



# Vexing the Grumpy Orc (Silvermist Mates #3)

**Author:** *Chloe Graves*

**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Territory lines werent made to keep out fate.

Hannah

Saving my petrified familiar requires rare mountain mushrooms and sacred ritual grounds. Unfortunately, both sit squarely in one extremely hot and incredibly grumpy orcs territory. One defiant step across my ritual circle unleashes magic far more dangerous than any gorgons curse—the kind that burns between bodies instead of bones.

But with Digbys stone form growing colder by the day, failure isnt an option—even if success means trusting the orc who ruins my spells with a single touch.

Galan

Witches destroy everything they touch. My fathers exile taught me that lesson well.

But this witch stalks my woods with a sharp tongue and even sharper magic. Her fierce loyalty and forbidden rituals set my blood burning and instincts snarling for more.

My chief shatters my solitude and commands me to keep her safe while my father orders me to march her off a cliff. Blood should win over heart, but she makes me question every truth I thought I knew.

Fate branded Hannah into my soul, and I wont rest until I claim her as mine.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### GALAN

The migraine pulsed behind my left eye as Miranda measured out a pale green liquid into a vial. Her steady hands moved with practiced care, but the slight curl of her lips said she enjoyed my discomfort far too much.

“Almost done.” The witch’s smug superiority crawled under my skin. “Unless you’d prefer to keep glaring holes in my back?”

I shifted my weight, refusing to give her the satisfaction of a response. The kitchen walls pressed in close, heavy with the scent of herbs and whatever magic she’d worked into them. My cousin might have welcomed this witch into our village, but that didn’t mean I had to like it.

But my only other choice was pain that left me bedridden for days. Shaman Durzum turned me away each month, telling me the witch’s potion would do the trick better than any he could brew.

It felt suspiciously like a setup, and I hated being shoved around for another’s whim.

“There.” She stoppered the vial and slid it across the counter. “Three drops in water, same as always.”

I snatched up the vial, ignoring how the glass warmed at my touch. Magic. Her magic, seeping into everything it touched. Just like she’d seeped into our clan, our

traditions, our?—

Osen's watchful gaze from across his kitchen kept my tongue in check.

"Thank you for your... assistance." I managed not to spit the last word. Barely.

"Always a pleasure, Galan." Her tone dripped honey-sweet venom. "Such stimulating conversation."

I gave her the barest nod required by clan courtesy. Any less, and Osen would tear it from my hide. The chief might be my cousin, but his mate was still his mate with all the possessive, protective bullshit that went with the bite.

The door didn't quite slam behind me. The sound of their low voices followed me out—probably discussing my 'attitude problem' again.

The autumn wind bit through my clothes as I stalked through the village. My head throbbed in time with each step. The pain felt righteous somehow, matching the fury that burned in my chest.

Grimstone had changed in the year since Miranda's arrival. Small things. Subtle things. The way the night watch carried healing potions alongside their weapons. The strange herbs drying in kitchen windows. How quickly they'd forgotten my father's exile while embracing an outsider.

A year since Alris died after getting in bed with dark magic and rotten covens. A year of watching my cousin moon over the witch who'd turned our world inside out. A full fucking year of my father's empty seat at clan gatherings while Miranda sat in a place of honor.

At least Torain had the decency to keep his human mate in Silvermist Falls. Though

watching him abandon his duties to play shopkeeper wasn't much better. The clan's master carver, reduced to dusting shelves and hosting reading circles. Our ancestors must be howling.

I left the village proper behind, following the steep path that wound toward my territory. My cabin perched on the edge of clan lands, where the mountain met the sky. Close enough to fulfill my duties as border guard, far enough to escape the stench of change that clung to Grimstone's streets. The isolation suited me. Let them have their progress. I'd keep to the old ways, guard the boundaries that mattered.

The vial burned in my pocket. A reminder that some lines had already been crossed.

Shadows stretched long across the mountainside as the sun dipped behind jagged peaks. The wind shifted, whispering promises of the first snow. Good. The cold kept visitors away and left me to my solitude.

I rolled my shoulders, working out the familiar tension. My head still throbbed, each beat a reminder of the unopened vial in my pocket. I needed to get back to my cabin, take the damn potion. Just enough time for it to work its magic before the steep climb to my father's door. Just enough to make the visit bearable.

I froze. Something crisp cut through the mountain air. Mint. Then something darker. Richer. Like honey dripping down my spine. It curled through my senses, making my mouth water and tusks ache.

The sound of branches snapping echoed from the clearing ahead. Trespasser. In my territory? Near our sacred grounds?

I moved silently through the trees, following that maddening scent. A woman crouched just beyond the border stones, her hands busy with... were those shadow caps? The mushrooms were rare, growing only under the right conditions.

And used in the clan's most sacred rites.

The thief muttered to herself as she arranged the caps in a precise circle. Around a stone... badger? The absurdity of it barely registered past the fury building in my chest. Magic crackled in the air, raising the hair on my arms.

Another fucking witch.

"This is clan territory." I kept my voice level despite the way my blood hummed. "Leave. Now. "

She didn't even look up. "Busy at the moment. Come back later."

The casual dismissal hit like a slap. "Those mushrooms are sacred to my people. You're trespassing."

"Sacred, yes. Yours? Debatable." She carefully placed another cap, then traced some symbol into the dirt. "The land doesn't recognize property lines."

"The clan's claim goes back generations."

"Fascinating." Her tone suggested it was anything but. "Did the mountains sign off on that arrangement?"

I advanced, using my height to loom over her. Most humans had the sense to back down when faced with an angry orc. She just tilted her head, finally meeting my gaze with sharp green eyes as vibrant as any venomous snake.

The impact knocked the breath from my lungs. Her scent crashed over me—the bite of winter frost and mint, the richness of freshly turned earth, and beneath it all, the thick honey sweetness that made me want to bury my face in her neck and breathe

until I drowned in it.

No. Absolutely fucking not.

“Get. Out.” I growled past the sudden desert in my throat.

She rose slowly, brushing dirt from her knees. Red-gold hair caught the fading light like sun fighting through mountain mist, making my fingers twitch with an urge I immediately wanted to cut off at the root. Even standing, she barely reached my chest. But the way she squared her shoulders and lifted her chin spoke of steel beneath her hourglass proportions.

“Make me.” The words came soft and deadly serious. “I have work to do here. Important work. So, stay out of my way.”

“You dare?—”

“I dare quite a lot, actually.” Her smile held no warmth. “Now, are we done with the territorial pissing match? Because these mushrooms need to be placed before moonrise, and your brooding is blocking my light.”

The headache exploded behind my eyes. Of all the nights for this—when I still had to make the weekly trek to visit my exiled father. When relying on another witch for relief still rankled. When everything in me screamed to either strangle this infuriating woman or slam her against the nearest tree and devour that poison-laced tongue.

“The mushrooms stay.” I stepped closer, satisfied when she had to crane her neck to maintain eye contact. “You leave. Final warning.”

“Or what?” She didn’t retreat an inch. “You’ll throw me over your shoulder? Drag me away? Because I have to warn you—” Her hand shot out, faster than I could track.

Something cold pressed against my side. “I don’t play damsel very well.”

I glanced down. The metallic glint of a blade kissed my ribs through my shirt. Not steel—silver. The witch came prepared for monsters .

“Last I checked, silver doesn’t affect orcs.” But I kept very still, recognizing the expertise in her grip. This was no amateur playing with daddy’s hunting knife.

“True.” That dangerous smile again. She pressed the blade harder, just shy of breaking the skin. “But I infused this one myself. Care to test what else it might do?”

Fucking witches. Always with their clever tricks and sharp tongues and the way they turned your world upside down without even trying. The way this one’s pulse jumped in her throat when I growled. The way her scent deepened with something that wasn’t entirely fear.

But she was right. One overzealous orc led to a dead human hiker, and the consequences snowballed into a shaman and my father plotting a losing coup. The clan had suffered enough, and Osen—with his witch mate and human sympathies—would never stand with his kind against one of theirs.

My hands clenched at my sides. Unless I wanted blood on them, there was nothing I could do to force her off the land. The realization tasted like ash.

“Be gone when I return.” The words scraped past my teeth. “Then we’ll see if you’re as good with that knife as you think you are.”

I stepped back. Turned away. Ignored every instinct screaming to stay. To act.

To prove I was the monster she clearly expected .

Her soft laugh followed me into the trees. “Looking forward to it.”

I lengthened my stride, trying to outrun her scent, the lingering tingle of her magic, the memory of those fierce eyes dismissing me like I was nothing.

The sun had fully dropped behind the peaks by the time I reached my father’s cave. Sweat cooled on my skin despite the autumn chill. The climb should have settled my temper to a familiar simmer, but it hadn’t. If anything, I felt worse. Brittle. Edgy.

And I knew why. That witch’s frosty scent clung to my clothes, making it hard to focus.

“You’re late.” My father’s accusation carried from the shadows of the cave. “I expected you an hour ago.”

No greeting. No warmth. Just disappointment wrapped in judgment. Even exiled, he kept score of every perceived slight.

I ducked through the entrance, squinting as my eyes adjusted to the dim light. The cave smelled of wood smoke and something less pleasant. Probably whatever he’d attempted to cook for himself.

“Got held up.” I set down the supply pack, deliberately not mentioning what—or who—delayed me. The last thing I needed was Coth ranting about witches corrupting sacred ground. “Brought extra firewood. Winter’s coming early this year.”

“The Blackrock clan wouldn’t make me huddle in a cave like a common beast.” He prodded the meager flames. “Their council chamber overlooks the entire Snake River valley. Glass windows from floor to ceiling.”

Here we go. I settled onto a worn cushion and braced for tonight’s fantasy.



“Their chief reached out personally.” Coth tended the fire, eyes bright with familiar fever. “Their council wants my guidance on some territorial disputes. Seems my reputation for wisdom carries weight, even out in Idaho.”

I nodded, letting the words wash over me. Last week it had been a clan in Oregon. Before that, Washington. The names changed, but the story stayed the same—some distant group that recognized his wisdom, valued his experience, would welcome him with open arms if only he chose to leave.

If only he wasn’t honor-bound to stay near his son.

The unspoken accusation hung between us like smoke. My fault he stayed. My responsibility to make it right. To speak for him, champion his return, convince Osen that the past was past.

But I’d seen the hatred in his eyes when Miranda healed Torain from certain death. Watched him dishonor himself by attacking my unarmed cousin. The truth was, no clan would touch a disgraced elder who plotted against his own chief. But pointing that out would only feed the bitterness that ate at him like rot.

“The supplies should last two weeks.” My head throbbed, the migraine returning with a vengeance. I stood, unable to take another minute of this. “I’ll bring more before the first snow.”

We both knew he’d be here.

His grunt of acknowledgment followed me into the cool evening air. I dragged in lungfuls of crisp, clean oxygen, waiting for the agitation to bleed away. The visits always left me drained and hollowed out. Like I’d given pieces of myself away and gotten nothing in return.

The trek down was harder in the dark, but I knew these paths by heart. Every tree root, every loose stone, every hidden hollow. I'd learned them young, mapping escape routes for when my father's temper burned too hot, or his disappointment cut too deep. Now the trees watched as I fled his home in exile like I was still that child.

A flicker of purple light through the trunks snapped me back to attention. The witch. She was still here. Still defiling sacred ground.

I veered off the path, following that unnatural glow. Maybe it was the lingering tension from Coth's fantasies. Maybe it was the buildup of a truly shitty day. But suddenly, confronting one mouthy human seemed a hell of a lot more appealing than brooding alone in my cabin.

The clearing glowed with unholy light. Mushrooms formed a perfect circle around that stone badger. A larger circle of branches and glittering stones ringed the mushrooms. Tendrils of purple energy danced through the air, weaving patterns I couldn't begin to understand.

And at the center of it all knelt the witch.

Her eyes were closed, hands moving in intricate gestures. Whatever she was doing, it radiated power. The hair on my arms stood on end as magic crackled through the air.

I should leave. I knew that. Nothing good ever came from messing with witches and their rituals.

But this was my land. My responsibility. And I was sick of being pushed around by arrogant humans who thought they could waltz in and do whatever they pleased.

I stepped closer to the edge of the glowing circle. "I thought I told you to be gone."

Her eyes snapped open. For a moment, they blazed with otherworldly light. Then awareness returned, along with that infuriating smirk.

“And I ignored you.” Her fingers never stopped moving. “Funny how that keeps happening.”

I gestured at the pulsing mushrooms, the swirling energy. “You’re working magic on clan lands. Sacred lands.”

“So you mentioned.” Her fingers sketched symbols that hurt my eyes. “Several times, in fact. Your conversational range seems rather limited.”

The dismissal in her tone—like I was some ignorant child who couldn’t grasp basic concepts—snapped the last thread of my patience. No one spoke to me that way. Not here. Not in my territory.

I stepped toward the circle.

“Stop!” Her voice sharpened with genuine warning. “The ritual circle is active. Cross it now, and the consequences?—”

“What were your words?” I took another deliberate step. “Make me?”

“This isn’t about territory.” Those green eyes blazed with power and frustration. “This is about not being an idiot who disrupts dangerous magic because his ego got bruised.”

“No one tells me what to do here.”

“Apparently they should.” Her lips curved in a sharp smile. “Since you seem determined to prove yourself a fool.”

The last word hung between us. Magic thickened the air, making it hard to breathe. Hard to think past the need to show this witch exactly who she was dealing with.

I lifted my foot.

“Don’t—”

The circle flared as I stepped across the line. Power surged around us both, and the world exploded into purple light.

## Page 2

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### CHAPTER TWO

#### HANNAH

Magic surged wildly, reaching for the orc like a living thing. Power crackled across my skin, licking along my nerve endings. Hungry. Desperate. Searching for an outlet.

A pathway.

He came to a stop on my side of the circle. Orcs ran big—everyone knew that—but seeing it in person was different. Broad shoulders blocked out the moonlight, casting me in his shadow. Dark hair had come loose from its tie, falling around a face that could have been carved from stone. He snarled, his tusks gleaming in the purple light.

“You absolute idiot.” I shoved to my feet, barely keeping my balance as the magic pulsed between us. “Do you have any idea what you’ve done?”

Weeks of research. Careful planning. Everything had to be perfect if I wanted any chance of breaking Digby’s curse. The purple mushrooms only grew in the places where ley lines crossed. Finding them had been hard enough, then arranging them in the proper formation while maintaining the energy flow...

And this territorial asshole just blundered straight through my protections.

“Stopping whatever corruption you’re working into my land.” His voice rumbled like distant thunder, dark satisfaction curling through the words.

“Corruption?” I barked out a laugh. “You think this is—” The magic shifted, coiling tighter around us. Fuck. I needed him gone. Now. Before the magic twisted completely and took root where I didn’t want. “This is a purification circle, you paranoid jackass.”

Was. Heat bloomed where it touched, spreading through my veins like liquid fire. Oh no. No, no, no. This was not supposed to turn into that kind of ritual.

His eyes narrowed, pupils blown wide. “I’ve seen the unnatural things you play at. I know how this darkness tears families apart.”

“That’s not—” My breath caught as another wave of power rolled through me. Through us both, judging by how his massive chest heaved. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t I?” He took another step, forcing me back. He towered over me, muscles coiled tight beneath his shirt. “I know what magic is, witch, and I despise it.”

The sneer in his voice caught me off guard. This wasn’t just territorial posturing—this was personal. But I didn’t have time to unpack his trauma. The ritual’s energy spiraled higher, drawn to him like iron to a lodestone.

Heat pooled in my belly, a blush creeping across my cheeks. There was no escaping it. Not with the magic locked onto him as a conduit. I tried to shake off the rising arousal, but it only spread lower. Between my legs, aching for something I knew I shouldn’t want. Shouldn’t need.

Not now. Not like this. Digby needed me.

The orc crowded closer, growling under his breath. It vibrated through me, stirring the desire I couldn’t quite quash. Stupid. Fucking. Body.

“What trick is this?” He dragged his tongue across his lower lip. “What have you done to make me want?—”

His mouth opened and closed like he couldn’t find the words. Couldn’t say them out loud. But his hips rocked, body betraying how badly it ached. Judging by the bulge straining at his jeans, I wasn’t the only one struggling to stay focused.

“It’s not a trick.” Desire flooded me at the sight. An answering call, roaring through my veins. Urging me to cross the remaining space. To let him sate the need clawing at me from the inside out. “It’s truth.”

For all his accusations of corruption, he caused the problem. Ignoring my warnings, stepping into my circle, drawing my magic directly into his system. He’d taken what was designed to bring Digby back to living form, and instead created this feedback loop of lust between us.

“Liar.” But his voice had gone rough. “I don’t want a witch.”

“Prove it.” I lifted my chin. “Walk away.”

His hands clenched at his sides. “Tell me what ‘truth’ you seek in my woods first.”

I turned away, desperate to salvage what I could of the ritual. His hand snapped out, fingers circling my wrist and yanking me back. I shoved against his chest, but he just used the momentum to pull me closer.

“None of your business.” I twisted in his grip, only to find myself pressed fully against him. Heat radiated through his thin shirt, and goddess, I could feel every ridge of muscle. “Let go.”

“My territory makes it my business.” His free hand slid into my hair, forcing me to

meet his burning gaze. “Tell me what you’re hiding, witch.”

I tried to wrench away, but he just tightened his hold. My pulse hammered where his fingers pressed against my wrist. The magic swirled tighter, hotter, until I couldn’t tell if it was the ritual or my own desperate need making me arch against the thigh pressed between mine.

“Make me.”

I surged up, meaning to headbutt him or bite him or something equally violent. Instead, my mouth crashed against his. His growl vibrated through my chest as he hauled me impossibly closer. I grabbed his shirt, intending to push him away. My fingers curled into the fabric instead, dragging him down to deepen the kiss.

He tasted like mountain air and fury. Like every bad decision I’d ever wanted to make. His tusks scraped my lower lip, sending shivers down my spine. I bit him in retaliation, earning another growl that made heat pool low in my belly.

“I hate witches,” he snarled against my mouth.

I yanked his hair, forcing his head back. “I hate territorial assholes.”

His hands slid to my hips, fingers digging in hard enough to bruise. Good. I wanted the marks. Wanted proof that this was real and not just some fever dream brought on by magical backlash.

“Then why are you here?” He nipped along my jaw, the scrape of his tusks sending shivers down my spine. “What’s so important you’d risk pissing me off?”

My ritual circle pulsed around us, the magic demanding more. Closer. Deeper. Even through layers of denim, I felt how hard he was. How much he wanted this, no matter



what bullshit came out of his mouth.

Fuck. I needed... I needed to focus. To remember why I was here. What was at stake.

“My familiar.” The words tumbled out as he mouthed down my throat. “I need to save him.” I gasped as his teeth found my pulse point. “He’s cursed.”

The orc stilled, pulling back just far enough to meet my gaze. Suspicion warred with curiosity in those dark eyes. “A curse?”

“Digby took a gorgon’s blast meant for me.” My fingers were still tangled in his hair. I couldn’t seem to let go. “He saved my life and got turned to stone for his trouble.”

Understanding flickered through his dark eyes. Then determination. His mouth crashed back to mine, and this time there was nothing gentle about it. Need clawed through me, fed by the ritual’s wild magic and my own desperate hunger.

I owed Digby everything. My life. My sanity. My one true friend who’d never asked for anything in return. I would break this curse. I would save him.

But right now, with this infuriating orc’s hands branded on my skin and his taste on my tongue, all I could think about was how much I wanted him to never stop kissing me like this.

The magic pulsed again, and we both groaned as another wave of heat rolled through us. I shoved at his shirt, desperate to feel skin. To ground myself in something real before I lost myself completely in the maelstrom.

He released me just long enough for me to rip the offending fabric over his head. I caught a glimpse of tattoos curling around his powerful arms, then his hands were on me again, one wrapping around my throat—not squeezing, just holding. Possessive.

The other slid under my sweater, calloused fingers dragging across my ribs.

“Fuck,” he growled against my throat. “You feel...”

I knew exactly what he meant. Every brush of skin on skin sent sparks racing along my nerves. Like my entire body had become one giant livewire, and he was the only thing keeping me from flying apart.

I arched into his touch with a needy whine I barely recognized as my own. “More.”

He hesitated for half a heartbeat. Then his thumb brushed my nipple through my bra, and holy fuck, the size difference. His hand nearly spanned my entire ribcage.

“You like that?” His voice had dropped to a dangerous rumble. “Being manhandled by a monster?”

I bit his lower lip. Hard. “You’re not nearly monstrous enough yet.”

Something dark and hungry flashed in his eyes. He shoved my shirt up, exposing my breasts to the cool night air. The lace of my bra did nothing to hide how my nipples had hardened into tight peaks.

“Pretty.” He traced one peak with his thumb. “Delicate.” His fingers closed around my breast, squeezing just shy of pain. “Breakable.”

I grabbed his wrist, grinding my hips against his thigh. “I don’t break easy.”

He made a sound like he wanted to test that theory. His mouth replaced his hand, hot and wet through the thin fabric. I clutched his shoulders as he sucked hard, sending sparks of pleasure straight to my core.

“Fuck.” My nails dug into his skin. “Please. I need?—”

His growl vibrated through my chest as he yanked the cups down. The first touch of his tongue on my bare nipple had me crying out. He switched between gentle licks and sharp nips, driving me wild.

“What?” His free hand slid down my stomach, fingers tracing the waistband of my jeans. Teasing. Testing. “What do you need, witch? Tell me.”

The order in his tone sent a fresh wave of heat pooling between my thighs. I should have been embarrassed by how quickly I spread my legs. How eagerly I pressed into his touch. But the magic had burned away any pretense of shame.

“Touch me,” I demanded. “Make me come.”

A wicked smile curved his lips. He lowered me to the ground with surprising gentleness, cushioning my head with one massive hand. Then he was hovering over me, all rippling muscle and barely contained strength.

I lifted my hips in silent invitation, and he made quick work of the zipper. The cold air barely registered as he dragged my jeans down my thighs, leaving me exposed to his ravenous gaze.

The first brush of his fingers against my clit had me arching off the ground with a strangled cry. He circled the sensitive bud slowly. Too slowly .

“So wet.” His voice held an edge of wonder. “So fucking wet for me.”

I tried to snap something witty. Something about how it was the magic, not him. But then he slid one thick finger inside me, and all rational thought fled. I wanted this. Wanted him. I wanted to crash against that fury and raw masculinity, feel all that

power drive deep home.

“Please.” I rocked against his palm, chasing more friction. “Harder.”

He added a second finger as his thumb continued working my clit. Pleasure built in waves, drowning out everything but the sensation of him filling me. Claiming me.

I buried my face in his shoulder, biting down on sweat-slick skin. He growled, fucking me deeper. His thumb pressed hard, just on the edge of painful, and I shattered around his fingers. He worked me through it, drawing out my release until I collapsed against the forest floor with a shuddering gasp.

When I finally managed to pry my eyes open, I found him watching me with an expression I couldn't quite place. Wonder, maybe. Mixed with something darker. Hungrier.

I reached for his belt, suddenly desperate to level the playing field. To make him fall apart the way I just had. I fumbled with the clasp, fingers still clumsy from orgasm. But I managed to shove his jeans down far enough to free his cock .

My mouth went dry at the sight of him. Long and thick. So fucking thick. The head already glistening with precum. Goddess, he'd be huge inside me. My core clenched at the thought, fresh heat flooding my pussy.

“See something you like?” But there was tension beneath the taunt. A flicker of uncertainty in those dark eyes.

I answered by wrapping my hand around him, relishing his groan of pleasure. His hips jerked into my touch, a growl rumbling from deep in his chest. I stroked him experimentally, testing how much pressure he liked. His head fell forward, teeth sinking into his lower lip as he rocked into my fist.

My thumb brushed a thick vein running along the underside of his shaft, and he shuddered. “Witch.”

Then I was shoving him onto his back, taking control. His hands settled on my hips as I positioned myself over him. The first press of his cock against my entrance had us both gasping. Fuck, he was huge. I worked him in slowly, giving my body time to adjust to the stretch.

“Gods.” His fingers dug into my skin. “You feel incredible.”

I leaned down, nipping at his lower lip. “I thought you hated witches.”

He bucked up, slamming deep. I cried out at the sudden fullness, nails digging into his chest. “Shut up and move.”

I snickered, the sound turning into a moan as he hit just the right spot. I braced my hands on his chest and rolled my hips, chasing that delicious fullness. Slowly at first, then faster as our bodies found a rhythm.

The magic roiled through us both, amplifying every touch. My thighs burned with the effort of maintaining the rhythm, but I couldn’t bring myself to care. Not when each stroke drove the haze of need higher. Not when his eyes blazed with hunger as he watched me take my pleasure from his body.

His hands slid to my ass, urging me to move faster. To ride him harder. And oh goddess, he felt incredible. Huge and hot and everywhere. My vision blurred as pleasure washed over me, drowning out everything but his touch and the ragged sounds that spilled from his lips.

He sat up, changing the angle. One arm wrapped around my waist, the other tangling in my hair to pull my head back. His mouth latched onto my throat, sucking hard

enough to leave a mark.

“Come for me.” His voice shook with barely restrained need. “Want to feel a witch fall apart on my cock.”

The sound he made then—part snarl, part plea—was the most beautiful thing I’d ever heard. His control slipped, thrusts becoming sloppier. Deeper. Harder. Until we were both gasping for breath, clinging to each other like the world might end if either of us dared let go .

White-hot pleasure coursed through me as I shattered. He swore savagely as I clamped down around him, grinding deeper into my heat. One final thrust, and he followed me over the edge with a roar.

Magic surged through the circle, releasing its hold on us both. The dregs of power snapped back into me, dissipating into harmless sparks. For a moment, I saw the currents flowing through the world below me. Mountains and valleys and rivers of pure energy.

We collapsed in a tangle of sweaty limbs, both panting heavily. For a long moment, neither of us moved. The magic slowly faded, leaving behind a bone-deep satisfaction.

Then reality came crashing back.

I scrambled away from him, stumbling to where Digby’s statue sat unmoved among the now-dark mushrooms.

“No, no, no...” I traced the cold stone, searching for any hint of warmth. Any sign of life.

Nothing.

The ritual had failed. All my research, the precise timing and location with the ley lines, the rare mushrooms—wasted.

“Did it work?” The orc’s voice held genuine curiosity beneath the lingering roughness.

I whirled on him, fury replacing our earlier heat. “Of course it didn’t work! You broke the circle, you arrogant—” I bit off the insult, gathering my scattered supplies with shaking hands. “Do you have any idea how long it took to figure out this ritual? How rare these mushrooms are?”

He rose to his feet, impossibly tall and broad in the moonlight. Any other time, I might have appreciated the view. Now, I just wanted to throttle him.

“You’re the one performing unauthorized magic in my territory?—”

“And you’re the one who couldn’t keep his territorial bullshit in check for five more minutes!” I snatched up my shirt, yanking it over my head. “I was so close. If you’d just left me alone?—”

“Left you alone?” He scoffed. “You’re lucky I didn’t drag you straight to the village elders. Outsiders aren’t welcome here, witch. Especially not ones working magic on sacred ground.”

We glared at each other, chests heaving. The air between us crackled with renewed tension. But this time, there was no magic to blame. Just anger and frustration and the sinking realization of what we’d done.

“Get off my land.” His voice was cold. “You and your filthy magic aren’t welcome

here.”

“Gladly.” I shoved the last of my supplies into my bag, and met his glare with one of my own. “And next time? Stay the fuck out of my way.”

“Oh?” One eyebrow arched in challenge. “Planning on trespassing again?”

“I don’t have a choice.” I hefted Digby’s statue, cradling it close to my chest. “This is the only place with shadow caps and a strong enough ley line intersection needed for the ritual.”

His answering growl sent shivers down my spine. “Try it. See what happens.”

I stormed into the trees, leaving him standing in the wreckage of my failed ritual. Angry tears burned behind my eyes, but I refused to let them fall.

I’d lost control. Let myself get distracted from what really mattered. And now Digby would pay the price.

Never again.

Next time, I’d be ready. And no arrogant orc—no matter how good he felt inside me—would stop me from saving my familiar.



### CHAPTER THREE

#### HANNAH

“Coffee’s getting cold.”

Bree’s gentle nudge snapped me back to the present. I blinked at the nurses’ station clock, surprised to find my first shift nearly over.

“Sorry. Big day.” I wrapped my hands around the lukewarm mug, letting the familiar smell ground me.

Hospital coffee—even badly burnt and bitter—felt oddly comforting after weeks of cheaper instant stuff in my apartment. Cheaper because I hadn’t planned on needing an apartment in Silvermist Falls at all. But that disastrous ritual two weeks ago left me no choice. Digby needed me, and breaking his curse required resources. Resources meant money. Money meant employment, and bills waited for no witch.

At least the small-town hospital felt quiet after years in bigger facilities. The two-story building housed a small ER with eight beds and a collection of doctor offices for routine care. Each room was equipped for both human and supernatural patients, though the former tended to require stitches, splints, and antacids while the latter included spells, potions, and occasionally fur removal from odd places.

“You’ll get used to the pace.” Bree leaned against the nurses’ station, coffee mug cradled in her hands. “Small town doesn’t mean boring. Silvermist’s got character.”

“And characters.” Susan settled into the chair beside me. “Remember that siren last spring? Three different shifters fighting over her in the parking lot.”

“While she just sat there filing her nails.” Bree shook her head. “At least they took it outside. Unlike that wendigo couple last month.”

“Sounds eventful.” I smiled despite myself. The easy banter reminded me of my old hospital, before everything went sideways with a gorgon turning my life plans to stone.

My heart ached at the reminder of Digby’s continued decor status. I missed him. Not just for the magic—though working spells without my familiar felt like trying to write with my off hand. I missed his grumpy huffs and puffs. His steady presence at my side. The way he always knew exactly when to offer comfort or distraction.

“Usually quiets down in the winter.” Bree stretched. “Most supernaturals handle their own healing anyway. Especially the orcs up in Grimstone.”

My ears caught on ‘orcs’ and ‘Grimstone’. Heat bloomed through my core as memories crashed over me. Strong hands gripping my hips. A gravelly voice snarling against my throat. The way he’d felt inside me, stretching me open while magic surged around us...

I shifted in my chair, clearing my throat. “The orcs handle their own healing?”

“Most of them.” Bree sipped her coffee. “They’ve got shamans for that. Though the chief’s mate works her magic with them sometimes.”

“His mate’s a witch?” The words slipped out before I could stop them.

“Miranda, I think?” Susan nodded. “She’s helped a lot with bridging the

communities. The clan even opened a shop downtown last month. They're expanding their woodworking stall from the farmer's market."

That explained some of his venom about witches tearing families apart. Though not all of it. There was too much raw hatred in how he'd spat the word 'witch' for it to just be about the chief's mate.

A knock on the doorframe saved me from more dangerous questions. "Ladies."

Dr. Harrison Rocha stood in the entrance, dark hair artfully tousled and smile professionally charming. "I was thinking of welcoming our newest nurse to the team with dinner at Silver Kettle. My treat."

Bree and Susan exchanged a look I couldn't quite read .

"Thanks, but I promised my kids a movie night." Susan grabbed her bag with suspicious speed.

"Rain check." Bree was already halfway to the door. "Early shift tomorrow."

And just like that, I was alone with Harrison's expectant smile.

I should have made my own excuse. But burning bridges on day one wouldn't help Digby, and a free meal was a free meal. Even if something about Harrison's too-perfect smile set my teeth on edge.

Fuck.

"The Silver Kettle has the best patio in town." He held the door as we left Silvermist Medical. "Perfect weather for outdoor dining."

The place lived up to Harrison's praise. Hugging the end of a row of cute shops lining Main Street, the restaurant boasted a brick courtyard dotted with wrought iron tables. Strings of lights crisscrossed overhead, creating a warm ambiance. Even the mountains seemed close enough to touch, looming high above the streets.

It should have been cozy. Instead, it felt suffocating. Being out in public reminded me how exposed I was without Digby nearby. That first week after his petrification had been hell. Walking around town filled me with nervous energy, and the urge to run kept growing stronger every day.

Harrison chose a table near the railing, ordering wine before I could protest. "Red okay?"

"Sure." I focused on the menu instead of his too-perfect smile. The prices made my bank account weep, but he'd offered to pay. After weeks of living on ramen packets while I hunted for work, I planned to order the most expensive thing they served.

"The chef here does an amazing filet mignon." Harrison leaned back, completely at ease. "Though I usually avoid the salmon. You know how sensitive the... diverse population can get. Wouldn't want some kraken claiming I ate their cousin, after all."

The hesitation before 'diverse' carried volumes of meaning. The hollow laugh he tacked on at the end made me want to punch him. I thought of the orc's accusations about corruption and darkness. At least he'd been honest in his prejudice.

My fingers tightened on the menu. "I imagine most people know the difference between friends and food."

"Of course, of course." The server appeared with our wine, and Harrison nodded approvingly as she poured. "But as medical professionals, we have a duty to consider liability issues. Especially with patients whose baseline health parameters fall outside

established norms.”

I studied the delicate stem of my wine glass, counting breaths like I used to do during difficult trauma cases. No wonder the other nurses had bailed so fast.

“But you have to admit, treating non-human patients presents unique challenges.” Harrison leaned forward like we were sharing secrets and darted a glance across the street. My skin crawled. “Take orcs, for instance. Their accelerated healing makes dosing difficult. One wrong calculation could have serious consequences.”

I followed his gaze. Two orcs wrestled what looked like a massive wooden desk through the doorway of Sombra Mountain Artisans.

My heart stopped.

The server saved me from responding, but Harrison’s shit opinions had killed any trace of appetite. I mumbled the first menu item I saw, my attention fixed on the storefront across the street.

Even from here, I recognized the broad shoulders and powerful build of the orc who’d ruined my ritual. He’d ditched the shirt this time, muscles rippling as he maneuvered the furniture. Tattoos wrapped his arms, the same ones I’d traced with my fingers that night.

His head snapped up like he sensed my attention. Dark eyes met mine across the street, and heat bloomed in my core. Recognition flared, followed by that same crackling hostility that had drawn us together in the woods. For a heartbeat, I was back there—magic surging between us as he filled me completely.

I jerked my gaze away, cheeks burning. Dammit. I didn’t need this complication. Not when I was trying to figure out if I could stomach working for someone who clearly

saw supernatural patients as a nuisance at best.

“Hannah?” Harrison’s voice drew me back. “You seem distracted.”

Because I could still feel those eyes burning into me. Still taste mountain air and fury on my tongue. Still hear his growled commands echoing in my head.

“Sorry, I—” I broke off as his phone rang.

“Excuse me.” He checked the display. “I need to take this.”

The moment Harrison stepped away, heavy footsteps approached our table. I didn’t need to look up to know who it was. The scent of mountain rain and moss wrapped around me, stirring memories I’d tried very hard to forget.

“Making a habit of trespassing where you’re not wanted?”

I forced myself to look up slowly, deliberately, matching his sneer with one of my own.

“Public street. Public restaurant.” I gestured around us with my free hand, grinning viciously when he flinched from my fingers. “Your territory doesn’t extend this far.”

“No.” His eyes flicked to Harrison’s abandoned seat. “But I’d think even a witch would have better taste than associating with trash like him.”

I offered him a bland smile and trailed my finger along the rim of my wine glass. “Bold words from someone who fucked said witch in the dirt. ”

His growl sent an unwanted shiver down my spine. I hated how my magic responded to the sound, reaching for him like it had that night. “A mistake. One that won’t

happen again.”

“Agreed.” I tipped my glass in mock cheers. “Though you seemed to enjoy my filthy magic well enough at the time.”

His nostrils flared. Before he could respond, the other orc approached. Leaner but still impressive, with smaller tusks that gave him a perpetual hint of a smile.

“Galan?” The newcomer’s voice held equal parts concern and amusement. “Everything okay here?”

I smiled sweetly. “Oh, is that your name? Galan?” I drew out the syllables, watching his jaw clench. Score one for the filthy witch. “Suits you. All hard edges and?—”

“Everything all right, Hannah?”

Harrison’s return wiped the satisfaction from my face.

“Hannah.” The orc’s savage grin turned triumphant. “Good to finally know your name.”

Goddess damn him. My name rolled off his tongue like smoke and sin. Heat crawled up my spine. I hated how much I liked hearing him say it. How much I wanted him to growl it against my skin again. Rougher. Darker. The way he had in the woods.

“Galan.” The other orc’s voice held an edge of warning. “The delivery.”

He hesitated just long enough to make it clear he was leaving by choice, not command. I kept my eyes on my glass until his heavy footsteps faded.

Only then did I let out the breath I’d been holding. Let my fingers unclench from

around the stem.

Harrison slid back into his seat, voice dripping with false sympathy. “I apologize you had to deal with such a... primitive specimen. Some of them can be quite intimidating when they forget we’re a civilized society.”

My fingers tightened around my wine glass. The urge to throw the contents in his face grew stronger with each word.

“Their clan in particular has violent tendencies.” He glanced around like he was sharing state secrets. “They slaughtered a human without remorse.”

“Really.” Ice coated my tongue. “And I suppose you were there? Witnessed this alleged slaughter firsthand?”

“Well, no, but?—”

“Then, disrespectfully, shut the fuck up.”

He blinked. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me.” I set the glass down before I shattered it. “I’ve had enough of your thinly veiled bigotry for one evening.”

“Bigotry?” His perfect smile slipped. “I’m simply expressing concern about documented violent incidents?—”

“You’re expressing shit.” The words burned in my throat like acid. “You’ve spent this entire dinner making snide comments about non-human patients. Suggesting they’re too difficult or dangerous to treat. That’s not medical concern—that’s prejudice wrapped in a white coat.”



“I see.” He sat back, studying me like a disappointing lab specimen. “I had such high hopes for you. But I suppose even nurses can fall prey to monster sympathies.”

“Monster sympathies?” I barked out a laugh. “Is that what you call basic decency?”

“I call it dangerous naivety.” His voice hardened. “These creatures may wear civilized masks, but underneath they’re still savage beasts. My duty as a doctor is to protect?—”

“Your duty is to heal. Period.” I shoved back from the table. “And those ‘savage beasts’ are people. With families and lives and every right to proper medical care.”

“Ms. Cuyler?—”

“I quit.” I grabbed my purse. “Find someone else to nod along with your bullshit.”

I stormed out of the restaurant, fury burning through my veins. The cool evening air did nothing to calm me down. Neither did the heavy footsteps approaching from behind.

“Witch.”

I whirled on Galan, who at least had the decency to look startled by my expression. “What? What could you possibly want now? ”

“You defended us.” His dark eyes searched my face. “Why?”

“Because he’s wrong.” My hands shook with lingering anger. “Because his sort of judgment is just fucking stupid . Because—” I broke off, chest heaving. “Just because, okay? Now get out of my way.”

He shifted closer instead. “Hannah?—”

“No.” I jabbed a finger at his chest. “You don’t get to say my name. Not after you ruined my ritual and called my magic filthy. Not after you made it impossible to save—” My voice cracked. “Just stop ruining my life and leave me alone.”

I shoved past him, half-expecting him to grab my arm. To demand more answers. But he let me go, his burning gaze following as I fled down the darkening street.

Tears pricked my eyes. Stupid. So fucking stupid. I’d just torched my best chance at steady employment in Silvermist. And where else could I go that would have the ley lines and mushrooms I needed for Digby’s ritual? Which meant travel, which meant saving, which meant more and more and more time.

But Harrison’s disgusting tone as he dismissed entire species as primitive... I couldn’t stomach it. Wouldn’t stomach it. Not even for Digby.

My familiar would understand. He’d probably have bitten Harrison’s ankles if he could.

The thought made me smile despite everything. Then I remembered the statue sitting in my cheap apartment, cold and lifeless, and the smile crumbled.

I’d figure something out. I had to. But right now, I just needed to get home before I punched someone. Or kissed someone. Or both.

Definitely both.

### CHAPTER FOUR

#### GALAN

C old mountain water swirled around my boots, but it did nothing to cool the restless heat under my skin. My gaze drifted to the purple mushrooms dotting the bank, their caps glowing faintly in the afternoon shadows. The same shade as the ones she'd arranged in that ritual circle. The ones that had pulsed with power when?—

My fingers tightened on the fishing rod, knuckles whitening as if I could strangle the memory away. Fuck. Even fungus reminded me of her now. Of smooth skin under my hands. The way she'd arched against me, demanding more. Her nails raking down my back as I?—

No. I cast the line harder than necessary, sending the hook sailing past the deeper pools where trout usually lurked. Focus on catching dinner for Father. Not on witches who smelled like winter air and defiance. Not on how she'd felt wrapped around me, so tight and hot and?—

Gods damn it.

Shame coursed through me. Witch magic. That was the only explanation, despite her claims of channeling 'truth'. Filthy, corrupting—and I'd let her seduce me with her spells. Let her take what should have been saved for a proper orc mate.

Father would explode if he knew. Bad enough I'd failed to drive her off clan lands. But to rut with her like some mindless beast...

Twigs snapped behind me. I tensed, already reaching for the knife at my belt before recognizing the familiar heavy tread. Osen emerged from the brush, his expression grim.

I turned my back on my chief and cousin, focusing on the fishing line cutting through dark water. “What did he do this time?”

A weary sigh answered me. We both knew there was only one reason the clan chief would track me down personally. One stubborn, delusional reason living in a cave and spinning tales of nonexistent allies.

“Your father chased off another park ranger.” Osen came to a stop on the bank, arms crossed. “He was caught destroying their equipment, and accused them of spying.”

Fucking hell. Fury flashed through me. Again? This made the fifth official complaint from humans, and the third time he’d gotten destructive. As much as I understood his frustration—humans did love poking their noses into private clan business—the rangers kept random hikers from straying too close to our borders.

The clan did not need another dead human on its hands.

“He’s getting worse.” My knuckles whitened on the pole. “The isolation?—”

“Is his own doing.” Osen’s voice cut through my excuses. “He chose exile over accepting my leadership.”

He was right, damn him. But it didn’t make the truth sit any easier.

The hook snagged on a submerged branch. I yanked it free with more force than necessary. “And what do you want me to do? He barely tolerates my visits as it is.”

“Talk some sense into him.” Osen kicked a pebble into the water. “Make him understand?—”

“That his exile was justified?” I whipped around with a snarl. “That his own son betrayed him for a chief who lets witches into our territory? You’re his chief?—”

“I’m not. He made that clear when he tried to drive an ax through my skull and murder my mate.” My cousin’s voice turned frigid. “The Silvermist mayor is threatening the clan’s access to the lower trails. Miranda’s already working overtime setting wards against some unknown magic she sensed near our borders, and I don’t have the patience to deal with your father’s paranoid rages on top of everything else. Just make sure he stays in his damn cave until we sort this out. ”

My grip tightened on the rod. Hannah. Her ritual. The shadow caps dotting the bank suddenly felt like accusatory eyes.

“The wards won’t be lethal,” Osen continued, “but we don’t need him stumbling into them and starting another incident. Handle it.”

“Don’t.” The word tumbled out before I could stop it.

Osen’s reflection went still. “Don’t what?”

Fuck.

“Don’t set any wards.” I reeled in slowly, buying time to choose the words I forced past gritted teeth. “There’s a witch. She needs the shadow caps. For some ritual.”

Osen dragged a hand down his face. “You know this how?”

Because I caught her trespassing. Because something drove us together in ways I still

couldn't explain. Because I fucked her in the dirt while filthy magic surged around us, and woke up every day since with the feel of her still on my cock.

I shrugged. "Caught her gathering them."

"And you let her go?" Disbelief colored his voice.

"What was I supposed to do? Kill her?" The mere thought turned my stomach. "She's not dangerous, just desperate to save her familiar. A gorgon turned it to stone."

Osen studied me with uncomfortable intensity. "You care what happens to this witch."  
"

"I care about not starting a war with Silvermist over a handful of mushrooms." I snorted, but it didn't cover the bitterness of the lie. "She works at their hospital now."

Or she had, before I'd apparently fucked that too. Her furious words echoed in my head: Stop ruining my life . First her ritual, then dinner with that prick doctor. I shoved down the unwelcome sourness that tried to crawl up my throat.

Not my problem. None of it was my problem. She was just another witch bringing chaos to clan lands.

"Then we compromise." Osen rose, brushing dirt from his pants. "She can perform her ritual, but only under supervision. Your supervision."

"No." The word exploded from my chest. "Find someone else."

"You already know her. You know the situation." His tone brooked no argument. "This way, she gets her ritual. We maintain control of our borders. Everyone wins. Unless there's some reason you can't handle this duty?"

Images flashed through my mind. Pale skin in moonlight. The arch of her spine. Her lips forming my name.

“Fine.” I yanked my line from the water. “But I’m not responsible for whatever trouble she causes.”

“Just keep her from causing any.” Osen’s satisfied nod only irritated me more. He turned to leave, then paused. “And make sure your father understands his place. The clan’s had enough of his madness.”

My fingers tightened on the empty fishing basket until the wood creaked. He wasn’t wrong—I’d watched my father spiral further and further into delusions and face-saving tales of nonexistent allies. And after he’d swung that ax at Osen... But hearing my cousin dismiss him so coldly, like some rabid beast that needed putting down, made my blood boil even as shame twisted in my gut.

Talk sense into him. Make him understand. As if I hadn’t spent months trying.

I left without a single damn fish. The empty basket mocked me as I packed up my gear and shouldered the other supplies. I’d wasted too much time arguing with Osen. Father would be in one of his moods by the time I arrived—hungry and suspicious and full of questions I couldn’t answer without setting him off.

Something gray darted between the trees ahead, too deliberate to be a squirrel. I dropped the basket, hand flying to my knife.

Yellow eyes gleamed from behind a fallen log. The cat—Miranda’s familiar—stared with unsettling intelligence. My hand stayed on my knife, remembering how that same innocent-looking creature had torn a dark witch’s soul from her body. Just because this magic wore a friendly face didn’t make it less dangerous.

But it had also saved Torain's life. Saved the clan. The contradiction made my head ache worse than any migraine.

I tried stepping around him. The cat simply jumped on a boulder, tail twitching. When I moved again, he repeated the maneuver.

"Fuck off, cat." My voice carried more confidence than I felt. "I'm not in the mood for witch games."

Those yellow eyes continued to stare at me. The familiar's fluffy tail twitched once, twice, before it turned and trotted further up the path.

Curiosity won over caution. I followed, knife still drawn.

Around the path's bend, perched on a flat rock, sat a woven basket. The smell hit me before I even nudged up the lid. Fresh fish. Six of them, cleaned and ready to cook.

The familiar sat beside it, tail curled neatly around his paws.

"I don't need handouts from your witch."

The cat's stare felt judgmental. Like he knew exactly what choice I faced—show up empty-handed and watch Father spiral further into his delusions, or swallow my pride and accept help from the very people who'd caused this mess.

"Fine." I sheathed my knife and grabbed the basket. "But this changes nothing."

The familiar yawned, showing off too many of those sharp teeth. I didn't flinch—did not flinch—but the beast was gone between one blink and the next .

Leaving the basket.



I stood there too long, jaw clenched, before snatching it up and stepping into the gathering dusk. Time to lie to the man who taught me honor while plotting against his own clan. Who preached tradition while trying to murder his chief.

Who would disown me in a heartbeat if he knew what I'd done with a witch in the woods.

The cave mouth gaped ahead, dark against the mountainside. No smoke rose from the entrance. He'd been letting the fire die again, choosing to huddle in darkness rather than venture out for wood.

"About time." His voice rasped from the shadows. "What news from the village?"

I set both baskets down and crouched to rebuild the fire. "Same as always."

"Lies." Something shifted in the darkness. "The clan doesn't operate in a vacuum. That witch-loving cousin of yours must be planning something. Why else keep me trapped out here?"

The kindling caught. Firelight threw his gaunt features into sharp relief—deeper shadows under his eyes, more gray in his beard. He smelled strongly of alcohol. I frowned. Nice of Osen to warn about that bit of thievery.

Or maybe the full extent of destruction had yet to be uncovered.

"You're not trapped." I kept my voice neutral. "But the rangers filed another complaint. You destroyed their equipment."

"Spies." He snatched a fish from the basket, examining it with narrowed eyes. "Crawling all over our mountains, marking trails for the humans to invade. I did the clan a service."

“You threatened our access to the lower trails.” I shoved the other supplies into their usual places with more force than necessary. “Osen says you need to stay in the cave until things cool down.”

The fish hit the cave wall with a wet slap. “Osen says? Osen says?” Father’s voice rose to a roar. “I was guarding these mountains while he was still suckling at his mother’s teat! He doesn’t command me!”

“He’s the chief.” I picked up the fallen fish, brushing off dirt. “And the rangers aren’t spies. They’re just doing their jobs.”

“Let them try.” He grabbed a knife, gesturing wildly. “We’ll gut them like these fish. Remind them why their ancestors feared the dark.”

Yes, and then the dryads would be gathering at the borders because a human mate was among the terrified to death. Then the shifters would enter the fray, because why the fuck not? Let’s wait till midnight and invite the bloodsuckers into our homes, too.

Any threat to one portion of Silvermist would bring out the whole fucking town with their pitchforks and torches.

“They’ll stay on their side of the wards,” I said through clenched teeth. I speared one of the fish and positioned it over the flames. “And we’ll stay on ours.”

“Wards? What wards?” He lurched forward, grabbing my wrist. His fingers dug in hard enough to bruise. “What else has Osen’s witch done? What aren’t you telling me?”

I jerked free. “Border wards. Osen mentioned some foreign magic. Probably nothing.”

“Foreign magic.” His voice dropped to a whisper. “More witches? In our territory?”

I stared into the fire, watching flames lick at scales. Debated how much to reveal. How much I could hide. “Just one. Some witch gathering mushrooms for a ritual. Osen assigned me to supervise her ritual.”

“Supervise?” Father threw back his head and laughed, a harsh sound that echoed off stone walls. “Is that what they call it now? First my so-called chief lets one witch spread her legs and poison his mind, now he’s whoring you out to another?”

My fingers tightened around the cooking stick. “It’s not like that. She just wants to save her familiar.”

“Familiar?” His eyes narrowed. “You’ve spoken to this witch? Let her spin her tales?”

Spoken. Fucked. Watched her rage against that doctor who’d insulted our clan. I shoved the thoughts away. “I caught her trespassing. Warned her off.”

“Yet she’s still coming back.” He leaned in, breath sour with alcohol. “Tell me you’re finally taking proper action against these vermin. A witch trespassing on clan land deserves only one fate—walked to the nearest cliff and pushed over the edge. Then piss on whatever’s left splattered below.”

The same thought had crossed my mind that night. Before she’d looked up at me with those fierce green eyes. Before I’d felt her body yield to mine, hot and tight and perfect.

Before I’d lost control in ways that still haunted my dreams.

“It’s just mushrooms.” I turned the fish, watching skin crisp. “And she’ll be

supervised.”

“By you.” He grabbed a jar of dried herbs from the supplies, squinting at the label. “My son, a Rockflaw warrior, reduced to witch-minding. I didn’t raise you to waste yourself on human trash.”

The irony burned worse than the flames. Decades of lectures about tradition. And all those lessons about honor. All those words on respect. He didn’t believe a damn word of it. Not even when his own blood stood between him and his desires. For power. For dead humans.

The jar turned in his hands, revealing the partially removed label. Brewed Awakening. Miranda’s shop.

Shit.

“What is this?” He thrust the jar in my face. “Witch poison! You bring that filth into my home?”

“It’s just salt and herbs?—”

He hurled the jar into the fire. Glass shattered, herbs igniting with a hiss .

“From her shop!” He knocked the cooking stick from my hands, sending the fish into the flames. “You think I don’t know where that comes from? That witch cunt’s store!”

Before I could stop him, he grabbed the basket of cleaned fish and dumped the entire contents into the flames.

“Fucking hell!” I lunged forward, trying to save at least one. “That was dinner!”

“Better starve than be bewitched.” His eyes burned with the same fanatical light I’d seen when he’d swung that ax at Osen. “Is that what happened? Did you eat her food and let her enchant you? Is that why you’re defending a witch?”

The accusation hit too close to the truth. Not that I’d eaten anything she’d offered—but that I’d fallen under her spell all the same. Years of pushing away interested females because they weren’t ‘suitable.’ Because their bloodlines weren’t pure enough. Each rejection had felt like duty, like honor, like protecting the clan’s future. Because Father had someone better in mind—someone who never materialized.

And in one night of magic-fueled madness, I’d thrown it all away on a witch with winter in her scent and fire in her touch.

“You disappoint me, boy. I taught you better than this.” Spittle flew from his lips. “First you let a witch trespass, then you agree to help her, now you bring their filth into my home?—”

“Your home?” I stood, towering over him. “This cave? This is what you chose over the clan. Over your family. And you have the nerve to talk about disappointment?”

“I chose honor!” He jabbed a finger at my chest. “I chose?—”

“I’m done.” I grabbed my pack. “Enjoy your cave.”

“Running errands for your witch masters?” He straightened his clothes with shaking hands. “The Moonclaw clan would never tolerate?—”

“There is no Moonclaw clan.” The words came out sharp and cruel. I could have softened the blow. Should have. But shame and anger churned in my gut—shame for letting the witch’s magic seduce me, anger at still wanting her. At Osen for forcing

me to face her again. At my father for making me choose between loyalty and basic decency.

So, I twisted the knife deeper. “No one wants your counsel. No one’s coming for you. You can rot here, and we’ll celebrate each day you don’t ruin our fucking lives.”

His incoherent howl of rage followed me into the gathering dark.

### CHAPTER FIVE

#### GALAN

The box of ornaments and trinkets slipped in my grip, corner catching my knuckles. I swallowed a curse and readjusted, following Torain's bobbing head through the crowd. His enthusiasm for the weekly Mist & Market circus hadn't dimmed since he'd opened the new storefront. Mine grew darker with each visit.

Humans scattered from my path like startled deer. Their scents clogged my nose in a dizzying mix of perfumes and foods and whatever else they used to mask their natural odors. The mist rolling off the river didn't help, turning everything damp and indistinct. Give me the clean mountain air of Grimstone any day over this cramped maze.

But to think it should disappear and erase over a century of shared existence? Or even would? Pure idiocy .

Torain slipped into the clan's stall ahead, his head dipping immediately to that tiny human mate of his. Carissa. The way she tilted her face back to meet his gaze, eyes full of trust, twisted something in my gut. If anyone touched her, he'd tear them to shreds. Human or orc. Asshole snake shifter or his own father. Didn't matter.

"You're sure about the placement of the bowls?" She drummed her fingers inches above the rim of a pair balanced on the front table. "I worry they'll look out of place."

“Trust me.” Torain’s voice held that disgustingly besotted tone he got around her. “The grain catches the morning sun just right. Watch.”

He shifted a polished bowl slightly, and sure enough, the wood seemed to glow from within. Carissa’s delighted laugh drew more stares from passing humans, but neither of them noticed.

If Father saw them now, he’d spit curses about clan purity and human weakness. Fucking prick.

“Fine, you win.” She stretched up on tiptoes to kiss his cheek. “But I still say we need better lighting for the smaller pieces.”

I cleared my throat before they could get more nauseating. “Where do you want these?”

“Pop the box under the back table,” Torain said absently, pointing toward the rear of the tent. “Zral swears he’ll have the new display when he comes in this afternoon, but I had a dwarf ask if we’d stock any today, so we’ll pull from there if not.”

I grunted, swallowing the bitter taste of being an afterthought. I could have brought the display. But Zral would handle it—he always did. He knew how to joke with the customers and charm them into parting with their cash. Unlike me, who couldn’t get through a single market day without someone’s pointed suggestion to smile more.

A breeze stirred through the open front of the stall. Winter air and mint tickled my nose.

My grip tightened on the box. That scent. Her scent. The witch.

Father’s crude words about introducing witches to cliffs flashed through my mind.



Fucking asshole.

I forced myself to keep moving. To focus on navigating the cluttered space. If I couldn't find the witch, I technically wasn't failing Osen's orders to watch her or my father's to kill her. Simple. Just ignore the way her scent clawed at my ribs and dug into my lungs. How it stirred memories of biting kisses and hungry moans.

So close. If I just turned, I'd see her standing somewhere in the crowd. Probably scowling. Most likely arguing with someone.

Dammit. I couldn't leave her unwarned about the wards, no matter how much I wanted to avoid her and her bewitching scent. Better to handle this now than wait for her to stumble into trouble on clan lands again .

I set the box down harder than necessary. "Need to check something."

Torain's reply was lost in the market noise as I slipped into the crowd. She moved quick for a human, darting between stalls and down side streets. The winter frost and mint trailed behind her, maddeningly easy to follow despite the press of bodies. How could one witch's scent stand out so clearly?

She veered away from the market and toward the heart of Silvermist Falls. The crowd thinned as I followed her path to Bean Me Up. Her trail mixed with strong roasts and fresh bread, then vanished into the shop. I growled under my breath before posting up against a wall across the street. Going inside meant dealing with humans who'd either flinch at my scowl or try too hard with their fake smiles and nervous chatter.

Better to wait. She'd emerge eventually.

Minutes crawled by. Other scents drifted past—more coffee, pastries, chattering humans. But underneath it all, that damned hint of winter frost. Like she'd marked

the whole town as her territory.

Through the window, I spotted her laughing at something the barista said. She drifted along the counter, studying the menu board while steadily closing the distance to the kitchen. The flash of red-gold hair vanishing through the employees' door left me standing there like an idiot.

Clever witch .

Her trail led to Pixie Dust next, where she lingered over crystals in the window display before sidling inside. Magic hummed in the shop's doorway, old spells that warned me to mind my manners. No way in hell was I following her in there.

I circled the block instead, catching a glimpse of red ducking into an alley between two brick buildings. Always just ahead. Always just out of reach.

The winter frost and mint grew stronger where pavement gave way to forest. Her hair caught my eye far up the path leading out of town, the red-gold shining like sunlight through morning mist. She took the winding trail at a steady clip, clutching a paper bag to her chest. Probably more supplies for whatever she planned.

The path ended at a small rental house, the kind that attracted drifters who never stayed long. Paint peeled from the siding in gray strips. Dead flowers filled the window boxes, remnants of some previous occupant's attempts at home. But under the neglect, the witch's scent saturated everything.

This was her den.

I hung back at the property line. Approaching a witch's home uninvited seemed unwise. Who knew what wards she'd set? What traps waited for intruders? The memory of her magic surging around us that night made my skin prickle.

“Planning to lurk there all day?”

I jerked my head up. The witch had slipped around the corner of the wraparound porch. She leaned against the railing, a steaming mug cradled in her hands. Her lips curved in a mocking smile.

“You must be the worst hunter in your clan if that’s your idea of stealth.” She took a pointed sip from her mug. “Should I be worried about having a stalker now?”

My shame burned hotter than my irritation at being caught. A hunter who couldn’t track prey in broad daylight? She might as well have gutted me.

“I wasn’t stalking—” I bit back the denial. She wouldn’t believe it, and why would she? I’d slunk around on the sidewalk like some abandoned pup. “I need to talk to you about your ritual.”

Her eyebrows rose over the rim of her mug. “Really. And following me across town seemed easier than, I don’t know, walking up and saying hello?”

“I don’t do hello.” I shifted my weight, eyeing the tree line. I didn’t like being so exposed on her tiny debris field of a front lawn. “The chief’s mate sensed magic near our borders. The clan’s setting wards.”

That got her attention. The mocking smile slipped. “And you came to gloat about ruining another ritual?”

“I came to help, actually.” The words tasted strange on my tongue. “The wards won’t be lethal, but they could still hurt you. I convinced Osen—the chief—to let you continue, only...”

“Only what?” Her fingers tightened around the mug .

“The chief offered a compromise. You can perform your ritual under supervision.” I forced my shoulders to relax from somewhere around my ears. How did one inform a witch she needed a babysitter? “My supervision.”

The witch barked out a laugh. “You’re joking.”

I crossed my arms. “Do I look like I’m joking?”

“You look like someone’s holding your balls in a vice.” She set her mug on the railing with the deliberate care of someone trying not to chuck it at my head. “Why would you volunteer for that?”

“I didn’t volunteer.” My temples throbbed. This was going worse than expected. “Osen assigned me after I told him about your ritual.”

“And why would you do that?” Her eyes narrowed. “Last I checked, you despised witches and their filthy magic.”

My words, thrown back at me again. I growled, but the sound held more frustration than menace. Why did she make everything so difficult?

“I’m doing it because you’ll try again anyway.” I met her gaze steadily. “Better supervised than dead in a magical backlash.”

And to keep my father from stumbling across her alone. But she didn’t need to know about that particular complication.

Her shoulders tensed. For a moment, I thought she’d tell me to fuck off. Then she nodded, though her posture remained wary .

“Fine.” She retrieved her mug, wrapping both hands around it like a shield. “I need

two nights, minimum. First to locate and harvest fresh shadow caps, then the actual ritual. The mushrooms can be tricky to find in the dark.”

I shifted my weight, remembering the patch I’d spotted while fishing. The purple caps had taunted me all afternoon, but now... “I might know where to find some. Save you the search.”

“You’d share that information?” Her voice held equal parts suspicion and hope. “Just like that?”

No. Not just like that. Nothing about this situation was simple. But I had my orders and couldn’t get the taste of her out of my head and the urge to give her what she needed roared like wildfire in my veins.

“Meet me tomorrow.” I gestured vaguely toward the mountains. “I’ll show you.”

“Tomorrow.” She studied me like she expected some trick. “And you won’t interfere this time?”

Images of what I’d like to do with her—interfere with her plans, that is—flashed through my mind. My fingers flexed involuntarily as I recalled digging my nails into her ass, dragging her onto my cock. How she’d felt in the dirt—hot and slick and willing.

Fuck, the things I wanted to do to her. With her. On her. In her.

“I gave my word to the chief.” The reminder of my duty steadied me. This was clan business, nothing more. And she was a witch, not a proper orc mate .

She sipped her drink, watching me over the rim with those knowing eyes and smug smile. Like she knew exactly what I’d been thinking, and wanted to toy with me for

her pleasure.

Gods, I wanted to wipe that smirk off her face.

“What made a gorgon target your familiar?” I forced the words past the tightness in my throat. “Please tell me you don’t make a career out of provoking territorial monsters.”

“Gotta pay the bills somehow.” She lifted one shoulder in a lazy shrug. “And if you think the tourists would pay to watch me rile up the local wildlife...”

I fought a smile. She wasn’t funny, dammit. Just rude. Infuriating. Tempting. “Answer the question, witch.”

She huffed into her mug and took a long sip of coffee. The frost in her scent shifted, growing colder. Sadder.

“I was a trauma nurse before this. Good at my job. Too good, apparently.” Her lips twisted. “Because a gorgon colleague didn’t appreciate being passed over for the promotion I received. She waited until my shift ended, cornered me in the parking garage. I didn’t even see her coming.”

My gut clenched. Ambush. Coward’s tactics. As bad as issuing a challenge for clan control and not waiting for an opponent to arm themselves.

“But Digby did.” Pride and pain warred in her voice. “He appeared between us, took the full blast. Saved my life and got turned to stone for his trouble.” Her laugh held no humor. “Then the hospital fired me because their policy forbids familiars in the workplace. Said I should have left him at home where he belonged.”

“They what?” The words came out as a growl.

“Apparently his presence created ‘liability issues.’” She spat the words like poison. “Never mind that he saved my life. Never mind that I’d worked there for years without incident. Policy is policy.”

The rage in her voice matched the fury building in my chest. No wonder she’d defended the clan so fiercely to that prick doctor. She knew exactly how it felt to be treated like shit on a shoe.

“Your familiar showed honor.” The words felt inadequate, but her eyes snapped to mine. “Protecting the innocent deserves respect. That kind of loyalty... it matters.”

Not the twisted version of loyalty my father demanded—blind obedience to tradition and hatred. But the pure, unflinching courage that drives someone to stand between danger and those who need protection, regardless of the cost.

Something shifted in her expression. Not quite trust, but... consideration. “That’s unexpectedly decent of you.”

“I can be decent.” When I wasn’t letting prejudice and old wounds and my fucking shitbag of a father cloud my judgment. “Sometimes.”

“Sometimes.” A ghost of a smile touched her lips .

The morning mist curled around us, carrying her scent. Winter frost and mint. Clean. Pure. Nothing like the tainted magic I’d been raised to fear.

She broke eye contact first. “So. Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow.” I latched onto the change of subject. “Just try not to do anything too witchy before then.”

“Try not to stalk any other witches.” She lifted her mug in mock salute. “You’re terrible at it.”

I started down the path, shooting her a glare over my shoulder. There was less heat in it than before, and her answering smirk held more amusement than mockery.

“Galan?”

I paused at the property line.

“Thank you. For speaking up about the wards.”

Something warm unfurled in my chest. I grunted and turned away before she could see it on my face.

It would be easier if I could hate her the way my father wanted me to. If I could see her as nothing but a witch to be feared and despised.

But her scent followed me down the path. It would probably follow me all the way back to Grimstone. Back to my empty cabin, because I couldn’t face my father’s cave again so soon. Back to my own bed where memories of pale skin and hungry moans waited in the dark.

Tomorrow couldn’t come soon enough.

And I refused to examine why that thought pleased me so much.



### CHAPTER SIX

#### HANNAH

I stretched over a fallen log, fingers straining for the perfect purple cap nestled against its base. My jeans caught on rough bark as I reached, but I wasn't about to let a single shadow cap escape. Not when Digby's freedom hung in the balance.

"Got you, you little bastard." I plucked the mushroom and added it to my basket, already half-full with the glowing caps.

The late afternoon sun filtered through the canopy, casting dappled shadows across the stream bank. Perfect mushroom-hunting weather. Not that I'd have cared if it was pouring rain or blizzarding—I'd crawl through hell on my knees if it meant getting Digby back.

My babysitter leaned against a nearby tree with his muscled arms crossed, looking like he'd rather be anywhere else. I'd caught him watching me at least six times in the past hour, his dark eyes tracking my movements with an intensity that made my skin prickle. Not entirely unpleasantly.

"You know," I said, straightening and brushing dirt from my knees, "when you said you knew where to find shadow caps, I expected door-to-circle service. Not a nature hike."

Galan's mouth twitched. Not quite a smile, but close enough to count as progress. "You'd miss all the fun of digging through mud."

“My idea of fun usually involves fewer splinters.” I gestured to the tear in my jeans.  
“And more alcohol.”

“Humans and their weak tolerances.” He snorted, but his eyes lingered on my legs before snapping away too quickly to be casual.

I bit back a smile and returned to my work. The memory of his hands on my body during that first ritual flashed through my mind. His rough palms cupping my breasts. His teeth grazing my neck. How magic had surged between us, wild and demanding. How easily I’d surrendered to it. To him.

Not that I planned on a repeat performance. I had enough distractions without dwelling on how his eyes tracked my movements, or how his scent—mountain rain and moss—made my pulse skip every time the wind shifted.

“You navigate these trails like you were born on them,” I said, watching him from under my lashes. “Most people would need a map and compass to find these spots.”

His shoulders stiffened at the observation, but I caught the brief flash of pleasure in his eyes before he masked it with indifference.

“Most people aren’t orcs.” The rigid line of his jaw softened, just slightly. “These mountains have been Sombra territory for generations. My great-grandfather carved his home into the rocks while your kind was still debating whether to burn us or study us.”

“And you?” I frowned down at my harvest. The basket held a decent haul, but not enough. Not for what I needed to do. “How do you, Galan, orc of the long-established Sombra clan, know these spots so well? I doubt the entire clan spends their free time tracking magic mushrooms.”

He shifted his weight, a gesture I was learning meant he was weighing his words. “I spent a lot of time out here as a child.”

“Playing hooky from orc school?” I couldn’t help the teasing tone. His ears actually twitched.

A flash of violet caught my eye further up the bank. Another patch. Without hesitation, I charged toward it, splashing through the shallow edge of the stream.

“Impatient witch,” Galan cursed under his breath, following with footsteps nearly silent despite his size.

I flashed him a grin over my shoulder. “If not hooky, then what? Bootlegging? Muscle for a sprite mafioso?”

When no response came, I glanced back. He’d stopped at the water’s edge, his gaze fixed on something I couldn’t see through the trees. The playful moment evaporated.

“Just... existing.” His massive shoulders hunched slightly, making him look younger despite his size. “I don’t always fit with the clan.”

The admission seemed to cost him something—pride maybe, or the carefully maintained distance between us. His hand drifted to a clan tattoo on his arm, fingers tracing the marks of belonging even as he spoke of not belonging.

“Don’t fit?” I frowned. “You’re literally of their blood.”

“It’s complicated.” He picked up a stone, turning it over in his massive hands. “My father has certain expectations. Traditions that matter to him. I’ve never quite...” He trailed off, shrugging those broad shoulders. “And I definitely don’t fit in town. Too big. Too green. Too many tusks for human comfort.”

The raw honesty in his voice struck something inside me. For all his intimidating presence, in that moment he seemed more vulnerable than I'd expected. More real.

"That's a very human opinion," I said, "thinking you have to fit somewhere."

His head snapped up, eyes narrowing. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just that humans are obsessed with belonging." I selected another mushroom, examining its gills before adding it to my basket. "We're pack animals. Social creatures. We need to fit in somewhere, with someone. It's exhausting."

"And witches don't need that?"

I thought of the covens I'd been invited to join over the years. The Sisters of the Serpent. The Lunar Collective. Groups that promised belonging, never mentioning the fine print of conformity.

"Some do," I admitted. "But the best witches I've known carved out their own spaces. Found their own paths." I met his gaze. "There's no shame in wanting peace, Galan. Or in creating a place where you can just... breathe."

Something flickered across his face—surprise, maybe, that I understood. That I wasn't mocking him. He looked away first, focusing on a point somewhere over my shoulder.

Silence stretched between us, broken only by the gentle gurgle of the stream and the soft sounds of my harvesting. When I finally stood and dusted off my pants, my basket overflowed with purple caps.

"You're done?" Galan asked, pushing away from his tree. He sounded almost disappointed.

“With this part.” I hefted my basket. “Now comes the fun bit. Setting up the ritual circle.”

His posture shifted subtly, a tension entering his shoulders that hadn’t been there before. The tips of his pointed ears darkened slightly .

I made no effort to hide my smirk. “What’s wrong? Worried about a repeat performance?”

“We should get on with it,” he growled, not meeting my eyes. “Daylight’s fading.”

“Afraid you won’t be able to control yourself around me?” I pressed, enjoying the way his discomfort manifested in that delicious flush creeping up his ears.

He made a strangled sound and stalked out of the clearing, his broad back rigid with what I suspected wasn’t entirely anger. I followed, keeping a respectable distance—but not so far that I couldn’t appreciate how his muscles moved beneath his shirt with each determined stride.

I adjusted the pack holding Digby’s stone form and hurried after Galan. My thighs burned from crouching to gather mushrooms, but I couldn’t slow down. Not when I was this close to bringing my familiar back.

“So, the woods were your escape?” I pushed as he picked our path through the underbrush. “From your father’s expectations?”

His stride hitched. For a moment, I thought he’d shut down the conversation entirely. Then his shoulders slumped.

“His. The clan’s. From a lot of things.” He ducked under a low-hanging branch. “My father’s exile hit the clan hard. Some blamed Osen. Some blamed his witch. But

everyone looked at me like they expected me to... I don't know. Fix it somehow. ”

“Exile?” The word caught me off guard. “What happened?”

“A human died in our territory.” His words came slow, measured. Like he was weighing each syllable. “But it started a whole shitstorm with the town. The humans wanted justice. Osen, who'd just become chief, was trying to navigate it all. Then Miranda saved my other cousin's life with magic, and suddenly half the clan was calling for her head. My father...” His jaw tightened. “He saw an opportunity.”

“For what?”

“To challenge Osen. Take control of the clan.” The words came out clipped and painful. “He conspired with our shaman. Set up a ritual combat that should have left Osen defenseless. Except I...” He shook his head. “I couldn't watch it happen. I threw Osen a weapon.”

The implication hung between us. He'd betrayed his father. Chosen honor over blood.

“Your father lost,” I guessed.

“Osen exiled him. He lives in a cave deeper in the mountains now.” Galan's voice grew rough, jaw clenched. The muscles in his neck stood out like cords. “And keeps fucking around and causing problems.”

Goddess. No wonder he'd reacted so strongly to finding me performing magic on clan land. Maybe humans and witches weren't the cause, but they were clearly factors. “And you still visit him? Even after that? ”

“He's still my father.” He pushed a branch aside for me to pass, fingers brushing my shoulder. “Someone has to make sure he doesn't starve.”

I ducked under his arm, close enough to catch the scent of mountain rain and moss that clung to his skin. His words settled over me like pieces of a puzzle clicking into place—the boy who'd found sanctuary in these woods, growing into a man who chose solitude over judgment. The defensiveness made more sense now, knowing what loyalty to a rotten father had cost him.

“It’s hard,” I said quietly, risking a glance up at his face, “watching someone you love destroy themselves with hate.”

Those dark eyes locked onto mine, searching. A muscle ticked in his jaw, then he looked away with a grunt. Which, I was learning, could mean anything from ‘fuck off’ to ‘you might have a point’. This one leaned toward the latter.

We reached the ritual site as twilight deepened around us. The remnants of my previous circle still marked the ground, though wind and weather had scattered the branches. I set my pack down carefully, making sure Digby’s statue remained stable while I unpacked.

“What’s all this for?” Galan asked as I arranged fresh branches in a wide circle.

“The outer ring is for containment.” I pulled crystals from my pack, placing them at each cardinal point. “Magic tends to... spill. Like banks for a stream, the circle keeps the magic focused where I need it.”

He handed me a branch, careful not to disturb my arrangement. “And the crystals?”

“Amplifiers and stabilizers.” I held up a piece of clear quartz. “This one focuses intent. The amethyst protects against magical backlash.”

His wariness faded as I worked, replaced by genuine curiosity. He crouched just outside the circle, watching me position Digby’s statue in the center.

“And the mushrooms?”

“Shadow caps grow along ley lines—natural pathways of magical energy.” I settled the glowing fungi in a spiral pattern around my familiar. “They absorb that energy, making them especially potent for reversing curses.”

He nodded, processing the information with none of the dismissive scorn I’d expected. “How do you know where to place everything?”

“Practice. Research.” I adjusted a crystal slightly. “A lot of trial and error.”

“And it will work this time?” His gaze flicked to Digby’s stone form.

“If we don’t have any... interruptions.” I shot him a pointed look.

His ears darkened again. He held up his hand and took an overly large step away from the boundary. “I’ll stay outside the circle.”

“Good.” I finished placing the last mushroom and stood back to examine my work. Everything was perfectly positioned—better than my first attempt. “Because I really need this to work.”

I dug through my pack for my mortar and pestle, then returned to kneel in front of Digby. The shadow caps glowed purple in the growing darkness, casting eerie light across my familiar’s frozen features. My heart ached at the sight of him—still as vigilant in stone as he’d been in flesh.

I dropped the most vibrant shadow cap into the bowl and crushed it into a fine paste. The mushroom released its earthy scent as I worked, mixing it with a few drops of water from the stream, until only the final ingredient waited.



I pulled a small silver knife from my pocket and pressed the blade to my index finger. A quick slice—practiced, clinical—and crimson welled to the surface.

Galan hissed, his head snapping away.

“What’s wrong? Big bad orc doesn’t like blood?” I teased, letting three drops of blood fall into the mixture.

“Not blood without purpose.” His ears darkened again. “Wasteful bleeding is for fools and showoffs.”

“This has purpose.” I stirred the mixture with my fingertip, watching it turn from purple to deep crimson. “Blood carries intent. It’s the strongest binding agent in magic.”

He shifted his weight, looking uncomfortable. “You must be used to it. With your nursing.”

“Former nurse.” I smeared the mixture across Digby’s stone forehead, careful to make the symbol exactly as the grimoire had shown. “Though the medical board might have a new complaint about Harrison Rocha to consider.”

The symbol complete, I pushed away all thoughts of Harrison, of jobs, of everything but the magic gathering in my blood. This moment belonged to Digby.

Taking a deep breath, I began the chant.

“Shadow caps of twilight’s hour, grant me now your sacred power. Blood of witch and mountain’s heart, break this curse and stone apart. What was flesh and now is stone, return to life and blood and bone.”

The words pulled at something deep inside me, drawing magic up from my core and into the circle. Sweat beaded on my forehead as I channeled more power, feeling it flow through my outstretched hands toward Digby.

“Shadow caps of twilight’s hour...”

The crystals vibrated, humming with energy. The air thickened as the mushrooms began to pulse.

A sudden crack echoed through the trees. Galan moved before I could blink, positioning himself between me and the sound. His huge frame blocked my view of the forest, muscles tensed for attack. I froze, spell momentarily forgotten as he listened, head cocked.

“Deer,” he finally said, relaxing slightly. “Just passing through. Keep going.”

I nodded, though he wasn’t looking at me anymore. His gaze swept the tree line, vigilant. The protective gesture wasn’t lost on me. For someone who claimed to hate witches, he seemed awfully concerned about my safety. I didn’t comment when he settled closer to my circle than before, though still carefully outside its boundary.

I closed my eyes and centered myself again. The ley lines hummed beneath me, power rising through the earth and into my bones. I let it fill me, channeling it through my blood and into the circle. My limbs trembled with the effort, but I couldn’t stop now. Not when I was so close.

“Blood of witch and mountain’s heart, break this curse and stone apart. What was flesh and now is stone, return to life and blood and bone.”

Again.

“Shadow caps of twilight’s hour, grant me now your sacred power. Blood of witch and mountain’s heart, break this curse and stone apart. What was flesh and now is stone, return to life and blood and bone.”

Again. The mushrooms brightened, their purple glow intensifying with each word. I poured more and more of myself into the spell. Each syllable felt heavier than the last, like speaking through honey. But I had to keep going.

“Blood of witch and mountain’s heart...”

My voice grew hoarse, but I pushed on, focusing everything I had on Digby’s stone form. On memories of his warm weight against my side. His indignant chattering when I worked too late. His unfailing loyalty that threw him between me and danger.

“What was flesh and now is stone, return to life and blood and bone!”

A pulse of energy surged through the circle. The mushrooms flared blindingly bright, then dissolved into sparks that swirled around Digby’s form. The crystals shattered, their fragments suspended in the air for one breathless moment before falling like glittering rain.

And Digby?—

Stone gave way to fur, gray and white and black. Claws. Whiskers. His black eyes blinked rapidly, adjusting to the world again.

“Digby!” I cried, swaying where I knelt.

My familiar looked around in confusion, taking in the unfamiliar surroundings. Then his gaze locked on Galan, and his hackles rose. With a fierce growl, he placed himself between me and the orc, teeth bared in warning.

The sight of my badger—my tiny, brave familiar—challenging a creature a zillion times his size broke something inside me. Laughter bubbled up, slightly hysterical with relief and exhaustion.

To my surprise, Galan laughed too, a deep rumble that shook his chest. “Protective little bastard, isn’t he?”

“That’s my Digby.” I wiped tears from my cheeks. “Always ready to fight monsters for me.”

Digby’s growl deepened at the sound of Galan’s voice. My hands shook as I reached for him, the simple movement requiring more effort than it should. I stroked his back, feeling the familiar texture of his coarse fur beneath my fingers.

“It’s okay, buddy,” I soothed Digby. The clearing spun lazily around me, like I was viewing it through water. “This is Galan. He helped us.”

Digby sniffed suspiciously, his posture still defensive.

“Smart creature,” Galan commented, keeping a respectful distance. “Knows a predator when he sees one.”

The last dregs of power slipped through my fingers, leaving me hollow. Black spots danced at the edges of my vision as exhaustion pulled at my bones. Every muscle screamed as I fought to stay upright.

“Hannah?” Galan’s voice seemed to come from far away.

My legs gave out. I pitched forward, bracing for impact with the hard ground. Instead, strong arms caught me, cradling me against a broad chest. Digby’s alarmed chitter faded as the ritual took its toll.

“I’ve got you, witch,” Galan murmured, his voice the last thing I heard before consciousness slipped away.

### CHAPTER SEVEN

#### HANNAH

Warm. Too warm. I floated in that hazy space between sleep and wakefulness, my body heavy as stone. Everything ached—muscles I'd forgotten I had protested each breath. The scent of mountain rain and moss wrapped around me, mixed with wood smoke and something earthy.

Not my bed. Not my room.

Memory flickered through the fog. Purple light. Chanting. Digby's fur beneath my fingers.

Digby.

My eyes flew open. Panic surged, then receded as quickly as it had come. A rough wooden ceiling stretched above me, illuminated by the soft glow of a dying fire. I lay beneath a heavy quilt on a bed that smelled of him. Of Galan.

"You're awake. "

I turned my head toward his voice, wincing as the movement sent a throb of pain through my temples. Galan sat in a chair beside the bed, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. His dark eyes bored into me with an intensity that might have been unnerving if I'd had the energy to care.

“Did I die?” My voice came out as a croak. “Because this feels like death.”

Relief washed over his face. “You’re not dead. Just stupid.”

“Charming.” I tried to push myself up on my elbows, but my muscles trembled with the effort. Galan’s hand shot out, hovering near my shoulder without touching.

“Easy,” he said. “You’ve been out for hours.”

“Hours?” I blinked, trying to focus. The room spun slightly. “What time is it?”

“Near dawn.” He stood, looming over the bed. “You need to drink something. Stay put.”

As if I could go anywhere. My legs felt like overcooked noodles. I watched him duck through the doorway, his broad shoulders nearly brushing both sides of the frame.

Alone, I took stock of my surroundings. The bedroom was small but simply furnished with wooden furniture that looked handmade, and windows framing views of the forest. A fire crackled in a stone hearth through the doorway, casting dancing shadows on the walls .

Isolated, yes. Spartan, definitely. But undeniably a place someone had built with care.

The bed creaked as I shifted, trying to swing my legs over the edge. The room tilted alarmingly, and I clutched the quilt to steady myself. Bad idea. Moving could wait. The ritual had taken more from me than I’d expected.

But it had worked. Digby was free.

Galan returned, a steaming mug in his massive hands. He frowned when he saw me

half-sitting, half-sprawled against the headboard.

“I said wait.” He crossed the room in three strides, setting the mug on a small table before reaching for me.

“I’m fine.” The protest died as my arms gave out. I pitched forward.

Galan caught me, one hand on my shoulder, the other at my waist. The heat of his palm burned against my skin. His touch lingered, steadying me as he eased me back against the pillows.

“Stubborn witch.” No bite to the words. If anything, he sounded... amused.

A blur of black and white fur leapt onto the bed, wedging itself between us with a warning chitter. Digby’s small body vibrated with protective fury as he positioned himself squarely between me and Galan.

“He’s been a menace since you passed out,” Galan said, his tone surprisingly fond for someone describing what must have been hours of badger harassment. “Wouldn’t let me near you without supervision.”

Digby chuffed in agreement, pressing his warm body against my side while keeping his beady eyes fixed on Galan.

“I wasn’t sure what to feed him,” Galan continued. “But the claw marks on my refrigerator made it clear the beast was hungry. Hope you don’t mind I gave him some beef meant for a stew.”

I stroked Digby’s fur, reveling in the familiar texture beneath my fingers. “Thank you for taking care of him. And me.” I took a sip of tea, the honey soothing my parched throat. “I didn’t expect the ritual to drain me so completely.”



“You looked like death when you collapsed.” He looked away, jaw tightening. “I couldn’t leave you out there.”

“You could have. Your duty was done.” I held Digby closer, feeling his small heart race against my palm. “Many would have.”

His eyes snapped back to mine, dark and intense. “I’m not most.”

No, he wasn’t. Most men didn’t help witches they claimed to hate. Most orcs didn’t share their territory, their food, their bed with outsiders. Most people didn’t look at me the way he was looking at me now, like I was a puzzle he couldn’t quite solve but couldn’t stop trying to.

My gaze caught on a fresh scratch running along his forearm. Three parallel lines, red and angry against his green skin. Exactly the width of Digby’s claws.

“He got you.” I set my mug down and reached for his arm without thinking.

Galan hesitated, then extended his arm toward me. “Your protector has sharp claws. It’s nothing.”

I closed my fingers around his wrist, pulling him closer to examine the wound. The nurse in me assessed it automatically—not deep enough for stitches, but it had broken the skin. The woman in me noticed other things: the warmth of his skin, the surprising softness beneath calloused palms, the way his pulse jumped beneath my fingertips.

“It should be bandaged,” I murmured, unable to resist another swipe of my thumb.

“For a scratch?” He snorted, but made no move to reclaim his arm. “I’ve had worse from tree branches.”

I looked up to find his eyes fixed on where my fingers met his skin. Something hot and wild lurked in their depths. My lips parted, my own heartbeat quickening to match his.

Digby growled low in his throat, but I ignored him. I couldn't look away from Galan's face, from the way his breathing had changed, grown deeper, more deliberate.

"Hannah." Just my name, but the way he said it—low and rough—sent heat spiraling through me. "What you did... You were—are..."

His free hand cupped my cheek, thumb brushing my lower lip. I should have pulled away. Should have remembered all the reasons this was a terrible idea—his hatred of witches, my focus on Digby, the temporary nature of my stay in Silvermist Falls.

But his skin burned beneath my fingertips, and the memory of our bodies tangled together during the ritual flashed through my mind with startling clarity. And those eyes, so dark, so watchful and hungry, held me trapped in the moment I didn't want to end.

"Magnificent." The syllables were barely a puff of air, but the word was written on every inch of his face.

The first brush of his lips against mine was gentle, almost hesitant. Testing. My eyes fluttered closed as I leaned into him, answering his unspoken question. Yes. This.

The ritual had drained me, but this—his mouth on mine, his heat surrounding me—brought me back to life. I pushed myself up, ignoring my body's protests to get closer to him. His other hand came to my waist, steadying me as I shifted to my knees on the bed.

Digby made a distressed sound and leapt from the bed, but I barely registered his departure. All I could focus on was Galan—his taste, his scent, the way his hand slid from my cheek to my neck, thumb brushing my pulse point.

He surged forward, one knee on the bed as he claimed my mouth with newfound hunger. His tusks grazed my lips, adding to the ache building between my thighs. I pushed at his chest, creating just enough space between us to reach for the buttons of his shirt.

“Let me thank you,” I murmured, working the first button free. “Properly.”

He swallowed hard, the movement visible in his throat. “You don’t need to?”

I silenced him with another kiss, softer this time. “I want to.”

Another button. Another kiss, this one tracing the edge of a tattoo that peeked above his collar. His breathing grew ragged as I worked my way down, savoring each new inch of revealed skin.

“What is this one?” I traced the black lines of what looked like a mountain range inked across his left pectoral.

“Clan territory,” he said, voice strained. “Given when I reached adulthood.”

I kissed the peaks and valleys, imagining the pride he must have felt receiving such a mark. Another button revealed more of his abdomen, the muscles taut beneath my exploring fingers.

“And this?” I traced a spiral pattern near his ribs.

“Successful hunt.” His hand settled in my hair, not guiding, just holding. “First deer I

took down alone.”

When I reached his stomach, I felt his muscles jump beneath my touch. The final button gave way, and I pushed the fabric off his shoulders. He shrugged out of it, letting it fall to the floor .

I sat back on my heels to take him in. Green skin stretched over defined muscle, marked with more scars and tattoos that told stories I wanted to learn. I palmed his cock through his jeans, feeling him throb beneath my touch.

“Let me,” I whispered, meeting his eyes. “Please.”

Something flickered in his gaze—vulnerability, maybe, or uncertainty. But he nodded, his hands falling to his sides.

His breath hitched as I unbuttoned his pants, sliding the zipper down with agonizing slowness. I glanced up, watching his face as I hooked my fingers in his waistband and tugged. He lifted his hips, helping me slide the fabric down his thighs.

His cock sprang free, hard and thick against his stomach. I wrapped my fingers around him, marveling at how he filled my hand, at how his skin felt like velvet over steel.

“Fuck,” he hissed, hips jerking as I stroked him slowly.

I maintained eye contact as I lowered my head, letting my breath ghost over him. His pupils dilated, nearly swallowing the dark irises. When my lips closed around the head of his cock, he made a sound that was half-groan, half-growl.

“Your mouth,” he rasped. His hand came up to cup the back of my head, not pushing, just resting there as if he needed the connection. “So fucking hot.”

I hummed around him, taking him deeper. His taste filled my senses—earthy, masculine, addictive. I worked him with lips and tongue, alternating between teasing licks and deep, sucking pulls.

His breathing grew ragged, the muscles in his thighs tensing beneath my hands. I glanced up to find him watching me, his expression a mixture of awe and hunger that made my core flood with heat.

“I can’t—” His fingers tightened in my hair. “Hannah, I’m going to?—”

I doubled my efforts, taking him as deep as I could. His cock pulsed against my tongue, and then he was coming with a guttural groan that seemed torn from his very soul. I swallowed everything he gave me, working him through the aftershocks until he tugged gently at my hair.

I released him with a final lick, looking up to find him collapsed against the bed. His chest heaved with each breath, staring at me with something like wonder.

“Can I...” He hesitated, eyes darting to the junction of my thighs. “Can I taste you, too?”

The uncertainty in his voice caught me off guard. This wasn’t the confident orc who’d fucked me senseless during the ritual. This was something else—something vulnerable.

“Have you done that before?” I asked gently.

The tips of his ears turned a deep shade of red and his eyes slid away from mine. “No.”

A suspicion formed in my mind. He’d been so hesitant and... awed, at times. Easy to

cast aside as appropriate partner appreciation, or first time nerves, or... or... First time, first time nerves.

“Galan,” I said, searching his face, “have you done any of this before? With anyone?”

He shifted uncomfortably, suddenly finding the ceiling fascinating. “Didn’t have time for such distractions.”

“But the ritual—” My hand flew to my mouth. “That was your first time?”

His defensive growl confirmed it before his words did. “Don’t make it a thing.”

“But it should have been—” Guilt crashed through me. His first time had been during a magical ritual gone wrong, with a stranger, on the forest floor. No tenderness, no connection beyond the physical. Just magic-induced lust neither of us could control. “I stole that from you.”

“You didn’t steal anything, witch.” He caught my chin, forcing me to meet his gaze. “It was truth, not desire. Remember?”

My own words from that night echoed back to me. Truth, not desire. The magic had amplified what was already there—an attraction taking root from the second I saw him standing over me in the forest. It’d only stripped away all our pretenses and excuses.

“Still,” I said, twisting my fingers. “Your first time should have been?—”

“No.” His thumb brushed my lower lip. “I chose to cross that line. I wanted you then. I want you now. No magic. No ritual. Just us.”

The raw honesty in his voice silenced my protests. I studied his face, searching for

signs of regret or resentment. Found none. Just that same intensity, that same hunger that had drawn me to him from the start.

“Besides,” he added, a smirk tugging at his lips, “I’m a quick learner.”

To prove his point, he lowered his head and captured my nipple through my shirt. The heat of his mouth seared through the thin fabric, drawing a gasp from my throat.

I chuckled low in my throat. His eyes darkened as I reached for the hem of my shirt, pulling it over my head. My bra followed, leaving my breasts bare to his gaze. His breath caught audibly.

“Then yes,” I whispered, leaning back against the pillows. “You can taste me.”

He needed no further instruction. His lips closed around one nipple, tongue flicking experimentally. I arched into the contact, a moan escaping my throat. He grew bolder, alternating between gentle suction and teasing licks until I was squirming beneath him.

He moved down my body with agonizing slowness, placing open-mouthed kisses along my stomach, my hip bones. When he reached the waistband of my jeans, he looked up, seeking permission.

“Yes,” I breathed, lifting my hips to help him remove them .

My panties followed, leaving me completely exposed to his hungry gaze. He settled between my thighs, his broad shoulders pushing them wider apart. He looked up at me, uncertainty warring with desire.

I reached down, threading my fingers through his hair. “Start slow. Use your tongue. I’ll tell you what feels good.”

He nodded, then lowered his head. The first touch of his tongue against my clit was tentative, exploring. I gasped, my fingers tightening in his hair.

“Like this?” he murmured against my flesh, the vibration of his voice adding another layer of sensation.

“Yes,” I hissed, grinding against his mouth. “Right there. Harder.”

He growled and licked me harder. Deeper. His hands gripped my thighs, holding me open as he devoured me. There was nothing hesitant about it anymore. His tongue dipped inside me, tasting, teasing, testing to see what made me gasp. What made me shudder. What made me writhe.

When he slid a thick finger into me, curling it just right, my thighs shook. Fire raced through my veins, coiling low in my belly. A second finger joined the first, stretching me. Filling me. I rocked against him, chasing my release.

“Galan,” I panted, straining for it. So close. Almost there. “Just like that. Don’t stop.”

He didn’t stop. He kept licking and thrusting and growling.

His eyes met mine, dark and feral with desire. The orgasm slammed into me, ripping through my core. I cried out, bucking against him. His grip on my thighs tightened, anchoring me as wave after wave of pleasure tore through me.

He worked me through the orgasm, not stopping until I tugged him away. He crawled up my body, pressing kisses to my stomach, between my breasts, along my neck. I tasted myself on his lips when he finally kissed me. Slow and lingering. Devouring.

He settled between my thighs, the weight of his hips deliciously heavy against me.



The feel of him, hot and hard again, dragged a moan from my throat.

He paused, dark eyes seeking mine. “Like this?”

GALAN

The sight of Hannah spread beneath me, flushed and wanting, stole my breath. My cock throbbed where it pressed against her entrance. Part of me still couldn’t believe this was real—no magic, no ritual, just us. Just her.

The witch.

My witch.

Not proper. Not even a little bit orc. She was human—warm-blooded and soft. Delicate in ways my kind couldn’t afford to be. Too trusting. Too stubborn. Too full of questions and curiosity. Too many reasons why this was a horrible idea.

Too many reasons I couldn’t resist her.

“Please,” she whispered, rolling her hips. The movement dragged her slick heat along my length. “I need you inside me.”

I growled and pushed forward, watching her face as I sank into her tight cunt. She moaned, back arching. I nearly came right then, just from the feel of her surrounding me, squeezing me, drawing me in like we were made for each other.

“That’s it,” she breathed, hands sliding up my arms to grip my shoulders. “Goddess, you’re huge.”

The praise sent fire racing through my veins. I bottomed out with a groan, fighting

the urge to thrust mindlessly into her perfect pussy. Her inner walls rippled around me, adjusting to my size.

I withdrew slowly, watching every flicker of emotion across her beautiful face. Eyes squeezed shut. Mouth open in a silent gasp. She felt like silk against my shaft, better than anything I could have imagined. Better than anything I deserved.

I slid home again, unable to resist the pull of her heat.

“Move,” she commanded, digging her nails into my skin. “Fuck me, Galan. ”

My name on her lips sent fire licking through my veins. I pulled back slowly, savoring the drag of her flesh around my cock, then snapped my hips forward. The impact drove a gasp from her throat. Again. Harder. Deeper. Each thrust pulled new sounds from her—whimpers, moans, breathless curses that made my blood sing.

“Like this?” I growled against her throat, setting a punishing rhythm. “This what you need, witch?”

“Yes,” she hissed, meeting me thrust for thrust. “Harder. Make me feel it tomorrow.”

Her words shot straight to my cock. I hooked her leg over my arm, opening her wider, driving deeper. The new angle had her crying out, clutching at my back.

“That’s it,” she panted. “Right there. Don’t stop.”

Her encouragement fueled my hunger. My tusks scraped her neck as I buried my face against her skin, inhaling her delicious scent. I wanted to consume her, mark her, claim her in ways I didn’t fully understand. Make her mine in every way possible.

She shoved at my shoulder, rolling us in one smooth movement until she straddled

me. My hands found her waist as she sank back onto my cock, drawing groans from us both.

“Watch me,” she ordered, placing my hands on her breasts. “Watch how much I love riding your cock.”

She rose up slowly, then sank back down. My eyes locked on where we joined, mesmerized by the sight of her taking me. Her pussy gripped me like a vise, hot and slick and perfect.

“Hannah,” I choked out, thumbs brushing her nipples. “Fuck.”

“That’s it,” she breathed, picking up speed. “Talk to me. Tell me how it feels.”

“Like nothing I’ve ever felt,” I admitted, utterly transfixed in the moment. “Like I’m drowning in you.”

She threw her head back, hair cascading down her spine like liquid fire. I’d never seen anything so erotic—her perfect tits bouncing, her gorgeous face contorted in pleasure, her cunt stretched to take my cock. I pinched her nipples, earning a husky cry of approval. I would watch her forever if she let me.

In that moment, she was no mere witch. She was a goddess. My goddess. Wild and untamed, claiming me as her willing sacrifice. The urge to worship her overwhelmed me—to pledge myself to her, to protect her, to give her everything I had and everything I was.

“Hannah,” I breathed, the name a prayer on my tongue. “Hannah.”

Her eyes opened, meeting mine with startling intensity. Something passed between us, something deeper than physical pleasure. Her rhythm faltered as she leaned down

to kiss me, her lips soft against mine.

“Touch me,” she murmured against my mouth. “Make me come on your cock.”

I slid my hand between us, finding the slick bud of her clit. Her whole body shuddered as I circled it with my thumb. She rode me harder, faster. She clung to my shoulders, forehead pressed to mine as she chased her release.

Slick heat bathed my cock as her rhythm grew frantic, her thighs trembling. I knew she was close, could feel it in the way her inner walls fluttered around me. I fought the instinct to roll us again, to pin her and drive into her until she screamed. Until she forgot anyone who came before me.

Until she belonged to me.

“Come for me,” I growled, catching her earlobe between my teeth. “Now, witch.”

Her body obeyed with a long, shuddering moan. Pleasure washed over her face, so fucking beautiful it hurt. Her pussy clenched around me, pulling me impossibly deeper. Ripping my own release from my throat with a roar.

I thrust into her, fucking us both through it until her body went limp and boneless.

She collapsed onto my chest, both of us panting heavily. I wrapped my arms around her, holding her close as aftershocks rippled through us. The weight of her felt right. Perfect. Like she belonged there.

Mine, something deep inside me whispered.

The thought should have terrified me. Horrified me. Sent me running for the nearest blade to end the threat bewitching me into insanity.

Instead, a strange warmth spread through my chest, settling beneath my ribs like an ember taking root. My skin tingled where it touched hers, as if my body recognized something my mind refused to name. Something permanent. Unbreakable.

I buried my face in her hair and breathed her in, memorizing the way she felt in my arms, even as I told myself this was temporary. Just pleasure. Nothing more.

Not finding my fated mate in a creature I should hate.

### CHAPTER EIGHT

#### GALAN

The workshop door creaked under my hand. Familiar scents hit me—fresh sawdust, linseed oil, sweat. I paused, throat tight. It had been two days since I'd escorted Hannah and Digby back to her door, two days of patrol routes deliberately avoiding her cottage, two days of failing to outrun memories of her.

Two days wasn't nearly enough to forget the way she'd looked riding my cock, her hair the fiery halo of the sun cutting through morning mist. Or how right she'd felt in my arms after, her soft curves pressed against me, her scent mingling with mine.

I growled, shoving the door open harder than necessary.

Zral looked up from his workbench, chisel poised over a half-carved piece of cedar. His eyes narrowed, nostrils flaring as he caught my scent .

"Galan." He set down his tools, wariness written across his features. "What can I do for you?"

I stepped inside, letting the door swing shut behind me. Words stuck in my throat. This wasn't a conversation I'd ever imagined having, especially not with Zral. But Torain was wrapped up in his human mate, and my options were limited.

"This is something I would bring to... well." I couldn't finish the sentence.

Understanding flashed across Zral's face, followed by something that might have been hurt. "Torain, yeah."

The silence stretched between us, heavy with all the ways I'd kept myself apart from the clan. Even as children, I'd been the one watching from the edges. Too serious for Torain's games, too blunt for Osen's diplomacy. They didn't know what to make of a boy who hid in the forest during his father's rages, and I'd learned early that solitude was safer than connection. The woods didn't judge or demand or disappoint.

"I—" I started, then stopped, pacing between stacks of lumber. "Have you ever—" No, that wasn't right either.

"Spit it out," Zral said, crossing his arms. "Some of us have work to do."

"It's a human issue," I finally managed, the words tumbling out after several false starts.

"So, ask Miranda," Zral interrupted, turning back to his carving.

"No, that's not?—"

"What, too proud to ask a human for help?" Anger crept into his voice. "Thought you were different from Coth."

"She's female," I snarled, bristling at the comparison. "It's not that she's human. This is a..." I pressed my lips together and tried to find answers in the ceiling above me. The stone here was as silent as the beams in my cabin and all the branches of all the trees in the entire territory. "It's a male issue."

Zral's eyebrows shot up. "Ask Osen then."

“It’s not a matter for the chief.” The thought of discussing Hannah with my cousin made my skin crawl. Bad enough I’d had to report the completion of my assignment yesterday. Osen’s questions about the witch had been awkward enough without revealing how personal it had become.

Zral sighed, setting his carving aside completely. “Fine. Sit before you wear a hole in my floor.”

I hadn’t realized I’d been pacing. I dropped onto a stool, the wood groaning under my weight.

“So,” Zral prompted when I didn’t speak. “Human woman troubles?”

I grunted. Close enough.

“What, she won’t fuck you?” His lips quirked. “Can’t say I’m surprised. You’re not exactly charming.”

“She did,” I snapped, then winced at my own admission.

Zral’s eyes widened. “Well shit. Didn’t think you had it in you. ”

I glared at him, hands clenching into fists. This was a mistake. I should never have come here. Just another opportunity for mockery, another reminder that I’d spent years living out my father’s ideas of honor and tradition. And for what? To end up alone while my cousins found happiness with their mates—human mates, no less?

I stalked toward the door with a growl.

“Wait.” Zral’s voice stopped me. “I’m sorry. That was... uncalled for.”



The apology, rare from Zral, hung in the air between us. I hesitated, hand still on the door.

“Look,” he continued, setting his chisel down. “Whatever’s eating at you must be serious if you’re coming to me. So just... talk.”

“It’s about the witch. Hannah.” I turned back slowly, jaw clenched. The admission felt like surrender, like acknowledging every tradition I’d clung to had been as hollow as Coth’s promises.

Zral nodded, expression suddenly serious. “The one you were watching. Torain mentioned her.”

“The ritual worked. She freed her familiar.” I leaned against the wall, arms crossed. “My assignment is over.”

“And?” At my look, he shrugged. “What’s the problem?”

“And I can’t stop thinking about her.” The words scraped my throat raw. “She’s... different.”

The problem was I couldn’t stop remembering how she’d felt beneath me, around me. How right it had felt to carry her to my bed after the ritual. How I’d kept watch while she was at her most vulnerable, fighting the urge to trace the curve of her cheek, the line of her jaw, the fullness of her lips.

The problem was I wanted more. And that terrified me.

“She’s a witch,” I said instead, as if that explained everything.

Zral studied me, his expression unreadable. “And?”

“And witches can’t be trusted.” The words sounded thin even to my own ears. I’d seen Hannah’s dedication to her familiar, her refusal to give up. I’d felt the truth of her magic—raw and powerful but fundamentally honest.

“This from the orc who’s been visiting his exiled father like clockwork?” Zral’s voice cut through my thoughts. “The same father who conspired against our chief?”

I growled, a warning he ignored.

“She’s your mate, isn’t she?” Zral asked quietly.

The question knocked the air from my lungs. It put words to the feeling I’d been fighting since that first night in the ritual circle. The stirring in my chest whenever she was near, the aching desire to hold her, the instinct to protect her that overrode even my distrust of magic.

“No.” I denied it, but the word tasted like a lie.

“Bullshit.” Zral laughed. “Oh, this is rich. Everyone was sure you’d die alone clutching your precious principles, and here you are, mooning over a human witch.”

“She’s not—” My snarl died in my throat. Maybe she was my mate. I couldn’t ignore how being with her felt like finding something I hadn’t known was missing. But—  
“She has no reason to stay now that her familiar is free. Her life is elsewhere.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted, my fingers digging into the wooden table edge until it creaked in protest. She had no attachments now. She could go anywhere, do anything.  
“But she came here with a purpose, and that purpose is fulfilled.”

“And you?” Zral studied me with uncharacteristic seriousness. “Where do you belong?”

The question caught me off guard. I’d never truly belonged in Grimstone—always at the edges, always apart. Even before the exile, I was just my father’s shadow. The son who wasn’t good enough, the asshole who got along with no one. Now, I was the permanent reminder of traitor’s blood.

“I don’t know,” I said again, the words like gravel between my teeth.

“Maybe that’s what mates are for,” Zral offered, returning to his carving. “Finding what you truly need. Osen found his purpose as chief when Miranda came into his life. Torain found his voice through Carissa.”

“And what would I find with Hannah?” The question was barely a whisper .

“Freedom, maybe.” Zral shrugged. “From Coth. From the past. From all the shit you’ve been carrying that was never yours to begin with.”

Freedom. The word echoed through me, unfurling some tiny kernel of hope in my chest. Freedom to forge a path beyond duty and obligation. Freedom to explore what existed beyond the lines I’d blindly followed. Freedom to live.

Freedom to love.

“You’d be doing me a favor by getting on with it,” Zral continued, his tone lighter. “More females for me now that you and Torain are off the market.”

“I’m not off any market,” I growled automatically, but the protest sounded weak even to my own ears.

“No?” Zral arched an eyebrow. “Then why are you here, asking about a human witch you can’t stop thinking about?”

I glared at him for a beat. Two. He met my stare calmly, undeterred. I sighed, feeling some last dregs of resistance slip away.

A sudden commotion outside cut through our conversation. Shouts echoed across the square, followed by the distinctive clang of weapons.

Zral and I exchanged glances before moving as one toward the door. Outside, a crowd had gathered near the clan hall. Osen stood at the center, flanked by guards. And between them, struggling against their hold? —

“Traitor!” My father’s voice cut through the square like a blade. “Witch-lover!”

I froze mid-step, watching Coth struggle against the guards who held him. His clothes were singed, face streaked with soot. The acrid smell of smoke clung to him, mixing with something else—herbs and oils. Miranda’s scent.

“What have you done?” The words scraped my throat raw.

Osen stepped forward, fury etched into every line of his face. “Your father burned down Miranda’s workshop. Her entire supply of winter remedies, destroyed. He’s lucky she wasn’t there.”

The world tilted beneath my feet. Coth had crossed a line I never thought he’d touch. Destroying a clan member’s livelihood was bad enough, but to target the chief’s mate...

“Suffer not a witch to live!” Coth spat on the ground. “She has poisoned our chief’s mind, turned him against his own kind! She’s destroying everything we stand for!”

“The only poison here is your hatred,” Osen growled. “You’ll rot in the mountain cells for this.”

I stalked forward, each step heavier than the last. Coth’s face lit with savage triumph, clearly believing I was coming to his defense.

“What did you think would happen?” I asked, my voice dangerously quiet. “That burning her things would drive her away? That Osen would suddenly see things your way?”

The rage I’d inherited from him—the only true gift he’d ever given me—simmered just beneath my skin, hot enough to burn. My hands trembled with the effort of keeping them unclenched, of not becoming exactly what he’d raised me to be: violent, reactionary, ruled by anger.

“I thought my son would stand with me!” Coth roared. “Against the corruption of our traditions! Against the human filth invading our territory!”

The crowd’s murmurs grew louder. I felt their eyes on me, judging, waiting to see which side I’d choose. Always caught in the middle. Always the son of the traitor.

“There’s no honor in what you’ve done.” I forced myself to breathe through the fury, to find the cold clarity beneath it. To be better than him in this moment when it mattered most. “You talk of tradition while spitting on our most sacred laws. You speak of proper behavior while acting like a rabid animal.”

“She’s bewitched you too.” Coth’s voice dropped, disbelief etched across his features. “My own son.”

“No one’s bewitched me.” I stepped closer, close enough to see the flecks of gray in his beard, the lines time and bitterness had carved around his mouth. “I’ve just finally

seen what true honor looks like. And it isn't this."

"You would choose them over your own blood?" Coth strained against the guards holding him. "You ungrateful whelp. After everything I've done, all the sacrifices?—"

"I would choose my mate." The words left my mouth with surprising ease. "And yes, Father, she's a witch."

The crowd had gone silent, watching our confrontation with bated breath. I could feel their eyes on me, but for once, I didn't care what they thought. This moment wasn't about them. It was about finally breaking free from chains I'd forged myself.

Coth recoiled as if I'd struck him. "What?"

I expected anger. Disgust. The same hatred that had been drilled into me since childhood—witches were untrustworthy, dangerous, lesser.

Instead, a strange calm washed over me. Acceptance. Relief, even. The world hadn't ended with my admission. The floor hadn't opened beneath my feet.

"You heard me." I squared my shoulders and glared down my nose at this weak excuse for an orc. "Hannah is my mate. My fated mate. And I choose her over you. Over your hatred. Over everything you stand for."

"No." He shook his head violently. "No son of mine would?—"

I turned my back on him—the ultimate sign of disrespect among our kind. A declaration that I viewed him too weak to be a threat, too dishonorable to be acknowledged.

His howl of rage followed me as I walked away, but I didn't turn. Couldn't. If I saw his face now, I might waver. Might fall back into the pattern of placating, of compromising, of denying what I knew to be true.

"You're dead to me! Dead! No son of mine would bed a witch! No true orc would?—"

"Take him to the cells," Osen ordered, his voice cutting through the noise. "Let him rot there until I decide what to do with him."

I kept walking, spine straight, eyes forward. Didn't stop when Zral stepped up to take Coth away, didn't flinch when he clamped a hand on my shoulder in solidarity. Didn't look back to see the pity in the eyes of my clanmates.

Pity was worse than judgment. Pity meant they saw me as broken. Damaged by my father's legacy. And maybe I was. But there was one person who wouldn't look at me that way. One person who saw me clearly, without the shadow of Coth hanging over me.

Hannah.

I needed her. Now.

The path to her cottage blurred beneath my feet. My mind raced with everything that had happened, with the irrevocable step I'd just taken. I'd publicly claimed a witch as my mate. Turned my back on my father. Severed the last thread binding me to a life that had never truly been mine.

The sun had begun its descent behind the mountains by the time I reached her porch, painting the sky in bruised purples and angry reds. The forest sounds washed over me—birds settling for the night, small creatures rustling in the underbrush. For the

first time in years, I allowed myself to simply exist.

Her scent reached me first—winter air and mint—carried on the evening breeze. I lifted my head as she rounded the corner, Digby trotting protectively at her heels.

She froze mid-step, surprise flickering across her face before melting into a smile. “Well, well. The mountain comes to the witch.” She approached the steps, stopping just short of where I sat. “I was beginning to think I’d need to scry with bones and bind you with a poppet to see you again.”

I tried to smile at her teasing, but my face wouldn’t cooperate. “Wouldn’t work. I’m immune to your spells, witch.”

“Is that so?” Her smile faded, eyes narrowing as she studied my face. “Something’s wrong.”

“Nothing worth laying at your feet.” My voice came out rough, choked. I cleared my throat and tried again. “Today hasn’t been good.”

“I thought we were past keeping secrets.” Her voice was soft but firm. Just quiet insistence and green eyes seeing too much.

“My father...” I started, then stopped, unable to find words for the tangle of emotions choking me. Anger. Grief. Relief. Shame.

The wall I’d built around myself—years of rigid control, of swallowed words and buried feelings— crumbled all at once. My face crumpled with it, a sound escaping my throat that wasn’t quite normal.

Hannah didn’t hesitate. She opened her arms.



I slid from the step to my knees before her, wrapped my arms around her waist, and buried my face against her stomach. Her fingers found my hair, gentle and sure, as I shuddered against her. Everything I'd held back for years poured out in silent, shaking waves.

We stayed like that, neither speaking, as the last light faded from the sky outside. Her heartbeat steady under my ear. Her scent surrounding me. Her touch anchoring me when everything else felt unmoored.

In her arms, the choice I'd made didn't feel like loss. It felt like the first step toward something new. Something real.

Something mine.

### CHAPTER NINE

#### HANNAH

I stood with my fingers tangled in Galan's hair, his face pressed against my stomach. His massive shoulders trembled under my touch. The mountain air turned cool as night settled in, but I didn't move. Couldn't. Not while he needed this.

How far we'd come from that first night in the woods. Me arranging mushrooms, him barking territorial orders to fuck right off. The memory almost made me smile. Almost.

I didn't push. Didn't pry. Just held him as darkness settled around us like a blanket, waiting for whatever storm had driven him to my door to pass. I traced the contours of his face, the sharp angle of his jaw, the curve of his ear. I'd learned enough about him to know he'd speak when ready, not before.

Digby circled us warily before settling on the porch steps, his dark eyes fixed on Galan. Even my familiar had come to accept the orc's presence, if not entirely approve.

Minutes stretched into what felt like hours before Galan's breathing steadied. His grip on my waist loosened, but he didn't pull away.

"My father burned down Miranda's workshop," Galan finally said, his voice rough. "Destroyed her winter remedies."

“Shit.” The word escaped before I could stop it. “Is everyone okay?”

“She wasn’t there.” He exhaled slowly. “But Osen... he ordered Coth to the cells.”

I brushed my thumb across his cheekbone. “And you?”

“I turned my back on him.” His voice cracked. “In front of everyone.”

The weight of that choice hung between us. I knew enough about orc culture now to understand the gesture meant a complete severing of ties. They were no longer blood, no longer clan. Coth was no longer even worthy of acknowledgment.

“He crossed a line,” I said softly. “You had no choice.”

“I had every choice at every step.” He insisted, hands tightening on my hips. He pulled back slightly, his eyes meeting mine with a wild light. “And I let him lead me down a road to becoming the same hateful, bitter shell of an orc as him. Clinging to traditions that were never about honor, just about control and fear.”

The confession felt ripped from somewhere deep inside him. This wasn’t just about his father or clan politics. This was about something fundamental shifting within him.

I bent to press my forehead against his, our breath mingling in the cool evening air. “What happened?”

“I chose you.”

My heart hammered against my ribs. “Me?”

“I told him you were my mate. My fated mate.” The words tumbled out, as if he needed to say them before courage failed him. “The one person in this world meant

for me. The one I'm meant for."

The world tilted beneath my feet. Mate. Everyone knew the stories, even if they didn't believe the tales. Witches had their own legends of rare pairings where magic recognized its complement in another soul, where power called to power across impossible distances. My grandmother had spoken of a great-aunt who'd found her mate in a selkie, how their magic had twined together until neither could exist without the other.

Something that terrified and thrilled me in equal measure.

"Is that..." I swallowed hard, my throat suddenly dry. "Is that what this is? Between us?"

"Yes." No hesitation now. No doubt. Just certainty burning in his dark eyes. "I think I've been fighting it since you pulled a knife on me. Since I caught your scent and touched you and lost my damn mind."

"Truth, not desire," I whispered, echoing my own words from that night.

But that wasn't right. It had been both. Truth and desire tangled together until I couldn't separate them anymore. The heat in his eyes when he looked at me. The way my body responded to his touch. The comfort I found in his arms.

"I always thought fated mates were something that happened to other people," I admitted, my fingers still tracing the sharp line of his jaw. "Stories from the old covens, rare magic that would never touch my life. But I can't deny what I feel when I'm with you."

"And what do you feel?" His voice roughened, hands tightening on my hips.

The question hung between us, demanding honesty I wasn't sure I was ready to give. I'd come to Silvermist Falls broken, focused solely on saving Digby. I hadn't planned on staying. Hadn't planned on him.

"Like I've found something I didn't know I was looking for." The truth slipped out before I could stop it. "Like maybe I don't have to face everything alone anymore."

Galan surged to his feet, towering over me. His hands cupped my face with surprising gentleness, thumbs brushing my cheekbones. "You don't."

"I don't know how to do this," I confessed. "I'm not good at needing people."

"Neither am I." A ghost of a smile touched his lips. "But I'm tired of denying what I want. What I need."

He leaned down, his breath warm against my lips. "And I need you, Hannah."

The raw honesty in his voice broke something loose inside me. I'd spent so long being strong, standing alone. First as a nurse fighting for respect in a system that undervalued me. Then as a witch desperately trying to save her familiar. Always pushing forward, never letting myself lean on anyone else.

But here was this mountain of an orc, offering to shoulder my burdens alongside his own. He'd chosen me as his safe harbor. His sanctuary. And I realized I wanted to be that for him—wanted him to be that for me, too. A place where we could count on the other to step shoulder-to-shoulder in telling the rest of the world to go to hell.

"I need you too," I whispered against his mouth.

His kiss was gentle at first, almost reverent. Then hunger took over, and I found myself pressed against the porch railing, his massive body caging mine. I tangled my

fingers in his hair, pulling him closer, needing to feel the solid weight of him against me. I tasted desperation on his tongue, need and relief and something deeper—something that felt dangerously like love.

“Hannah,” he groaned against my neck. “Let me in. Let me?—”

“Well, isn’t this touching. ”

The harsh voice shattered our moment. Galan whirled, pushing me behind him with one fluid movement. Digby growled, fur bristling as he positioned himself at my side.

An older orc stood at the edge of my property. Blood matted his gray hair, and his clothes were torn. But it was the hatred in his eyes that made my skin crawl—pure, undiluted loathing directed straight at me.

“Father.” Galan’s voice turned to ice. “You should be in a cell.”

Coth. The name clicked into place. The exiled elder who’d conspired against his chief. The traditionalist who hated humans and witches. The father Galan had just publicly disowned.

Even in the dim porch light, I could see the family resemblance. The same strong jaw, the same broad shoulders. But where Galan’s face held warmth, this orc’s was a weathered map of bitterness.

“Did you think those cells could hold me?” Coth sneered. “I built those tunnels before you were born, boy.”

He took a step forward, and Galan tensed. “How touching that the witch called her thrall home. Does she pull your strings with a spell, or just with her cunt?”

“Leave,” Galan growled, the sound rumbling through his chest. “Now.”

“Not without finishing what I started.” Coth’s hand moved to his belt, drawing a wicked blade that gleamed in the moonlight. “First her, then Osen’s witch. I’ll purge this infection from our clan, even if I have to cut it out myself.”

“You’ll have to go through me first.” Galan’s stance widened, hands curling into fists.

Coth’s laugh was ugly. “I brought you into this world, boy. I can take you out just as easily.”

I reached for my magic, drawing it up from the earth beneath my feet. But before I could shape it into a protective ward, Coth lunged.

Everything happened too fast. The flash of steel. Galan’s movement to intercept. The sickening sound of blade meeting flesh. Galan’s grunt of pain as he drove his fist into his father’s face, sending the older orc staggering backward.

“Galan!” I screamed as he stumbled, one hand pressed to his side. Blood seeped between his fingers, black in the moonlight.

Coth recovered quickly, wiping blood from his split lip. “Weak. Just like I always said.”

He advanced again, blade raised. But this time, I was ready.

I thrust my hands forward, channeling every ounce of protective magic I possessed. “Shield of earth and sky, between us rise!”

The barrier materialized between us and Coth, shimmering with power. He slammed

into it with a howl of rage, the impact sending him flying backward. He hit the ground hard, the knife skittering from his grip.

“You dare use your filthy magic against me?” he snarled, struggling to his feet.

I ignored the fucker’s charming words, maintaining the shield with one hand while I checked Galan with the other. The wound was deep, blood flowing freely despite the pressure he applied. His face had gone ashen, lips pressed into a tight line against the pain.

“Hannah,” he murmured, swaying slightly. “Don’t let him?—”

“Shh.” I guided him to sit on the porch steps, my heart racing with fear. “Save your strength.”

I reached for my magic, pulling it from deep within. Healing had never been my strength—protective spells were my specialty, not mending flesh—but I had to try.

“Flesh mend, blood bind, pain recede, life find,” I whispered, placing my hand over his. Warmth flowed from my palm, but I could feel the magic struggling to take hold. The bleeding slowed but didn’t stop. Not enough. Nowhere near enough.

“We need to get you to a hospital,” I said, fighting to keep my voice steady.

“No hospitals,” Galan grunted, trying to sit up. “Our healer?—”

“Is too far away,” I snapped, pressing harder on the wound. “You’ll bleed out before we reach Grimstone.”

A crash made me look up. Coth had found a rock and was smashing it against my barrier. Each impact sent painful reverberations through me, weakening the shield. I



couldn't maintain it much longer, not while trying to heal Galan.

"We need to go," I said, looping Galan's arm over my shoulder. "Now."

He nodded grimly, jaw clenched against the pain. Each movement clearly cost him, but he pushed to his feet with my support.

The barrier flickered as we staggered toward my car, each step leaving a dark trail on the ground. Digby circled us protectively, his fur bristling.

Another crash. The barrier wavered, translucent patches appearing where Coth's attacks had weakened it. I poured more energy into the spell, but it was like trying to patch a dam with my bare hands.

We were halfway to my car when the barrier shattered with a sound like breaking glass. The magical backlash exploded outward, a concussive wave that knocked us all off our feet. I hit the ground hard, Galan's weight crashing down beside me with a pained grunt.

Through the settling dust, I saw Coth sprawled motionless several yards away.

I didn't waste time checking if he was alive. I helped Galan to his feet. Struggled the rest of the journey to the door. Shoved him into the passenger seat.

Goddess. Every time I looked, his skin drained of more and more color.

Digby leapt into the back as I slammed the door and ran to the driver's side. I glanced back once as I started the engine. The spot where Coth had lain was empty, only a dark stain marking where he'd fallen.

I floored it toward Silvermist Medical, one hand on the wheel, the other pressed

against his wound. Blood soaked through my fingers, warm and sticky. His breathing grew increasingly labored, his massive frame slumping against the door.

“Stay with me,” I demanded, pushing harder against the wound. “Don’t you dare check out on me now.”

His eyes fluttered. “Bossy witch.”

“You haven’t seen bossy yet,” I threatened, relief flooding through me at the weak attempt at humor. “Just wait until you’re better. I’ll show you bossy.”

By the time we screeched to a halt at the emergency entrance, my shirt and hands were soaked with his blood. Galan was barely conscious, his head slumped to one side.

“Help!” I screamed, throwing open my door. “I need help out here now!”

Two nurses burst through the sliding doors, followed by an orderly pushing a gurney. Their eyes widened at the sight of Galan.

“Stab wound,” I explained, nurse mode kicking in despite my panic. “Heavy bleeding. He’s lost consciousness twice.”

Together, we managed to transfer Galan’s massive form onto the gurney. I kept pace as they wheeled him through the doors, Digby trotting at my heels .

The harsh fluorescent lights of the ER made the blood on my hands look obscenely bright. And they shook. So much. Too much. I needed to be steady. I needed to help

The doctor at the nurses’ station turned and narrowed his eyes. Harrison Rocha clicked his pen closed and stuffed it into a pocket.

“Ms. Cuyler? What’s going on here?”

“He needs surgery,” I said, ignoring the question. “Now.”

Harrison approached cautiously, his gaze flicking from Galan to me. “Surely, he should be seen by his own kind? A shaman, or some such nonsense, I believe?”

Rage exploded through me. “Are you fucking kidding me right now?”

“I’m simply suggesting?—”

“Let me be very clear.” I grabbed his lab coat, yanking him close. My hands were steady now, the tremors replaced by cold fury. Blood—Galan’s blood—smeared the white fabric where my fingers gripped.

I’d spent my career navigating the politics of hospital hierarchies, swallowing my pride, playing nice. Following rules created by bastards like Harrison who thought their medical degrees gave them the right to lord over anyone who walked through their doors needing care.

That Hannah was gone. Burned away by the sight of Galan’s blood soaking through my clothes, by the memory of his body shielding mine, by the weight of his declaration: My mate.

“If he dies because you delayed treatment, I will end your career. I will go to every medical board, every ethics committee, every news outlet in the country. I will make sure everyone knows exactly what kind of doctor you are.”

Harrison’s face flushed. “Are you threatening me?”

“I’m promising you.” I held his gaze, letting him see the witch behind the nurse.

“And then I’ll come for you personally.”

Harrison blanched, stumbling back when I released him. “Dr. Patel!” he called, his voice cracking. “Emergency case here!”

A woman in scrubs appeared, taking in the scene with a quick, professional glance. “What happened?”

“He’s been stabbed and needs surgery,” I said, not taking my eyes off Harrison. “Dr. Rocha seems to think his species disqualifies him from care.”

Dr. Patel’s eyebrows shot up. “That’s not hospital policy.” She moved to Galan’s side, checking his vitals. “Get him to OR Two. Now.”

The orderlies sprang into action, wheeling Galan through double doors. I tried to follow, but a nurse gently blocked my path.

“You need to stay here,” she said kindly. “We’ll take good care of him.”

I stood there, covered in Galan’s blood, watching the doors swing shut behind him. My legs threatened to give out as the adrenaline began to ebb.

Digby pressed against my calf, his warm weight anchoring me to the moment. I sank into a nearby chair, burying my fingers in his fur.

“He has to be okay,” I whispered, more prayer than statement. “He has to be.”

### CHAPTER TEN

#### GALAN

I traced the grain of wood in Hannah's windowsill, following its path with my eyes as sunlight slanted through the glass. The mountain air filled the small bedroom, carrying scents of pine and distant rain. A week trapped in this bed had me memorizing every knot in the wood, every pattern in the ceiling.

My side twinged as I shifted on the bed. A week since Hannah had let me use my own two feet for anything more than a trip to the bathroom. A week of her fussing and hovering and threatening to hex me if I tried to get up without permission.

Seven fucking days since my father had tried to kill us both.

My jaw clenched. The clan's search parties had found nothing. No blood trail leading from Hannah's yard. No sign of him in his cave or any of his usual haunts. Just... gone. Like a ghost .

But Coth was no ghost. He was flesh and blood and hatred. The wound in my side had mostly healed—Hannah's blast of magic, a skilled surgeon, and orc constitution had seen to that—but the deeper wound festered. My own father had tried to gut me like an animal. Would have killed Hannah without hesitation.

Part of me hoped he'd bled out in some forgotten corner of the forest, his hatred finally consuming him completely. Another part—the son who'd once sought his approval, who'd carried supplies to his cave every week despite everything—dreaded

the day they'd find his body.

The front door opened, followed by the familiar sound of Hannah's footsteps. Digby's claws clicked against the hardwood as he trotted ahead of her, appearing in the bedroom doorway first. The badger gave me a once-over, as if checking I hadn't moved from where they'd left me, before hopping onto the foot of the bed.

Hannah appeared a moment later, and my breath caught on my growl about being treated like an invalid. She wore a simple green dress that brought out her eyes, her hair pinned back from her face in a way I'd never seen before. Even her face looked different—something dusted across her cheekbones, color on her lips.

"You look..." I swallowed hard, searching for words that wouldn't sound like the fumbling of an inexperienced youth. "Different. "

"Good different or bad different?" She quirked an eyebrow, approaching the bed.

I caught her wrist as she reached to check my bandage, pulling her closer. "Beautiful."

She smiled, allowing herself to be drawn in before placing a hand on my chest. Her free hand rose to my forehead. "No fever. Must be the medication making you delirious."

"Must be," I agreed, drinking in the sight of her. After a week of her in shapeless sweaters and worn leggings, this transformation struck me dumb. Not better—I'd found her breathtaking covered in dirt and mushroom spores—just different. A side of Hannah I hadn't seen before.

"How's the pain?"

“Nonexistent.” I stretched deliberately, hiding the twinge that shot through my side. “See? I’m fine. No need for this lockdown.”

“And I’m sure your medical degree qualifies you to make that assessment.” She rolled her eyes, but her touch remained gentle as she peeled back the bandage and inspected the stitches with a critical eye. “Another few days and you can go back to prowling the woods and terrifying hikers.”

“You weren’t terrified,” I reminded her, catching her wrist. “Just annoying.”

“Poor baby.” She patted my chest, her touch lingering. Her lips twisted and her tone turned serious. “You’re lucky to be alive. If that blade had been an inch to the left...”

She didn’t finish the thought. Didn’t need to. We both knew how close I’d come to bleeding out on her porch. To dying before I had a chance to claim my mate. Before I’d even really gotten to know her.

“So...” The ends of her hair tickled at my chest as she leaned over to replace the bandage. “Before your father tried to kill us, you were saying something about mates?”

The question caught me off guard. We’d been dancing around the topic since that night, too focused on my recovery and making sure Coth couldn’t hurt us again. I’d begun to wonder if she regretted the admission and if the bond I felt so strongly was one-sided after all.

“I did.” I kept my voice neutral, watching her face for any sign of rejection. “You’re my mate, Hannah. My fated mate. If you want me.”

She shifted on the bed, moving to face me fully. “And what does that mean, exactly? For us?”

I hesitated, choosing my words carefully. The last week had given me too much time to think. Time to imagine a future beyond the confines of tradition, the limits of clan and kinship. A life with meaning beyond duty.

She'd already sacrificed so much because of me. She loved being a nurse. It was woven into who she was, as much as the magic in her blood. I'd watched her these past few days, tending to my wound, worrying, hovering. There was a weariness in her shoulders that didn't match the satisfaction of providing help.

But the bridge to her career had been burned to ash, and I'd been the match.

"I think it means leaving Silvermist Falls," I finally said, the words heavy on my tongue. "And Grimstone."

Her fingers traced the edge of my bandage. "Would you go back to Grimstone? After everything?"

The question hit a nerve I hadn't realized was exposed. "To be the disgraced son who needed his mate to save him? The one they whisper about behind closed doors?" I shook my head. "I've had enough pity to last a lifetime."

"Is that what you think?" Her hand found mine, fingers lacing through mine. "Galan, your cousins have been driving me crazy with constant calls for updates. Osen and Torain nearly broke down my door the day after surgery. Miranda sent healing salves. Zral even brought food."

My head snapped up. "Zral was here?"

"Left it on the porch with a note that said 'Don't die, asshole.' Very touching." She smirked. "Your clan cares about you, Galan. Whether you want them to or not."



I stared at Hannah, trying to process what she was telling me. The clan hadn't abandoned me out of shame. Hadn't written me off as weak or broken. They'd been here, checking on me.

"You didn't say," I said, voice rough .

"You weren't exactly in a state to receive visitors." Her thumb traced circles on my palm. "And I might have been a little overprotective."

The admission warmed something in my chest. My fierce little witch, standing guard over me. The irony wasn't lost on me—I'd started as her reluctant bodyguard, and now our roles had reversed.

"I heard something interesting from Torain," Hannah continued, those green eyes peeking through dark lashes. "Apparently there's an opening for a park ranger here in Silvermist. You could choose how much to let them in. Make that space you wanted for yourself?"

Because my father terrorized the last ranger until he fled. I snorted. "I'm not becoming a fucking park ranger."

"Of course not." Her tone was too agreeable. "Far too much responsibility, making sure idiots don't get themselves killed in your mountains."

"They're not my mountains."

"No? That's not what I heard." She tilted her head, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "And you're pretty good at telling people where they can and can't go."

"Funny." I caught her hand again, my mind caught on the idea. Working the land I knew, protecting the mountains I loved, but on my own terms. Not as Coth's son or

the exile's heir. Just... me.

I shook the thought away. "It doesn't matter. You need work, and after Harrison?—"

Her lips curved into a slow smile. "Well, what if I get a job here?"

I blinked. "Here?"

"Harrison's been forced to resign. Turns out threatening a patient's life based on species is frowned upon, even for the great Dr. Rocha." Her smile turned wicked. "Dr. Patel's taking over as chief of medicine, and she offered me the head nurse position."

"When?"

"Today." She gestured at her dress, grinning. "Had the interview this morning, actually. That's where I've been."

"You've thought of everything, haven't you?" I couldn't help the smile that spread across my face. This woman, my mate, had been ten steps ahead while I'd been wallowing in self-pity.

Hannah shrugged, but the proud tilt of her chin gave her away. "Someone has to. You're too busy being a big green brute."

I caught her wrist and tugged her toward me. "Come here, witch."

She didn't resist, allowing herself to be pulled forward until our lips met. The kiss started gentle, but hunger quickly took over. I grabbed her hips and guided her onto my lap, arranging her so she straddled me.

“Galan!” She pulled back, hands braced against my chest. “Your wound?—”

“Is fine.” I slid my hands up her thighs, bunching the fabric of her dress. “I’ve been trapped in this bed for a week. Let me touch you.”

Her eyes narrowed, searching my face for signs of pain. “If you tear those stitches?—”

“I won’t.” My cock strained against my sweatpants, the thin fabric doing nothing to hide my reaction to her warm weight on my thighs.

Hannah’s gaze dropped to the obvious bulge between us. A slow smile spread across her face as she palmed my cock, squeezing me hard. “More than fine, I see.”

I groaned, head falling back. “Don’t tease.”

“Only if you promise to go slow.” Her fingers traced the edge of my bandage. “And stop if you feel any pain.”

“I promise.” I’d have promised her the moon and stars if it meant having her right now. “No heroics.”

Satisfied, she leaned down to kiss me again. This time there was nothing soft about it. Her tongue slid against mine, demanding and hungry. I groaned into her mouth, my hands tightening on her thighs.

For a week I’d been confined to this bed, allowed to touch but not take. To hold but not claim. The need that had been building—the mate bond demanding completion—roared through me like wildfire.

Mine.

I slid my hands higher under her dress, discovering the lacy edge of her underwear. Her eyes darkened as my fingers dipped beneath the fabric. She was already wet, her body responding to my touch with an eagerness that matched my own. I circled her clit with my thumb, drawing a gasp from her lips.

“Like that?” I murmured, watching her face for every reaction.

“Yes,” she breathed, rocking against my hand. “Just like that.”

I slid one finger inside her, then another, feeling her body clench around me. Her head fell back, exposing the pale column of her throat. I leaned forward to taste her skin, savoring the salt-sweet flavor as I worked my fingers deeper.

“Fuck, Galan,” she moaned, grinding down on my hand. “That feels so good.”

Her pleasure fed mine, her responses teaching me what she liked, what made her moan. The way she bit her lip when I curled my fingers just so. The flush that spread across her chest when I pressed my thumb against her clit.

“There!” Her whole body tensed, thighs trembling around mine. “Right there.”

I kept the pressure steady, my thumb circling her clit as my fingers stroked inside her. Her pussy clenched around me, growing wetter with each thrust.

“I want to feel you come on my fingers,” I growled against her throat. “Then I want to feel you come on my cock.”

Her answer was a breathless, frantic nod as she rode my hand, chasing her pleasure. I watched her face, memorizing every expression, every sound. This was mine now. She was mine. My mate. My witch.

Hannah's movements grew more desperate, her breath coming in short gasps. "I'm close," she whispered, her voice breaking. "So close."

I pressed deeper, harder, driving her toward the edge. Her release washed over her in a wave, her body clenching around my fingers as she cried out. I worked her through it, gentling my touch as the aftershocks subsided.

When she came back to herself, her eyes found mine, dark with desire. She reached between us, tugging at my sweatpants. "I need you inside me."

I lifted my hips, helping her push the fabric down just enough to free my cock. She wrapped her hand around me, stroking firmly from base to tip.

"Fuck," I hissed, my head falling back against the pillows. "Hannah?—"

I leaned up to capture her lips, my fingers fumbling with the zipper at her back as I poured everything I couldn't yet express into the kiss. All the wonder at finding her, all the fear of losing her, all the gratitude for her strength when mine had faltered. The mate bond hummed between us, no longer just an instinct but something we were choosing, together.

She rose up on her knees, yanking the dress over her head and positioning herself above me. The head of my cock nudged against her entrance, teasing us both .

"Still claiming this isn't a spell?" I grinned against her mouth as she began to sink down onto me.

HANNAH

"Still pretending you don't want me?" I replied, biting Galan's lower lip.

A rumble escaped his throat as his large hands settled on my waist, his fingers spanning almost my entire ribcage. The contrast between us—his green skin against my pale flesh, his massive strength holding me with surprising gentleness—sent a shiver of anticipation down my spine.

He guided me down onto his thick length, his eyes never leaving mine. I held my panties to the side as I took him inch by glorious inch, a delicious burn that had me moaning low in my throat. The stretch was exquisite—my body remembering him from our first explosive encounter in the woods, then a second taste in his cabin.

This somehow felt entirely new. Deliberate. Chosen.

“Witch.” The word left his mouth like a prayer. “Perfect little witch.”

His lips found mine again, hungry and demanding. I melted into the kiss, savoring the feel of his tusks grazing my lips. His hands skimmed frantically up my sides, around to my bra, fumbling once, twice, until I reached around and unclasped it for him.

Galan immediately dropped his hands, fingers hooking into the sides of my panties. With one sharp tug, he tore them clean off my body. I gasped into his mouth, earning a satisfied grunt in return.

One big hand found the back of my neck, angling my mouth for a deeper kiss as he rolled his hips to meet mine. With each stroke, I fell further, until he finally bottomed out. Until everything faded until all that remained was heat and want and his cock stretching me deliciously wide.

We froze, eyes locking, breaths mingling. Emotion welled up in my throat—so strong, so new.

Mate. Mine. His.

Whatever spell he claimed I'd cast, it worked both ways. Power hummed between us, crackling along my nerves. Our hearts beat as one, his pulse hammering in sync with mine. The world tilted, colors shifting to brighter hues, sounds resolving to crystal clarity.

I braced my hands on his chest, careful of his wound as I began to move. Each rise and fall sent sparks shooting up my spine. His cock hit places inside me that made my vision blur, the thick ridge of his head dragging against my walls in a way that had me gasping.

"Fuck, you feel good," I moaned, picking up speed. "So fucking deep. "

His hands roamed my body, cupping my breasts, thumbs brushing over my nipples. "Say that again."

"Your cock fills me up so good," I whispered, leaning down to nip at his ear. "Stretching my pussy just right."

Galan growled deep in his chest. His hands gripped my ass, fingers digging in as he guided my movements. I watched his face—the way his eyes darkened, his jaw clenched.

"That's it," I purred, rolling my hips. "Fuck me hard."

He sucked down a sharp breath at my words. He slid one hand up my back, tangling in my hair as he pulled me down for a bruising kiss. His other hand found my clit, circling roughly.

"Like this?" he asked against my lips, his touch growing bolder.

"Yes," I moaned. "Just like that. Don't stop."

His thumb pressed harder, matching the relentless pace of his cock pounding into me. Heat coiled in my core, building with each stroke. My pussy clenched around him, drawing a savage groan from his throat.

“Not gonna last,” he warned, his rhythm faltering. “You feel too good.”

“Then don’t,” I panted, riding him harder. I tilted my head to expose my throat. “Mark me, Galan. Make me yours.”

His lips found the junction where my neck met my shoulder, kissing the spot before grazing it with his tusks. The gentle scrape sent shivers down my spine, my body instinctively arching into his.

“Mine,” he growled against my skin, his thrusts growing more desperate. “My mate.”

His grip tightened, one hand still tangled in my hair, the other pressing hard against my clit as he drove up into me. The dual assault on my senses prolonged my climax, wave after wave of pleasure crashing over me until I couldn’t tell where I ended and he began.

Then his teeth sank into me, and the world exploded into stars.

Pain and pleasure crashed through me in equal measure, indistinguishable from each other. My back arched sharply, a cry tearing from my throat as his claiming mark burned into my skin. The sensation radiated outward from the bite, flowing through my veins like liquid fire until every inch of me was consumed.

I felt him pulse inside me, his hips jerking as he growled against my throat. His release triggered another aftershock, my pussy clenching around him, milking every drop as he filled me.



He released my throat with a gasp, his tongue laving gently over the mark he'd left. I melted against his chest, boneless and sated. His arms wrapped around me, holding me close as our breathing slowly returned to normal.

“Hannah,” he murmured, pressing soft kisses along my shoulder. “My witch. ”

I smiled against his skin, tracing the bandage covering where his father had tried—and failed—to tear us apart. The mark was still angry and red, but healing. Just like Galan himself. No longer the solitary guardian at the edge of clan territory, no longer defined by his father's disgrace. He'd found his own path, one that led straight to me.

“My orc.”

### GALAN

Hannah's hand slipped into mine as we approached One Hop Stop, her fingers twining with mine like they belonged there. The evening air carried the scent of pine and woodsmoke, mingling with Hannah's winter-mint essence that had become as familiar to me as my own heartbeat. The low hum of conversation and laughter spilled from the brewery's open windows, along with warm light that painted golden patterns across the cobblestone path.

A month ago, that sound would have sent me retreating to the solitude of my cabin. Now, with Hannah's palm pressed against mine, I felt something unexpected—anticipation, not dread. She anchored me, a silent reminder that I wasn't walking into clan territory alone.

The mate mark I'd left on her neck peeked out from beneath her hair as she twisted to face me. My mark. My claim. My chest swelled with pride every time I caught sight of it.

"Are you going to tell them?" Hannah asked quietly, her voice quiet enough that only I could hear.

I tore my eyes away and met hers, taking in the slight furrow between her brows. "Haven't decided yet."

Her lips pursed, but she didn't press as I pulled the door open. The familiar scent of hops and wood smoke wrapped around us. I scanned the room, my hand settling protectively at the small of Hannah's back.

Vanin looked up from behind the bar, his eyebrows shooting toward his hairline. “Well, shit.” He set down the glass he’d been polishing. “Did someone drag you here by force?”

“Not planning on making it a habit,” I grunted, but there was no real heat behind it. “The clan’s standards are slipping enough as it is.”

Vanin snorted, sliding pints toward us without asking for our orders. “Go on, they’ve claimed the back tables. You break anything, you buy it.”

I ignored the warning, taking a long pull from my beer. The rich, malty flavor hit my tongue—Vanin’s special reserve, not the watered-down shit he served to tourists. The gesture wasn’t lost on me.

“Galan!” Torain’s voice boomed across the room. “Over here!”

I turned to see my cousin waving from a large table in the corner, surrounded by other clan members. These post-market gatherings used to feel like obligations I avoided at all costs.

Now, with Hannah beside me, the room seemed less hostile. Less like a trap.

We threaded through the crowded bar, Hannah’s hand still firmly in mine. Torain was the first to reach us, clapping me on the shoulder with a grin that split his face.

“Finally decided to grace us with your presence!” He looked me up and down, his eyes lingering on my side where he knew the wound lay beneath my shirt. “How’re you feeling?”

“Fine,” I said flatly, shifting away from his scrutiny. I hadn’t come for their pity.

“Good to see you up and about,” Zral said, sliding over to make room. His eyes

flicked to Hannah's neck, then to our joined hands, but he said nothing. "Thought you'd be dead by now."

I settled onto the bench, Hannah beside me, and raised my glass. "Sorry to disappoint."

"So," Carissa leaned forward, excitement brightening her face. "I was just telling everyone about the next Paint-and-Sip night at the bookstore next weekend. You two should come!"

I took another swig of beer. "No."

"It'll be fun," she pressed, undeterred. "We've got a local artist coming in to teach?—"

"Not interested. "

"You don't have to be good at it," Carissa continued, as if I hadn't spoken. "That's what the 'sip' part is for."

"I don't paint."

Hannah nudged me with her elbow. "Come on, it could be fun. Who knows mountains better than you?"

I shot her a betrayed look. "That's very different, and you know it."

"I'll be Hannah's date," Miranda chimed in and winked. "We can make it a girls' night."

Hannah laughed, the sound warming something in my chest despite my scowl. "Settled. I'm ditching the orc for my one true love of alcohol and bad influences."

I rolled my eyes, but couldn't stop the corner of my mouth from twitching upward. The conversation flowed around us, Hannah's laughter mingling with Miranda's as they plotted their artistic adventure. Something settled in me as I watched Hannah slip so easily into conversation with my clan. With my family.

She belonged here as much as I did—maybe more. She leaned in to discuss wine options with Carissa, her hands animated as she spoke. The two of them had their heads together now, Carissa pulling up pictures on her phone while Hannah nodded appreciatively. Zral lifted his head from his phone long enough to waggle his eyebrows and offer inappropriate suggestions that made Hannah snort with laughter.

"I need another drink," I announced, pushing back from the table.

Osen approached the bar a moment later, Torain close behind. "Heard the news," my cousin said, his voice pitched low. "About the ranger position."

So that's what had them circling like vultures. I sighed, accepting the fresh beer Vanin slid across the bar. "It makes sense. I know the territory better than anyone. And the borders between clan land and the park have always been... flexible."

"It's perfect," Osen said, clapping me on the shoulder. "You've always been more comfortable in the woods than in Grimstone anyway."

"The elders approved it unanimously," Torain added, fighting—and failing—to keep his grin contained. "Though I suspect that's partly because they want you out of their hair."

"My father would have hated it." I turned the glass in my hands, watching the amber liquid catch the light.

"Which probably means it's exactly right," Osen finished, understanding in his eyes.

I nodded, something loosening in my chest. For so long, I'd measured my choices against what Coth would want and what would earn his approval. Even after his exile, his shadow had loomed large. Too large.

Not anymore.

When we returned to the table, Zral was hunched over his phone, thumbs tapping rapidly across the screen. Torain set down the drinks and peered over his shoulder before Zral could hide the screen.

Torain's eyes widened comically. "Holy shit, Zral's on MythMatch! "

The table erupted. Miranda lunged across the table, grabbing for the phone. "Let me see your profile!"

Carissa leaned in, all business. "I can help you optimize your metrics. It's all about the right keywords and photo selection."

Zral snatched his phone back, but his usual scowl had softened into something almost resembling amusement. "It's just for fun," he insisted, tucking the phone into his pocket. "Not all of us are looking to get domesticated like you sad bastards."

"Sure it is," Torain grinned, dropping back into his seat. "You need a better profile picture. That one makes you look constipated."

Zral's phone lit up with a notification just as his gaze darted to the door. A slow smile spread across his face as he spotted whoever had entered.

"Don't wait up," he extracted himself from the table and crossed to greet his match.

Hannah leaned against my side. She tilted her head to look up at me, her green eyes reflecting the warm lights of the bar. "Glad we came?"

I glanced around at the table—at Miranda and Osen, heads bent close in conversation; at Carissa showing Torain something on her phone that had him laughing so hard he nearly spilled his drink; at the clan members who'd nodded to me in respect, not pity, when I entered.

"It's not as terrible as I expected," I admitted.

Hannah smiled, pressing closer. Her scent—winter air and mint—wrapped around me, as familiar now as my own. The mate mark on her neck seemed to pulse with our shared heartbeat.

For years, I'd defined my territory by what it wasn't—not Grimstone, not the human world. I'd carved out a space at the edges, convinced that's where I belonged.

Now I understood. My true territory was the space between worlds, where Hannah and I belonged together. Where magic and mundane coexisted, where witch and orc created something new.

My father had taught me that a warrior defined himself by what he guarded against. What he kept out. Hannah had shown me something different—that strength came from what you let in. Who you let in.

Hannah's fingers traced lazy patterns on my thigh, her touch inching higher with each circle. "What do you say we follow Zral's example?" she murmured, her voice dropping to a husky whisper. "Make an early exit?"

Her smile—wicked and sweet all at once—was all the territory I'd ever need.

I drained my glass in one long swallow and stood, pulling her up with me. "Lead the way, witch."