



LAYLA FAE

THE  
ORC'S  
THE SILVER FURY BOOK 1  
BRIDE

A MONSTER ROMANCE

# The Orc's Bride

*A Monster Romance*

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# Chapter 1

## *Urgan*

Urgan raised his axe.

Vulga, the chieftain of the Tokoma clan, was kneeling in front of him, blood gushing from his wounds. Wounds that Urgan had given him. Now, it was time for the last strike that would end the war and mark Urgan's greatest victory as the general in the Orc Imperator's army.

The axe fell in a fast, clean strike. Vulga's head rolled away, blood squirting from the green stump of his neck. Urgan roared, and his men roared with him, a thunder of voices. The victory was theirs.

While the conquered orcs cleaned the battlefield, piling the bodies of the fallen to be burned later, Urgan and his officers went to a victory feast. It had been hastily put together by the humans who lived on Tokoma's lands, now the Imperator's lands.

The lands of the Tokoma clan, now claimed by the Empire, were green and fertile. There was an abundance of game, fruit, honey. And mead made by human women from villages on Tokoma's lands.

And orcs liked nothing better than mead and fire-roasted game. Maybe apart from some pretty females to mate in their post-battle frenzy.

The tables set out in an orchard by the village were laden with food and drink. Young human women had been hard at work preparing the tables, but all save one slinked away as soon as the warriors approached.

Urgan sat at the top of the table, leaning his victorious axe, rusty with Vulga's blood, next to him. He raised his cup of mead, and his officers and most distinguished warriors gave a roar of triumph.

They threw back their drinks and tore into the meat.

When he satisfied the first hunger, Urgan sat back, watching his men eat their fill.

“A glorious victory,” said Grikh, Urgan’s officer and his closest friend. “You’re becoming a power among orcs, general. And I’m not the only one who can see it. I heard rumors that after your countless victories, the Emperor wants to tie you to his family. You lucky bastard! You will be a power behind the throne.”

Urgan drank his mead and grunted.

“Of course. He doesn’t want me to rise against him,” he snorted. “As if I would. I’m not strong enough.”

“Yet,” said Grikh. “You’re not strong enough yet. But you will be. Every day, more orcs come to join your army. Do you think it’s because they love the Emperor? No. They want to taste the victories YOU will give them. They join for you. Now, say. If you WERE strong enough – would you rebel?”

Urgan laughed, startling the human wench, who was pouring more mead in his cup. Her dark eyes flashed in fear and then anger before she turned on her heel. Urgan’s gaze trailed after her as she walked away.

That anger in a human, anger directed at an orc, was unusual.

“Of course. Don’t they say I am Urgan the Bloodthirsty? When there aren’t any more clans to fight, I will need a new enemy. Humans are not a challenge right now. There will only be the Emperor left for me to kill.”

Grikh smiled, showing rows of large, sharp teeth.

“This is why he’s planning to marry you to Urzulah. If you’re his son-in-law, you won’t rise against him.”

Urgan frowned. That was true – family was everything. If he became the Emperor’s son-in-law, he could never fight him.

If he rose against his kin, he would be shunned. Despised. His warriors would turn their backs on him. Clever, clever Emperor, seeing the danger Urgan posed and trying to prevent it in such an ingenious way.

And maybe he would have been tempted... if his bride-to-be hadn’t been Urzulah.

She was a vile, stupid creature. She treated her servants like scum. Throwing tantrums, maiming and even killing human servants in fits of childish temper. This kind of behavior was a sign of a slow mind. Of no foresight.

Urgan wasn’t a politician, but as a military man, he knew the dangers of underestimating weaker creatures.

Not to mention the risk of insulting those who had access to you when you slept and who prepared your food.

That was why he never mistreated his servants. He knew the risk.

There was another reason Urgan despised Urzulah. When he had been younger and not yet the general, she once used him in a way he couldn't forgive. He had been weak, then. An orc of inferior status because of his mixed heritage. An easy target.

Urzulah always targeted the weak. She had no courage.

"I won't marry her," he said.

He wouldn't be used like this. Urgan served the Emperor because, this way, he had plenty of opportunities to fight. To lead armies. But he wouldn't be tricked into giving up his freedom.

"You will refuse the Emperor's generous gift?" asked Grikh.

Urgan shook his head. Of course, he couldn't do that and live.

Would he really have to marry the female who had once set fire to her own room in a fit of bad temper and then ran away? Refusing to face the consequences of her actions was Urzulah's vilest weakness. He would rather be banished than have a partner whose spirit was so weak.

"Are you certain of this?"

Grikh nodded solemnly, and Urgan believed him. He trusted his friend implicitly.

There had to be a way to avoid marrying Urzulah without giving up his position.

Suddenly, the solution became obvious.

"I will have to be married already," he said. "The Emperor can't force Urzulah on me if I already have a wife."

He was ready to rise and go looking for a bride then and there. Urgan was an orc of action. If there was a solution, he wouldn't delay. He would solve the problem.

His future wife would have to be smart and fearless – he had no time to be picky about anything else. These, however, were the qualities he had to have in a partner.

Grikh bashed the table with his fist, acknowledging that it was a good solution.

"Yes. But where will you find a willing bride? No orc female in her right mind will marry you fast enough. You will have to court her for months,

and in that time, the Emperor will make it known you're intended for Urzulah."

Of course. Orc females expected a long courtship. They enjoyed testing their future husbands, having them kill their enemies for them or sending them on long quests to find a special plant or craft a superb weapon.

Urgan didn't have time for all that. And sacrificing his time and resources just to satisfy a female's shallow whims was odious to him.

Thinking hard about another way out, he let his eyes wander.

They fell on the human woman, who was pouring mead for his warriors. Such a short female, her head barely higher than the heads of seated orcs. Soft. Too soft – she looked like she would break if he squeezed her.

One warrior, Druzan, tried to cup her bottom. Some orc males were drawn to human females, and now, after the last battle, most of his men were probably going crazy with lust. And she was the only female in sight.

The girl saw Druzan's hand just in time. She dashed away, fast like a mountain stream, and bashed his hand playfully with an empty jug. Druzan grinned at her and she wagged her finger in front of his face.

There wasn't even a trace of fear about her. Unusual. Most humans trembled in terror when faced with an orc. But not her.

Urgan's blood was also running hot and lusty after the fight. He took in her lithe body, his eyes drawn to the small swell of her breasts, the arrogant sway of her hips, the imperious way she was holding her head.

An instinct to hunt and possess her made his blood run faster. Urgan bared his teeth, his mind already made. This woman was his.

"You're right," he said. "An orc female won't agree for a quick union. But a human female might."

## Chapter 2

*Una*

I carried the empty jug back to the provision tent we had set up for the feast. The other girls weren't in sight, probably scared of the orcs. I sighed. Who could blame them for being afraid?

Those beasts were bloodthirsty warriors who had just been in a fight. Of course, they were getting rowdy. The other girls didn't want to deal with rowdy orcs.

But that meant I had to serve the orcs all by myself. There were over thirty, most of them officers and the most distinguished warriors. They were chugging mead without restraint.

And I was scared, too.

That orc who had just tried to grope me... I shouldn't have reacted the way I did. I should have just gotten out of his reach and ignored him. Instead, I had to hit him. Playfully, yes. Or at least, to him, the weak impact of my hit must have seemed playful.

And thank gods for that. If he had realized I was trying to cause him some pain, I'd be dead.

My temper was a serious problem. I acted without thinking, letting my instincts take over. And in doing so, I often got myself into situations that weren't easy to get out of.

Like serving orcs during this feast. Anna had come to me, saying the Emperor's orcs had won the battle and overthrown Tokoma, and now they were expecting a victory feast.

She said there was no one else to serve them. Normally, some women or men volunteered, and there always were at least a few servers. We had gotten used to Tokoma over the years, so it wasn't as terrifying.

But these new orcs? Everyone was afraid.



I was, too. But when Anna started crying and begging me to come and serve them, I didn't think twice. I grabbed my apron and rushed here.

Foolish, quick-tempered Una.

Now, I picked up two jugs, giving Anna the empty one. She was pouring mead while Olivia was turning the meat in its roasting pit.

"Keep them coming," I said. "And try to get at least one girl to help me. I won't manage it on my own." Anna didn't even look up when she shook her head, denying me help. I clenched my jaw. "You know what, if no one helps me out, I may not be around the next time we have to serve some orcs."

That made them actually pay attention. Anna paled.

"You wouldn't! You're the only one who isn't afraid of them. And you can understand some of their language. You can warn us when they get violent!"

I snorted. As if the orc language was so difficult to learn! You just had to know a few crucial words, like *blood*, *kill*, *female*, *meat*. They hardly ever talked about anything other than fighting, food, and mating.

"I am also the only one who always volunteers for these events, so other girls don't have to. What will you do if I'm gone? I may fall sick or travel someplace else. I may die. And someone has to serve our rulers, keep them happy. You know what happens if they don't get their way."

Olivia shook her head, her eyes filled with fear. Anna sighed.

"I know you're right. But how can you force the other girls to serve these monsters? They are so afraid!"

I gnashed my teeth. So it was fine for me to be afraid, but not for others? Sometimes, I was losing patience with these people. My people, who cowered in their corners instead of fighting the oppressors.

My people who, if they united, could become free. But they had to conquer their fear first. And that would never happen if they didn't even try.

That was fine, though. I would save them all.

"You think I'm not afraid? I am terrified! Orcs murdered my father! Orcs rule us, take our food, slaughter us if we don't obey them! If I could, I would kill them all! But I can't. The only thing I can do is hide my fear. I'll never be a slave cowering before them!"

Anna gave me a mournful look. She had lost her husband in the same war my father had fought in when the Tokoma clan first came to claim our lands. She hated the orcs, too.

But she also had three daughters and two grandsons about whom she worried very much. That's why she volunteered to help during the feasts. She wanted to protect her family. If not for them, she would have never served our hateful masters.

Me? I had no one. My mother had died soon after my father had been killed. I volunteered because no one else would. Because I wanted to face my fears, show myself I could be stronger.

Because, one day, when I was ready, I would make the orcs pay for what they had done to us. For what they were doing to us every day.

As soon as I conquered my temper, it would be easy. Orcs might be strong, but they were also as dumb as rocks.

And I already had some experience giving them justice for their crimes.

"I will get Ginny to help you," said Olivia. Ginny was her daughter, a nonsense girl who didn't get overwhelmed by emotions. She would do the job well.

I nodded gratefully and went out of the tent carrying two heavy jugs. Half of the orcs' cups were already empty. I worked fast, filling them, noting which platters of food were emptying and how many we would have to bring.

Thankfully, the orc who had tried to grope me didn't touch me again. Apparently, the Emperor's warriors were better behaved than Tokoma had been after they first invaded us.

That had been a dark time when many women were raped.

But maybe being ruled by the Emperor would improve things. I had heard he had made some laws protecting us, humans. The rules were simple: if we didn't rebel or refuse when they asked for something, they wouldn't use force against us.

Which was quite ironic. If we refused them something when they asked nicely, they had every right to take it from us by force. That law hardly changed anything.

Although it did result in fewer rapes, as I'd heard. Probably because orcs were incapable of asking nicely for a woman to spread her legs.

My skin prickled with a sudden fear. I straightened. An orc was looking at me.

Sitting at the top of the long table, he was larger than the others, his helmet with bigger horns, his bloody axe leaning against the bench next to him. There was an air of menace around him, of coiled power ready to

strike. His green skin was a darker shade than the others' and more scarred, especially around his hands.

And such large hands they were! I had a sudden vision of one of those hands closing around my waist, enveloping it completely in a powerful grip, squeezing the life out of me.

Shivers ran down my back, and I bit the inside of my cheek, tasting blood. Do not cower. Do not be afraid.

I forced myself to look boldly into his face, a face with a long, uneven scar running down his cheek. A face with a large, sharp jaw and thick, dark eyebrows. I looked past these formidable features and fixed my gaze on his eyes. I was insolent. Challenging.

I wasn't prepared to be sucked right in.

His eyes were peculiar. Orcs usually had dark, beady eyes. His were silver, with vertical pupils. A bit like a cat's. They looked like they would glow in the dark.

I was suddenly lost in those eyes. Like pools of mercury, they drew me in, capturing my entire attention, making my body go rigid with a strange longing I didn't have a name for. Something alien and dark stirred inside me, filling my chest and belly with an exhilarating feeling of recognition.

My instincts were sounding bells of triumph, shouting confirmation. Of what? I did not know.

I was captivated.

But then I remembered that mercury was poisonous, and that those were an orc's eyes. And there was nothing beautiful and entrancing about orcs. There couldn't be. I closed my eyes, shook my head once, and looked at him again. My head was clearer now, although to keep it that way, I had to avoid looking into his eyes.

So I looked at his mouth.

His mouth, which was grinning, showing me a row of sharp, shockingly white fangs. I remembered as if through a daze that orcs rarely smiled. Usually, if they showed you their teeth, it meant a threat. They were threatening to bite you. To kill you.

Fangs bared in that grin, which was either a threat or an expression of amusement, the orc beckoned me closer.

## Chapter 3

### *Urgan*

When the girl gave him that haughty, angry look, Urgan almost licked his lips. There was fire behind her eyes, and plenty of fight. And he was always up for a challenge.

She was also afraid of him. A twitch of her eyelid, a suppressed flinch, betrayed her. But she strove to hide it and faced him despite her fear. That was interesting.

He watched her, appraising. Her lush lower lip jutted out rebelliously, and her eyebrows formed an angry frown. She had a pale complexion dusted with freckles, dark eyes, and hair so light it was almost white. It fell down her shoulders, enveloping her petite frame in a soft mantle.

Urgan felt an urge to wrap that hair around his fist and force her head back, watching the fire of rebellion appear in her eyes. He wanted to feel that tiny body writhe against his hold in barely concealed passion.

He chuckled, wondering if she would try to hide her desire the way she was hiding her fear. Something told him she would.

But he would know anyway. Nothing could hide from his keen sense of smell.

Urgan had never desired human women. They were frail, dainty. Fearful. And sometimes, if a large, heavy orc was too passionate, a human woman could become injured.

Urgan wasn't interested in holding himself in check. When he mated, he mated hard. And he had no intention of breaking his lovers. All of this meant a human woman's delicate body had never aroused him before.

But now, the exhilaration of recent bloodshed was still singing in his blood, making it flow faster, warming him up from within.

He blamed the excitement of victory for the way he was now reacting to the mere thought of holding the tiny female.

He would make her come with him. He didn't have much time: as soon as he reached the Emperor's capital, he would be officially informed that he should court Urzulah. He would have to obey. Or else turn against the Emperor.

It was too early for that.

Yes, one day Urgan would be strong enough to fight the Mighty Ruler of All Orcs. But this day hadn't come yet.

And when he fought the Emperor, his wife would be by his side. He had never expected she would be human, but now it seemed just right. As he looked into the female's fiery eyes, he knew she would be loyal. Fierce. When claimed, she would burn with desire just for him.

Baring his teeth in a confident grin, he made a come-hither motion with his green, clawed finger.

Her eyes widened with fear again, and he watched closely as she forced that fear deep down, covering it with an expression of quiet mutiny. She forced her body to let go of the cowardly instinct to curl up and straightened her spine. When she walked over to him, her head raised proudly, she looked nothing like a serving wench. She looked regal.

He approved. After all, one day, she would be an empress by his side.

Because orcs mated for life.

"You summon, I come," she said in his language. She pronounced the words softly as her vocal chords could not produce the harsh, crowded sounds that came naturally to orcs. But he could understand her. That was a very welcome surprise and an undeniable asset in a prospective human mate.

It would also make this exchange so much easier. No need to fetch the Tradesman, who could interpret his words.

"How do you know our language?"

She gave him a defiant look, her body held rigid with sheer willpower. Her fear, hidden from view but apparent from her smell, curled around her like pungent smoke.

And there was something else under the fear. Another smell, so faint he couldn't immediately recognize it. But that was fine. As soon as she stopped being so afraid, it would come to the fore.

"I listen," she said. "I talk to Tradesman. I able to speak few words. Can listen to more words."

He nodded. So she couldn't speak very well but she could understand his language. A few months in his company and she would speak fluently, making her better able to deal with life in the capital. Urgan would make sure she learned.

Also, it was intriguing that she had taken the time to talk to the Tradesman in her village.

The Tradesmen were the official contacts between the orcs and the humans. Every village had one Tradesman who held the official position. He was the one who announced the tax demands and new laws to the human population.

Urgan wondered what reason this woman had had to talk to the official. As a female, she wouldn't be able to become his apprentice. So why make the effort?

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Una."

"Una," he repeated, the name melting like honey on his tongue. He noticed with amusement that she couldn't hold back a shiver.

Urgan grinned, showing her his teeth, and she shivered again. Then she bit her lip, her face drawn in frustration.

She was furious with herself for being afraid.

Urgan chuckled, watching her squirm. She was forcing herself to stay, to not run away. By his side, Grikh bared his teeth, too, but didn't say a word. He was watching their exchange with interest.

"Una," Urgan repeated, savoring her shudder of fear... and something else. "I want you to come to the capital with me."

She gasped at that, her eyes wide, her lips parted in shock. Her fists clenched, and her calves tensed, ready to run away. Yet she stayed put.

"Why?" she asked, her voice trembling.

"Because I need a mate and you caught my eye. I will court you, Una. By the end of the journey, you will become my mate."

She bit her lip again, hard, and the metallic yet sweet scent of her blood filled Urgan's nostrils. He inhaled deeply, enjoying the aroma. His desire stirred inside him like a serpent sensing prey. Getting excited for the chase. For the conquest.

But not yet. Not yet.

"What if I come and... not want mate you?" she asked, the words now garbled, barely comprehensible.

“You will. I will court you and you will want to become my mate.” He chuckled at her angry look. “But if not, you can become a servant in the capital.”

No need to tell her that would never happen. He would make her his.

Her eyes narrowed a fraction, suspiciously. She didn’t trust him. And why would she? He could snap her neck with one hand. He could take everything he wanted from her. Why would she trust him to keep his word?

Urgan weighed his options. He could let her mistrust him. But he was planning for her to become his mate not only in name. She would be his loyal confidante. As such, she deserved his respect, and he needed her trust.

“I swear on my axe,” he said, raising the bloodied weapon.

This oath wasn’t the most solemn one, but it was a good, solid oath. If she had really learned from the Tradesman, she would recognize its value.

And she did. Her eyebrows arched in disbelief. Her fear had receded somewhat, and now she was more curious than frightened. And excited. Her heart was beating fast and fierce, and her pale cheeks colored pink.

For some reason, she was becoming very enthusiastic about his offer.

His instincts told him that reason wasn’t her eagerness for marriage.

Urgan bared his teeth at her again, now less in amusement, more as a show of strength. He sensed she was excited about being in the capital. She wasn’t interested in his offer. Was she only planning to use him?

Whatever her reasons for using this opportunity, it wouldn’t do to let her regard him as a tool in her hands. He wouldn’t be used.

Urgan rose, his huge, powerful body unfurling in one fluid motion. He towered over her, the top of her head barely reaching his sternum, her torso like a twig in comparison with his thick limbs. It was a show of dominance.

Her reaction was instant and gratifying. Terror shimmered in her eyes and her lips trembled, no longer defiant but soft and slightly wet. Invitingly parted.

And under the terror, there was the unmistakable musk of female arousal. It was so faint he would have missed it – if he weren’t aroused himself.

Urgan grinned and put one finger under her chin, pushing her head up so she had to look into his face.

“What will it be, Una?” he asked, all his teeth bared in a display of command. “Will you come with me?”

# Chapter 4

*Una*

I couldn't believe my luck. I'd go to the capital! I would even be given work in an orc household, with access to other servants, and maybe even to the Emperor's court! This was more than I could ever ask for.

Being there, in the thick of things, I could help build a resistance movement among the humans. I could kill the most important orcs in the capital, throw it all into mayhem. After all, they ate and slept. Even a weak human could kill an orc in his sleep. Or poison him. It's not like the orcs were smart enough to suspect anything...

Maybe... Just maybe... I could overthrow the Emperor!

And save the human race from servitude to the orcs.

I had never dared to dream this big. I hoped to maybe, one day, kill the Tokoma chieftain during a feast. Make our lives in the village more bearable for a while as orcs fought among themselves for who would be the next chieftain.

But even this had been out of my reach, as Tokoma higher-ups had never feasted in the village. Too lazy to come up from their own town.

I had had a plan brewing to get hired as a servant in the chieftain's house, and kill him this way...

But this was a thing of the past. Now we belonged to the Emperor. He would send his overseers to control us, to collect taxes and tithes. Even if I somehow got rid of them, the Emperor would just send others, and then punish us for causing trouble.

Now, the only way to end our servitude was to overthrow the Emperor. And I couldn't do this from my village.

But if I were in the capital... Maybe, just maybe, I could really fight for our freedom.

Of course, I needed to take this chance.



The only problem was the orc who was offering it to me. Now, his silver eyes were boring into me, and I stood, transfixed, barely keeping myself from bolting. He terrified me, more than any orc had ever had.

It wasn't just his size. Orcs were larger than humans. No, it was about his presence. The power that suffused his whole being. A demanding attitude which could bear no resistance. He was used to being obeyed, and he radiated a kind of cruel arrogance, a certainty that nothing could hide from him. Nothing could run from him.

And nothing and no one could resist him.

Could I?

He unsettled me in ways I hadn't ever expected. He didn't just terrify me. I could have lived with that.

He did something infinitely worse.

He *fascinated* me.

He seemed so unlike the orcs I had met, and it wasn't just because of his silver eyes or his all-consuming presence. There seemed to be a sharp, calculating wit in his eyes. The way he looked at me, analyzing, burrowing down through my layers of defiance and pretended courage, made me feel completely helpless.

It seemed I couldn't hide from those attentive eyes that missed nothing.

Which was deeply unfair. Since when did orcs care about us, humans? Since when did they expect us to be more than just useful servants, or their dumb playthings?

He didn't see me as a toy or a slave. No, he looked at me as if I were his equal in intellect and cunning. He didn't underestimate me.

It meant he was deadly dangerous to me, to my plans, to any underground movement I was planning to organize. I hoped like hell that after we arrived in the capital, he would really let me go so I could become an overlooked servant in some other orc's house.

And if not? Well, I would have to make him lose interest in me somehow.

And if I couldn't lull him into thinking I was just a mediocre human female and no threat at all... I would have to kill him.

And under no circumstances could I become attracted to this cunning beast. Because if I made the mistake of agreeing to this bizarre marriage proposal, I wouldn't be able to carry out my vendetta.

Oh. And, of course, there was another reason I couldn't agree to become his wife. If we married, we would have to mate. Lie together. My body in

the grip of his enormous paws.

His gargantuan member ploughing inside me, maybe even tearing me apart.

My cheeks heated when a vision of his hands wrapped around my waist appeared in my mind. His sharp teeth marking my skin, drawing blood. And his monstrous length entering me, filling me close to breaking, tearing into my body with beastly force.

Warmth pooled in my lower belly, and a slickness in my underwear. My eyes widened in comprehension and a new terror. No! That couldn't be! I couldn't *possibly* be wanting to rut with an orc.

Yet, that was exactly what my body was telling me.

I clenched my fists, letting my nails dig deep into my palms. I had to calm down. I had to deal with my body's betrayal. And I would. But first...

"I will come with you," I told the orc, trying to speak to my best ability. What came out probably sounded like gibberish. The important thing was, in my head it sounded all right.

Learning to speak the language of the orcs had never been my main priority. I had learned to understand them so I could kill them better. Besides, my human tongue wasn't made to speak the crude sounds of the orc language.

"When do you set out?" I asked.

He grinned at me, now more amused than threatening.

"Now," he said.

Without a warning, he picked me up as if I were a sack of potatoes and threw me over his shoulder. I didn't even have time to gasp – or say goodbye. We were off, moving fast with the orc's easy strides. A few other orcs rose and followed us.

The orc's hands were gripping the backs of my thighs, and I felt his skin against mine, hardened and calloused. His hands were warm.

And again, my warmth rose inside me, unbidden and unwanted. Treacherous, foolish body. As if it didn't know that desiring an orc could only lead to pain. That it was unnatural.

"Let me go," I said, trying to struggle in his grip. But it was useless. I was like a kitten seized by a mountain bear.

"Oh, no," he said, his voice dark. "Not when you smell so nice, and right under my nose."

I paled. Was he implying...?

“What do you mean?” I asked, half-choked.

“That you will make a delicious mate for me,” he said.

The other orcs, who were now closer and could hear us, chortled and hooted. My face burned with the humiliation of it. I was now stripped of all the control I used to have. My body was acting like it wasn't mine, and I was being handled like a child or a doll.

Blasted orcs with no courtesy or manners.

“I want to walk on my own legs,” I said again, determined to stand my grounds even in this shameful position.

“You won't be able to keep up,” he said. “Soon, we'll reach our horses. You'll ride with me. Until then, I'll carry you.”

I looked at the ground, moving past so fast it almost blurred. With a sigh, I stopped struggling. He was right. Even if I ran like hell, I couldn't keep such a pace.

And he just had to rub it in, didn't he? How the orcs were so much faster than us. Bigger, stronger, more ferocious. Which was all true, of course.

I shivered with a new apprehension.

Soon, I would be smack in the middle of a city full of orcs. I'd be a mere servant at their mercy. An icy fear gripped me, filling my stomach with roiling uneasiness. The fast pace and the swinging rhythm of the orc's steps added to the nausea. I gritted my teeth, breathing deeply through my nose. I wouldn't be sick all over him. I would not.

Hanging on to the last dregs of my dignity, I closed my eyes. I needed to give myself a moment to absorb everything that had just happened. Just to breathe and come to terms with my new reality. I had decided too fast, without thinking it all through. What else had I missed?

I'd probably never see home again.

Never before had I been further from my village than the woods surrounding it. And now, I was travelling who knew how far. Travelling with a pack of orcs. Bloodthirsty beasts who were used to taking what they wanted from humans.

I should have planned some kind of defense. To make these orcs keep their paws off me. To keep this orc who was carrying me as far from me as possible.

Fat chance. But I would deal with it. I always did.

None of this mattered, I reminded myself. When I carried out my plans, I would be free. But until then, I would have to stay sharp. I would have to

improvise.

And gather any information I could.

“How long to the capital?” I asked, wondering if the orc would hear me. My head was somewhere in the area of his shoulder blade.

“Four days on horseback,” he replied.

Four days. It seemed like an eternity.

“And how long until you let me go?” I wasn’t sure I had chosen the right words, but that was what I was trying to ask: when he would put me safely on the ground and take his hands off me.

With my limited knowledge of their language, I probably sounded like an imbecile to this orc, I thought. Ironical, since I was pretty sure my human intellect much surpassed his.

But if he thought less of me... maybe he would be less inclined to go through with this marriage.

“Never,” he replied with a dark chuckle. “You WILL be my wife. Even if you don’t know it yet. And my wife will be always by my side. In battle and in peace. At day and at night.”

Gods. Why was he so determined to marry me? He barely knew me! And orcs married human women so rarely. Almost never! So why me?

Was he crazy? That thought gave me pause. Dumb orcs I could deal with. But a mad orc...?

Maybe if I could understand his motives, I would find better ways to discourage him.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Urgan.”

“And why do you want to get married, Urgan?”

He stroked the skin on the back of my thigh with his finger. My flesh broke out in goosebumps and I clenched my jaw. I wouldn’t allow myself to enjoy his touch. Even though a dark, treacherous part of me thought it *was* enjoyable.

“I get lonely in my bed at night,” he said, chuckling.

Aha. That’s why he decided he would marry a complete stranger from a remote village he had just invaded. Yes. Of course.

“Bullshit,” I muttered in my language, not knowing the right word in orc.

He laughed, a slow, deep rumble of amusement, and I realized with horror he must understand human speech. He was more dangerous than I had thought.

“Clever female,” he said, in orc. So he probably didn’t speak human. “I have my reasons.”

“Why not share them with me?” I asked. “Husbands shouldn’t keep secrets from their wives.”

He gripped my thighs harder, the pads of his fingers denting my soft flesh.

“That is true. But you aren’t my wife yet. You don’t have the right to know my secrets.”

For a moment, I had a wild urge to marry him just for that: so he would tell me things. Whisper his secrets in my ear. I wanted to become the person he confided in, the person he trusted the most. Being this close... would make me feel special to him.

Which was not something I should want!

“Fine,” I said, trying to sound calm. “It’s probably something shameful. You won’t tell me because then I would know you’re... I don’t know. Not good enough for orc ladies.”

The world spun around when Urgan turned me in midair and put me, feet first, on the ground. His hands lingered to steady me. As soon as I was certain I wouldn’t fall on my backside, I looked at him, hiding my fear.

Did I manage to insult him? Was he about to become violent?

“We’re here,” he rumbled, deep in his throat, the same knowing smirk still on his mouth. He was completely unruffled.

Oh. So implied insults didn’t affect him. I should probably try harder, then.

Before I could realize how idiotic that last thought had been, I saw what *here* meant. We were at the edge of the battlefield where Tokoma and the Emperor’s army had clashed. Orc horses, which looked like the offspring of ordinary horses mating with dragons, were grazing.

And by grazing, I meant tearing flesh off other horses’ corpses with their unhorselike fangs and licking blood that was still around, forming dark, viscous puddles on the hard ground.

I had never seen those horses up close. Orcs didn’t bring their beasts of burden close to human settlements... I wondered why.

“Do they eat humans?” I asked Urgan.

“Let’s find out,” he said, and only a gleam in his eye betrayed he might be joking. He started making strange growling noises towards one of the dragon horses.

I wasn't running away only because my legs were paralyzed with fear.

Seeing Urgan, the devilish horse trotted over, almost prancing with joy. It would look absolutely adorable – a cheerful dragon horse happy to see its master – if not for its muzzle dripping with blood. It stopped in front of Urgan, pricking its ears, and neighed.

The horse was so huge I had to crane my neck to look at it. No wonder orcs rode those beasts – they were the only ones who could match them in size.

“This female will ride you,” Urgan said to the horse. “You will protect and serve her. Do you understand?”

The horse threw its head in a reaction that I was sure meant: *DON'T TELL ME WHAT TO DO! I AM A FREE HORSE! AND I'LL JUST EAT HER NOW TO PROVE A POINT!*

Urgan didn't look concerned. My body frozen, I watched as if from afar as the horse lowered its head, turning it so that one blood-red, wet eye could focus on my face. My whole body broke out in sweat and I was shivering.

It seemed very important that I don't blink.

The horse snorted softly... and sniffed me. Its nostrils were right in my face now, opening to draw in air. They were the size of small saucers. It sniffed a few times, snorted again...

And licked me.

Its surprisingly pink, rough tongue slid across my cheek, leaving behind a trail of horse saliva that smelled of fresh meat and blood.

I used to have a cat when I was little. That cat, after it had eaten fresh meat scraps, had a breath that smelled exactly like the horse's. It was also the cutest ball of ginger fluff and I had loved him dearly.

Wasn't it curious that this bloody, murderous beast reminded me of my kitten?

The horse nudged my face with his nose, and I raised my shaking hand to pat him on the side of his muzzle.

“His name is Brrthak,” said Urgan. “And he's never eaten human flesh. Once they get a taste for it, they hunt humans, so we try to keep them away from your people. And feed them well with animal meat.”

“This is... very kind of you,” I said, still petting Brrthak. My knees were getting weak from all this excitement, and I was feeling fuzzy.

Urgan snorted with disdain.

“It’s not kind, it’s practical. We don’t do kind, Una. Try to remember it when you live among us. Force, military skill, and status are what counts. If someone is ‘kind’ to you, they are pretending. They are trying to trick you or use you.”

“It’s not that different for us,” I said, frowning. “Genuine kindness is rare. Usually, people who are nice to you will want something in return.”

Urgan put his large, dark green hands on my waist. My body suddenly felt hot and tense, and hyper-aware of his touch. I looked up into those silver eyes.

“Remember this every time you think I’m being nice,” he said.

I wasn’t sure if the sparks deep in his eyes meant he was joking and trying to rile me up... or whether he was thinking about the things he would demand from me in return for every kind gesture. Dark, sensuous things. An orc’s violent desires.

I shivered. At that moment, I wasn’t entirely sure I would be able to resist his demands for the next four days.

# Chapter 5

*Urgan*

Why was she working so hard to keep her fear in check? Urgan wondered this when he watched her face Brnthak. She was positively shaking with fear, and yet she let his mount sniff her, touch her. And then, she touched him back.

All this, with her face so pale it seemed bloodless. With legs trembling so hard it was a wonder they supported her.

This woman had a secret.

Urgan frowned, looking at her with more scrutiny now. There was a determination about her that was hard to miss. And discipline. The way she held herself, the way she overcame her strongest, most primal instincts, spoke of an almost military preparation.

Una must have actively trained hiding her fear. Also acting despite of it.

And, if he wasn't mistaken, that training had been done purposely for interacting with orcs.

Urgan rarely was mistaken.

For the first time since he had the idea of taking this human woman as his wife, he questioned whether he had made the right choice. What exactly was she hiding? Why had she gotten so excited when he said he would take her to the capital?

Was she using him just to get there?

He clenched his jaw, his face turning hard and cold. He had made it clear he would court her. She should at least be open to the possibility of becoming attracted to him.

If she was only treating him as a means to her ends, he would break her neck like a twig.

Urgan snorted, his nostrils flaring wide, the hot air of his fury expelled with force.



If he killed her, he would be without a mate. And forced to marry Urzulah.

Better wait, then. Whatever she wanted, he would make sure she wanted him more. And, judging by her body's reactions to him, it wouldn't be that difficult.

He would also learn her motivation for coming with him. If she proved to be a danger to orcs, he would have to neutralize her. It was his responsibility as the general.

Urgan looked at Grikh and his two other officers, Zadran and Kluga. They were attending to their mounts and soon would be ready to depart. Good.

Of course, Urgan would rather travel with Una alone. That way, she would be forced to focus on him only. No distractions. No defenses. But that would be too dangerous.

The Emperor's lands were vast and wild. Human settlements were often clustered together, the clusters surrounded by primeval forests and deep lakes. Only a few tracks led through the wilderness from one human area to another.

Orc settlements weren't as close to one another, and they were usually stranded in the middle of wild, dangerous woods. There were creatures in these woods which could kill an orc. Easily.

Some of them had come with the orcs when they were thrown into the human realm from their home world. It didn't do to travel alone if one didn't have to.

Especially with a weak human female by one's side.

Urgan looked at Una again. She was now leaning against a tree, a few steps away from him. Eyeing Brorthak with curious but wary eyes. Urgan guessed she was trying to collect herself.

He had to admit she *was* weak. If one of his orcs became too agitated when speaking, for example, and gestured wildly, he could hit her. And kill her. By accident.

And if an orc wanted to hurt her intentionally? She would be dead.

Not to mention what would happen if Urgan gripped her too hard in the thrall of passion. He could be the undoing of his own mate.

Why had he thought choosing a human female would be a good idea? His desire for her must have been so strong it overrode his reason.

Una, whom he was still watching, took a deep breath. She squared her shoulders and wiped her face off all emotion. One moment, she had looked defeated, tired, frail. Now, he was looking at a queen disguised as a peasant.

Urgan raised his eyebrows. That had been impressive.

Orcs couldn't hide their emotions well. Some had to learn it. Like him. Becoming a military powerhouse required a measure of control, even deceit.

But he could never master his expressions like Una mastered hers.

And he knew it wasn't a skill that came to humans naturally. Even if they lied with their mouths, their bodies betrayed them. Nervous gestures. A hunched posture. Shady eyes.

Most of the time, the only thing that gave Una away was her scent, and that could be masked with certain substances. Urgan could use a mate who could lie so well.

If only she weren't lying to him.

Una looked at him and smiled the confident smile of a woman who had everything just where she wanted it. She came over, her hips swaying to the rhythm of her steps.

"Why so fast back to capital, Urgan?" she asked. "Not need rest?"

He shook his head.

"No rest for the general. The Emperor will want to hear the report from me. My soldiers will come back slowly, after feasting and sleeping."

Her eyes widened.

"You... the general? Like... army leader?"

Urgan bared his teeth in a grin.

"You've caught yourself a fat fish," he said. "Yes, I am the Emperor's general. *The* general. Urgan the Bloodthirsty they call me. And who are you, Una?"

She shook herself off and returned his smile. Easy. Calm. Only the smell betrayed her.

"No one important. I sew clothes. Work the field. Serve orcs food and drink," she shrugged with indifference. "I am village girl. Nothing special."

Urgan growled quietly. All lies.

Or not lies. He supposed she was telling the truth in the strictest sense. But she was omitting something. He had asked her who she was, and she was all those things, but she was also something else. Something more. She wasn't telling him the most important part.

He would find out all her secrets. It was just a matter of time.

Urgan growled at Brrthak, commanding him to come closer. He whistled, a short signal for others to get ready. They would set out.

Without a warning, he caught Una's waist and picked her up. She squealed softly in surprise. Urgan raised her so her face was level with his. So close their noses were almost touching. So close he could bite her... or kiss her.

Her eyes were wide with shock even as her mouth parted, revealing the pink flesh inside and a hint of white teeth.

"I'll make you mine," he said, so low only she could hear him.

The musk of her arousal, now familiar, wafted to his nose. Urgan chuckled, inhaling her scent, making it a part of him. Then, before she could protest, he put her in Brrthak's saddle.

She gripped his mount's mane, looking at the ground below her. When she saw how far down it was, she closed her eyes tightly. Urgan stepped in the stirrup and swung his leg over the saddle, settling himself behind her.

She was so tiny she barely took up any space on the enormous beast's back.

Urgan clucked at Brrthak, instructing him to go slowly. He put his hand over Una's fists that were holding Brrthak's shaggy mane in a grip of death.

"Do you want me to hold you?" he asked her, his voice low. "I'll make sure you don't fall."

Una's body became even more rigid, even harder. She was all tense. That wouldn't help her stay in the saddle.

"No, thank you," she said, her voice polite.

Urgan chuckled. Her fear was almost choking her, but she still managed to sound calm. Bored, even. Very impressive.

"Then you need to relax," he said, his large hand still on top of her tiny fists. "While we ride, Brrthak will move. There is a certain rhythm to it. If you don't allow your body to follow the rhythm, you will fall. To your death. So either relax or I'll hold you. I want you to live, Una."

She took a deep breath and nodded. Slowly, carefully, she let go of some of the stiffness. But still, she was keeping her muscles in check. Urgan realized she was trying to keep her body from touching his.

"Are you afraid of touching an orc?" he asked her, mocking now.

Una hissed like an angry cat.

"I not afraid of you!"

“Aren’t you? All I’m smelling is fear. I told you clearly I would court you, Una. If you find the idea hateful, if you’d rather not be courted by an orc, I’ll let you down. You can go back to your village. But you must tell me now. When we set out, I won’t let you go until we reach the capital.”

“Why?” she asked, turning slightly so she could see him from the corner of her eye.

“Because if I leave you alone out there, in the wilderness, you will die.”

Una gasped softly.

“We go... through the Wilds?”

“It’s the fastest way,” Urgan said, shrugging. “So? What’s your decision?”

Una let out a huge breath. Suddenly, she fell against him, her body pliant and soft. Her back rested against his abdomen, her head leaning against his sternum. She nestled into him with another, much gentler, sigh. “I come with you.”

Urgan froze. Lust, arousal, desire – those were familiar. Feelings and urges he had felt since he was a youngster. He could handle those. But what was this new feeling? Where had it come from?

This alien tenderness?

He lowered his head slowly to sniff Una’s hair. It smelled of sun and herbs. Her body was warm against him, warm and so absurdly fragile. A hot, heavy feeling gripped his chest.

He would protect her. This woman, so small and so very brave, was his and his only. He would be the only one who touched her. The only one who looked at her unguarded face. He would watch over her sleep, fight her enemies, and always keep her close.

And he would possess her completely. She would give him everything. Her lies and her truth. Her pain and her pleasure. He would have it all.

Urgan took the reins, his arms forming a cage of muscle around Una to keep her safe, cocooned in him. He grunted at Brrthak and they were off, trotting slowly. His mount moved in a steady rhythm, rising and falling with every step, and Una’s body in front of Urgan moved with the rhythm, her bottom and back grinding against Urgan’s shaft.

He grinned, feeling it swell with desire. Let her feel what he had in store for her. As soon as she said yes to him, he would take her. Again and again until they were both too exhausted to continue. Until she slept in his arms, completely satisfied. And completely his.

And then, when she woke, he'd do it again.

# Chapter 6

*Una*

We were riding slowly, the monster horse jerking beneath us. It wasn't a smooth ride. If I survived this bumpy journey through the Wilds, I would be all sore.

But for now, it didn't worry me. I had more pressing problems. One was literally pressing against my back. Hard and huge, it was a thing I refused to contemplate. I chose to ignore it and was doing fine, apart from getting an irrational urge to rub myself against it.

I was doomed.

My stupid body had gone completely mad. Why? I couldn't imagine. Of course, I had heard stories of women who had fallen in love with orcs and mated with them. I had always suspected those women were feeble-minded or maybe even cursed...

And such cases were few and far between! In our village, there were no such unions.

Not willing ones, at least.

But that aside, how was it possible for me of all people to feel attracted to an orc? I hated orcs! I was plotting their downfall! This mad, unreasonable desire was muddling my brain. It was a complication, and one I couldn't afford.

If he were at least stupid! Or vulgar in the manner of some orcs who belched and farted constantly, comparing whose farts smelled the worst. I would have been able to deal with this, then. I would have been able to dismiss it as a stupid bodily reaction. Nothing to do with feelings. Just body humors.

But no. He had to be intelligent. Civilized.

And a general!

I couldn't help being impressed. He was the one who had conquered all those lands for the Emperor. He was the one whose name other orcs spoke with either admiration or fear. Usually both.

I had, of course, heard of Urgan the Bloodthirsty. During my lessons with the Tradesman, he told me about the Emperor's rise to power. How he conquered almost all orc lands, how he grew his Empire. And about the orc who had been instrumental in it. But I would have never guessed my Urgan would be him!

And I was already calling him mine. Really, I was raving mad.

I looked at his large hands holding the reins in front of me. His dark green skin was scarred and rough. Two of his knuckles were misshapen, as if he had hit someone so hard they shattered and healed badly.

The body against my back, swaying, relaxed, in the saddle, was hard and chiseled with muscle. There wasn't an idle bone in Urgan's body. Everything about him, every bit of his physique, spoke of violence and hard work. Smart work, too.

He was a fast, efficient killing machine, and I was literally in his arms, pressed close to him. Enveloped in his warmth.

It made me feel safe.

Mad. I was definitely mad.

We had been riding for a few hours in silence, with only a short drinking break when we encountered a stream. Soon after setting out, we had veered away from the main track, which was a reasonably safe trade route that most travelers used. We were now riding along a narrow, partly overgrown path in the woods.

The forest around us was gloomy even though the evening was still an hour away. The thick canopies blocked almost all sunlight. In the gloom, a stifling silence reigned. Not a leaf moved in the wind. Not a fly buzzed.

It was as if all animals were sitting deep in their burrows, holding their breaths. Scared witless.

By us? Well, maybe. Not by me, but the small band of orcs was probably quite a threat to any animal that had some meat on its bones. But I'd never seen the world become completely frozen and silent because some orcs were passing nearby.

This was about something else.

I was about to ask Urgan where we were and why it was so quiet when he put his finger on my lips. The question stuck to my tongue. My mouth

tingled.

Urgan let his finger brush against my lips, stroking across them once, and I had to bite my tongue to keep myself from reacting to his touch.

And I didn't feel even one bit scared.

That was the thing I remembered the most afterwards. How eerie the forest had been. How tense Urgan was behind me, how alert. How his finger felt pressed against my lips.

How utterly safe and protected I felt.

There was a rustle in the undergrowth ahead of us, behind a bend in the road. It was so soft I would have missed it. But Urgan didn't. He pulled on the reins, stopping Brrthak mid-step. He growled to the other orcs, just one sound. They moved instantly, dispersing, giving him space. Facing the bend in the road.

I didn't make a sound. But as I looked around, I could see a loose formation around me and Urgan. We were being protected, I realized. *I* was being protected.

The leaves ahead shivered. There was a quiet, reedy sound, like a soft giggle. It sounded all wrong and made my skin prickle with cold terror.

A large red shape shot out of the trees, so fast it blurred. With a high, piping sound, it dashed at the orc that was closest to it. It was trying to bite his leg, but at the last moment, the orc's horse moved, and the beast's fangs sank into its flank.

Everything happened so fast I could barely process what I was seeing. But now, the creature wasn't moving for a moment, and I could see it clearly.

It looked like an anatomy model from the Tradesman's book. He had showed me once what a human and an orc would look like if they had been stripped of their skin. Both had hard strips of red and pink muscle wrapped around their frames, with small deposits of yellow fat.

That was what the creature was. A skinless body of naked, pulsing muscle, with rotting patches of fur hanging off its back. Its eyes were red and mad. It was shaped like a wolf. Although I'd never seen one as large as this.

Urgan was shouting orders, his words as sharp as the crack of a whip. The other orcs raised their throwing axes. They aimed and let the heavy blades fly. One missed. Two buried themselves in the creature's back.



It gave a high, piercing scream, which sounded like a child's plaintive cry. It let go of the horse's flank, blood still dripping from between its jaws. It turned around, looking at the others. I could see the axes had not been enough to kill it. But it seemed slower. The pain was dulling its reflexes.

The red, crazy eyes of the beast settled on me.

"No," Urgan grunted.

With one powerful swing, he jumped off Brrthak's back and landed by the horse. The earth shook. Brrthak pranced back, giving Urgan room, taking me out of the beast's range.

And the beast charged. All its fury, all its mad pain was now focused on Urgan.

It ran at him, fast, and Urgan didn't move. My treacherous mouth shouted for him to duck, to run, but he stayed there, crouching, all the strength of his massive muscles coiled and ready to strike.

When the beast was almost on top of him, its bloodied jaws inches away from Urgan's neck, he turned, gracefully swiveling out of the way, his hand landing between the beast's shoulder blades with a wet smack. He was so fast that I would have missed it had I blinked. The beast landed hard, its plaintive bark sounding confused.

But Urgan wasn't finished.

He grabbed the red, wet meat, and picked the creature up. The tendons around his neck tensed from the effort. The creature writhed in his powerful grip, but he wouldn't let go. He raised it high over his head, even though it looked so heavy, and threw it on the ground.

Bones crunched. One last giggling sigh escaped the beast's muzzle, and it was still.

Urgan wiped his hands on the nearest mossy tree trunk and faced his men.

"All good? Was anyone bitten?"

No one had been. He gave orders, his eyes now even more alert, scanning the trees around us as he was speaking. We would move in a tight formation and we would ride late into the night. When we stopped, it would only be for a few hours to give the horses some rest. We would keep watch, so two orcs would always be awake.

The orc whose horse had been bitten took out a wide, curved blade and slit the horse's throat. Just like that. He patted it roughly on the side when the horse's eyes grew still. And then, the orc dragged the carcass into the

bushes. The horse's side where the creature had bitten it was exposed. The wound was oozing black, putrid blood.

Some arrangements were made in the harsh, fast speech of orcs in their battle mode. Two orcs would share a horse, riding and running in turns. Soon – too soon – everyone was ready to set out, all eyes vigilant, all muscles taut.

I hadn't expected the aftermath of a fight to be so tense. The enemy had been slain, but no one was celebrating. They were all ready for more bloodshed.

When Urgan had finished giving orders, he wiped his hands against the grass and spat on them, rubbing the remains of the creature's blood off. When his hands were reasonably clean, he came over to me. I was still sitting atop Brrthak, watching everything with wide eyes.

"You aren't hurt," he said.

It wasn't a question, but I nodded anyway. It was then that I realized that through the entire event, he must have been hyperaware of me. He had faced the beast and fought it with his bare hands because it had been a threat to me.

And now, after that fast but still frightening fight, he hadn't come rushing to my side to check if I was fine. He didn't have to. He knew because he had been monitoring me.

Or was I imagining it?

"What was that... thing?" I asked.

"I'll tell you on the way," Urgan said, putting his foot in the stirrup. He raised his body and sat down in the saddle behind me, and the tension trickled out of me. The wall of heavy orc muscle behind me was protection. I sagged into him.

But Urgan remained tense. This time, no erection pressed into my back, although I could still feel the substantial bulge behind me. But it seemed this wasn't a time for arousal.

"That was a ragghit," said Urgan.

"I don't know what it means," I confessed.

"A ragghit is a sick creature. It's an empty shell. It doesn't have any thoughts, any feelings."

"So..." I switched to human, hoping he could understand me, "...a husk?"

“Yes. Ragghit. A husk. The sickness spreads through saliva. If a ragghit bites you, you will become just like it. Another husk. Your mind will become empty of thought, and your skin will fall off in stripes. The only thing you’ll know will be pain. You will attack anything and everything. Violence dulls the pain.”

“Why have I never heard of them?” I asked, uneasy. Those things sounded dangerous. Humans should be aware of them.

“They came from our world. Just a few of them, so they are rare. We keep the sickness in check. If there ever is news of a ragghit, we kill it. They are too dangerous. The only ones we allowed to live are locked up in the Emperor’s dungeons. His beast lore masters study them.”

“So... You expect there are more around?” I guessed. “Because the illness can spread so easily?”

“Yes. If there are more, they may be hunting us. But after we killed that one, they’ll be cautious. Waiting until we’re tired and weak.”

We were riding now, not too fast but not at a leisurely pace, either. One orc was jogging behind us, his eyes scanning the undergrowth on each side of the path.

“And why did he kill his horse?” I asked again. “Because it would turn into... that thing?”

“Yes,” Urgan said. “A ragghit is as powerful as the body it has. An orc horse ragghit would be very strong.”

“Can a human become a ragghit?”

“Yes,” Urgan said again, patiently. I thought he would tire of my questions soon, but he didn’t seem to mind answering them. “Although not a very strong one. Cunning, maybe. Ragghits retain some intelligence from the higher beasts.”

“The higher beasts...?”

“Orcs and humans,” he said with a shrug that made his chest move behind me. “Those who can speak and count.”

“Were you...” I chewed on my lip, thinking how to phrase the question. “Were you surprised it was there? Was it not usual?”

We rode in silence for a moment. I tried to turn my head to look at his face, but he was sitting so close behind me it was impossible. If I looked up, I would see the underside of his chin.

My ear pressed into his massive ribcage. I listened to the strong heart beating inside his chest. It was comforting.

“Not many things surprise me,” Urgan said finally, his voice thoughtful. “But today, I was surprised twice. The ragghit surprised me.”

“And what else?” I asked, frowning.

“You did.”

An electric tingle ran over my skin. I was thrilled, and there was a sort of empty, sucking feeling in my stomach. I felt like I was falling, falling, falling. I was suddenly anxious that whatever surprised him had been a bad thing. At the same time, I was thrilled to think it had been something good.

That I had made a good impression on him.

It had been a long time since I felt so... vulnerable. Yes, vulnerable. So dependent on another person’s opinion of me.

Which was wrong. Not only because he was an orc, although that was my biggest concern. It was wrong, because I was my own woman. I never ever allowed the opinions of others to touch me, to influence how I was feeling.

Now, the turbulent emotions Urgan aroused in me... I hated them. I should have never agreed to come with him. I should leave. I should wait for him to fall asleep and sneak off into the woods, find my way back home.

But how could I leave now, knowing those husks were out there in the woods, hunting prey?

And how could I ever leave the protection of those green arms, keeping me safe from harm?

I was growing more and more dependent on him. With every minute of this journey, I was losing more of myself. I wondered... If this went on, would there be anything left of me?

# Chapter 7

## *Urgan*

He frowned when she tensed, her body shying away from him. A moment before, she had been cocooned in him, listening to his heartbeat, asking curious questions.

The moment they had been sharing was peaceful, friendly... even intimate. He was certain she was being her true self. Not pretending anything, at least for a moment.

But now, every fiber of her being was recoiling from him. She was swaying in the saddle, her back rigid, her head high. Silent and unapproachable.

Why?

Was it because of what he had said? That she surprised him? Did she find it offensive?

Urgan was looking at the darkening path in front of him. Soon, they would have to light torches. Orc horses were sturdy and didn't get injured easily. Even so, one wrong step in the dark wood could lead to a damaged joint or a broken leg.

And they couldn't afford to lose another horse.

But torches would turn them into easy targets. Urgan heard a sound far away, and he focused on listening... There. Rustling high in the canopy of trees. And a soft, melodious trill.

The forest was coming back to life. That meant they were safe from ragghits for now. Urgan grunted, moving his head, stretching his tense muscles, his vertebrae popping. They would have a much needed moment of respite.

He could focus on solving other problems.

Una was holding onto Brrthak's mane again. Riding with such a tense posture was already difficult for her. A few hours more of this? She would

be hurting all over. And if her muscles became stiff and sore, she could fall easily.

Could it be that what he had said to her meant something different to humans than it did to orcs? Maybe saying someone was surprising had a hidden meaning he wasn't aware of?

Urgan growled low in his throat. Was this what being bonded to a female was like? Picking apart her every gesture, trying to guess what she meant?

Urgan didn't have time for this.

"Halt and keep watch," he called to his warriors.

He got off Brrthak's back and turned to Una.

"We will talk now," he said. Without another warning, he grabbed her tiny waist in his large hands and lifted her off Brrthak's back. Her squeal of surprise made him grin.

Urgan put Una slowly on the ground, making sure her legs, which were certainly tired and stiff after riding for so long, supported her. When he was sure she could stand, he let go of her waist and took her small, pale hand in his. She stifled a grimace, stepping from one foot to another.

"Follow me."

Urgan led her into the trees, just a few steps away from his warriors. He let his senses expand, straining to pick up sounds and smells from a much larger area than normally. It took effort but was well worth it.

There was no danger nearby.

"Are you upset?" he asked, schooling his voice and face to be polite, even though he was getting angry. Despite the temporary lull, they were still in danger and it was his natural instinct to focus on eliminating that danger. Yet, she was distracting him. He needed to fix this problem, whatever it was, so he could focus on protecting her.

And he also didn't want her to recoil from him like that.

Una's eyes were wide with astonishment. But not fear. Urgan studied her briefly. Not long ago, she had been terrified of him. What had changed?

"Yes," she said. "It almost night, and I tired, and... and this stupid that we ride in darkness."

Urgan frowned. Hadn't she understood what he had told her about the ragghit attack? Was she too dim to realize they were still in danger?

Or was she lying again?

His eyes narrowed.

"No more lies," he said, baring his teeth at her.

She flinched. Now, she was afraid. Good, Urgan thought. Maybe she would tell him the truth.

“Why are you upset?” he asked again.

“You are orc,” she said, her body trembling now. “It... not normal. Not natural.”

She gave him a defiant look, even though her lower lip was trembling adorably, spoiling the effect. Urgan had an urge to press his finger against that lip and make it be still under his touch.

Dangerous, distracting thoughts.

Desiring her, that was one thing. Understandable, easy to cure. But this... this tender protective instinct? Towards a human almost-stranger who was lying to him? This was far too dangerous to allow.

And yet, right now claiming her for himself had become Urgan’s priority.

Somewhere along the way, Una had stopped being just a way out of courting Urzulah. Urgan realized he now wanted her just for her. She was a challenge and a puzzle, and her body drove him dangerously close to losing control.

She was fated to be his and he would stop at nothing until he claimed her for his mate.

He would unravel all her lies until she stood before him naked in body and soul.

“Are you afraid of being torn apart by my orc cock?” he asked, peering at her with amusement. He had heard his share of jokes and foolish stories about orc cocks so large they could rip females – or males – in half. But they were just that: jokes and stories.

The terror in her face, the way she froze, almost paralyzed with fear, made his amusement disappear. She really was afraid of that. Urgan frowned.

“Don’t you know orcs have mated with human women for decades?” he asked. “Those are happy unions. No one suffers. There is offspring, too. Our races are compatible to mate and breed.”

Una was chewing on the inside of her cheek, her pale lips twitching with the movement. Finally, she replied.

“I saw different.”

“What did you see?” Urgan pressed.

“Women broken and bleeding in streets. What you said... torn apart by orc... things.”

“Who?” he asked, meaning the rapist orcs who had broken the Imperator’s law.

“My mother,” she spat at him, her eyes suddenly blazing with vicious hatred. “Raped by orcs, bleeding and dying. Raped by Tokoma orcs when they conquer us.”

Urgan cursed under his breath. Of course, he should have expected it. The wilder tribes, those living on the fringes, not yet assimilated into the Empire... They still lived the way they had in their orc world.

Too slow to realize times had changed. Too stupid to see that humans weren’t just smart animals, but higher beasts. Just like orcs. And thus, should be respected.

The orc domination was fresh. Orcs had been in this world only for a hundred years, their ancestors having been sucked in through a rip in their own world. A rip which closed immediately, leaving the orcs with no other choice but to carve a place for themselves in the human realm.

Faced with such powerful enemies, humans succumbed easily. But it didn’t mean they should be disrespected and mistreated.

Urgan knew with all certainty that humans, even though physically weaker, were much smarter than most orcs.

Tokoma hadn’t paid enough for their crimes. Would it be possible to undo the damage they had done?

Blast it all. He knew an orc male could damage a human female if he were inconsiderate. If he lied on top of her... she would be crushed and could even suffocate. And if he mated with her without waiting for her to become aroused, he could hurt her, too.

But Urgan also knew there were ways of making the mating safe. And very pleasant for both parties.

How was he supposed to quell Una’s fears when they were smack in the middle of a ragghit infestation?

Una watched him, her face now pale, her eyes huge and tearful. She was shaking, her arms wrapped tightly around her midsection.

Urgan had no doubts she was telling the truth.

She was also hurting. Very much. Now, he could see it clearly: there had been much suffering in her life because of orcs. Because of his kind.

But he was not the one who had hurt her. He would not act apologetically on behalf of the weak, stupid orcs who couldn’t hold their instincts in check.



With one step, Urgan was in front of her, so close their bodies were touching. Before she could protest, he wrapped his arms around her, folding himself over her protectively. He stroked the back of her head with two fingers, gently. Her hair was smooth and soft.

Una sobbed once, her body shaking even harder. It seemed to Urgan she couldn't decide whether to run or let him comfort her. Then, with another wet sob, she melted into him, her balled fists pressing into his abdomen. She cried while Urgan expanded his senses, listening for danger. Protecting her in her moment of vulnerability.

"Now," he said when a minute had passed. "We must go."

He stepped back and looked at her face. It was red and puffy from crying, and wet with tears. The mask was off. This was the real Una.

Urgan had never seen a lovelier sight.

He wiped her cheeks with his thumbs, his movements slow and careful.

"They will be punished if they are still alive," he told her seriously. "In the Emperor's land, the punishment for killing an innocent, be it an orc or a human, is death."

Una gave him a hard look.

"No need to punish. They dead. All orcs who rape my mother dead."

Urgan was intrigued by the ferocious intensity in her voice.

"How did they die?" he asked, already suspecting the truth.

Una stared at him for a moment, her brown eyes alight with hatred.

"I kill them. When they feast in our village, I bring them drink. Poison with belladonna. Everyone think they just drunk and only later realize they dead. Other orcs say stupid Zorrak, stupid Fuhdra, they suffocate on own vomit when drunk. No one suspect me."

Urgan frowned, approval and displeasure warring inside him.

"You were within your rights to avenge your mother. It's one of the most important laws." He paused, giving her a hard look.

"But you did it without honor."

Una laughed derisively.

"What would be with honor? You say I must come up to them and say, you killed my mother, now we fight?" Her laughter turned into a bitter cackle. "How I even stand a chance in fight with orc, Urgan? You say I must die to have honor? Because I prefer living."

His frown deepened. There was undeniable logic in her words, and he had to admit she was right in the most factual sense. The law allowing

revenge for one's murdered kin was an orc law. It hadn't been written with humans in mind. And maybe one day, it could be adjusted to allow for the humans' disadvantage in battle.

But for now, it was as it was: a revenge could only be honorable if it were a duel. Using poison was the cowardly way.

As a military man, Urgan valued honor above all else.

If an orc female avenged her murdered family using poison, he would demand that she wipe away her blame and restore her honor.

He would expect nothing less of his future mate.

"It is done now," he said. "But your honor is blemished. You should clean your name."

Una's jaw jutted out rebelliously.

"This no human law. Because if you tell your Emperor I kill orcs in revenge for mother, what he say? That the law? Or that Una human, so she be raped and killed herself for killing an orc?"

Urgan's eyes narrowed, and he stepped closer to her, swathing her in his shadow. His displeasure was growing.

"The Emperor is short-sighted and ignorant about many matters. But honor is important. If you are to become my mate, you will have to clean your name."

Fury flickered in Una's eyes, and a second later, her face became blank, even though her chest was heaving with her agitated breathing.

"Very well," she said, only the slightest tremble in her voice betraying her emotions. "How I clean my name?"

Urgan grunted, pleased by her acquiescence. Because in this case, there could be no other solution.

If need be, he could compromise on some matters.

This wasn't one of them.

"As the general, I can give you a penance. One deed that you must do in order to restore your honor. It is usually a deed of submission and servitude."

Her eyes flashed again, hot and full of hatred, and she set her mouth in a grim line.

"Will you do your penance?" Urgan asked, the calm in his voice contradicted by his growl.

Her answer was a sharp nod.

He stepped back, giving her a long, calculating look.

“Very well. This is your penance: when we reach the nearest stream, you will kneel before me and do as I say.”

Her face paled in an instant, the only color remaining the brown of her eyes. Eyes that were filled with terror.

# Chapter 8

*Una*

Why had I told him?

I kept thinking about it while we were riding, the torches' dancing light barely making a dent in the darkness. Why had I told him I had killed those orcs?

It was my temper again. Somehow, it had seemed important that I show him how vicious I could be. That I didn't need an orc to punish those who had hurt me. I wanted to shock him for once.

Because I had felt weak and vulnerable and wanted to feel strong again.

And now, I would pay for that.

I clenched my fists, my nails digging into my palms. The punishment Urgan had given me seemed mild enough... but the thought of kneeling in front of an orc was too humiliating.

And not only because it was a gesture of utter subjugation.

I felt doubly humiliated because a part of me felt *thrilled* to do that. A part of me would enjoy kneeling between Urgan's muscular thighs. Looking up at him. Being close enough to smell his musk.

What would he demand of me when I knelt at his feet? My belly filled with a cold, roiling terror... and butterflies of nervous excitement.

I thought frantically about a way out. What would Urgan do if I refused? Would he abandon me in the middle of the Wilds?

No. He valued honor, obviously, and he had given me his word. He **WOULD** take me to the capital. So... Maybe I could just refuse?

"Urgan," I said hesitantly. "What would happen if I... said no to your penance?"

He shifted behind me, his breath blowing into my hair as he snorted.

"If a penance is refused, the matter is given to an orc higher in station. In this case, to the Imperator."

I stiffened, my hands shaking. If he hauled me in front of the Emperor and told him what I had done... I would be executed. And even if I were given another penance, something told me it might be much more painful.

Urgan wouldn't tell the Emperor. Or would he...?

"Fine," I said, gritting my teeth. "Where is this stream? Let's get it over with."

Urgan shook with silent laughter, and I closed my eyes, my heart beating fast from nerves.

"I can smell running water, so not far," was his response.

And indeed, we stopped soon by a wide stream, its water black and rippled in the dark. Urgan told the other orcs to keep watch and took me off Brrthak's back. He and I would be gone for half an hour, and after that, our journey would resume. It was still too early to make camp, according to Urgan.

He took a torch, his silver eyes flashing in its light, and took my hand, his huge, calloused palm easily wrapping around my small, pale one. We were walking up the stream for a few minutes, a taut silence between us.

My palms were sweating, yet Urgan didn't let go of my cold, moist hand.

We reached a wide, tall rock sitting on the bank, its bottom disappearing under the water. To my horror, Urgan started undressing.

"What are you doing?!" I demanded, my voice a squeak of terror.

He didn't even look up at me. With quick, methodical movements, he removed his wide belt with his curved orcish sword and put it on the ground. His shoes went next, and then his leather breeches.

All that was left was a long shirt that hung halfway down his thigh... and something underneath it, hopefully.

I wasn't even trying to hide my terror now. And yet, there was an eager curious voice inside me that wondered: *Will he remove the shirt?* It was the voice that belonged to that part of me that was itching to slide my fingers under his clothes.

I squashed that voice and focused on my terror. After all, fear and trembling was the appropriate reaction here.

Urgan sat down on the rock, his legs in the stream. It was shallow there, the water coming barely above his feet.

The light of the torch flickered on the moving surface of the water.

"Kneel," he said. His voice was hoarse.

I closed my eyes, my whole body shaking.

I could say no. I could travel with Urgan farther, pretending to be an eager and compliant future bride, and then run from him before we reached the capital.

I could do that.

But what would become of my life if I did? I knew I had been born with an important purpose. I needed to save humankind, or at least make human lives easier. And the only way to do that was to go to the capital.

I sighed deeply, promising myself I would do whatever Urgan demanded. It was only for half an hour. I could deal with it.

And the mad part of me thrilled, its excitement shooting straight to my lower lips.

Oh, yes. I would do whatever he asked. Eagerly.

I hitched up my dress, tucking it behind my belt. My legs were completely bare now, only my undergarments covering my sex. Urgan's silver eyes were on me, evaluating. Cold.

His gaze gave away nothing.

I stepped in the water, hissing when the cold current bit at my feet. The bottom of the stream was covered with soft sand, and I thanked the gods for this small mercy. Kneeling on stones would have been excruciating.

I stepped closer to Urgan and knelt between his powerful legs. At first, I winced from the cold. The icy water was reaching almost to my buttocks. I gripped Urgan's knee to steady myself, and it was warm and rock-hard. A sigh escaped me... And in this moment, I decided that if I had to do this anyway, I would at least enjoy it.

Without letting go of his knee, I looked up at Urgan, a challenging smile on my lips.

"You have me where you want me. What now?"

For the longest while, he said nothing. I was beginning to shiver, the cold water lapping at my skin. Urgan's throat moved as he swallowed, and I suddenly became aware that he wasn't cold and indifferent anymore.

The sight of me at his feet was affecting him. Which meant I could enjoy myself even more.

I gave him a playful smile and a wink, leaning my forearms against his legs, looking up at his face. Urgan frowned, his eyes filling with thunder. He bent down, his face close to mine.

We were a breath apart.

“I will give you an order now. If at any point you wish to touch me anywhere else than I say, you must ask for it. You will obey me to the letter. There will be no less... and no more.”

I drew a shuddering breath. I had forgotten to breathe while he had been speaking.

So much for my insolence.

Urgan raised one eyebrow and gave me a smirk. I bit my lip, suddenly wishing I hadn't leaned against his knees. With exaggerated care, I removed my forearms. Urgan's smirk turned into a wolfish grin.

“Wash my feet.”

I sputtered in indignation. I watched Urgan's face, waiting for the glint of amusement or any other sign that this was a joke.

But he was watching me, evaluating now, and dead serious. I gulped, realizing he really meant it.

And also... this was a test.

Clenching my jaw, I looked down where his legs disappeared under the water. The first thing I noticed was how large his calves were. And his feet. I looked at my small hands, realizing this task would cost me a lot of effort.

Biting my lip to hold back a curse and a stupid voice of disappointment, I reached for his left foot.

There wasn't any soap, but the soft sand on the bottom of the stream felt clean, so I rubbed his foot with it. Hesitantly, I started massaging his ankle and foot with the sand, running my hands over his skin.

Above me, Urgan sighed. I looked up. His eyes were closed.

A thrill went through me. He was enjoying it. The great general was relaxing under my touch.

I went on massaging his foot. Finally, I pried my fingers underneath it, and Urgan lifted his leg without a word. I washed his sole with sand, running my fingers over the rough skin and pushing them between his toes.

I repeated everything with his other foot, focusing on my task in the hopes of eliciting another reaction out of him. He grunted deeply when I dug my fingers into his instep, so I kept doing it.

“Enough,” he said, his voice deep and quiet. “Now, wash my calves.”

So the way this was going was up. My heart beat faster.

I scooped up more sand and ran it over his calf. I tried to massage it, but there was no give: his enormous muscles were as hard as steel. And yet, Urgan gave me another deep grunt.

I cleaned his other calf with sand and water, noticing for the first time that Urgan's skin, while thick, was hairless. My mind immediately travelled to his thigh and further up, wondering about his groin.

Would there be hair...?

When Urgan's calves and shins were clean, he said hoarsely: "Wash my knees."

My hands stilled. I wasn't freezing anymore because the exertion had warmed me up some... But at that moment, I shivered.

From fear? Or from impatience? I pushed the thought away and focused on Urgan's knees, running sand over them. Soon, I was done, and Urgan shifted, leaning back on his forearms, his eyes now open but hooded.

"Wash my thighs."

I was breathing too fast, getting dizzy. My hands trembling, I scooped up more sand and started at his thigh right above his knee, eyeing the hem of his shirt. I would have to roll it further up to reach higher.

I kept working, my desire for Urgan battling with my reason. My arms were hurting from holding them up.

"May I stand?" I asked and closed my eyes in mortification at the sound of my voice. Squeaky and breathy. It gave away too much.

"No."

I looked up at him, and a gasp escaped me. His features were relaxed, his eyes filled with an intense silver sheen, and his shirt... was tented. Enormously so. His member was standing to attention, only the thin fabric preventing me from seeing it.

I swallowed hard, my hands motionless against Urgan's thigh.

I had done it. It was my first thought, and it came with a surge of power. I had caused this hard warrior to not only relax but also swell with arousal.

Slowly, I resumed massaging his thigh, reaching further up. Closer to his groin.

While my hands were working his hard muscles, passing over his green skin, almost black in the dark, I couldn't stop wondering. What else could I do to him?

Could I... make him groan in passion? Could I draw curses of pleasure out of him? Could I make him lose control over himself?

That last thought made me shiver as I moved the shirt another inch higher up. What would Urgan be like when he lost control?



My underthings were already soaked through, my sex throbbing with painful need. I wanted him. I wanted him feral and uncontrollable.

I looked up into his face, my breathing fast, and remembered in time what he had told me. That I had to ask. At this point, I was willing to do just that, my self-respect be damned.

But Urgan's eyes were wide open and alert, focused on the forest behind me. He snarled suddenly, and there was a startled rustling sound in the undergrowth. Something had been there, and he scared it into running.

"Get up," Urgan said. "I smelled a ragghit. We must be on our way."

I stood up shakily, leaning against his leg. I was getting far too comfortable touching Urgan, I thought. His hand landed on my waist and he steadied me. Soon, we were out of the water, Urgan dressing fast.

He picked me up and almost ran, the frown on his forehead deeper than normal. When we reached the others, he put me in Brrthak's saddle and we set out at once, riding as fast as the flickering light of the torches allowed.

"You have cleaned your name," Urgan said, his arms a safe cage around me. "Your honor is intact."

And now, why was I having an urge to stain my honor again only to repeat what we had just done?

I shook my head, trying to dislodge the lunatic thought. I wasn't supposed to want Urgan. It wasn't the plan.

I was only using him to get to the capital. And any feelings I had for him were just... stupid bodily urges. Nothing more.

And I was stronger than my body, I told myself firmly. I would resist, and soon, I would be free of Urgan forever. Yes.

Content with my conclusion, I snuggled closer to the warm body behind me. I was shamelessly leeching Urgan's body heat. The night had gotten chilly, and my linen dress was damp. Urgan hadn't given me a chance to grab a cloak when he snatched me away, so I reasoned it fell to him to make me warm now.

I shouldn't be touching him willingly, I reminded myself. But I was so tired. So tired and tense, in fact, that I had revealed a dangerous piece of information. I owed it to myself – and to my plans – to rest.

And what harm could it really do? As soon as we reached the capital, I would ditch Urgan. We would part ways and I would never see him again, end of story.

So... why not enjoy him while I still could?

I turned my face into him, pressing my ear to his chest, tangling my hands in the loose cape he had put on earlier. Just for tonight, I promised myself. Just for one night, I could let go.

His arm pressed to my side, holding me secure, and a deep rumble vibrated in his chest. It could have been laughter, or words of comfort, or...

I fell asleep.

When I woke up, I was in Urgan's lap. We weren't riding. He was sitting with his back to a large tree and holding me close. I was enveloped in his heat... and pressed very close to his monstrous length that was as hard as a rock.

It seemed like a dream. A good one, too. Still fuzzy from sleep and so pleasantly warm, I rubbed myself against Urgan's hardness, arching my back. A soft sigh escaped me. I squirmed in Urgan's lap, heat and wetness building up between my legs.

"Stop," he said quietly. I froze, going from mellow to wide awake in a matter of seconds.

"Stop or I won't be able to hold back. And this is not the time and place." His voice was calm, but I could hear the tension now. The suppressed passion.

Gods. What was I doing?!

I tried to push him away and step back, but his hold on me would not budge.

"Oh, stay. It's pleasant with you in my arms. And you've done a good job keeping me awake and alert. But... even I have my limits."

"Let me go," I said through clenched teeth.

Urgan peered down at me, his silver eyes reflecting the glow of a torch that was burning nearby, stuck into the ground.

"Tell me why and I will."

"I... I need to pee," I said. It was true enough.

And I was also hungry. I had only had water over the journey, and my last meal had been somewhere around noon. I could bet it was past midnight now.

Urgan let his arms drop.

"Don't go far," he said. "It's safe for now, but it could change any minute."

I shivered. For now. Of course. Because there were ragghits on the prowl, hunting for blood.

I squatted behind a bush just ten steps away from the camp, caring little if Urgan heard me. I could travel over a mile and he would still be able to hear me if he focused. The orcs' senses were that sharp, as I had learned from the Tradesman.

And they had a keen sense of smell, too... I closed my eyes, mortified. Had he smelled me just now? He must have.

I gathered some dry, soft moss growing on the side of a tree and wiped myself as best I could. What I really needed was a proper bath, with water and herbs, but I doubted I could get it in the middle of the wood.

And I could guess what Urgan would say if I demanded to wash myself in a stream.

He would say he would watch me. For my safety, of course.

Being in the water, having those silver eyes caress every inch of my naked body... Urgan's sharp focus on me only... I closed my eyes and shook my head. I was getting wet again. At this rate, no amount of moss would save me.

Why would my mind not behave?

I stood up, looking around. I could just make out the darker outlines of the trees and the general entanglement that was the undergrowth. I could probably walk through this forest until I found a human settlement. There were plenty of streams here. There were berries and nuts. I wouldn't starve.

There were also ragghits and other beasts. Or, at least, Urgan claimed they were nearby. We hadn't seen anything since the attack. And, of course, there was Urgan himself, who would hunt me down as soon as he noticed my disappearance.

But... maybe next time, I would set off further into the woods to do my business. That way, if I decided to run away, I would gain a few precious minutes. He wouldn't suspect me right away if I walked too far off.

When I got back, Urgan was waiting, his eyes flashing in the darkness.

"Grikh," he said. "Zadran."

Two orcs sat up at once, rubbing their eyes. Urgan motioned for me to join him. He had fashioned one bag from his saddle into a lumpy pillow and was sitting by it, waiting. I walked closer to him and sat down.

He offered me his waterskin, and I drank deeply. He then gave me a big, rectangular piece of...

"Orc bread?" I asked, raising my eyebrows. Orcs didn't share their bread with just anyone. Humans rarely had a chance to taste it. It was a guarded

orc secret.

“From my oven,” he said, watching me calmly.

I took it from him, hesitating. It seemed to be all hard crust. I sniffed it and was surprised to smell honey and caraway. Urgan’s eyes were fixed on me, not even blinking. He was giving me far too much attention.

“It’s not poisoned or anything?” I asked, trying to sound joking, but my voice hit a too high pitch at the end of the question. I sounded nervous.

“It’s bread from my oven,” Urgan repeated. He seemed to be waiting for me to realize something.

I looked at the bread again. It looked golden in the warm light of the torch. I really wanted to taste it, but Urgan’s behavior was making me wary.

“And?” I prompted him.

Urgan shook his head. He seemed somehow disappointed but also amused.

“The Tradesman didn’t speak to you about mating rituals?”

I choked on saliva I was about to swallow and dropped the bread into my lap. As I was coughing, Urgan chuckled. Finally, when I could breathe normally again, I looked up at him accusingly.

“Is that... I don’t know, a trick? Will eating the bread make me your wife?”

Urgan laughed quietly, his fangs flashing in the light of the fire. I was fuming. Hunger and the fact that this deliciously smelling bread was right in front of me was irritating.

“When I make you my wife, you will know it without a doubt,” he said with annoying confidence. “No. The bread means that you are family. Only my family can eat bread from my oven.”

Oh.

A lump grew in my throat. I looked down at my hands, suddenly stripped of my ability to face him head on.

Family.

It was a magical word, a word that was tied up with all kinds of suffering and longing inside me. Ever since my parents had died, I was all alone. And even when they had been alive... I hadn’t felt like I had a proper family.

The word conjured a nostalgic image. A fireplace with happily burning logs of wood. Laughter. Food steaming on the table and kids chasing each other around it. Things that I had only seen in my imagination because I had never experienced them in my own life.

And now, the word became tied to something else: the smell of honey and caraway.

I picked up the piece of bread and kept turning it in my hands. It felt warm and comforting. I was surprised when a drop fell on the crust, followed by another one. Was it raining?

Then I realized. I was crying.

“You know,” I said, trying to make light of the suddenly serious mood, “when I thought an orc would make me cry, I didn’t expect it would be by asking about my past... or giving me bread. Are you sure you’re an orc?”

I looked up at him then, and my lips parted in confusion.

He had the most quizzical look on his face. A sort of softening, as if all his hard lines had smoothed. The frown that had been almost a constant fixture on his forehead was gone. His eyes, usually so perceptive and intent, were relaxed.

Not that he looked suddenly like a human. He could never be that, with his wide nostrils, sharp teeth, catlike eyes. But, for the first time, he looked like a person. Someone who could feel a variety of emotions. Someone with a heart.

I wasn’t looking at Urgan the Bloodthirsty, the Imperator’s general, the slayer of his enemies. I was looking at Urgan, the male who was offering me bread.

Something told me not many people or orcs had seen this Urgan.

“I am many things,” he said.

I nodded, speechless. And then, I did the only thing I could think of: I ate the bread baked in Urgan’s oven. I accepted the invitation to become his family.

And all the time, I kept telling myself it didn’t mean anything. It was his custom, not mine. For him, the bread meant something. For me, it was food, and I was hungry.

No matter how many times I reminded myself the bread meant nothing... I couldn’t extinguish the small flame of hope glimmering in my chest. That I, too, could have a family.

# Chapter 9

## *Urgan*

“They will keep watch,” Urgan said. “We can sleep now.”

“Um...” Una fidgeted. “You said that when I close to you, you be, um, alert. Don’t you think you rest better without me?”

Urgan’s eyes narrowed. He could tell she was bluffing again. She was trying to avoid him but chose not to be upfront about it. What was it with this woman and her lies? He would have to find out the whole truth as soon as possible.

“But I warmer with you,” she added quickly, giving him a cheeky grin.

She was perceptive, too. Urgan nodded once, pleased despite himself. She could tell already when he didn’t trust her, and she could change her strategy quickly. He beckoned for her to come closer.

She lied down in front of him, pressing her back against his chest and accidentally pushing her hair into his mouth. Urgan growled, a low sound of surprise and annoyance.

This wouldn’t do.

He lifted her up effortlessly and rearranged her body. Now, her bum was firmly pressed against his groin. And her hair was out of his face.

“Oh,” Una gasped, when he slung his arm across her chest, hugging her closer. He could feel her heart beating frantically. The smell of her need was thick in the night air and it took all of his willpower to resist the urge to just take her.

“I like your hair,” he rumbled, his voice amused, “but not so much that I want it up my nose. This is much better.”

She murmured softly, sounding sleepy. She fell asleep so easily in his arms, he noted. A lesser orc might feel offended about it... but Urgan was pleased. It meant she felt safe. It meant she trusted him.

Or, at least, her body did.

He glanced up at Grikh and Zadran, who were setting up new torches in place of the ones that had burned down. Both orcs looked vigilant and ready to take on their watch. Good. He could sleep.

When Urgan woke up, the wood was gray with the morning light. And Una was squirming against him, rubbing her perky backside against his cock and sighing softly.

She was still asleep and Urgan was painfully hard.

It would be so easy to hitch up her dress, tear off her underwear, and bury his length in her slick flesh. He could bet she would enjoy it too, mewling through her sleep, waking slowly to the rhythm of him impaling her on his shaft again and again...

Urgan cursed under his breath, forcing the fog of lust out of his mind. She hadn't said yes yet. Her body could be sending multiple signals of arousal, but if Una's mouth didn't speak the words of desire, he wouldn't touch her.

But maybe he could get some truth out of her in her sleeping but active state.

"What do you want, Una?" he asked quietly, his mouth brushing against her ear.

She ground herself against him with a moan, making Urgan clench his teeth. It had been a bad idea, then. He was about to break away from her too tempting body, when she sighed and moaned: "I want... Urgan..."

He didn't move, watching her with a new intensity. So it wasn't just her female body reacting to his male one. She really wanted him.

"What else do you want?" he asked softly, drawing on the last reserves of his self-control.

Una turned to him, her eyelids fluttering gently like a butterfly's wings in the wind. Urgan didn't dare move.

"Want..." she said in human. "Want... to kill..."

Her eyelids fluttered again. And shot wide open.

With a shriek of alarm, Una sprang up and away, stopping a few steps from him and breathing hard.

"To kill whom, Una?" Urgan asked, standing up. "You want to kill whom?"

"I not know what you speak," she blurted, looking left and right in a panic. "I dreaming about..." Her eyes widened when she looked at him, and

a pink blush rose on her cheeks. She bit her lip. “Dreaming. About things. Nothing about killing. Is it day? We ride now?”

She was obviously trying to change the topic. Urgan snorted with annoyance. He had been so close to learning her secret. But the moment was gone.

Well. He could always try the next time she fell asleep.

“Yes. We ride soon. Here.” He reached out his hand, holding his waterskin.

Una took a deep breath and walked closer to him – just close enough to snatch the waterskin out of his hand. She drank and gave it back. Urgan offered her another piece of bread.

“Not hungry,” Una said brightly, turning away from him.

But he had seen the brief moment when she had leaned towards the bread, her fingers twitching eagerly. She *was* hungry. Of course she was. Lying again.

Urgan clenched his fists, calculating whether it was worth it having another forced heart-to-heart with her. He decided against it. He needed to calm down first because his anger, frustration, and lust were running too high. He didn’t want to risk losing control with her.

And sometimes, the best way not to lose one’s control was to put off some confrontations for later.

He rose and gathered his bags. Una was nowhere in sight, and he instantly became alert, reaching out with his senses. A soft trickle of water from fifty paces away reached his ears.

She was nearby, taking care of her needs. He kept a careful watch on her until she came back, making her way through the undergrowth.

“You should have told me you would be away,” he said. It came out as an angry growl even though he hadn’t intended it this way. His hold on himself was slipping.

“Fine,” she said, throwing her hair over her shoulder. “Next time I tell you.”

She turned away from him again, walking over to where Brrthak was chewing on what looked like the remains of a fat beaver. Orc horses were smart enough to find their way back to their masters, so orcs allowed them to roam freely while they camped. This way, the horses could hunt for food.

“Did you catch it all by yourself?” Una trilled in human, patting Brrthak on his side. “You’re such a good boy! Yes, you are! Who’s a good boy?”



Urgan blinked slowly. Why was she talking to his red-eyed, blood-spattered scaly horse as if it were... a puppy?

Brrthak neighed cheerfully and lowered his head to nudge her lightly with his nose. A hunk of beaver meat was caught between his fangs.

Una laughed and scratched him under his chin. Brrthak snorted softly... and dropped the meat at her feet. He was offering her food. Urgan shook his head in disbelief. Brrthak had never offered any food to him even though they'd been riding together for a decade. And yet he had just gifted half a beaver to the human female he barely knew.

"Oh, thank you," Una said, looking genuinely happy. Urgan frowned. Would she eat the meat? Wasn't she disgusted? He knew humans didn't eat raw meat... "But you need it more than I do! Come on, big boy! Eat up so you have the strength to carry me! Go on!"

Brrthak snorted again, picked up the meat, and went back to chewing. Kluga, who was strapping his bags to his horse's saddle, grinned at Una.

"That was a very good beaver," he said. "If you didn't want it, you could have given it to me."

Una smiled up at Kluga. Something in Urgan's gut clenched, and his mind filled with a red mist.

"What your name?"

"I'm Kluga. That ugly orc there is Zadran, and the pretty one with feathers in his mane is Grikh."

Both of them turned, giving Kluga mockingly threatening growls. Una grinned at them.

"Kluga, you a big boy, too," she said, that smile still on her lips. "You catch yourself a fat beaver. Don't take from poor horse."

Kluga laughed loudly, shaking his large head.

"That horse isn't poor. He's the best mount in the army and can hunt better than any orc. I don't think I could match him."

"The best, huh?" said Una. "Of course. The general must have best. Why he pick me, then?" she asked, eyeing Kluga from under her lashes.

Urgan clenched his fists, his claws digging into his palms. Wasn't she aware he could see her? Or was she doing it on purpose to provoke him?

"Maybe you are the best," Kluga said after shooting Urgan a glance. To his credit, he said nothing more and did his best to get busy with his horse and ignore Una.

Urgan realized he was probably sending out strong smell signals right now, informing everyone around how possessive and jealous he was of her. Kluga had sensed it and was now doing everything he could to avoid Urgan's wrath.

Only Una seemed oblivious to his mood.

He gripped his bags and strode to Brrthak. With dexterous hands, he strapped the bags to the saddle. He faced Una, who was standing silently nearby, not looking at him.

"Una."

She looked up reluctantly. Her face was a mask, perfectly wiped of emotion. She looked bored.

"Yes?"

"When we were setting out, I gave you a choice. I told you if you weren't interested in being courted, you could go back."

Her face remained impassive, but she was fidgeting with her hands nervously.

"You chose to ride with me. Is this right?"

"Yes," she sighed, almost too quiet to hear.

"Did you mislead me, Una? Did you already know you would never become my wife, no matter how the courtship turned out? Tell me. Because the one thing I cannot stand is being used, Una."

Slowly, her mask peeled off to reveal a look of helpless frustration. She looked into his eyes and he looked back, trying to uncover the mystery she was hiding. But no matter how focused on finding out her secrets he was, he couldn't help being enchanted by her eyes.

They were buttery brown, a striking flash of darker color in her pale face. Clear and expressive, they were the gates to her internal fires. Through those eyes, one could glimpse the enormous stores of determination and courage inside her.

Now, their light was dimmed.

Urgan was waiting for her answer, sharpening his senses to detect even the smallest hint of deceit.

# Chapter 10

*Una*

There was no wiggling out of this one. I could already tell he wouldn't let me get away with a lie, and I had already seen that he was too perceptive to be easily fooled.

I couldn't lie well enough to deceive Urgan. Or maybe I didn't want to. At this point, I wasn't sure about anything anymore.

All because of the stupid bread.

So I told him the truth. Well, the least damaging part of it.

"I was... I am... attracted to you. I think you can tell, can't you?"

His eyes narrowed suspiciously, and he bent his head lower so our faces could be closer. His warm breath brushed my cheek.

"I know that your body is attracted to me. But I don't know what Una, real Una, thinks and believes. You're hiding something."

"Yes," I said with a sad smile. "But the secret I am hiding is not just for anyone to hear. So unless you are my husband, I'm not telling you."

For a moment, he looked utterly furious. Despite myself, I took a step back – only for my back to hit a tree. I was trapped between an orc and the trunk.

But then, he threw back his head and laughed that rich, rumbling laughter of his. I sighed with relief. The mood had lightened and maybe I could escape unscathed, after all.

"Throwing my words back at me already?" he asked. "But distraction won't work. I want my answer. Will you become my bride?"

Aha. Not so easy, after all. I would have to lie because the truth – that I had used him just to get a safe ride to the capital – wouldn't cut it. Not after what he had said about hating being used.

So, a lie.

If I pulled this off, this would be the most successful lie I had ever told. I looked bravely into his eyes, squared my shoulders to look completely confident in my words, opened my mouth... and gulped.

I didn't have to lie.

I could tell him the truth. I opened and closed my mouth and cleared my throat, thrown by the thoughts running through my head. By images, suddenly revealed, that I knew must have been already living in my mind for some time. Images of happiness. Of a family.

With him.

I could tell him the truth and it would be what he wanted to hear. So I did.

"I'd... like that," I said. My voice sounded like surrender. "I... want to become your mate. But... I need some more time to be certain."

He looked at me long and hard until he finally seemed satisfied. He stepped closer, trapping me between his large body and the tree behind me. He caught my waist and leaned down, his head closer and closer to my upturned face.

Our noses were almost touching. I couldn't breathe.

Urgan looked into my eyes, trapping me with his quizzical gaze. I was intoxicated with the power of his attention. And dizzy. I was the only woman in the world, he was the only male, and we were spinning together, our body heat trapped between us.

He kissed me.

Urgan's lips brushed mine, at first softly. Strange colorful lights were now flashing before my eyes. I opened my mouth wide to draw in a deep breath... and pulled Urgan's breath inside.

His mouth moved against mine, and I couldn't help but kiss him back. I wanted to taste more and more of him, hungrily drawing him closer, eager to run my tongue against his fangs and find out just how sharp they were.

The world bounced when Urgan grabbed my buttocks and lifted me. My back was pressed to the tree, my legs around his waist, my hands at the back of his head, grabbing him to me. Pressing him closer, wanting more...

Urgan snarled into my mouth, and after the snarl, his tongue followed. He tasted... not at all like I imagined an orc would taste. He tasted of caraway. Of the masculine musk I had already come to associate with him. Of power, arousal, and most of all, safety.

I did what I wanted then, darting my tongue inside his mouth, exploring, curious. His teeth, so large and pointed, were smooth. I softly ran the tip of my tongue under one fang, testing it. Sharp.

This discovery made heat pool in my lower belly. I was now squirming against Urgan, my whole body pulsing with need. I was on fire for an orc with a mouth full of fangs and I was loving it.

Urgan pressed me closer to him, kissing harder and demanding more of my lips. His fang pressed against my tongue and I felt a sharp pain. With a furious growl, he broke away.

“Offering me blood already?” he asked.

His voice was rough, and his face distorted in a grimace of primal passion. This was what I had always imagined orcs were: beasts, almost animals. Blood-crazed predators. Only, this wasn’t an image conjured by my mind. The beast was right in my face.

And I wanted him more than anything.

“We have to go,” Urgan said, lowering me to the ground.

He was putting a tremendous amount of effort into controlling himself. The fire in his eyes gradually burned down to cinders and his features relaxed slightly. But he still looked feral. And he was still very much desiring me, if his hard length was any indication.

“What does it mean... about the blood?” I asked haltingly.

My voice sounded harsh, and I was panting. I checked my hair, and it was a tangled mess. Oh gods.

“It’s a part of mating rituals,” Urgan said. “Exchanging blood. It’s not dangerous. It just means... trust.”

He summoned Brrthak and lifted me into the saddle. Calling to the other orcs to get ready, he mounted the horse, and I leaned against him, trying to keep my body relaxed, even though my mind was in turmoil.

Trust. Why did that word bother me the most of everything that had just happened? I should be much more bothered by having kissed an orc and enjoyed it. I should have been bothered by riding with him now, leaning against his hard body, and feeling protected.

But it was the way he had said “trust” that made me feel so upset.

No, not upset. Horribly guilty, more like it. Because I was actively deceiving him, and he had only offered me honesty and protection until now.

Well, not all the time. I still didn't know why he was trying to court me, a human woman he had just met. But he had been honest when telling me it was a secret.

I had pretended from the start that I had no secrets. I had agreed to come, actually meaning to kill him if he became a hindrance to my plans. My plans, which now, after spending only a short time among orcs, seemed completely naïve and unrealistic.

I had been so sure all orcs were stupid, arrogant, and self-absorbed! They were supposed to spend their days sniffing each other's armpits and flexing their muscles. And treat all humans with contempt, barely paying attention to them.

How mistaken I had been!

If all orcs in the capital – or even a handful of them – were as bright and suspicious as Urgan, there would be no rebellion. No secret meetings, no poisoning or killing orc masters in their sleep.

If Urgan or even some orcs half as bright as him caught any wind of humans organizing an underground movement, they would thwart it. I had no doubt about that.

They weren't dim-witted beasts. Neither were they contemptible idiots. At least, not all orcs were.

They could be smart. They could be loyal. And they could be just.

Which meant that even if I could start my rebellion somehow, I would feel wretched killing them. For example, how was it Urgan's fault that Tokoma males had raped women in my village? He hadn't known about it, didn't approve of it – and he believed they should be punished!

So, how could I kill him or any other orc, knowing full well that he might be innocent? That he might not have hurt any humans?

I was having all sorts of big revelations today. Pity they had come so late in the journey.

So, what was there for me to do? Become Urgan's wife? I shuddered. Yes, I desired him. Yes, I liked his company and felt safe by his side. But at this rate, he would soon dig out all of my secrets, including the fact that I had agreed to come with him because I wanted to kill the Emperor.

Urgan had told me he hated being used.

He would be furious if he found out. What would he do? I didn't know.

And besides, the thought of mating with him still filled me with fear. Desire, too. But the fear was stronger.

So, I wouldn't marry him. My other option would be to come to the capital and become a servant in an orc household. I grimaced. Stripped of my dreams of rebellion, the vision of such a future seemed dull and humiliating.

We kept riding, and I was looking around, not really seeing the forest. Something rustled in the canopy above us, drawing my attention. And then...

My heart beat faster. I straightened, nudging Urgan.

"A bird is singing! Does it mean it's safe?" I asked. "No ragghits nearby?"

Urgan grunted.

"Possibly. But the silence has followed us for quite some time. We still need to be cautious."

After a moment, he spoke again: "Ragghits avoid settlements, and there is a human village nearby. If some are following us, they may have strayed farther to stay away from the village."

My heart hammered in my chest. A village. A human village!

"How do you know there is a village?" I asked, straining to keep my voice idly curious.

"We passed a clearing not long ago. I could see smoke in the east. And I know from the maps that in this area, there are only human settlements."

"Oh, you have maps? Of the entire Empire?" I asked to make it seem like a normal conversation.

While Urgan was telling me about the Emperor's mapmakers, my mind was busy scheming. We were due for a stop. If there was a village nearby, there had to be a river or a stream. I supposed we should stop soon to refill the waterskins...

But if we didn't, I would just claim I wanted to pee and demand a brief stop. It wouldn't be as good though. I wanted the orcs to get busy with their water supplies and not pay any attention to me. This way, I would be able to escape more easily.

And then... what? March to the village? Find a place to stay?

Yes. But only after I'd made sure Urgan and his orcs had gone. They would look for me in the village, I would bet. Or would they follow my scent?

I bit my tongue to keep myself from cursing. Of course they'd follow my scent! What I needed was...

“River ahead!” called Kluga, who was riding at the front.



# Chapter 11

## *Urgan*

They stopped by the river. It was much wider than the streams they had encountered before, and the water flowed clean and shallow. Una had been right, too. The birds were singing. No ragghits were following them.

Urgan made the call to stay longer than necessary. They all needed a moment of respite.

His warriors had been marching and fighting for weeks, and now this ride through the Wilds, with ragghits on their heels, was exhausting their reserves of energy.

He ordered an hour-long break to clean themselves, rest, and let the horses drink and hunt.

Una was eager to hop off Brnthak's back. She drank deeply from the river, splashing herself with water. Leaving her to her devices, Urgan busied himself filling their waterskins and cleaning his equipment. For once, he trusted Una not to get herself into trouble.

The river was shallow, so she wouldn't drown. There were no enemies nearby. Surely, even a weak human would survive.

Also, for once, he was confident about her honesty. Having learned her behaviors, gestures, and smells, he knew she had been truthful during their last conversation.

That kiss which still lingered on his tongue had been honest, too.

Urgan would have a bride. He would avoid the Imperator's ploy and Urzulah's clutches.

And he would have Una for his mate. The sweet, fragile, scheming Una would be all his.

He would fill her lower belly with his seed over and over again. He would claim her in every way possible, drawing screams of pleasure from

her lips. And he'd give all his attention to claiming her, for once letting go of war and fighting.

It would feel good to bury himself in her sleek depths and disappear from the world.

Urgan chuckled. To think that the great general would finally find a pastime more worthwhile than bloodshed! And that he'd find it between a human's lips and legs, too.

Soon. They would have to perform the mating rituals before they reached the capital. So, tomorrow? Or maybe even today. He was certain she would surrender if he kissed her again. If he hadn't broken that kiss before, she would have already been his.

His shaft tightened in anticipation, and Urgan snorted, amused. He, a mature orc and a general, was acting like a youngster who had just discovered the pleasures of the flesh.

Something prickled the back of his neck. A hint of alarm. Urgan looked around, taking in his orcs, busy tending to their weapons. The horses, trotting around the other bank of the river.

The lack of Una.

She was gone.

Urgan snarled, at once overcome with anger at himself and his protective instincts going into overdrive. Had she gone too far? Was she lost? Was she in danger?

If something happened to Una, it would be all his fault. Like a lust-crazed youngster, Urgan had lost his focus. He had let her out of his sight.

He cursed, expanding his senses, searching for the sound of her voice, for a hint of her smell.

There! Urgan heard the faintest dissonance in the sounds of the river. A repetitive, rhythmic splashing... Steps in the water. He rushed in the direction the sounds were coming from, his powerful legs pumping fast.

Why was she walking in the river...?

But Urgan already knew, the realization twisting his face into a hateful grimace. Una was trying to run away. She was smart enough to figure out how potent the orc sense of smell was, and she'd thought she knew how to avoid being detected.

Had she lied again? Had it all been just another scheme? Or did she get cold feet when she realized how serious he was?

It didn't matter. If she thought he would let her go now, she was out of her mind.

And when he got his claws on her, she would give him answers. Finally. Urgan was done playing. He was done waiting.

His fury fueled him, and he shot past trees, getting nearer.

He wanted to wrap his fingers around Una's lying throat and squeeze the truth out of her. Make her choke on all the lies she had told him.

He was close now. So close he could smell her, a faint waft of herbs and female musk over the water.

So close he could hear her stop walking...

And scream.

The world went white at the edges of Urgan's vision. Because just as his ears registered the terrified, broken scream, his nostrils picked up another scent.

Ragghit.

Urgan ran faster, pure adrenaline fueling his body. He was in full warrior mode, uncaring about anything. Only one thought remained in his skull.

Slay his enemies.

# Chapter 12

*Una*

I walked along the riverbank first, pretending I wanted to do my business or get cleaned up. No one paid me any attention when I was leaving. They were all wrapped up in the sense of security that came from knowing the ragghits weren't chasing us.

After I'd walked far enough, I took off my shoes and stepped in the river. The current was slow and lazy, the water shallow and not too cold. I picked up the pace, worried about the pursuit. When would they realize I was gone?

But no one seemed to be after me. Excitement bubbled in my belly. I really did it! I outsmarted the orcs and was on my way to freedom! I wouldn't have to spend my life living among the orcs as a servant – or a slave...

I focused all my attention on the excitement, doing my best to ignore the painful stab of disappointment.

*I would never see Urgan again.*

But it was for the best. Of course it was. As soon as I found my way back into some human company, I would shake off these bizarre feelings and desires. Of course I would.

I'd never been good at lying to myself.

My steps slowed down a bit. Why wasn't Urgan after me? Had something happened to him? I listened hard for the sounds of pursuit, but there was only the susurrant of flowing water and the wind rustling in the trees.

I clenched my fists and forced my legs to go faster. Now wasn't the time to hesitate. If I went back, I'd never get another chance to get away. And I would end up either in a lifelong servitude to some orcs, or ripped in half, left alone to bleed out in the street. Just like my mother.

There was a crunch in the undergrowth, and I stopped, my heart beating fast. Was it Urgan...?

And that was when I realized I couldn't hear any birds singing. The only sounds I could hear were those of the river and the wind. All living things were silent.

Eerily silent.

A creature emerged from the gloom under the trees: an elk, its body stripped of fur, its eyes gleaming red. I was rooted to the ground, my knees locked in terror. I opened my mouth, but no sound came out.

The beast made a step towards me, baring its teeth that were sticking out of bloody gums. The scream that I was choking on finally made it past my constricted throat.

I screamed.

The elk shook its head like it was trying to chase away a pesky fly. It made another step in my direction, its mad eyes boring into mine. I couldn't move, couldn't breathe. My scream ended when I ran out of air and I couldn't draw in more.

So much for not cowering in fear, a snarky voice in my head said. I'd been pushing myself so hard to suppress fear, to hide it, to act in spite of it... And yet here I was. Rooted to the spot.

I drew in a gulping breath. *Right*. And another. The ragghit was taking its sweet time coming over to me, probably thinking I was a weak victim. Easy pickings.

Well, I would prove it wrong. I wouldn't die like this, paralyzed and helpless.

When it made another step forward, its hoof touching the water on the low riverbank, I turned away from it and ran, dropping my shoes. Water splashed behind me, and there was that sinister, reedy giggle. I didn't look back.

The bank in front of me was higher than the other – a steep wall of earth with tree roots sticking out of it. If I could climb it fast enough, I would have an advantage. The elk wasn't made for climbing. It would have to find a more accessible spot to go up this riverbank – and meanwhile, I'd be up a tree.

That was a brilliant plan.

But I hadn't taken into account that the earth out of which the tree roots were sticking wouldn't be packed and firm. In fact, it was pretty loose.

I was climbing frantically, pulling myself up by the thicker roots, and the soil – sand, really – was sliding from under my feet. But I was making a good progress, even as the elk came closer, still giggling madly... when a lower part of the bank slid down in a small avalanche.

I was holding on to a tree root, my feet dangling, helplessly trying to find some purchase. I looked over my shoulder. The ragghit was almost to me now, its head level with my hips.

Close enough to bite me.

I tried to pull myself up with just the strength of my arms... But failed. I was too weak. And the ragghit's grinning muzzle was right by my butt. I squeezed my eyes shut.

There was a low whistle, followed by a wet thump. The ragghit whined, a high-pitched, painful sound. I risked a look over my shoulder.

An orc axe was stuck in the ragghit's hindquarters, and up on the other riverbank, teeth bared in a snarl, stood Urgan.

He unsheathed his curved, orcish sword and grinned at the beast.

"It's your lucky day," he said, swinging the sword in a tight circle. "You get to be killed by Urgan the Bloodthirsty."

He charged. One moment he was standing still, the menace and deadly energy coiled like an aura around him... and then he was full-on running, already in the water, the sword at his side.

The elk charged Urgan with a whistling giggle. But it was bulky and wounded. Urgan, despite his size, was much faster and nimbler. He got out of the ragghit's path and cut low over one hoof.

For a moment, everything was still.

And then, the ragghit's leg gave, and it toppled, head first, its back legs scrambling madly. Trying to hold it upright.

I was certain Urgan would finish it now. But he just stood there, looking at the beast with cold fury.

He swung again, slashing the skin on its back. Again, crippling another leg. Again.

"Where. Are. Your. Friends." He punctuated each word with a cut.

The ragghit was trembling now, its body oozing black blood from its many wounds, its voice a high-pitched squeak. I felt sorry for it. After all, it wasn't evil. It was just sick.

"Urgan, stop!" I said, trying to get a better grip on the root I was hanging from. Should I just drop into the river? It was safe with Urgan here.

“It will be your turn when I stop,” he said without turning his face to me.

I gulped, even more terrified than when I had faced the ragghit. Urgan was livid. I realized his anger wasn't for the beast. It was for me. For my escape. What would he do to me? Surely, he wouldn't kill me... Right?

Calm down. The way to go was up, and then... Prayer?

I swung back and forth, my weak arms screaming from the effort of holding me up for so long, my palms raw from hanging onto the rough surface of the root. My toes touched the wall of sand and earth. I would swing again, and the next time, maybe I'd be able to scramble up the riverbank...

A powerful arm wrapped around my hips and dragged me away, making me let go of the root. I yelped and struggled. But it was useless, of course. I risked a glimpse down. The muscles on the arm that was holding me were pumped and hard as steel, bunching under Urgan's green skin.

I'd never escape his grip.

He carried me across the river, and I could see the ragghit's corpse bleeding into the water. When we reached the low riverbank, Urgan put me on my feet. He got a hold of my loose hair, hanging wild and tangled down my back, and pulled on it, forcing me to look up at his face.

Oh my.

His teeth, bared, the fangs gleaming much too sharp. His wide nostrils flaring in anger. His forehead sweaty with the effort of running and fighting. And his eyes.

A silver inferno of fury.

“Talk,” he said. “All of it. Now.”

He wanted to know the thing I had been hiding from him. The truth.

My naïve, stupid, unrealistic secret that I had already abandoned. Because I met him.

I looked into his eyes, everything inside me quivering from fear. I didn't want him to know I had planned to use him. And... I didn't want him to know how naïve my plans had been. I cared for his good opinion.

But Urgan smelled of rage and gore, and all I had was the truth.

“I was stupid,” I began, looking into his eyes. Dreading the contempt I would see there. “I wanted... When you said you'd take me to the capital, I wanted to go. Not... to be with you. Not to become a servant, either. I wanted to...” I sighed, biting my lower lip. But Urgan snarled, and I

flinched. "Lead a rebellion. Among humans. And kill the Emperor. Kill... as many orcs as I could. All... all of you."

He was still holding my hair. I couldn't look away, even though everything inside me was screaming to do that. To avoid the sneer that would appear on his face. To avoid seeing his disappointment.

But Urgan didn't look at me with contempt. He looked... weary. As if he had no hope left. As if nothing was worth caring about.

And that was infinitely worse. I opened my mouth, trying to come up with something, anything that would make him look less defeated, but no words came. There was nothing I could say.

He let go of my hair and turned away from me. Without another look or word, he started slowly making his way back to the camp, his gait heavy and tired. He was nothing like the warrior who had killed that ragghit.

My heart beat faster, panicking. I had done that to him.

I hadn't realized... but just as I cared about his opinion, so he cared about mine. I winced. I'd just told him I had been planning to wipe out his entire race. It didn't matter that I was wiser now, that I didn't believe all orcs should be destroyed... that I respected him. Could probably come to respect other orcs.

But Urgan didn't know that. All I had told him was... oh gods.

"Stop," I breathed. My throat was dry, my voice raspy. I panicked harder. What if I couldn't scream loud enough? What if he didn't hear me?

What if he left, and I never saw him again?

I started running, barefoot, trying to scream his name. Thankfully, Urgan was walking slowly. I caught up with him and followed, clearing my throat.

"Wait. Let me explain."

Urgan didn't even look at me. His jaw was clenched, his eyes unfocused.

"Just... Stop, will you? You don't know all of it."

He stopped, then. He still wasn't looking at me, but at least he was listening.

"What else is there to know, Una? You want every one of my kind dead?"

"Not anymore," I said. Pleaded. "Please. I... didn't know any orcs. Not really. I only saw the war, the fights. The rapes. I didn't know!"

He turned to me now. I recoiled. His eyes were cold and alien. All the warmth, all the shades of Urgan's emotions... wiped away. I was looking into a stranger's eyes.



“When I told you I’d take you to the capital and court you,” he said, his voice cool and even, “and you were planning your rebellion... What did you decide you’d do, Una, if I didn’t let you go? Or if I got suspicious? What were you ready to do?”

And this cut deep because we both knew what I’d been ready to do. Kill all orcs.

He was an orc.

“I didn’t know you,” I said, but even to me, it sounded like a weak excuse.

His nostrils flared, and he turned his back to me. Started walking again. We were close to the camp now.

“You wanted to go,” Urgan said. “So go. You’re free. There’s a village nearby. You’ll be safe.”

I stopped in my tracks. No. Not now, when I’d finally realized I wanted him so much! Not when I had to repay him for the damage I’d done. Not when my relationship with him, whatever it was, was the only exciting, purposeful thing in my life.

Not when my heart was hurting as if it were about to break.

“I’m coming with you,” I said, low. Keeping my voice from cracking with sheer willpower. “You promised. You swore on your axe.”

Urgan turned back so fast I thought he’d get whiplash. His teeth were bared in a snarl. I took a step back, but at the same time, something inside me rejoiced. I’d take furious over defeated. Even if his fury made my knees knock together in fear.

“A liar expects me to keep my word? You used me to serve your schemes, and now you want to use me more. This is all there is. Go away before I snap your neck.”

I was getting angry, too. And it was a good thing because otherwise, I would have just given in to my fear and fled.

“I don’t want to use you! Didn’t you hear what I said? I was stupid. I thought all orcs were dumb, no better than animals. Because Tokoma orcs were like that. But I was mistaken! You are... You are sharp. If there are such orcs as you in the capital, no rebellion has a chance. You’d discover it and end it.”

He was looking at me, his furious eyes fixed on my face with a painful intensity. I had difficulty keeping my thoughts in order.

“So, I don’t want to go with you because of my schemes. Those schemes will never work. I want to go... To make it up to you. I did wrong. And I want to repay for this wrong. I swear on my mother’s bones, this is the truth.”

I used an orc oath, one I had learned from the Tradesman. But would it be enough to make Urgan believe me? He had no reason to, after my lies...

Urgan’s face softened just a bit. But he was still furious. He still didn’t trust me. But this time, he believed I was telling the truth.

“How do you want to make it up to me?” he asked, his eyes mocking.

I hadn’t thought that far. I didn’t have the faintest idea of what to answer.

# Chapter 13

## *Urgan*

He watched her, some of his anger dissipating. If he had been in her position, Urgan wondered, living his life as one of the weaker race, losing his family to the stronger kind, wouldn't he want a revenge, too?

Yes, he would. But the proper, honorable way to avenge his mother would be to kill only those responsible. Not wipe out their entire race.

A thought occurred to him, and his blood chilled. How far had she thought her plans through...? Had she also planned...? He had to know. If she gave him the wrong answer, Urgan wouldn't hesitate to bring her to the capital to be tried and executed for plotting heinous crimes.

"Una. Have you ever seen orc cubs?"

She frowned, distracted by the change of the topic.

"You mean... Babies? Children? No. Tokoma lock up their wives and children in their village. I only meet warriors."

He nodded, somewhat relieved. But he needed to dispel all doubts about what Una had planned.

"And when you were planning your revolution, what did you plan for orc cubs?"

She looked confused for a moment... And then, a look of horror appeared on her face. She covered her mouth with her hands, shaking her head violently.

"I never hurt a child! Children are innocent!" she shouted finally.

Urgan raised his eyebrows.

"Even orc children?"

"Yes! All children! Oh gods. How come I never think about that...? I know why. Because I only start my plan for real when you offer it. Before, I have no real chance to go to capital... Gods, Urgan. I so, so stupid. Really, I... Leave me. You don't want me go with you, I understand."

It was his turn to frown. Yes, she had run from him. Yes, she had come on this journey with insidious plans in her mind. But hadn't she realized her mistakes?

Urgan didn't really want to let Una go. He was still drawn to her. Even so, he couldn't trust her now.

"Come. I did swear on my axe that I would take you to the capital. But the courtship ends now. I don't want to marry a woman who lied to me."

Her chin trembled and her eyes reddened, becoming shiny with tears. Something flickered in Urgan's chest. Something that felt very much like hope.

Was Una about to cry because he rejected her? Did she actually want to become his wife?

She pressed the heels of her palms to her eyes, took a deep breath, and faced him with a cool smile.

"Of course. I understand. I not make any trouble. Not expect courtship from you."

Not even one tear slid down her cheek.

Urgan grunted, pushing his disappointment far into the depths of his mind. It was better this way.

They walked to the camp together, keeping a brisk pace that wasn't too fast for Una. When they arrived, Urgan told his warriors about the ragghit attack.

"For whatever reason, they are following us. Maybe there is no other prey. Maybe they are stupid and want to die. I don't care. If a ragghit strikes again, we'll kill it. But we also need to report they are here. Send a troop to hunt them. It's an unnecessary risk to face them when we are so few.

"We'll ride late into the night and make a brief stop before dawn. At dawn, we'll set out again. We'll be home tomorrow."

He put Una in Brthak's saddle and mounted him himself. She relaxed against him to ride more easily, but this time, she didn't melt against his torso. Urgan gnashed his teeth, banishing any protective or lewd thoughts. Locking desire behind closed doors of his mind.

He had a job to do, and Una was no longer his future bride. She was just a girl who travelled with him. And he would act appropriately no matter what his body might want.

They set out, and the forest around them was singing and rustling with animal activity. Maybe the ragghit he had killed was the one that had been

following them. Maybe they were safe now. Urgan let himself relax just a notch, keeping an ear out for any changes.

They rode on and on through most of the day, making just one brief stop by a stream to let the horses drink. When it got dark, they lit the torches. And still rode on. Una swayed in front of Urgan, but she wasn't sleeping. Not once did her head drop against his chest.

He knew she must be tired. And she used to fall asleep so easily in his arms. Not anymore.

When they finally made camp, everyone was stiff, hungry, and dog tired. Urgan took the first watch so his orcs could rest, and Grikh joined him.

"Here," Urgan told Una, giving her his cape. She took it from him with a cool nod of gratitude, and something in his chest throbbed. He turned away from her, hiding his displeasure from her disinterested eyes.

They sat together, Urgan and Grikh side by side in the flickering light of torches stuck into the ground. Grikh was gnawing on strips of dried meat. Urgan was staring into the rustling darkness of the wood, keeping utterly focused on his watch.

Refusing any thoughts of Una to enter his mind. Because if they entered, they would not leave.

"Courtship isn't going well, eh?" asked Grikh.

Urgan looked around, focusing on the others. Kluga and Zadran were snoring. They had fallen asleep as soon as their heads had hit the ground. Una was curled up in his cape, her face turned away. He expected she too was asleep.

Good. He could speak freely.

"It isn't going anywhere. She came with us so she could assassinate the Emperor."

Grikh guffawed, and after a beat, Urgan joined him.

Because when he said it like that, it *was* hilarious. The tiny, slim, soft-faced Una trying to kill the enormous, dark-green mountain of flesh that was the Emperor – what a ridiculous vision!

"I don't see where the problem is," Grikh said, grinning. His fangs gleamed in the light of the nearest torch. "You seem to have a common goal."

Urgan's mirth evaporated. He shook his head.

"She came to her senses. But her plans were much grander. She had been daydreaming about starting a war and killing all orcs." His jaw set in a

grimace. Urgan took out his axe and a whetstone and started working on the blade methodically.

“It’s good we conquered Tokoma. They were giving our race a disgusting reputation back there. If they were all Una knew of orcs...” He sighed, testing the edge with his thumb. “It still doesn’t excuse her. But at least it’s easier to understand.”

Grikh was silent for a moment, and only the rhythmic metallic scraping of stone against blade could be heard.

“What will you do?” Grikh asked after a long moment.

“Court Urzulah,” Urgan said, shrugging. “I’ll make sure it takes a long time... Long enough for me to plan a coup. It may be more difficult this way. If my soldiers see I’m courting her, they will be less likely to believe my plans to overthrow the Emperor.”

Grikh grunted in assent.

“But what else is there?” asked Urgan, frowning at his axe. “If I refuse to court Urzulah, the Emperor will take it as an insult. He’s arrogant enough to have me executed.”

He cast a glance over his shoulder at the sleeping form of Una.

“The worst thing is I liked her. More than liked her. She is attractive, bold, good at facing her fears. A delicious female. Good for politics, too. And to think that instead of her, I might get Urzulah... It disgusts me.”

There was nothing left to say after this. Urgan and Grikh ended their watch soon, and Urgan went over to Una to lie down by her side. He missed the feel of her pliant body pressed against him like a sweet promise of pleasures to come.

But there were no pleasures in his future. And he wasn’t courting her any longer.

He lied down an arm’s length away from her. He was so tired now he couldn’t hold his emotions in check properly.

The sky was becoming gray with the oncoming dawn, and birds were waking, trilling sleepily in their nests.

Una turned to face him. Her eyes were open and bloodshot.

“You weren’t sleeping,” Urgan said.

“I hear you talk about someone with name Urzulah,” she said. “Guess you angry I hear?”

“Not angry, no.”

It wasn't really Una's fault that he'd just assumed she was sleeping. And, hell, he was actually glad she'd heard.

Una blinked up at him. She was too far away for him to feel her breath, but close enough that he could smell her. She was starting to smell a bit too strong, actually. She needed a bath. He did, too.

And instantly, his mind filled with visions of Una naked, bathing in the large tub he had in his general's quarters in the palace. Her body lathered with soap, her wet hair plastered down her breasts.

And he with her. Soaping her up. Standing behind her, gripping her both slim wrists in his one hand so she couldn't get away. Spreading her legs apart with his knee.

Sliding into her tight heat, the water steaming around them.

Urgan gnashed his teeth, trying to shake off the too tempting vision. It would never happen. It couldn't.

But he was too tired and under too much strain. His self-control was slipping. He was in a dangerous territory, and Una right there with him.

"So..." Una started, biting her lower lip. Urgan tried not to focus too much on that lip. How lush it was. How it dented under the edge of her teeth. How it had tasted when he kissed her.

"You must court someone you not like?" she asked hesitantly.

Urgan focused on her question, forcing the lewd thoughts out of his mind. His body had already responded, though, his cock growing hard.

"Urzulah," he said. Yes, he would talk about Urzulah. That would kill his desire instantly. "She is the Emperor's daughter. I received news that upon our return, the Emperor will offer her to me as my future bride."

Una frowned, looking unconvinced.

"But... Emperor's daughter is like orc princess, no? Why you not want to court her?"

Urgan called up the image of Urzulah's dull, arrogant face and let it fill his mind's eye. His erection deflated.

"She has many vices. She isn't someone I can respect. Also..." Urgan's face twisted at the memory. Should he tell Una? Oh, hell. She already knew enough. It wouldn't hurt. "I already courted her once. When I was not yet the general, just a young orc in the Emperor's army. Working hard to become an officer."

Una scooted closer, listening intently.

“I didn’t know her well. But she was the Emperor’s daughter, and she seemed to be a bright, attractive female. She came to me. She was the one who began the courtship.”

“So females can do that? How?” Una asked.

“There are various ways. Some females just say they want to be courted. Some are more discreet. Urzulah came to me when I was alone in a training hall. She picked up my sword and polished it with an oiled cloth. It was... very obvious.”

“Oh.” Una’s lips parted, and she blushed.

Urgan chuckled despite himself.

“I was a male and a soldier, but I was wet behind the ears and unused to female attention. So believe me when I say, my reaction was similar to yours.”

Una giggled at that, muffling the sound with her hand.

“So you court her then.”

Urgan nodded.

“I did. But orc courtship... It’s not the way I was courting you. It’s a long process. The female gives tasks, and the male must perform them. It’s tedious and stupid, but it is how it’s done. The only part of the courtship that makes sense is when the male shows the female his desire.”

Una gave him a look of mock disapproval.

“Aha. So that why you get yourself human bride? You too lazy to court proper?”

“I wanted to marry fast to avoid having to court Urzulah. So yes, that’s why I picked a human girl. You. Because I needed to be married before reaching the capital.”

A tense silence bloomed between them. Una looked like she was chewing on some words, trying to decide what to say and how. Urgan’s jaw clenched. He didn’t want her guilt or her pity. He wouldn’t listen to whatever words of sympathy she was about to speak.

“But she deceived me,” he continued the tale, adding pointedly: “She lied. Urzulah wasn’t really interested in me. She wanted a different orc. Durug. He was a highborn officer in the Emperor’s army. Unfortunately for her, Durug was courting another orc female, and they were close to becoming mates. So when I started courting Urzulah, she gave me my first task: to kill the female Durug was courting.”

Una looked outraged.



“What? To kill can be a courting task?!”

Urgan shifted to position himself more comfortably on the hard ground. The new position also brought him closer to Una.

“Usually not but it can be. Well. I refused. That female wasn’t my enemy and Urzulah couldn’t provide a convincing argument why she should be killed.”

“What happen then?” asked Una, her eyes wide with curiosity.

“My life became a bit more difficult,” Urgan said with a grin. “I got to see the ugly side of Urzulah. Her childish tantrums. She also tried to get her revenge on me for daring to refuse her, but she wasn’t very good at plotting. Soon after, I distinguished myself in battle after battle. Became an officer. And then, the general. By then, I was too precious to her father. I became untouchable. She stopped paying attention to me.”

Una looked into his eyes seriously.

“Stupid Urzulah. Urgan, you unusual orc. Smart. And not look down on humans. Good at winning war. I bet there no other orcs like Urgan. Are there?”

He closed his eyes briefly. He was too exhausted to evaluate the situation properly. Also, it wasn’t exactly a secret. So he told her.

“Not many. Because there is human blood in my veins. My grandmother is human.”

Una’s mouth opened in shock and Urgan’s lip curled bitterly. Always the same reactions. Always the looks, so disbelieving. Like he was a freak. Not a proper orc, and obviously not a human. A beast in between.

He had thought Una of all people wouldn’t be so surprised... Even hoped she would like his mixed heritage. Because, even though right now he couldn’t forgive her lies, a part of him still wanted her.

Well, he had been wrong. She was obviously disgusted. And now, he was tired of it all. He turned his back to her and summoned sleep.

## Chapter 14

*Una*

Before I could fully understand his meaning, he turned away with a grumble. I bit my lip, thinking what to say, but it seemed like Urgan wanted to sleep. And who could begrudge him rest? He had to be exhausted.

So I lay there, thinking. Because I wouldn't be able to sleep, that I knew.

When he'd finally told me why he had courted me, I had an urge to simply... offer myself to him. Help him avoid having to court that awful orc Urzulah. But before I could put it into words, he told me more, and then...

The big revelation. Urgan's grandmother was human.

And she was still alive, if I understood him correctly. So... She'd mated with an orc, gave him children who then had children of their own, and she lived through it all to ripe old age.

Now, that was something to think about.

Or not. I reminded myself Urgan wasn't courting me anymore. He didn't want me. Because I was a foolish liar. Right.

And yet... something told me he was still attracted to me. And I had seen his bulge get big and hard when he lied down next to me. So maybe not all was lost?

I sighed, noting ruefully how it had all turned around. At the start, all I had wanted was for him to lose interest in me. And now that it had finally happened, I hated it. I longed for his attention. I wanted to be courted.

And not like the orc ladies. Although... Now that I thought about it, maybe they were onto something. Having a large, powerful orc do your bidding must be intoxicating... What would I ask of Urgan if he courted me the orc way?

Heat pooled in my lower belly, and I squirmed, rubbing my thighs together. I would ask him for more of those kisses... And maybe for those

strong hands of his to massage my back... and my legs... and my buttocks... And...

Well, whom was I kidding. I didn't want to be courted. I wanted to be mated, plain and simple. I wanted him inside me, filling me to the brim, looking at me with those intent, silver eyes. I wanted him growling my name.

And I wanted to get a good, long look at that orc... cock of his. My face heated when I thought that word, and I knew I was blushing. But that was the truth: I wanted to see it up close. See it rise before my eyes, getting ready to ravish me.

I wanted to run my hand down it. See if hair grew at its root. What color it was.

And see its tip, swollen and glistening. Maybe even taste it.

I had been with a human man before, so I had seen a member up close. Well, just glimpsed it really, before he shoved it inside me for a few underwhelming minutes.

I wondered how Urgan's girth would feel inside me. I could bet it would be every shade of overwhelming.

That was when it hit me. I gasped softly, covering my mouth with my hand. I wasn't afraid anymore of mating with an orc. No, not just any orc. I wasn't afraid of mating with Urgan.

I actually wanted it very much.

And it was too late because now, he didn't want me.

I looked up at the sky, which was getting lighter with every minute, inevitably getting closer to sunrise. Time was running out. Today our journey would end.

Which meant I had at least a few hours to make Urgan want me back.

Plenty of time. Ha.

When the sun rose, Kluga and Zadran, who had the watch, whistled a sharp tune. Urgan opened his eyes at once, sitting up. He gave me a tired nod and rummaged in his bag, taking out his waterskin. And food.

His bread. The last two pieces of it. I held my breath. Would he offer it to me again? I longed to taste it.

Urgan handed me the waterskin and pushed a strip of dried meat into my hand.

"It's beef. Good meat."

He ate the bread himself, not even offering me a crumb.

Which was fine. Of course. I should have expected it.

But it also put me in a hopeless mood. Because how was I supposed to make him want me back? I was no seductress. I couldn't polish his sword suggestively and keep a straight face. I would burst out in nervous giggles before I could even try it.

What I needed to do was show him he could trust me. That I wasn't trying to use him. But building that sort of trust would take months if not years! I didn't have that kind of time.

"If we make haste, we'll be home before sundown," Urgan said to his orcs.

Aha. So I had until sundown... unless I caused some sort of delay? I shook my head to myself. No. No more scheming. I had to be trustworthy... And I shouldn't be working against Urgan's goals for my selfish reasons.

He believed getting to the capital fast was important, even though the forest was bursting with birdsong. Clearly, no ragghits were after us.

He probably just wanted to get rid of me as soon as possible.

Which was fine. I should have expected it.

I bit the inside of my cheek and focused on the mild pain to stop my tears. Stupid, stupid Una. Crying over an orc.

Urgan got Brrthak ready for the journey and put me in the saddle without a word. He avoided looking at my face, and his expression was stony.

It was hopeless.

He sat in the saddle behind me, and I hesitated. Should I snuggle into him? I badly wanted to. It might be my last chance to be this close to him.

So I did. I fell against his hard stomach, turning my head closer to Urgan's chest, listening to his steady heartbeat. I looked at the skin over his wide, strong ribcage. It was scarred and uneven, a deep shade of forest green. A sigh escaped me, my breath fluttering over his skin.

Urgan grunted, and his bicep, which I had a good view of, tensed, cording with meaty muscle. But he said nothing, so I just stayed like this, enjoying him. Although... he was getting a bit too pungent.

None of us had bathed during this journey, of course. Which meant I probably smelled too, even though I couldn't really tell.

We were off. Every step bringing us closer to the end of the journey. I didn't know what to do to get him back. My mind was working frantically as we traveled along narrow forest paths, the forest chirping and rustling around us.

Soon, we stepped onto a proper road that looked like it was used regularly. There were cart tracks imprinted in the packed earth. We had reached a common trade route. We were out of the Wilds – and close to the orc capital.

“Say, Urgan,” I said some time later. “Orcs have such a great sense of smell, right? So... What do you do if people around you smell bad?”

Urgan chuckled. He was in a good mood. Relaxed, too. I guessed he was expecting the rest of the journey to be safe and easy.

“Am I too much for your human nose right now?”

“Just a bit,” I said honestly. “But I wonder... you know... if I’m not too much for you.”

Urgan’s chest vibrated with a silent laughter. I scooted just a bit closer to him. This felt intimate. And intimate was good. Trust-building.

“Not yet. This nose has smelled battlefields and many human villages where people believe bathing causes illness, so they do it once a year.”

I wrinkled my nose. Thankfully, it hadn’t been like that in my village.

“But orcs usually bathe daily. We can smell ourselves quickly, so this is why. Your human noses just shut down when the smell is too much. Ours don’t.”

I pondered this in silence. Cultural differences. I was learning more and more. Not just the orc language, like during my lessons with the Tradesman. But all sorts of very important details that only talking to an orc – an orc who was aware of the differences between our races – could explain.

It slowly dawned on me that my naïve revolution plans had been even more doomed than I had thought. Because when one was planning a revolution, everything mattered: starting from orc mating rituals, ending on their bathing habits.

Urgan whistled, and Zadran, who was jogging in front of us, turned his head.

“Say, Zadran,” Urgan called. “What’s the worst stink you’ve ever smelled?”

Zadran turned to face us, running backwards now.

“I know. That fish dish my mate’s mother makes. She uses rotten fish that’s been sitting in a barrel for a month. It smells disgusting. But it tastes good.”

Kluga, who was riding behind us, snorted.

“You don’t know a foul smell if this is what you came up with. I once courted a human female who kept a dog. I visited her one day when it was raining. That dog was running outside and its wet fur smelled like the most disgusting thing.”

“You courted a human female?” I asked, my interest spiking. “Is it... common?”

Kluga laughed.

“Not common. But it happens.”

“So... Did you tie the knot?” I asked, trying to sound nonchalant. However, my meaning must not have translated well into orc, because Urgan, Kluga, and Zadran hooted with laughter.

“You got me confused with the dog,” Kluga said finally, when they were done laughing. “Orcs don’t knot. We don’t have to.”

I frowned, puzzled. Dogs... Knot...

“Oh,” I said, blushing. Urgan was still laughing, his chest rumbling against my head. I should have really let go of this conversation at that point, but I was curious.

“What do you mean, you don’t have to?”

It was Urgan who answered me.

“A dog knots so its seed can reach the bitch’s womb. If it didn’t, another dog could come and mate her, and its seed could be faster. She would birth the other dog’s pups.

“Orcs don’t have to do that. First, we are very fertile. Our seed is fast and strong. Besides, when an orc mates with a female, he won’t let another orc near her. If a female becomes an orc’s mate, she will never have another male.”

Heat grew in my lower belly, and I bit my lip. Why, why did my body have to be so obvious?

But the thought of becoming Urgan’s mate, of belonging to him and him only, of him keeping me possessively just for himself... It made me squirm with need. I wanted his fast and strong seed inside me.

I sighed, resigning myself to smelling like a bitch in heat. At least Urgan wasn’t cruel enough to point it out and reject me again.

Actually...

I pressed closer to him, my lower back flush against his bulge. A bulge that was growing larger and harder. My heart hammered in my chest. He still wanted me, then.

Or was it just a bodily reaction that meant nothing? I refused to think that. I had to cling to hope.

We rode in silence, his arousal trapped between our bodies. Urgan said nothing, did nothing. He was pretending it wasn't there.

But it meant something, and I had to make the most of it.

"Urgan," I said quietly.

"Hm."

"You asked me before how I wanted to make it up to you. After I had... you know. So, I've been thinking..."

I took a deep breath, arranging the words in my head. My belly was squirming with nerves.

"I know you don't want me. But I could become your bride. Pretend bride, if you want. As long as you need. So you don't have to court Urzulah."

He said nothing. We rode on, and I was feeling more and more mortified that I had dared to suggest this when I knew he hated me. Still, he said nothing. The uncertainty was becoming unbearable. So I started babbling just to fill the silence.

"I mean, I would never ever lie to you again, I swear. And... I would love to be your mate for real. But if you don't want that, I understand. Only I thought I could help you..."

Urgan's hand covered my mouth. The words got stuck in my throat.

"Enemy," Urgan said quietly.

Zadran drew his curved sword out of its sheath. I looked around as much as I could without moving my head, which was now pinned to Urgan's chest with his hand.

But I saw nothing. And I heard nothing – nothing apart from us. The forest was dead silent.

Brrthak snorted and stopped walking. He started shifting in place, turning this way and that nervously.

My throat constricted. The orc horses hadn't acted nervous during the first ragghit attack. Could this be... something worse? Something capable of making an orc horse afraid?

Urgan let go of my mouth and drew his axe.

"Stay here. I'll protect you," he whispered.

He jumped off Brrthak's back and landed on the road. Behind us, Kluga did the same. Grikh, who was much farther ahead, stayed in his saddle, his

axe in his hand.

A high-pitched giggle came from the trees on our left. Another ragghit then. I clutched onto Brrthak's mane, my hands white. Would it be another wolf, deadly fast? Or another large animal like that elk?

The small hairs on my neck rose when another giggle came from the other side of the path. There were two of them!

Urgan barked his orders. He faced the left side, while Zadran faced the right one. Kluga moved closer to us, guarding the rear. Brrthak was dancing under me, snorting. He was acting like he didn't know which way to turn.

I loosened my grip on his mane and started speaking quiet, meaningless words that were meant to calm him down. For a moment, I thought it was working. Brrthak froze, his head turning left.

A ragghit emerged from the gloom under the thick fir trees. A red-eyed bear. It wasn't yet stripped entirely of its fur – most of it still clung to its hide, matted with black blood.

It was as large as Urgan. And then, it stood on its back legs and gave a raspy roar, followed by an eerie ululation.

Larger than Urgan.

My heart stopped for a second. All it would take for the bear to defeat Urgan was one bite. One bite... or even a dribble of saliva into a fresh wound... and Urgan would be gone.

Infected and turned into a ragghit.

The bushes on Zadran's side of the road rustled and a slim, almost normal-looking deer emerged. Its fur was only just beginning to darken with rot, but its eyes gleamed red.

The air was dense with the sickly sweet corpse smell of the ragghits. I tried not to gag. In my mind, Urgan's question from before echoed. *What's the worst smell you've ever smelled?*

And I knew. The ragghit reek of death was the most revolting stench there was.

The bear ululated again, lunging at Urgan. They locked in a wrestling embrace, Urgan gripping the beast in half, ducking his head out of the reach of its muzzle.

On the other side of the road, Zadran swung his axe at the deer's head, but it pranced out of his reach.

I realized I was smack in the middle between the two beasts. If either Urgan or Zadran fell, I'd die.



Kluga was making his way closer to us, focused on Urgan and the bear. Good, he'd help him. But Kluga stopped before reaching us. His eyes opened wide, and he swayed slightly before whipping back.

I gasped. A small orange squirrel was hanging off his back, its teeth sunk into Kluga's flesh. Its fur was streaked with the black of the ragghit illness.

Kluga reached back, trying to throw the animal off him, but his movements were jerky, uncoordinated. A sob escaped me.

Urgan was still wrestling with the bear, his snarls and growls getting louder and angrier. He was holding the beast in check... But how long would he last?

Zadran had disappeared between the trees, probably chasing the deer. And Grikh had got off his horse and was running toward us.

I knew he wouldn't make it in time.

Kluga fell to his knees, and the squirrel got off his back. It landed, nimble and fast, and turned to Urgan.

Everything inside me froze.

No.

If the squirrel ragghit reached Urgan, it would bite him. Urgan was defenseless, unable to move in the bear's grip. Even if he saw the squirrel, he wouldn't be able to avoid it.

Slowly, as if in a dream, I turned. Zadran was gone. Grikh was too far away. And the squirrel was preparing to launch itself at Urgan.

Something inside me gave, as if a coil wound up too tight finally snapped. A lightness filled me, a certainty of purpose.

"At least it's not a bear," I murmured, sliding down Brrthak's side.

With a squirrel, I could fool myself that I stood a chance.

I landed hard, the impact reverberating in my heels and teeth. But I didn't fall. And the next thing I knew, I was running, positioning myself in the squirrel's way.

Just in time. It was already rushing at Urgan's back, so light it was almost flying. I moved, my body painfully sluggish, my limbs as if stuck in a pool of molasses. I was too slow. The squirrel could evade me easily, and there would be nothing I could do.

But it didn't.

As soon as it saw me, it gave a squeak and an almost girly giggle. It changed its direction effortlessly and was flying at my face, its mouth open. My outstretched hands not fast enough to grab it.

As if through a fog, I heard Urgan's angry snarl. My name on his lips.  
And then... darkness.

# Chapter 15

## *Urgan*

It was so surreal it was almost impossible. A ragghit attack on one of the busiest roads of the Empire? Unheard of.

Yet, here the beasts were. Two of them. And no other travelers in sight. Urgan thought fast. It didn't matter how unlikely it was. All that mattered was to fight and to win.

To protect Una.

When the ragghit bear emerged from the forest, Urgan let go of all unnecessary thoughts. His battle instinct took over, cataloguing his surroundings, noting the sounds, the smells, other fighters. Of the other ragghit nearing Zadran.

He grappled with the bear.

The beast stank so much worse up close, and its body didn't allow for a proper hold. He couldn't grip it by the fur, because it would just detach with a sickly wet noise.

And the ragghit was sticky with ichor, making Urgan's fingers slide. It was strong, too. It took all he had to hold the bear from walking right over him.

Urgan would have had no trouble with a normal bear if it dared attack him. But this was a ragghit bear. Ten times stronger and more vicious. It pushed against him, trying to squeeze Urgan in the grip of its paws. Urgan gnashed his teeth, planting his feet more firmly against the road.

He wouldn't let it through to Una.

Una, who had gotten off Brrthak's back. His alert senses picked up the rustle of her clothes, her fast and shallow breathing, her smell. She was standing on the road now. Why hadn't she listened to him? She was safest up there, out of the reach of the beast. Unless...

The air behind him moved. Another reedy giggle came from down the road.

There was a third ragghit. And Una was moving... not away from it. Was she about to fight it?

He called to her, pushing against the bear, but the mountain of putrid flesh wouldn't budge. Time for another tactic. As Urgan registered Brrthak's frantic neighing, he stepped back, letting the bear move forward. The beast stumbled, unprepared for the sudden lack of resistance. It gave Urgan enough time.

He unsheathed his sword and cut high, aiming for the ragghit's throat. Black gore gushed from the wound, and the bear swayed. Urgan cut again, this time its leg. The fur on the bear's legs was almost entirely gone, so he could see perfectly where the critical tendon was.

He severed it. The bear toppled onto the ground, bleeding quickly from its neck wound.

Urgan turned away from it. Where was Una?

There. She was lying on the road, between Brrthak's unsteady legs. Brrthak was standing over her, neighing again.

A squirrel ragghit was sitting on his back, its teeth sunk into the horse's flesh.

Urgan stomped down on his instinct to roar and rage. Slowly, carefully, he put down his sword and moved toward Brrthak, speaking evenly:

"Good Brrthak. Loyal mount. Stay. Do not move. Stay as you are."

If Brrthak moved now, he would trample Una. She was unconscious, right between his hooves. Urgan had no way to see if she was hurt.

Brrthak was still now, looking less nervous. Less in pain. But he wasn't calm, exactly. He seemed muddled... The ragghit poison was working.

With one jump, Urgan was at Brrthak's side. The squirrel, which was biting into Brrthak's flesh with gusto, looked up a moment too late. Urgan seized it by its tail and nape, and broke its spine with a crunch.

"Good Brrthak," he said, keeping the tension out of his voice. "Stand still. It will be good soon. Everything will be well."

He crouched by the horse and quickly pulled Una out, throwing her over his shoulder. Then, he grabbed his sword and slit Brrthak's throat, ending his life with one, deep cut.

He looked around. They were alone, save for Kluga, who was as good as dead. Urgan walked over to his friend and brother in arms, who was lying

on the forest floor, his breathing shallow, his wound black with ichor.

Without hesitation, Urgan stuck his sword between Kluga's ribs, piercing his heart. The harsh breathing was cut off.

The forest on the right, where Zadran had been facing the other ragghit, was silent. Urgan stretched out his senses. Something rustled deeper in the wood. And then, a roar of pain. Grikh.

Urgan cursed and tore into the forest, Una still slung over his shoulder, her body limp. He couldn't leave her alone. And he had to help Grikh.

He pushed through the undergrowth, finding his way to a small clearing. There, the ragghit deer lay slain on the grass. Zadran, his arm bleeding black, lay by it, his eyes glassy and unseeing. He was dead.

And by his side, Grikh was kneeling, rocking on his haunches, his face twisted into a grimace of pain. His clothes were spattered with the black gore. Urgan's heart became heavy with grief.

"Brother," he called. "Did it bite you?"

Grikh turned. He looked lucid and in control of his movements.

"No. But Zadran is dead. Kluga was bitten, too."

"I know. I killed him."

Grikh nodded once, his lips pressed into a thin line.

"And I killed Zadran."

"You did right," Urgan said, and Grikh nodded again. They both knew killing their infected friends had been necessary. But it didn't make it any less painful.

"Keep watch," Urgan ordered, laying Una on the soft forest floor.

He looked her over first, checking for any marks or wounds seeping black blood. But there weren't any. She hadn't been bitten. Her breathing was deep, and her eyelids were moving. Urgan ran his fingers gently over her limbs, checking if her bones were intact.

She seemed fine. And yet, she wasn't waking.

He nodded to Grikh.

"Let's go find the horses."

Urgan took Una into his arms, and together with Grikh, they walked back to the place of carnage. Brrthak was dead, and so was Kluga's horse. That only left Grikh's mount.

Walking further down the road to leave the place that still reeked of blood and danger, they stopped where Grikh had been when the ragghits appeared. Grikh called his horse. Urgan put Una on a patch of soft grass by

the road and sat by her side, watching her face without blinking. Waiting for the signs of consciousness returning to her.

Soon, Grikh's horse trotted over, looking spooked but no worse for wear.

"General," Grikh said, addressing Urgan by his military title. That meant he had an official request.

"Yes."

"I ask for permission to speak freely. I must warn you that what I want to say is only based on suspicions."

Urgan frowned. They never hid their opinions from one another. If Grikh was making a formal request, that meant he was about to throw a serious accusation.

"Speak."

"I don't believe it was a coincidence that the ragghits targeted us. They can be trained to follow certain scents. I believe these ragghits had been trained this way."

"It sounds far-fetched," said Urgan. "And there is no proof. But I agree it is strange that they followed us for such a long time and attacked on this road."

Grikh nodded.

"You have many enemies, general," he continued. "And... there is a chance someone from the capital has sent them to kill you."

"Go on."

"I think..." Grikh paused, shooting a glance at Una. Her eyelids were twitching now, a sign that her eyes were moving fast underneath. "It may be safer for you and her if you don't return to the capital right away. I want to seek your permission to go alone and find out what I can."

Urgan thought about it, weighing his options. Staying out in the woods was a risk. There could be more ragghits nearby. He wouldn't survive another attack like the last one.

And if he were on his own, it would be enough to make his mind. He would ride into the capital and find whoever had sent ragghits his way. If that was indeed what had happened.

But he wasn't alone. He was responsible for Una. And he couldn't protect her if he didn't know who wished him dead enough to prepare such an elaborate attack.

"You may go. But first, we'll bury our brothers. And then, we'll find a safe place where we can wait for you."

Grikk hit his chest with his fist, accepting the orders.

Una moaned, her eyes fluttering open.

“You alive,” she said, her voice raspy. She tried to smile, but her smile turned into a grimace. “Oooh... My head in pain. When Brrthak push me to the ground, I must hit my head... Ow.”

“What happened?” Urgan asked.

“I think... That squirrel ragghit coming for you. And you hugging the bear, so I... I think, squirrel ragghit not very strong, right? Even I can catch fluffy squirrel... Only the stupid thing too fast!”

She groaned, sitting up slowly. She touched the back of her head gingerly and winced.

“And Brrthak come suddenly and push me to the ground. I hit my head then. Everything dark.” She looked around then, peering at Urgan and Grikk. She turned, looking behind her.

“Where others?”

Urgan told her in clipped, simple words. When Una heard about Brrthak’s death, her eyes filled with tears. When he told her Kluga and Zadran were dead, she started sobbing, big fat tears wetting her face.

Honest tears and sincere grief for his brothers in arms. And for Brrthak.

If Urgan had had any doubts left about her, they would have dispersed at that moment. She had saved his life. And then, she cried for his brethren. She wasn’t asking for anything. Wasn’t using him. For her, he was more than a tool.

He was her companion. Someone worth of saving. Someone worth of sharing grief with.

He opened his arms to her, and Una shuffled into his embrace, shaking against him. Urgan gave Grikk a grim look. He believed they were thinking the same thing – if it turned out someone had sent those ragghits to kill them, there would be no mercy. Urgan and Grikk would avenge their brothers.

# Chapter 16

*Una*

Seeing Zadran and Kluga lying dead side by side, I couldn't stop crying. I didn't see just orcs. I saw people with whom I had traveled, talked, laughed. People who died protecting me, too.

Urgan was set on burying them, and I couldn't agree more. I said I would clean their bodies, but Urgan forbid it. He wanted me to stay far away from their infected blood. So, I offered to help with digging, but Urgan ordered me to sit still and sip water.

"You hit your head, and your human heads are fragile. You will sit here and rest. Besides, we're not going to dig."

They walked farther into the wood, but not far enough that I couldn't hear them. Urgan was making sure I was close enough that he could get to me fast in case of danger.

I heard them moving around and discussing something. Then came sounds of heaving, grunts of effort... and then, a series of creaks. The forest floor shook when something hit the ground.

Some time later, Urgan and Grikh emerged from the trees, their bodies muddy where earth had mixed with sweat. They picked up Kluga, careful not to touch his blood, and carried him. I followed.

When we arrived, I gasped. They had torn out a tree from the ground. It was lying on the forest floor, its roots sticking in the air, earth clinging to them.

And it wasn't just a flimsy sapling. It was a full-grown tree. A bit on the shorter side, granted, but its thick trunk made up for it. Tearing it out of the earth would have been impossible for a human.

Just how strong were the orcs?

The hole where the tree used to be seemed deep enough to fit two large orcs. Urgan and Grikh must have deepened it after pulling out that tree.



Now, they lowered Kluga into the hole and went back for Zadran's body. When both fallen orcs were down in the ground, Urgan started a solemn, slow chant.

I didn't understand one word of it. It was a deep, gravelly chant with an intense rhythm that resembled war drums. It made my skin break out in goosebumps. In that chant, I could hear grief, sadness, the memory of battles fought and blood spilled.

It spoke deep into my soul.

Hearing this chant, I was struck again by how little I used to think of the orcs. Never had I expected how deep their feelings went. How profound and soulful they could be.

The chant ended, leaving me hollow, strangely wiped of all emotion. My tears had dried, my grief had been lulled.

Urgan and Grikh grabbed the tree they had torn out of the earth and lifted it back into place, the muscles on their backs cording with the effort. They heaved and pushed until the tree was back in its place, most of its roots back in the hole, together with Kluga and Zadran.

Urgan held the tree in place while Grikh stepped on the earth around it, packing it tighter. Then, he put supports made of thick branches to lean against the trunk, holding it in place. When Urgan let go and stepped away, the tree stayed put.

With time, it would grow stronger and taller, a living headstone and a monument to the fallen orcs' memory.

We didn't speak after that, just made our way back to where Grikh's horse was waiting. Urgan gathered his bags from Brithak and salvaged some supplies from Kluga's dead horse. Then, he dragged each horse off the road, breathing hard.

"Lake Maldava?" Grikh asked when he was done, and Urgan nodded.

Without a word, he put me in the saddle of Grikh's horse.

"Hold on tight. It's an hour away," he said.

Urgan and Grikh walked fast on each side of the horse, and I swayed in the saddle, letting my body rock easily to the rhythm of the horse's steps. Letting myself just be numb and unthinking for a while.

After some time, we veered off the road onto a path leading into the trees. It looked to be used often. Soon, the trees thinned and something glittered through the branches.

A lake, sunlight reflecting off its rippled surface.

“Orcs from the capital sometimes come here in the summer,” Urgan said. “But not many. It’s a few hours of travel. There are bigger lakes closer to the city.”

I sighed. Wind was rustling in the tall grasses and cattails growing by the water. A lone bird was singing a plaintive song. The wind smelled of fresh water and mint.

“It’s beautiful.”

Urgan helped me get off the horse. He unloaded some bags off the horse’s back and spread his cape on the grass.

“Sit,” he ordered me. “We’ll gather wood and you can mind the fire while we hunt.”

I nodded but couldn’t stay put. My head wasn’t hurting too much – only a dull throbbing remained which I expected would pass soon. I walked closer to the water and found a patch of wild mint. I made a fragrant bouquet of it and returned to Urgan’s cape, chewing on the leaves.

Soon, Urgan and Grikh emerged from the trees and piled dry branches on the ground. They used their supplies to start the fire and left me sitting by it. I fed it sticks, chewing on mint and sipping water.

It wasn’t long before they returned, carrying a pheasant and a few rabbits. I grabbed the bird and started plucking off feathers. Urgan skinned the rabbits, while Grikh built a makeshift spit using a thin metal rod he had by his saddle and some stones.

“Grikh will go into the city and we will wait for him here,” Urgan said, glancing at me.

I shook out my hands, which were already cramping up from plucking the stiff feathers.

“Why?”

Urgan watched me for a moment while I returned to cleaning the pheasant. Finally, he spoke.

“We believe someone has sent those ragghits to hunt us. Grikh is going to find out if our suspicions are correct.”

“I will do my best to come back as soon as possible. Maybe even the day after tomorrow,” Grikh said, sticking a rabbit on the rod.

Soon, another skinned rabbit joined the first one, and then another. Grikh put the rod over the fire.

My heart beat faster. If I understood it correctly...

“So... I’ll stay with you here?” I asked Urgan, not even trying to hide how breathless this idea made me. “Just... us two?”

He nodded. His face was still solemn. He was grieving. Yet, there were sparks deep in his eyes. He was looking at me with an open, steady gaze.

I inhaled sharply, my whole body tingling. Suddenly, I wasn’t hungry anymore. My insides were twisting with nerves and expectation.

Because it meant he still cared about me. It had to.

Urgan and Grikh talked some more, making plans and suggestions that meant little to me. Speaking about spies, informants, trusted soldiers and members of the Emperor’s court. They were compiling a list of orcs and humans whom Grikh could approach to find out whether the ragghit attacks had been orchestrated.

Soon, the rabbits were ready. Urgan had a pouch of salt. He sprinkled it on the meat, and we ate. I couldn’t stomach more than a few bites, which I forced down my throat.

I hadn’t slept last night. I had been through a grueling journey and attacked by beasts from hell. My travel companions had died. And my entire world had been flipped upside down. I had to change the way I viewed everything. Orcs and humans. Revenge and what it meant.

That last one had truly left me reeling. I was still coming to terms with the fact that orcs weren’t just dumb beasts. That the plans I had been making for the last five years were naïve and unrealistic. And impossible to carry out if I didn’t want to become a monster. The bad kind.

I looked at Urgan as he wiped his greasy hands on a piece of cloth. He reached for a knife and quickly pared three claws of his right hand. He tested their edges, now blunt and short, with his thumb and nodded once, showing his fangs in a grin.

It struck me how attractive he was to me. I could watch even such a simple action with bated breath. Finally, I was ready to accept it: I desired Urgan and wanted to spend my life with him.

I should have been exhausted after everything that had happened. But my heart was beating frantically, fueling my body with adrenaline and butterflies.

Urgan looked up at me, and his mouth split in a sharp-toothed grin. Oh, he still looked feral. His skin was still green, and eyes so uncanny they gave me a pause. But despite all that, I felt safe with him. Like he was my home.

And I could not look away.

After we finished eating, Grikh rose and saluted Urgan. He mounted his horse and rode off.

And I just sat there, suddenly paralyzed. We were alone. The birds were singing around us, insects buzzing. It was safe. The day was warm, and the water was glittering, silver and inviting like Urgan's eyes.

Eyes that were fixed on me with a toe-curling intensity.

"It's an old custom that after a funeral, lovers mate. Death and mating are two bones, growing one next to another. Only having two of them together can make one whole."

Urgan stood up, his powerful body towering above me, green head jutting into the blue sky.

"Come, Una. The water should be warm enough."

I shivered, my breath hitching. Everything inside me was trembling with expectation. What would happen now? I was afraid of the unknown yet eager to find out.

So I stood up, stumbling a bit, and Urgan's arm snaked around my waist, steadying me. He looked down into my face, his eyes darker now, like the sky growing leaden before a storm. My breath stuck in my throat, my pulse roaring wild in my ears.

"You smell like mint," he said. Whispered almost.

He bent his head lower, his huge body folding so his head could reach mine. But he didn't kiss me. He touched his forehead to mine, breathing deep. We stayed like this for a moment, the wind whistling in the reeds around us.

Finally, he raised his head slightly. I was looking up into his eyes, soft and silver, and the world around me shrunk. Nothing mattered now. Nothing but us.

"I want you to be my mate," Urgan said, his voice raspy.

Something inside me twisted. So he wanted me, after all. My body trembled and sang... and only one dark thought spoilt my joy. I bit my lip.

"I'll say yes," I said. "But please tell me one thing. Is it only because you want to avoid that Urzulah? I just... I must know. How much I can expect of you. How much... I can want."

Urgan snorted softly, his breath blowing past my cheek.

"You can want anything and I'll give it to you," he said. My knees weakened from relief and he held me up as they buckled under me. "You risked your life to save mine. There can be no other female for me now and

never. You will be my mate. The mother of my cubs. And one day, you will be my Empress. You will be mine and only mine. And I will be yours.”

I had no words to say to that, so I just nodded, gazing up at him. Drinking him in. The soft, untroubled face of Urgan. The face that he revealed just to me. Not the face of Urgan the Bloodthirsty, although I liked that face, too.

But this was the face of Urgan who wanted me to become his family.

He picked me up, cradling me in his arms, and walked to the edge of the lake, where the water was gently lapping at the shore. He put me on my feet and knelt in front of me. He grasped the hem of my dress and slowly hitched it up.

I raised my hands above my head, and Urgan took the dress off me.

My blood was boiling now, heat coursing through me, wetness spreading slowly between my lower lips. For once, there was no reason to hide it or to feel ashamed. We were alone, and he wanted me just as much as I wanted him.

I stripped off my underwear and stood in front of him, brazenly naked.

Urgan’s eyes burned with a silver fire. With fast, effortless movements he threw off his clothes. His dirty, bloodied shirt, his breeches, his heavy boots.

My breath hitched in my throat. I drank him all in. His chest, wide and hard with the defined lines and bulges of muscles. His abdomen, hard and muscular. The green, scarred skin of his broad torso.

The way his abdominal muscles formed a sharp downward V, like an arrow pointing at his groin, where a tangle of curly hair, silver like his eyes, surrounded the root of his... cock.

I licked my lips. That word fit more than any other.

It was jutting out, pointing in my direction. It widened from its root to its tip – the head being its thickest point. Bulging with veins darker than Urgan’s skin, it was almost as long and thick as my forearm.

The tip, its color a slightly lighter green than the rest of Urgan, glistened with a viscous, silvery fluid.

And behind his cock hung an enormous green sack, heavy with the weight of his orc rocks. I could see their outlines pressing against the bottom of his sack: two perfectly round balls. Full of orc seed.

I squirmed, rubbing my thighs together. I moved a step closer, but haltingly. I wanted to touch his length. To taste that most intimate, hidden part of Urgan. But I couldn’t help feeling apprehensive at its size.

Urgan stepped closer to me, laying his hand on my cheek. He was so close now that the head of his cock pressed into my skin right under my sternum. I stared at it, breathing so fast I was getting dizzy.

Urgan put his finger under my chin and raised it so I was looking into his face.

“We’ll get clean first,” he said. His voice was hoarse. “And then, we’ll mate. I know how to make it safe for you. You will enjoy it.”

I took a deep shuddering breath and nodded. So what if I was still afraid? I wanted him too much to let the fear stop me.

There was no turning back now.

Urgan took my hand, and we waded slowly into the lake until I was covered almost up to my collarbones. Urgan rubbed his hands together in the water, cleaning them thoroughly. When his hands were clean, he gently stroked my cheeks, wiping the dust and sweat off my face. His fingers dipped lower, onto my neck, as water trickled down my face.

“Turn around.”

My breath hitched as my body obeyed him instantly. My back was to him now, his rigid cock, a spot of warmth in the cool water, pressing into my spine. Urgan lowered his hands into the water, bringing them up to my face again, his fingers tracing the curve of my cheek, the line of my jaw.

His hands dipped under the water again, cupping my breasts. I gasped. Urgan’s calloused fingers slid over my nipples once, twice. An emptiness was opening inside me, an agonizing longing that only he could satisfy.

My legs were shaking.

I had been wanting him for so long, it seemed, that his every touch felt so much more potent. Urgan’s fingers were circling my nipples, which had hardened almost painfully. It felt as if a taut chain was connecting my nipples and my core, pulling on them. With every flick of Urgan’s thumb, the chain became tighter and tighter.

I mewled, and he raised one hand to my lips, running his finger along the edge of my teeth.

I was becoming a shuddering mess.

“Urgan... This is torture...” I breathed, pressing myself more firmly into him.

He pinched my nipple too hard, and I moaned in pain. Pain that was tinted with ecstatic pleasure. The coil in my core wound up even tighter. I mewled, and then closed my mouth around Urgan’s finger, suckling it.

Urgan growled, and his cock twitched against my skin.

“Wait,” he said and stepped back.

I turned just as he was disappearing under the water with a splash. I watched the surface of the lake, waiting for him to emerge. But the water was still, only the light wind rippling it, sending sparks of sunlight into the air.

The water moved around me, and Urgan’s hand grabbed my buttock, squeezing. I jumped and moved my hands under the water, trying to catch him, but he was gone. A moment later, he emerged next to me.

“Enough bathing,” he said, water trickling down his head. “Come. I’ll make you my wife.”

He put his hand on my lower back, just where it was curving into my butt, and pushed me towards the shore. We walked out of the lake, water splashing around us, and Urgan picked me up, his hands under my buttocks.

I wrapped my legs around him, pressing my hot center into him, rubbing myself shamelessly against his green skin.

He was carrying me fast now, and I grabbed his head, pulling his lips closer to mine.

Urgan kissed me without hesitation, and I opened myself to him, letting his tongue plunder my mouth. I was devouring him just as he was devouring me, and the tension in my body was making me shake uncontrollably.

Two more steps, and we were by Urgan’s cape. He lowered me onto it without breaking the kiss, and with another growl that vibrated deep inside me, he spread my legs open with one hand.

I cried out when his fingers touched my exposed core. They dived between my folds, spreading my sleek wetness around, caressing my nub. I was mewling and moaning into Urgan’s mouth, my arms around his neck, holding on for dear life.

His cock pressed into my thigh, twitching and pulsing with desire. I twisted in Urgan’s grip, spreading my legs wider, reaching for him.

I stroked along his length, hesitantly at first. Urgan groaned into my mouth, his fang catching on my lip. I tasted blood. He groaned again, thrusting into my hand. His cock was a living, warm thing in my grasp, and I stroked it more eagerly now.

Urgan’s finger entered me and I arched into his hand, so close to the brink it was maddening.

He moved his finger inside me in circles, pushing against my walls. Opening me wider. My head fell back, and I moaned. My knees were shaking so badly now. And he would enter me soon, I knew. It was happening. An orc cock would be inside me. Urgan's cock.

He slipped another finger in my heat, and I cried out. His fingers were thick. For a moment, it was unpleasant, an unfamiliar pressure pushing against my body. But the pleasure from his touch, from his closeness, from his thumb circling my nub consumed me, dulling the pain. I stretched around his fingers, getting used to the girth, opening for him.

"I want to mark you before we mate," he said, his voice so low and dark my toes curled.

I looked into his face. Urgan's eyes were wild, his teeth bared in a horrible, unsettling grimace. Threatening. Dangerous.

Consumed with passion.

"Yes," I breathed.

"It will hurt," he said, his voice strained, his eyes boring into mine.

"Oh, just do it," I said, thrusting my hips against his fingers still buried inside me and grabbing his cock more firmly with my hand. Urgan snarled like a predator ready to kill.

And then he bit me.

His teeth tore into my skin just under my collarbone, and I screamed from the pain. The bite burned like fire, his teeth buried deep in my flesh, and for a moment, the agony consumed everything, squeezing tears out of my eyes.

Urgan let go, his mouth red with my blood. He pierced the tip of his finger with his fang and put the bleeding finger on top of my wound. Our blood mingled, slowly trickling down my skin.

Urgan was still looking into my eyes, and I was watching him through my tears as gasping sobs were tearing out of me. His desire had dulled, and now he was wearing a fierce, satisfied look.

"You are mine," he growled. "And I am yours. Forever."

I took a deep breath. The pain was already receding, turning into a hot, pulsing throbbing. My desire was taking over again, the tension inside me still waiting for release.

"Now we mate," I said. It was a command, impatient and demanding.

And Urgan laughed and bent lower to lick the blood off my breast.



“Now we mate,” he confirmed, sliding his fingers out of me with a squelch.

My eyes widened. I was soaking wet. But the thought disappeared from my mind as Urgan grabbed my hips and flipped me over. I was lying on my stomach, breathing hard, and he raised my hips up.

I got on all fours, arching my butt up, desire and apprehension mixing inside me, making my head spin.

Something touched my opening. The tip of Urgan’s cock. I bit my lip, my body tensing up, waiting for the intrusion. Waiting to be impaled on the impossibly enormous shaft.

But Urgan didn’t enter me. He let his cock sit right there, at my entrance, while his fingers dipped into my folds again, spreading my wetness thoroughly, teasing my nub. I arched against him with a moan, and he kept stroking me, oh so slowly...

Keeping me right on the edge.

I hissed with impatience and squirmed against his hand. Urgan chuckled.

Almost mad with desire, I drove my hips back, trying to take him inside me. I was done waiting. I wanted that orc cock and I wanted it now.

Urgan gripped my hip, holding me in place. His fingers passed over my pulsing nub, pushing me closer to release... and still not close enough.

And then, the pressure.

He was pushing inside me slowly, stretching my opening, making my skin so taut I was afraid it would break. I opened my mouth wide, but no sound came out. He was driving himself into me, so very slowly, and the slick space inside me was filling with Urgan. I was filling with Urgan.

“Oh!” I gasped.

The pressure was now adding to my tension, not pain anymore, but something else, something so much better...

I couldn’t take in any more of him. And yet, he was filling me more. Pushing deeper inside me, opening me for himself, owning my body completely.

An eternity passed that was just a few seconds, and he stilled, his cock buried deep, my body quivering around his hard length. I was gasping, my breaths large and hungry.

And then he pushed even deeper. I cried out from surprise and a fresh wave of pain. I had been so certain he had already buried himself inside me completely, but there was still more of his length. More of Urgan.

I stretched around him, my body accommodating him. Getting used to him slowly but surely. Finally, he stilled, my walls hugging him from all sides. So snug.

Urgan moved. Ever so slowly, his cock slid out and came back, filling the whole space inside me. All my empty spaces were filled with Urgan.

Urgan, who was breathing as hard as me, snarling, and moving faster now, so easy in my slickness. His thrusts, even and measured at first, were becoming frenzied. He couldn't help himself, and the thought that I was the one making the great general lose his control made me drunk with power.

His heavy balls were slapping against my thighs.

My hips buckled, inviting Urgan in, taking him deeper, and he stroked my nub with firm circles... and I was exploding around him, shouting and moaning, my body squeezing him tighter, a powerful wave after powerful wave...

He snarled, drove himself into me faster, once, twice... and stilled, buried deep inside my core. A new pressure was building up inside me, and I gasped, my mouth wide open with shock. Suddenly, without a warning, I reached another peak, my tunnel sucking Urgan's cock deeper with powerful throbbing.

My shaking arms and legs gave, no longer able to support me. I fell on my face exhausted, fuzzy... exhilarated. As I fell, Urgan's cock slid out of me, followed by a sticky gush of his milky seed.

It covered my inner thighs and spread underneath me in a puddle, and I could do nothing but lie in the viscous warmth. I was spent.

"The strong and fertile orc seed, huh?" I asked and giggled. I tried to flip over to lie on my back, but my arms were too weak.

Urgan lied down next to me and turned me so my back was to his chest. He kissed the top of my head or maybe just smelled my hair – I wasn't sure – and whispered words that slipped past me, too quiet to catch. I slept.

# Chapter 17

## *Urgan*

He should have been tired and spent, but he wasn't. Urgan was a fighter and a conqueror who usually found exhilaration on the battlefield. But marking Una and mating with her turned out to be another type of conquest. Now, it invigorated him even more than a victory in battle.

The sight of his seed on her skin filled him with vicious pride. It whetted his appetite for more.

The sounds of creatures buzzing and chirping around him were a steady source of reassurance while Urgan focused on Una sleeping in his arms. Her lips were pink and parted, her breathing deep and restful. Urgan was simply holding her, drinking in her heartbeat and the warmth of her skin. She was alive. Safe.

His.

And he was far from done with her. That first mating had been too quick for Urgan's liking, if very satisfying. He would much rather explore Una leisurely, tasting her, watching her reactions. There were a myriad caresses and touches he wanted to try just to see what she would like.

Myriads of things he wanted to do to see what *he* liked with her. Already, he was thinking about some of them, licking his lips with anticipation.

The curiosity added to his lust and his cock was far from deflating.

But she was exhausted. He would let her sleep for a short while until she ground herself into him again like she had done that first night. Then, he had held back. Now, he didn't have to.

Time passed. The sun moved closer to the horizon. Finally, Una stirred in Urgan's arms, moaning his name in her sleep. Pushing her butt against his cock and arching her back.

He didn't need another invitation.

Slowly, carefully, he slid inside her wet tunnel. Una moaned, writhing in his arms, and he held her tight. The pleasure of being inside her, in such a narrow yet slick passage, almost made Urgan cross-eyed.

No orc female had ever given him such pleasure.

Una whimpered in his arms, wriggling her hips, and Urgan rocked into her, his thrusts even and unhurried. Exploring. Leisurely. He grinned when she pushed her hips closer to him, impatient and demanding even in her sleep. Yet, he didn't pick up the pace.

He raised himself on one elbow, watching her face as he thrust into her. Her eyes were closed and scrunched up, her mouth wide open and panting. Urgan reached over her hip and dipped into her sweet wetness, searching for her pleasure button.

Una moaned louder, opening her eyes. She froze for a moment, breathing hard. There was an adorable look of confusion on her face, and then recognition. She looked up at him, moaning his name, and Urgan suddenly knew he would never get tired of this. Never get tired of her.

This time, he took his time, filling her completely, wrenching orgasms out of her, and each time she shattered in ecstasy from his touch, it was a victory.

Later, they washed themselves and their clothes, swimming in the lake in the velvet luminosity of twilight. The clouds were reflected in the silvery water, their edges still glowing with the last rays of the sun that had just set.

Una at twilight looked like a creature out of myth. A daughter of air and shadow. A living temptation, a fairy or a witch. And she was his.

When the sky darkened, glimmering with stars, he let her sleep wrapped up in his spare furs while he stayed awake, keeping watch. They were so close to the capital and near a relatively busy track, but he wasn't about to take his chances. Una was his to protect.

She woke later in the night and offered to stay awake while he slept.

"No, it's my responsibility to protect you," said Urgan. "Not the other way round."

Una scoffed at that.

"And how you protect me when you no sleep? Even strong Urgan get weak from no sleep."

He laughed at that, acknowledging the truth of her argument. So he slept until dawn... when he was woken by Una's mouth licking his hard cock.

They spent the next day bathing in the lake, making love, eating the leftover meat from the previous day. Resting and enjoying each other while they could. Because Urgan knew that when Grikh came back with the news and when they finally returned to the capital, they would be busy with work and problems to solve.

But for that one day, they were just the two of them, fresh mates in the throes of passion.

Grikh returned the next day. He had brought them bread and meat from the capital, and they sat down to eat while he shared his news.

“General, our suspicions were right. The ragghits that attacked us came from the imperial menagerie. They had been trained to follow your scent. And it had been ordered and arranged... by the Emperor himself.

“He doesn’t want you to court his daughter. That was only Urzulah’s wish. She spread the rumors that you were intended for her, hoping to discourage other females from approaching you. But the Emperor believes you have outlived your purpose.

“He wants you dead.”

*End of Book 1 of The Silver Fury trilogy*

# Thank You!

Thank you, Dear Reader, for picking up this book! I hope very much that you enjoyed reading *The Orc's Bride* as much as I enjoyed writing it!

Now, this cliffhanger might have thrown you a bit... So, I just wanted to let you know I am working hard on Book 2, *The Orc's Wife*, and expect to publish it in early December 2021.

Are you wondering how Urgan will deal with the Emperor's plot to have him killed? Are you curious how Una will manage as Urgan's human wife in the orc capital?

Or maybe you'd like to watch Urzulah in action and see for yourself if she really is that bad?

If yes, then you'll definitely want to check out *The Orc's Wife*! It's available for pre-order now (swipe right to get a look!) If you'd like to be notified as soon as it goes live, join my newsletter under this link: <https://sendfox.com/LaylaFae>

I promise not to spam your inbox as I'd rather be writing monster romances than emails, but you can expect an occasional message about a new release... or a subscriber-only free story about Urgan and Una. When I finally write it, that is.

Once in a blue moon I might recommend an awesome book by another author in a similar genre (huge alpha monsters or aliens, because that's my jam).

I'd love it if you left a review telling me your honest opinion! Did you like *The Orc's Bride*? Are you waiting for Book 2? Let me know!

Thank you again, Dear Reader! Have an orcsome day!

*Layla Fae*

## Books In This Series

*The Silver Fury*

### **The Orc's Wife**

I did it. I'm in the orc capital... only not as I imagined. For one, I am mated to the formidable orc general whom everyone fears. And two, the orc Imperator is secretly planning my mate's death.

With strong, bloodthirsty Urgan by my side I am not afraid... until he locks me up in his dungeon and forbids me to leave while he's preparing a military coup. It's for my safety, he says. But I don't feel particularly safe in the palace crawling with orcs, with the orc princess Urzulah trying to rip me apart so she can have my mate for herself.

Urgan doesn't take it well when I defy him. A rift grows between us, and when it seems that our bond hasn't been fated, after all, he rejects me publicly.

And now, I can't even tell him I'm pregnant.

This steamy monster romance is a 50.000 word novel and ends with a HFN. It's book two in The Silver Fury trilogy, which ends with a HEA. It is scheduled for December, but I'm doing my best to make it available sooner!

## Books By This Author

### **GRIM: Monster Erotica**

When I'm hanging over a cliff and getting ready for death, the only way out is to promise the Grim Reaper anything he wants.

Because what's a girl to do when her arms are going numb and she doesn't want to become a pancake? Also, he is kind of gorgeous. I mean, apart from the terrifying skull he has instead of a head, his eye sockets filled with fire, his horns, and his prehensile tail.

When I fall to my death and Grim catches me to whisk me off to his lair, I am ready to look past the skull and the horns. But then, it turns out I'm not really saved. The only way for me to stay alive is to drink his essence. The essence that shoots out of the sinfully monstrous thing between his legs. Yup. That essence.

It tastes nothing like what I've expected.