



The Princess and the Orc (Cursed Kingdoms)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: She was supposed to marry a prince. Instead, she's been claimed by an orc.

Princess Amalia of Sherith has spent her life preparing to rule, navigating the demands of court and her father's expectations. When the handsome Prince Frederich asks for her hand in marriage, she dares to hope for a future of stability and alliance. But her dreams shatter when a reckless ride into the woods ends in an ambush—and a brutal rescue by an orc warrior.

Drogath, leader of the Broken Claw clan, is no mindless savage. He's on a mission to save his people, and the fiery princess who stirs his blood might be the key to securing peace between their warring races. But when Amalia bargains for her life in exchange for marriage, she has no idea that orc customs make their union binding.

Trapped between duty, desire, and the whispers of a growing war, Amalia must decide: fight the mate bond and return to the safety of her castle, or embrace the wild strength of the orc who has claimed her heart.

A steamy fantasy romance filled with fated mates, dangerous betrayals, and a love powerful enough to bridge worlds.

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Chapter One

Amalia, Princess of Sherith, ran her fingers over the petals of a blood-red rose, avoiding the sharp thorns on the stem. Her mother had loved these roses. She had spent hours in the garden, with Amalia by her side, despite the gardeners being horrified that the queen was digging in the dirt with them. Many other countries often asked for clippings of her mother's plants to take with them when they left Sherith. It was considered a great honor to have one of the Queen's roses in their garden. With her mother gone, Amalia tried to keep up with the garden, but she feared she did more harm than good.

"Their beauty pales compared to your loveliness, dear princess," Prince Frederich of Darea spoke from behind her, his voice soft and pleasant.

She shivered in the cool morning air and slowly turned to meet his stare. He truly was one of the most handsome men she had ever seen. She had been subjected to an endless round of men courting her over the past year, ever since her father declared her to be his heir to the throne. She hadn't realized how many eligible men existed in the kingdom and the constant social whirl was exhausting. But none compared to Prince Frederich.

His blond hair was artfully tousled, just long enough to tempt her to want to run her fingers through it. His blue eyes were a deep blue, the color of the sea that he described to her with such affection on their daily walks through the garden. And his body was lean and muscular, filling out his simple tunic and leggings nicely indeed, making her wonder what he looked like without his clothes.

She blushed at his admiring regard. “My mother created this strain of roses. I used to spend hours watching her tend to them as I was growing up.”

He stepped up close, the heat of his body burning into her, and he laid a hand over hers. “Then we’ll have to bring some with you when you come to Darea, so you’ll feel at home.”

Hope flared in her heart, and he squeezed her hand. “I hope I’m not being too forward. We must return home at once. The filthy orcs have attacked one of our border towns and we must prepare a response. I would like your permission to speak to your father. Ask for your hand.”

Amalia had the presence of mind to not let her jaw drop, even as her heart leapt in her chest. Instead, she steadied her breathing as she had been taught. “Of course, Prince Frederick. I would be honored.”

He bowed, brushing his lips over the back of her hand, and withdrew. She waited until he had left the garden to begin dancing among the plants. She was to be a queen and to marry the most handsome prince of all! Even better, she would unite their kingdoms, protecting her people with a solid alliance. Her father would have to accept the offer.

* * *

“I don’t understand why you won’t agree to the marriage settlement, father,” Amalia said as she settled at the breakfast table in the main hall of the castle. She tucked a cloth napkin over her blue velvet riding dress and thanked the servant, who set a plate of eggs and sausage in front of her.

Her father, King Henrik, looked over at her from the head of the table where he sat with his chief advisor, Sir Cadvael, and sighed. Her father had a full head of white

hair, perfectly coiffed by his valet. He was tall and broad shouldered, not letting himself go like so many of the men of the court, yet he was older and she could see the weight of his years beginning to take its toll on him. He still stood strong and proud, yet his shoulders were slightly rounded. He had lost weight recently, not enough to make him look sickly, but he was not as robust as he had been a few years prior. And his face had more lines than before. Whether they were worry or age, she didn't know. He was still a handsome man, though Amalia often thought she saw loneliness in his eyes and a grief that still haunted him even twenty years after her mother had died.

He frowned as he glanced at his most trusted advisor. "I don't trust Prince Frederich or his father. They seem perfectly pleasant, but something doesn't feel right to me. I want to make sure you have the best options for your marriage. After all, your husband will rule our kingdom with you after I'm gone."

Amalia leaned over and took her father's hand, feeling the dryness of his skin and the bones so close to the surface. "Not for a very long time. We need the allies, father. Orcs have been harassing our borders and our neighbors to the north in Osna have been getting more aggressive. Frederich and his army would add much support to us if we need it."

Sir Cadvail, an aging courtier with a balding head and expanding waistline, had been more like a benevolent uncle than an advisor while Amalia had grown up. He nodded approvingly, pleased that she had taken his lessons on governing to heart, even if she had appeared bored during his many lectures of duty and neighboring politics. "The princess shows a keen grasp of the issues facing our kingdom, your majesty. And she must marry. It is past time for her to be wed."

Amalia stifled a sigh. She'd been fighting the battle about marriage for the past several years, since she turned eighteen more than five years ago. She couldn't understand why she had to be married to rule her country. Her father had been in no

hurry to marry her off, not wanting to lose his last connection to his long-deceased wife, so he hadn't pushed. But now, it seemed her time was up, though no man had been good enough for her, not yet.

She wasn't opposed to marriage. In fact, she wanted children. She only wanted to be allowed to help her people too, and lead them. Prince Frederich seemed like a charming man, quite handsome and kind. She had spent a week with him recently and was quite taken with him.

Her father only shook his head. "I would like to send you to one of the other kingdoms, to visit their sons. Maybe another one of them would be more to your liking. Or at least mine," he muttered the last under his breath.

She sipped her hot chocolate for a moment before responding. This had been a familiar argument in the past two weeks since Prince Frederich had visited the castle. Her father had been perfectly pleasant, but put off finalizing the marriage agreement. Frederich had been less than pleased and had professed a great desire to marry her as soon as possible to protect her from harm, as he was worried about her safety.

She rose from the table. "Father, I am most pleased with Frederich. He is kind, charming, from a neighboring country so we would be close by. Our people are close in traditions, and he would settle with us fine. He has already promised to let me run Sherith when it's time. He won't try to take over."

Her father scowled at her. "Are you going out riding?"

She sighed patiently. "I go every day, Father. Shergar needs his exercise."

"I wish I had never gifted you that damned horse. He's too much for a young woman," he grumbled.

Amalia kissed her father's forehead. "He's perfect for me." Though Frederich hated the horse, and Shergar hated Frederich too.

"I don't want you going out riding. The brigands have been sighted too close to the castle."

"Father, this is my only freedom," she protested, but he cut her off.

"I don't care. No riding today, or until further notice." He turned his attention back to Cadvael, dismissing her.

Amalia narrowed her gaze and resisted the urge to argue further. He had never issued an order quite like that. It had been raining for the past several days, and she was dying to get out and ride. When Prince Frederich was there, she had to ride sedately, like a princess, but when she was alone, with only a couple of guards, she was free to be more uninhibited. No, she was going to have her ride. They'd stay close to the castle and not venture too far. Just enough to get some exercise and fresh air.

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Chapter Two

A malia laughed as the wind tore through her hair, the ribbons that had tied it back drifting behind her as they raced through the open field. Shergar had needed the run more than she had anticipated and they had outrun their guards and lost sight of the castle in short order. She pulled up on the reins to slow him down and he snorted, tossing his head up and in down in protest, but he stopped, stamping his hooves.

She looked around at the clearing and the trees that surrounded them. She knew every inch of the area around their castle. She had traveled much further than she'd thought. The castle was no longer in sight and she had even passed some of the villages. She glimpsed the pond through the trees where she used to spend time with her nanny. She had broken the rules. She had ridden too far, and now she could barely hear the shouts from her guards.

She tugged the reins to turn Shergar around and saw a horrible sight. A band of men on horses emerged from the trees in the distance behind her. They split into two groups; one headed for her and the other for the guards frantically riding to protect her, but they were too far. She froze for a moment, Shergar bellowing a challenge, his head tossing and his hoof pawing the ground.

“Run!” The word tore from her throat as she kicked Shergar into motion. The warhorse needed no encouragement, launching forward with powerful strides that ate up the ground beneath them. Behind her, she could hear the thunder of hooves and the cruel laughter of men who thought they had cornered easy prey.

Her heart pounded against her ribs as Shergar carried her toward the treeline. The

forest. It wasn't safe. Her father's warnings about orc raiding parties echoed in her mind. But neither was staying in the open field where the attackers could surround her. At least in the woods, Shergar's agility might give them an advantage.

Branches whipped at her face as they plunged into the shadows beneath the ancient trees. Shergar wove between trunks with the precision of a dancer, but their pursuers were gaining. These weren't common bandits. They rode like military men, and their coordination spoke of years of training together.

An arrow whistled past her ear, and Amalia ducked low over Shergar's neck. "Please," she whispered, her fingers white-knuckled on the reins. "Please, faster."

But even Shergar's legendary stamina had limits, and she had been riding him hard before the pursuit. His breathing grew labored, his stride less sure as they went deeper into unfamiliar territory. The sounds of the chase grew closer, and Amalia's eyes stung with helpless tears. She had been so foolish, so reckless.

A fallen tree loomed before them. Shergar gathered himself to jump, but his tired legs betrayed him. He stumbled on the landing, and Amalia was thrown forward. She hit the ground, stunned by the impact, and her horse took off, still gripped by fear. The thunder of hooves came closer now, shaking the ground, and rough voices called out in triumph.

"Nowhere left to run, Princess!"

"The client wants her alive, but he said nothing about unspoiled!" A mocking laugh accompanied the words, and her stomach clenched.

Amalia's mind raced, and her heart pounded in her chest. She could surrender, hope they truly meant to take her alive and not hurt her, or she could run on foot, though she knew that would only delay the inevitable. Her skirts would hinder her movement

and there were too many men. They could easily change their mind and wound her to capture her.

Before she could decide, an inhuman roar shattered the forest's tension.

A massive shape erupted from the underbrush, a green figure of muscle and fury. Amalia's eyes widened in terror as she recognized the deep green skin, the massive tusks, the rippling arms thick as tree trunks. An orc warrior, easily eight feet tall, burst between her and the men, wielding a massive battle-axe as though it weighed nothing at all.

The first soldier barely had time to turn before the axe cleaved through his armor like parchment. The orc moved with shocking speed for something so large, spinning to catch another rider with a shoulder check that sent both horse and man flying into a tree with a sickening crunch.

“Orc!” One soldier screamed. “Fall back! Fall—” His words ended in a gurgle as the axe found his throat.

The remaining attackers tried to flee, but the orc was everywhere at once, a whirlwind of calculated violence. In mere moments, what had been an organized attack force was reduced to broken bodies and terrified horses fleeing into the woods. One rider escaped, galloping in the distance.

Then there was silence, broken only by the orc's heavy breathing.

Slowly, deliberately, the massive warrior turned to face her. Amalia struggled to her feet, swaying a little from the shock and impact. She stared at him, unsure of what he would do to her. Blood dripped from his axe and splattered his leather armor and skin, but his movements were controlled, almost graceful. His features were harsh, strange, yet somehow handsome. High cheekbones, a powerful jaw, distinctive tusks capped

with studded metal. His eyes, when they met hers, were a startling black obsidian, intelligence burning in their depths.

“You are far from your castle walls, little princess,” he rumbled, his voice deep as thunder, yet surprisingly articulate. He took a step forward, and Amalia flinched back. The orc stopped, and though his expression was hard to read, she thought she caught a flicker of something, possibly amusement. But why would he be amused? “I am Drogath, of the Broken Claw clan. And you are either very brave or very foolish to ride alone in these woods.”

Amalia's heart raced for entirely different reasons now. Everything she knew, everything she'd been taught, told her that orcs were monsters, mindless savages who lived only to raid and destroy. Yet this one had saved her life and now regarded her with an intelligence that defied all her preconceptions. His presence radiated power and danger, yes, but also something else. Something that made her pulse quicken and her cheeks flush.

“Thank you,” she managed, her voice barely a whisper. “For saving my life. Though I don't understand why.”

Drogath's tusked mouth curved in what might have been a smile. “Perhaps, princess, there is much about my people you do not understand.” He stepped closer again, and this time Amalia held her ground, mesmerized despite her fear. “Though if you wish to learn, these woods are my territory. And I would not be opposed to teaching you.”

* * *

Drogath glided through the forest, his footsteps silent despite his massive frame. The morning's frustration still simmered beneath his skin. Three days he'd waited for an audience with King Henrik, and for three days the human guards had turned him away with increasingly flimsy excuses. As if he couldn't smell their fear, their

instinctive revulsion at the sight of an orc approaching their precious gates. He couldn't afford to be away from his clan much longer, yet he also couldn't afford to fail in his plan, either. His people needed him to succeed. They couldn't fight a war on two fronts. Not alone.

The crack of branches and thunder of hooves pulled him from his brooding. His hand found the shaft of his axe as he moved toward the sound, keeping to the shadows of the ancient trees. As the shouting grew closer, he crouched behind a fallen tree and assessed the situation. The scents hit him first—horse sweat, human fear, and the acrid tang of malice that always accompanied those who enjoyed causing terror in others. Rage filled him and he moved out from the trees, hoping he was in time to help the poor soul who was under attack.

He crested a small rise and took in the scene at a glance. Six mounted soldiers pursued a lone rider on a black horse, a woman, judging by the skirt and hair flowing behind her. Their uniforms weren't those of either Henrik's guard or Drogath's enemy, yet the way they moved spoke of professional training. Mercenaries, then, or someone's private army. He feared for her if they caught her. While orcs were often touted as vile creatures, he knew all too well that humans often caused the most harm to their own.

Drogath didn't hesitate. Whatever game these humans played, it wasn't a fair hunt. He raced through the forest, hoping to intercept the action. The woman's horse leapt over a fallen log and stumbled, with the woman going over the horse's head and onto the ground. The horse took off, leaving the woman huddled on the ground. He burst from the cover with a roar that shook leaves from the branches, letting battle-rage fill him even as he kept his mind clear and tactical. The first two humans died before they could even turn their horses, toppling from them, dead before they hit the ground. The third managed to raise his sword before Drogath's axe separated his head from his shoulders.

The remaining soldiers broke and scattered, as humans so often did when faced with an orc warrior's fury. But Drogath was too quick, cutting them down before they could escape, save one who had turned tail like the coward he was as soon as Drogath had revealed himself.

He turned to the woman, expecting the usual reaction—screaming, fainting, or trying to flee. Instead, she met his gaze evenly, chin raised despite the fear that radiated from her in waves. Her features were delicate, aristocratic, and startlingly familiar from the coins that bore her image. Princess Amalia herself. Well. This complicated matters.

“Thank you.” Her voice shook a bit as she spoke. “For saving my life. Though I don't understand why.”

Drogath smiled. Maybe he would finally get his audience with the king. King Henrik could hardly refuse to speak with the orc who saved his only daughter. “Perhaps, princess, there is much about my people you do not understand.” He stepped closer again, testing her courage, and she didn't flinch, though she smelled of fear, and something else. “Though if you wish to learn, these woods are my territory. And I would not be opposed to teaching you.”

“Take me home,” she commanded, her voice impressively steady. “At once.”

Drogath smirked. She was terrified. He could smell it on her, yet she dared to order him about like a common servant. More interesting still was the other scent threading through her fear. Arousal, sharp and sweet. His blood stirred in response, along with something else he hadn't expected to find and didn't dare name, not yet. Didn't dare to hope.

“Take you home?” he rumbled, letting his voice drop to its deepest register. “But I am an orc, little princess. Haven't you heard? We kidnap beautiful women for sport.

Keep them, bind them to us forever.”

She paled further, her skin creamy under her fiery red hair, but lifted her chin higher. “You saved my life. You won't harm me now.”

“Such certainty.” He stepped closer, noting how her pupils dilated. “But there are brigands still searching these woods for you. The second force that had split from this group. I hear them even now.” He did, too. Crashes through the underbrush, voices calling to each other in the distance. “I could protect you, escort you safely home... for a price.”

“What price?” Her fists tightened next to her body, but she didn't back away.

“Marriage.”

“What?” The word exploded from her in a most un-princess-like squawk. “Absolutely not!”

Drogath shrugged his massive shoulders. “As you wish.” He turned, hefted his ax, and began walking away, counting silently in his head. One. Two. Three. Shouts were growing closer. Whether they were the enemy or her own guard, because there was no way the princess was out alone, he didn't know. But if he didn't know who it was, neither did she, which gave him an advantage. He had waited for an opportunity, leverage with the king. Now he had one in his claws. The princess herself. His victory would be sweeter if she came willingly.

“Wait!”

He smiled, then smoothed his expression before turning back. Amalia stood rigid, hands fisted at her side, face white but determined, her face tilted in a regal expression. Behind her, the voices grew closer.

“I accept.”

“Accept what, precisely?” He wouldn't make this easy for her. He needed her to say the words, to seal the bargain.

She swallowed hard. “I accept your offer of marriage.”

“Ah.” Relief flooded him. He had her.

Drogath moved closer until he towered above her, forcing her to look up to meet his eyes. “Then we must seal our bargain properly.” He reached for her, giving her time to pull away if she truly wished to refuse. When she remained still, he cupped the back of her head with one massive hand and drew her toward him.

“With a kiss.”

Chapter Three

A malia held herself rigid as Drogath's massive hand cradled the back of her head. It was just a kiss, a meaningless gesture to seal a bargain that would never come to pass. Her father would never allow her to marry an orc, no matter what promises she made in the heat of the moment. The thought steadied her. One kiss, and then she would be safely escorted home.

She tilted her chin up, expecting a quick, perfunctory press of lips. Instead, Drogath's dark eyes caught and held hers, filled with an intensity that made her breath catch. His other hand settled at her waist, and with surprising gentleness, he pulled her to him as if she weighed nothing at all.

“Scared, little princess?” His deep voice rumbled through her where their bodies pressed together, and she realized her hands rested against the solid wall of his chest, the heat from his mostly bare body searing her.

“Of course not,” she lied, proud that her voice remained steady. “It's just a kiss.”

His tusked mouth curved in a knowing smile. “We shall see.”

Then his lips claimed hers, and all thoughts of propriety and politics burned away in a rush of sensation. This was no chaste peck between nobles at court. Drogath kissed like a warrior claiming territory, passionate and demanding, yet with an underlying tenderness that made her knees weak. His tusks, which should have been awkward or frightening, somehow added to the erotic pleasure of the kiss.

Against her will, Amalia melted into him, her lips parting on a gasp. Drogath took immediate advantage, deepening the kiss until she moaned softly into his mouth. Her fingers curled into the leather straps that criss-crossed his chest, trying to ground herself as unfamiliar heat pooled in her belly.

He broke the kiss only to trail his lips down her throat, and Amalia's head fell back, her body arching into his touch. "This isn't... we shouldn't..." But she made no move to push him away.

"Tell me to stop," he murmured against her skin, his breath hot and sending shivers down her spine. "Tell me you don't want this."

She should. She knew she should. But when she opened her mouth, all that emerged was another breathy moan as his teeth grazed her pulse point. His hands, so massive they could span her waist, slid up her sides with maddening slowness.

"So responsive," he growled approvingly. "So perfect."

One hand tangled in her hair while the other pressed against her lower back, molding her more firmly against him. The hard planes of his body felt amazing against her softness, and she could feel the evidence of his desire pressing against her belly.

Horror and arousal warred within her as she realized just how much she wanted this, wanted him. He was an orc, her people's enemy, everything she'd been taught to fear and revile. Yet her body sang for his touch, and when he captured her mouth again, she kissed him back with equal passion.

His tongue stroked against hers as his hands roamed her body, learning her curves through the thin fabric of her riding dress. Every touch left trails of fire in its wake. When his fingers brushed the side of her breast, she gasped and arched into the contact, wanting more. He tugged the top of her riding dress and the buttons sprang

open, exposing her breast to the air. He cupped the mound, rubbing his thumb across the taut peak. The shock of his touch on her bare skin sent heat shooting through her body, straight to her core, which throbbed with a need she had never felt before. She moaned and pushed into his hold, trying to get closer.

He chuckled and tweaked the nipple. “Be still. I want to look at you.”

But he didn’t look for long. He bent down and sucked one tip in his mouth, his tusks brushing the side of her breast, his teeth worrying at the peak, skirting the edge of pleasure and pain. She buried her hands in his black hair, finding it smoother than she expected, and tugged him closer, twisting the dark strands in her fingers, holding him to her.

He nipped her and shifted to the other side, feasting on her while massaging the soft flesh, his dark green color a shock against her pale, creamy skin. He drew her dress further open and, baring her stomach, and began kissing his way down the gently curved belly. Shouts echoed in the distance, penetrating the haze of passion that clouded her mind. She shook her head and pushed him away.

“We have to stop,” she gasped.

Drogath slowly lifted his head, his eyes hazy with passion, and rested his forehead against her stomach. His breathing was as ragged as her own, his obsidian eyes dark with desire. Sounds in the distance penetrated, and his fog cleared quickly. He stood, pulling her dress closed.

“We need to move,” he said, his gaze looking around the forest surrounding them. “Before I take you right here in the forest.”

The words should have shocked her, should have snapped her out of this madness. Instead, they sent another wave of heat through her core. Images flashed through her

mind. Those powerful hands on her bare skin, his massive body moving over hers, taking her with the same passionate intensity he'd shown in battle.

“Yes,” she whispered, though whether she was agreeing they should stop or begging him to continue, she wasn't sure. Her lips felt swollen from his kisses, her body trembling with a need she'd never experienced before.

He growled low in his throat and kissed her again, harder this time, his control clearly fraying. One hand slid down to cup her bottom, pulling her more firmly against him, and Amalia moaned at the friction. Her fingers slid under the leather straps, seeking warm skin.

A distant shout snapped her back to reality. The soldiers were still searching, drawing closer. Drogath pulled back slightly, though he kept her pressed close with one arm around her waist.

“Finish dressing before those soldiers find us,” he said, his voice rough with restrained desire. “Unless you've changed your mind about wanting to return home?”

The question held layers of meaning. Amalia fought to gather her scattered thoughts, horrified by how close she'd come to giving herself to an orc in the middle of the forest. Yet she couldn't deny the way her body still hummed for his touch, or how right it had felt in his arms. She fumbled with the buttons, avoiding his gaze.

“Take me home,” she managed, hating how breathless she sounded. “Please.”

His knowing smile sent another shiver through her. “As my princess commands.”

Shergar snorted from somewhere behind Amalie, having circled back to them. Drogath lifted her easily back onto her horse, his hands lingering longer than necessary.

“Know this. When we are alone, I will finish what we started here. And I will take my time with it. And you will like it, my mate.”

Amalia's face flamed, but she couldn't suppress a thrill of anticipation at his words. What had she gotten herself into? And why did the thought of being at his mercy fill her with such desperate longing?

* * *

D rogath kept a careful distance behind the princess as they traveled, close enough to protect her if needed, but far enough that she wouldn't feel crowded by his presence. His keen senses remained alert for any sign of the remaining soldiers, though they seemed to have withdrawn once he'd entered the picture. Smart of them.

His body still hummed from the interrupted moment they'd shared earlier, his cock aching where it pressed against his breeches, damning him for stopping when he had a willing female present. The princess had been a ball of fire in his arms, full of passion and heat, an unexpected surprise, and most welcome. He'd had his share of females, both human and orc. any human females found orcs irresistible, something to do with scents, according to their legends. But when an orc found his fated mate, the pull was undeniable, and his mate, whether she be human or orc, would be unable to resist. It appeared the princess would be a fiery mate to warm his bed, and he was grateful for his match.

While he had been frustrated at his attempts to see the king, his efforts appeared to have paid off in a most unexpected way. He had come seeking an ally, and he would leave with a mate and a stronger alliance, or so he hoped. His clan needed him to succeed. Their very existence relied on his ability to convince King Henrik that the orcs were not to blame for the border raids. If the king denied the mating pact and threw him in the dungeon, a very real possibility, his clan and the fate of all orc clans that he hoped would unite under one banner would be in jeopardy.

And all of it rested on the head of one spoiled princess.

Amalia kept her horse to a sedate walk, slow enough to allow him to keep pace and protect her, though a little ahead of him. She rode with her body rigid, her chin tilted up and away from him, acting as if he was her servant, not her mate. He allowed it, amused by her petty rebellion. It wouldn't last once they were mated, though technically, in the eyes of his people, they already were since she accepted the bond. He doubted she would have gone along so easily if she understood what she was agreeing to, so he had decided not to share the details. Once he had her fully mated, he would take her in hand and she would be unable to resist him. For now, he would settle for admiring the curve of her ass as she rode her steed, and thinking about how she would ride him someday, her tight pussy clenching around him, her soft breasts bouncing, her belly rounded with his young.

He clutched the silk ribbon from her hair in his hand, plucked from where it had snagged on a branch during their interlude. It was infused with her delicate scent and teased him. He could still taste her on his lips, still feel the way she'd melted against him, desire overwhelming her fear and prejudice. But he wasn't fool enough to think that would last once she was back in her gilded cage.

When the castle towers appeared through the trees, her shoulders stiffened. Her horse sensed the change in her posture and pranced nervously. Drogath slowed his pace, giving her the space she needed to make her choice. He'd known this moment would come from the instant she'd agreed to his bargain. She would run from him, but she would never escape.

Amalia drew her mount to a halt, half-turning in the saddle to look back at him. For a moment, their eyes met across the distance. He saw the conflict there, the whisper of regret that almost made him hope that she would choose him.

Then she turned back, kicked her horse into motion. The animal's hooves thundered

against the packed earth as she fled toward the safety of her walls. Drogath watched her go, noting how she leaned forward in the saddle, her red hair streaming behind her like a banner. She was beautiful in flight. And it gave him a reason to spank her delectable ass, once he caught up with her.

He continued his steady pace toward the castle, watching as she reached the gates. She spoke briefly to the guards, then disappeared inside without a backward glance. By the time he approached, the guards had arranged themselves in a defensive formation, spears leveled at his chest.

“That's far enough, orc,” the captain called out, his voice steady despite the scent of fear rolling off him in waves. He probably was alarmed by the blood smeared on Drogath's chest, some of which had come off on the princess's velvet riding habit. “The princess warned us you'd try to follow her. Turn back now, and we won't be forced to hurt you.”

Drogath's laugh rumbled deep in his chest. “Hurt me? With those toothpicks?” He took another step forward, noting how the younger guards shuffled nervously. “Your princess and I have business to discuss.”

“The princess gave explicit orders that you're not to be admitted,” the captain insisted. “She says you accosted her in the forest.”

“Did she?” Drogath held up the silk ribbon, letting it flutter in the breeze. “Strange that she'd give her token to someone who accosted her, wouldn't you say?”

The captain's eyes narrowed as he studied the ribbon. Drogath could practically see the thoughts churning behind his eyes. The ribbon was clearly the princess's, its quality unmistakable. And if Drogath had truly attacked her, why would she have ridden home accompanied by him instead of being pursued? Why would she be unharmed?

“Could have taken it from her by force,” one of the younger guards suggested, but he didn't sound convinced.

“And yet here I stand, asking permission to enter rather than scaling your walls or breaking down your gate,” Drogath pointed out mildly. “I’ve come to speak with King Henrik about matters that concern both our peoples. The princess can confirm that I mean no harm, unless you're suggesting she's a coward who runs from peaceful discussions?”

That hit its mark. None of them would dare imply their princess was a coward. The captain shifted uncomfortably, clearly uncertain how to proceed.

“Send for Sir Cadvael,” he finally ordered one of his men. “The king's advisor will know how to handle this.”

As the messenger hurried off, Drogath wandered over to a bucket of cold water and washed the blood off of his skin. It was getting itchy as it dried, and he didn’t want to meet the king looking like a barbarian, after all. Then he settled into a relaxed stance. Let them see that their weapons didn't concern him. Let them wonder why their princess had given him her token. Let them stew in their uncertainty and prejudice while they waited for someone else to make the hard decisions.

He inhaled deeply, picking out individual scents through the miasma of human fear and sweat. There. The lingering trace of Amalia's passage through these gates. Beneath the fear she'd been projecting, he'd caught a hint of arousal, of reluctant attraction. She might have run from him, might even have convinced herself she'd escaped a monster, but her body remembered the truth of what had passed between them.

She was his promised bride, whether she admitted it to her people or not. And Drogath was nothing if not patient. Let her hide behind her walls for now. Let her

pretend their bargain meant nothing. He would wait, and watch, and when the moment was right, he would have his mate, his prize.

He smiled, showing just enough fang to make the guards shuffle backward. The ribbon danced in his grip like a promise.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 8:01 am

Chapter Four

Amalia settled into her seat at the banquet table, after having carefully bathed and dressed for dinner. Her body still hummed from her afternoon with the orc, but she had to put him firmly behind her. There was no way the guards would let him into the castle. Orcs had been conducting raids along the borderlands, sadly leaving few survivors. Prince Frederick had told her of his own country's woes with the orcs, which he admitted was one of the reasons he sought her hand in marriage. He wanted an alliance with Sherith to join forces and defeat the orcs once and for all.

Only, her orc hadn't seemed warlike or nasty or evil at all. He had saved her from sure death, or at least a kidnapping, the outcome of which she didn't know and feared. Being a princess wouldn't save her from harm. She wasn't naive enough to think that would make any difference. In fact, it would probably put her in more danger. She was a valuable hostage, being the daughter of the king and the only heir to his throne. The brigands could have held her prisoner and forced her father into any manner of things, or forced her into a marriage to take over the kingdom. Stranger things had happened elsewhere.

Amalia knew her behavior had been impetuous and reckless. She should have listened to her father, heeded his warnings. At least no one needed to know about her adventure.

She picked at the roast pig, normally one of her favorites, especially the way Cook made it. But she had no appetite this evening. Her stomach was tied in knots, worried as she was that somehow her dalliance would come back to haunt her. As the meal progressed, her father and his chief advisor discussed matters of state. Normally,

Amalia tried to pay attention, learn from them. Her father had been involving her in the running of the kingdom more and more, telling her that she could not rely on her husband-to-be. She thought it would be boring, but she liked it, enjoyed being needed and involved. It was better than sitting in her solarium and stitching useless things. Besides, no one liked her needlework. It was atrocious.

Finally, a soldier came to speak to Sir Cadvael. He frowned and excused himself. Her father turned his attention to her and they spoke of Prince Frederick and his reasons for refusing the marriage.

A commotion at the door roused their attention. Sir Cadvael stood there with the captain of the guard behind him and another figure looming over both of them. A green hulking beast of a creature. Her stomach plummeted. It was the orc. How had he gotten in despite her orders?

She clenched the arms of her chair, her heart freezing in her chest. Sir Cadvael shot her a sympathetic look, then refocused on her father. “Your majesty. We have a visitor who says he knows Princess Amalia. He says he is her... fiancé.”

Everyone turned to stare at Amalia. A servant dropped a platter to the floor, shattering the silence that had gripped the hall. Her father stood, still looking uncertain.

“Please, come in. Join us, sir.”

The orc pushed past Sir Cadvael. “I’m Drogath, representing the Broken Fang clan. I have been trying to speak with you for three days, your majesty.”

King Henrik arched his eyebrows, but when he spoke, his tone was mild. “And instead you accost my daughter? How did that happen, exactly?”

He turned to Amalia, and she squirmed in her chair, avoiding his penetrating stare. “I went for a ride today and got separated from my escort. Brigands attacked me, but this orc saved my life.”

His expression turned thunderous. “I expressly forbade you to go riding. You are a target, Amalia. I told you this could happen.”

“You didn’t tell me this. You only asked me to stay close to the castle. How was I to know that I would be attacked?”

King Henrik rolled his eyes and looked at Drogath. “Are you sure you want to marry a headstrong female such as this?”

Drogath only smiled. “We made a bargain, your majesty. I escorted her safely back to the castle in exchange for her hand in marriage.”

“You can’t mean to hold me to that. I was coerced!” Amalia cried out.

Her father exchanged glances with Sir Cadvael and his expression turned cagey. “Will you join us for dinner?”

* * *

Drogath sat on the red velvet cushioned chair across from King Henrik and immediately servants began laying plates in front of him, piled high with food. Roasted pork. Fresh warm bread. Creamy butter. Cold ale. Spiced wine. It was a feast for the senses, and he was starving. Yet the only thing he wanted to devour was his mate, Princess Amalia. She had bathed in something floral that masked her own sweet scent, but he could still smell her underneath it all. And her courtly dress covered more than he would like, hiding her from his eyes. It was the orc way to show off their mates and flaunt their treasures, for that was what a mate was—a

veritable treasure that not all males were honored to find, but he wasn't ready to share his.

“What brings you to my kingdom?”

Drogath smothered a smile. “Orcs used to roam freely across your lands, your majesty. But we have restricted ourselves to the mountain regions for safety in recent decades. I came because I believe we have an enemy in common.”

The king exchanged glances with his chief advisor. “We do? I was under the impression that your people were our enemy.”

Drogath frowned. “You have been misled. We are not your enemy. We only wish to live in peace with you and your people. We have not attacked your borders or your people. Instead, we have been the victims of foul attacks and slander against our name.”

Sir Cadvael spoke up. “We have evidence of your attacks on our villages.”

“Lies,” Drogath spoke flatly. “We have never attacked your villages or anyone else. Anyone killed has only been in response to attacks on our homes.”

“You’re saying that someone left orc weapons and clothing in our villages and used your techniques to kill humans?”

Drogath wanted to slam his hands on the table. Why wouldn’t they listen? But he had to maintain his composure to save his people. He was his clan’s, no, all the orc clans’ only hope of defense against their dishonorable enemies. He had to persuade King Henrik to ally with them and stand against their enemies before it was too late. Other orcs were attempting to reach out to other kings, but Sherith had always been friendly to orcs and they were in the direct line of attack. Drogath had no doubt that once the

orcs were removed, Sherith would be next, whether from the enemy within or the one they could not see on their borders.

He knew the neighboring kingdom of Darea had been attacking his people, but he had no proof. They used uniforms from Osna or none at all, appearing as brigands or outlaws to throw his sentries off the scent. But he'd caught sight of their prince with his distinctive white-blond hair, watching the attack from a distance, even coming close enough to take part at one point. Darea was involved up to their prissy little necks, and he suspected they were behind the attack on the princess earlier that day.

But Drogath met the king's gaze evenly. "Yes, I am saying exactly that."

The king frowned and his advisor looked troubled. "These are serious accusations. I assume you have proof?"

Drogath scowled. "Not enough for a human court."

The king made a sound and focused on his food for a few minutes. Drogath waited but, when nothing else was said, he also began eating. The food, while delicious, felt like dirt in his mouth. The only positive side was that his mate was also picking at her food, avoiding his gaze, though occasionally stealing glances at him, her eyes darting away when he caught her.

The king didn't miss the exchange. "Explain how you think you're worthy of my daughter's hand in marriage."

Drogath heard the steel in the king's tone and had a choice to make. He could kowtow to the king, as many of the human courtiers would, or he could act as a warrior and stand up for himself.

He met the king's gaze. "Your daughter pledged herself to me in exchange for her

safety. This is between us.”

The king’s white eyebrow raised. “She needs my permission to marry.”

“I’m not asking to marry her. In the eyes of my people, we’re already mated.”

“What?” Amalia screeched, half rising out of her seat. “You didn’t tell me that.”

He smirked at her. “You didn’t ask, nor did you stay around long enough for me to enlighten you.”

“You are under the impression that you and my daughter are already mated?” The king asked, his tone mild.

“Not an impression, a fact,” Drogath corrected. “She accepted my terms. We are mated. Though there is still a ceremony we will perform with my clan. Amalia is of an age to make her own decisions. We do not rely on family permissions, like humans do. We allow the parties involved to make their own decisions.”

The king pursed his lips and glanced at his advisor, who looked consideringly. They put their heads together and spoke quietly for a few moments.

Meanwhile, Drogath felt Amalia's glare upon him, her hands fisted around her knife as if she envisioned stabbing him with it. He liked a female with fire. She’d make a fine mate and mother for his young.

She leaned forward and lowered her voice. “Why didn’t you tell me that you thought we were mated? I would have never agreed to that.”

He leaned back in his chair and narrowed his eyes. “So you had no intention of honoring your word?”

Her jaw snapped shut. Anger flashed in her eyes. “That’s not what I meant.”

“So you running away and blocking me from entering the castle was a misunderstanding?” He challenged, almost laughing at the frustration coming off of her in waves.

Amalia turned to her father, who studied them thoughtfully. “Daddy, you can’t make me marry an orc.”

“I admit, this is not the marriage I had envisioned for you. However, it appears that your recklessness has actually made that point moot. You are mated to an orc. You made a deal with him and you must honor your word, Amalia. And I believe an alliance with the orcs might be in our best interest.”

“But daddy, I’m supposed to marry Prince Frederick!” she wailed.

“I told you once before that I will never allow that. I don’t trust him and would never want you tied to him,” her father said sternly.

Amalia stood and raced from the room, crying. The men watched her leave. Her father sighed. “She may give you trouble, Drogoth.”

Drogoth nodded solemnly. “I can handle her, sir. And I think your distrust is well placed. I believe Prince Frederick is behind the attacks on both of our people.”

The king stood and extended his hand. “Then we have a common enemy. For now, be our guest for a few days.”

Drogoth stood, relief loosening the muscles in his shoulders. The king believed him. The alliance was still possible. “Thank you. But I must return to my people as soon as possible.”

“I understand. But we must have a wedding ceremony, so everything is legal on our side as well. I will hurry it along as soon as possible. One of our servants will escort you to Amalia’s rooms, since you are mated, as you call it.”

Drogath bowed. “I can find her, your majesty. Thank you.”

He left the room, following the scent of his sweet mate, ready to finish what they had started earlier that day.

Chapter Five

Amalia's hands trembled as she unpinned her hair, letting the dark auburn waves cascade down her back. The events of the day felt like a dream, or perhaps a nightmare. Her armed escort had returned before her, raising an alarm, but she quickly quelled the concerns, saying that she had evaded the attackers and returned by a different route, carefully omitting any mention of the orc or their bargain. There was no need to worry anyone about a promise that would never be fulfilled.

Then Drogath had burst on the scene, revealing the true events of the day. She had been convinced that her father would throw her in the dungeon for daring to touch his daughter, or presume to claim Amalia's hand in marriage. Never mind that she had made the foolish bargain in the first place. Who could hold her to such a thing when she had feared her life was in danger? The orc showed no honor by forcing her into this deal.

But her father shocked her by agreeing with the orc, inviting him to dinner and upholding the foul arrangement. He took her to task for trying to get out of it and insisted she keep her word, going so far as to promise a quick wedding, even as the orc said they were already mated in the eyes of his people.

Her life was ruined! Just that morning, she had been trying to figure out how to convince her father to accept Prince Frederick's betrothal, and tonight, she was pledged to an orc, their kingdom's enemy. What had happened? How could her life have changed so dramatically?

Her maid had helped her undress, and she was seated in front of her vanity in a plush

emerald green robe, the color reminding her of Drogath. She dismissed the maid, needing quiet to think and settle her nerves. Amalia had just picked up her silver-backed brush when the bedroom doors burst open. She whirled, clutching the brush like a weapon, only to freeze at the sight of Drogath filling her doorway. Candlelight from the hallway silvered his green skin and glinted off his tusks, making him appear even more otherworldly than before. Guards flanked him on either side but made no move to arrest him or remove him from her quarters.

“Get out!” she hissed, glancing frantically at her chamber door. “You cannot be here.”

“Why not? I’m your mate. Where else would I sleep but by your side?” He asked, closing the door behind him. “I have every right to be here, my little princess.”

She wrapped the edges of the robe closer around her, his black eyes heating as they tracked her hands.

That word sent a shiver down her spine. “I am not your mate, and I am not your little princess. That bargain was made under duress.”

His dark eyebrow arched. “Duress, aye. You were in danger and I saved you from it, under significant threat to my own life.”

She scoffed. “You had no problem handling those soldiers. In fact, you probably organized the whole thing!”

“No, princess. I don’t deceive others. I keep my word and speak my truth plainly. Something you seem to have trouble with, since I believe you planned to break the oath as soon as you made it.” He advanced on her slowly, step by step until he towered above her. “Did you think I wouldn’t know? That I couldn’t smell the deception on you even as you agreed to my terms?”

Amalia backed away until her legs hit the edge of her bed. “That's not true. I only wanted time to prepare my father for your arrival. To explain the situation.”

“I do not allow my mate to lie to me.” The word rumbled from his chest. “You ran from me. Tried to bar me from following. These are not the actions of a mate preparing her family, but of one trying to escape her obligations.”

“Obligations?” Her voice rose despite her effort to keep quiet. “I always fulfill my duty to my people. I have done everything my father has asked, as I prepare to follow him leading the kingdom. But this is not how things are done. You can't just declare that I am your mate.”

“First off, I didn't declare you my mate. You did. Second, you are no longer bound only by the laws of your people.” He leaned closer. “When you accepted my bargain, you became subject to orc law. And by our laws, you are my mate. My responsibility.” His dark eyes gleamed. “Including the responsibility to punish you when you misbehave.”

Horror and something far more dangerous curled in her belly. “Punish? You mean to beat me?”

His laugh was dark, honeyed, rich and dangerous. “Beat you? No, little princess. I'm going to spank you.” He reached for her, massive hands surprisingly gentle as they caught her wrists, drawing her close. “And I think you might even enjoy it.”

“That's barbaric!” Amalia protested even as her body betrayed her, heat flooding her core at his words. She tried to twist away, but he simply gathered both her wrists in one hand, using his other to tip her chin up.

“Your pulse is racing,” he observed, thumb stroking over her throat. “Your pupils are dilated. You're aroused by the idea, aren't you? My proper little princess, excited by

the thought of being turned over my knee and spanked like a naughty child.”

“I am not!” The words emerged breathy, unconvincing even to her own ears.

“More lies.” He pulled her closer until she had to tip her head back to maintain eye contact. “Tell me, mate, do you know what happens to liars in orc culture?”

She shook her head mutely, mesmerized by the heat in his gaze.

“They get extra strokes. But I’ll go easy on you for your first time.” His hand slid from her chin down her back, coming to rest possessively on her bottom. “One for running away. One for barring my entry. And now two more for lying about your motivations. That’s four spansks you’ve earned yourself, princess. Shall we make it five?”

Amalia’s breath came in quick gasps. She should scream for the guards. Should fight, should protest this barbaric treatment. Instead, she found herself swaying toward him, her body yearning for his touch even as her mind rebelled.

“Please,” she whispered, though she wasn’t sure if she was begging him to stop or continue.

“Please what?” His hand squeezed gently, making her gasp. “Please punish you? Please claim you properly, as I should have done in the forest?” He leaned down, his breath hot against her ear. “Please make you admit how much you want this?”

“I don’t know,” she almost wailed, her body yearning for something she didn’t understand.

“Five it is, then.” In one smooth motion, he sat on the edge of her bed and pulled her between his thighs. “Remember, princess, you earned every one of these. And if you

scream,” his hand stroked over her robe. “Well, then everyone will know exactly what's happening in here, won't they?”

* * *

Amalia eyed him carefully, as if trying to figure out how to handle the situation. He could almost hear her thoughts, and he could certainly smell her arousal, so she wasn't terrified. But the robe had to go.

She bent over, and he stopped her. “First rule of punishment, you must be naked. However, since this is your first time, I'll settle for you removing your robe.”

Her eyes widened even as her arousal scent spiked. She clutched the edges of the robe together in a show of modesty. “Absolutely not. You can't see me naked.”

“Why not? I'm your mate, am I not? Make it quick or you will be naked for this and I will add to the count.”

She hesitated for a moment, then carefully shrugged out of the robe. Before she could drop it to the floor, he gestured to the bed. With a mulish set to her jaw, she laid the robe across the foot of the bed and turned back to him, leaving her clad in a silk nightgown barely skimming her curvy body, revealing the lush curves he was dying to explore as her mate.

He patted his thigh, and she narrowed her eyes, but she slowly settled over Drogath's lap, her lush ass in the air. He savored the weight of Amalia across his lap; her scent a heady mixture of fear, arousal, and anticipation. The silk of her nightgown was whisper-thin beneath his palm as he caressed her bottom, letting her anticipation build. Her breath came in quick pants, and he could feel the tension in her slender body. He was going to enjoy his mate.

“Count them,” he commanded, then brought his hand down in a measured strike.

She gasped but managed a breathy “One.”

He alternated cheeks, careful to moderate his strength. He had no wish to truly hurt her. This was about claiming, about teaching her that actions had consequences. Each strike drew a desperate little sound from her throat, followed by the count in an increasingly strained voice.

By the fifth strike, she was squirming in his lap, her arousal evident in both her scent and the way she pressed her thighs together. He smoothed his hand over her warmed flesh, enjoying how she arched into his touch despite herself.

“Good girl,” he rumbled, and she shivered at the praise. “Now, shall we see how wet this punishment made you?”

She whimpered, wriggling against his rock hard cock, but didn’t say anything. He suspected she didn’t know exactly what she was silently begging for. That was okay. He could guide her. Normally he would have done this with her bent over, but he suspected she was untouched and he wanted to see her expression as he brought her to climax the first time.

He gathered her up, turning her to straddle his lap. Her face was flushed, pupils blown wide with desire as she looked up at him, tears glistening in her eyes. When he captured her mouth in a searing kiss, she melted against him immediately, arms wrapping around his neck.

His hand slid between them, finding her center through the thin silk. She was soaked, her body more honest than her words had been. When he stroked her core, his fingers splitting her soaking wet folds before finding her soft nub at the top, she jerked against his hold and broke the kiss with a desperate cry.

“Quiet,” he reminded her, continuing his careful exploration. “Unless you want the guards to overhear?”

She buried her face against his neck, muffling her sounds as he worked her higher, stroking her with his thumb, while his finger delved deeper into her tight channel. She was a virgin. Not that he expected anything else, but it would make consummating their mating more difficult. She clearly had an exhibitionist streak in her, considering how she reacted whenever he brought up someone overhearing. That would be a good thing for an orc mate. Orc males loved to show off their mates, though they rarely shared them.

Her hips rocked against his hand, seeking more friction, more pressure. He gave her what she needed, drinking in her quiet gasps and whimpers, using his fingers to stretch her, getting her ready for his much larger cock, while his thumb worked her nub relentlessly.

When she finally shattered, she bit his shoulder to stay silent, her body trembling in his arms. He held her through it, murmuring praise in his native tongue as she came down from her high.

“Why...” she managed finally, her voice shaky. “Why didn't you...”

“Take you fully?” He smiled against her hair as he stroked her back with one hand, his other still buried inside of her. “That pleasure will wait until you’ve been prepared.” He decided not to mention the claiming before the clan. She wasn’t quite ready for that knowledge, though he suspected she’d enjoy it. He shifted her in his arms, laying them both down on her bed. “For now, sleep. You'll need your strength for the next few days.”

She made a soft sound of protest but was already drifting off, curled trustingly against his chest. Drogath pulled her closer, breathing in their mingled scents. His little mate

might fight their bond, might rage against the changes coming to her life, but her body knew the truth of where she belonged.

He would let her sleep for now. Tomorrow they might battle again, but tonight she purred like a kitten, wrapped safely in his arms where she belonged.

Chapter Six

“Why is this... creature attending our council meeting?” Councillor Victor Basinger, a hardened older man from one of the border regions, sneered at Drogath, who sprawled in one of the chairs looking remarkably unconcerned.

Amalia glanced nervously between her father and Drogath, wondering if anyone was going to respond to the inherent challenge in the comment. Amalia often attended Council meetings, initially under her father's gentle suggestion so she could learn the business of the kingdom, then as she found it interesting. She knew many of the older Council members were waiting for the day when she married, constantly putting forth potential husbands for her father's consideration so she could get to her real purpose: popping out babies and raising the next generation. She was nothing more than a vessel to many of them, though there were a few, like Sir Cadvael, who respected her and listened when she spoke.

Now King Henrik stood and announced her marriage, or mating, to an orc. The clamor was deafening, and Drogath only sat there, one leg propped over the arm of the chair, swinging slightly, a smirk on his face. He was intentionally baiting the Councillors, acting the part of a lazy, indolent orc, when she suspected otherwise. They had spent only one night together so far, but she already knew he was far more intelligent than anyone believed, which he manipulated to his advantage. Was it a game or did he have a deeper purpose in coming here? What did a common orc know about ruling a kingdom? He would be better served hanging with the soldiers, as her maid told her he'd done that morning.

Amalie caught Drogath's gaze across the chamber, and he gave her a wicked wink,

his sharp teeth flashing in a knowing grin. Heat licked down her spine, pooling low in her belly as memories of the previous night crashed over her. The way his calloused hands had roamed her body, the way his mouth had explored, teased, claimed—she had never felt anything like it. Prince Frederich, with his careful courtship and chaste kisses, had never dared to touch her so intimately.

And now, all she could think about was returning to their bedchambers, peeling away the layers of propriety and seeing if it had been as good as she remembered. Or if it would be even better.

Not that she was particularly pleased with him at the moment.

She had slept all night wrapped in warmth, cocooned by the solid weight of a male who radiated heat like a living furnace. His scent, rich and dark with the spice of something utterly him, had wrapped around her like a second skin, and for one blissful moment, she had expected to wake to his hands skimming her body, to the rough scrape of his tusks against the delicate skin of her throat.

Instead, she had been met with empty sheets and the chill of his absence.

The disappointment had been sharp, unexpected. Perhaps a little distance had been for the best. She wasn't sure she was ready to lose herself completely in an orc's embrace.

Tell that to her traitorous body.

Every time Drogath flashed her that wicked grin, the heat flared again, spreading like fire through her limbs. Her thighs pressed together involuntarily, desperate for friction, for relief from the ache building inside her. He knew exactly what he was doing to her. She could see it in the way his gaze lingered, the way his nostrils flared slightly, as if he could scent the longing curling beneath her skin.

And gods help her, she wanted him to do something about it.

“Princess Amalia. Are you listening?” An exasperated voice broke into her thoughts, and she turned her burning face to Councillor Basinger.

Before she could respond, Drogath growled and leapt to his feet, stepping between her and the Councillor. “Speak to my mate with more respect. She is my mate, your princess, and your future queen.”

The Councillor’s eyes flared with fear and he stumbled back a few steps, falling into his chair. Amalia stifled a giggle, glad to see the overbearing man put in his place. He had been the one to put forth Prince Frederick as a potential husband, being related to the prince or something, and she was sure he was disappointed by the king's refusal to consider him. But her heart warmed at the defense. Even her father had never defended her, saying she needed to hold her own against the Council if she wanted to rule after he was gone.

“My apologies, Princess Amalia,” Councillor Basinger finally sputtered in her direction.

She gave a graceful nod. “Thank you, Councillor. As you can understand, this may not have been the alliance we were expecting with our neighbors of Darea, however, this marriage will bring us more safety and a strong union with the orc clans of the mountain regions through which our enemies have to travel to invade us. Our orc allies know the mountain passes better than anyone and can provide defense for us, along with faster warnings, so we can be better prepared for any attacks.”

“Assuming they are not the ones attacking us now,” the Councillor muttered.

“We are not attacking you,” Drogath stated flatly. “However, that is an excellent change of subject. Who is attacking your settlements, not to mention ours?”

Councillor Basinger glared at him, then turned to the king. “Your majesty, I don’t have to speak to the creature who is killing my people.”

King Henrik steepled his fingers in front of him, a thoughtful look on his face. “In fact, you do. I have sent several of my guard to investigate and have not heard from them. They were supposed to coordinate with you and you have not mentioned them. I find this alarming.”

The Councillor paled and settled back in his seat heavily. “Your majesty, I thought they had returned by now with their reports. They must have been intercepted. I sent word with some of my own guards for protection.”

The king studied him with a shrewd gaze. “Everyone out. The Councillor, Sir Cadvael and I need to discuss the border. Drogath, we’ll review the details of the alliance tomorrow.”

Drogath’s jaw tightened, but he nodded once and held his hand out to Amalia. She avoided him, curtseying to her father, and headed from the room. Though he had defended her, she wasn’t pleased that he’d left her that morning. And if he thought she would forgive and forget and be brought to heel, then he needed to think again. Amalia hurried out, weaving through the councillors, leaving Drogath behind.

She headed for her favorite place, the one place in the castle that gave her comfort, at least when she couldn’t go riding. Her mother’s gardens and the hedge maze her mother had designed and planted. Though her mother had not lived to see it fully realized, Amalia loved to wander the twisty paths and think of her future.

The guards nodded respectfully to Amalia as she exited the castle into the expansive back gardens, where a sea of greenery and blossoms stretched beneath the warmth of the afternoon sun. Towering hedges, their edges meticulously trimmed, formed elegant archways and secluded alcoves, creating a sense of both grandeur and

intimacy. The scent of roses, jasmine, and lavender lingered in the air, mingling with the earthy aroma of freshly turned soil. Winding stone pathways led through beds of vibrant flowers, their petals painted in every hue of the sunset, while ivy curled around marble trellises, casting dappled shadows across the ground.

At the heart of the garden lay the hedge maze, an intricate labyrinth of dense, verdant walls that stood nearly twice Amalia's height. Her mother had designed it as a place of both wonder and quiet reflection, filling its hidden nooks with stone benches, ivy-covered statues, and fountains that murmured with the gentle trickle of water. Amalia had spent many childhood afternoons darting through its twisting corridors, shrieking with laughter as she played elaborate games of hide-and-seek beneath the shifting canopy of green.

Now, the maze seemed less like a playful retreat and more like a symbol of her own uncertain path. She trailed her fingers along the leaves as she passed, remembering the warmth of her mother's guiding hand, the way she had lovingly coaxed each bloom into life. Unlike her, Amalia had no talent for tending the delicate balance of nature. She was more likely to over water a plant or let it wilt beneath her forgetfulness. Hopefully, she would prove to be a better mother than a gardener. Though as she glanced at the winding passages of the maze, she couldn't shake the uneasy thought that motherhood, too, might be a puzzle she was not yet prepared to navigate.

She sensed a presence behind her, a large shape that made her shiver in the shadows of the maze. Drogath was in pursuit, not content to let her flee from him. She laughed quietly and slipped around corners, trying to elude the clever orc, but he maintained his steady pace, not quite catching her, letting her lead him on in their cat-and-mouse game. She thought she glimpsed his dark green skin through the hedge, but it only spurred her to move faster, more recklessly. She knew the maze better than anyone, knew its twists and turns. She circled the fountain and came through another side to try to catch Drogath off guard when he stepped in front of her, seizing her wrist.

“Caught you, mate.”

* * *

Drogath hadn't wanted to leave their bedchambers that morning. Every instinct urged him to stay, to keep Amalie beneath him, to savor the heat of her body and the way she fit against him. But duty called, and he had another reason to pry himself away. Testing the limits of the king's so-called hospitality, was he truly a guest, or merely a prisoner in a gilded cage?

He also hoped to speak with the king about the attacks plaguing the land. Instead, he found the palace in a slow morning haze, with courtiers taking breakfast in their rooms and no sign of the king himself. That left him with only one option. Seeking those who truly knew the castle's secrets. The ones who moved unseen but saw everything. The servants and the soldiers.

Drogath had started in the kitchens, where his arrival initially startled the staff. Pots clattered, a scullery maid nearly dropped a tray, but Cook barely blinked. The formidable woman simply pointed to a stool in the corner and, without waiting for argument, piled a plate high with steaming meat, fresh bread, and thick slabs of cheese. She kept his cup filled and, between directing her bustling staff, plied him with talk of the borderland, apparently the place of her birth. She spoke of old stories and places they both knew, but none of the information he sought. Still, he left the kitchen pleasantly full and understanding that Cook now considered him her guest. A useful ally in a foreign court.

Still unshadowed by guards, a fact that both intrigued and unsettled him, he made his way to the soldiers' practice field. There, he spotted the captain from the previous day. Drogath braced himself for a confrontation, expecting to be ordered away. Instead, the man simply tossed him a weapon and gestured to the open field.

The sparring started slow. He tested their techniques, feeling out weaknesses, pushing where he could. But soon, others gathered. They watched. Then they joined. By the time the sun hung high in the sky, he had moved through a dozen different fighters, sweat slick on his skin, muscles burning with exertion. He might not have won them over, but he had earned something just as valuable. Respect.

He returned just in time for the Council meeting, and, while the morning didn't yield any valuable information, he was comfortable with his progress, though his one regret was leaving Amalie's bed at all. Judging by the occasional sharp glances she shot him, she hadn't been pleased to wake alone either. The scent of her arousal still lingered in the air, tantalizing, undeniable. She wouldn't be satisfied until their mating was complete, but she wasn't ready yet. Not to belong fully to an orc. Not while she remained untouched.

But there were other ways to prepare her.

And when the time came, she would not be left wanting.

The Council meeting was a futile endeavor, much like his morning activities. Though the border lord, Councillor Basinger, showed a suspicious amount of anger toward Drogath and his clan. Drogath was familiar with the man and his soldiers, and not in the best way. He had suspected that Basinger colluded with Prince Frederick, and the man's reaction to his presence, the nasty reaction, only confirmed it.

It appeared the king also had his suspicions and Drogath was content to allow him to handle the situation. Especially since it allowed him to spend time with his mate, who was clearly irritated with him. Maybe he could sweeten her mood.

Drogath followed Amalia's scent through the twisting paths of the hedge maze, tracking her with the patience of a predator. The afternoon sun had warmed the fragrant leaves, releasing their herbal essence into the air. But he would know her

anywhere. The sweet flutter of her pulse, the subtle fragrance of roses that clung to her skin.

She was playing with him, leading him deeper into the maze's heart. He heard her quiet laughter around corners, caught glimpses of her skirts disappearing around bends. His little mate had grown bold in their time together, learning to tease and tempt him.

She darted around the fountain in the center, and he figured out her game. Moving quickly to counter the motion, he blocked her escape, neatly cutting her off. Sunlight filtered through the leaves above, dappling her skin with patterns of light and shadow. Her chest rose and fell quickly with excited breaths, her eyes bright with mischief. He lightly captured her wrist, holding her still, feeling the rapid beat of her pulse just under her skin.

“Caught you,” he rumbled, advancing slowly into the space. She backed up until she hit the hedge wall, but her smile only grew wider.

“Did you?” She tilted her chin up defiantly. “Or did I want to be caught?”

The scent of her arousal confirmed her words, making his blood heat. He braced his arms on either side of her head, caging her with his body. “Dangerous game, little mate, teasing an orc.”

“Perhaps I like danger.” She reached up to trace one of his tusks with a delicate finger. The intimate gesture made him growl low in his throat.

“You've grown bold,” he observed, lowering his head to nuzzle her throat. She tipped her head back immediately, offering better access. A gesture of trust that humbled him. “Remember when you used to tremble at the sight of me?”

“Now I only tremble when you touch me.” Her hands slid up his chest to tangle in his hair. “When you look at me like you want to devour me.”

“I want to devour you.” He grazed his teeth against her pulse point, feeling it jump beneath his lips. “To taste every inch of you. To make you cry out my name until your voice gives out.”

She shivered in his arms. “Someone might hear.”

“Let them.” He captured her mouth in a searing kiss, swallowing her soft moan. When he pulled back, her lips were swollen, her eyes heavy-lidded with desire. “Let them all know how thoroughly you're loved. How completely you're claimed.”

“Drogath.” His name was a plea on her lips.

He stepped back, enjoying how she swayed toward him, seeking his touch. “Come, mate. I think it's time we retired to our chambers for another lesson.”

She took his offered hand, twining their fingers together. “Lead the way, mate.”

Chapter Seven

The door slammed behind them and Drogath had her pinned to the door, his lips claiming hers in a deep kiss that left her breathless. A sharp tearing sound made her gasp, then her dress fluttered to the ground around her.

“Drogath! That was my favorite dress!”

“You won’t need it anymore. Not today.”

Before she could react, he lifted her with effortless strength and strode to the chair in front of the fire, settling into it, with her straddling his thickly muscled thighs. The motion sent her shift skimming higher, baring the smooth expanse of her legs and leaving her lower body dangerously exposed to his heated gaze. His large hands, calloused from battle, settled possessively on her hips, holding her firmly in place. The dark embers of desire burned in his dark eyes as he took in the sight of her, his deep rumble of approval sending a shiver through her core.

With another tug of his hands, the linen shift tore up the center and he tossed it off to the side, leaving her bare to his heated gaze. She shivered but didn’t cover herself, sitting proudly on his lap, her nipples pebbling in the cool air, his iron-hard cock pressing uncomfortably against the front of his breeches. She already knew from the previous evening that if she covered herself, he would only pin her arms to her side or behind her. While she loved his show of strength and being helpless in his arms, she wanted to retain some control.

He reached up and cupped both of her breasts, fondling them, and flicking his thumbs

over the rigid peaks, his gaze firmly fixed on what he was doing. The calluses on his fingers rasped against her skin, the coarse texture against her soft skin sending shivers through her body. Her pussy flooded with heat, softening and growing damp with arousal. He chuckled and tweaked one of her peaks between two of his fingers.

“Like that, mate?”

She gasped and moaned at the sharp bite of pain. He only laughed again, then leaned forward and sucked a peak into his mouth, his tongue curling around the tip and tugging lightly, his tusks scraping the side of her breasts. She buried her fingers in his hair and held him close, letting her head fall forward, her auburn hair cascading around them.

He dragged his other hand down the front of her body, over the soft curve of her stomach, to delve between her splayed thighs. He stroked a long, thick finger through her wet folds, separating and toying with them, teasing her with his touch. She rocked against his hand, trying to maneuver him where she wanted him.

He spanked her on the ass once, a loud clap that shocked her into stillness but didn't hurt, just stung, before a burning heat spread through her. Then she softened against him with a moan, her head falling onto his shoulder.

He chuckled again and peppered her ass with quick slaps until it was burning. She shifted restlessly against him, rocking against his hard cock, her arousal soaking the front of his breeches. He cupped her ass and held her in place.

“You're not in charge of this, mate. I am in control of your pleasure,” he said sternly.

She looked into his hard gaze and swallowed hard, then nodded, trying to still the minute motions of her lower body silently begging for relief. He waited for a moment, then curved his fingers from the back, around to tuck against her slit, first

brushing against her puckered hole, then stroking lower to her weeping entrance. He slid a thick finger in, stretching her until he reached the barrier of her virginity, pressing against it, then he added a second finger and a third to rim her entrance.

She moaned at the feeling of being so full and pressed down against him, begging for more. But he pulled his fingers out and sucked her juices off of them with a sound of satisfaction.

“I won’t be taking your maidenhead with my fingers, little princess. You’ll be claimed by my cock. And not tonight. Not yet.” He lifted her easily, setting her on her knees on the floor between his spread legs. “Now, for your next lesson.”

She stared up at him in confusion. “But what about...”

He smirked. “You thought you would get an orgasm? That depends on how well you do in your lesson.” He loosened his breeches and gestured to the bulge in his crotch. “Take me out.”

What did he want her to do? She had no idea what he was asking her for, but she was intrigued. She carefully reached for his soft leather pants and tugged at the material. But the laces would not give and she worried at her lower lip while she worked at the pants.

He sighed. “It won’t break. Take it out.”

She scowled and pulled hard. The laces gave, and she fell back on her sore ass. His cock sprang out from its confines, a deep green and swollen, with a plum shaped head, weeping fluid from its tip. She stared at it, her eyes wide and slightly horrified.

“There is no way that’s going in me. It’ll never fit.”

* * *

D rogath didn't even try to hide his smile at her horrified look. It had been a long time since he'd been with a virgin, especially a human virgin. Most human females had the same reaction when they saw an orc cock, whether or not they were virgins, though some of the more experienced females were eager to give orc cock a ride. Amalia was a virgin, and a sheltered one, it appeared, so he wasn't surprised by her reaction. But she was a fiery female, and had taken quickly to his instruction and reacted well to his attentions. He had no doubt she would be a good mate for him.

And, he noted, she hadn't run away at the sight of him. Her arousal hadn't abated either, so she was intrigued despite herself. Her gaze was fixed on his cock and she licked her lips, belying her words.

"You'll be fine, princess. Now, come. Touch me."

She scrambled to her knees, putting her at eye level with his groin. She reached for him and he took her hand, bringing her to grasp his cock. Her fingers could not fit around him and she brought her other hand to fully circle him. She stroked him slowly, using his fluid for lubricant.

"Harder. I won't break," he said gutturally.

She looked up at him through her lashes and did it again, harder with a twist. He groaned and let his head fall back. She began stroking and he let her explore, gritting his teeth at her touches while she grew more bold. He slid his hand through her hair, cupping the back of her head, and pulling her forward.

"Suck me."

Her eyes widened, and she resisted for a moment, but he was too strong, too firm. She

leaned forward and licked the tip, her pink tongue darting out to sweep the tip, then her mouth opened.

“It tastes sweet.”

He swept a thumb along her cheek. “It’s different for everyone.”

What he didn’t tell her was that when his mate was fertile, his release became thicker, richer, and had a flavor unique to each orc and their mate. Nature’s way of ensuring their union bore strong offspring. She didn’t need to worry about that now. Subtly, he urged her closer, and she opened her mouth, sucking the tip in. He was too big for her to take all the way without training, but she did her best, fitting the tip in her mouth, her tongue dragging along the underside of his cock. She sucked, and he moved in and out, fucking her mouth gently. He massaged her jaw and throat, encouraging her to relax, and he moved further in with each motion.

Her eyes watered, but she kept sucking and trying to take him deeper. He took her hands and wrapped them around the shaft, and she took the hint, moving her hands and mouth a bit clumsily but finding a rhythm as he fucked her face, eventually hitting the back of her throat.

Tears streamed down her face and she watched him, her pupils blown with passion. “You’re so beautiful like this, on your knees for me, mate,” he grunted.

She made a noise, a hum that vibrated along his cock. His balls tightened as his release drew closer. It had been too long since he’d been with a female and his pretty little mate was too alluring, even in her inexperience.

“I’m going to come and you’ll swallow it all, understood? Or you’ll go to bed without an orgasm.”

She nodded, and he thrust a few more times before he came with a shout. His release shot into her mouth. Ropes of thick, creamy come that she struggled to swallow. He held himself inside of her until he finished. Some of his come spilled out of her mouth and he caught it with his finger, holding it out for her to lick. She cleaned his fingers eagerly, meeting his gaze for approval.

“Good girl. Are you ready for your reward?” She nodded, biting her lower lip. “Get on the bed, legs spread as wide as you can. Show me your pussy and how much you liked servicing me.”

She scrambled to her feet and raced to lie on the bed, legs splayed wide. Her pussy was coated in cream, swollen and red, ready for a climax. He considered toying with her, but she was already writhing on the bed, begging for relief.

He prowled to the bed, his cock already stirring to life, but he wasn't going to claim Amalia. Not yet. But he'd give her some relief and enjoy her sweet pussy at the same time.

He grasped her ankles and tugged her to the edge of the bed, falling to his knees and spreading her legs further so he could fit between them. He opened her lower lips and stared at her glistening center, seeing the evidence of her arousal coating her deep pink pussy. Her nub was swollen and begging for his touch. He licked from her entrance to her clitoris and she arched her back off the bed with a cry.

He slapped her thigh. “Settle, mate, or I'll stop.”

She whimpered and grasped the bedsheets, her muscles tense. He kissed her above her mound, then sucked her nub into his mouth, twisting his lips and sucking hard. She screamed and came hard, her release soaking his face. He slipped two fingers into her passage, rimming her opening to tease her and prolong her climax. Her legs closed around his shoulders, and she bucked against his face, riding him as he

continued to lick, suck and stroke her through her climax and into another. He kept her coming until she finally collapsed boneless onto the bed.

He climbed onto the bed and pulled her under the covers, bringing her against his chest. She snuggled against him with a sleepy sigh. "Sleep, mate."

"I like when you call me mate. Will you still be here when I wake?"

He kissed the top of her head. "I will be here."

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Chapter Eight

Amalia swirled the wine in her goblet, watching the crimson liquid catch the light from the hundreds of candles illuminating the great hall. The wedding feast was in full swing, with musicians playing, nobles dancing, and servants weaving through the crowd with platters of food and drink. She should have been at the high table with Drogath, but she'd needed a moment away from the constant scrutiny. For a speedy wedding, plenty of the kingdom's nobles had arrived to celebrate—or gawk. She wasn't sure which it was, but considering the things she'd overheard, she leaned toward the latter.

“—can't believe the king allowed it,” came a woman's voice from behind a nearby pillar. “A common orc? In the royal family?”

“Did you see how he handled that roasted boar? Tore into it like a beast,” another voice added with a delicate shudder. “Poor Princess Amalia. To be bound to such a creature.”

“But he is a beast. I mean, he's an orc,” the first woman whispered loudly, and the other giggled.

Amalia's fingers tightened on her goblet. These past few days had shown her a very different side of Drogath than the savage they imagined. She'd watched him bow respectfully to her father, discussing trade routes and border security with an understanding that had impressed even the most skeptical advisors. The castle guards, initially wary, now sought him out in the training yard, eager to learn his fighting techniques. Even the servants spoke well of him, noting how he always thanked them

and remembered their names.

“But how can she possibly be queen now?” the first voice continued. “Who would accept a throne shared with a barbarian?”

Barbarian. The word made her think of their nights together, of how those massive hands could be so gentle, how he'd brought her pleasure again and again while never taking his own. How he'd whispered poetry in his native tongue against her skin, teaching her the words between kisses.

Though he wasn't always gentle. He was commanding and always in control. She never thought that would be so attractive. She'd never liked someone giving orders. She was the princess. She gave the orders and others followed them. But he took control of her effortlessly and made her beg for more. Something he hadn't been willing to give, not yet.

And why hadn't they consummated the mating? He said they were already mates. Was he waiting for the human ceremony despite professing not to care about it? It was maddening. Much like this conversation she was listening to.

“Perhaps she's ensorcelled,” a third voice suggested. “I heard orcs know dark magics.”

“Or perhaps,” Amalia said loudly, stepping around the pillar, “I chose him because he has shown more honor, intelligence, and genuine nobility than any of you gossiping vipers.”

The ladies, Lady Rosewood, Lady Blackthorn, and Countess Devereux, paled at her appearance. They dropped into hasty curtsies, stammering apologies, but Amalia wasn't finished.

“Drogath has never spoken ill of anyone behind their backs. He treats every person in this castle with respect, from the highest noble to the lowest servant. He's helped improve our defenses, negotiated fair trade agreements, and our marriage has brought peace to our borders.” Her voice rang with conviction. “If that's what you call barbaric, then perhaps we need more barbarians and fewer ‘civilized’ nobles.”

She turned on her heel, leaving them gaping in her wake. But she had barely taken a few steps before a sharp, mocking voice cut through the crowd.

“So the little princess enjoys laying with monsters now.”

The hall went eerily silent. The speaker, Lord Edrich of House Vale, smirked from his seat near the high table, his goblet sloshing slightly as he leaned back. “Tell us, Princess, has he taken you yet? Or is the beast still pretending at civility?” Laughter rippled through his little circle of men, though a few looked uneasy.

Before Amalia could react, Drogath was there.

He moved with a warrior's speed, closing the distance between them in an instant. The air in the great hall thickened with tension as he lifted the older man effortlessly, despite his larger girth. Drogath's dark eyes burned with barely restrained fury.

“You dare insult my mate,” Drogath growled, his deep voice sending a shiver through the room.

Edrich's face turned red, but he forced a smirk, as if he thought he was in control, as if someone would come to his aid. No one moved to assist. “Do you wish to challenge me, beast?”

“If you speak of my mate in such a way again, I will not hesitate. I will not pause. I will destroy you,” Drogath rumbled. His massive hands flexed around the man's

throat, his muscles coiled like a predator waiting to strike. “You insult her, you insult me. And that, Lord Edrich, is something I do not allow.”

The silence stretched. Edrich’s bravado faltered. He looked toward the other nobles for support, but no one spoke. Drogath's reputation in battle was well known. No one in this hall could stand against him.

Amalia’s heart pounded, her breath caught between outrage and something far more dangerous, something warm and flattered and wickedly pleased.

“My lord,” she said softly, stepping beside Drogath and placing a hand on his arm. His muscles were like steel beneath her touch, still thrumming with the urge to kill.

She tilted her chin, her voice carrying through the hall. “He’s not worth it.”

Drogath growled low in his throat, still eyeing Edrich as if deciding whether to crush his throat, anyway.

She pressed her palm against his chest, meeting his gaze with something softer. “Instead,” she murmured, just for him, “let me make it worth your time.”

His attention snapped fully to her. His eyes darkened, the heat in them eclipsing his fury.

“Take me to our bedchambers,” she whispered, loud enough for those closest to hear.

A slow, wicked grin spread across Drogath’s face. Dropping Edrich, who fell to his knees, choking and sputtering, he swept Amalia into his arms, cradling her as if she weighed nothing.

Gasps and murmurs followed them as he strode toward the great doors.

“As my mate commands,” he rumbled, voice rich with promise.

She curled her arms around his neck, her lips brushing his ear. “And this time, no more waiting.”

He let out a deep, pleased growl, his grip tightening around her.

As the doors shut behind them, the last thing she heard was Lady Rosewood’s scandalized “Well, I never!” and Lady Blackthorn’s grudgingly admiring “Lucky girl.”

Lucky, indeed.

* * *

D rogath carried Amalia through the torch-lit corridors, savoring her warmth against his chest. She had chosen him. Not just accepted their bargain, but publicly claimed him before her people. His blood burned with pride and desire.

The moment their chamber door closed behind them, he captured her mouth in a searing kiss. She met him with equal passion, her fingers tangling in his hair as he pressed her against the door. Gone was any trace of the timid princess who had once feared him. His mate knew what she wanted now.

“Are you certain?” he asked against her lips, needing to hear the words.

“Yes,” she breathed, arching into him. “I want to be yours. Completely.”

He growled low in his throat and lifted her again, carrying her to their bed. The wedding finery she wore presented an enticing challenge. He undid layers of silk and lace with careful patience, revealing her skin inch by precious inch. Each new

expanse of flesh earned his devoted attention, kisses and nips and tender caresses, until she was trembling beneath his touches.

“Please,” she whimpered, reaching for him. “I need you.”

“I know exactly what you need,” he rumbled, settling his larger frame over hers and pinning her hands over her head. “My beautiful mate. My fierce princess. But you’re not in charge. I am.”

She peered up at him, her eyes wide and unfocused, glazed with passion. She worried at her lower lip and nodded. Satisfied, he made himself a place between her thighs, his cock brushing against her core. She rocked her hips against him, trying to bring him closer. Her arousal soaked the tip of his cock and he growled, resisting the urge to plunge deep inside of her in one stroke.

He shifted so she couldn’t move further and claimed her lips in a searing kiss, his tongue surging deep inside to taste the remnants of wine blended with her unique taste. When he finally lifted his head, she was panting, her lips slightly open. He trailed his lips down her throat, his tusks lightly scoring her skin, and nipped at her pounding pulse.

She gasped, “Please, Drogath.”

He nipped her and continued down to the tip of one breast, lifting it to his mouth and sucking it inside. He curled his tongue around the nipple as his fingers played with the other tip, tormenting and teasing, then he switched sides, until she was begging him for release. Her fingers were buried in his hair, tugging at him, holding him close, the prick of her nails a burn against his scalp.

He lifted his head. “I can’t wait to decorate you with jewels and rings.”

Her eyes widened. “On my body?”

He smirked. “Everywhere.”

His fingers drifted lower and buried themselves between her thighs, tweaking her clit sharply. “This would also look pretty all dressed up.”

Her mouth opened, and her eyes were wide with shock. “There?” She almost whispered.

He grinned. “I have the perfect jewel for your pearl. But first, I need another taste. It’s been almost a day.”

He slid down and wedged his shoulders between her thighs and opened her pussy to his gaze. He stared at her for a long moment, at the arousal that generously coated her swollen, pink folds. Then he stroked his tongue through them, tracing every inch of her, tasting her and gathering up her cream until it covered his tongue. He curled his tongue around her swollen nub and teased it, sucking lightly, then nipping it gently.

Amalia writhed on the bed, her thighs pressed to his shoulders, her cries and gasps echoing in the chamber. He rimmed her entrance with a finger, then a second, slowly inserting them partway and stretching her. She cried out, and he felt her channel begin to pulse around his fingers.

His cock ached with the desperate need to be inside of her, but first, she had to come. He needed her soft and pliant before he fucked her. Her first time was going to be difficult enough without his size. He added a third finger and sucked hard on her nub and she came screaming around him, her arousal soaking his face and hand. He kept her coming until she slowly settled on the bed.

He prowled up the bed and notched his cock, now copiously dripping pre-cum, at her

entrance. He cupped her cheek and brushed her lips with his, once, twice, until her eyelids fluttered and she focused her slightly dazed gaze on his.

“Look at me,” he commanded softly. “I want to see your eyes when we are joined.”

Her gaze locked with his, full of trust and desire and something deeper that made his heart clench. He eased his way inside until he felt her maidenhead. She tensed for a moment, and he reached down to brush against her clit, tweaking it until she was distracted, her desire rising. Then he thrust, breaking through her virginity quickly.

She cried out, her gasp of pain quickly caught by his lips. When he was fully seated, he stilled, kissing away the salty tears that spilled from her eyes. “It’s only for a moment, only the first time. Then it will be wonderful.”

She focused on him and nodded, still tearful. After a few moments, she moved under him restlessly, as if testing him. He rocked inside of her and she sucked in a breath, her mouth dropping open. “Do that again.”

He obliged, dragging his cock out and thrusting, slowly, back in. Her head fell back, eyes closed, and she moaned. Her legs wrapped around his waist and she lifted her hips to meet him as he drove into her again and again, the sweet clasp of her tight, wet heat sucking him in. The muscles of her pussy clenched at him, pulled at him, trying to keep him inside. All too soon, he felt the flutters of her channel tightening around him.

“Look at me when you come,” he growled.

Her eyes flew open, and she met his gaze, a hint of fear in them, as if terrified by what she was feeling. A few thrusts later, she shattered around him, crying out his name, her pussy milking him like a vise. He followed her over the edge with a roar that probably echoed through half the castle.

He rolled to the side and pulled her close against his chest, both of them covered in a light sheen of sweat. He traced gentle patterns on her back as their breathing slowly returned to normal.

“Mine,” he murmured against her hair, the word carrying all the weight of an orc mating claim. “Now and always.”

“Yours,” she agreed sleepily, snuggling closer. “My barbarian.”

He smiled at the drowsy note in her voice. He had finally found a mate worthy of him. But what would she think when she found out the truth?

Chapter Nine

A malia tugged at the unfamiliar fabric of her breeches, still uncertain about wearing such masculine attire. Women of her station wore dresses and would never be caught dead wearing such scandalous attire. Yet Drogath had delivered this outfit to her this morning, saying they needed to make good time on the road and she needed to be properly dressed. While it wasn't appropriate, she felt free wearing breeches, able to move more easily and comfortably.

The morning air was crisp, carrying the scent of autumn's approach as she stood in the castle courtyard, watching servants load the last of their supplies onto pack horses. Drogath argued with them about the amount of supplies, directing them to remove much of her things and the food, saying they could follow later.

"Stop fidgeting," Drogath rumbled from behind her, his massive hands settling on her shoulders. "You look beautiful and practical."

"No decent woman wears such things," she muttered, though with less conviction than she might have had a week ago. The breeches allowed for easier movement, and the soft leather felt pleasantly supple against her skin.

His chuckle vibrated through her. "In our clan, we value functionality over ornamental beauty. Our women are warriors, hunters, leaders, not decorative objects to be admired from afar." His fingers traced down her spine, making her shiver. "Though you manage to be both practical and breathtaking."

A thrill ran through her at his words. Warriors. Hunters. Such roles had never been

open to her before, constrained as she was by the expectations of court life. “You mean I could learn to fight? To hunt?”

“If you wish it, though, I will protect you with my life.” He moved around to face her, his dark eyes warm with affection. “You’ll find we have different ideas about what makes a decent female among my people.”

Before she could respond, a familiar whinny caught her attention. Her heart leaped as she saw Shergar being led into the courtyard, saddled and ready for travel. Beside him was a massive bay stallion, clearly bred for carrying Drogath’s considerable weight.

“We’re riding? Where’s the carriage? How will we bring my clothes? Our supplies? This isn’t acceptable.” Amalia protested.

“I thought you would be happy to have your horse, free to ride without the confines of a carriage,” Drogath said, a warning clear in his tone.

She sniffed. “I like to ride, but this isn’t a morning jaunt. You’re forcing me to leave my home. I don’t understand why we can’t just stay here. I’m a princess and you’re a regular orc. What do you have to go back to?”

His eyes darkened, and he leaned in to speak in a low voice. “Watch your tone, mate, or I’ll punish you here and you’ll be sore for the ride.”

“You wouldn’t!” She drew back and stared at him in shock.

He only arched an eyebrow. She considered his words for a moment, then decided it would be far better to back down than test him. “Fine. Do I at least get to ride by myself?”

His expression smoothed. "Of course. You're my mate, not my prisoner, and you're an accomplished rider. I trust you to stay by my side by choice." He paused, then added with a hint of fang, "Though if you try to run, I might have to spank you. Again."

Heat flooded her cheeks at the memory, along with other places she tried not to think about in public. Another piece of her preconceptions about orcs, and him, crumbled away.

"Why such haste to leave?" she asked, changing the subject as she watched the five royal guards mount up. Her father had insisted on sending them, despite Drogath's protests. "Surely we could stay a few more days? And why are we riding? Not that I don't like riding, but if we took a carriage, we could carry all the supplies."

His expression darkened slightly, and he frowned into the distance. "I've delayed too long already. I must return to my clan. We must move swiftly. Your things, along with supplies, can follow more slowly." Something in his tone suggested there was more he wasn't saying, but she knew better than to press him in front of others.

"Amalia." Her father's voice drew her attention. King Henrik stood at the castle steps, looking older than she remembered. When had his face grown so drawn?

She ran to him, propriety forgotten as she threw herself into his arms like she had as a child, tears springing in her eyes. "Father."

"Hush now." He held her tight, his voice rough with emotion. "This isn't goodbye forever. You're barely a day's ride away, and with our new alliance, there will be regular communication between us and the clan." He pulled back to cup her face in his hands.

Amalia blinked back tears. "I'll make you proud, Father. I'll show them all that this

alliance can work.”

“You already have.” He kissed her forehead, then turned to Drogath with a stern expression. “Keep her safe.”

“With my life,” Drogath promised solemnly.

The farewell became a blur after that. Last-minute instructions, tearful hugs from her ladies' maids, last checks of the supplies. Before she knew it, she was mounted on Shergar, the familiar leather of his reins grounding her as they passed through the castle gates.

She looked back once, watching her childhood home grow smaller behind them. Drogath rode beside her, his presence both intimidating and comforting. When she faced forward again, she sat straighter in her saddle. She was no longer just Princess Amalia, ornamental daughter of King Henrik, heir to the throne. She was an orc mate, though she had no idea what that meant or her role in his clan. She'd figure it out eventually and hoped she could handle it.

Though she wished he'd tell her why they were in such a hurry.

* * *

Drogath's muscles tensed as he guided his mount through the narrow mountain passes. Every instinct screamed at him to move faster, but he couldn't risk the horses on the treacherous terrain. He'd sent two guards ahead to scout while three remained with their group, though he trusted his own senses more than their human eyes.

The wind shifted, bringing with it the scent he'd been dreading—metal, leather, horses, and too many men. An army on the move.

One of the scout guards appeared around the bend, riding hard. “My lord! There's a force moving parallel to us through the valley. At least two thousand strong, maybe more.”

Drogath cursed in his native tongue. He'd known this was coming, had felt it in his bones when he had not seen Councillor Basinger at the royal wedding. He knew the man was colluding with Prince Frederick in their attacks on the orc clans, and, when the older man disappeared before the wedding, he feared that the older man would move on his clan. He'd hoped to have more time, to get Amalia safely to the clan before war broke out. But it wasn't to be. He'd led his mate straight into danger.

“Show me,” he ordered, dismounting. He turned to Amalia, who watched him with worried eyes. “Stay here with the guards. I need to see this myself.”

The guard led him to a rocky outcrop. Below, partially hidden by the trees, moved a sea of armed men. They had no banners, but Drogath didn't need them to know who the men belonged to. This had been building for months.

He returned to the group, his decision made. “Matthias,” he addressed the youngest of the guards, “you and Tyrell ride back to the castle. Tell King Henrik that Councillor Basinger's troops march on orc lands, along with Darea's troops. Trust no one but the king himself with this message. Go!”

The guards' faces paled at the implications, but they wheeled their horses around without question and galloped back the way they'd come.

He turned to Amalia. “We must hurry. You will ride with me for the rest of the trip.”

She only nodded, her face pale. Crispin, the captain of the guards, helped her dismount and Drogath settled her on his mount, then mounted behind her. “We ride quickly. No stops.”

Everyone nodded. They understood the urgency.

Several hours of hard riding later, they rode through the clan gates. Amalia's slight form tensed against him as they rode through the wooden gates. The settlement sprawled across the valley floor, stone buildings interspersed with tents and training grounds. Orcs stopped their activities to stare at the approaching group, their expressions ranging from curiosity to outright hostility. Despite the late hour, preparations were well underway for battle. Word had reached the clan about the approaching army.

He could smell Amalia's fear, though she held herself proudly. He wanted to comfort her, to explain that his people would come to love her as he did, but before he could speak, a massive figure shouldered through the gathering crowd.

Korroth. Of course, it would be Korroth.

His cousin's scarred face twisted in a sneer as he took in their small party. "Welcome home, cousin. I see you brought back three soldiers. Scant defense against an army." He gestured at the royal guards. "I brought something better. A promise of alliance with Osna. Their warriors are fierce, their numbers great."

Drogath kept his voice level, though his hand tightened on Amalia's waist. "A promise is nothing without action. I've brought an alliance with Sherith itself. This is Princess Amalia, my mate. King Henrik's only daughter and heir to the throne."

Murmurs rippled through the crowd. The clan elders pushed forward, their aged faces grave as they studied Amalia.

Korroth's laugh was ugly. "Oh, brilliant strategy, mating a human. But tell me, does your human princess know there's an army marching toward our lands? Will her father's troops come to our aid, or will they abandon us to our fate?"

“I’m aware of the army, having seen them with my own eyes,” Drogath growled. “I’ve already sent riders to alert the king.”

“Have you now?” Korroth's eyes glittered. “Then we shall see who saves our people first. Your human allies or mine. We’ll see who is worthy of leading our people.” He spun on his heel and stalked away, shoving aside anyone too slow to move.

Elder Throkgar stepped forward, his white braids gleaming in the sunlight. “The situation is grave, Chief Drogath. We must speak with you immediately.” His eyes flicked to Amalia. “Let the females see to your mate's comfort. This is a matter for warriors.”

Drogath wanted to refuse, to stay with Amalia until she was settled, but he could read the urgency in the elders' faces. He swung down from his mount, then reached up to help Amalia dismount.

She was trembling slightly, though whether from the long ride or the hostile welcome, he couldn't tell. Her voice was barely a whisper: “Did you marry me just to secure an alliance?”

The question hit him like a physical blow. He opened his mouth to deny it, to tell her how much more she meant to him than any political advantage. But Elder Throkgar was already pulling at his arm, speaking urgently about troop movements and defensive positions.

He allowed himself to be led away, hating himself for the hurt he saw in Amalia's eyes. He would explain later, would make her understand that, while the alliance had been his initial motivation for their bargain, she had become so much more to him.

But as he followed the elders toward the council chamber, he couldn't shake the feeling that she might not give him the chance to explain. He'd just handed his mate

over to strangers, leaving her alone among his people with her trust in him shaken.

Some chieftain and mate he was turning out to be.

Chapter Ten

A malia perched on the edge of Drogath's bed in his chambers as darkness crept across the sky, her thoughts as tangled as her emotions. The room was sparse but comfortable, decorated with furs and weapons that spoke of a warrior's life. She'd been so foolish, acting like she was doing him some great favor by deigning to be his mate. All along, she'd been just another piece in a political game. And to think she'd thought, for once, someone wanted her for herself, not her status, not as the princess, not her throne.

Her cheeks burned as she remembered how she'd looked down on him at first, treating him like some simple barbarian when he was actually the leader of all the orc clans. Or would be, once he secured his position, with her help. The thought made her stomach turn.

Dawn was painting the sky in shades of pink when Drogath finally returned. He filled the doorway, his massive frame casting long shadows across the floor. Even exhausted, he moved with the fluid grace of a predator, though she could see the weight of command in the slump of his shoulders.

“We'll be in battle by nightfall,” he said without preamble.

Amalia kept her eyes fixed on the far wall, refusing to acknowledge him. The silence stretched between them like a physical thing.

He sighed heavily. “I think you should return to your father. You should never have come here.”

“But you needed me here, at least to make a showing,” she said, bitterness sharp on her tongue. “How else would you have taken the role of chief of all orcs if not for having a human princess as your mate? Proof of an alliance with my father. Now you don’t need me anymore and I can be shuttled off, where you can ignore me.”

“Is that what you think?” His voice was dangerously quiet. “That I orchestrated all of this just to outmaneuver Korroth?”

“Didn't you?” She finally turned to face him, anger giving her courage. “You saw me in danger and saw an opportunity. The perfect way to secure both an alliance and your position as chief.”

“That's not...” He broke off, running a hand over his face. “Yes, I saw the advantage when I found you in the forest. And yes, I wasn't entirely honest with you or your father about my position among my people.”

“You lied to me. Lied to all of us.” The words tasted like ashes in her mouth.

“I wanted you to know me as just Drogath first. Not as the challenger for leadership of all orc clans.” He took a step toward her, but stopped when she flinched. “I wanted you to care for me, not my status.”

She laughed, the sound brittle. “Well, now you'll never know, will you? I want to go home.”

The words hung in the air between them. Drogath's face might have been carved from stone.

“So be it,” he said finally. “I’ll send you with a company of our best warriors.”

“No.” She stood, drawing herself up to her full height, though it still left her barely

reaching his chest. “You need every orc you have for the battle. I’ll go with my three guards. No one will care about me now. They’re all focused on killing orcs.”

Something flashed in his dark eyes, pain, perhaps, or regret. “For what it’s worth,” he said softly, “I do love you.”

Amalia turned away, blinking back tears. “Goodbye, Drogath.” She moved toward the door on unsteady legs, then paused with her hand on the frame. “I hope you got everything you wanted.”

She fled before he could respond, before she could see if her words had hurt him as much as he had hurt her.

Captain Crispin stood outside. “Your Highness. Is everything okay?”

“No, We’re going home. Immediately.”

He glanced over her shoulder and she stiffened, knowing Drogath stood behind her. A silent moment passed, then the captain nodded. “As you wish. I will gather the horses and the men.”

* * *

Drogath didn’t know how long he lingered in his chambers after Amalia left. The silence was suffocating, pressing against him like the weight of a boulder. This homecoming had gone nothing like he had planned. He had imagined easing Amalia into clan life, giving her time to adjust, to see that his world was not as savage as she feared. He had hoped to gently reveal the truth, that he was more than just a chieftain. He was a contender for the throne of all orcs.

Now, all of it was ash in his mouth. Never mind the human army breathing down

their necks. He had already lost something far greater. His mate. His future.

He raked a hand through his dark hair, his claws grazing his scalp as frustration coiled tight in his chest. His blood burned with the weight of a past that refused to let go. He had been born with an advantage. His father had been king, but that advantage came with a bitter curse. Many still blamed his father for the retreat to the mountains, for ceding their ancestral lands to the humans when Darea's aggression had become too great. And then there was the greater wound, the one that festered in the back of his mind like an infection. His parents' murder.

No one had ever uncovered the truth. They had died in a raid, supposedly by human hands, but the wounds on their bodies told a different story. Orc weapons had done the deed. Perhaps humans had wielded them, knowing it would sow discord among the clans. Or perhaps it had been other orcs, traitors within their own kind. He had always suspected his uncle, Korroth's father, but without proof, he had no recourse.

A title was not inherited in their world. It had to be earned, fought for with blood and steel. Drogath had been too young when his father fell, and in the chaos that followed, the throne remained empty, fought over by too many unworthy hands. For years, the clans had torn at one another like starving wolves, but now, the battle lines had been drawn. Two contenders remained. Drogath. Korroth.

Whoever survived the coming war and led an army to the final field of battle would be crowned king.

But tonight, Drogath felt like he had already lost.

His mate had ridden out of the valley, away from him, away from the promise that had bound them together.

Finally, he shoved aside his grief, strapping on his weapons with mechanical

precision. Whatever pain gnawed at his chest had to be buried. War did not wait for broken hearts. He stepped from the tent, shoulders squared, face unreadable, as he strode toward the assembled warriors. Korroth was already waiting, flanked by the elders, his scarred face twisted with amusement.

“No mate?” Korroth’s voice echoed with mockery. “The human abandon you already? A shame. I was looking forward to taking her from you when I claimed the throne.”

Drogath’s grip tightened on the hilt of his sword, his claws curling against the leather-wrapped hilt. He forced his rage into a slow, simmering burn. The elders were watching, waiting for weakness, for proof that he was nothing more than a hot-blooded warrior unfit for rule. He would not give them that.

“I don’t see your army, cousin.” His voice was steady, cold as tempered steel.

Korroth gave a lazy shrug. “They’ll be here. Unlike your mate, running from you as we speak. I wonder how far she’ll go before she tells the humans what a monster you are.” His lips curled, his tusks glinting. “You may have lost before the battle even begins.”

Drogath’s gut twisted, but he refused to let the words strike deep. Instead, he turned to the gathered chiefs and elders, raising his voice over the murmur of the warriors.

“They will come,” he said, not just to them, but to himself. He had to believe it. “We ride now. We must take higher ground before the enemy solidifies their position.”

The response was immediate. The orcs slammed their fists over their hearts, their war cry splitting the air. They stomped their feet in unison, the force of it rattling the earth beneath them, shaking the dust from the rocks. The sound of a thousand warriors roaring for blood should have filled him with fire, should have made his heart thunder

with purpose.

But his heart was hollow.

He had spent his life fighting for his people, for his father's lost legacy, for the crown that had been stolen from him.

And yet, as he looked out over the sea of warriors ready to die for him, all he could think about was a lone figure on horseback, riding away.

Chapter Eleven

A malia rode blindly, allowing Shergar to follow the guard ahead of her, the rhythmic pounding of hooves the only sound in the eerie quiet. Another guard followed behind, a shadow at her back, while the third scouted ahead, his keen gaze sweeping the darkened landscape for threats. She barely registered their presence, lost in the storm of her own thoughts.

They worried about leaving the safety of the clan's stronghold, even with war marching toward them. They feared being caught out in the open. Unprotected. Vulnerable. But she feared something far worse. Remaining in a place where she had been so cruelly deceived, used like a piece in a game she hadn't even known she was playing.

How could Drogath have lied to them all?

The question burned in her chest, sharp as a dagger. If he had only spoken to her father, explained the orcs' plight, her father would have listened. He would have understood. Drogath could have saved her, not trapped her with an oath that bound her to him, irrevocable and unbreakable. Her father would have granted Drogath anything if he had only asked. But now—now she was condemned to a half-life. Even if Drogath died in battle, she would never be free. No other man would marry her, not with the stain of a broken vow upon her. The throne would wither with her, barren and unclaimed.

Her hands clenched the reins.

And yet, the thought of belonging to someone else made her stomach twist with something far worse than anger.

Drogath had betrayed her. That was undeniable. But had he truly deceived her in everything? He had been fierce, yes, stern and commanding. But he had also been protective, shielding her from danger, defending her honor time and again. He had been careful with her, mindful of her comfort in ways she had never expected from a warlord.

Even when he had punished her, her face burned at the memory. He had not harmed her. And she had enjoyed it.

Mostly.

Her ladies-in-waiting had whispered of men who took no care with their wives, of nights filled with pain instead of pleasure. Not all women enjoyed the marital bed, they had said. Some endured it. Some feared it.

Drogath had made certain she enjoyed it.

More than that, he had given her something she hadn't even realized she craved. Freedom. Power. She had not been just a princess in his arms. She had been a queen.

And then there was Frederick.

A chill ran through her. She had not wanted to believe the things her maid had said about the prince, about the frightened, tear-streaked maids who avoided his gaze, the whispers of his hands wandering where they did not belong. She had dismissed them at the time, too caught up in her own hopes for an advantageous marriage. But now, she wondered. Had Drogath saved her from more than just the brigands?

“Your Highness?”

Amalia blinked, realizing she had pulled Shergar to a stop without meaning to. The two guards flanked her, their eyes cautious.

“Do you need to rest?” Captain Crispin asked, his brow furrowed.

Rest? No. Rest was the last thing she needed. She had been running, but she was running in the wrong direction.

Drogath had lied. That was a fact. But in the most important thing, he had told the truth.

He cared for her.

Perhaps even loved her.

And she loved him.

If she left now, if she abandoned him, she would regret it for the rest of her life.

“No,” she said, her voice strong, steady. “I need to go back.” She straightened in the saddle, her resolve firm. “But you need to continue on. Go to my father. Tell him to bring the army. Muster anyone you can on the way to the castle. We must help them.”

Captain Crispin’s expression darkened. He opened his mouth to argue, but the only sound that came out was a strangled gurgle.

A wet, sickening noise.

Amalia’s stomach lurched as blood bubbled from his lips. He toppled from his horse,

an arrow buried deep in his neck. His horse reared and bolted, a flash of white against the dark.

The second guard barely had time to react before another arrow pierced his chest, the impact so violent it knocked him from the saddle. He landed with a heavy thud, his body twitching once, twice, before going still.

Amalia's breath came in short, sharp gasps. Her fingers trembled against the reins. She turned slowly—too slowly.

A figure emerged from the trees, stepping into the moonlight.

Prince Frederick.

He smiled, his teeth gleaming like a wolf scenting blood.

“Princess Amalia,” he purred, his voice smooth, mocking. “How fortunate to find you here. All alone.” His eyes flicked to the fallen men, then back to her. His smile widened.

“Shall we talk?”

* * *

Drogath stood on a low rise behind his warriors, his gaze sweeping over the hidden figures nestled among the trees and rocky outcroppings that lined the narrow pass. The orcs lay in wait, their breath measured, their weapons gripped tight, ready to unleash fury. The terrain was their shield, the winding, treacherous path their last advantage against an enemy that outnumbered them.

Beyond the pass, the human army stirred. The glint of metal caught the dying light,

the distant rumble of marching feet vibrating through the earth. They were making their final preparations, a tide of bodies about to crash against the orc defenses. But it wasn't just the force before them that posed a threat. Another contingent had splintered off, intending to swing around and strike from behind, trapping the orcs in a brutal pincer maneuver.

Korroth had led his warriors to intercept, but splitting their forces was a risk. One they couldn't afford.

But what choice did they have?

Drogath's fists clenched at his sides, his claws biting into his palms. They had to hold the pass. They had to endure. And maybe one of their scattered allies would rally in time to aid them.

He didn't count on it.

He had learned long ago not to expect rescue. Hope was a fool's burden, one he had cast off years ago. He trusted in his people, in their strength, in their will to survive. But in outsiders? No.

At least Amalia was safe.

She might hate him, might never forgive his deception, but she would live. If the orcs fell today, if the valley was overrun, her father would ensure her safety. She would grieve, perhaps, but in time, she would move on. She would marry again. She would forget him.

A sharp pang twisted in his chest, unexpected and unwelcome.

He had wanted more time. He had wanted to see her with his young, her belly full

with the proof of their bond. He had wanted?—

No.

A shudder ran through the ground. Faint at first, then stronger. A steady, rhythmic tremor.

The army was on the move.

A young orc came barreling around the bend, his breathing ragged, his wide eyes gleaming with urgency. He skidded to a stop, his voice raw with warning.

“They come, Chief Drogath.”

Drogath gave a single nod, his gaze already turning back to the pass. The time for strategy was over. Now, there was only war.

But the young warrior didn’t leave.

Drogath frowned, shifting his attention back to him. “Was there something else?”

The young orc hesitated, his throat working as he swallowed hard. Fear flickered across his face, not for himself, but for what he was about to say.

“Chief, your mate...” His voice broke. “They have her.”

The world stilled.

The march of the human army, the rustling of wind through the trees, the weight of the impending battle, none of it mattered anymore. Everything inside Drogath went cold, a still, lethal quiet settling over him. His heart did not pound. His breath did not

quicken.

A slow, merciless rage coiled in his gut.

A mistake.

A fatal mistake.

Whoever had taken Amalia had signed their own death warrant.

His voice was low, deadly calm. “Where?”

Chapter Twelve

Amalia's heart pounded like a war drum, her pulse a frantic beat against her ribs. Fear coiled in her belly, cold and suffocating, threatening to pull her under. She swallowed hard, forcing it down, locking it away where it couldn't paralyze her. She was a princess. Frederick wouldn't dare harm her.

Would he?

Her throat tightened as she glanced at the lifeless bodies of her guards, their blood dark against the dirt. Frederick had killed them without hesitation, without remorse. His power-hungry gaze now turned to her, and for the first time, she felt truly trapped.

He had dragged her from her horse, binding her hands in front of her before hoisting her onto his warhorse. She had tried to twist away, to create even the smallest distance between them, but he was stronger. His arm locked around her waist, pulling her flush against him. The press of his armored chest made bile rise in her throat.

He laughed when she struggled.

"Don't worry, Princess Amalia," he murmured, his breath hot against her ear. "You'll see your filthy beast soon enough. You'll watch as I gut him like the mongrel he is. Him and all his kind."

Amalia stiffened, her breath shallow.

Frederich's fingers dug into her waist, his voice dropping into something colder, something crueler. "Too bad you married him. You're spoiled now. Worthless to me. We could have ruled together."

She turned her face away, revulsion curling through her. This was not the man she had once considered a possible husband. He had always been arrogant, but now she saw the truth. There was nothing noble about him. He was poison wrapped in silk.

A second rider approached, his horse slowing beside them. Councillor Basinger barely spared Amalia a glance, his expression twisted with disdain.

"You have the girl?" he asked.

Frederich smirked. "Of course. The orc will be so distracted that we'll have no trouble crushing them."

Basinger gave a short, humorless chuckle. "They're beasts. It was never going to be a fight. She's just insurance against the orcs and her father. Unless you've already handled that matter."

Frederich's grip on Amalia tightened. "Oh, he won't be coming."

Basinger smiled. "A convenient accident. Tragic, really. That leaves only his grieving daughter to inherit the throne." His gaze flicked toward her, calculating. "And a new king to guide her."

A chill shot through Amalia's bones.

Her father was gone?

No. It couldn't be. He was supposed to be rallying the army, supposed to be safe. Her

vision blurred, fury and anguish tangling into something sharp, something unbreakable.

“My husband is Drogath!” she shouted, her voice raw with emotion.

Frederich only sneered. “Not for long. As soon as you’re a widow, you and I will be married. Then we’ll see how long the marriage lasts.”

The implication sent ice through her veins.

Before she could respond, a soldier sprinted toward them, his breath ragged. “Your Highness, the orcs. They’re waiting for us.”

Frederich’s smirk widened. “Of course they are.” He pulled Amalia tighter against him, the shift pressing the hilt of his dagger against her bound hands. “But they’ll surrender the moment they see who I have.”

Kicking his horse into motion, he led his men forward. The army parted before him, soldiers shifting uneasily as they caught sight of their captive princess. Basinger fell in beside him, his own smile thin, pleased.

The column moved through the valley, toward the narrow mouth of the pass where the orcs lay in wait. The moment they reached the front line, Frederich yanked his horse to a halt.

Then cold steel kissed Amalia’s throat.

She froze.

Frederich’s voice rang out, cutting through the stillness.

“Orc!” he bellowed. “I have your mate. If you want her to live, show yourself.”

The battlefield held its breath.

Amalia’s pulse hammered, but she refused to tremble. She knew Drogath would come for her.

And the moment he did, there would be hell to pay.

* * *

Drogath's blood ran cold as he watched Frederich parade Amalia before his army. She sat rigid in front of him on his horse, her wrists bound, her face pale but composed. Pride and rage warred in Drogath's chest, pride at her courage, rage at seeing his mate in enemy hands. Behind Frederich, Councillor Basinger sat astride his own mount, looking smugly satisfied. The betrayal clearly cut Amalia deeply. Drogath could see it in the way she wouldn't look at her father's councillor.

“Surrender your army,” Frederich called out, one arm wrapped possessively around Amalia's waist, “and I might let your pretty whore live!”

Drogath noted that the prince said nothing about letting the orcs live, not that he expected they would survive the day if they yielded the field. No, the prince would rampage through his people, slaughtering all who stood before him.

“Don't surrender,” Amalia called out, her voice carrying clearly across the battlefield. Frederich yanked her hair in warning, making her gasp, tears springing to her eyes. But she remained steadfast, fixing him with an even gaze.

Drogath took a step forward, his hands raised in apparent surrender. “Let her go, and we can discuss terms.”

“Drop your weapon first,” Frederich demanded.

Slowly, deliberately, Drogath lowered his battle axe to the ground. He could hear the murmurs of confusion from his warriors behind him, but he kept his eyes fixed on Amalia's. There was something in her expression.

She caught his gaze and made a subtle movement with her bound hands. Understanding flashed between them. His mate wasn't as helpless as she appeared.

“Kneel,” Frederich commanded, clearly relishing his moment of triumph.

Drogath began to lower himself, watching as Frederich's attention focused on his submission. The moment the man's grip on Amalia loosened, she brought her fists up over her shoulder and into his throat with all her strength. As he wheezed and loosened his hold further, she threw herself from the horse.

Drogath was moving before she hit the ground. He snatched up his axe and crossed the space between them in three massive strides. Frederich was still struggling to breathe when Drogath's axe took his head from his shoulders.

“The princess!” Basinger shouted, wheeling his horse around. “Kill the princess!”

But Drogath was already there, sheltering Amalia behind his bulk as arrows whistled past them. His warriors surged forward with war cries that shook the earth.

A horn sounded from the rear of Frederich's army. Drogath grinned ferally as he saw the royal banners of Sherith appearing over the ridge. King Henrik had come after all.

“The king!” someone shouted. “The king has come!”

Frederich's forces broke in panic, caught between Drogath's warriors and Henrik's

cavalry. Basinger tried to flee in the chaos, but found himself surrounded by orc warriors who had specifically been watching for his attempted escape.

“Are you hurt?” Drogath asked Amalia as he cut her bonds, his hands gentle despite the battle rage still raging through him.

“No.” She looked up at him, her eyes bright with unshed tears. “You came for me.”

“I will always come for you.” He pulled her close, breathing in her scent. “Even when you don’t want me. My brave, clever mate.”

“I’m sorry I doubted you,” she whispered against his chest. “When they captured me, all I could think was that I might never see you again, never tell you how I felt. I was coming back, Drogath. I was coming for you.”

A throat cleared nearby. They turned to find King Henrik watching them, his expression caught between amusement and concern.

“Perhaps we should save the reconciliation for after we've dealt with the traitors?” he suggested mildly.

Drogath reluctantly released Amalia, though he kept one hand on her waist. “Of course, Your Majesty. Though I believe you can handle this part.”

“It would be my pleasure.” Henrik's eyes hardened as he looked at the captured Basinger.

Amalia leaned into Drogath's side, her hand finding his. “Take me home?” she asked softly.

“To the clan?” he asked, needing to hear the words.

She smiled up at him. “To our people.”

Chapter Thirteen

A malia lingered in the cave, the soft white robe draped over her body the only barrier between her bare skin and the cool air that whispered over her. Beneath the fabric, intricate symbols had been painted onto her flesh, each stroke laid with reverence by the clan's medicine woman, each marking binding her to the traditions of the orcs. The fire crackled in the small space, throwing flickering golden light over the cavern walls, but the warmth it provided did little to soothe the tremor beneath her skin.

Tonight, she would stand before the clan and be united with Drogath, not just as his wife, but as his true mate. The weight of it pressed into her chest, equal parts exhilaration and apprehension. Soon, she would rule beside him, not only over his clan but over all orc-kind.

She pressed a hand to her stomach, where the smallest flicker of life stirred within her. Their child. Their future. A future she would protect with everything she had.

It had been two weeks since the battle that never truly came to pass. Once Frederich fell beneath Drogath's blade and Basinger was captured, the enemy army lost its will to fight. Surrender came swiftly. The northern force, disorganized and leaderless, scattered like windblown leaves the moment they heard their leaders were either dead or imprisoned.

Not a single orc had fallen. They had won.

Frederich's father, ever the politician, had wasted no time suing for peace. King

Henrik had demanded nothing less than full surrender, absorbing the defeated kingdom as a city-state under Sherith's rule. Basinger's vast estates had been stripped from him, his co-conspirators swiftly identified and imprisoned.

But not all threats had been so neatly dealt with.

Korroth had vanished like a shadow at dawn, his treachery exposed. He had led Frederick's army through a hidden pass into the valley, betraying his own kind. Worse still, he had failed to secure an alliance with Osna. Without power, without allies, he was a fugitive now. Drogath had sent scouts to track him, ensuring that his cousin would never again bring danger to their people. Or to Amalia.

She was grateful for that. She had spent too long being hunted. Too long looking over her shoulder, waiting for the next betrayal.

Now, she only wanted peace, for herself, for her mate, and for the child she carried.

A rustling at the cave's entrance pulled her from her thoughts. The older orc female stepped inside, her sharp eyes gleaming with knowledge as they flicked over Amalia.

"It's time, child."

Amalia inhaled deeply, steadying herself. The nervous flutter in her stomach remained, but she no longer feared it. She clutched the robe closer for a moment before releasing it, smoothing her hands down her sides.

With a nod, she followed the elder out of the side chamber and into the larger ceremonial cavern where the entire clan had gathered.

The space was breathtaking. Torches lined the jagged walls, their flames casting warm light over the expectant faces of the orcs. The scent of burning incense and

earth filled the air, thick and heady. At the center, the elders stood in a semi-circle, their expressions solemn as they awaited her approach.

And there was Drogath.

Clad only in a leather loincloth, his massive form was painted with symbols similar to her own, his green skin a living canvas of tradition and power. His molten gaze locked onto her the moment she stepped into the light, the fire catching on the fierce, possessive hunger in his eyes.

He was magnificent.

Amalia's breath hitched as she met him in the center of the space, the murmur of the gathered orcs a distant hum against the pounding of her heart. Drogath cupped her face, his hands warm and steady, grounding her to the moment.

"Are you ready, my mate?"

Her lips trembled before curving into a small, nervous smile. "I think so."

Grithka, the elder who had painted her, stepped forward and gestured to Amalia's robe. "You must come to your mate as nature intended, unburdened by cloth or concealment."

A hush fell over the cavern.

Amalia's fingers trembled as she reached for the robe's edges. She hesitated for only a breath before letting it slide from her shoulders. Cool air kissed her skin, and she kept her gaze locked on Drogath, refusing to acknowledge the many eyes upon her.

His expression darkened, his nostrils flaring as his gaze raked over her, hunger

flashing across his face like lightning before he schooled his features. But she saw it. The raw, barely contained need in the tightening of his jaw, in the slight flex of his hands at his sides.

He wanted her. And that knowledge gave her strength.

Grithka began the ceremonial chant in the orcish tongue, her voice weaving through the space, ancient words binding them to the past, to the spirits who watched over them. She turned to Drogath expectantly.

He lifted his head, his voice strong, unwavering. "I claim this woman as my mate before all of you. Let any who would challenge this union speak now."

The silence was deafening, stretching long enough for Amalia's heart to hammer against her ribs.

Then Grithka turned to her, nodding.

Amalia swallowed against the lump in her throat, but when she spoke, her voice did not waver.

"I claim this male as my mate before the clan and all humankind. Let any who would challenge this union speak now."

Her stomach tightened. She had stood before a human court, bound to Drogath in a political marriage, but this was different. This moment felt real. Sacred. She half-expected someone to rise and rip it all away.

But no one spoke.

Grithka stepped forward, bringing with her a bowl of dark liquid and a length of red

cloth. “Now we mark you as one in the eyes of the clan.”

She dipped her fingers into the bowl, the thick, earthy-smelling paint cool against Amalia’s skin as she traced symbols over their joined hands. The words she murmured were foreign, but Amalia didn’t need to understand them to feel their weight, the power humming in the air.

When the markings were complete, Grithka wound the red cloth around their bound hands, the fabric soft yet unbreakable.

“Before these witnesses, you are claimed and marked. May the spirits of our ancestors recognize this bond.”

A roar of approval filled the cavern, voices rising in celebration, fists pounding against chests in rhythmic thunder. The sound echoed off the stone walls, vibrating through Amalia’s very bones.

Tears pricked at her eyes as she looked up at Drogath. He was hers. Now and forever.

He cupped her cheek again. “Are you ready to complete the claiming, mate?”

* * *

Drogath hadn’t expected Amalia to embrace this part of orc tradition so willingly. Many human females balked at it, bound by their fragile sensibilities and human morality. But Amalia was different. In many ways, she was his perfect mate, a woman who met his dominance with fire of her own, a mate who possessed a streak of wildness that called to something deep and primal in him.

Tonight, she would prove it before all.

An essential part of the orc claiming ceremony, especially for rulers, was the consummation of the bond before the clan, a public display of their union, their compatibility. Their people needed to witness the strength of their pairing, to see her surrender and his possession, to know without question that she belonged to him and he to her.

He inhaled deeply, sifting through the myriad scents in the cavern—the smoky incense still curling in the air from the ceremony, the warm musk of the gathered orcs, the damp mineral tang of the cave itself. But beneath it all, cutting through like the sharpest blade, was her.

His mate.

The scent of her arousal, thick and unmistakable, reached him, tightening every muscle in his body. She was nervous, but excited. Anticipation rolled off her in waves, mixing with her scent in a way that sent a deep, possessive hunger surging through him.

He tilted her chin, forcing her gaze to meet his. “Focus on me and nothing else. No one else is here.”

She grinned, mischief lighting her emerald eyes. “But they are here. And watching us. Kind of difficult to miss them.”

His thumb traced across her lower lip, feeling the slight hitch in her breath. “They’re here to witness and celebrate us.”

Her nervous laugh was breathy, laced with something raw. “Right. Our ceremonies are not like this.”

Drogath chuckled, the sound low and rumbling. “No, they are not.”

With a firm hand at the small of her back, he guided her toward the ceremonial bench—a structure designed to elevate her hips, placing her at the perfect height for him to claim her properly. It was padded for her comfort, adjusted to her smaller size, since orc females were built larger.

His rough fingers ghosted down her spine, savoring the contrast of her softness beneath his touch. She shivered, her skin pebbling beneath his palm, her breath catching as she eyed the bench with a flicker of trepidation.

She knew what was expected of her.

She hesitated for only a breath before surrendering to it, draping herself over the padded surface with the grace of a queen, gripping the carved wooden posts at the base. Her legs parted, baring herself fully to him.

His cock throbbed at the sight.

He pressed a heavy hand to the inside of her thigh, nudging her knees wider, spreading her until her pussy was fully open to his view. A fresh rush of slick glistened against her thighs, betraying her arousal.

Drogath growled low in his throat, sinking a finger through her folds, gathering the evidence of her desire. She moaned at the contact, her hips twitching in a silent plea.

His lips curved. Not yet, mate.

He withdrew his hand and delivered a sharp slap to the curve of her ass, relishing the way she gasped, her body jerking at the sting. A fresh wave of cream leaked from her, proof of her enjoyment.

“Settle, mate,” he commanded, his voice rough with restraint. “I decide what you get.

Do you understand?”

She nodded quickly. “Please, Drogath.”

He chuckled darkly. “Begging. Good. We’ll hear more of that before we’re done tonight.”

He slid a single finger into her, stroking her inner walls in a slow, torturous rhythm. Her thighs quivered, her grip on the bench tightening. His thumb brushed over her clit in a teasing circle, not enough to give her relief—just enough to drive her mad.

She whined, pressing back against him, desperate for more.

Drogath stilled. Then, without warning, he delivered five quick, stinging slaps to her ass, leaving her breathless, her moans dissolving into soft, desperate cries.

“Will you be still,” he rumbled, “or do I need to tie you down?”

She sucked in a sharp breath.

He knew she enjoyed being tied. They had experimented with it before, but tonight, she needed to surrender on her own.

She shook her head quickly. “I’ll be good, Drogath.”

A satisfied growl rumbled from his chest.

He pressed a firm hand to her lower back, pinning her in place, and slid two fingers deep inside her, twisting just right—finding that spot, the one that never failed to send her spiraling.

Her thighs trembled, her moans dissolving into pleas, her body tightening like a bowstring. And then nothing.

He pulled his fingers free abruptly, ignoring her whimper of protest, and lined his cock at her entrance. Then, with one powerful thrust, he buried himself inside her to the hilt.

Her sharp cry echoed through the cavern as her walls clenched down around him, her orgasm ripping through her in an uncontrolled, shuddering wave.

Drogath gritted his teeth, forcing himself to stay still, letting her body milk him, letting her ride the pleasure that had overtaken her.

Then he leaned over her, his mouth brushing her ear.

“Did you come without permission, mate?”

A choked sob left her lips. Her head dropped, auburn hair spilling over her shoulders.

Drogath wasn't satisfied. He curled a hand in her hair and tugged, forcing her to lift her head.

“Did you come without permission?” he repeated, his voice dangerously soft.

She nodded frantically, sniffing.

He exhaled sharply and withdrew from her tight heat, his cock glistening with her arousal. Every muscle in his body screamed at the loss of her, but he ignored it.

This was a lesson she needed to learn.

Stepping back, he let his gaze roam over her trembling form, her slick, clenching pussy still spasming around nothing. As if it needed him back.

Not yet.

His palm settled on the curve of her ass, rubbing slowly, soothing. Then, crack.

The sharp slap echoed through the cavern, her body jolting beneath the force of it.

Again. And again. Until her soft gasps became broken cries, her skin flushed and burning beneath his touch.

And yet, she was soaked.

Drogath smirked, pressing his fingers between her thighs to find her dripping, her body strung so tight it was almost cruel.

His perfect, perfect mate.

He lined himself up again, pressing the swollen head of his cock to her entrance.

“No coming,” he warned, voice thick with restraint. “Not until I say.”

She nodded, her cheeks still damp with tears.

This time, when he drove into her, there was no holding back.

His fingers dug into her hips as he took her, his pace punishing, every deep thrust designed to wring more pleasure from her, to brand her as his.

Her cries turned to screams as he struck the spot inside her that made her shatter.

He curled over her, pinching her clit between his fingers, wrenching one final sob from her.

“Come for me, mate.” His voice was raw, primal. “Come now.”

She shattered.

Her release gushed around him, drenching them both as he roared, spilling his seed deep inside her, claiming her in the most fundamental way.

Panting, he collapsed over her, pressing soft kisses to her damp skin.

“My perfect mate,” he murmured, stroking her hair. “I love you, Amalia.”

She turned her face, pressing a lingering kiss to his lips.

“I love you, my mate.”

* * *

Check out more of the Cursed Kingdoms fairytale retelling books in the series. You do not need to read them in any particular order. Check out the series [here](#).

And, if you like orcs, check out my book, *Rescued by her Monster Mercenaries*, a monster menage romance featuring an orc, minotaur and a human! Read on for an excerpt!

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I didn't know how long I had been a prisoner in this strange land.

I just remembered having that huge fight with my asshole of a boyfriend, him dumping me out of the car on the side of the road, then driving off.

Having no other options, I limped down the road, my fire-engine red stiletto heels not suited for a long walk on a deserted road.

And yes, the Eagles song about Hotel California was playing in my head the whole time, especially when the fog drifted in and I got disoriented.

Then I got dizzy.

The ground became uneven and difficult to walk on.

Then I felt woozy and woke up in this weird renaissance faire land.

Only, it wasn't make-believe, I hadn't bought a ticket, and I didn't think there was a way home. So much like the song.

I had been here several days at least.

I had woken up in a wagon that was little more than a wooden box on wheels with a roof to keep out the sun, with a few openings in the wood to let the air in.

The only light came from cracks in the wood and the small window in the back that was too small to fit through, and since there were three metal bars on the window, I

was definitely not getting out that way.

The hay that was my current bed was scratchy and rough, and smelled like it had been out in the weather for a while and had gotten wet, with mold possibly growing in pockets in the recesses where I didn't want to look.

My hands were bound in front of me and a chain trailed from my ankle to a bolt in the floor, my shoes nowhere to be found.

That really pissed me off.

They cost me a month's salary, not that my loser of a boyfriend helped pay for them, even though he loved me in them.

Four-inch spiked heels.

Fire-engine red leather.

A killer to walk in, but he didn't like them on the ground.

He was more into them on his shoulders or digging into his back. Right about now, if I saw the asshat, the heel would be digging into his balls.

Outside the wagon I could hear the creaking of wood and the clop of hooves in the dirt, the squeaking of the axles and wheels as they rolled along.

The wagon wheels clunked as we rolled over the ground, the livestock that followed the weirdest parade of lowing and baaing.

I was in a country version of Oklahoma and I wasn't happy about it at all.

But hey, I didn't have to pay my rent or credit card bill for my shoes, so there was an

upside.

Maybe my asshat boyfriend would have to get a job or live in a box with his Xbox.

The wagon ride seemed to go on forever.

I was exhausted and hungry and thirsty, but the man driving the wagon hadn't offered me anything except at night when we'd stop.

He had been rough but hadn't tried anything with me.

All he said was that I would fetch a good price at market as long as I was unspoiled.

Did that mean I was food—or something worse? I didn't know what he meant exactly, but he was carrying hides and leading livestock and wouldn't answer any questions.

But he didn't touch me, which was a huge relief, so maybe it would be okay.

Each evening he would let me out to stretch my aching and sore muscles after being cramped and bruised in the wooden wagon, the hay being little barrier to the hard floor.

And the roads were rutted and full of potholes, which transmitted every bump since they hadn't heard of shock absorbers in this backward, god-forsaken place.

I'd pee and do other stuff behind a bush, eat some stew with coarse bread, then back into the cart for more endless rocking.

The first few nights I tried talking to him.

Well, I tried pleading to let me go, to bring me home.

Then I tried bonding with him.

Isn't that what you were supposed to do with your kidnapper? Create empathy so he wouldn't hurt you? He only grunted and told me to mind my mouth.

I was going to the house no matter what.

And I could do it with or without a gag.

Judging by the filthy state of his clothes, I'd rather skip the gag, assuming it wouldn't be any cleaner than him.

So I shut up.

After several days, we rattled up to what looked like a medieval village and all hope for escape turned to despair.

The village was surrounded by a stone wall, and a few guard towers with guards standing on them.

The streets were dirt with a few muddy puddles.

The buildings were low and square, with thatched straw roofs and wooden doors.

The whole town looked like a decayed version of a medieval village, like one that you'd see in a picture book or on postcards or in a movie.

The whole place felt like that, like you were in a movie and a director was telling you where to stand and what to do, that you couldn't talk or do anything but act, like you were in some fantasy world.

The village was shaded by a wall of forest, but there were some buildings beyond the

tree line.

It was early spring, the days not hot but still warm enough to not require a coat.

The houses were a variety of shapes, sizes, and designs and were built of wood, stone, and clay.

The roads were dirt, and most of the people were peasants in simple peasant clothing, but there were also soldiers in armor and noblemen in richly decorated clothing.

I had no hope of figuring out how I got here or where I had even come through from my world.

Nor would I be able to find my way back, being hopeless with directions without a GPS.

As I looked out from the bars, this was something out of a fantasy movie or a role playing game that my boyfriend, now ex-boyfriend probably, used to play.

All manner of creatures walked through this town, not just humans.

In fact, there were few humans.

Large, strange creatures wandered the streets, the likes of which I had never seen except in those stupid video games or fantasy movies my boyfriend made me watch.

I had no idea what to call some of these creatures, so I relied on what he called them.

It terrified me, reinforcing that I was in a whole new world, and it might never change.

Green-skinned orcs with tusks jutting up from their lower jaws, strong, powerful

looking, easily seven feet tall and bigger than any man I had ever seen.

Dark-haired, fierce looking, with piercings through various body parts.

They only wore trousers, more like shorts, leaving their chests bare, and a sword or other weapons arrayed on their body.

The creatures of the town gave them a wide berth when the orcs walked by, with respect and a little fear.

Smaller creatures, somewhat misshapen and distorted, a lot smaller than me, though I was pretty tall, around five foot nine, which always irritated my boyfriend, especially when I wore the heels.

These creatures, maybe goblins, had big bellies and spindly legs, and topped maybe five feet tall.

They wore what looked like a toga.

I didn't see weapons, but I was sure they had them.

They scurried about, usually in groups.

Much larger gray-green creatures, even larger than the orcs, and ugly, reminded me of trolls or ogres.

They were solitary, ugly and grumpy looking creatures, carrying large axes or clubs.

I vowed to avoid them if possible.

Then there was another species I never thought I'd see outside of mythology books.

Half man, half bull.

A minotaur, that's what it was.

Huge, fur on most of his body, massive, towering over most of the creatures, with a brace of axes crossed over his back.

Damn, I was in some weird-ass fairy tale, completely outside the realm of anything known. I was so screwed.

“Get out before I drag you out.”

My savior and owner glared at me from the opening at the end of the wagon.

He'd treated me kindly so far, but the bars on the wagon and the bindings on my wrists reminded me that I was still his prisoner.

I slowly got to my feet and inched my way out of the wagon.

He unlocked the foot shackle and dragged me out.

I stood and briefly contemplated running.

But in which direction? Before I could decide, he attached a length of rope to the chain between my wrists.

“In case you get any ideas,”

he growled.

I realized that the area had grown silent, and we'd drawn a crowd, most of the creatures I had noticed earlier.

I was still wearing the small red dress my boyfriend had liked me to wear when I had gone missing, the one I had hoped to have fun dancing in.

Now it attracted far too much attention from these creatures, despite being torn and dirty and smelling far too fragrant from not bathing.

But it revealed more skin that I would like in front of these creatures and, while I had loved showing off my body at the club, I longed for a cloak or something to shield me from the hungry gazes pressing close.

My captor waved a club at the pressing crowd.

“Get back, you bastards.

Pay your dues at auction if you want another look.”

He grabbed my upper arm, hard enough to leave prints, and hustled me through, liberally using the club to beat back anyone who got too close.

He dragged me to one of the larger houses in the town that looked like an inn, maybe with a sign swinging over the door.

I didn’t get a chance to see what it said as he dragged me around the side to a smaller door.

He rapped on it three times and an older woman opened it, wearing a deep wine colored dress bordered in gold braid.

She was older than me, probably in her forties, and attractive in a handsome way.

She didn’t seem surprised to see us there—almost as if she had been expecting us, or at least him.

She stepped back and motioned for us to enter, then quickly shut the door behind us and barred it.

The woman led us down a hallway, past several closed doors, and into a larger room at the end.

The room we entered was decorated with finely crafted furniture, velvet curtains, and expensive artwork hung on the walls.

In the center of the room was a large table with a decanter and glasses on it.

A roaring fire burned in the stone fireplace against the wall.

The woman gestured to one of the chairs, and my captor settled heavily into the velvet-covered seat.

The older woman remained standing, watching me. I wasn't offered a seat or a removal of the manacles.

“Hadron.

I didn't expect to see you.

You almost missed our auction.

What have you brought me this time?”

Her voice was brisk and her gaze assessing. I squirmed as the woman gave me an assessing look. “Found her in the forest on the border between our lands and the orc lands, Odelia.”

Odelia took my chin in a surprisingly firm grip and tilted my head. “A very unique

find, Hadron. A redhead. We haven't had one of them in a long time. Curvy, sturdy. Our bidders will be very pleased. Too bad you're coming in late. We could have driven up the entry fee considerably."

"Not my fault the roads were muddy after the rainy season. You could always keep her for the next auction. Drive up the price, Odelia,"

Hadron grumbled, glaring at me as if it were my fault that he was late coming in.

The woman gave a harsh laugh. "Not on your life. Not with the Orc King seeking all human women and not caring if they're in his domain or not. I don't want to be caught with any unmated humans. It's a death sentence, even if we're not on orc land."

Hadron grunted. "Fine. I'll take my cut and go."

"After the auction. It was good you paraded her a bit before you got here. Maybe more will come."

She turned to me, not unkindly. "Come, girl. You need a bath and clean clothes. And probably a decent meal. I've had his cooking. You're lucky you didn't die."

Hadron grunted again and stomped off. Odelia took my arm in a firm grip and the door slammed shut behind me, ending my chance at freedom.

* * *

The madam wasn't kidding about a bath and clothes and I wondered how I was to pay for her largesse, or when it would start.

Two maids scrubbed me to within an inch of my life in the hot, lilac-scented bath, which I didn't expect.

The maids were two young women with matching black hair.

The dark green, almost olive color of their dresses contrasted with their pale skin and their dark hair.

Their lips were painted red and their eyes were lined with black.

A dark green ribbon tied their hair back in a tight ponytail, leaving only a few black strands loose.

The other end of the ribbon was tied tight and held their hair in place.

They worked in tandem with scratchy sponges that resembled my loofah back home, scrubbing and rinsing.

The water got darker and darker as I lost the dark grime that I had accumulated after days in that awful wagon.

The water calmed me and, despite the aggressive cleansing, I rested my head against the back of the tub and closed my eyes.

I might as well enjoy the pampering.

Who knew when I would get the chance again.

The floors and walls were polished wood, with the light from the candelabra flickering and reflecting in the deep varnish.

The furniture was a deep wood, also polished to a shine, with comfortable cushions embroidered, possibly by hand.

Nothing looked like it came from IKEA or a department store.

The maids talked around me as if I wasn't even there, assessing my looks and my assets as if I were a commodity, which I guess I was.

They discussed my hourglass figure, my smooth skin, my large breasts, and how I could fetch a high price at auction, especially with my fire hair.

I asked what this auction was, but they ignored me and kept talking about how I could fetch the highest price they'd ever seen and how it was too bad that I hadn't come earlier to really drive up the competition.

Something must have been in the water, or maybe in the glass of wine they had given me to sip because I couldn't find it in myself to freak out about this auction.

I could only hope a high price meant I wouldn't be abused, enslaved, or mistreated.

But who knew? Someone hopefully would tell me what the hell I was in for.

And the wine was truly excellent.

If I was going to be a slave, I highly doubted they would bathe me and give me excellent wine.

Right? Or maybe they were lulling me into a false sense of security.

Either way, I'd enjoy it while I could.

Eventually, the water ran clear, and I was dried off and handed a pretty, deep green dress that reminded me of the renaissance faire dresses I had seen in pictures.

The waist was cinched tightly and my breasts were pushed high, making them appear even larger than they already were, which was saying a lot since they already were a generous D cup.

While I had never been called petite, the way the dress was cut, I had a curvy figure, wide hips, and an ample butt, which my boyfriend always liked.

The maids looked proud of how I looked in the dress, saying how they would love me.

I wished I knew who they were, but I feared it was the creatures I saw on my way in.

Hiding in the inn was a great way to bury my head in the sand about my new reality, especially since I was surrounded mostly by human women or what passed for humans since both women with me had pointy ears and an otherworldly quality about them that I couldn't quite place, but that existed beyond these walls.

Finally, I was escorted to a sitting room where food had been laid out.

Several women were already in the room, gathered in small clusters, eating at different tables, talking, and laughing as if they weren't prisoners about to be auctioned off like livestock.

One would think they wanted this.

I felt my stomach growling with hunger as I saw all the delicious-looking dishes presented before me.

Despite my fear and uncertainty about what was going to happen next, my mouth still watered at the sight of freshly roasted lamb and chicken with vegetables and fruits, along with several pastries and all sorts of other goodies spread across the tables.

Despite the situation, I could always eat.

Hence my curves.

Despite being scared out of my wits, I forced myself up from where I had been seated and made my way toward one of the tables.

My hands were shaking as I picked up a plate and piled it high with food.

I paused, unsure if I should trust the food.

I remembered how I felt with the single glass of wine, as if I had been drugged, and wondered if the food had anything added to it.

As I stood there staring at the feast laid out before me, I noticed some of the women looking at me curiously from across the room.

I thought maybe these other girls were talking about me or judging me for being an outsider or just not fitting in.

“You should eat something. There’s plenty of food and it’s good. Better than most of us got anywhere else.”

A woman spoke from my right and I turned.

The other woman was raven haired with beautiful blue eyes. Hell, she was gorgeous, taller than I was, curvy like I was, but she wore it well, proud of who she was and her status. She was easily the star in this room and everyone knew it, which was probably why she stood alone. She ran her gaze over me, in a considering fashion.

“You’re the new girl, right? Hadron brought you in? I’m Daria.”

Well, shit. I didn’t want to make an enemy of the top bitch in the room. Maybe try the truth and see where it got me. No one had listened yet. “Olivia. I honestly have no idea what’s going on. I’m not from here and I just want to go home.”

She initially laughed, then it died away when I didn't. "Oh, you're serious. You're from away. I've heard of girls like you. Get something to eat and we can talk."

We piled food on our plates and found a small table near a window.

I sensed this was Daria's private table, and no one dared touch it.

Queen bitch indeed.

We settled in and looked out over the courtyard and main part of the town. Daria was right. The food was excellent and a significant improvement over Hadron's stew or whatever it was. Daria let me eat until my plate was clean, a small smile on her lips.

"So Hadron found you?"

I nodded. "My boyfriend and I had a fight, and he dumped me. I was walking to town, and a fog came in. Next thing I knew, I was here, in Hadron's wagon."

Daria looked thoughtful. "I've heard of stories like yours. People, often women, but not only women, who wander unknowingly into our realm through doorways."

Excitement seized me. Finally, someone who believed me and who might be able to help me. "Do you know how I can get back again? Do you know anyone who can take me?"

Daria shook her head sadly. "I've heard these doorways move and they don't always go to the same place or the same realm. You could end up somewhere far worse. Trust me, you're lucky you came here."

I snorted. "To be auctioned off like cattle? I'm not a slave."

Daria stared at me. "We're not slaves. The auction is good for us, well, most of us."

I held up my wrists where I still had marks from the shackles. “Tell me how this is good?”

Daria wrinkled her nose. “Hadron is not the best at collecting women or explaining things. It must be his ogre father. Not smart, ogres. But the auction is good for us. These males pay for the privilege of being chosen to be our mates. They have to pay and we get to select them.”

I don’t think I heard the other woman right. That didn’t make any sense. “I don’t think I understand. They pay to be a part of the auction, but we get to choose who we want?”

A broad grin crossed Daria’s face. “Yup. We decide who we’ll mate. The only catch is that we have to pick one from the available crop. You can’t decline to pick. And that’s a risk. You never know who has enough money to enter. Unless you set it up.”

She gave a sly grin and sipped her tea.

“Why don’t you just marry outside of this? Find someone you love and marry, or mate or whatever it is?”

“You could do that, but there’s no guarantee they can afford you. You see, in auctions, they have to pay, which means they have the means to keep a mate. If your family doesn’t have prestige to demand that outside of an auction, this is the best way to ensure you can raise your circumstances. And your family gets a cut of the bride price.”

In my case, Hadron sold me like a slave and I still get screwed. Still a slave. “Well, not for me. No family. Only Hadron who will sell me and pocket the money. Still like a slave.”

Daria shook her head.

“Believe it or not, he saved you.

If you were near the orc lands, their king would take you a prisoner and force you into slavery or worse, his harem.

If anyone else found you on the road, they could have force mated you.

Hadron, while he gets money for you in the auction, protected you by bringing you here, giving you the protection of a respectable mating.

Every female of a certain age has to be mated or they are fair game for males of ill repute.

And the orc king? He’s hunting for females to sire a child on.

He’s vicious.

“It may not seem like it, but he saved your life.”

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