirt, then looked at his.

'Twas...satisfying to see them spelled out thusly. Together.

I beamed at him. “I want to learn more.”

He studied me for a long moment, then glanced back down at our names. I followed his gaze, just in time to see Sunday Supper, the arsehole hen, scratching at the letters in the dirt. Was it my imagination, or did Jorak’s lips twitch?

“Aye,” he announced abruptly, thrusting himself to his feet. He lowered his hand to me. “I’ll teach ye.”

My breath caught at the casual agreement. As if my most obtainable dream was naught to him. And then when I placed my hand in his and he pulled me to my feet, my chest tightened.

Because he didn’t drop my hand right away.

CHAPTER SIX

Jorak

Verna had made bread. ‘Twas one of my favorite treats, but I rarely made it more than once a sennight because of how much work it required. To have fresh bread made for no reason was a delight, and it paired well with the ever-present soup and honey butter.

She’d offered her body to me, and my Kteer still wasn’t at peace with turning her down...but Verna was turning out to be a valuable houseguest for other reasons. Which was quite the admission, considering how tightly I’d always defended my solitude and order.

But seeing her excitement at practicing her letters was a joy. Her breath would catch as she studied each stroke of my stylus, then woosh out as she proudly identified the letter.

The first time she was able to sound out a word— Orc —she looked at me with such wonder and exhilaration in those spring-green eyes that I had to look away lest I say something stupid. Like how proud I was of her.

We practiced until dark, using grain spread across the desk to draw with our fingers. I’d never had another being stay in my home this long, and certainly not squish up next to me at my desk. But having her tiny body on the stool beside mine felt...right, somehow.

I suppose the point is, I was minding Verna less and less.

I might even be...beginning to like having her around.

That night, she slept in her chemise, curled away from me. But I woke in the morning to her plastered against my back once more and my cock throbbing with need.

‘Twas enough to set any male in a bad mood, so when she sat up with an abrupt gasp, I barked.

“What?”

Those wide green eyes turned my way as she clutched the blankets to her chest, and I hated the uncertainty I saw there.

“The storm has stopped,” she offered by way of explanation.

I cocked my head to listen. Aye, I should have noticed the cessation of wind. But truthfully, when I was here in such a small space with her, all my senses were attuned to Verna Verna Verna .

Nodding, I turned away to reach for my kilt.

“I’ll go exercise the horses. Check the stones.” Aught to get away.

My ears told me she was holding her breath as I stomped out of the cottage, hoping the frigid air would calm my cockstand, but I didn’t know why.

I slogged my way through the drifts around the circle of standing stones—not expecting to find aught amiss, and not disappointed—and managed to set some traps along the burn and just inside the copse of pines.

When I returned to the byre-cottage, warm honied porridge was waiting for me, and Verna was gripping her hands together as she watched me with wary eyes. I was halfway through breaking my fast when I realized she was worried about me sending her away now that the snow had stopped.

If I told her I was considering it, would she offer her body again?

Yesterday she said she wasn't Mated—wasn't married either. Then what did the contract mean she'd had in her satchel? There wasn't a male waiting for her in her world, so she was free to take a lover here.

But I couldn't forget her look of distance, the way she'd removed herself, as I'd touched her.

I wouldn't accept a pity fook from a female who found me abhorrent.

But I couldn't force her out into the winter, either. Not if she wanted to stay.

So, when the meal was done, I scooped up my bowl to place it in the wash basin, and asked, "Do ye want to go to the village now?"

Verna opened her mouth, her response immediate...but then seemed to second-guess herself. She peered at me warily.

"Do you want me to go?"

I forced myself to shrug. "'Tis a half-day's journey by horse. It might be better to wait a few days and allow the snow to blow out of the valley so 'tis easier."

I knew it wasn't my imagination when relief flashed across her face.

“A few more days with you, aye,” she agreed too quickly. “Can we work on reading again today?”

How could I deny such a request?

For years, I’d spent my time with these scrolls, these letters, and my own painstaking manuscripts. While it had never occurred to me that someone else might find interest in them, I might have considered sharing them. But now? With Verna?

I enjoyed sharing the things I loved with her. I took pride in her accomplishments, and knowing they were thanks to me.

And my Kteer didn’t know what to make of this.

I could feel it, confused and anticipatory, in my chest. It wanted me to focus on her body and the primal urge to claim take taste pleasure ...but I’d spent years controlling those primitive urges, and could now take joy in something as simple as the way Verna’s eyes lit when she read another word.

“So many scrolls,” she whispered in awe, her head tipped back to study my library of cubbyholes, the position highlighting the smooth skin of her throat. “Imagine the stories they contain.” She gave a self-deprecating little laugh and glanced at me. “I suppose you do not have to imagine . You have read them all?”

I hesitated, then dropped my chin once in acknowledgement. “Some are merely contracts.” Like the ones she arrived with. “Some are letters, some epic poems. A few research treatises, which are useful.”

“May I touch one?”

It was the reverence in her tone which made me cock a brow. “Aye. They will no’

explode.”

Still, she was holding her breath as she reached up to pull out... ah . I’d forgotten to mention that one.

“This is...” She smoothed her fingers across the vellum, glanced at me, then back to the writing. “This looks like your letters, Jorak.”

I tapped my claw against the manuscript. “Because ‘tis my handwriting. I weight down the vellum with rocks so I can do it with only one hand.”

Her eyes had gone wide. “You not only read, but you have written a book as well?” she breathed in admiration that made my Kteer crow.

I found myself shrugging, dismissing my accomplishment.

“I lead a simple life. The stones dinnae require much upkeep—they are ancient.” Truthfully, they rarely needed me, except at the full moon, when I acted as a gatekeeper. “The animals are my companions, as are these scrolls.” Of course I’d try my hand at writing.

Verna was peering down at the letters, clearly trying to make sense of the shorter words. “What is it? What are you writing?”

No reason not to tell her. “A history of my people. Ours is an oral tradition, and I thought by capturing some of it, we might share it farther than just the clan.”

“Your clan.” A flash of green under her auburn lashes told me she’d glanced my way. “The Bloodfire clan?”

Before she could ask why I’d isolated myself from them, I hurried to explain. “And

our allies and enemies.”

“Who are your enemies?”

Mayhap she was thinking of her reasons for crossing through the stones.

“We’ve been feuding with the Bladesedge warriors in the south for generations. The Battleborn and the Breakshield are allies, our closest neighbors.”

Now her attention was entirely on me.

“You go to battle?” she asked, a moment before her eyes flickered to the stump of my arm and back again.

I sighed, knowing what she was asking. “Bladesedge are led by a fierce warrior, but our chief Kragorn is his equal.”

But Kragorn had been missing since late autumn’s battle, and the clan was desperate for word of his survival.

“Seven years ago in a skirmish, I allowed my control and focus to slip, and I paid the price.” I kept my tone even, my words fast, as I waved the remnant of my right arm. “I am lucky to be alive, lucky the Bloodfire healer could save me.”

Verna’s lips formed a little “oh,” but no sound emerged. Her gaze moved from the stump of my arm to my face, and back again twice.

Finally, she took a deep breath and pushed the scroll across the desk to me.

“I am glad you survived, Jorak. Will you read me your history?”

No one had ever asked that of me.

The realization, coming so quickly after baring my past to her, had me confused.

I moved the candle closer, cleared my throat, and began to read to cover how unordered my thoughts were.

We took breaks throughout the day, of course, but she was with me. And, to my surprise, I didn't mind.

After years of being alone, 'twas surprising how much amusement I got out of her nicknames for the brown hen who I'd always just called "the brown hen," but now thought of as "Her Majesty," thanks to Verna. And I appreciated being able to turn the hated chore of milking the cow over to her, although the animal's production had slowed in recent months. And after...

She taught me to make biscuits.

'Twas a little thing, but I watched listened, and when I wrote down her recipe, she gasped in delight and demanded I read it back to her to check.

They were delicious.

That night, I allowed myself to roll onto my other side to face her. 'Twas more comfortable with my arm, anyhow...and sometime during the night I wrapped my arm around her and tucked her up against me.

It felt... right .

My Kteer howled at me to claim her, and 'twas becoming more difficult to resist. She was not Mated or married to anyone in her world, and despite her distaste that first

time I'd touched her, my nose occasionally caught the sweet scent of her arousal when I sat near her.

But I could not make an offer. Not if I wanted to maintain my rigid control. The last time I allowed my Kteer to break free, I nearly died.

On the third day after her arrival, Verna read an entire sentence. 'Twas a simple sentence, but she squealed in joy and threw her arms around my neck, bouncing in excitement.

I froze, not daring to breathe.

And I felt the exact moment she realized what she'd done. But she didn't pull away. Instead, spring-green eyes stared into mine, our noses close enough to touch, since I was seated and she stood.

"Jorak," she whispered, and I'll admit that my chest ached and my cock throbbed to hear my name on those lips.

Those lips I wanted to taste. Those lips I wanted to claim.

"Aye?" I managed to rasp.

She swayed closer. "Thank you." Her breath caressed my lower lip.

I wanted her. Torvor's Hammer, I wanted her .

But I couldn't have her.

I shut my eyes so I wouldn't have to see her temptation, and realized how foolish it was in a heartbeat. Because now I could feel her, scent her, even more clearly.

“Lass,” I groaned, trying to find the strength to push her away.

“Jorak,” she breathed again, and I knew her lips were an inch from mine.

Unable to resist, my hand rose to settle on her hip. I felt her shudder, smelled the sudden rush of her arousal, and I knew I was going to kiss her.

But her lips pressed against mine, and she was the one to claim me. Her mouth was small and fit perfectly between my tusks. This human tradition was a delightful one, and I leaned into her, inhaling her sweetness.

She was perfect. And she was in my hold.

Abruptly, Verna pulled away, straightening. I opened my eyes to see her chewing on her lower lip, the way I wanted to be doing.

I tried to force my throat to work, my voice to ask what was wrong, but all I could manage was a quirked brow.

Her blush was adorable, and her gaze dropped to my chin.

“Thank you,” she whispered again.

And shame slammed into me.

She was thanking me for teaching her to read. That kiss had been, to her, merely a sign of appreciation. A service rendered in thanks for my teaching.

Fook .

Swallowing, I pulled away, knowing I needed to stay away from her, for my own

pride.

My intentions might have been good, but unless I insisted she travel to the village, the two of us were stuck here in my home, and I couldn't stay away from her. I couldn't stay away from her excitement, her enthusiasm. I couldn't stay away from her cooking, her teasing.

And I couldn't stay away from the way I caught her looking at me, her scent revealing confusion and interest.

That night, I slept with my arm around her, although I told myself 'twas a bad idea. I needed to maintain my distance.

My Kteer didn't listen.

I didn't listen.

On the fourth day, I found a pair of plarquet in my traps and carried them back by their long ears.

“We willnae have to eat The Royal Bitch tonight after all.”

Laughing at me using one of her names for the brown hen, Verna practically skipped across the room to lift the meat from my hand.

“Rabbits! Would you like me to add them to the soup, or roast them?”

My brow twitched. She cared about my preferences?

“I have some carrots and turnips we could roast beside them.”

“Good.” Her grin was almost contagious. “I’ll get them started.”

As dinner cooked, she dragged me toward the desk.

“Last night I was thinking...”

I cocked a brow when she trailed off, and she ducked her chin.

“I mean, I know I gave the scrolls to you, but...would you read them to me?” Verna snuck a peek at me. “I stole them from Alred as I escaped because I thought one might be my contract, but I do not know if they are important.”

So I was about to learn of her past? With a grunt, I reached up to pull her scrolls from their cubby.

“Most of them are contracts, aye, but I dinnae understand them.”

“Did one have my name on it?” she asked eagerly.

One did. I shuffled them about until I found the correct one then handed it to her to unroll. Then I began to read, sharing the important passages with her.

“’Tis a contract made between two men. An Alred and a Jerome, dated five years ago.”

“Aye, Jer is my brother. He owed debts to Alred.”

I kept reading. “A significant sum. Jerome, unable to pay the debt, offers his sister in trade.”

Verna leaned into my line of sight now, her scent teasing my lips as she peered at the

vellum.

“That is me.” Her finger jabbed at the words. “Verna, I recognize my name.”

I swallowed, sitting back, trying to decide how to ask what needed to be asked. “This Alred...he is yer Mate?”

Snorting, Verna straightened to cross her arms. “He wishes. Nay, I told you humans marry ...but he is not my husband. He always made it clear he was too good for me.”

Too good for her? I frowned at the paper.

“This is no’ a marriage contract? Yer brother selling ye to Alred in exchange for his debt?” A barbaric custom, and one I’d been wrestling with since I read the contract the first time.

But Verna was shaking her head and now tapped the scroll with her finger.

“Alred owns a tavern in town, a popular one. Not just for the ale and the food, but for the...entertainment.”

Her cheeks pinked at that, her gaze locked on my shoulder, as if she didn’t want to meet my eyes. But I didn’t understand.

“Entertainment? What does this have to do with yer brother’s debt?”

Blowing out a breath, Verna looked away, wrapping her arms around her middle as if she could hunch in on herself.

“Whoring,” she announced dully, speaking to my desk. “He keeps whores upstairs, women who have contracts with him to pay off their brother’s or father’s debts.”

Whoring. Brother's debts .

I couldn't help the way I inhaled sharply as I finally understood her meaning.

Her wince told me she'd heard it.

"Ye were..." I could barely choke it out. "A whore ?" I only knew the word from the stories I'd heard of the human world; our people didn't view sex as a sin. "Ye... slept with males in exchange for gold?"

Another wince, and she hunched lower. "There was no sleeping. And I did not get to keep any of the gold."

"Malla the Beginner ," I breathed, as things began to make sense.

The way she'd offered her body to me, thinking that's what I would want. The way she refused to look at me when I touched her, going someplace in her own mind to keep herself sane. The way she watched me, as if she wasn't certain what I was thinking.

"Men used yer body," I murmured, "and ye thought I was like that too."

A flash of green from beneath her lashes told me she was peeking at me.

"It has been my experience that all males want a willing female. I have..." I watched her swallow, then look down once more. "Experience being willing."

"Malla the Beginner," I cursed again, or mayhap 'twas a prayer. "Yer brother forced ye to..." I couldn't even voice the words. "He..." I shook my head, unable to form a sentence in my shock.

Mayhap 'twas all Verna needed, that pity. She reacted the same way I would; by straightening, lifting her chin, by pressing on .

“’Twas not so bad. I only had to do it for five years, and then Jerome’s debt was paid.”

“He should have protected ye,” I growled.

Her twisted smile was rueful, and didn’t reach her eyes as she shrugged.

“They signed the contract at midwinter, which is approaching. I had no plans for the future, other than getting away. And then, the night afore the full moon, Alred told me my contract had been extended by two years.”

I slammed my palm onto the desk and pushed myself to my feet, unable to remain sitting there any longer.

“That bastard !”

“But I knew ‘twas a lie,” she hurried to explain. “Jerome died last year, the farm passing to our other brother. He had no opportunity to grow his debt to Alred.”

I could barely focus on her words. Instead, I paced, outraged on her behalf. My Kteer howled in my chest, urging me to slash punish kill feast , and I wasn’t so certain I should keep tamping it down. Her brother might be dead, but Alred needed to be punished.

“So when Torvolk showed up and bought Isadora at that horrible auction, I knew I could take advantage of Alred’s distraction. Twenty pieces of gold would be enough to distract anyone.”

Verna was watching me pace now, her eyes worried. “I meant to only snatch my contract afore I ran, but when I found Alred had so many scrolls, I could not tell which one was mine.”

I spun on her. “Yers . Ye mean...” I pointed a claw at the pile of scrolls. “The rest of those are contracts of other females? Who Alred believes he owns, and can force to whore for him?”

Verna’s nod was hesitant, her gaze wary. “Most of them are dead—disease or hunger. Right now, there are three other whores, besides me?—”

Her words cut off in a squeak as I lunged forward, pinning her against the desk with my bulk. I took her small chin in my hand and forced her head back as gently as I could, until she was staring up into my eyes, her own bright with fear.

“Ye are nae whore, Verna,” I stated, as clearly as I could, trying not to squeeze her delicate cheeks. “Ye are no’ his. Ye are no’ yer brother’s to barter away. Ye are yer own person.”

Her gaze skittered across my face, as if searching for truth, and I held her. I wanted to do more. I wanted to wipe away her past, her horror. I wanted to give her good memories.

“Verna, ye have worth .”

Slowly, her eyes widened. Her inhalation told me she was finally understanding what I meant, even if I didn’t.

“Jorak,” she whispered, although ‘twas muffled by my hand on her chin.

I should step back. Should give her space. Should pity the disgust she’d been through

and survived by not forcing my touch on her.

I didn't.

'Twas no' ye she shied away from when ye touched her. 'Twas her past .

And I could change that.

"In the last five years, have ye enjoyed yerself, Verna?" I growled. "Have ye learned to find pleasure in a male's touch?"

Slowly, despite my hold on her, she held my gaze and shook her head.

I knew what I needed to do. What my Kteer needed me to do. For her.

I released her and stepped back.

"I want to touch ye. Now."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Verna

“I want to touch ye. Now.”

My mind stuttered at the command and I could only gape up at Jorak.

“Wh-what?”

His gaze was hard, unreadable, but at least he wasn't scowling any longer.

“When ye arrived, ye offered me yer body...” He leaned closer, close enough I could smell his musk. “Yer mouth, yer sweet little cunny.”

I swallowed. I had . I had offered those things to get him to let me stay, but...I thought I was making myself useful otherwise. Glancing toward the shutters, I reminded myself that the snow had stopped and I could always choose to travel to the village now. I didn't have to give in to his demands.

But...

Something whispered in the back of my mind, reminding me of the way that kiss had felt yesterday. I hadn't intended to kiss Jorak, but his lips—and his hand on my hip—had made me feel things I hadn't expected. He made me feel things I hadn't expected. I should be terrified of him.

But I wasn't.

"Aye," I agreed softly, telling myself I was giving in to the inevitable as I reached for my skirts to draw them up. 'Twould be better to give him what he wanted now, than wait for him to take it later. "How do you want me?"

Jorak still watched me, only now I saw a flare of green in the center of his dark eyes. It had happened a few times in the last days, but never this intense.

"On the desk," he rasped, stepping up and pushing the scrolls aside. "I want to see what I'm doing."

Me. You will be doing me.

Sighing, I clamored up onto the desk and sat, facing him with my legs spread. Vaguely, I recalled this position was called The Burning Bush, when a man stands between a woman's legs. Jorak was bigger than any human male who'd paid for my company in the last years, but I vowed I wouldn't cry out.

And I told myself 'twas na?ve to be disappointed that it turned out this was all he'd wanted. Apparently, finding out my past, finding out I was a whore, was all he'd needed to use me.

Once I was settled, my skirts drawn up around my knees, I inhaled, lifted my chin, and met his eyes.

"I am ready."

"Och, dkaar ..." His lips curled upward into what I could only describe as a wicked grin, an expression so unexpected on Jorak that I could merely stare. "Ye arenae."

I...wasn't ready?

And then I was sucking in a breath again, because he'd moved between my legs and lowered his face to my shoulder. Nay—his mouth to my neck. The sensitive spot where my neck met my shoulder. He nuzzled there for the briefest of moments, then used his tusk—his tusk !—to push my gown out of the way so his lips could brush against my skin.

Fisting my hands around the wool of my skirt, I shivered.

“J-Jorak?”

“Has anyone ever kissed ye here?” he murmured against my skin, sending tingles down my spine. “Or here?” he moved his mouth up my neck to the spot beneath my ear.

When I felt his tongue brush against that spot, I nearly squeaked, “Nay!” but instead I tipped my head to one side to allow him better access. My heart thundered in my chest, and I felt as if every inch of my being was focused on him.

The huge male who stood between my legs, touching me so...gently.

His hand rose to rest on my shoulder then slid down my arm, warm and soft. He wrapped his fingers around my wrist and lifted. With wide eyes, I watched him straighten just enough to pull my wrist to his mouth.

He held my gaze as he pressed his lips to the soft underside. When I saw his tongue dart out—'twas gray and wide and covered in ridges!—I realized I'd ceased breathing.

“Delicious,” he murmured, without allowing me to look away. “I want to touch more

of ye, Verna.”

Mutely, I nodded, mayhap too enthusiastically.

This was no longer about me giving in to a stronger male or offering him what I could in exchange for his protection. This was about me and how he was making me feel. The way my blood was thrumming, the way I felt attuned to him. The way my core throbbed, making me yearn to squeeze my thighs together or, at the very least, press forward against his hardness.

Instead, I stayed very, very still as his fingers—the claws retracted—skittered up my side. His palm brushed over my breast and I sucked in a breath so quickly I went light-headed. Then he was touching my chest, dragging his fingers across my skin feather-lightly.

“Can ye unlace yer bodice for me?” His question was silky smooth, a mere murmur, his gaze locked on my face, as if watching for clues.

My fingers were clumsy as I reached for my ties, fumbling in my haste. For the first time in a long while... I wanted this .

When my bodice hung loose, Jorak leaned close again, inhaling...and the little rumble of pleasure that came from his chest—a growl? A groan?—nearly undid me. And then his mouth found the soft skin at the top of my breast, and I know I whimpered.

I think I tried to say his name, but no sound emerged. My hands flapped uselessly, and I was uncertain what he expected of me.

As if he could read my questions, Jorak’s hand gripped my wrist once more, gently moving it beside and behind me. He flattened my palm against the desk and nudged

me back until I was resting my weight on my hands, and his little sound of approval told me I'd done what he wanted.

Then he was reaching for my bodice. I held my breath when he delved into my chemise and lifted out one of my breasts. After so many years, I would have thought them dull to manhandling, but...

But he lifted it gently and placed a kiss on the skin right above the nipple. A kiss . With a gentle huff of approval, he rubbed his nose across the same spot, inhaling. His tusk scratched my skin, and it should have hurt...but instead I shuddered with anticipation.

I couldn't recall the last time I'd been this aroused.

Certainly never by a man!

But this was no man ...this was Jorak. My Keeper.

His tongue rasped along the pink of my nipple, but avoided the bud, which was pebbled and aching.

"Jorak," I whimpered.

"I imagine ye've had yer share of selfish males, aye?" He didn't give me time to answer. "Males who've squeezed and rubbed these beauties, using them for their own pleasure."

He gently set down my right breast, then reached into my bodice to scoop out the other, which he kissed reverently. "They've no' had the time or attention they deserve. Are they sensitive?"

Were they? I felt as if I were floating on a pink cloud of bliss.

“I...I would have said nay. But now...”

Was it my imagination, or did he chuckle at that? Nay, surely not; Jorak didn’t chuckle .

He tipped his head to the side so that his tusk scraped along my nipple and I couldn’t help my body’s response; I shuddered and tried to close my legs, but he was standing between them so I merely clamped them around him.

“There are so many neglected places on yer body, Verna. I want to find them all.”

I wanted that too. And as soon as I could draw breath, I would tell him.

Except he chose that moment to step back to lower himself...and before I could understand his plan, Jorak was on one knee between my legs, his hand sliding over my knee, pushing back my skirt.

Instinctively, I hunched forward, uncertain of his intentions...but I needn’t have worried. His mouth found the inside of one of my thighs and I jerked in surprise.

Trust him. Trust Jorak .

He was gruff and irritable and didn’t want me here...but he’d been kind in his own grumpy way. And now...? And now he was showing me a kindness I’d never expected.

His tusk was cool and smooth against my skin as he nuzzled at the place where my thigh met my cunny. I’d long ago ceased to be embarrassed by my body, but I was suddenly feeling self-conscious. I knew I was wet with arousal; could he tell? It

happened so rarely that I wasn't certain how to act...

Jorak inhaled and made that pleased-sounding rumble from his chest again, and I felt myself relaxing. He seemed to... like my cunny.

"So wet," he rasped, and I wondered how he could tell if he hadn't touched me yet. "Ye like my touch."

It wasn't a question, so I pressed my lips together to keep from whimpering, and instead, flexed my hips forward.

"Such a good lass, such a sweet-smelling cunny. I'll wager ye taste even better."

I wasn't sure what he meant...until I felt his tongue swipe along my cleft, and I blurted a mewl of surprise as I jerked forward. I swear I felt his lips curl, then he slid his ridged tongue along me again.

I couldn't breathe; I didn't want to breathe. I just sucked in quick gulps of air and hoped I wasn't passing out. There were sensations spiraling through me I couldn't recognize or name...and it was thanks to this male.

Jorak pressed forward, his shoulders causing me to spread my thighs wider. To my surprise, he slid the remainder of his right arm along my left thigh, the scar tissue scraping along my sensitive skin in a delicious way as he lifted his hand to my core.

He continued to lick me, and I felt him catching my lip between his, sucking, then teasing. How did he know such things? I remembered the illustrated scroll I'd seen years ago, *A Harlot's Guide to the Forbidden and Delightful Arts*, and I wondered if he had a copy as well.

Then his finger slid into me, and I stiffened. 'Twas not as large as a cock, and the

invasion wasn't unexpected, but the memories...

"Easy, lass," he murmured against me, and I swear I felt the reverberations throughout my body. "Ye're doing so well."

And then the second finger joined the first, and I was stretched. Jorak's fingers filled me comfortably and I waited for him to begin to pound into me.

But instead, he curled his fingers forward, his tongue still taking little sips of me, until his fingertips brushed against a place behind my most sensitive spot which made me gasp and reach for him.

As my fingers dug into his hair, I felt him huff another laugh.

"Ye like that."

And he did it again, brushing against that rough patch inside me, making me jerk against him.

"Jorak," I whimpered, uncertain what I was experiencing.

"Hush, lass," he murmured, then nuzzled against me again, tusks scraping and the stubble along his chin making my thighs quiver. The ridges of his tongue teased my cunny...

And found the bud of my pleasure. I gasped and rocked forward again, the pleasure spiking between his fingers and his tongue.

"Right there," I managed. "Oh, God..."

He licked me again. And again. His fingers curled softly inside me as his lips and

tongue teased, and darkness spread across my vision as I focused on these sensations.

Then his lips closed around my pearl. He sucked, and I gasped his name, curling forward over his head as my climax burst over me. I rocked against him, trying to draw out the pleasure for as long as possible, and Jorak accommodated me; stroking his fingers and flicking his tongue against the sensitive nub until I could stand no more and had to suck in great, heaving gulps of air.

Never, in all of my life, had I experienced something like that.

So mayhap 'twas a bit of shock that had me staring down at the top of his head. When he finally emerged from between my thighs and tipped his head back to look at me, one corner of his lips twitched upward. His mouth and chin were covered in my spend, and as I watched, he flicked his tongue—oh God, that tongue!—across his tusk to gather more into his mouth.

I couldn't help the way I shuddered at the sight.

My mouth opened, but the only sound that emerged was a sort of dazed croak.

Jorak's smirk grew and he stood in one smooth motion. When he was standing between my legs once more, I had to tip my head back to stare up at him, but I couldn't look away. His hand cupped the back of my head, his fingers—fingers which had just been inside me!—massaging the tightness there, holding me in place.

Then his other arm rose and he scraped his scars across my chin. So often, he hid this part of himself, but I knew he'd adapted to use what remained of his right arm in day-to-day life. Today was the first time he'd touched me with it, though.

Without thinking, I lifted my left hand to clasp his stump, holding it against my jaw, while I held his gaze. He sucked in a breath at the audacious move, and the green

light in his eyes flared brighter until it seemed to fill the dark depths.

“Yesterday.” Jorak’s voice was a mere rasp, and now he cleared his throat and tried again. “Why did ye kiss me?”

It seemed the time for truth. For boldness.

“Because I wanted to,” I whispered. “Because you made me happy.” I swallowed. “Why did you...?” Apparently my boldness deserted me, because I felt heat rush up my neck, flaring across my cheeks as I dropped my gaze.

He was quiet for a long moment before he answered.

“Because ye deserved it.”

It had been out of pity, then? When he’d learned I’d found no pleasure in men’s touches, he’d decided to prove me wrong?

Before I could decide on his meaning, he pulled his stump away and shifted to the side so he could slide it beneath my knees. I sucked in a gasp at the sudden movement as he lifted me into the air.

Part of me hoped he would deposit me on the bed so we could continue, but I was feeling so sated, so lethargic...so confused.

Jorak did lower me onto the bed, but when I expected him to join me, he merely pulled one of the furs over my bare breasts and turned away. But not before I saw the way his kilt tented in the front.

He was aroused, and I felt... guilty. ‘Twas my responsibility to take care of him—of that, was it not?

“Jorak,” I blurted, and when he turned with a raised brow, I dropped my gaze to his erect cock. “Do you want me to...?”

“I need none of yer pity, lass,” he growled, and stomped toward the table.

Pity ? Is that not what he’d shown me, in what I’d just experienced?

He tossed open the chest of supplies and pulled out the ground wheat. His face was set into his habitual scowl—one even more noticeable now that I’d seen his smile—as he began to mix ingredients in a bowl.

When I realized he was making biscuits— my biscuits!—I struggled to sit up.

“I can?—”

He cut me off with a snarl and a sudden motion of his stump, as if he was trying to make a chopping motion.

“Just lie still! Rest.”

“Rest?” I repeated in a confused whisper.

“Aye, lass,” he growled angrily, still not looking at me. “Let someone else take care of ye for a change.”

My mind must have been muddled, because I couldn’t make sense of the command. Let someone else take care of me? But...’twas my responsibility to be useful. To be needed.

To be used , a small part of me whispered.

But Jorak...today he hadn't...

I shook my head, not seeming to grasp what had happened.

"Take care of me?" I whispered, even as I laid my head back against the pillow.

He turned, his scowl still in place, his hand still mixing the biscuit dough.

"Ye dinnae have to use yer body to gain a place, here or anywhere, Verna. Ever again. Do ye understand?"

My eyes widened during his impassioned words.

Use your body . That is what I'd always done, that is what Jerome and Alred expected of me. But...Jerome was dead, and Alred was a world away, and...I could be safe here.

"Safe," I whispered, pulling the fur around me.

His fierce glower eased slightly. "Aye, safe. Rest, Verna. I'll take care of ye."

And for the first time, I felt hope.

I'll take care of ye.

He had . In his own gruff way, he had taken care of me, protected me from my own folly. He'd expected naught in return; in fact, he'd taken my offers as pity! But today...

My gaze followed him as he quickly and competently shaped the biscuits.

Today, he'd shown me pleasure. Not because he expected something, but because I deserved it. Pity, mayhap, but remarkable nonetheless. Remarkable that he saw me as someone deserving of pleasure, then sought to give it to me.

My body was sated, my blood still thrumming with the aftershocks of that orgasm. But the memory of his tongue on me, in me, had me pressing my thighs together to capture that sensation once more.

Mayhap he could tell, because Jorak grunted.

"Rest, lass," he commanded gruffly, his gaze averted. "Ye need it."

I should object, should tell him I was strong and I wouldn't make him regret protecting me. But I was so very comfortable, so very warm and satisfied.

Mayhap if I just closed my eyes for a few minutes...

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jorak

‘Twas easier to keep my mind on mundane tasks such as ensuring the biscuits didn’t burn in the pan. If I didn’t, if I allowed my gaze to stray toward the female sleeping in my bed...

Growling softly to myself, I forced my attention to the coals and the roasting plarkeet .

Dinnae think of her. Dinnae think of the way she gasped yer name as she came on yer tongue. Dinnae think of the wonder in her eyes when she looked at ye after .

When I realized my cock was still rock-hard, I knew I’d done a shite job of not thinking .

The meal was soon ready and Verna was still asleep. Reluctant to wake her, I munched on one of the biscuits as I pulled on my heavy boots and cloak, checked on her once more, then headed to the byre. The animals didn’t need my constant attention, but with such a tempting female in my bed, I couldn’t afford to linger in the cottage.

My cock was still hard, and my Kteer was still raging, when I finished my chores.

Shaking my head at my foolishness, I pushed my way out into the cold afternoon to patrol the stones. Which also didn’t need me.

I'd built a place—a space—for myself here which I could navigate. I could control. But...how useful was I, really? I spent my days hunched over my books and scrolls, occasionally ensuring my clan's travel remained opened. But except for two days of the month when I needed to patrol the pathway, I was virtually useless.

Wasn't I?

They called me the Keeper, but I was realizing I kept little.

Ye have Verna .

Did I?

In the last few days, I'd had a fierce need to protect her, to care for her. To take care of her, which was something I'd never experienced. I'd never thought to have another person in my carefully ordered space, and while she could be chaotic, she was also...helpful. Nice . She was nice to have around.

Aye, that was why I'd wanted to make her feel good.

I reached the copse of trees where I'd set my snares. There was naught for me to do here, either. I planted my hand on my hip and tipped my head back to stare up at the tall pines, inhaling deeply of their scent.

I might not be useful, but I liked it here. I liked the solitude. I liked the order.

Verna wouldnae like it .

She was brightness and laughter and energy. She needed to be in the village.

I knew I would have to take her there—take her there and return to my quiet order...I

wondered if I'd be lonely.

Aye, of course I'd be lonely! After having her in my home, 'twould seem empty without her. I would miss hearing her humming under her breath, the scent of her in the air. The scent of her arousal .

Gods below, how could I forget that scent once I'd tasted it? Once I'd felt her spend on my tongue?

Despite the cold, my cock was still rigid.

Thinking of Verna and her body's response to me, my hand crept toward the front of my kilt. Aye, I needed this. I needed a release.

The cold air was a shock as I lifted my kilt, but even that did naught to diminish my hardness. My Kteer howled for release, and so I stroked myself.

I stroked myself, my palm sliding over my ridges, each inch sensitized and desperate. 'Twas not the touch I needed, but 'twould have to do.

I stroked myself, my legs braced, my head thrown back, imagining 'twas Verna's hand on me, her mouth . Her sweet, warm cunny.

I stroked myself, my back to my cottage, thinking about the female curled up in my bed so trustingly. Thinking of her body, those tits , and how she tasted. Thinking of the soft way she'd gasped in pleasure at my touch. Thinking of all the things I wanted to do to her, the different ways I wanted to bring her ecstasy.

Aye ! My Kteer urged me on. Remember the way she tasted. Remember the way ye felt when ye made her climax! Remember the way yer Mate called for ye ? —

I gasped as I came, suddenly and explosively, my cock spurting out a thick rope of pale green spend across the snow. My nose wrinkled at the spicy-sweet scent, but I was too dazed to do more than just stroke my palm lazily along my cock.

Mate ?

Where had that thought come from?

Verna wasn't my Mate. She was just...a female who'd needed my help. A female I could help.

After seven years of being useless, 'twas nice to be needed.

She wasn't my Mate. I wasn't worthy of having a Mate.

I resisted the urge to scrub my hand over my face as I blew out a frustrated breath, then scooped up some clean snow to clean it instead.

"Gods below," I murmured, hating this knot in my chest.

Spilling my seed had eased some of my tension, but by the time I returned to the byre-cottage, I was feeling itchy and hot all over again. I needed something, and I wasn't sure what.

The meat was cooling, and my stomach rumbled. Giving in to the inevitable, I crossed to the bed. I was just going to call her name, nudge the mattress a bit. But seeing her sleeping so peacefully, her brow smooth and her lips plump...

I found myself sitting beside her, my fingers hovering over her cheek.

"Verna," I whispered. Then, a little louder, "Lass, wake up."

Her eyes opened swiftly, and when she saw me above her, she sucked in a startled breath. I should move back, give her space. But between one heartbeat and the next, her expression turned to genuine joy . A soft sort of joy, a smile between two people who shared experiences.

“Hello,” she whispered.

The sun was low in the west, and ‘twould be full dark soon, these midwinter nights lasted ages. But she had only just woken and looked satiated and well-rested.

Unable to stop myself, I dropped my fingers to her cheek.

“Did ye sleep well?”

Her smile turned rueful. “I cannot remember the last time I napped, unless I was ill.”

“Then ‘tis time ye did. Yer body needed it.”

Just thinking about what else her body had needed had my blood heating. Mayhap she was thinking the same thing, because I felt her shift, smelled the faint perfume of her arousal.

“I...” Her gaze dropped to my chin. “Thank you,” she whispered. “Before... No one has ever...”

My fingers found her chin, and I tipped her head back on the pillow to meet my gaze.

“Nae male has ever tasted ye, dkaar ?” I murmured, the endearment slipping out again. “Nae male has ever licked ye until ye came?”

Just the memory had my cock stirring again. I was not some young buck, insatiable

and indefatigable. The fact the fooking thing was hardening again, so soon after release, should be impossible.

Verna's cheeks and throat were pink with her blush, and that sweet scent of her had strengthened. But she held my gaze when she licked her lips nervously and confessed, "No man has ever made me...come."

Then, as if she'd exhausted her boldness, her gaze flicked to my ear. "No man has ever cared enough to give me pleasure," she whispered.

And deep in my chest, my Kteer crowed. I'd done that for her! I'd been her first!

My fingers tightened on her chin, and I wanted to lower my mouth to hers. I wanted to kiss her, claim her, to give her pleasure . Because I did care.

But I didn't. Because she wasn't going to stay here with me, she was going to the village. And when she went, she would carry the memory of one male who had cared enough about her pleasure to ensure she received it.

And that pride? That would be enough to carry me through the rest of the long winter months, alone in my cottage.

So I sat back, pulling my hand away from her skin, although 'twas the most difficult thing I'd done.

"The meal is ready."

Verna's lovely eyes widened, snapping back to mine as she struggled to push herself up on her elbows.

"The rabbits! I was roasting?—"

“Hush, woman.” I hid my frustration and dread by standing and turning away so she wouldn’t see my tented kilt. “I am taking care of ye today, remember? The meat is prepared. Come eat.”

Aye. She would be gone soon enough , but I would care for her while I was able.

Verna

The meal was truly delicious, and Jorak poured us both a measure of uisce beatha , so I was feeling all sorts of cozy. The sun had long since disappeared, but the byre-cottage was delightful; the warmth, the smell of baked spiced apples, the gentle lethargy in my limbs.

So I smiled across the table hopefully. “Would ye read to me again?”

His brow twitched. “The scrolls ye stole?” He didn’t appear to be nearly as relaxed as I was, judging by his barely controlled energy. “I read enough of them.”

Oh. My chin rose, unable to miss the challenge.

“But I have not.” When he glared mulishly at his mug, I sighed and put mine down. “Look, Jorak, I am sorry I surprised you earlier with the news that I am a whore.”

“ Were a whore,” he barked, not looking up.

Aye, I suppose, if I was safe here in the orcs’ world—safe with him—then I didn’t need to whore any longer. I was strong and capable and could find better work. Work that my brother didn’t force me to do.

I sighed, the lethargy gone, and leaned forward to plunk my mug on the table.

“W as a whore,” I agreed. “And I do not regret telling you, just so you are aware. Your response was...” I was blushing, wasn’t I?

Finally he met my eyes, his brow raised in challenge again. “Was what?”

Fine, I would tell him. “Quite satisfactory. I have never...” I shook my head, knowing I’d told him that already. “It was very different from what I know. The thought of allowing me to use my body for two more years...”

“Yer contract was for four years.”

My gaze slammed into his. “What?”

“The contract with yer name on it. It stated the debt would be absolved after ye ‘worked’ for Alred for four years.”

I could hear the disgust in his voice, but could only shake my head, wide-eyed. That bastard. Alred had lied to me about adding an extra two years to my contract, but it had never occurred to me he’d already lied to me.

“He kept me there an extra year already,” I whispered, angry gaze locked on the hearth, “because I was too stupid to know better.”

“No’ stupid,” Jorak correctly quietly. “Just unlearned. Ye’re learning now, so nae one will be able to take advantage of ye again.”

He was right. I planted my palms on the table as the realization swept through me. He was right. By teaching me to read, Jorak was giving me the assurance that I would never again be at someone else’s mercy.

‘Twas a powerful bit of knowledge.

“I want to know everything,” I demanded. “Teach me.”

After a long moment of studying me, he finally nodded.

“Aye.”

‘Twas all he said. ‘Twas enough.

I took a deep breath. “And I want to start with the other contracts. The women I... The other whores who worked for Alred. Women like Isadora. I want to know if he’s been cheating them too.”

Heaving a sigh, Jorak pushed himself away from the table.

“Aye,” he growled again. ‘Twas enough.

The candle was burning low by the time we found the first discrepancy. Greta had been whoring for Alred for three years now, and her contract only stipulated eighteen months. My stomach clenched, thinking of what this would mean for her.

And poor Mabel, who died last year struggling to bring a bastard into the world? Her contract had ended six months before. The horror she’d endured because of one man’s greed...

I couldn’t comprehend.

“He is a monster,” I whispered, staring down at the letters through a veil of unshed tears.

“He is.” Jorak’s claw tapped at Mabel’s contract. “These females...they were betrayed by their men?”

I sniffed, trying to remember. “Greta’s husband sold her to Alred, saying she was barren and thus worthless. Being barren is a fine quality for a whore, though.” Only a careful schedule of teas and cleaning routines had kept me safe and disease-free all this time.

“Mabel...I cannot remember. I believe she was alone, but I remember her speaking of a long-ago suitor who had abandoned her because her family had no money.”

“Alone,” he spat. “Despicable. These males are meant to protect their Mates.”

Sadly, I covered his hand with mine. “In our world, the best a female can hope for is a husband who will commit to her and not abandon her and her children when someone better comes along.”

I could feel the anger roiling off him. “A male who would abandon his kitlings and Mate— wife is no male at all, but a coward. A weakling.”

In an effort to calm him, I twined my fingers through his.

“You are right,” I whispered, hating my world even more. “I am glad I am safe from that now.”

“I am glad too,” he grunted, squeezing my fingers, and although my heart hurt for Mabel and Greta and the others, I reveled in the knowledge I had escaped that pain.

I had a future here. Thanks to Jorak.

I smiled. “Thank you. For saving me from that. Keeping me safe.”

“Aye.” He wasn’t looking at me. “Ye are safe here. The village is...”

When he trailed off and shook his head, I wondered what he'd been planning on saying. Did he want me to go to the village?

Did he want me gone?

I didn't want to leave.

For so long, I'd been focused on finding safety. I thought that was the village, once Jorak had told me of it, and the women who lived there. But then I'd realized how he cared for me, and how much I liked that. I didn't want to leave him.

But if that's what he wanted...

I squeezed his hand again and took a deep breath, trying to change the subject.

"Is that all the contracts? I do not ever want to return, but I will feel guilty if I do not find a way to send word to Greta and the others at Alred's tavern."

"The veil is only open for an hour each full moon." Jorak still wasn't looking at me. "In three weeks, a sennight after Midwinter's Festival, 'twill open again."

Then I was safe for another three weeks. I stifled my sigh of relief, knowing I was glad I didn't have to make the decision to be brave until then.

"Midwinter Festival? How do you celebrate?"

Finally he glanced at me, although there was confusion in his eyes. "I dinnae celebrate. I am here." Alone. The word was unsaid, but unnecessary.

"The clan then?" I prompted with a smile. "How do they celebrate?"

His gaze turned distant, as if he was remembering something from long ago.

“Everyone allows their fires to go out. Then a big bonfire is lit in the middle of the village and the light is brought into our—their homes. Food. Dancing.”

It sounded... “Wonderful,” I whispered. “Humans have a midwinter celebration, but ‘tis a solemn, religious ceremony. We do burn a Yule log, but yours sounds more fun.”

His lips twitched as he glanced back at me. “Aye, ‘tis. Ye’ll enjoy it.”

So he did want me to be in the village by then?

In an effort to distract myself, I reached for the remaining scroll.

“You have not read me this one.”

He gently pulled his hand from mine and flicked his fingers dismissively as he began to organize the rest. “Tis no’ a contract for work, like the rest.”

Frowning, I peered at the letters, trying to make sense of them. “What is it, then?” There were signatures, but I didn’t recognize them.

“A deed of property. Land and a building.” His claw tapped two places. “Dated long ago. It says that the owner is a Lars Weaver.”

Why would Alred have such a deed? I found what I thought was the name Lars , and traced the signature with my fingers.

“Lars Weaver. Do you know anyone by that name?” I couldn’t recall any weavers in the village, although there was a tailor.

“Nay, I...” He began, but when he trailed off, I glanced up to see him frowning into the distance. Suddenly, he lunged forward and pulled a book from one of the cubbies—the history of his clan he’d been working on.

Muttering to himself, he flipped it open, his finger dragging down the page. I watched in fascination, wondering at his arcane actions. Finally, he tapped the page and blew out a breath.

“Erlena Weaver, only child of Lars and Betta, stolen by and then Mated to Bartolk,” he read. “Bogat...” He trailed off and shook his head. “She had three sons, and a daughter too, and is now the grandmother or great-grandmother to half of Bloodfire Village. We call her Nan.”

My brows had risen in surprise that he’d been able to find Lars Weaver’s daughter, and she lived here in the orcs’ world.

“She Mated an orc male?” I peeked over his shoulder, and although I recognized his precise handwriting, couldn’t see what he read. “Was she happy?”

“Was?” Jorak scoffed. “She’s a cheerful auld meddler, intent on getting her grandsons Mated and happy.”

Well that didn’t sound too horrible, and I was pleased she was still alive. But there was something dismissive about the way he’d said it... I gasped as I understood. “She is your grandmother?”

Without looking at me, Jorak scowled and slammed the book shut.

“Bartolk was my grandfather’s brother. She is merely my great-aunt.”

I nudged his shoulder with a playful scoff. “Nan does not sound like a mere anyone,

Jorak. I take it she has spent some time meddling in your life, and you do not like it?”

He grunted noncommittedly, and I knew I was right.

“When I return to the village for supplies, I’ll bring her this deed.” He pulled it from under my hand. “’Tis no’ needed any longer, but she can decide what to do with the property.”

Oh, aye, the property. “What is the deed for?” I asked before he could roll it away.

He paused, then his eyes scanned the scroll. “A large building, two stories. On the southwest corner of the main intersection, it says here.”

My heart began to pound.

Jorak continued to read. “It has two sets of shuttered windows, a kitchen in the rear, and a double?—”

“A double counter,” I finished in a whisper, certain my voice betrayed my horror.

“Aye. Suitable for tavern use , it says.”

And that’s exactly what it had become. I swallowed, or tried to. My throat had closed off in terror, as I understood what this deed meant. Understood what Nan’s ownership of it meant.

“Hell,” I managed to rasp.

Jorak tipped his head to glance at me, but his mild curiosity changed to concern in a blink. “Verna?” He dropped the scroll to grab my shoulder. “What is it?”

But I couldn't answer.

Could barely understand myself.

Because the admission was too painful. So soon after realizing how happy I was here with him, how lucky I was to be safe at last...

Now I knew the truth.

I wasn't safe, and never would be.

CHAPTER NINE

Jorak

I don't think Verna slept that night.

I told myself 'twas because of her late nap, but I'd seen the way the blood had drained from her face when I'd read the deed to her, and I had a suspicion of what it meant.

Still, if she didn't want to tell me what was bothering her, 'twas not my place to push her. I wanted to protect her, aye, but only if she'd allow it.

So I laid there in the bed, my arm around her middle as it had been the night before, and listened to her think. Och, well, I couldn't actually hear her mind whirling, but I knew that was what was happening. Her breathing was too fast and occasionally hitched as if she was fighting tears.

It took every bit of control I possessed not to roll her over and demand she confide in me.

At some point, I dozed. Mayhap she slept then as well, but I was wakeful enough to know that she hadn't turned to me like she had the night before. Dawn seemed a long time in coming.

When we both climbed from the bed, I realized that hot, itchy, irrational sensation was lodged in my chest once more, and I scratched at my skin to try to rid myself of

it.

It didn't work.

The animals didn't need much, and I returned in time to help Verna with the porridge. We worked in silence, and I wanted to tell her that I could make it, and she should rest...but I was selfish enough to admit that I enjoyed having her beside me.

How strange. After seven years alone, seven years in my careful, solitary routine, I enjoyed having someone else in my space? I might have laughed at myself, were I the type to laugh.

I ladled the porridge while Verna held the bowls. I'd become used to doing things with only one hand...but having two extra around was more helpful than I expected.

Or mayhap 'twas just her .

I grabbed the honey pot from the mantel and settled myself on my stool as she placed the bowl in front of me. But instead of joining me, Verna stepped back and clasped her hands in front of her.

My brows drawing in, I glanced up at her in question and saw her take a deep breath.

"The weather is fine today." She wasn't looking at me, but at a spot over my head.

I grunted a cautious agreement.

She took another deep breath. "I would ask...I would like..."

Her worry was affecting me. If she wouldn't confide in me, then at least I could do my best to reassure her. I plopped my spoon down and pushed the bowl out of the

way so I could lean my arm on the table and face her fully.

“What is it, lass?”

“I need to go to the village. Bloodfire Village.”

Ah. My lips tugged into a frown and now ‘twas me who looked away.

“Of course,” I mumbled. I’d known that was her destination from the moment I began tracking her small prints in the snow. It should come as no surprise.

So why did my chest feel so tight at this revelation? Why did I want to snarl and break things?

Because I’d only just become used to having her here. With me.

And now I was losing her.

“I would ask you to allow me to borrow one of the horses. Just borrow,” she was quick to assure me, when I finally was able to glance her way. The gods below knew what my face looked like when I saw how quickly she tried to reassure me.

“When I get to the village, I can have it taken care of for you?—”

“I need supplies,” I managed, turning back to the table. ‘Twas easier to focus on eating, so I pulled my bowl to me. “I’ll take ye.”

The way she sucked in a breath, then held it, told me she hadn’t expected that.

“Really?” she whispered.

I couldn't speak, so I shoved a spoonful into my mouth and managed a nod. Aye, of course I'd go with her. I had to keep her safe, did I not?

She exhaled and carefully stepped toward the opposite stool.

"I suppose...I know this might seem difficult to believe..." She seemed hesitant as she perched on the edge of the seat. "But I really do know how to ride. And follow a map, if you would draw one for me."

I suppose, if she was raised on a farm, she wasn't ignorant of woodlore. I remembered the small prints I'd found, hidden inside of my larger ones. I remembered the way she'd sought out the shelter of a fir tree's trunk—the needles to keep her warm and the branches to protect her from more snow when she'd realized her journey was impossible.

And I mentally kicked myself for considering her not ignorant. Nay, she was...

Since I could see from the corner of my eye that she was still watching me, I swallowed twice to get my voice to work.

"I have confidence in ye."

"You do not have to come, Jorak," she whispered. "I know you prefer it here."

I merely grunted and spooned another bite of porridge into my mouth. I did prefer it here. That didn't mean I wasn't going to go with her.

Verna sighed and stood, and my protective instincts kicked in.

"Eat. We have a long day ahead of us and ye'll need yer energy."

I saw her nod, saw her reach for her bowl, saw her play with her spoon. Finally, though, she placed it back on the table and looked up at me.

“I have to go, Jorak. I am sorry. I know you are likely happy to see the last of me, and I?—”

I don't know what she would've said, because I glanced up so quickly at her claim I wanted her to go, that she snapped her mouth closed.

She studied me with drawn brows, worrying. Again. Fook . I forced myself to relax, to hide the irritation and disappointment I was feeling, and it must have worked, because, after a long minute, Verna picked up her spoon again and began to eat.

“If you...if you really do not mind escorting me to your village—or rather, allowing me to accompany you on your supply run, I would be grateful if you could introduce me to Nan.”

My sharp glance had her blushing, and she hurried to explain.

“I know I gave all the stolen scrolls to you, Jorak, and I hope you will not think me ungrateful. But...that deed belongs to your great-aunt, and she needs to have it.” Verna glanced over her shoulder at the cubbies. “And 'twould be safer if it could not be found here.”

Who would think to look for it here? I shook my head.

“I'm no' mad, lass. Nan does deserve to have the deed. And the property, if she wants it.”

Verna was scraping at her bowl. “She would want to return to the human world?”

“Nay,” I shrugged, knowing ‘twas the truth. “But orc and human pairings can produce different kitlings. Male children are born looking like their fathers, while females look more like their mothers. While we have few human males in the village, one of Nan’s daughters Mated a human, and their daughters look fully human. Mayhap she’ll grant the deed to one of them as a dowry.”

I shrugged again, not really caring what she did with the property.

But Verna seemed fascinated. “What if one of her daughters married— Mated with an orc?”

“It happens frequently. Their offspring look like full-blooded orcs. Torvolk is her grandson, and he looked?—”

“Just like you,” she breathed, eyes wide as she studied me.

But I scoffed. “Nay, Torvolk is broader, stronger.”

More capable. A better fighter. More controlled.

“So? Ye are far more handsome.”

When I jerked my gaze up in surprise, Verna blushed and bent over her porridge again.

She thought me handsome ? I was missing a fooking arm , by Palton’s Spear!

But I continued to watch her, and when she shifted, I caught the faint scent of her arousal and knew she was thinking of yesterday.

I wanted to do that for her again. Gods below, I wanted to make her scream my name.

I wanted to claim her, I wanted to please her. I wanted to protect her, to take care of her.

But she wanted to go to the village.

And I would honor that.

After we broke our fast, I went back to the byre to ready the animals to survive on their own for a few days.

“Brown hen, ye’re in charge,” I commanded sternly. “I’ll be back soon. Dinnae eat all yer grain at once.”

The chicken pecked at my boots in a clear indication she spoke only Chicken.

“Dinnae fash, I’m just dropping off Verna, and will then return to eat ye.”

The blasted animal gave a mighty cluck and flapped her wings in what seemed like disapproval. Resisting the urge to kick her back to her coop, I stomped over to the horses.

They’d been enjoying the exercise I’d been offering them, but since the morning I’d ridden out after Verna’s tracks, I hadn’t bothered saddling one. ‘Twas a pain in the arse with only one arm, but I could no’ allow that to stop me now.

Still, I was sweating by the time I got the gelding saddled.

The door opened behind me, and I almost snapped that I wasn’t ready yet, but Verna looked so...uncertain, and I pressed my lips together. She’d braided her hair, hiding her glory, and had removed the rag she wore at her waist as an apron. Her bright red cloak hung around her shoulders, and she clutched something wrapped in a towel.

I nodded to the bundle. “Gifts?”

She glanced down, as if it held the answers. “I made some more apple spread. I hope you do not mind I used one of your empty crocks. I just...I want them to like me.”

Oh, gods below.

“They’ll like ye, lass,” I sighed, scrubbing my hand over my face. “How could they no’?”

She seemed a little more assured as she considered my words. She peeked up at me.

“I also wanted to ask... I know ‘twas part of my gift to you, along with the scrolls, but could I borrow the satchel again? To carry Nan’s deed and this crock?”

Oh, for fook’s sake.

“Ye can take aught ye want, Verna. Everything.” After all, she was taking part of me with her, was she not? “Ye’ll need both yer hands free to ride.”

That got her attention. She plopped one of those hands on her hips and eyed the unsaddled horse speculatively. “And if I told you I do not wish to ride by myself?”

Part of me—I suspected ‘twas my Kteer leapt to attention at this news, but I pretended disbelief. “I’d no’ believe ye. Ye told me ye were a capable rider.”

She shrugged. “May I ride with you?”

I wanted that. By Torvor’s Hammer, I wanted that. But I kept my voice nonchalant.

“Ye’ll have to ride behind me. I cannae hold ye and the reins.” As much as I wanted

to.

Her smile lit up my world, and when she whirled back to the cottage with a cheerful, “I will be only a moment!” I felt my claws digging into my chest, as if I could dig out my very heart.

Mate .

My Kteer whispered the word, and I didn’t want it to be right.

But I think I knew it already.

Verna had come into my life like a strong north wind, disrupting everything. And now that she was leaving it, I couldn’t imagine what my lonely life would be like without her.

We were halfway to Bloodfire Village before she stirred against my back. I’d wondered if she’d fallen asleep back there.

“Jorak?”

I was never going to grow tired of hearing my name, my true name, on her lips.

“Hm?”

“What I said earlier...”

When I twisted in the saddle, she loosened her hold on me, and I raised a brow in question.

She raised one right back. “I can ride.”

“Aye. Ye said ye could.”

A smile tugged at her lips and she snuggled closer once more. “I just wanted the chance to...I wanted to hold you. One last time.”

That last part dimmed my Kteer’s joy at hearing the first part.

“Aye, well...” I turned back to stare at the horse’s ears. “Ye willnae get lost this time, at least.”

“I was not lost last time,” she sniffed. “I was just...slow.”

Behind us, the other horse plodded along serenely. I could offer to move her to his back, but I didn’t want to lose her yet.

“If ye hadnae been wearing that ridiculous cloak that day, I might no’ have found ye,” I rasped, desperate to think of something else. Remember the fear, that ye wouldnae reach her in time . “I assumed ye dinnae understand woodlore if ye wore something so garish.”

She sniffed again.

“ ‘Tis garish.” There was no humor in her tone. “Alred gave it to me two years ago. Said I should...” I felt her hold on me tighten. “Said I should look like a whore.” Another sniff, and when she spoke again, her voice was falsely cheerful. “But ‘tis warm enough.”

I closed my eyes at her words, trying to hide some of my rage when I growled, “He deserves to die.”

“He cheated and tricked so many women?—”

“He hurt and abused females whom he should have protected.” My knuckles ached from how hard I was gripping the reins. “I wish...”

I felt her stir.

“What do you wish, Jorak?”

My Kteer howled at me to face my enemy, defeat him in battle. Lose control, allow my primitive instincts free rein. But the last time that happened...

I shook my head, unwilling to voice my past.

“He will never find himself on this side of the stones, so I willnae be able to face him, even if I could.”

My Kteer whispered, Ye should go to the human’s world for yer Mate’s revenge . But I was no warrior, and Verna was not my Mate.

At my back, Verna shuddered and pressed closer, and I vowed to speak no more about it.

She didn’t stir again until we saw the smoke from the village chimneys, and then I felt her shifting as she peered around in curiosity. As we approached the outskirts, she gasped in surprise.

“There is no...where is the castle?”

I shook my head. “Orcs have nae need for castles. Our chiefs live just like the rest of us, and we would never attack females and kitlings.”

“That is why there is not a surrounding wall?” She didn’t give me time to answer.

“Your chief really lives in one of these cottages and not in a mighty home? Kragorn—What is his name?”

The horse slowly picked its way toward the center square, and I exchanged reserved nods with those who recognized me.

“Aye, Kragorn lives in the house with the blue door.” I gestured with my chin, because I was preoccupied with keeping the horses in line. “But he has been missing since the autumn, in a raid against the Bladesedge and their allies. Torvolk and others have been searching for him.”

I could feel Verna twisting about, trying to take in everything.

“There are so many humans! That woman just waved to me. Everything is so... friendly looking.”

Was it? I tried to see Bloodfire Village through her eyes, and supposed she was right. The homes were waddle-and-daub, freshly painted and thatched. The cookfires perfumed the air with delicious scents, and the villagers—more orcs than humans, but plenty of humans—went about their duties with welcoming smiles.

I only visited a few times a year; most of the time Kragorn sent the supplies I needed—my “payment” for my duties—via one of the young males. Now, though, I tried to see what Verna saw...and realized just how pleasant the village was. Especially to a female who had been stuck alone with me.

My heart ached at the thought of leaving her here, and I was surprised it had naught to do with my Kteer. My heart—I was going to miss her, but I would be content knowing how much happier she’d be here, among her own kind.

“Keeper?”

I twisted in the saddle when I heard the male's relieved bellow, and my brows rose to see Vartok drop his hammer and hustle out of his smithy.

"Oh, thank the gods, I have need of ye!" he announced, reaching me and pulling the lead of the second horse from my pommel as his various charms and beads clinked. "Are ye here to stay?"

He...needed me? I shook my head in confusion.

"I'm dropping off—" Verna squeezed me, and I turned my attention to her. "Verna, this is our chief's brother, Vartok. He's been in command since Kragorn's disappearance."

The handsome male smiled charmingly at her, and my Kteer growled in warning.

"Welcome to Bloodfire Village, Verna." The attractive arsehole offered a little bow, and I told myself I wasn't going to turn to see if she was blushing at the attention. "I look forward to hearing yer story."

My knuckles tightened on the reins as I fought the urge to kick in Vartok's tusks—rings and all. He was being charming—he was always being charming—and I couldn't fault him for trying to woo Verna. She was bonny and needed a male like him to keep her safe.

'Twas logical. Ordered. So no wonder that my Kteer rebelled against it, demanding I protect her from Vartok's charm.

He now turned a relieved smile my way. "I wasnae meant to lead, Keeper. Tell me ye have news of my brother?"

When I shook my head mutely, he deflated, then shrugged and scrubbed a hand down

his face.

“Och, well, I suppose I’m no’ surprised. Nae one can come through the stones since Torvolk, and I’ve already sent him south to look for news with the Battleborn. His new Mate is pining for him, puir lass.”

I felt Verna lean around me, still holding tightly. “Isadora is living here?”

She had guessed who Vartok meant.

“Aye,” the other man agreed with a rueful grin. “Torvolk refuses to see their Mating Bond.” He nodded to me conspiratorially, although I didn’t know why. “I expect him back afore Midwinter’s Festival, and maybe then he’ll put the wee thing out of her misery.”

Enough small talk. “Why do ye need me?” I barked. “I need to return...”

Verna stiffened behind me, and I had to resist the urge to turn and comfort her. I didn’t know what was wrong.

Vartok, however, was already shaking his head, sending his beaded braid swaying. “Ye ken more about our people—our history, our traditions—than anyone. I’ve never had to lead afore, and I’m reaching the end of what I can manage on my own. I need ye to help guide me.”

I’d reared back at the I need ye . Had anyone ever needed me?

Verna did. Ye saved her life .

I suppose ‘twas true. And now Vartok was staring up at me hopefully, so I nodded slowly.

“Aye, I suppose...I’ll answer what I can.” Being needed? It felt...strange. Good.

“Thank ye,” the other male exhaled gratefully, then stepped back. “I’ll let ye get settled in and come to talk to ye in the morning. Dinnae fash about supplies—yer home is cold, but we’ve kept it clean and stocked for ye, and I’ll have someone bring ye a meal soon.”

He clucked his tongue to the horse and moved toward the stables, and I could only watch, dumbfounded. The clan’s acting chief needed me ? He had a place saved for me here?

Behind me, Verna stirred. “You have a home in the village?”

“I...” Shaking my head, I urged our horse toward the setting sun. “I did. Afore I took up the mantle of Bloodfire Keeper, I had my own cottage, which belonged to my father afore me. I assumed...”

When I trailed off, she poked me. “You assumed what?”

“I have no’ lived here for almost seven years.” As soon as I’d healed from the shameful injury, I’d been desperate to atone for my lack of control and moved to the Keeper’s byre-cottage. “I expected them to have given the home to someone else.”

But when we reached the cottage, ‘twas exactly as I recalled it; neat, ordered, if mayhap a bit overgrown with the ivy climbing up the right wall.

“Oh, Jorak, it is lovely!” Verna eagerly swung down, using my boot as a step. “May I see inside?”

As if I would deny her aught. At my nod, she beamed and pushed open the door. I could hear her delighted squeal from outside, but I hid my smile as I climbed down

more carefully.

I would fetch the horse to the stable soon, but first I wanted to see her reaction to my home.

Home ? Nay, the Keeper's byre-cottage was my home, was it not?

"Oh, Jorak, 'tis so cozy." When Verna twisted in a circle to take it all in, her red cloak billowed around her. "Are the linens in that chest? I will make the bed. Oh, look, you even have a desk here! Where did you keep your scrolls when you lived here?"

My lips curling into a reluctant grin, I nodded to the space beneath the desk. "In a chest. I brought it with me when I moved away."

Busy pulling out blankets for the bed, Verna threw over her shoulder, "When you move back, we will ask someone to build us cubbies over the desk for your library!"

'Twas said so causally.

As if I would be giving up my life and returning to live here. With her.

I wanted to be with her, but my place wasn't here. Was it?

"I will get the fire going in the hearth," she offered as she dropped the linens to the mattress with a pleased smile, "if you want to take care of the horse."

'Twas remarkable, how cheerful she could be while laboring. I wanted to do all these things for her. I wanted her to sit and rest while I fetched food for her, and warmed her with fire, and made her bed.

But thanks to my mistakes of my past, I couldn't. I could never be the male she needed me to be.

So I nodded once and backed out of the house, telling myself I deserved this shame.

CHAPTER TEN

Verna

‘Twas possible I loved this cottage even more than Jorak’s home by the stone circle. I loved how comfortable ‘twas. There were several windows—shuttered now against the cold midwinter morning—and when I went out to dump the piss pot I was delighted to find a garden.

A garden!

Overgrown now, aye, but how pleasant it would be to grow things once more, to feel dirt under my nails and the satisfaction of eating a carrot I grew.

Mayhap I stood there for a moment, admiring the barren, snow-covered fenced area, before remembering this wasn’t my garden, this wasn’t my home. I had no right to imagine a future here.

Because I wasn’t going to be here.

I washed my hands and went back inside to prepare a morning meal, only to remember we hadn’t been here long enough to have supplies. Last night, after Jorak returned from stabling the horses, a knock at the door revealed a lean, grinning orc and a very pregnant human.

“Welcome to Bloodfire Village!” she’d declared, thrusting a bundle of food into my arms and pushing past me to stand near the shuttered window. Her dark skin looked

flushed and she fanned herself.

“I am Avaleen, this is Mkaalad, my Mate.”

I was staring at her belly. Jorak had told me humans Mated with orcs, but seeing the evidence before me was a little disconcerting.

But, remembering my manners, I blurted, “Verna! I...I have been staying with Jorak.”

Her mate had clasped Jorak’s arm and was pumping it vigorously, disregarding the one-armed male’s scowl.

“Congratulations, cousin! We’re glad to have ye back.”

“I’m no’ back.” Jorak pulled his hand away and propped it on his hip, his brows lowering further. “Just escorting Verna.”

Mkaalad made a noise of understanding and exchanged glances with his wife—his Mate , who merely rolled her eyes and smirked.

“Males can be such idiots, aye Verna?”

I wasn’t sure how to respond to that, so I asked the first question that came to me.

“You are cousins?”

“Everyone is a cousin, it seems like,” Avaleen laughed. “Mkaalad is Torvolk’s twin, and they are cousins with Vartok and Kragorn. The Keeper is their...” She pursed her lips, deep in thought.

“Second cousin,” growled Jorak. “ At best .”

“Och, just because ye dinnae like us doesnae mean ye dinnae have to claim us!”
Mkaalad slapped the other male’s shoulder. “Ye’re family.”

Jorak’s scowl had eased to a look of...I saw confusion in his eyes, which had been green since we’d arrived at the village.

“I never said I dinnae like ye.”

“We ken the truth, though, with ye hiding away.”

“I’m...needed at the stones.” But Jorak didn’t meet anyone’s eyes when he said that.
“Things are neater there.”

“And chaotic here,” his cousin agreed. “But ‘tis part of the fun!”

When he extended his arm to his Mate, Avaleen gave me a quick hug—her stomach really was huge—and bustled after him, leaving Jorak and me alone in the cozy cottage with enough bread, cheese, and sausage to feed an army.

Or rather, a Jorak. He’d finished most of it for supper before lying on the bed and rolling away from me. I’d tried not to be hurt by that, telling myself he’d made it clear he was just dropping me off and would be returning to his neatly ordered space.

Now I searched for any of the leftovers, thinking to prepare a simple meal for us...but I was still searching when another knock came at the door. Jorak came out from behind the screen and crossed to the portal, yanking it open with bad grace I hadn’t seen from him since the first day I’d met him.

“What?” he barked, then promptly backed up.

My brows rose when I saw why.

“Jorak, kitling, ye’ve spent too long away from home!” The old woman—a human—was shuffling toward him, her arms open, clearly hoping to embrace him. “‘Tis about time ye returned!”

Jorak’s arse bumped into the table before he apparently realized ‘twas ignoble to run from an elderly woman. I saw his eyes roll to the ceiling only slightly as he bent and allowed her to pull his cheek down for a wet kiss, and tried not to giggle.

“Hello, Nan,” he announced with a sigh.

This was Nan? How wonderful to meet her so soon!

Mayhap I made a sound, because the old woman turned to me, her arms spread again. “And ye brought a Mate! Lovely Verna, welcome to the village!” she announced, taking me in her arms with a gentle squeeze.

I’d never had a grandmother, and I didn’t remember my mother. If she’d been alive after Da’s death, mayhap Jerome wouldn’t have sold me to cover his debts. But this hug? The way Nan’s breath ruffled my hair? I closed my eyes, wondering if this was what a mother’s embrace felt like.

After too short a time, she straightened and clapped her hands together.

“I’m so happy ye’re here. We have much to discuss.”

Jorak, who’d been watching me with a gentleness I hadn’t expected, now shook his head as if to clear it, and barked.

“Discuss what?”

Nan waved dismissively. “Och, no’ ye, ye silly lad. Ye go have a nice chat with Vartok and Mkaalad. I’m stealing Verna away to ken her better. Och, here!” Almost as an afterthought, she dug into her satchel and pulled out a bundle wrapped in a towel. “I made ye a sausage roll, laddie, I ken they’re yer favorites.”

The look on Jorak’s face as he unwrapped the treat was...well, I suppose the closest I could call it was awe .

“I havenae tasted one in...” he began, but trailed off as he turned the large roll in his hands.

“Since ye left us, aye.” Nan’s tone was as gentle as her pat on his forearm. “I’ve missed ye—and the way ye enjoy my baking—as much as the rest of the village has. Run along now, that’s a good laddie.”

It was almost funny to see the bemusement on Jorak’s face as she pushed him out the door. But she didn’t close it. Instead, she gestured to me.

“Come along, lassie, we’re going to my home where I have some treats for ye.”

I didn’t ask what they were—another sausage roll?—but gathered up the apple spread and the deed and followed her through the village.

“Bloodfire Village is a lovely place to live.” The old woman sent me a knowing smile. “All of us here have found so much happiness with our Mates.”

“Aye,” I agreed softly, looking around. “I can see that.”

‘Twas too bad I could not stay.

“Here we are, Verna,” Nan announced, sweeping me toward a well-kept cottage that

shared a garden with another. “Let us see what I have for ye...”

‘Twas not the cakes and tea laid out on the table that made me gasp with delight, but...

“Isadora!” I cried, hurrying to hug the other woman. “Ye are safe? Ye are well?”

Laughing, she embraced me. “I am ! Torvolk saved me!” She pulled back to hold me at arm’s length. “Verna, I cannot thank you enough for what you did for me.”

I scoffed, but fingered her butchered hair.

“I did naught. Not enough.” Although what I could have done to protect her from Alred’s cruelty, I didn’t know. “I am sorry.”

Isadora merely smiled and pulled me into a hug.

“You comforted me when I needed comfort. But how are you here? I have only been here for a sennight, so you must have crossed through the veil the same time I did? Oh, I am sorry, where are my manners? This is Myra.”

Her words and questions had come at me quickly, and I wasn’t sure which I was supposed to respond to, until that last one. Isadora turned me to face the hearth, where a pretty dark-skinned woman nodded solemnly.

“Myra, this is Verna, who—she was at the tavern that night. She protected me.”

“I did not.” I wasn’t going to allow her to paint me as a hero. “I merely gave you a hug.”

“A hug I needed .” Isadora’s arm was still around me, as if she could offer comfort in

return. “I have hoped I would have the chance to thank you.”

I knew I was blushing.

“What were you doing there?” Myra asked quietly, her expression carefully neutral.

I lifted my chin.

“Whoring. I was doing what Alred wanted Isadora to do, and when Torvolk bought her, I saw my chance to run.”

Myra’s expression softened just slightly, and something like regret flickered in her dark eyes.

“If you have aught to discuss, aught I can do to help...”

Nan stepped up the table, interrupting our reunion.

“Myra is a midwife,” she announced matter-of-factly. “She’s here for her sister Avaleen’s confinement, but she’s been helping me with all manner of healings.”

Och, now I was definitely blushing, unable to meet their eyes.

“Nay, I...I am...” I swallowed. “I am clean. I have no need of your services.”

Myra merely nodded, but Isadora squeezed me.

“But how are you here ?”

Before I could answer, Nan clucked her tongue.

“Tea! Cakes! I baked all last night so we could have this treat, and ye can catch up as we break our fast!”

“Nan is passionate about sweets,” Myra whispered as an aside as we took our places, and I saw mischief sparkling in her dark eyes. “And being in charge of the conversation.”

Rather than deny the accusations, the older woman just cackled and demanded Isadora pour the tea.

My stomach was too tight to eat, but I bit into the seedcake to be polite. My eyes widened.

“Oh my !” I mumbled. It was delicious !

Isadora chuckled in agreement, and while Nan preened, even Myra’s stern facade eased.

“I told you,” she murmured, serving herself. “Nan takes her sweets seriously.”

My stomach might still be knotted, but I wasn’t going to miss the chance to eat something this good—honey and tartness burst over my tongue.

“Jorak would love this.”

It wasn’t until Nan chuckled that I realized what I’d revealed. Aye, so I knew his likes...I’d been living with him for a sennight.

More than living with him .

Well, aye.

“Lassie, drink yer tea and get comfortable.” Nan nudged my mug closer. “I think Isadora will burst if ye dinnae explain how ye came to be in our world, and with our Keeper nae less.”

Our world . The woman was as human as the rest of us, but she spoke like an orc. I glanced around the table. Isadora was Mated to Torvolk, although I guessed there was a story there. What about Myra? There were so many human women here in Bloodfire Village, and it seemed so ideal.

I wished I could stay.

But to protect them, I would need to go far away.

Still, I took a deep breath and began my story.

I told of my brother’s bargain with Alred, and the contract, and how Jorak had discovered Alred’s deceit. I told of Isadora’s escape providing the distraction I needed, and how I’d stolen all of his scrolls and followed her. She took my hand and squeezed when I spoke of the terror of crossing into the mist, and how Alred hadn’t followed me through the stones. And when I spoke of following her and Torvolk, Myra made a clucking noise.

“‘Twas foolish, Verna. The village is hours’ ride from the stones. You could not walk it.”

I shrugged. “I did not know that. All I knew was that Jorak did not want company, and he sounded...”

“Grumpy as a sick bear,” supplied Nan. “And not half as cute.”

“Jorak is a fine male.” I bristled. “And quite handsome.”

“I ken it, lassie,” Nan said with a teasing wink. “I’m glad ye see it as well.”

Myra was glancing between us. “I came to this village at midsummer, aye? I thought I knew everyone here by now, and most of the traveling traders. So...” She gestured with her mug. “Who in the hell is Jorak?”

“Och, lassie, dinnae be daft,” Nan cackled. “’Tis the Keeper!”

Myra’s eyes had widened. “The Keeper has a name?”

When Isadora giggled, Myra realized how foolish that had sounded, and scoffed to herself, “Oh, for fook’s sake, Myra, of course the Keeper has a name.” Shaking her head in disgust, Myra lifted her mug to her lips. “Sorry. I have only ever heard him called Keeper.”

“That was how Torvolk introduced me to him as well,” Isadora offered shyly. “Is his name well-known?”

Nan munched happily on her cake. “He’s related to half the clan, so they’ll recall his name soon enough when he returns to us. He’s been hiding at the stones for years, punishing himself, telling himself ‘tis the best for everyone, including himself.” She winked at me. “Verna here is teaching him differently.”

Was I?

I admit, my heart leapt at the old woman’s certainty of Jorak’s return to his clan, but at the same time, I was sad to know I wouldn’t be here to see it.

“So you trotted out after Isadora and Torvolk on foot?” Myra prompted me to return to my tale. “But you did not make it to the village.”

“Nay.” I winced in embarrassment and tried to hide behind my tea. “About the time the snow started, I realized how foolish I had been. I...” I closed my eyes as I remembered the terror. “I thought I would die there. Jorak saved me.”

It seemed such a simple phrase. Jorak saved me . He had saved me, in so many ways. He’s saved my life. He’d given me a place. And...he’d shown me caring. Gentleness I hadn’t imagined. And pleasure.

Dear God, the pleasure!

“Ah.” Myra hummed knowingly. “And I suspect that look is meaningful as well.”

Before I could sputter a denial—although should I?—Isadora changed the topic.

“The snow came the day after the full moon. You were likely trapped in his cottage?” She patted my arm consolingly. “The Keeper did not strike me as an easy man to live with.”

I found myself bristling again. “He is gruff, aye, but kind and gentle. He was worried—” Nay, that wasn’t the right way to say it. “He knew I would disrupt his order, but he allowed me to stay.”

And he did not ask for my body in return. He thinks I am worth plenty as I am!

“He seems to like my cooking, and...and he is teaching me to read!”

The other women made impressed noises at that announcement, and I nodded, relieved to have turned the topic.

“Jorak read Alred’s contracts, and we learned how he had cheated so many women. And...” I scrambled for the scroll I brought and laid it beside Nan. “And I learned

that his tavern actually belongs to Lars Weaver.”

Isadora and Myra didn’t seem to understand, but I was watching Nan. The older woman’s fingers shook just slightly as she opened the scroll.

“Really?” she whispered. “I...havenae thought of my father in years.”

“Jorak says you are his only child,” I murmured. “So the deed should go to you.”

The old woman frowned down at the letters, letters I could only now recognize thanks to Jorak’s hours of patient teaching.

“I dinnae need it or want it.”

“Alred’s tavern belongs to you, Nan?” Isadora asked. “’Tis a fine building.”

“That just means he will want the deed back,” warned Myra in that blunt way of hers.

I stared bleakly down at my cake and whispered, “I know.”

I did know. The veil might only open once a month, but at the next full moon, after the Midwinter Festival...he would be waiting. I knew it.

“Nan,” Isadora interrupted my dread. “Will you tell us about your life before your Mate stole you away? Did you live on a farm like Myra?”

The older woman’s fingers wrapped around the scroll, but her expression slowly softened into a smile.

“My grandfather had a farm, but my mother’s family kept sheep, and she and my father made wool?—”

“Oh, Weaver .” The blonde woman pulled her hand from my arm and scooped up her cake. “I should have realized.”

“I still dinnae like the smell of wet sheep,” Nan confessed, and Myra grunted an agreement. “Nasty creatures. Sorry if you like them, Verna.”

Drawn back into the conversation, I shook my head, forcing myself to focus on the here and now, not the fear of the future.

“I was raised on a farm, and I never liked them...but I like them better than goats.”

Myra’s breath burst from her in what might have been a laugh. “Aye, definitely. Chickens or ducks?”

Nan shared a story about a friend of hers whose ducks laid the most delicious eggs, and I found myself telling my new friends about Jorak’s brown hen, and all our names for her.

The morning grew late, and we helped prepare a meal, then we tackled chores Nan needed help with, and I felt... welcomed . Never in my life had I had true friends. At the farm ‘twas just Da and my brothers, then later, Alred’s other whores. I had kept my own council.

But Isadora had changed that. I’d comforted her, had felt her pain...and when she’d escaped, it had made me brave enough to try. Because in that moment in the tavern, she’d become my friend. And now?

And now I had more friends. Nan. Isadora. Myra. Avaleen. The other women whose names I heard. They were welcoming me, glad to have me here in Bloodfire Village. A place where one family wasn’t above another because of greed. A place where women were not only valued, but cherished . Protected. A place where children...

Well, Myra explained that orcish children were only conceived between Mated pairs. So sex wasn't considered taboo; 'twas actually encouraged as "practice" before young people found their Mates. So when children were born, they were born to strong, loving partnerships, and were never unwanted.

'Twas a beautiful place, one that seemed almost magically impossible after the horrors of the last five years.

I wanted to stay here.

But I couldn't bring danger down on their heads.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Jorak

The first day back in Bloodfire Village, I was...surprised. Aye, surprised was the best word for it.

The people—my clan—all remembered me and greeted me almost deferentially. As if I was someone important . They hailed me with, “Welcome home, Keeper!” and offered me small gifts.

‘Twas strange.

My people should be ashamed of me, should they not? I’d failed in battle, I’d become half a male. My distraction, my lack of control, had resulted in disaster, and I’d spent seven years atoning for that lapse.

But apparently they saw this as service to the clan . At least, that’s what Vartok told me before he was called away to settle a dispute between Darnaal the shepherd and his brother. He asked to meet with me the next day, and although I’d planned on returning to the stones, I couldn’t deny the request from the acting chief.

Unfortunately, Mkaalad discovered I was no longer in a meeting and badgered me into sparring with him.

I still carried a blade because ‘twould be foolish to travel through the Highlands without it. But I didn’t practice with it nearly as much as I had when I was younger.

My balance was different now, and my left arm was slower, more cumbersome.

Still, my cousin— second cousin —refused my excuses, and I ended up with a shield strapped to the remains of my right elbow, sweat streaming down my face, as Mkaalad cheerfully hacked at me.

‘Twas humiliating.

And difficult as the hells themselves to keep my Kteer in place. It wanted me to berserker rage, to attack, to hack away at my perpetually smiling cousin, and do real pain damage hurt kill , and I wasn’t going to allow that. But I was itchy and irritable and breathing heavily, trying to contain those urges while also working muscles I hadn’t in a long while.

But Mkaalad seemed oblivious to my struggle. And through it all, he called out encouragement.

“Good! Aye, a fine block. Nay, ye must see that coming!” He laughed as he swatted me in the thigh with the side of his blade, making my Kteer howl in fury. “Faster, Keeper— Good ,” he blurted in admiration when I finally went on the attack.

Dimly, I was aware of the other males who’d halted their sparring and were gathering around to watch our humiliating bout. I hated that they were seeing me like this—awkward, shamed, out of practice.

But to my surprise, I began to hear shouts of encouragement from them. Cheers when I landed a blow. Bellowed suggestions and advice. Wagers and heckling for both Mkaalad and myself.

The cadence was...familiar, somehow. Welcoming.

They weren't there to mock my lack of practice or my missing arm or even the impetuosity which had led to it. They were there in support . They were there as my clan. As my friends?

The sun was rushing toward the west when Mkaalad lowered his sword and backed away, panting. With that big grin on his face, he called out.

“Well done, Keeper. Do ye need a bath as much as I do?”

And I felt my scowl easing.

“I doubt I stink half as bad as ye.”

He threw back his head and laughed then stepped up to my side—still chattering away about the match—and removed the shield from my arm without being asked.

‘Twas strange to have him touch me. To have him help me without waiting for me to ask. Would I have asked? I'd grown used to doing things alone over the last seven years, but I could not have managed the shield alone. My cousin had seen what I needed, and did it nonchalantly, without judgement.

Hmm.

I didn't say much as a group of us—sweaty, jostling warriors—soaked in the hot springs, but I listened. I listened to how they spoke to one another...and how they spoke to me . And I felt...

Well, I suppose I felt as if, for an afternoon, I was one of them. As if I could have a place here in this chaotic, loud life, so very different from what I was used to.

But by the time I returned to my cottage, my Kteer was back to making its demands.

Irritation bubbled inside me and I knew it had naught to do with the sparring or the realizations of the day, and everything to do with the tempting little female who waited for me.

As Verna spoke in excitement about the women she'd met and how she'd spent her day preparing this meal for us with her new friends, 'twas even more obvious how much she deserved this. How much she needed to live in Bloodfire Village.

But I was the Keeper. My place was at the stones, was it not?

That night, I couldn't not reach for her. But I knew my Kteer—and my cock, and my heart—wasn't going to be satisfied with merely holding her. So I waited until she fell asleep, then rolled up in my plaid in front of the dwindling fire.

The hearth was uncomfortable, but I told myself no worse than what I deserved.

I snuck from the cottage before the sun was up, like a dog with its tail between its legs, unwilling to face Verna's cheer. Wandering the village that early was cold, lonely, and frankly stupid, but Nan opened her door as if there was never a doubt I'd be standing there.

"Come in, laddie, and have another sausage roll afore ye meet with Vartok."

Did the old female know everything? I couldn't pass up one of her sausage rolls though, so I followed her inside. Determined not to linger, I stood beside the door, but when I bit into the warm bread, I couldn't contain my rumble of approval.

"Good, eh?" She nudged me with her elbow, then crossed her arms and stood there, watching me eat. "I like a lad who can appreciate good cooking."

I'd missed good cooking, all these years. 'Twas no more than I deserved, learning to

make my own pottage and bread, but?—

Why ?

I frowned thoughtfully while I chewed. Why, what?

Why did ye deserve that? To struggle? To be lonely?

I preferred to be alone. No distractions.

Ye isolated yerself as punishment. Ye denied yerself the things ye loved for seven years. Why?

Because I deserved it.

For momentarily losing focus? For suffering a horrible injury?

Scowling, I stopped eating, glaring down at the treat in my hand. Where in the shite had all these thoughts come from?

“I’ll wrap it up for ye, Jorak,” came Nan’s quiet offer. “Ye have much on yer mind.”

I did.

When she shooed me out the door, I grunted my thanks, but said naught else to her, afraid if I opened my mouth, the words would spill out. Words I didn’t yet know or understand.

Not sure if I wanted them to spill out. If I wanted to hear them myself.

I was still scowling when I arrived at Vartok’s home, the small one attached to the

smithy. 'Twas always warm in here, which was nice in the winter.

"Good morning," Vartok yawned, inviting me in. "Ale?"

I raised a brow, and he shrugged sheepishly in response to my question. "I havenae gone to sleep yet. 'Tis still verra late at night for me."

"Fook, Vartok, the shepherd thing must have ye worried."

He plopped down at his table and dropped his head into his hands. " Everything has me worried. What if we cannae find Kragorn? What if he's..."

Dead . He didn't have to say it.

Each full moon since the autumn raiding season, I'd seen the messages flying back and forth, the comings and goings, as the clan become more frantic to find their missing chief.

"We would've had word if he was dead, Vartok."

"No' if he fell after the battle." His voice was muffled. "There was chaos in the retreat. If he was wounded and separated..."

The blacksmith, normally so charming and affable, sounded bleak now.

"Or captured by Tarbert. They could have killed him and tossed his body into a pit, and the gods wouldnae even have a chance to honor him."

Oh hells, mayhap the male did need some ale. I crossed to the mantel, where a pitcher waited.

“Ye’ve always been his heir. Ye had to have kenned this was a possibility.”

Vartok lifted his head to glare at me, and I acknowledge ‘twas not the most sensitive thing to say. I thrust a mug of ale at him in apology.

“Ye’re good at talking to people,” I offered. “Ye’re diplomatic.”

“But I hate being in charge.” He stared into the depths of the ale. “I need a council. Torvolk. Ye.”

“Me?” I couldn’t help the way I blurted it. “I’m no’...”

“Ye’ve studied the most of any of us.” Taking a deep breath, he placed the mug on the table and met my eyes. “I need yer advice. I need ye to guide me. If I’m to tackle this—gods forbid, for the rest of my life—then I need to understand the past.”

I was impressed. “Aye, ye do.” ‘Twould be how I’d tackle the problem, for certes. “But it doesnae have to be me . I’m the Keeper.”

“Aye, and...” He scrubbed a hand down his face, his claw catching on the ring through his lip, and scowled at himself. “I would ask that ye consider moving back to the village for three weeks out of the month. I’ve already sent young Farord and Garn to yer byre-cottage—they’ll leave this morning and care for the animals while ye’re here. Please?”

He met my eyes. “I need ye, Keeper.”

Well, fook .

He was sending someone to care for the cows and chickens? Sighing, I rubbed the back of my neck.

“I’ll stay another day.”

“A fortnight,” Vartok countered, his gaze determined. “I’m no’ the only one who needs ye here. The clan needs ye to teach us. Myra tells me ye’ve taught Verna to read ?”

“I’ve taught her the basics,” I confessed.

“Yer clan needs that. We need ye , Keeper.”

“I...” I shook my head. “The stones...”

Vartok leaned back in his chair and folded his arms.

“The stones only need ye a few days out of the month. Ye can be both the Keeper of the Bloodfire legacy and the Bloodfire veil, aye?”

Could I? Could I live in the village for three weeks out of the month, and tend to the stones when the veil was open?

I thought of Verna, and how happy she was here. I thought of being able to see her for part of the month, when I visited...

“At least a sennight, Keeper,” he wheedled. “Or stay until after the Festival. I have a thousand questions already. For certes, ye can help me.”

Another sennight of sleeping on the hearth to avoid having to touch Verna. Another sennight of my Kteer urging me to touch claim lick taste love .

“I cannae,” I whispered in a raspy voice, my eyes closing, accepting the truth. “I have to leave. I cannae stay around her.”

It wasn't until I heard Vartok's hiss that I realized what I'd confessed. I winced.

"Ye havenae claimed her yet?" he asked.

My shoulders dropped back against the mantel and I opened my eyes, only to stare over his shoulder at the door to the smithy.

"Nay," I croaked, hating the confession. "No' completely."

Just the memory of the way she'd shuddered and spent on my tongue, the way she'd gasped my name...Malla the Beginner forgive me, I couldn't be strong for very much longer.

"Keeper..." Vartok's voice had gone soft, almost pitying. "Ye ken she's yer Mate. Ye cannae argue with that. Yer eyes?—"

"Aye, I ken it," I growled. An orc's eyes glowed when he was in the midst of some passion—anger, fear, love...or the Mating Heat. "She doesnae."

Vartok tilted his head to the side, sending his beaded tail of hair swaying. "And when ye return to the stones, ye'll take her with ye?"

"Nay." I took a deep breath. "She belongs here. With ye. With the women. Safe."

"Ye could keep her safe. I heard ye held yer own against Mkaalad yesterday."

The male really did know everything that went on, did he not? Scowling, I spat the words, "I'm missing an arm, Vartok."

"And it didnae seem to matter." The other male shrugged. "Ye cannae expect to return to yer stones and leave yer Mate here, Keeper. It willnae work, no' with the

Heat, or yer Kteer . If ye return without her, if ye deny yerself...”

I saw him swallow as he shook his head, dropping his gaze to the mug on the table in front of him as he continued in a whisper.

“That horrible feeling in yer chest and limbs will continue. ‘Twill get worse . Ye willnae be able to concentrate, naught will make sense.”

I studied the ornaments wove through his dark hair with a frown.

How did he know? He was speaking from experience, I was certain of that. What had been happening in the village? What had Vartok been struggling with?

I straightened with a deep breath.

“I can control it.”

I could . The last seven years of my life had been all about control. I could do this.

But the acting chief just shook his head sadly and finally met my eyes.

“Ye would be lonely.”

“I like being alone.”

He grunted softly. “Do ye?” Without giving me a chance to lie, he shook his head again. “Ye cannae leave with it unresolved between ye and Verna. Ye have to explain to her. Ye have to go claim yer Mate.”

Long after I’d sent him to bed and promised to return in the afternoon, long after I stalked through the village on the way to the loch, long after I’d found my old

favorite overlook and stood there, glaring at the frigid waters, I remembered his words.

Go claim yer Mate.

Go claim yer Mate.

Go claim yer Mate.

My Kteer approved, of course, judging from the jostling in my chest. But was it the logical thing to do? Giving into instinct, giving into my heart ?

My gaze shifted to the stump of my right arm. Look what had happened the last time I loosened my hold on my control. Disaster. I'd lost my...my everything .

But...

I swallowed.

Mayhap disaster would be worth it, to claim Verna as my Mate. Even just for a night.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Verna

I was beginning to think Jorak was avoiding me. I couldn't lose the nagging suspicion that he hadn't slept beside me, and he was gone when I woke. That, added to the general surliness since we'd arrived in the village, told me he couldn't wait to be rid of me.

Well? What do you expect? He has made it clear he prefers the solitude of his byre-cottage .

And despite all the little improvements I'd made to this home—the sweet-smelling herbs, the cheerful pillows Isadora had helped me sew, the daily fresh bread now that I had access to a real oven—he still wanted to leave. It wasn't enough.

I wasn't enough.

Snow had fallen during the night, so I bundled up in my red cloak—and couldn't help but remember how Jorak had called it ridiculous—to sweep the front walk. Keeping busy was the key, although even the activity couldn't distract my mind.

I was likely frowning when I heard Avaleen calling my name.

“My goodness, Verna, you look as if you are trying to melt the snow with your glare!”

The dark-haired woman was waddling toward me, her arms full of fabric, a big grin on her face.

I had to smile ruefully. “Just thinking. Should you be out and about without Mkaalad?” I now knew she was expected to give birth around Midwinter, and I couldn’t help but worry for her. “What if you fell?”

“You sound just like my Mate.” She rolled her eyes and headed for the door. “It is a handful of steps—a footful?—from my home to yours. And I promised I would sit at your table as you tried these on. Come along.”

I followed in bemusement. “Try them on?”

When Avaleen dropped her bundle on the bed in triumph, I gasped in delight. “Avaleen, these are lovely!” I scooped up a simple wool dress dyed a pale purple. “Whose are they?”

“They are yours now.” My new friend lowered herself into a chair with a little grunt as I turned in astonishment. “Bloodfire Village is used to human women arriving with little to their name, so we share things. Many of those were donated to me when Mkaalad brought me for healing. I have outgrown them.”

Winking, she hefted her breasts to show me exactly what she meant.

“So, I am passing them on.”

I could only shake my head in amazement.

“Avaleen, I cannot accept?—”

She tsked and flicked her fingers dismissively.

“Everyone has shared what they can. Myra brought all of our gowns and personal things when she crossed over, and we have all made more since we have been here. Try on the lavender, ‘twas dyed to match the heather.”

I clutched the gown to my chest, overwhelmed by the generosity. “I...I do not know...”

“Oh, go do it.” She gestured toward the screen and, grinning, I hurried to follow her order.

When was the last time I had a new dress? And there was a fine linen chemise included, much nicer than my stained, mended one. And new stockings!

When I emerged from the screen, I felt like a new person.

Avaleen, who was slumped in her chair, rubbing her stomach, brightened. “Oh, you look lovely! Take down your braid, let us see you!”

I obliged, running my fingers through my curls. Then, at her urging, I spun about with a little laugh.

“Just stunning,” she announced. “The embroidery at the neckline draws the eyes. You must tell me what the Keeper thinks.”

Her wink was positively lewd, which should have looked odd coming from such a pregnant female, but instead made my heart sink.

She must have noticed. “Oh, dear. What is it? Your Mate does not treat you correctly?”

“Jorak is not my Mate,” I mumbled, bending to sort through the clothing on the bed.

“And he treats me perfectly.”

“Hmm. Not perfectly enough, if you do not believe you are his Mate.”

When I turned a sharp glare over my shoulder, Avaleen shrugged. “We can all see it.” She pressed her palm to the middle of her chest, her expression softening. “Surely you can sense something...here?”

I paused, against my better judgement, focusing on what was going on inside my chest as she continued.

“To orcs, Mating is...part of who they are. Who they are . There’s a part of them which recognizes their Mate and reacts. Mkaalad told me ‘tis like...a knowing . They just know whom they belong with, who will be their partner for the rest of their life.”

So like...a marriage? I glanced over at her bleakly.

“I am no wife.”

But Avaleen shook her head. “‘Tis no’ so simple. Marriage vows can be broken, or ignored, or put aside. A Mating bond...cannot. Once an orc male recognizes his Mate, he will not have eyes for another female for the rest of his life, even if his Mate rejects him.”

Oh .

That did sound rather different from marriage.

“Verna,” she asked softly, “do you love him?”

Suddenly overwhelmed, I crushed what I was holding—apparently a light linen robe

of some sort—against my stomach and dropped to the mattress with an oof , staring off into the middle distance.

“Verna?” my new friend prompted softly.

“I do,” I whispered. “I should not. The last years have taught me the folly of allowing my heart to be involved, but Jorak...he is so kind. Gruff, aye, but sweet. And he is the only male who...”

I trailed off, certain my blush was warring with the tears in my eyes. Avaleen made a noise of understanding.

“See?” She murmured. “He is your Mate.”

Snorting, I tried to wipe my eyes. “No matter how much I might want it to be true, it cannot be.” I couldn’t stay here in his world. “He has made it clear he plans to leave me here in the village when he returns to his home.”

Avaleen hummed as she glanced about. “He does not like it here?”

“He thinks he has to care for the veil as some sort of—of penance. And he does not want me in his space.” He’d been clear enough of that when he’d saved me.

“What do you think? If he returned to the stones, would you be content to stay here in the village?”

I stared at my friend, my eyes aching from unshed tears.

“I...do not know. I like it here.” Nay, I loved it here. I loved how welcoming and caring everyone was. But the thought of losing Jorak...

The tears began to seep. “But I have to leave.”

I had to face Alred so he wouldn’t find Nan.

Avaleen, however, assumed I meant to follow Jorak, and nodded in understanding.

“You cannot allow him to abandon you here. If you want to be with him, you will have to convince him to either stay with you, or take you with him.”

I hurried to wipe at my eyes and dropped the robe back onto the bed.

“What do you mean?”

“Well...” She patted the table across from her, inviting me to conspire with her. “You need a plan.”

My eyes went wide. “A plan to do what?”

Her wink was leisurely, teasing, then she nodded to the robe I’d just dropped.

“Why, to seduce your Mate, of course.”

Jorak

I’d tried to stay away, I really had. But stalking through the village, scowling at neighbors, sparring with the warriors, even prowling the nearby woods...none of it was helping.

Something drew me back to the little cottage where I’d once lived. The cottage I knew now must belong to Verna. Her scent covered everything. Her touches were throughout.

Being there with her and unable to claim her was simultaneously torture and bliss.

I needed her. I needed her to be mine. Even if she chose to stay here...

Swallowing down my frustration, I threw open the door.

I wasn't sure what I expected, but... 'twasn't this.

There was a basin by the hearth, the steam rising from it telling me 'twas for bathing. Another clue was the fact that Verna stood, one leg on the chair, dragging a soapy rag up her thigh.

Torvor's Hammer , the sight of all that creamy skin... I groaned aloud as I kicked the door closed behind me and reached for the clasp of my cloak.

Verna, meanwhile, didn't act surprised or irritated. Nay, she straightened and twitched the robe she wore—where did she get linen so sheer it molded to her skin?—so it revealed even more. She dragged the rag up her leg once more then tossed it carelessly into the basin—without moving her gaze from mine.

“Hello, Jorak.” Her voice was low, enticing.

Mayhap I made a noise as I stumbled toward her, but I had no way of knowing. I managed to stop myself from reaching for her when I was mere inches from her, my tongue aching for her taste, my claws digging into my palm to hold myself in check.

“What are ye doing?” I rasped idiotically.

Her grin was wicked. “Tempting you.”

I didn't know how to respond to that. She'd offered her body once before, and I'd

told her she didn't need to do that.

“Verna...”

She shifted her hips then, opening to me so her naked knee brushed against my thigh...and the scent of her arousal—the scent of her wet cunny—slammed into me. This wasn't gentle and subtle. She wanted me .

With a groan, I stopped fighting. I reached up and wrapped her hair around my fist, tipping her head back so she stared up at me as I shifted closer. My cock pressed against her, but she would know what that meant.

“Ye want this?” I growled harshly. “Ye want my touch? My mouth on ye?”

I knew I was being too rough, and I half-hoped I would scare her off. But my Verna was bold and brave.

She held my gaze and lifted her arms to drape them around my neck.

“Nay, Jorak. I want ye .”

Her words shook me to my core. Even my Kteer stuttered in confusion, and in trying to understand, I repeated what I believed.

“Ye—ye just want me to make ye come.”

“I know you will,” she whispered. “You have already shown me how magnificent your touch, your tongue is. But now...” She stretched up on her toes and pressed her lips to mine.

I don't know what she was trying to say, but I don't know if it mattered then. Instinct

took over and I crushed her to me, plundering her mouth the way I yearned to claim her body.

Then she whimpered and slid her thigh along mine, and I swear I could taste her arousal on my tongue. On her tongue.

I wanted this. I needed this. My Kteer howled with victory as I pulled her lip between my teeth. That, and the little whimper she gave, was my last chance.

Desperate, I ripped myself away, breathing too hard, and crushed her head against my chest. I focused on the still-steaming water in the basin, trying to regain control.

Of myself. Of my life. Of aught.

“Jorak,” she murmured, her lips caressing my chest, and I shuddered.

She was skilled.

“By Palton’s Spear, ye tempt me, lass,” I ground out, hating the confession. “Ye make me...”

She wriggled her hips, capturing my hardness against her stomach, making me think of how warm and delicious her cunny would be.

“I can make you feel good.”

Aye, that was the problem. I closed my eyes on a groan.

“I am no’ one of yer customers .” I spat out the word, angry at myself and the males in her past who should have protected her. “I’ll no’ be pitied, nor obligated to. Ye dinnae have to accept my touch just because?—”

When she pushed away from me I snapped my teeth closed on the bitter words and glanced down to see her fierce glare.

“How dare you think I am doing this just because—” Sputtering, she shook her head. “Why do you think I pity you? You said that afore, when you made me feel so good. You said I deserved that pleasure, as if you pitied me !”

The scent of her anger mixed with her arousal.

“I dinnae pity ye, lass. I’m enraged on yer behalf, angry I couldnae protect ye from the pain in yer past, but?—”

“See?” Scowling, she pulled even further away and smacked my chest as I released her hair. “ See ? You say the most perfect things, and yet you think I would pity you? Why would I pity you? You take care of me, you protect me?—”

Frustrated at this litany, I waved the stump of my right arm in her face.

“Because I’m half a man, Verna!”

Her eyes widened as her jaw dropped.

Unable to help myself, I bellowed, “The last time I lost control, this happened! I allowed myself— Fook .” I turned away and dragged my hand through my hair as I stalked to the opposite side of the cottage, back, and away again, trying to calm my erection and my Kteer .

“Verna, I cannae lose control again. The last time I did, the last time I gave in to my primitive side, I nearly died, and I lost my future.”

I heard her scoff. “You did not. You healed, and you found a new role helping your

clan.”

“I have a carefully ordered life. Allowing ye into it...” I tugged my hair, growling, frustrated, angry at myself. “Naught has been the same since that morning I found ye in the snow,” I muttered. “I dinnae like to lose control.”

“I came into your life and disrupted your order.”

At her neutral tone, I cautiously turned to see her studying me, her hands on her hips.

“Aye,” I agreed.

“But you still allowed me to stay.”

I took a deep breath and held it, feeling on the edge of a precipice. “How could I no’?” I confessed simply. “Ye were...”

“Lost. Helpless. Too talkative.” She raised a brow, daring me to contradict her. “Chaotic. Full of questions. In your space.”

“Everything,” I whispered, eying the way those magnificent curls fell around her shoulders. “Ye were everything.” My everything .

Her spring-green eyes softened. “And you took care of me. Jorak, I need you to know that sometime in the last days we have spent together, I have fallen in love with you.”

In love with you . I closed my eyes on a helpless groan. In love with you.

My Mate was in love with me, and I should be crowing in victory...but I didn’t know where I belonged. Didn’t know what my future could be.

“Jorak.” Her tone was sharp, and when I looked at her, she nodded once then pointed.
“Sit in that chair.”

She was bold and brave, and, aye, I loved her. She was my everything.

I moved to sit in the chair.

“Good.” Verna turned the chair her foot had rested on earlier so it faced me. Then she slowly sank into it, holding my gaze.

Now we sat, facing each other, without the table between us. She spread her thighs slightly, so the scent of her arousal grew. What had caused it?

“Do you know what I was doing earlier?” she murmured, lifting her hands to rest on the top of her tits. “When I was washing? I was thinking of you.”

She dragged her hands under those magnificent breasts, lifting them. I could see the pebbling of the nipples through the robe, which gaped open, revealing too much of her cleavage.

“I was thinking of how you touched me so gently. How you drove me mad.”

Her hands slid down her sides and my mouth went dry as my gaze followed the sensual motion. When she reached her thighs, she slid her hands between them, spreading them, and I suspected I stopped breathing.

“I was thinking of your tongue on me, Jorak. The pleasure you brought me...” She used her palms to slide the robe along her thighs, pushing it aside...until it fell behind her. She sat, legs spread, her wet cunny on display as she dragged her fingers closer to her core.

“When you touched me here .”

My claws dug into my palm as I tried to hold myself in check. The scent of her arousal, the sight of her touching herself...I was half-mad already.

“Do you remember, Jorak?” she murmured, dragging her finger along her wetness. “No man had ever touched me like that. Tasted me. You were my first.”

Such simple words, but they were an arrow to my heart. The flash of the blade that removed my arm. The cut, the pain, the exquisite joy , the shock?—

I lurched from the chair, falling to my knees in front of her, my fingers dimpling her thigh as I tried to remember to breathe.

You were my first .

Her lips curled as she cupped one of my cheeks. “How could you ever think I pitied you, Jorak? I love you.”

“Please,” I rasped, not certain what I was begging for. “Verna, I’m losing control. If ye dinnae want me to claim ye?—”

Her other hand joined the first, smelling sweetly of her cunny. She pulled me to her.

“I want to make you lose control. I am yours,” Verna whispered against my lips.

And I fell.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Verna

With a groan, Jorak took control of the kiss, and I was beyond delighted to let him. With him kneeling between my legs, I was able to push forward, rub myself— all of myself—along the hard planes of his body. I loved the way he gripped my hair—as if I was his lifeline—as he plundered my mouth.

He was so much bigger than me that even when I was sitting, his cock didn't fully line up with where I wanted it. I gyrated my hips and knew I was rubbing the dew of my arousal all over his kilt.

Oh well. I would wash it for him.

Later .

When his lips trailed along my jaw toward the sensitive spot beneath my ear, I gasped and wriggled against him, loving the way his chest stimulated my nipples. The linen gown had long since parted, and the sensation of it sliding over my skin was just one more thing to drive me wild.

“ Dkaar . Tlak'dkam, ” he murmured against my throat, and I tipped my head back with a groan to give him access. God, I loved when he lost control and spoke in his people's ancient tongue.

Or mayhap I just loved his tongue, period.

His hold on my hair loosened, then his hand was sliding down my back, around my side, down my thigh and back up again. I shuddered, already so aroused at the strength of his touch, and my fingers dug into his hair.

“Oh, God, Jorak, yes .”

“Tell me,” he commanded, his mouth against my shoulder. “Tell me what ye like, dkaar .”

“I want you to touch me,” I groaned. “Everywhere.”

“Here?” he murmured, sliding his hand up to cup my breast. ‘Twas a gentle touch, and I shuddered.

“ Aye .”

What was it with males and tits? Since working for Alred, I’d had all sorts of men squeezing and plucking and biting them. Some even wanted me to use them on their cocks, so they could spill across them.

But none— none of them—had ever treated my breasts with the reverence and softness Jorak showed them.

I wanted to lean back, to spread myself out, to let him feast gently upon my skin...but I didn’t want to break the contact. So I held on as if my life depended upon it, and lost myself in the pleasure.

I gasped when he dragged his wickedly ridged tongue across my nipple.

“Ye like that?” he murmured. “More?”

“More please.” I loved that he knew my body already, and that he was asking me what I wanted. “I love your tongue.”

Was it my imagination, or did he smile at that?

“My tongue loves ye.”

With that, he turned to capture my other breast, and his tusk scraped along my nipple. The sensation—hard and smooth and wet—had me gasping and arching against him, clutching him to me.

Enough!

“I want you in me, Jorak. Your cock, please.”

He reared back, his hand still cupping me, his expression guarded.

“This is about yer pleasure, dkaar .”

“Nay,” I said firmly, tightening my hold so he’d know I meant it. “I have already come once.” When he frowned, I elaborated. “Jorak, just thinking of you and what you could do to me made me come. I told you I touched myself, did I not?”

His eyes flared green. “Ye touched yerself when ye thought of me, and brought yerself to climax?”

“Of course.” I grinned. “And it was not the first time.”

“Malla the Beginner,” he whispered in what sounded like awe, his gaze darting over my face.

I gyrated my core against him. “I am pleased , you must believe me. But now I want your cock. In me.”

When he opened his mouth again, possibly to object, I hurried to explain.

“In the last days I have become close with some of the women in this village, and they have told me what to expect when it comes to sex with you.”

Avaleen had been quite explicit, with Nan offering suggestions and naughty cackles. Myra had listened, her dark skin flushing, as Isadora asked dozens of questions. I guess she and Torvolk hadn’t fully Mated yet.

But now Jorak’s gaze turned wary.

“What to expect?”

I dropped my hands, running my palms across his muscled shoulders. One hand slid down the remains of his right arm, and I saw him shudder as I caressed the scar tissue there, while the other...

The other dropped to the bulge in his kilt, and when I wrapped my fingers around his cock, he groaned.

“They tell me that an orc’s cock is made for pleasuring his Mate. When you impale me with it, I will climax. It is a gift from the gods to ensure I am ready to take you again and again.”

His eyes were half-shut as I stroked him through his plaid, but he managed to rasp, “This...this is true.”

“I want to experience that, Jorak. Please? Please give me your cock?”

“Ye’re certain?” he groaned.

“ Now , Jorak!”

His arm snaked around me, pulling me close.

“Lift my kilt,” he ground out, and I did. This allowed me to wrap my fingers around him—or try to. His cock was thick and— aye !—as ridged as his tongue. I squeezed him, wishing I could see it. Wishing I could taste him.

“ Dkaar , this is for ye.”

We were so close I had to stare at his lips.

“Use me how ye want.”

That was the invitation I’d been waiting for. I guided his cock to my weeping entrance and positioned him.

Jorak rocked his hips forward, impaling me.

And just as my new friends had told me, as soon as he was fully embedded, a climax burst over me, sudden and violent. Gasping, I arched my back, clinging to his hips as wave after wave of pleasure coursed through my veins.

He’d frozen, and I could feel him watching me.

“Good lass,” he murmured, gently stroking my back. “Take yer pleasure. Fooking magnificent, dkaar . Fooking remarkable.”

My pleasure was still a pink haze when I felt him move. He rocked backward just

enough to slide a few of those ridges from my cunny, which caused me to gasp again. My core was so sensitive from the orgasm and I could feel each and every ridge against my skin.

I found myself clutching at him.

“Aye,” I gasped. “Again!”

When he chuckled—actually chuckled? —I felt it throughout my body, and he slid in and out once more. It felt so good, I squeezed my eyes shut to try to capture the sensation.

His lips found my brow, then my nose, then my lips, gentle, teasing. I marveled that he could kneel on the floor and bend like this to be able to reach me.

“I cannot believe...”

He thrust into me, and my words cut off with a groan.

“What is it, Verna?” His voice sounded strange. “What can ye no’ believe?”

“Feels so good,” I gasped. “So soon.” I couldn’t believe how quickly he was stroking me back to an aroused state. I began to rock against him, trying to take him deeper, deeper. The pressure began to build behind my mound, utterly incredible.

I’d never been with a male who cared enough to bring me to climax once, much less twice!

“Thank you,” I whispered, arching in his hold, not certain what I was thanking him for exactly. “Thank you, please.”

Jorak froze, his cock so deep in me I swear I could feel him against my womb. And in that moment, I realized I wanted this. I wanted him . I wanted all of him, wanted him more than I'd ever wanted anything .

I didn't want to drink teas and worry about timing and fret about a pregnancy. Because I wanted Jorak, a piece of him, and I knew— knew —he would keep me safe.

“Jorak,” I whispered.

And he began to untangle himself.

“I cannae,” he groaned, trying to pull away as I held him closer.

“Verna, I...” He sounded tortured, and I opened my eyes to see his eyes glowing a fierce, desperate green. “I cannae hold on to my control.”

“Good.” I swallowed. “I do not want you to.”

His green gaze flicked across my face, searching, searching.

“ Dkaar —”

“What does that mean?” My cunny pulsed in need, and I was desperate to move. But not yet. Not now, not until he wanted this.

After a brief hesitation, he admitted, “ Beloved .”

“Dkaar ,” I whispered with a soft smile, my hands stroking his skin. “I love you.”

With a groan, Jorak lowered his lips, and I stretched up to meet him. But before he

kissed me, he growled a warning.

“If ye dinnae let me go right now, Verna, I’m going to spill in yer sweet cunny. I’m going to do what I’ve been dreaming of doing since I first met ye, and fill ye up with my cum. I’m going to claim ye , again and again, until nae one will doubt ye’re mine, and this is yer last chance to stop me .”

Didn’t he understand? I tightened my hold on him and smiled.

“I do not want to stop you. I want all of that.”

With a groan, he dropped his forehead to mine, and I knew he was so close to losing control. I wanted this. I wanted him to claim me, to care for me. If that meant using my body for his pleasure, well...this was the first male I genuinely wanted to pleasure. The first man whose pleasure mattered to me. I’d already climaxed twice, and that would be enough for me.

“Please, Jorak?” I whispered sweetly. “Please come in my sweet cunny?”

With a growl, he clutched me to him, flattening me against his chest as he pushed himself up on one knee. I gasped and wrapped my arms around his neck and my legs around his hips, and he stood while holding me. While impaling me.

With a quick turn and two steps—which felt remarkable!—he backed me up to the table. When he released me, I laid back, spread out like a meal. And the way he looked at me told me he was starving.

His cock still throbbed inside my core as he stood staring down at me. This angle was much more direct; I could feel him even deeper inside me. He yanked at the tie to my robe, spreading the linen around me like a tablecloth, then dragged one claw down my chest, between my breasts.

“So fooking bonny,” he muttered, his eyes glazed with that green need . “Mine.”

“Aye, Jorak, yours.” I wriggled against him. “Please.”

“Forever, Verna. Once I claim ye, we will be Mated.”

My lips formed the word forever , and I recognized what he was saying was important...but I couldn't concentrate on aught other than the need pulsing through me at that moment.

He bent over me, kissing my shoulder, the top of my breast, as his large hand spanned my side. The movement dragged his cock from me just a bit, each ridge sending my cunny shuddering, and I found myself mewling.

I reached for him, wanting to give him pleasure as well, but he growled and captured first one wrist, then the other with his wide grasp. Before I could understand, he pinned them above my head before moving his hand back to caressing me.

Well, I guess I could take a hint.

I closed my eyes so I could better focus on the sensation of his touch, holding my breath as he caressed, and teased, and licked. I felt him dragging the scar tissue of his right arm along my side and grinned at the way the sensation made me shiver. I loved that he was letting me see this part of him. I loved that he was letting me see him .

Each time he touched me, he slid in and out of my core, teasing me until I was mad with need. I squirmed on the table, pinned by his touch and his cock, until I could take no more. What was that I'd thought about giving him pleasure? Despite my paired climaxes, he seemed ready to give me more.

“Please, Jorak,” I whimpered, biting my lower lip. “I need...”

Taking pity on me, he began to move. His thrusts became stronger, more urgent.

“Puir human, need ? Ye need this?” he rasped, plunging into me. He fell forward, supporting himself with his palm at my side as his thrusts increased.

“Ye need to take yer Mate’s thick cock? Ye need to feel it filling yer cunny?”

“Aye!” I closed my hand around his wrist, as if I could hold myself in place, as my other hand went to my breast, tugging at my nipple the way he had.

“ Aye !”

“Say it,” he growled, spearing my cunny again and again. “Say it, Verna.”

“I need you!” I cried, my pleasure so very close . “I need my Mate’s thick cock. I want my Mate’s cum filling up my cunny, Jorak, please!”

In one swift move, he straightened, plunging deep into me as his hand moved to my curls. He remembered what I liked; his callused thumb brushed against the bud of my pleasure once, twice...

On the third time, I exploded.

“Jorak!” I screamed, my climax so sudden, so forceful that I arched my back, pushing against him.

‘Twas all he needed, apparently. I felt him stiffen as my inner muscles squeezed tightly...then he threw his head back and roared as he spilled into me. I felt a flood of warmth filling me as I milked him, rocking back and forth to try to draw out the sensation.

‘Twas...

‘Twas...

Amazing .

He curled forward over me, sliding his arm behind the small of my back, and after a long moment I felt him exhale, his warm breath stirring the hair at my temples. I laid there, still pinned by his cock, my legs dangling from the table, my arms at his back, and marveled at his strength. At his caring. At him .

I turned my head to press a kiss against his jaw.

“I love you.”

‘Twas a simple declaration, but he shuddered and pulled away. Before I could object, he straightened, pulling me with him. The movement caused his cock—not as thick as a moment ago—to slide from me with a spill of liquid warmth. Mayhap I winced, thinking of the damage done to the linen robe, because his expression was stern as he stared down at me.

“That was no’ well done,” he muttered.

I raised my brow and dragged my hands down his upper arms.

“I thought ‘twas exceedingly well done. Climaxing twice around your cock was...” I shook my head in disbelief. “I could not imagine such wonder.”

“Nay,” he said sternly, taking hold of my chin between his thumb and forefinger and tipping my head back so he could glare into my eyes. “‘Twas no’ well done of me .”

The green glow had faded slightly from his eyes, but his stare still just as intense. “I cannae believe I allowed myself to...”

“Lose control?” I grinned. “I enjoyed it.”

“Aye, I ken it,” he growled arrogantly, his gaze sweeping over me. “But I failed to bring ye enough pleasure. I should have focused on ye.”

My brows rose. “I thought?—”

“Ye only thought that because ye’re new at this.”

Chuckling, I wriggled against him. “I am nowhere close to being new at sex, Jorak.”

“No’ new at sex ,” he murmured, dropping his mouth closer to mine. “New to pleasure. As yer Mate, I should’ve brought ye to climax six or seven times afore I worried about my own. I’m going to have to make up for that.”

With that, he bent to scoop me up, his stump beneath my knees. I gasped and threw my arms around his neck.

“ Six or seven times ?” I squeaked.

From this angle I could only see his jaw, but I swear I saw it flex as he smiled just slightly. His arrogance was showing.

“I’ll fetch ye some food and water, Mate,” he announced, moments before tossing me onto the bed.

I floundered, trying to pull the robe from my shoulders and sit up at the same time.

“Water? Why?”

“Because,” he growled a vow, “Ye’re no’ leaving this bed until ye scream my name loud enough for the whole village to hear.”

Oh.

Oh, aye .

My lips curled into an anticipatory smile as I lifted my arms and beckoned him to me.

“Promise?”

He did.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jorak

My Kteer had won. I'd completely lost control of myself, my reserve, and my intentions. And let it be known: I had no regrets.

Because Verna was mine . Mine in every way. That first time I'd claimed her, with her spread out on the table like that? Sheer perfection. But as I'd told her, 'twas not the way things should be done.

'Twas my job, as her Mate, to fulfill her in every way.

And I spent the night—and the next day, and the next night, and a few days after that—doing so.

I lost count of the number of times I made her scream, but I knew my heart would never get enough of the look of wonder on her face each and every time I did.

I quickly learned that my favorite was the way she'd gasp in delight each time I entered her and her orgasm unexpectedly hit her. So I took great pride in doing that again and again. I would lick her until she found fulfillment, then enter her and watch her come a second time...then withdraw and feed and bathe her, denying my cock its release because of how miraculous Verna thought 'twas.

And my cock could handle a wait. 'Twas worth it.

Then came the morning when, to my surprise, she was awake before me. I slowly woke to the most delicious sensation, and it took me only a moment to identify it—Verna's mouth on my cock.

I was already on the edge of the precipice, my body reacting to hers. But being awake, and seeing her red hair falling across my green skin as her swollen lips struggled to take more and more of my ridges?

I nearly came then and there.

“Dkaar !” I blurted, reaching for her. “What are ye doing? ‘Tis my responsibility to?—”

My cock popped from her mouth.

“Hush, love,” she commanded. “I am making you feel good.”

Och, aye, she was!

“If ye continue that, I'll spill in yer mouth,” I warned sternly.

“Aye, and I will lick it all up. Lie down, Jorak, I am very, very good at this.”

She was.

My cock was thick and she could only get a fraction of it down her throat, but that didn't stop her from bobbing enthusiastically, her palms and fingers spreading her saliva across my ridges, clamping me tightly.

My hand went to her head, my fingers wrapping through her hair in wonder. I had heard that some females did such things for their Mates, but I never imagined... The

act felt differently than sex, but I liked it very much. I think ‘twas the involvement of her tongue.

“Verna,” I gasped, unable to hold myself in check. “I’m going to...”

When she hummed, I felt it throughout my body.

I came with a wordless roar, thrusting upward into her mouth. My Mate, despite her best intentions, wasn’t able to take it all. On the first spurt, my seed spilled from her mouth as she opened it. The second spurt hit her forehead and hair, and by then she was laughing too hard to notice when the third spurt coated her red curls.

I found myself chuckling at her joy, which made her laugh harder.

Aye, it made my heart happy—and my Kteer proud—to know I’d brought her such joy. Such satisfaction.

After that, I bundled her into her red cloak and an old gown and took her to the hot springs where I washed her hair and body. Then I laid her out on the little stone ledge to clean her with my tongue then do it all over again until she was languid and sated from the heat and the pleasure.

When we returned to the cottage, we found a full meal waiting for us, which was more satisfying than the dried meats, cheeses, and tarts we’d been making do with so far.

“Where is this all coming from?” Verna asked in surprise as I poured her some ale.

“Our clan members are happy for us. They ken we will be...occupied, and uninterested in providing our own food, so they’ve been dropping off provisions for us. One day ‘twill be our turn to provide for another couple going through their

Mating heat.”

Because aye, I would stay here in the village. Vartok had made it clear how much he valued my council and insights, and had already begun to speak of me teaching the kitlings. I admit I wasn’t thrilled at the thought of being surrounded by so much chaos all the time, but I would gladly do it for the sake of my Mate.

The lads Vartok had sent to my byre-cottage by the stones had already returned with the bulk of my scrolls, my personal belongings, both cows, and the chickens. The gods below knew how they’d managed that, but it meant there was no need to hurry back. When the full moon approached, I would return to the cottage to monitor the pathway, and mayhap my Mate would go with me.

I would welcome the opportunity to be alone—with her—once more.

Aye, although I never thought I would be comfortable among my clan again, I was learning to be. No one faulted me for my mistake which cost me my arm. During sparring, the warriors cheered for me just as much as my opponent, and I was grateful for their suggestions and help. I would never again go to battle, but I would be capable of protecting my Mate and clan if necessary.

‘Twas easy enough to get overwhelmed with so many beings around me when I was used to the solitude of my byre-cottage...but Verna made everything better. I could retreat to her arms and know ‘twas worth it.

She belonged here in Bloodfire Village, and I belonged with her.

Two days before Midwinter Festival, I woke her with my tongue. I licked her gently, my weight supported by the remains of my right arm and my knees resting on the fur on the floor I’d placed there for just that purpose.

Grinning against her wet, pliant cunny, I realized we'd made many changes to this cottage on the outskirts of the village. 'Twas our home now, and I for one was looking forward to spending the next fifty years here with my Mate.

I knew the moment she woke, because Verna stretched and hummed, her hand dropping to my hair to hold me in place. I loved how she'd become so good at this, so ready to accept pleasure, and give it in return.

Her legs opened wider, allowing my tongue to thrust inside her and curl upward, while my thumb gently rubbed the little nub of her pleasure.

"Jorak!" she gasped as her inner muscles suddenly clamped down hard on my tongue and her climax burst over her.

I could do naught but drink down her spend as she came on my face.

Fooking perfection .

When she released me, I slowly sat back, my aching tongue lapping her dew from my chin and lips.

"Good morning, Mate."

Verna's arms stretched languidly to each side.

"Hmmm. Good morning. That was a perfect way to waken."

"Then I'll endeavor to wake ye that way each morning. Are ye hungry?"

She sat up and studied me. "Ye seem different— Oh! Your eyes!"

Without thinking, I touched my cheek, below one eye.

“What about them?”

“There is no green.” She peered closer. “Since a few days after you saved me, your eyes have always had a spark of green in them, or sometimes even glowing green. Now they are just black again.”

Grinning slightly, I bent down to claim her lips. When I straightened, I told her matter-of-factly, “’Tis because the Mating Heat has been satisfied. My Kteer and I are in accord once more, and I am in control.”

“Pity,” she sighed as she swung out of bed, holding the blanket around her. “I like when you lose control.”

Snorting, I swatted her arse as she shuffled toward the screen to perform her ablutions, and I began to prepare our morning meal.

When she joined me, dressed in that lovely purple gown again, I had to pull her to me for a kiss. Aye, my Kteer was at peace, finally, and I could take a moment to revel in the harmony of having my Mate at my side.

But when I pulled away, Verna’s eyes looked...sad?

“What is wrong, Dkaar ?” I murmured.

Her smile seemed forced.

“Naught is wrong,” she promised, lifting one hand to cup my jaw gently. “I was just thinking how much I love you, and how happy I am here.”

She did not look happy. I studied her, wanting to fix her troubles.

“Will ye allow me to take care of ye?”

Now her smile turned impish, more like my Verna.

“I would say you have already taken care of me.”

With a scoff, I swatted her arse again and nudged her toward the table. “And now I will feed ye so ye have the strength to bear up under my ministrations.”

With a put-upon sigh, she threw herself into the chair.

“Work, work, work! You are so demanding.”

“Aye,” I growled, wagging my brows lewdly. “And as my Mate, ye must give into my demands!”

She giggled and I slid the honied porridge across the table to her.

“What are yer plans today?”

I will admit the last days had been hazy. Hadn’t she done laundry with the village females the day I went with the warriors to fetch the tree to burn at the Midwinter Festival?

“More time with yer friends?”

Her smile didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“Aye, I told Myra I would help her catalog her herbs. She helped Nan make the spice

mixture for the festival's wine and now needs to know what is left."

I nodded, marveling at how domestic and natural it felt to be sitting here, breaking my fast with my Mate, discussing our plans for the day. Aye, I was right where I belonged.

So why couldn't I ignore the nagging feeling that she wasn't happy?

Verna

Today was...different.

As I hurried through the village, the hood of my cloak pulled tightly around my cheeks so I wouldn't feel compelled to stop and chat with any of the humans and orcs who had become my friends, my chest felt heavy and tight.

I was mourning.

I was mourning something which hadn't even happened yet.

I was mourning the loss of this support, these friendships...and Jorak.

Because now that his Heat was finished and his basic needs were satisfied, I knew 'twas time for me to move on. I loved him, more than I thought possible, and I could not bring danger to him or his clan.

Now that I knew he was safe and settled and happy in his new home and could see how supportive those around him were, I could be satisfied to leave him.

Well, nay, I could not, but...at least I would know he was where he was supposed to be.

I knocked on Nan's door and let myself in before she could answer. There were candles lit to combat the closed shutters, more than usual, and Myra bustled about, weighing and hanging herbs.

"Good morrow," I called, focusing on my cloak, pretending all was well. "Where is Nan?"

"She is sitting with Avaleen." Myra huffed out a breath as she stretched up to tie a bundle of rosemary to a line across the back of the cottage. "She says Leenie is likely to go into labor any day. 'Tis frustrating, not knowing what to expect."

But Myra had been in Bloodfire Village for half a year now, had she not?

"Have you helped with any other births?"

"Aye, three—one here in Bloodfire, and two for the Breakshield clan, our allies. But...this one..."

"Avaleen is your sister," I agreed quietly. "I can understand why you would be nervous."

Myra blew a raspberry in frustration and rolled her shoulders. "I do not like not knowing what to expect."

My lips twitched. She was so like Jorak, with his rigid control and expectations.

Jorak has changed .

Aye, and so might Myra, one day.

"Tell me how I can help."

“Not until you tell me everything.”

I raised my brow at the other woman, who now stood with her arms crossed expectantly.

“I—about what?”

Myra rolled her eyes. “You are here , looking conflicted, aye, but here . Which means the Mating Heat is complete? You are both sated?”

I felt myself flushing, and I concentrated on settling myself at the table.

“Well...aye? Mostly.”

“ Mostly ,” Myra huffed in what might have been a laugh. “The village has been making wagers on our Keeper and our Ranger, which one would break first.”

“This morning...” I kept my attention on my hands as I murmured, “Jorak told me the Heat was satisfied.”

Myra slid into the seat across from me. “And how was it?”

My gaze jerked up in shock. “The Heat?”

Her dark eyes were serious. “ All of it. My sister and Nan tease Isadora with talk of boundless pleasure, and the ways her Mate will bring her to climax. But...” She shrugged in that no-nonsense way of hers. “I thought mayhap ye could tell me specifics.”

Because I wasn’t related to her? Or because I’d been with so many males?

I took a deep breath. “’Twas...special. Magnificent . Jorak was...” How to explain? “He cared about me, about my pleasure, more than he cared for his own. ‘Tis a heady feeling.”

“His tongue...” Myra began, then locked her gaze over my shoulder as her voice dropped. “’Tis really ridged? Vartok likes to tease me, telling me ‘tis, but...”

Vartok? Interesting . I eyed the other woman. I’d only ever heard her complain about the male as being overbearing, annoying and too controlling. But now adding teasing to the mix?

The other woman took a deep breath. “I am a midwife who knows naught of pleasure. Naught of how pregnant mothers came to be in that state. Avaleen cannot tell me without giggling, so I thought...”

She thought she’d ask me. Well, if ‘twas one thing I knew, ‘twas males.

“Why not tell me how to help you, and we can talk as we work?”

A good idea, it turned out, because ‘twas easier to answer her questions about males and pleasure and orc cocks—and their abilities—when we weren’t actually looking at one another.

Myra had me sit and weigh the bundles and stems as she stripped and peeled the stems. The rosemary was one of the few herbs still growing in the garden, so the rest of the dried herbs we carefully collected into linen bags.

Through it all, Myra asked thoughtful and educated questions and I answered the best I could, although my cheeks burned. I told myself that sharing the intimate parts of my last sennight with Jorak would help Myra become a better midwife. I hoped.

Finally, though, the herbs were sorted and hung up, and her questions were answered. She was quiet as she bustled about, making tea for us, and I was grateful for the reprieve.

However, when she settled across from me with our mugs and a plate of oat cakes, she had a speculative look in her eyes.

Grateful for the soothing tea, I cocked my brow over the edge of the mug.

She sighed. “I was anxious to ask my questions, but that does not mean I did not see there was something wrong with you . I should have asked, but I found myself desperate to understand, so I could help Avaleen...”

I shook my head, wanting to put her at ease. “There is naught...” Naught you can help me with .

But Myra wasn’t believing it. “Are you worried about the festival? Assuming Midwinter Festival is like the midsummer one, ‘twill be chaotic and hectic, but fun. It begins in a few days at sunset and lasts a full day until the following sunset. Our days will start getting longer by then.”

My smile was weak and I focused on my tea.

“Something to look forward to, at least.”

“My friend, you are not acting as a woman who has been tugged and pleased and sated for days and days. What is wrong ?”

Could I confide in her? This other woman was an outsider too; not Mated, living with her sister, without a real place of her own. Could she understand my dilemma?

Sighing, I placed my mug down and stared into the dark depths.

“I do not think I should be here by the festival. I need...I need to leave.”

To my surprise, my friend didn't try to convince me I was wrong. She merely hummed.

“Why?”

“Nan's deed,” I said simply. “And the contracts.”

Of course she was bright enough to understand.

“Ah. What was your old master's name? The one who thinks he is the owner of the tavern, but the deed belongs to Nan?”

I should have remembered that she'd been the one to connect the two the first time I'd sat at this table with my new friends. I should have known she'd guess.

“Alred,” I whispered.

“You think he will try to get the deed back?”

“I know he will.” I turned anguished eyes to my friend. “He will need that deed and those contracts if he wants to continue the lifestyle he has created. He will come through the stones after me, on that next full moon.”

“And you think that if you run, he will follow you?” Myra's tone was skeptical, but I nodded.

“He must . He has no idea I brought the deed here. He will expect me to run as far

from him as possible, and I must do that, to keep him away from Bloodfire Village.”

She was studying me. “He might not come through.”

Nay. “If he does not come this month, then the next, or the next. I cannot put Nan in harm’s way. I cannot put any of you in harm’s way.”

I thought of Jorak, and how ashamed he was of his missing arm, lost in battle against another orc. I could not put him in a situation where he could be harmed again.

“How will he know where you went?” Myra was asking. “Why would he not just come here looking for you?”

I frowned. A good point.

“What if...what if instead of running...” My mind whirled. “What if I met him at the stones? What if I confronted him?”

“And tell him what?”

Tell him... Tell him... Inspiration struck.

“And tell him I have destroyed the deed! And the scrolls! He can go back to his tavern—his life—and believe all is well. If no one else in his world knows about the contracts and the deed, then all will be well. I will assure him no one here wants aught to do with them, and send him on his way.”

Myra was frowning as she shook her head. “I do not think that will work.”

“It must work!” In my desperation, I leaned forward to hold her gaze. “I cannot risk him being stuck here in the orcs’ world, being a danger , for a month until he can

return! If I meet him when he comes through the veil, I can speak to him, then turn him right around and send him back.”

The other woman watched me with a mixture of pity and concern.

“And what about Jorak?” she asked quietly. “Your Mate might object to your plan.”

I shook my head. “Do you not see? I am doing this for him, to keep him safe! He is happy here! He can see how much his clan needs him, trusts him, and he finally has his place. He is...”

I swallowed and sat back to stare down at my tea. “He is happy here,” I repeated. “Better off without the trouble Alred will bring by following me. Better off without me.”

“Oh, Verna,” Myra whispered sadly in the distance. “I do not think either of us truly understands the Mating bond. ‘Tis no’ like marriage.”

No, ‘twas not. I took a deep breath.

“I do not want Jorak to be hurt. Alred would never understand. ‘Tis...’tis better this way.”

And I had to believe that.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Jorak

Two days before Midwinter's Eve, I woke to feel Verna pressed against my back. 'Twas not sexual, but...comforting. This was the first time in a sennight I had not woken painfully aroused, and the way she held me now reminded me of our first few mornings together.

When she was busy burrowing into my heart.

I closed my eyes and sighed in contentment.

'Twas only later that I thought to wonder why her hold had felt so desperate. Why her forehead was pressed against my skin as if she wanted to imprint herself on me...or vice versa.

She was gone when I woke the next time, but she'd left porridge for me. I smiled as I ate it, and realized I'd been doing more of that since she'd come into my life.

Smiling. Laughing, even.

But as the morning wore on, I felt less like smiling. That gnawing, itchy sensation was back in my chest, making me scowl at passersby. My Kteer was alerting me to danger, but I could see none.

I even checked my reflection in the water bucket, but my eyes were as dark as they

were supposed to be. This wasn't the Mating Heat.

So, what was it?

I was sparring with Garron when Avaleen and Myra strolled by, the midwife supporting her sister, who looked as big as a house. I frowned, briefly distracted. I'd thought Verna would be with her friends, but?—

Taking advantage of my distraction, Garron smashed the side of his blade into my shoulder. The resulting guffaws made me focus, although my Kteer howled for blood.

At noon I ate with the other men then followed Nan's instructions as she bossed us all about to set up the bonfire. Two nights hence, 'twould be lit by a spark from our chief—our acting chief—and we would all take a branch home to relight our hearths.

Home.

Aye, I knew now that the cottage in the village was home in a way my little house by the stones could never be.

Seeing the Bloodfire clan come together, working and teasing and shouting to prepare for a joyful occasion, should have made me proud. But instead, my chest ached more.

Where was Verna?

The clan females were bustling about, cooking, preparing the feast, herding the kitlings...but I didn't see Verna. I didn't see Isadora, for that matter. Were they together?

"Ho, Torvolk!" I flagged down the other male. "Have ye seen Verna?" I glanced at the sky. 'Twould be dark in another few hours. "She must be hard at work?"

Frowning, the other male shook his head as he hurried toward his cottage.

“She’s no’ with Isadora,” he called over his shoulder.

That itchy, dreading sensation began to grow in my chest, and I dug my claws into my skin as I turned in a circle. Looking for Verna? Or looking for...

“Keeper!” ‘Twas Vartok’s shout, and as I turned, I saw the smith-turned-chief jogging toward us, a worried look on his face. “Have ye seen Verna today?”

Worried now, I shook my head. “Have ye?”

He was panting as he stopped before me. “Myra—she said...” He stopped to take a few deep breaths, and I resisted the urge to shake him. “She and Myra were together yesterday.”

“Aye, I ken it,” I growled. How did Vartok know this? “Are they together today?”

The other male shook his head. “I cannae be certain, because the female is the most stubborn being Malla put on this ground?—”

“Verna is perfect,” I snapped.

Vartok patted the air in front of him. “No’ Verna, Myra . She willnae give me a straight answer, but something she said made me wonder if Verna had plans to leave.”

“Leave?” I barked, stepping up to grab Vartok by his cloak and haul him closer. Panic colored my voice. “Leave the village? Why?”

“I dinnae ken.” The other male wasn’t offended by my handling, but kept his palms

open to show he didn't mean to retaliate. "But Myra seemed to think she was..." He winced. "Afraid? Like she had a reason to run?"

Afraid ?

My throat tightened and I stumbled back, dropping Vartok. The other male watched me in concern.

"Why—" I croaked. "Afraid?"

"No' of ye," Vartok assured me quietly. "Myra hinted she was running to save ye."

Myra hinted?

"Myra!" I roared, turning about. "Myra! Where are ye!"

"Hold, Keeper!" Vartok shouted, throwing himself in front of me and blocking me from running after the midwife. "She's no' the one?—"

"Myra!" I bellowed again. "I need ye!"

The dark woman came at a run, rounding the corner from Nan's house, her skirts held high, her boots slapping the snow. She took in the scene—Vartok barely holding me in check—and her eyes widened.

"What is it?" she asked, getting right to the point. "Who is hurt?"

Someone would be hurt if I didn't get answers! I pushed against Vartok, trying to get closer to my Mate's friend, but the bastard wouldn't let me.

"Myra! Where is Verna? Where did she go?"

The midwife actually stepped back—from my frantic rage? Or in loyalty?

“Lass,” I growled in warning.

Myra lifted her chin and met my eyes. Whatever she saw there must have convinced her, because after a moment’s hesitation, she blew out a breath and looked away.

“The stones,” she murmured. “Verna went back to the stones to stop him.”

“Him?” repeated Vartok, but his moment of distraction was all I needed to throw off his hold.

“A horse!” I roared, sprinting toward the clan’s stables. “I need a horse!”

I found her tracks two miles out of the village, heading—as her friend said—back to the stones.

But what made my chest tighten and my blood freeze was that there were only her prints. No horse.

The damn foolish female had set off across the Highlands on foot again!

Bellowing wordlessly in fear and anger, I spurred my own animal on.

How well I remembered the irritation and ire as I’d tracked her once before; but then, she’d only represented a distraction, an obligation, a disruption to my careful life. Now, though? Now, Verna was my life.

It took me longer than expected to catch up with her.

She’d set out early this morning, ‘twas clear, and had followed the sled marks the

lads had made to and from the stones. Smart. Smarter still was evidence that she knew what she was doing. She took rests in protected areas, was clearly eating and drinking, and twice her steps sped when I found evidence of wolves in the trees. She'd seen it too, and hurried along.

Such reminders should have eased my fears, reminding me that she knew her woodlore and would be safe. But all I could imagine was my bold Mate being set upon by beasts, and I urged my mount ever faster.

We were only a few miles from the stones when I saw her, a distant figure in a red cloak struggling through the snow in the valley below. The spike of relief I felt did little to ease the tension in my chest, but it made me feel better.

Wordlessly, I galloped toward her.

Verna heard me coming and turned, her hands gripped before her, holding a...a dagger? Was that my dagger? I felt some relief that she hadn't ventured out completely unprotected. Still, I was scowling as I pulled my horse to a stop before her.

"Female! What in the name of Torvor the Strong were ye thinking?"

She'd lowered the dagger when she recognized me and now focused on sliding it back into its sheath. Although she tried to hide it, I could see her hands shaking, even covered in the mittens.

"I thought I would go for a stroll," she said mildly.

'Twas such a preposterous claim that I had to stifle my laughter. Instead, I tucked the reins beneath my thigh and thrust my hand out to her.

“Come. We’re going home.” Once I might have doubted my ability to ride with her in my lap...but not anymore.

Her chin rose and those spring-green eyes met mine.

“Nay. I am—” She swallowed. “I am going to the stones.”

My gaze flicked across the valley. Still miles away, my byre-cottage sat beside the pathway. She’d made the distance in a day, but still was not safe.

“Why would ye do something so stupid?” I murmured softly, shaking my head.

Not softly enough, apparently, because Verna slapped her hands on her hips and glared up at me.

“’Twas not stupid. I was prepared and supplied, and I had a plan.”

A ridiculous plan.

“Ye walked across the Highlands, lass!” The reminder had my anger tightening my chest again, and the horse sidestepped, reacting to my emotions. “That is stupid! Ye could have been—a thousand things could go wrong!”

Verna, still glaring at me, stepped up to the horse to grab its bridle and calm it.

“They did not go wrong. You might call it a stupid plan, but I am not stupid!”

“Of course ye’re no’ stupid,” I roared. “I love ye!”

When she huffed in irritation, the steam almost clouded her face.

“Then you must admit I did it correctly.”

I opened my mouth to yell again, but she quirked a brow in challenge and I clamped down on whatever I’d been about to say.

“Aye,” I reluctantly admitted. “Ye did well.”

“I am warm enough.” She wagged her mittens at me, and I saw she was also wearing a knitted hat and scarf beneath her two gowns—the gray one and the purple one. “And I have plenty of provisions.”

Sighing, I offered her my hand again. “’Twas a much better thought-out flight than the first time I had to save ye.”

Smirking, she took my hand, placed one of her booted feet atop mine, and allowed me to lift her into my lap. She was well-padded, and I was pleased to see she showed no signs of being too cold.

“You did not have to save me this time,” she announced primly, trying to twist to sit facing forward in the saddle. “I was almost to our wee cottage.”

Our .

The word melted away even more of my anger, and I clamped down on her to keep her right where she was. I could support her back with the remains of my right arm and guide the horse with my left. The worst part was being unable to hug her like I needed.

With a noncommittal grunt, I nudged the horse into a slow walk. The poor beastie needed his stall, but I wouldn’t push him tonight. The sun had already set over the mountains, painting the western sky pink, and the half-moon hung over the stones in

the east.

As Verna got comfortable on my lap, I forced my heart to slow, my Kteer to cease calling for blood. She was safe. She was warm. She was in my hold. She was safe .

Gods below, I needed her.

When I thought I might be able to speak without my voice betraying all my emotions, I asked, “Why did ye sneak away, lass?”

“Because I knew you would try to stop me,” she admitted quietly, her gaze locked over the horse’s ear.

That made even less sense. “Then ye must have kenned I’d come after ye, aye?”

She didn’t speak for a long moment, then she blew out a breath that might’ve been a sigh.

“Nay, I thought...”

“Ye thought what?” I snapped, getting angry again.

Her eyes fluttered closed, although her back remained straight.

“I thought you would be happy in the village. You had your friends, you had a place...”

It took a few moments to sputter through that reasoning, to try to find a response that didn’t insult her.

Finally, I settled on, “I cannae be happy without ye, Verna.”

She sighed again and finally allowed her head to tip to the side, to rest against my shoulder, and I did my best to hold her.

She whispered, “I cannot be happy without you either, Jorak.”

And the ache in my chest eased.

Verna

We were almost to the house when Jorak finally asked the question I’d been dreading.

“Why did ye leave me, dkaar? Why did ye run from the village? I thought ye were happy there?”

I felt tears pricking at my lids.

“I never wanted to hurt you,” I managed to rasp, straightening and turning to him. “This was to protect you.”

Likely the wrong thing to say, judging from his scowl.

“Protect me, how?”

“Alred will...” I winced in frustration at my inability to explain. “He will have to come after me, do you not see? Once I realized what that deed said, I knew ‘twould be the truth. He has to come after me to retrieve it—his entire livelihood is based on his ownership of that building and his control over his whores.”

I felt his arm tighten against my back and knew he didn’t like the reminder of my past. A muscle in his jaw ticked, although he kept his attention on the path ahead in

the deepening twilight.

“Ye realized this as soon as I read the deed to ye? Ye kenned then what it meant?”

“I needed to take the deed to Nan. It belonged to her,” I hedged.

“That’s no’ what I asked.” When he turned his hard gaze to me, I saw anger flashing green in his dark eyes. “Ye accepted me as yer Mate, ye welcomed me into yer body, ye told me I was special ...even kenning ye’d be leaving me?”

I gasped as my stomach clenched and my heart ached.

“Jorak...” I whispered. I lifted my hand to his jaw, and wished I wasn’t wearing the silly mitten so I could feel his warm skin. “Jorak, you are special. You are my Mate.”

“I must no’ be,” he muttered, pulling his cheek from my grasp. “Mates dinnae abandon one another.”

“I had to ,” I cried—and aye, there were tears in those words. “He is a horrible, evil man, Jorak! If he came after me and found me in the village—if he found you ...” I shook my head frantically enough to knock my hood off, frantically enough to cause the horse to sidestep slightly.

“I could not live with myself if he hurt you.”

“Ye think me incapable of defending myself?” he growled, and I winced again.

“I did not mean that.” I knew my tone was defeated, because I was defeated. “I know you are strong and capable and the smartest male I know...” I closed my eyes again and finished in a whisper.

“But I had to protect you.”

“Foolish female,” he finally muttered. “’Tis yer Mate’s job to protect ye .”

I could admit that I liked that plan. I tipped my shoulder against him once more.

“I cannot stand the thought of you being hurt further, Jorak. Because of me.”

“If Alred comes?—”

“He has to come,” I corrected. “If not this full moon, then the next or the next. If he does not, I have to go back to my world to tell him?—”

Jorak squeezed me tightly enough to cut off my words.

“Yer hypothesis is sound, dkaar . But if he doesnae come through next week, we’ll go to him together next month. We’ll find him. Together . Because that’s what Mates do.”

Together.

The word made tears prick my lids again. Or mayhap I was just feeling weepy.

Together.

But...

It will not work .

It wasn’t until I felt him stiffen that I realized I’d said the words aloud.

“Why will it not work?” he growled.

I opened my eyes to see that we were approaching the byre-cottage. But instead of turning the horse toward the byre doors, Jorak had stopped halfway to the stone circle and was now glaring down at me.

I knew he wasn't angry at me; not with how gently he held me. He was angry at my words, at the defeat in my tone. How to explain?

Swallowing, I looked away.

“My people... Humans do not understand Mating.”

“I thought I'd explained it to ye. There is a?—”

“Aye,” I interrupted, placing my hand against his chest. “A knowing . Mating is more than a partnership, or even love. It is a connection at the deepest level.”

His gaze turned difficult to read, even by the light of the half-moon.

“Today...I kenned there was something wrong, even before I learned what ye'd done.”

I winced, then lifted a shoulder in a half-shrug.

“And although you made no noise, I knew when you were coming for me. I could feel you riding toward me.”

When he exhaled, his muscles relaxed. “Ye do understand Mating, lass.”

“I do...but my people do not. Alred will not. If we face him together, he will see you

as naught more than..." I forced myself to say the words. "Than a protector I have traded my cunny for."

That had been my plan all along.

When I'd woken in Jorak's byre-cottage, I'd thought only to secure my protection, and I'd use the only thing I had to trade...my body. Alred would make that assumption, and in some ways he'd be right.

But Jorak was studying me now, his expression unreadable. Mayhap he was thinking the same thing.

Finally, he shifted, holding his forearm out for me to grasp. We didn't speak, but seemed to understand one another. He swung me from the saddle, then climbed down silently beside me. I took the reins from his hand and twined the fingers of my other hand through his.

Was he considering my words? Did he feel the sting of helplessness as well?

He was frowning down at me now.

"Does my role matter, dkaar ? Whether I am yer Mate or yer protector?"

"Alred has a contract with my name on it. He will believe I belong to him, and that would trump a hired protector."

"The contract is past its expiration," Jorak growled. "He will ken that."

"But he will not know that we know it." I didn't bother keeping the pleading from my tone. "He knows I cannot read and would not think you capable of it."

My Mate turned to the side and spat out a curse then began to stride toward the circle of stones, dragging me with him. The reins of the horse slid from my fingers, but I couldn't care, not now.

"I am sorry, Jorak," I cried, my heart breaking for him. "But to Alred, you are not my father, my brother, my husband, nor the owner of my contract. To him, our relationship is irrelevant."

Irrelevant .

"Ye are my Mate !" Jorak roared, reaching the center of the circle and spinning to pierce me with his green gaze. " Mine !"

"Aye," I agreed softly, pressing my palm to his chest once more, and stepping close. "I know it, and you know it...but Alred will still believe himself to have a greater claim on me than you."

" Ye. Are. Mine ."

Strangely, Jorak's anger was making me feel better . More confident about the upcoming confrontation, at least.

"And you are mine," I agreed, tipping my head back to offer him a small smile. "I love you, Jorak."

We stood there in silence for a few minutes, his breathing slowing, his shoulders no longer as tight, until he wrapped his arm around me and crushed me against his chest in a growl.

"I am no' yer father, nor yer brother, nor yer owner, Verna. I am yer Mate."

“You are,” I agreed.

“This Alred...he would recognize my claim if I were yer husband. Yer people barter females for favors in this way?”

‘Twas a description of marriage I’d never considered, but...

“Aye. Alred understands marriage. Three years ago there was a woman who whored for him, and when her husband showed up to fetch her home, Alred was enraged, but deferred.”

A pause.

Then, under the moon’s light, Jorak announced, “I will be yer husband.”

The preposterous thought had me pulling back, had me staring hard up at him.

“What?”

“I will write a contract. Ye will sign it. We will declare commitment to our gods and our people.”

He meant it?

“Is there another aspect to human marriage I am missing?”

My mind raced. Was there?

“Ahhh...nay. I...the priests would bless the union.”

“Do ye want this?” he snapped. “A human priest?”

In a daze, I shook my head. “Nay, I—I have never needed?—”

My words snapped off when Jorak suddenly pulled away and sank to one knee in front of me, and I could only gape. The snow wasn’t as deep here in the center of the circle, and the moon suddenly seemed to shine brighter. Here, in this spot arranged by unknown hands hundreds of generations ago, I could feel the power of the world.

“I, Jorak, the Bloodfire Keeper,” he announced, his tone serious, “declare myself to be yer husband. By the grace of Malla the Beginner, by the strength of Torvor the Strong, by the wisdom of Markep the Merciful, by the bravery of Palton the Hunter...I am yers, and ye are mine.”

I stood, gripping his hand in both of mine, staring down at him through a veil of tears.

‘Twas not the wedding ceremony I had imagined as a young girl. That had been in a church, in the spring, surrounded by flowers.

Here I stood in the midwinter darkness on the Highland moor, surrounded by stones cut a millennia ago, lit by the harsh light of the half-moon.

‘Twas perfect .

Grinning through my tears, I repeated his vows.

“I, Verna, now of the Bloodfire Clan, declare myself to be your wife. By the grace of our gods, I am yours. And you are mine.”

In a sudden movement, Jorak surged to his feet and swept me up. He buried his face in my hair as he strode toward the cottage. Toward home.

Together .

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Verna

I was...married?

‘Twas a strange sensation. But even stranger was that I never doubted it. The same way I knew deep in my chest that Jorak was my Mate, I also knew he was now my husband. There’d been no priest, no blessing...but we didn’t need it.

The moon, the stones, the snow...they’d been all the blessings we needed. Jorak was my Mate and my husband, and that was all I needed.

That night, he showed me exactly how much he loved me. Seven times, actually.

I fell asleep sprawled across his chest, wearing only a grin.

The following morning, I woke to Jorak’s gentle touches. He lay on his side, his weight resting on his scarred stump, his gaze intense as his eyes followed his fingers across my skin. I watched him for a moment, intrigued by the emotion I could see in his expression.

Finally, I could no longer stand the soft caresses and had to squirm away. His gaze darted to mine, and when he raised a brow, I allowed my chuckles to burst free.

“Apparently I am a bit ticklish.”

His second brow joined the first. “Ye didnae ken?”

When would I have found out? Between the hard labor of my childhood, Alred’s beatings, and the rough use of my customers? Jorak was the first to touch me with such gentleness.

I surged up, wrapping my arms around his neck, capturing his mouth. He held me against him as he rolled onto his back and I felt his lips curl beneath mine.

That afternoon, we had an unexpected visitor. Torvolk arrived, clearly frustrated and seeking a distraction. He seemed surprised at Jorak’s welcome, and more surprised at my presence. He’d only recently returned from his mission when I’d decided to leave the village, so mayhap he hadn’t heard Jorak and I were...

Mated. There is no use avoiding the term. You have been blessed with a future. A male who will protect you. More importantly, a male who loves you, who wants to make you happy.

Aye, and I wanted to make him happy. I loved the way we worked together—cleaning out the empty byre, or in the kitchen, or setting traps in the woods. I loved him ...and I worried for him.

I worried terribly.

Midwinter came and went and we celebrated in our own way.

Another pair of fat rabbits roasted over the fire, the vegetables boiled, and the cheese baked into the bread the way I remembered from my childhood. The pair of us had too much wine, and I heard Jorak guffaw for the first time, which had me giggling for the rest of the night.

“If ye dinnae stop laughing at me, lass, I’ll have to give yer mouth something else to do,” he warned, trying to sound menacing.

This, of course, made me laugh harder, but as his scowl deepened, I fell to my knees, snaked my hands beneath his kilt, and slid his cock between my lips.

From then on, the only sounds we made were moans.

On Midwinter Day, we re-lit the hearth together. I held the flint and he struck it with steel, and we grinned at one another as it took.

“A new year,” I whispered.

“A new life,” he replied, standing and scooping me into his arms.

I squeaked, “Where are we going?”

“Back to bed, Mate. I have read about yer people’s traditional honied moon, and I have some catching up to do.”

Aye, there was quite a lot of laughter too.

But beneath it all? Worry.

We were in our honied moon, yes, but... Each night, the moon grew a little larger in the sky. The full moon was almost upon us, and I worried what that would bring. I worried for Jorak— not because I didn’t think he could handle himself—but because I didn’t want it to come to that.

If Alred came through the veil this month, I needed to be the one to confront him, to send him on his way.

To keep everyone I'd come to love safe.

The evening before the full moon, Jorak came in from outside, stomping the snow off his boots, and reached for the clasp of his cloak. To my surprise, he also began to unbuckle his belt. One of the things I'd learned to love these last weeks was the ease of access granted by kilts, and I was surprised he was bothering.

Because when he shot me an expectant, knowing look, I found myself blushing, understanding exactly what he wanted.

"Again?" I murmured teasingly, already untying my bodice laces. Although 'twas easy enough to just lift my skirts and climb onto his lap, I knew he liked to tease my nipples. I liked it too.

"Tonight is the full moon," he announced arrogantly, when he stood before me fully naked. My fingers paused what they were doing, just so I could admire his strong thigh, smooth stomach and...and other bits.

"Mate, I require yer help."

A little distracted, I promised, "Aught."

The noise he made might have been a chuckle, and he crossed to help me undress.

"Good lass. 'Twill be yer responsibility to tire me out."

I tipped my head back up at him with a smirk.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Tire me out, female!" he repeated, smacking me lightly on the arse. "I need a nap to

make it through the night, and ‘tis yer job to make it happen.”

Giggling, I led him by the hand to the bed, where I pushed him down onto his back. I tried for a serious tone when I announced, “I have never tried to fook ye without coming a few times before hand, but I will try.”

Jorak stretched arrogantly and placed his hand behind his head. “Do yer best, lass, I’ll rate yer performance later.”

I couldn’t contain my laughter as I straddled him, but I could admit his demands—and just the expectation of the pleasure to come—had already made me wet. I braced my palms on his chest and slid backward until his cock was nestled against my curls.

Despite his attempts to appear disinterested, Jorak was watching me intently. As I slid my cunny along the underside of his cock, his nostrils flared.

“I think ye’ll do just fine,” he murmured, and I knew he was smelling my arousal.

I reached between us, moved his cock into position, then slid down atop it.

The climax burst over me.

Clamping my thighs against his hips, I rode out the pleasure, rocking and moaning, loving the way he felt in me. Through it all, Jorak stayed still, watching me.

Only when I was recovered did he begin to move, his hand roaming over my thigh, my side, cupping my breast, playing with my clitoris. I loved how this position allowed him to hit the rough spot deep inside me that drove me wild...I came a second time on his cock as he massaged my bud.

After that, he held my hip in place as he took over the rhythm, slamming upward into me with his feet braced. I loved his strength, and I tipped forward to brace myself on either side of his head. This allowed him to capture my nipple in his mouth, at the same time his fingers probed my back entrance.

‘Twas so decadent I felt my third orgasm building, and when his tongue rasped along my skin and his claws dimpled my arse, I fell off the precipice.

“Jorak!” I screamed, even as I felt him swelling inside me.

“Mate,” he growled as he came, spilling wave after wave of spicy-scented seed against my womb. “My Verna.”

When I collapsed—truly exhausted—against his chest, I wasn’t surprised to feel his heart pounding as strongly as mine.

After a few minutes, I acknowledged I should probably get us a wet cloth, but his arm tightened around me, holding me in place.

“Yer performance was sufficient.” He yawned. “I should demand a nap more often.”

Too tired to giggle, I placed a kiss on his chest.

“I shall endeavor to put ye to sleep each full moon.” A pause, and then, knowing I needed to bring it up: “Jorak, tonight...”

His hand, which had lazily been dragging up and down my spine, paused for a moment.

“Tonight, I suspect Torvolk will have to return to the human’s world to look for our chief. He’ll hate leaving Isadora, I ken, but he is the only male who can find Kragorn,

if the puir bastard has been taken by the humans.”

It hadn’t been what I wanted to ask, but I was glad for the distraction.

“Was he? Taken I mean?”

“We dinnae ken.” Jorak yawned once more. “If Torvolk crosses over tonight, we’ll find out more in a month.”

And if Alred didn’t come through tonight, I’d have to wait a month. I gnawed on my lip, wondering how to bring it up...but Jorak’s snores interrupted my thoughts.

I had to grin. Mission complete . I closed my eyes and snuggled against him, glad for the chance to nap, myself.

That evening was...well, I suppose exciting would be a good description. If I weren’t so worried about Alred, I would have enjoyed helping Jorak with the preparations. When he told me he usually made pottage for any visitors who would be coming through the stones, I leapt to volunteer.

At least chopping vegetables would keep my hands—if not my mind—busy.

The nights might be getting shorter, but the darkness still seemed to last a long while. He gave me a hard kiss before he left the cottage, and I couldn’t resist throwing my arms around him and pulling him down for a longer one.

“Be careful,” I whispered, pressing my forehead to his.

“I’m the Bloodfire Keeper,” he murmured right back. “This is what I do.”

“What we do, husband.”

With my eyes closed, I felt his grin in my heart.

“Aye,” he drawled. “What we do.”

Before midnight, I peeked outside to see Torvolk—atop his horse—join my Mate by the stones. They stood, a pair of warriors, talking for a long moment before Torvolk suddenly whirled about. I watched Jorak watch him go, and was surprised to see Isadora—when did she learn to ride?—thundering across the valley toward her Mate. Torvolk swept her up, and I could see their relief from here.

I should be out there. I should stand beside my Mate as the veil opened. I hurried to pull on my warmest stockings and my hat and mittens...but as I threw the door open, a surprising sight made me gasp.

Isadora was hurrying toward me, leading her Mate, who all but carried another male, a bigger male, across his shoulders. Behind them, Jorak’s arm was around a tiny human female who slumped from exhaustion.

Glad now for the pottage, I built up the fire as the visitors joined us. As Isadora took over the woman’s care, Jorak and Torvolk laid the groaning male on our bed.

I thrust a mug of spiced wine into the woman’s hands.

“Who is it?”

Isadora was beaming.

“’Tis Kragorn! The chief has returned.”

“Please,” the little human whispered, curling around the warm mug. “Please help him. He is hurt.”

“I’m fine,” groaned the male on the bed. “Lillian is half-frozen.”

Isadora sprang to slide her cloak around the woman, and I knew I wasn’t the only one who wondered exactly how this pair wound up coming through the stones this night.

Jorak exchanged a glance with Torvolk. “Nan can heal him.”

“I’m fine,” the chief growled, but I could see the bloodstains on his plaid, see the dirt and blood and worse which covered his skin and matted his hair. Hear the weakness in his voice. “We werenae followed.”

“Well, thank fook for that,” Torvolk muttered, dragging his hand through his hair. “We have to get them to the village as quickly as possible.”

My Mate nodded and the two males began to make plans. I glanced between them and Isadora, who was fussing over—Lillian, was it?—and realized there was no one watching the stones.

If Alred came through tonight, I had to know it. I couldn’t risk him being stuck here after the veil closed. I had to send him back the way he came. With everyone distracted, I slipped from the cottage and ran toward the stones.

I was just in time.

As I reached the edge of the clearing, a horse burst from the mist, its rider wild-eyed and snarling. It took me no time at all to recognize Alred, and I clenched my hands into fists inside my mittens.

“You!” He snarled, catching sight of me. “Verna! In your whore’s cloak and smugness!” When he yanked on the reins, the horse pranced around in a circle, but Alred swung his head about to hold his glare. “Get over here, slut. You’re coming

home!”

I lifted my chin. “I am home, Alred. I am here to tell you to leave. There is naught for you here.”

The man spat angrily then swung down from the horse. I tried to hold my ground but could read the violence in his intention as he stalked toward me. I began to back up.

“When you left, you not only deprived me of my best whore, but also my contracts?—”

“I burned them,” I blurted, stumbling over a snowdrift as I retreated and falling to my arse. “The scrolls I took. I burned them. They are not here.”

That drew him up short, and he glared at me. “You burned them? Did you read them?”

I tried for a smile, but know it came out sickly as I attempted to struggle to my feet. “How would I know how to read?”

“True. So they’re gone?”

“Aye,” I huffed, hoping he would not see my lie. “Whatever they said, no one else back in town need know what?—”

My blathering ended on a gasp as he wrapped his hand around my wrist and yanked me to my feet.

“Without that deed, I cannae prove I own the tavern,” he muttered, pulling me toward the horse. “But if it has been destroyed, then at least no one else will know it.”

I dug in my heels. “I do not want to return?—”

His harsh bark of laughter sent dread through me. “You think I give a shite what you want, slut? My customers have missed you.”

He swung me toward the horse. “You’ve had a bit of a holiday, now get on the horse.”

As I stumbled against the horse, I reached for my dagger. Rebounding off the horse’s shoulder, I twisted about, brandishing the blade.

“I am not going back with you, Alred. I am happy here. You can leave safely now, knowing the tavern is securely yours.”

Another laugh. “Or I could take you with me.”

With that, he lowered his shoulder and bent over, intent on lifting me over his shoulder.

I could defend myself. I would defend myself.

But there was someone who could protect me even better.

Even as I scuttled backward, I took a deep breath and screamed.

“ Jorak !”

Jorak

Kragorn was alive! I was just as amazed—and pleased—as Torvolk. Our chief was wounded and ill-treated, but alive, and I looked forward to hearing the tale of where

he'd been since last autumn.

But for now, he was in good hands, and I had confidence my cousin and his Mate could bring the chief—and his wee human captive—safely to Nan in Bloodfire Village.

It took me far longer than it should have, however, to realize my own Mate was missing.

I snapped straight, peering in the corners of the cottage, as if the shadows hid a shapely redhead.

“Where’s Verna?” I barked, twisting in a circle. “Verna?”

Isadora was comforting the human and now shook her head in confusion.

“She was just here a moment ago.”

Dread coiled in the pit of my stomach, and I knew—knew that she was in trouble. This was the same way I’d felt when she’d snuck away from the village; certain she needed me, uncertain how I knew.

“Well, fook ,” I muttered, stalking toward the door.

I was just slamming it behind me when her scream rent the air.

“ Jorak! ”

I was running before my brain fully understood the danger.

A flash of red by the stones—Verna! Struggling to get away from a male!

With a roar, I ripped my sword from its scabbard as I hurtled toward them.

A part of me, the part of me I'd carefully nurtured for seven years, was warning me to stay calm, in control. To assess, to consider, to judge.

But my Kteer , that primitive, primal part of me, was screaming Kill hurt maim blood kill death PAIN.

The male had dared to touch my Mate and would pay.

But by the time I'd reached the stones, Verna had broken free. She turned, panic in her lovely eyes, and stumbled toward me. Instinctively, I lowered my sword, the need to comfort her overriding my Kteer 's urges.

“Verna!” I bellowed, the remains of my right arm reaching for her. “ Dkaar !”

And she was almost to me when the bastard behind her grabbed her by the nape of her cloak, yanking her backward. With a stifled scream, she slammed into him, and he wrapped his arm around her throat.

“Back off, orc,” he spat. “This is between us.”

Verna was struggling. “Let me go! Alred, you have to?—”

“I don't have to do aught!” He twisted her about, and when her hat fell off, he grabbed her hair. “Get on the horse!”

I'd frozen when he'd grabbed her, and in that moment, as Verna's eyes met mine, I realized why.

I was afraid.

The fear had paralyzed me.

I'd lived the last seven years in fear .

In fear of what would happen if I allowed my Kteer to rule me. Fear of what would happen if I reacted instead of considered, if I embraced the chaos.

The world around me seemed to slow as Alred swung Verna toward his nervous mount. He was going to take her away from me. If I didn't reach them in time, she would be in the human world for a full moon's cycle, without me.

Without me .

Well, to all the hells with that!

She was the one to teach me there were acceptable— useful —times to lose control...and this was one of them.

I took a deep breath and time sped up again as I lifted my blade.

"Release her," I growled.

Alred paused in the act of shoving Verna toward the saddle.

"Orc, I don't care what she promised, she's not yours."

I stalked forward. "She is mine."

The bastard had the ballocks to step toward me, while holding my Mate.

"Was she tugging you? Taking your beastly cock?" He shrugged. "She's a whore,

that's what she does . You mean naught to her.”

I glanced over his shoulder to see Verna's tear-stained face, and when I did, she began to frantically shake her head.

“That is not true?—”

But Alred interrupted her to spit at me. “You do not have a claim to her.”

Although my Kteer urged me to take off his head, I held the need in check for long enough to snarl, “She's my Mate. Let her go.”

“Mate? Mate ?” He had the audacity to laugh. “What does mating have to do?—”

That was enough. I lifted my sword and roared.

“ Take yer hands off my wife !”

I had the satisfaction of watching shock dart across his face before my blade bit true.

Verna's gasp was her only reaction to the sight of her old master's head wobbling, then falling forward into the snow. By the time his body followed, she had thrown herself against my chest, her arms around my neck, sobbing.

I dropped the sword, forgotten, in my need to comfort my Mate. My wife . I held her as she cried, and I whispered the words she needed to hear.

“’Tis over, dkaar . Dinnae fash, he cannae hurt ye now.” I wanted to stroke her back, her hair...but I also couldn't seem to make myself loosen my hold on her to do so.

“I have ye, ye are safe.”

“He was going to drag me away from you,” Verna sobbed. “Jorak, he was going to?—”

“Hush, lass, all is well,” I scolded, pressing kiss after kiss along her forehead. “I got here in time, did I no’?”

She jerked away from me and stared, wide-eyed up at me.

“You did.” Her hands moved to my cheeks. “Oh, Jorak, you did . You were there when I needed you. I should have never thought?—”

“To face him without me?” I rumbled. “I dinnae need yer protection, lass.”

“Nay.” Her smile was bright, despite her tears. “But I need yours. You have saved me so many times, my love, and now...”

I pretended to huff in exasperation. “I suppose I’ll have to spend the rest of our lives protecting ye.”

There in the snow, the full moon overhead, she stared up at me. Behind her, the mist slowly faded as the doorway to her world closed, and I knew she was right where she belonged. Here, among the Bloodfire Clan.

With me .

I bent down to kiss the tip of her nose, then her cheek, which tasted of tears.

“I love ye,” I whispered, my Kteer reveling in the fact I’d kept her safe and would continue to. “Thank ye for teaching me what I needed.”

“What do you need?” she whispered.

“ Ye . And my clan. And confidence in my own abilities. And the reminder ‘tis fine to lose control sometimes. ‘Twas... unexpected. ”

Her grin turned a little impish. “I like it when you lose control.”

“I ken,” I growled, leaning down to capture her lips in a gentle kiss. I wanted her—I always wanted her—but not now. Not with a body in the snow and my chief in our cottage.

“Later,” I promised.

When we pulled apart, she smiled softly up at me, and I saw the love in her gaze.

“I love you, Mate.”

Would I ever tire of hearing her call me that?

“ Wife .”

EPILOGUE

Jorak

The spring rains made traveling more difficult than usual, but ‘twas necessary.

“Ye dinnae mind leaving yer garden for a few days?” I asked the female on my lap.

Verna snuggled closer, pulling my leather cloak tighter around us both.

“Nay, of course not! Although I am certain the rabbits will have found my seedlings by the time we return.”

“Then I’ll hunt them for ye and ye can roast them the way I like.”

“Oh good. They eat my greens, and we eat them.” She poked my stomach. “Circle of life, and all that.”

My lips twitched and I tightened my hold on my Mate as the horse picked its way across the valley toward the stones.

“Ye could have stayed home, ye ken.”

Verna’s head popped up to glare at me. “And leave you to visit our byre-cottage alone? Nonsense. I miss the place.”

Aye, ‘twas a real smile tugging on my lips now.

“It wouldnae be the same without ye.”

“Of course not,” she sniffed, burrowing back down out of the rain. “’Twould be lonely and dull.”

“And quiet. And orderly,” I teased.

She poked me again, harder this time.

“Hurry along, please. I am half-frozen in here.”

Obligingly, I nudged the horse into a trot and we were soon at the byre.

Verna tumbled from my lap and hurried to open the large door, then as I rode through, left me to deal with the horse. I appreciated her willingness to start a fire in the cold hearth, so I took my time seeing to the animal and arranging our supplies.

Once I joined my Mate in the byre-cottage, the whole place was warm and cozy, and she had water boiling. She was also half-naked.

“So desperate, were ye?” I asked, cocking a brow at her as I laid the bags and bundles on the table.

“I am soaked through and practically frozen.”

“Och, we cannae have that.”

After hanging my cloak, I rounded the table and stepped up behind her, wrapping my arm around her chest and pulling her chemise-clad back against my chest.

“I’ll have to warm ye.”

“Aye, ‘tis your duty as my husband,” she announced primly, a smile in her tone.

I rested my chin atop her head as she sorted through the bundles.

“Oh good, I was hoping someone would send dried meat.” She peered at the packaging. “Look, ‘tis from Amma!” When she held up the little note, I could see her beaming smile. “How special. And the fruit is from Isadora!”

“They are both good students.”

“Nay...” Verna turned in my hold and wrapped her arms around my middle, pressing her damp chest to my stomach. “Ye are a good teacher.”

I snorted softly. “I can just about manage the adults. I dinnae ken how ye can stand having all the kitlings crowding around ye...”

When she laughed, I had to smile.

In the months since I’d returned to the clan, my Mate and I had found our new places. Each evening I taught her more and more—not just how to read, but how to form letters, how to think about sentences and stories. And during the day, we shared that knowledge with the clan: me teaching the adults who wanted to learn—and who were calm and biddable, for fook’s sake—and Verna the kitlings.

It turned out that she had quite a lot to teach them, whether ‘twas woodlore or letters, and she found such joy in being surrounded by them. I knew she was perfect for this role.

And once a month, when Bloodfire Village became too much for me, we’d retreat here to the byre-cottage by the stones. Alone for a few days, minus any travelers back and forth, we could find peace in stillness.

I know Verna missed her friends—and her garden, and the kitlings—during these days, but I was also grateful she chose to come with me. Mayhap, one day, I would turn the duty of Bloodfire Keeper over to another...but not yet.

For now, I enjoyed the chance to return to the quiet, well-ordered peace I'd built for myself for seven years. Verna had taught me 'twas not something I could maintain forever, and that I needed people—my clan, my family, my Mate—around me. But 'twas nice to escape sometimes.

Besides, with Verna here with me...

She hummed. "Is that my wee friend, coming out to say hello?"

I shifted so my hardening cock wasn't so obvious.

"I cannae help it," I grumbled. "Ye're all wet and warm and cuddly. Rubbing up against me like this. And what do ye mean, wee?"

"Och, I was not complaining ." Smirking, Verna pulled away from me. "But it cannot be comfortable for you, standing there in wet wool."

To my surprise, she began to unbuckle my belt.

"Have I mentioned how cold 'tis?"

This time I allowed my grin to show. "I believe ye have, aye."

I kicked off my boots as she dropped my belt to the floor, the clatter of my sword barely registering over the way my blood pounded in my ears with need for her.

"I would be a puir Mate if I allowed my wife to freeze to death."

“Aye,” she murmured, cheeks flushed, eyes already hazy with desire, as she pulled her chemise over her head and tossed it over the stool to dry. “So very cold.”

And then I gathered her—nude and wriggling and already aroused—against me, and discovered she was warm enough.

“Ye dinnae feel cold.”

Verna linked her arms around my neck and lifted her mouth toward mine. “Are you certain? You should check again.”

“Gladly,” I growled, pointing us toward the bed.

‘Twas the last coherent thing either of us said for a while.

Not ready to be done with the Bloodfire Orcs yet? Have you read the prequel, The Orc’s Fated Maiden ? It’s the story of how Mkaalad found Avaleen, and features the Hurt/Comfort trope, as well as Fated Mates and lots of humor. You can read it totally for free by clicking [here](#) !

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:20 am

From The Orc's Innocent Plaything

Oh God .

Was I really doing this?

Of course. You deserve this. Your sister agrees. We all agree. Just knock on the damned door !

Instead, I stared at the door, lit by the half-moon glinting off the snow piled around the walkway. The forge was never completely cold, and thus Vartok's cottage was never completely dark.

Mayhap tonight was the exception. Mayhap tonight he'd gone to bed at a reasonable hour, instead of allowing the stress and pressure of running the clan in his brother's absence keep him awake all night?

Are you hoping that is the case, or dreading it ?

Mayhap I should not have had that extra ale.

I swayed forward, and before my good sense could stop it, I'd knocked. On Vartok's door. In the middle of the night.

I told myself I would give him ten seconds. If he didn't answer by then, I would assume he was asleep and slink away to my bed—to try to satisfy this ache with my fingers yet again—and pretend it never happened.

But by the time I reached “four” I heard footsteps, and then the door was being yanked open. “Myra,” Vartok blurted before he could even fully see me. “What is it? Is Avaleen well?”

How had he known ‘twas me? Wait, what had he asked? The ale had muddled my thought processes, surely.

“I...she is fine,” I managed, swallowing past a dry throat. “Sleeping soundly with your cousin snoring at her side.”

Sharing a cottage with my sister and her Mate had been...an education, if naught else.

At my announcement, Vartok’s large shoulders loosened, and I realized he’d been worried for Avaleen. Logical. Why else would you be at his door this late at night ?

Now he was eyeing me speculatively. “Come in.”

Telling myself I was only agreeing because it was freezing outside, and to do otherwise would be rude, I accepted his invitation. When the door shut behind me, I felt my heart speeding up.

He stepped away from me, making no move to take my cloak. Good, I told myself. Good. I didn’t need to be here long.

Did I?

“Is it Nan?” he ventured. “Is someone else ill?”

I often worked with his grandmother, the village healer, but I had not seen her since this morning. Mutely, I shook my head.

He opened his mouth—presumably to ask another question—then closed it and shook

his head, sending the beads in his hair clanking against one another. I saw him glance at the table, where he had clearly been working on a project, then blow out a breath and scrub a hand down his face.

“Can I offer ye aught?” he finally asked. “Food? Ale?”

You had better say something, lest he think you the one who is ill . “I—I have had enough ale tonight, I think,” I croaked.

His dark brows rose. “Ye’ve been drinking?” Slowly, his lips—those wicked, expressive lips I hated that I loved—drew into a wry grin. Nay, a mocking grin? “Our innocent Myra has been drinking ? What did ye need the courage for, lass?”

Innocent Myra . I hated that he thought that about me. I hated that it was true. Mayhap ‘twas that knowledge that spurred me to stick out my jaw mulishly and blurt, “I do not want you to think me innocent any longer.”

Well, that shocked him into silence. He studied me, and as the seconds ticked by, I could feel my skin responding to his gaze. It prickled, as if I were too cold and too hot at the same time, and I shuddered, a dull throbbing beginning in my core.

I saw Vartok’s nostrils flare as the look in his eyes turned speculative.

I hated that, too.

In the months since I’d been in Bloodfire Village, in the months since Vartok had been forced to take on the role of acting chief in his brother’s absence, he hadn’t seen me as a female . Not the way he flirted with every other female in the village, at least. To me, he was teasing, mocking me almost. How could he know my innocence? Was it so obvious?

The fact that he was only now eyeing me speculatively told me I’d guessed correctly;

he'd never viewed me as a female, as a potential conquest, up until now.

And I hated that I hated that too.

“Why are ye here, Myra?” he finally asked in a low voice that seemed to reach right down to my core, making me want to shudder again.

“I want to...”

Damn him, it was the interest in his eyes which caused me to lose my courage. Caused me to trail off and look away.

But then he was stepping toward me, stepping too close . “What do ye want, wee human?” he all-but-purred, his movements too sensual to be allowed. “What do you want, that ye’ve come to me in the middle of the night? What could our sweet, innocent, learned and XXX midwife want from lowly me?”

‘Twas the mocking way he said it, as if he didn’t believe any of his words, that forced my chin up again, forced my glare to meet his eyes.

“I want pleasure,” I snapped out, daring him to say aught offensive. He towered over me, his muscles defined from years in his forge, but I wasn’t scared of him. I’d never been scared of him, had I. “I want to learn about pleasure.”

And you are the male to teach me.

The words were unsaid in the air between us. I realized I was holding my breath.

Vartok’s expression didn’t change, but I saw his nostrils flare again. He leaned closer, just a few inches, and inhaled, his eyes never leaving mine. Had there always been that green spark in the middle of each eye? I couldn’t remember.

“Pleasure,” he repeated in a murmur, all hints of his earlier teasing gone in favor of an intensity I’d only seen from him at his forge. “I can teach ye about pleasure, lass.”

“I know,” I rasped, my throat too dry for someone who’d had three ales. “I want...”

“I want too.” His gaze swept down my body. “I have wanted for months. But I have rules.”

Rules? What kind of rules?

My tongue darted out over my lips. Honestly, I was quite proud of my bravery in making it this far. Vartok hadn’t mocked me, hadn’t thrown me out. He seemed to be seriously considering my request. The least I could do was pretend this was a perfectly normal conversation.

“What do you want?” I managed.

He straightened suddenly. “Everything, lass.”

My eyes widened. “What?”

“Ye want to learn about pleasure?” He began to move, sauntering to my side with his kilt swaying, as if he were inspecting me. “I can teach ye. But ye will have to obey my rules.”

Now he was behind me. I struggled to keep from twisting my head, from following him. “What rules?” I yelped, my voice too high and my heart beating too fast.

When he stopped, I could feel him right behind me. He didn’t touch me, but I knew . I felt his heat, could hear his harsh breathing, as if he struggled for control as well.

Then he stepped closer, and his stomach was at my back, his breath on my hair,

and...and pressed against my lower back was a hard length I knew enough to recognize.

My lips parted on an involuntary moan as I squeezed my thighs together, trying to control my reaction to him. I swayed backward, then immediately forward when I realized what I'd done.

Vartok leaned down, his lips close enough to my ear to make me shiver.

"I am the one to give you pleasure, Myra. Only me. And when I say 'tis time, ye will agree. Do ye understand?"

"Aye," I squeaked, my senses too overwhelmed to really understand what I was agreeing to.

"I am the one who determines when ye need pleasure. I am yer teacher. I am in control of this little...game."

Game? Is that what this was to him? Is that what I was to him? My chin rose again, but something stopped me from complaining.

Shut up shut up shut up. You wanted pleasure, aye? Well, you are more aroused than you have ever been, and all you are doing is standing in his home. He is clearly the expert, and you are a good student. Just accept his terms!

"Do ye understand, Myra?" he purred in my ear.

Exhaling, I forced my shoulders to relax. "Aye," I whispered, even as I pressed back against him.

His hands rose to my shoulders. "Good lass." He sounded smug. "Such a good little plaything, to come to me for help."

I wanted to hate him, but my body was clearly loving him—nay, not him ! Just his touch...and his praise.

“When will we start?” I managed to ask, trying to sound as if this was a normal relationship between a teacher and pupil.

His hands slid to my chest as his mouth lowered to the skin of my neck. “ Now .”

This one is going to be HOT! With this new bargain, what will happen when Avaleen goes into labor, or when Vartok’s chieftain brother returns? Find out in The Orc’s Innocent Plaything !