

CRUCIS ORC TRILOGY

ORC'S PREY

A
MONSTER
ROMANCE

EDEN EMBER

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EDEN EMBER

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)
[Chapter 2](#)
[Chapter 3](#)
[Chapter 4](#)
[Chapter 5](#)
[Chapter 6](#)
[Chapter 7](#)
[Chapter 8](#)
[Chapter 9](#)
[Chapter 10](#)
[Chapter 11](#)
[Chapter 12](#)
[Chapter 13](#)
[Chapter 14](#)
[Chapter 15](#)
[Chapter 16](#)
[Chapter 17](#)
[Chapter 18](#)
[Chapter 19](#)
[Chapter 20](#)
[Epilogue](#)

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CHAPTER 1



Wren

All I wanted to do was take a walk outside the protective walls of the human colony on Daerr. After all, I have been here for several weeks and I have yet to know what it is like outside the compound built for us by the vampires who seek our blood. Diona Ardelean, the rich vampire on Daerr, promised we would have a life here on this planet unlike any we could imagine and that they would well care for us. The vampires would give us land and other resources to build our homes and raise families. For some, the vampires have been true to their word. To others such as myself, they have failed to live up to what I thought would be a true adventure.

“Let me go!” I scream at the large gray-black metal disk flying above me. “Don’t do this! Let me go!” It seems to be no use screaming as the tentacles of the robotic drone take hold of me and will not let go. We rise into the air, high above the Daerrian forests and hillsides where the human colony has made a home for itself. Why did I have to listen to my own thoughts and leave the safety of the high walls?

I am pulled up toward the drone before fins move out of the arms and then around me. Soon enclosed on all sides by the strange material, I feel a sudden thrust in some direction that most likely is away from the planet's surface. My mind, racked with fear and worry, assumes the worst will happen as I leave those I have gotten to know in the human colony. This is the Tarka System, and there are things out here that are not friendly to my kind. Not friendly at all.

"Please! No!" I scream repeatedly as g-forces overtake me. If it were not for the tight arms of the drone, I would likely fall out and plunge to my death. However, there is another purpose for me, I'm certain. One that will not be as forgiving as dropping to the ground below to my death. Whatever has taken me has done so for a purpose, and I doubt it means to give me a happy, fulfilling life.

I travel for quite some time inside the enclosure of the drone's arms before I feel it slowing down. The vessel lurches as if it is seeking somewhere to land, but where? What will I find when it opens up and releases me to whatever being has kidnapped me from my friends on Daerr?

"Oh, no!" The fins from the arms suddenly retract and I dangle several feet above the ground below. My eyes widen as I look around to see that I am no longer on Daerr. The landscape here differs from what I have become accustomed to on the vampire's moon.

I feel the tentacles of the drone detach from me. "Please, don't drop me!" I call out as the drone shakes. "No! I don't want to die! Take me back to the colony! Please! I swear I will never go outside the walls again!"

It is no use. The lifeless drone above is a machine that does the bidding of its master. I was the target and now I am to be delivered to the depraved soul who has likely paid for my delivery. My immediate concern is the fact I will fall several feet before landing on the ground. Is it the wish of whoever has sought me out to have me injured or killed beforehand?

“NO!” The arms of the drone suddenly release me and I plummet to the ground. Down, down I go, my voice halting as I attempt to thrust out my arms and legs to prevent my terrible death. Though I am not ready to die, I have no choice if it is my time, and there is no time left to worry about such things as I fall to the ground, anyway.

~CAGAN~

Pilgros are fast animals, and I've not seen one at all this morning as I have walked through the forest in search of one. They keep mostly to the roots of trees as they seek some of the grak grubs in the moist soil using their long snouts. The sound they make while doing so is unmistakable, which is why I constantly stop and listen for them. There is another beast, however, that I keep my ear attuned for as well, though not for the hunt.

The osciths are terrible beasts with long, slender fingers and terrible claws. They sometimes hunt pilgros as well, but they often seek larger creatures for their prey, and having something larger available to them is a sick game they play. Though I do not expect to be made a meal by them, I do not wish to face an Oscith by myself in the thick woods. It would be a hard fight, though I am confident in my ability to prevail. They are large and powerful, but not as powerful as an orc.

Something catches my eye. Turning, I make haste through the woods toward a clearing nearby. Many of the laptners nesting in nearby trees take flight as an object approaches from the sky. I narrow my eyes and strain to see what it is, but then it becomes clear.. A snatcher drone. It appears to have prey within its belly as it hovers over the clearing to drop whatever it has brought for the osciths.

“Poor creature,” I mumble while shaking my head. “You do not stand a chance.” The arms of the drone suddenly open and the prey drops from within to the ground below. Though interested in knowing what sort of being it has dropped this time, I do not wish to witness the terrible things they will do to it. So, I turn and walk back into the woods to continue my hunt.

Fate smiles upon me, as the commotion in the clearing has caused several pilgros to suddenly dash across the trail before me. Taking my dagger into my hand, I run toward the half-dozen animals scurrying in front of me. I dive into them, tightly gripping one of the largest of the pilgros before plunging my dagger deep into its neck. The beast quickly succumbs to its demise as it bleeds to death rapidly. Smiling, I pick up my trophy and throw it over my shoulder. I will eat well tonight.

Suddenly, I hear crashing through some bushes nearby. I turn and look for what it could be just as a creature runs right into me. It turns its eyes up at me and stares for a moment as I look down at it.

It? Wait. There is a scent from this one unlike anything I have experienced before. Looking over this creature, I realize it must be female. A woman of some higher species, perhaps, as she is wearing clothes and just staring at me. Had a pilgro or some other

wild animal run into me in just the same way, it would have already darted away instead of looking at me with such beautiful eyes, as blue as any I have seen. What is this creature before me?

She mutters something and turns to run, but I drop the pilgro on my shoulder and reach for her. Why would I do such a thing? There is something about this one that stirs me deeply and I cannot understand what that might be. The aroma of this one continues to tickle my senses as I inhale her scent. I am inflamed as I seek to know more about this being that has dropped into the forest.

CHAPTER 2



Wren

What the hell? Am I in hell? What is this huge green monster? He's partially dressed, wearing animal skin over his buff chest. Oh my, the muscles. Thick bracelet things encircle his wrists and a dagger is in his hand. The sword on his hip stays sheathed. Giant muscled legs and large hands move before me. He steadies me.

Then I react. I scream and shake my head, running away. Ha! Try outrunning a creature that stands more than a foot taller than me. It's not even a match. I go two steps and his large hand captures me.

"Please, don't." Did this thing have me captured by the drone? I flew for quite a while at breakneck speeds in the belly of that thing, unable to move much. But it was quick, like a flash. Here they fly in FTL, so it's no telling where I'm at. Judging by the stifling air, it's definitely not Daerr. Nor have I ever seen a creature such as this. I fight him, but he tucks me under his arm and we run. I scream and it doesn't seem to bother him in the least.

We climb a steep hill and enter a cave. The breeze from it is far cooler than the stifling humid air outside. A gentle reprieve, but whatever he wants with me, I'm not about to give him the chance. Am I his next meal? Sex slave? Admittedly, that thought brings a slight warmth to my middle. Shaking my head, I won't allow it. The moment he sets me down, I make a dash for the entrance.

He mumbles something, gesturing wildly, pointing outside, and shoves me back farther into the cave. I halt at a rock and perch on it. I'm out of breath, anyway. He's much faster than me. Of course, at some point, unless he tied me up, he'll turn his back and then I'll run. So for now, to conserve my energy and let my stiff muscles relax, I won't fight him.

He keeps talking and gesturing. I shake my head.

"I don't understand you."

He pauses and listens and shakes his head and mumbles. I point to the implant behind my ear. His expression brightens. He grins and shows me his. He pulls a little tool kit from his pouch on his belt. It's magnetic, and he moves it around on his implant and waves at me.

"Yes? Can you understand me?"

He keeps gesturing for me to talk. The litany of words coming from my mouth quickly tells of my history, of how I landed on Daerr and how the human colony wasn't what I expected. And then I landed here.

He grins brightly and nods emphatically.

"You understand me?"

He nods. And then he brings his little tool to me. I willingly cock my head to the side and move my hair out of the way so he can adjust mine. Then we can understand why I'm here and what he plans to do with me.

~CAGAN~

One little tweak and I speak.

"Can you understand me?"

Her eyes brighten and she nods. "Yes, yes, I can. Oh, praise be! Now, I need answers."

I laugh. "I'm sure you do. First, I am Cagan, son of the Queen and King of Crucis, Lord by title, banished because I didn't conform to the royal ways."

She giggles. "No shit? You are a lord orc?"

I nod and wait for her introduction.

"I am Wren, a human from Earth in the Sol Terran System. I came here to live in the human colony on Daerr. The vampires need our blood and in exchange for the bimonthly donations, we received food and shelter. Until that drone caught me. Well, okay, I may have gone over the wall to explore, because life in the colony was boring. But, yeah, the drone caught me and here I am. So please, why did you capture me? Am I a delicacy you want to eat? Or worse, am I your slave now?"

She speaks so fast I am captivated. Her body moves as she tells about her life. But I need to correct her quickly. She trembles with

fear in my presence, and the last thing I want to do is harm this beautiful creature.

“Wren. Yes, a lovely name. I did not send the drone to capture you. I will not eat you or enslave you. In fact, it’s another sour creature that lives on Daerr that sent the drone to capture you. You think I’m a monster, see them. They enjoy the hunt and, yes, they would eat you after torturing you. It’s a sport for them to bring their prey to Crucis and chase it, torturing it, until it falls over. Then they consume. I rescued you.”

“Oh. Wow. Well, thank you. I’m on Crucis? Damn, that drone flew fast from Daerr. And these monsters want to hunt me. Nice.”

“Osciths. They are an enormous threat to anything not an orc. I will protect you from them. But first, I need to sniff you and add my scent to you.” I move to her, grabbing her shoulders and pressing my nose to her neck.

She hits me and yells. “What the hell are you doing? Sniff me? I’m not an animal. That’s not how we operate.”

“I’m not trying to harm you. If my scent is on you, the osciths can’t smell you and then they won’t hunt you. They don’t mess with orcs. This is for your own good.”

She sighs and calms as I sniff her. My body reacts, the rigidity hard to hide, but I need to make sure they can’t smell her. My heart thumps hard. Her scent drives me wild, awakens something within me. I step back to keep from grabbing her and making her mine.

Her clothes put off her scent. Strong. “Remove your clothes. I need to wash them and put my scent on them.”

CHAPTER 3



Wren

“You’re crazy. Now I think you want to do things to me.”

He stands and growls. “I want to protect you, human. Your scent is powerful, so strong I’m not sure I can keep them out of the cave. I need to put my scent on your clothes and on you. It’s the only way to mask it and keep the osciths from coming after you.”

“I don’t believe you. I think you’re making this shit up. It sounds good.”

He grabs my hand and throws me on his back, and we take off running into the forest.

“Where are we going?”

“I’m proving to you the osciths are real and the real threat.”

He sets me down in a clearing, where the tall grass comes to my chin. He stands back, his eyes wide and watches. Rustling in the forest startles me. I whip around in time to see a lithe creature with long fingers and horrible black eyes bounding at me. It growls and I scream. Before it reaches me with its thick clawed hands, Cagan

grabs me and growls at the creature. It retreats and Cagan runs with me back to the cave.

“Do you believe me now? And now that I had to prove it to you, they will hunt like mad for you. The only way to protect you is to mask your scent.”

“How do you suggest we mask my scent?”

“I’ll wash your clothes. My scent needs to be rubbed on your body. I won’t hurt you. I will figure out where your scent is the strongest and mask it with my own.”

“Oh, and this is the only way?”

An Oscith bellows a call outside. I turn to her, my eyes wide. “Yes.”

“Can’t I just hide in here?”

“Until when? Remember, they captured you. They have your scent already from when the drone dropped you. You’re sport for them. At least, if I give you my scent, you can go outside of the cave with me. I can’t stay here to protect you the entire time. I have to hunt for food and gather fruits and vegetables.”

With great reluctance, I remove my clothes. No use in hiding my naked body, because he needs to mask my scent with his, whatever that means. He doesn’t act too interested in my goods when I hand him my clothes. He dips them into a spring and throws in what looks like a chunk of a soap bar. After a good rinsing, he hangs the clothes over a rope strung across the far end of the cave.

“I need you to stand.”

I comply and lift my arms while he sniffs, and rubs his cheek and lips spreading his scent. My body reacts, it's amazing. He's warm and gentle, and the heat floods into my pelvis. It's such a powerful urge, I can't control myself. I want to wrap my arms around this beast and caress him and make him feel as good as he's making me feel. But this isn't sexual, it's merely a means of masking my scent.

Moving down my body, I moan. "I need to lie down." I'm lightheaded.

"Yes, good idea. My scent is all over my bed."

The pile of animal skins will also help, and I lie back as he continues down my arms. At my breasts, his lips move and my nipples grow exceedingly taut. I want him in the worst way. The leather over his cock doesn't hide the fact that he's erect. And that makes me wet. He sniffs.

"Wow, you are really producing your own scent now."

"Do what you have to do to mask it so I can walk outside without the osciths coming after me."

He sniffs and rubs down my belly and my legs. It's torture to have him move all around me and not touch the spot.

"Flip over, I'll try to mask it there."

I do and he noses and moves his lips over my back and the backs of my legs. His face rubs against my butt and I moan. I don't care that we just met. I don't care that he's an orc and I'm a mere human. Fuck!

He rolls me back over. "It's here." He waves at my muff.

"Then I suppose you'll have to do what you can to mask it."

“It’s strong and getting stronger.”

I giggle, hoping I don’t stink to him. “I’m sorry if it smells bad.”

He moans. “No, it doesn’t smell bad at all. In fact…” Instead of finishing the sentence, he leans in between my legs as I open to him. His nose and lips move through my sex, licking and rubbing. And, oh, I am so wet, no doubt producing more scent. I don’t care.

Lips move through my center, tongue licking the hole and brushing against my swelling member. I moan, my back arching slightly as my hands come up to his head and hold him in place. He keeps licking and rooting and groaning.

The stars fill my sight, my body fully abandons me and I buck hard into his face as I come. The pleasure rushes through me like a tidal wave that knocks me off my feet. Fuck. I can’t stop and I don’t want to stop. He keeps going as I moan and move through the orgasm. Finally, I can’t take it and shove him back.

“Enough.”

CHAPTER 4



Eagan

The human completely let go and her desire filled her body until she came. I didn't think my tongue and lips could do that, but once she started moaning, her sex produced so much wetness filled with her raw scent. I replaced the need to cover her scent with the need to make her feel good.

Wren sat back, panting, her eyes steady on me.

"Well, that was weird. I guess I should thank you. And I owe you." She moves to me and reaches for my cock.

I'm so hard I want to split her legs apart and shove inside and claim her as my own. But now's not the time to do that. I need to earn her trust. It takes an immense amount of restraint to hold back.

"You don't owe me anything. I only wanted to mask your scent."

She laughs and sits back. Her body is so inviting, the soft curves move slightly with each breath she takes. "I think you masked me and then some. Wow. I haven't felt like that in a long time. Well,

okay, that's the first time I came that strong. Cagan, I'm sorry I lost control."

She stands and walks away but I grab her hand, stopping her. "No, don't be sorry for losing control. I'm glad you did."

She smiles. "I am too." Her high-pitched giggle sends shivers down my spine. I will my cock to calm down as I start a fire and move her clothes closer so they can dry.

"Do you have anything I can wear? A thin sheet or something. I didn't exactly pack my bags for this trip and I suspect I'll be here for a while."

My eyes go to the folded stack of blankets I have. She grabs one and ties it around her until it hangs like a dress.

"Who cares if I match? At least I wore my hiking boots to scale the wall on Daerr. Yay for me."

"You're beautiful." I smile as I watch her walking around in my blanket.

"Yes, I'm a pageant queen."

"A what?"

"Oh, it's human talk. It's someone who wins a beauty contest on Earth. I'm starving. Do you have food fit for a human?"

"I have pilgros. And barbs. It's a tasty meal. I assume you can eat what I do?"

I pull the food from under the rock in the makeshift cellar I dug where it keeps it cool.

“I need to hunt for more food. While I’m gone, stay here. The osciths shouldn’t catch your scent here.”

She laughs. “Not after that.” Her hand fans her face, still flushed from it.

I leave her behind, hoping she’ll stay put. This time I’ll hunt cragorios. The fat birds offer enough meat to give us two good meals. And while I’m out, I’ll pick up greens and noki fruit. She’ll enjoy that.

My entire world shifts. No longer am I here for myself. I have found my mate. My body let me know, the resonance of my heart makes no mistake. The heavens dropped her right in front of me. While the Oscith may have kidnapped her, fate knew she’s mine. My heart resonates with her beyond any doubt. I wanted to claim her, but I needed to wait. She was leery of me. And I don’t want her to think I’m making her into a sex slave. It’s mutual.

An hour later, I have two cragorios in my hands.

“Wren? I have dinner! Wren?”

She’s not in the cave. I run outside. “Wren!” No answer. I haven’t heard any oscith while on the hunt. Sniffing, I catch her faint scent and track that she follows a path into the forest. “Wren!”

I lose her scent on the trail where the osciths run. Why did she leave the cave? Is she trying to run away from me? Maybe she wanted some fresh air or was curious about the surroundings, but she knew better. I warned her.

My heart pounds with worry as I follow the trail. She could have fallen, gotten hurt. An oscith could have grabbed her. They won’t

show mercy to her. They fear me, not her.

“Wren?” I call and hear nothing but the warm winds blowing through the tops of the trees. I won’t stop looking until I find her. My heart races, fearing she’s in trouble. What if an Oscith grabbed her from the cave? She didn’t scream, but they could have knocked her out.

“Wren!” I will find her.

CHAPTER 5



Wren

I only wanted to explore close to the cave. After the fantastic orgasm and his scent on me, I figure I'm safe. It's boring in the cave. A small room with a bed, a fire pit, a small stream, and rocks for chairs. It's also dark. I enjoy sunlight, though Tarka is much closer here on Crucis.

Outside, the warm air swirls around me. The thin blanket makes for a cooler outfit, and I'm going commando underneath. What a freeing feeling! The trail leads into the forest. What will it hurt if I explore just a little? I'm not here to be a captive of Cagan. Some independence is what I want. I'll keep the cave in view as I walk along the trail into the forest.

Up ahead are colorful flowers. I want to pick some to bring back to the dreary cave, something to brighten it. Looking back, the cave is now out of view. But the trail is well-traveled and all I have to do is follow it back. What could it hurt? I'll pick the flowers and be back before Cagan comes back with the food.

I gather as many flowers as I can hold in my arms. A growl behind me startles me and the flowers tumble from my arms. Strong stench and heavy breathing shows me that whatever it is, it's very near and onto me. Without looking, I take off running through the flowers and off the trail, into the forest. The thick trees make it damn near impossible to run fast as I dodge between them. One quick glance and I see the awful creature on my tail. I scream and keep running, weaving through the trees, purposefully trying to lose the oscith, which has longer legs than mine and I'm sure it's faster. It's letting me run, though. Cagan said they like the sport of chasing, so it's toying with me.

Maybe I can find Cagan or circle back to the cave, where I can grab a dagger and have a fighting chance. Cagan must be hunting upwind and can't hear my screams. It's dreadful but I keep running. The thick forest suddenly opens up and I tumble down into a deep ravine. Landing hard on my back, I lose my breath. Lying there, the sun is in my eyes and I'm blinded. The oscith snorts and walks away. Slowly, I regain my strength. Sitting up, my back is sore, and I look around me. Sheer dirt walls with roots sticking out here and there surround me. I try to grab one and climb up. The snorting returns and above me, three osciths appear. Letting go, I fall back into the pit and hug myself. They can't get to me unless they fall down into the ravine too. But then they wouldn't be able to get out too quickly with me.

"Cagan! Help!" I scream as loud as I can, hoping he hears me somehow. Stupid girl I am for wandering from the cave. He warned me and I didn't listen.

~CAGAN~

Her screams come from deep in the forest. I know the osciths have her surrounded. She's yelling my name, which makes my heart sing, yet she's in trouble. My feet pound toward the forest through the screams. Standing before me are three osciths looking down into a deep ravine. They snarl and snort, looking upon their captive.

I jump at them with as fierce a growl as I can make. Two look up and snarl back at me. One takes off running.

"You touch my mate and I'll pull your heads from your stinking necks," I say.

They don't move and the one who ran comes back, hiding in the trees, with the same snarl. Three against one. It would certainly be a fight. I'm not in the mood to lose, though and I'll give it all I have to rip these creatures apart. I don't care if they are intelligent enough to send drones out to steal others. They don't communicate with us and they are solely in it for sport. I won't allow them to touch my mate.

I choose several stones, weighty yet that easily glides through the air hitting their mark. An oscith falls to the ground. The one hiding in the trees bellows at it. The other stands, eyes narrowing at me.

My feet stomp and I growl, showing them I mean business. Two more stones fly. The first oscith turns, and the stone misses his head and hits his shoulder. The other stone flings to the one hiding and he backs away.

I growl, stepping forward. I lurch and the one on the ground scrambles up. They run and I go after them, hoping they'll understand I will hurt them.

"Cagan, where did you go?" Wren calls for me.

Satisfied the osciths are gone, I turn back to Wren. She stands back as I climb down into the ravine to rescue her.

“How are you going to get out of this now?” Her hand goes to her curvy hip.

“The same way I climbed down. And why are you even here?”

Tears sprang to her eyes. “I only wanted to explore just a little outside of the cave. I’m so sorry! I saw these beautiful flowers and picked an armful to bring back to the cave. That’s when the Oscith showed up. I ran and ran until I fell down here.”

I grab her and hold her to me. She stiffens and then relaxes as her hand moves around my back. “Thank you for rescuing me again.”

I rear back, badly wanting to plant my lips on hers but instead I speak. “I told you I’d keep you safe. And that’s why I wanted you to stay in the cave. We can explore, but I need to be with you when we do. I hope you trust me enough now to know I only want to keep you safe.”

CHAPTER 6



Wren

Cagan kneels before me. “Climb on my back.” I do as he requests, and he climbs out of the ravine with ease.

The osciths are standing back in the trees, their lips in snarls. Cagan sets me down, narrows his eyes at them and emits a long low growl. It scares me. They back up a step but keep watching. Cagan turns me and puts his large hands on my shoulders. Leaning in, his lips landed on mine in a forceful kiss. He pulls me to him, close, his lips moving over mine. Hello! He’s sporting a stiff one under that leather. My body warms, remembering the wonderful time we had earlier. Damn, I could go for round two.

He backs away and glares at the Oscith. “She’s mine. You touch her, you die.”

The osciths stare at us. Cagan puts his arm around me and hugs me tightly. “She’s mine. You hear?”

I look at him, the determination in his powerful face speaks volumes that he means what he says. His jaw flexes. “Let’s go.”

He scoops me up, holding me like a newborn baby, and takes off in the opposite direction from the osciths.

I giggle. "I mean, it's nice of you to carry me, but really, I can walk."

"No. I'm showing them I mean business. You are my mate and they won't touch you knowing that."

First, I'm shocked at his declaration that I'm his mate. Second, that's asinine. "If you put me down and if I'm ever alone, it won't stop them. They don't care." I shake my head.

"No. I won't leave you alone. Not here. Too dangerous." He stomps on toward the cave.

"No, really. You can put me down, they didn't follow."

He reluctantly sets me on the ground. I kept stride with him, no doubt he slowed for my short legs. "And what do you mean I'm your mate?"

He side-eyes me and keeps going. "Just an expression."

"No, it isn't. It implies ownership, marriage, and agreed-upon companionship."

"We'll discuss it in the cave." His jaw flexes again. He just wants me out of danger.

I'm both titillated and exasperated by his decree. I'm his mate. We haven't mated. Or does he think because he brought me to orgasm that I'm his?

He pulls the feathers from the cragorios. I offer to help, but he tells me he can just do it faster. He's quiet. I pick up the cave, trying to make it more homey.

“Maybe tomorrow you can come with me to gather more flowers. I wish we had a window in here.” I’m speaking more to myself than him, but he looks up at me and lifts his brow.

“I will take you to get flowers. And I can’t build a window. Orcs live in the mines where it’s cooler, anyway. The surface is warm. We hunt and gather on the surface and live in the caves. I think you’ll agree if you ever had to sleep out there in the heat and humidity.”

“Thank you.” I smile. He’s trying. I perch on the rock, watching him cut up the alien chickens.

It smells like chicken cooking. Maybe gamey, but chicken nonetheless. I wash the greens he picked and set them on the table to eat with the chunked fruit, like a salad. At least, I’ve learned since being on Daerr to try the fresh foods out there. So far the pilgrims agree with me and the barbs.

We eat the meal, and he looks at me, smiling and shoveling in his food. He’s a serious eater. But then I suppose with a body like his with all those muscles, he needs nutrition. Junk food isn’t ever on the menu here. I’m curious about where he’s from.

“Your family lives in the mines. Where are they? Why did they banish you?”

“So many questions.”

I sit back and shrug. “I figure I better get to know my mate better.” It is a joke, sort of. I laugh and he just stares at me.

“The mines aren’t around here. It’s civilized there. Orcs aren’t monsters like you must think. Some of us choose to live closer to the surface like me. I wasn’t interested in the arranged marriage they

wanted for me. Orc women, well, they aren't like you, Wren. I never resonated with one."

I scoot closer to him. Even I admit there's a magnetic draw to him. Yeah, okay, it could be his magical tongue bringing my body such treasure. So what if it is? I really enjoyed that earlier. But there's something else about him. Like he's so protective because... because he loves me? Is that what resonate means?

"You think I'm your fated mate?" I touch his arm.

"I know you are."

He leans in and I close the gap by lifting my chin. Our lips meet. I have to know; I need to kiss the orc. Pulling back, I giggle. He looks hurt and I shake my head.

"No, I'm sorry. It's just funny. You're not human and I'm not an orc, yet here we are. I know the vampires on Daerr mate with humans just fine."

"My parents don't like it, but they don't run my life."

His lips find mine and the kiss turns up the heat. Passionate sparks fly between us.

"You are my mate, Wren. I don't care if you are human or vampire. You are mine."

I giggle. "I'm not a bloodsucker. But there is something I'd like to try. I owe you one." I look at the lump forming beneath his leather. My hand reaches for him, brushing over the top.

He groans and lifts me to his lap. Our lips meet, and he lifts me to him as he stands. Carrying me to the pallet on the floor that is his

bed, he perches on a rock next to it. I stand and gingerly reach around to the ties that hold up the leather pants. He helps me and steps out. WHOA!

CHAPTER 7



Eagan

My member stretches from me, the smaller one above it of particular interest to Wren. I grin as her hands reach for me, touching both the large and the small one. Immediately, my cock extends, the prodder plumps and vibrates. Wren squeals with delight.

“This is outstanding. Human males don’t have this. What does it do?”

“I noticed human females don’t have the *voary* prompter. They just have the tiny member that swells and gives pleasure. I surmise it promotes ova release.”

Wren giggles. “Orc females have a shallow hole that prompts ovulation? Interesting. Do they feel pleasure with this?”

“Indeed, they do.”

She knelt before me, her mouth so close her breath was warm on the head of my larger cock.

“Does the smaller one come too?”

“Both feel the orgasm. The smaller one helps the female feel pleasure. When she feels pleasure, it pleases us.”

She looks up at me. “I’m sorry I’m not a female orc. That must disappoint you to have a mere human. You resonated with a female of a different species. Are you sad about it?”

I grab her shoulders and lean closer. “I have no regrets. You are perfect. More than perfect. I never resonated with a female orc. It’s not the same.”

“Have you ever been with a female orc?” She blushes when she asks the question.

“I have. Nothing but physical and only once. We aren’t supposed to do such things. With you, the moment I touched you, I knew you were the one for me.”

“That’s so sweet. Honestly, I’m not sure how I feel. Well, conflicted, because I feel something for you. I have to wrap my head around the fact that I’m on Crucis and you’re an orc.” She giggles and shrugs and leans into me.

Her lips wrap around my cock head as her hand grasps the smaller one. Everything within me focuses on her lips and hands, she’s bringing about a sensation that sends me soaring. The pleasure floods in fast, I’m knocked back, breathless. Her tongue does magical things to my cock. She leans forward and takes the smaller cock into her mouth, causing it to vibrate excessively.

I grab her head and hold her to me as she sucks. I can no longer think straight. Everything in my being focuses on my cock. One more suck to the back of her throat and I lose it. The semen bursts forth, filling her mouth as she swallows. I hold her head to me, wanting to

pull out of her mouth and claim her in the right way. I groan and gasp for air as my world swirls dizzily. It's utterly fantastic and then I come down and push her back because she's drained me dry.

She sits back and smiles. "Now that's a blowjob."

"Blowjob? We call it *nurmanurma*."

"Nurmanurma. How funny." She laughs.

"Does this mean you think of me as your mate?" I look at her while I step into my leathers.

Her hand slips into mine. "Right now, I suppose I'm closer to that. Humans require time to fall in love, to see if they want to marry their chosen mates. We don't have fated mates. We fall in love. Our hearts are happy when we're with the one we love. That usually takes time. If it happens fast, it's called instalove. Honestly, big fellow, I was deathly afraid of you when I first saw you."

I nod. "Marry? Is that when you have a ceremony that binds you to your fated mate?" I'm truly curious how humans do it.

"Yes. First, we date. We go out, hang out, and spend time together. It can take a while. Sometimes a matter of weeks and sometimes it takes years. Then he proposes. Or she can. That's when he asks her to marry him. If she says yes, he gives her an engagement ring. Usually it's gold and a diamond. Then they have a wedding, the ceremony that seals them as married. Then we hope it lasts. But a lot of humans don't, and they divorce and find another to marry."

I frown and tremble. "Orcs mate for life. We never separate. We don't want to. Now if I had married that one, I wouldn't be happy, neither

would she. We resonate. Our hearts literally sing within our chests. We know when we meet our fated mates.”

“Wow. I wish humans were like that. Everything is so uncertain in the heart's area. I kind of like the way you do it. To find the one and be happy with them forever.”

I nod. “Yes, fated mates. Happy forever.”

This time, I lean her back on the furs, opening her legs. Once again, I dive in face-first to sniff her sex, to taste it and to enjoy watching her come with my mouth. The little nub intrigues me, how it swells, how she reacts. Her body grinds into the furs, her hands holding me in place, moans escaping from her beautiful lips. I lick her hole entrance, wanting to push my cock through and into the soft, warm tunnel. Maybe soon, she'll let me claim her fully. Until then, I like watching her enjoy what I do to her.

“Let's collect the flowers.” I take her hand and she leads me to the place where she found the flowers. After gathering an armful, we head back to the cave.

“Time to hunt. Are you staying here or would you like to go with me?”

She scrunches her face. “No, thank you. I'll arrange the flowers and do something with the meat you have under the rock.”

By the time I return, she has strips of meat lying out in the sun. “I'm making jerky. We won't have to keep this cold. However, if I had salt, it would be better.”

“Salt. We can get salt from the sea. It's not too far from here.”

She asks for a bath and steps into the cave spring where the water is cold. After, she's shivering and I gather her to me as the sun sets

and the three moons and Tetri rises. We lie on the furs as she turns to me.

CHAPTER 8



Wren

Is Cagan my fated mate? If he were human and we did the oral thing and hung out, I would start thinking maybe. But he's not human, and he's very serious. If we have sex, he'll expect me to stick with him, like forever. Am I willing to try that? But then, where will I go? I'm stuck on a sweltering hot moon with indigenous beings that take sport in making me their dinner.

I curl into Cagan. The makeshift sheet made into a toga doesn't take a lot for him to loosen the knot at my shoulder, and it falls from my body. Our lips meet in a sweet kiss and soon his hardness pokes up between us. I giggle and reach down.

"You just got off this morning."

"I could have claimed you right after."

"Really?" I lift my head and smile into his face. The night sky isn't as amazing as Daerr's night sky with a dozen moons and the outstanding ringed Jovian planet. Tetri is still amazing though. It's basically a hot rock and doesn't have inhabitable life. It has

biodomes over the mines where there are precious metals . But even in the mines there, it's nearly too hot for life.

His lips move down my neck, no time for answers, he's going to show me and I'm going to let him. My body warms under his caresses. His lips move to my breasts and he sucks a nipple while his hand dips low, between my legs. Artful moving fingers dance over my swelling clit and I moan, wanting more.

Precise movements on his part prove his intentions. He brings me under him, his knees between my legs, hovering. I draw my feet to his waist and lift my bottom to meet with him as he leans in. His cocks are at my muff and he groans. If he puts his full weight on me, I'll die. He's that much larger than me, but he's careful and moves over me without squishing me.

"Claim me, Cagan. I'm yours." As I moan, I want to feel him in me. I need him like I need oxygen.

Slowly, he drags the head of his cock through my soft warm folds. I moan as he swirls it around the entrance to my slick tunnel. His cock stretches me as he glides in. I groan from the thickness, the stretching verging on pain. But as he slowly fills me with his length and girth, pleasure blossoms the moment the smaller cock lands on my clit. I may not have a voary indention above my vagina, but my clit sure enjoys it.

He slowly moves in and out, building momentum. My lips stretch around his cock, the little one pressing at my clit. Immediately, it swells and I'm so wet and horny. My nails claw into his back with each thrust in and out. I'm grinding into the bed, moaning and losing myself completely.

“Are you my forever mate, Wren?” Cagan means business as he pumps into me.

“I am! Oh, Cagan, come with me!”

I cling to him as my pelvis explodes. The rocket of pleasure rushes through my body, my cries and my breaths come fast and loud. He joins me by lurching forward and pumping fast into my wet hole, filling me until I can't take it. We moan and move in unison as the pleasure washes over us again and again.

I collapse first, finished and completely lethargic after such a powerful orgasm. He rolls to the side of me, lying on his back, breathing in and out like me, as we just allow our senses to come back. We turn our heads and look at each other and laugh.

“Damn, Cagan. You took me on the wildest ride of my life.” I reach over and trace my fingers over his muscled shoulder.

He rolls to me, his eyes dreamy. “You brought me more pleasure than I dreamed possible. I feel as if both my body and my heart will explode. I have found my true mate. You are why I never resonated with a female orc. Fate knew my mate was a human from the Terran System.”

I curl against him, our naked bodies touching, and we fall into a contented sleep. My dreams flow in wild directions, little orc beings running around at my feet. Living off the land, happy with life. I wake up to the green giant beside me and he smiles, snuggling with me.

“Good morning, my beautiful Wren.”

“Good morning, my handsome Cagan.”

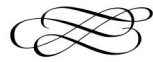
He laughs. "Aw, we know I'm not handsome in terms of the other beings around. We're considered monsters."

I lift a hand, my fingertips tracing over his muscled chest. "Oh, I don't know. They say beauty or handsomeness is in the beholder's eye. You are handsome, rugged, green, yes, and very muscled. I'm attracted to you."

"Oh, really?" He grins and rolls on top of me, his lips lowering to meet with mine. We kiss and the magic sparks.

I move around until I'm on top. My full weight on him isn't heavy and I hover over his swelling cocks. This time I will take action by moving him as I want. It doesn't take long and my body caves into the orgasm that has me screaming in wild pleasure. A few moments later, he joins me in a shuddering, lurching bomb, filling me with his orc goodness. I can't help but relish our time, as he leaves me breathless and completely satisfied. He's my mate and I accept that. Now, I need to figure out how, because this life is completely different to anything I've ever done before.

CHAPTER 9



Cagan

My life perspective shifts now that I have my beautiful mate by my side. I will do anything for her. She has given herself to me, and my heart is full.

We eat a breakfast of chicken jerky, which tastes delicious and *fellum* eggs I found. She remarks it tastes like chicken eggs.

“Chicken must have a universal taste,” I muse.

Outside, the familiar call of a messenger reaches my ears. Speaking of *fellum*, the call is very much like a *fellum* call, except for the deep tones of a male orc.

“I’ll be right back. Sounds like trouble out there. Stay here.” I march outside hoping Wren won’t show. I don’t need the messenger to see her.

“Greetings, Lord Cagan.”

“Greetings, Morog. How can I be of help?”

He opens the decree sent from my parents. “The royal couple saw the rogue flying in Crucis space and inquired what happened. It landed near here.”

“Indeed. Poor creature. Scurried away, and the osciths ran after it. You know how they make sport of anything smaller than them.”

“Yes, Lord Cagan. I shall tell the royal family the matter isn’t of concern.” He folds the parchment and turns to march back, no doubt he landed a small flyer in a field nearby.

It’s true then, they know where I’m living. I don’t want them finding out about Wren. She’s not acceptable, especially being I’m the son of the Queen of Crucis.

I’m not convinced they aren’t spying on me. There are plenty of caves in the area. I’ll scope out another. We don’t need the royal family finding us. Moving will also keep the osciths off our trail too. I head back into the cave to tell Wren.

“We need to leave here. Too many close calls out there. You want some freedom to go outside without me once in a while. The osciths are too close.” I pack up what I can. The food under the rock goes into a large pack I’ll carry on my back. I’ll need to make a couple of trips, but first, I need to get her to safety where the royal guard won’t find us.

“Are you sure this is necessary? Call me nostalgic, but that cave was special for us.” Her high-pitched giggle puts off nervous vibes.

“Nostalgic?” I trek in front of her, keeping my eyes and ears open to the osciths and the royal guard.

“It means it’s very special. It holds a special memory.”

I peer back at her and smile. “And indeed it shall. But you are my mate now, and we will make more memories. It’s the start of our life. We have the rest of our lives before us.” I strain at that last part because if my family gets wind of a human being here and with me, they’ll have things to say. And things to do, I fear.

It takes the better part of a day to find a nice cozy cave up in the hills above the jungled valley below. There’s a perfect lookout point so I can see anyone coming from far away.

“You stay here and start fixing things where you want. We’ll live in the main cave. There are tunnels that go down and possibly connect with the mines of my people, but the tunnels are too small for someone like me.”

She stands next to one and places her hand over it. “It’s like air conditioning. Cool air constantly flows through from the depths. What about water?”

“The cave next to us has water. It’s very drippy in there and this one is dry, so we’ll sleep in here and bathe next door. I’ll also store the food next door after I dig out a cellar.”

I take off, leaving her in the cave. The oscith, don’t go into the caves or mines since that’s where we live. They stay away from the orcs. I bring back the rest of the things in two more trips.

“Okay, this is homey.” Wren arranges everything into neat spots and places the bed furs away from the door where the ground has dirt rather than stone.

I nod my approval. “Very nice.”

“It’s like a long-term camping trip.”

“What’s a camping trip?” I grab the shovel so I can dig a hole in the next cave for our food.

“Uh, well, it’s like leaving home and roughing it out in the wilderness. Except we’d pitch a tent. Here, it’s just a cave.” She shrugs. “But I suppose it will have to do.”

My mate deserves better than a crude cave for a home. She’s delicate and certainly accustomed to finer things. Things like the mines can provide, except they won’t accept her there. The opening to the mines near the far side of Crucis offers the luxury Wren deserves.

I take her hand and turn her to me. “This will be temporary. We’ll move to the mines where you’ll have the comforts of home.”

“Really, Cagan, I don’t mind this. It’s all new to me. I’m sure in time we’ll make this cave homier, somehow.” She looks around. “I want to make you happy.”

“You make me very happy. You make my heart sing, where I’ve never felt such joy before.” I hug her to me, her body soft and warm.

We enjoy our first meal in the new home and head to bed, the furs cushioning our entangled bodies. Mating with Wren gives me a solid purpose in life. I no longer care about proving myself to my family because Wren is my family. She and I will make a life here, and together we’ll raise a family, if possible. I’m sure it is. Other orcs have flown away from Crucis and resonated with mates of other species and had young.

Wren sighs contentedly in my arms as the moon rises and Tetri sets. Warm breezes blow into the mouth of the cave and with it the scent of... orcs. I bolt up, my senses on high alert.

CHAPTER 10



Wren

Slumbering in my lover's arms always gives me warm, fuzzy dreams. However, to be awakened rudely by the royal guard put me in a rotten mood. The guards grab me before I open my eyes. They push Cagan back, and he seethes as they take hold of me.

"What's going on?" I demand and it falls on deaf ears. Clearly, they outnumber us. One has a drawn sword pointing at my throat, which garners my cooperation.

"Don't hurt her. She's my mate." Cagan's hands ball into fists.

"As long as you don't fight, we won't harm her."

I'm not one to go down without a fight and I struggle to get loose and Cagan kicks the sword away. I scramble to the corner of the cave while Cagan fights the two who are weaponed to the hilt.

They hold Cagan down and beat him until he's bloodied. I can't take it. Without his weapon, Cagan isn't a match for two orcs. I scream and step to them, holding out my arms.

“Stop! Stop harming Cagan. I’ll go with you. No fighting.”

“No! Wren!” Cagan’s wild eyes turn to me.

“Stop! It’s my decision.” I look at Cagan, willing him to understand. The guards drop him and capture me, wrapping a rope around my arms. They yank me, and I stumble until they are dragging me to the cave entrance.

“Stop hurting her. I’ll go with you. No more fighting. Promise you won’t harm her,” Cagan says.

“We said that in the first place,” one guard says.

They haul us to a small shuttle on the other side of the small hill from our cave. They sit Cagan in the back and put me in the front, with my hands tied to the seat.

“I won’t escape. I’ll go where Cagan goes.”

“Where are you taking us?” Cagan growls from the backseat.

“To the mines, where the queen has requested.” The guard smugly looks forward and ignores Cagan’s frown.

“I’m still lord to you.”

“Banished lord. We are the queen’s guards.”

It’s pointless to argue. Cagan finally stops trying and peers out the window as we fly low. The osciths ran before us, fearing the orcs. The entrance to the mines come into view. Tall pillars made of stone line the front. Orcs and other beings are going in and out of the entrance. To the side is an airfield with a lot of traffic. I’m surprised because Cagan lives so primitively. The front of the mines are grand, marbled floors and gilded lit walls and ceilings give the sense of

being in a windowless palace rather than a cave. We follow the corridor ever downward, like the inside of a building.

We turn into a room while Cagan marches on. “Cagan! Wait!”

“Don’t worry, I’ll get back with you,” he says flatly. This is a matter of ceremony for the orc.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Medical facility.” He turns me into a room through a door and it shuts behind me. I’m pushed onto a large chair, no doubt meant for an orc.

“I am Oranz, the healer. Please, come in and have a seat.” The older orc has white hair and wrinkles, though his body is every bit as muscled as Cagan.

“Do I have a choice?” I eye him suspiciously.

He chuckles. “No. Queen Sharn needs to make sure you’re not bringing in an illness or a germ from other parts. Crucis is very pure and those pesky osciths keep bringing in other creatures from around Tarka. Some carry viruses and bacteria that are harmful to us and our environment.”

I laugh. “I’m sure I’m fine. Check me out, and then, please bring me back to Cagan. He’s my mate.”

“I hope for his sake you are fine.” He jabs a needle into my arm to draw blood. Then a barrage of checks on my vitals and he’s satisfied I’m not the apocalypse.

“Where are you from exactly?”

“Earth in the Sol Terran System. I came to Daerr to live in the human colony. And the osciths snatched me while I was exploring my surroundings.”

“You must have wandered away, because I doubt they’d allow anything in the airspace over that precious colony.”

“I scaled the wall and was wandering around outside of it.” I look sheepishly at my feet, knowing I did a bad thing. But then I would have never met Cagan if I hadn’t.

“Your blood is clean.” Oranz pushes a button and a female orc enters. Indeed, I am nothing like her. She’s huge, though not as big as the males.

“Follow me.” I rise and follow her through the myriad of doors until I’m in some sort of bedroom. It has a bed and a dresser, oddly. And three more female orcs walk in, eyeing me.

“I’m Tristi, and this is Elvion and Jashara.” The three are younger than the one who led me here, and their clothes are very fancy for orcs.

“You are slight. We’ll need to alter an outfit.” Elvion looks me over and holds up a garment that’s obviously way too big for me.

“You don’t like what I’m wearing?” I am wearing my blanket toga.

“Queen Sharn will view that as rude. When you have an audience with the queen, she expects you to dress fit for royal company.”

I tremble. “Why do I need to meet the queen?”

“Because she demands it. And she’s Cagan’s mother.”

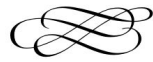
“But he’s banished and from what I understand, why would she care what he’s doing?”

Jashara laughs. “Is that what you think? That he's banished?”

I wince. “That’s what he told me.”

The three orcs laugh. “He’s on a crucible. Since he didn’t want to obey the queen’s decree of marriage, they sent him out to prove himself in a crucible. And I suppose he met you. Funny thing, fate is.”

CHAPTER 11



Eagan

“What have you done?” Mother paces before me, and Father sits on his throne, allowing her to do what she does, rule. The throne of Crucis belongs to her. My grandfather sat upon it for nearly a millennium until he grew sick and passed on. Queen Sharn took the throne and married Narod. Father doesn’t rule, she does. He agrees with everything she says. They had seven sons. Five married the female orcs of Queen Sharn’s choosing. The other two, my brother Xutag and I declined. Instead, they sent us on a crucible to prove our worth without mates.

I go down on my knees before Mother. “Please, I have found my mate out there. Fate dropped her right on top of me,” I beg.

Her eyes narrow. “You mean that creature they brought in? The one the osciths captured for the game?”

“Yes. She’s human, from Earth in the Sol Terran System. She lived on Daerr in the human colony and a drone captured her.”

Mother’s chin lifts as I talk. Her brow raises curiously. “She is not an orc. It is not your fate to mate with a being from another world. You

are a lord orc and are required to mate with your kind.”

“I have resonated with her. It’s done. It’s final. I will live and die to make her happy and protect her.”

Mother’s mouth twitched. She shakes her head. “Bring in the creature.”

“Her name is Wren. She’s an intelligent being, not just some creature you can cast about as you please. And she’s my mate.” I stand and look my mother in the eye. It doesn’t faze her in the least.

The guards open the grand doors to the throne room. Two females escort Wren in, who is now dressed in a beautiful light blue gown. Her lovely curves move under the dress and her eyes lock with mine as she approaches the throne, where Mother has taken her place beside Father.

“Don’t just stand there, girl. Do what you’re supposed to do in the presence of royalty.”

“Bow,” Tristi says.

Wren nods. “Sorry.” She bows as best she can.

“Have you never been in the presence of royalty before?” Mother asks.

“No. Uh, Your Highness.”

“No. Interesting. Clearly, she’s commonfolk.” Mother’s eyes turn to me. “And she’s not orc.” She says it like there’s gall in her throat.

“Lord Cagan, you have failed your crucible.” Mother’s decree rings out in the hall, and a few of the court dwellers all show shock with their noisy breath intake.

I look around and stand tall. “I have not failed, Mother. I’m still thriving in the wild of Crucis. I was minding my own business. Why did you see fit in coming out there and hauling us in like this?”

Wren’s head shakes. “I thought you said they banished you?” She spoke out of line in front of the queen. I shut my eyes and then look at Mother’s amused expression.

“They banished me. They call it a crucible. I call it banished. Kicked out. Deemed unworthy to live in the royal mines.”

“A crucible to prove yourself worthy. But this creature snared you, did you not?” Mother looks from me to Wren.

“Snared? No. Fate handed her to me. And immediately, I resonated. You cannot deny that which fate deems true.” I try to walk to my mate but the guard steps in and stops me.

“She is not a fit mate for you and I refuse to let this happen. Since she’s here, we’ll put her into service, but you shall go back to the wild and stay.”

“No. You cannot separate us.” I reach for Wren.

The females pull Wren away, and the guards grab me and haul me in the opposite direction.

“Cagan! Help!” Wren calls.

“I will find you.” The guards escort me to the shuttle and shove me into the seat.

“Let me go. I won’t tell my parents I’m here.”

Ornao shakes his head. “We obey Queen Sharn.”

“Of course.” I sit back, noting where they’re taking me. Crucis isn’t such a big place that I can’t find my cave home. Nor is it too big that I can’t find the mines again. I know the moon well and have traveled all over the surface. The sea is narrow and winds through like a thick river.

We land in the jungle, near an area I’m very familiar with. I don’t let them know I know it, but I’m not as lost as they think I am.

Immediately, I head back toward the mines. At least, Wren will be there, put into service, probably for one of my brothers. I toy with asking Xutag to help me rescue Wren, but I really don’t know where he is at the moment. Instead, I trudge on through the thick jungle. It will take me a day or two to reach the mines again. My parents won’t have the pleasure of knowing where I’m at as I’ll sneak in the back way disguised as a commoner.

I walk for hours and hunt. Hunger sets in and I need my strength. Thankfully, my weapons are always on me unless I’m bathing or with my mate. I tremble with determination to rescue Wren. If we have to, I’ll fly us off Crucis to get out from under Queen Sharn’s iron rule. She has no regard for anyone’s feelings or opinions other than her own. Five sons obeyed her decrees and married the females she chose. Two didn’t, and they sent them out of the kingdom on the crucible. Arik’s mate didn’t fare very well during her pregnancy and passed away, leaving him mateless. If I suspect correctly, Wren will be there helping him with his baby. That will be the first place I go.

CHAPTER 12



Wren

Queen Sharn shocks me. She's actually beautiful with long black hair and a narrow face, almost as if she's not an orc but mixed with some other species. King Narod looks a lot like Cagan and didn't say a single word. It's clear who wears the pants in this family. Even Cagan backed down from her and didn't come against her words. Of course, the dozens of royal guards at her disposal makes a big statement.

Jashara kneels and places ankle bracelets and a chain between my feet. "I'm sorry. Queen Sharn thinks you are at risk for running."

"She's right." I purse my lips and look around. If she thinks these lovely ankle bracelets and chains will stop me, she has another thing coming. I'll bide my time and leave as soon as I can.

"Lord Arik, this is Wren, a human from Daerr human colony, originally from Earth in the Sol Terran System." Jashara introduces us.

Cagan's brother is slightly smaller and older from what I gather. He holds his son, Borug, a tiny orc baby. His face remains drawn,

having recently lost his mate, Bula. She had gotten sick and passed away not long after Borug was born.

“She’s slight. Are you good with babies?” He holds up his son.

“I’m not a mother, if that’s what you mean. I hadn’t thought about having children. And for the record, I am your brother Cagan’s mate.” I’m hoping this knowledge will help him get me back to Cagan.

He grunts. “I need help. Let me see how you do.” He hands the baby to me.

I’m not completely at a loss, because I’ve had friends with babies before. Little Borug snuggles into my arms. I smile. “I can change diapers, make bottles, and feed him.”

Jashara nods. “Very good.” She leaves us. I sit on the sofa with the baby in my arms.

“You know, you can remove this silly ankle chain. I’ll have less of a chance of tripping with it off.” I bounce the baby on my shoulder as he wiggles and whines.

He bends without a smile and loosens the locks. “I will unlock it when you prove trustworthy.”

“Lord Arik, would you help me find Cagan? I realize you need help with your baby, but I belong with Cagan.”

He grunts again. “Cagan made his choice when he left the mines.”

My head shakes. “He didn’t leave on his accord. They escorted him away. I’m not sure where they took him. He wants to be with me as much as I want to be with him.”

He snorts. “An orc with a human subspecies. Nonsense. You are a servant here. Be glad they didn’t send you into the deeper mines.”

It’s no use talking to him. He’s as much under Queen Sharn’s thumb as everyone else. I bide my time, knowing I’ll eventually run away. Lord Vultog leaves daily to do his lordly duties, whatever those are. He leaves me with Borug and the home. I take care of the tiny babe and the small home, which is an apartment in the mines. Except for no windows, it’s a comfortable place. Outside the home, there are other apartments, from what I gather, of the well-to-do orcs all in royal service. Some have young babies, some are single, some are couples. They pay no attention to me. Down here, servants are plentiful.

I find a file the second day and when Arik leaves, I work the file in the locks on my ankles. I can’t quite get it by the time he returns, so I hide the file in my bed pallet. And what luck! Deep in the night, while he’s sleeping soundly, the lock clicks and I easily step out of the contraption.

Borug is a delightful baby and I’ve grown attached to his sweetness, but I need to find Cagan. The mines go off in different directions, and the commoners live down a mine that dips lower. My heart pounds as I check on Borug and, satisfied he’s asleep, I check Arik. He’s sleeping too and I make my escape, stepping out the door into the mines.

The lights are dim in the corridors as I creep along the edges. When someone steps out, I hide in the shadows. Other beings are here, and servants are out and about, but no one pays any attention.

The tunnels descend and become cooler. Cool air swirls around me. The last night with Cagan in our new cave had an opening with cool

air blowing. I miss him. These tunnels eventually lead back to the surface. I'm going in the opposite direction of the royals. I walk and walk and come to an area where it looks like residences. There are scooters outside of homes, toys and even clotheslines. It's pretty much life as you would find anywhere in the galaxy.

Behind some boulders, I hide between the buildings in the shadows as I move deeper into the mines. I'm not sure how loyal these subjects are to Queen Sharn or if they even know or care what's going on with Lord Arik. I'm sure by now he's awake and knows I'm gone.

The tunnels lead down more and more and I'm convinced they do not lead out. There were many choices and I am so lost, I sit on a ledge and cry. An orc hears me and steps over to me.

"Hello. Can I help you?" They bend to me, looking me over, no doubt trying to figure out what I am.

"I'm lost. I'm Arik's servant, and I went for a stroll and got so turned around."

"Hop on. I'm heading up for the news flyers. I'll take you back."

I look at him. "Is there an exit anywhere near here?"

"Oh, no. You've gone in the opposite direction. Hop on, I'll take you back to the entrance. I'm Alblev."

"Wren. Human."

Hope fills me. Perhaps I can leave through the pillared entrance since so many beings are coming and going. We drive for a while and when he curves up to the next level, we nearly run smack into Arik. He's holding the baby. I'm caught now.

CHAPTER 13



Wren

I play it up like I thought about escaping, but then didn't want to since I had told Ablev to bring me back to Arik. It was a well-played action on my part. I go down on my knees and beg Arik's forgiveness. He's still so distraught over the loss of his mate, he isn't thinking straight and perhaps he'll show mercy.

I follow him back to his apartment. He turns to me, his face stern. "I woke up and found my boy crying and you were gone with your chains on the floor. I figured you'd escaped."

I sit on the sofa and look at the floor. "What will you do with me now? I just wanted to find Cagan, but I don't know this place. I do not know where he is."

"I suspect he's in the wilderness where he belongs."

"He belongs with me, Arik." And honestly, I hope by being with Cagan's brother, he'll come here to look for me.

Arik holds up the chains. "I realize you are a master of escape. Should I put these back on or will you stay put?"

I chuckle. "I don't need the chains. It won't stop me from running, even with the chains."

"Obviously. I can't have you leaving Borug alone. Just promise me you won't do that."

I stand and take the baby from him. "I didn't, did I? And I wouldn't. I may be desperate to find Cagan, but I'm not a monster. I will take care of Borug."

He is desperate, and he takes me at my word. Plus, he seems a little mental, probably the fresh grief of having lost his mate. That's the only reason I'm helping him now. I feel for him and Borug. After all, this is Cagan's little nephew.

The days go by with no sign of Cagan. They must have taken him to the other side of Crucis. My heart tells me he's searching for me. I grow exhausted, and very nauseous.

"I think orc food doesn't agree with me," I say as I serve the fancy cut meat and Crucis vegetables. It all smells bad and I want to hurl. I make a bowl of grain cereal and sweeten it with honey. Bees exist on Crucis. Orc honey. It's not bad, a little pungent, reminding me of blackstrap molasses. Better than nothing.

The next day I'm lying on the sofa napping while Borug sleeps in his crib. Arik comes in, and I jump up and run to throw up.

"Are you ill?" He hears me retching in the toilet.

"I think so." I look at the crib and the room swirls. Quickly, I sit and hold my head in my hand. "It comes and goes in waves."

"I think you should see our healer."

“Oranz? He’s already run me through the tests, taken blood, and checked my vitals.”

It doesn’t matter, he takes me to the healer anyway.

Oranz smiles as he checks my vitals again. “You don’t have an illness. Let’s talk about your female cycles.”

It hits me like a ton of bricks. My eyes widen as I can’t remember when my last cycle was. All this traveling through the galaxy and the kidnapping and then Cagan. I say nothing as he draws blood and takes urine. Trembles rush through my body, and when he comes back holding a test tube, he shows it to me. There’s a light large circle and there’s a darker circle in the center.

“When a female isn’t pregnant, this is all the same color, the lighter red. When she’s pregnant, an orc anyway, the darker blue forms in the center. As you can see, you have tested positive for pregnancy. Now, I need to know when you think you conceived.”

I sigh. I haven’t been with anyone since I left Earth and even then it was so long ago I would have had the baby by now. I look him straight in the eye. “Since landing here on Crucis. The past month.”

Now, his eyes widen. “Really? Who, may I ask, were you with?”

I smile. “An orc. The one I’m trying to get back to. Cagan.”

“Lord Cagan?”

“The very one.”

“Interesting. You’re the first human that I know of who’s had a baby with an orc. There could be orcs elsewhere in Tarka that have mated with one outside of the orc species.”

The news leaves me reeling. I say nothing to Arik until we are back at his apartment since I'm holding Borug and keeping him occupied.

I sit in front of Arik. "I'm pregnant with Cagan's baby." He locks his shocked eyes with mine.

"This changes things."

I nod. "I'm more desperate than ever to find him and be with him. He resonated with me. He is my mate."

"I hope you survive it." He's thinking of Bula and I understand.

"I do too," I answer softly. "Will you help me find Cagan now?"

He blinks and nods, shifting Borug on his shoulder. "I will. We won't tell the queen. I'll need another nanny for Borug."

"How will we find Cagan?"

"Leave that to me." He stands, hands Borug to me and walks off.

Arik is an orc of few words. I look at Borug and see what my baby might look like. Only there are some vast differences between humans and orcs.

I walk around with the baby, singing to him. Happiness swells in my heart as I realize I'm bound to Cagan forever. Will Queen Sharn accept a half-orc grandchild? I believe she only has full-blooded orc grandchildren.

The next day, Arik prepares for the journey to find Cagan. "I'll be back with him as soon as I can. I can count on you to stay here and keep Borug safe?"

I smile as I bounce the infant in my arms. “Of course. He’s my nephew. And he’s my baby’s cousin. We’re family now.”

He nods curtly, touches his son’s forehead and leaves me alone with Borug.

CHAPTER 14



Eagan

For days, I stomp through the murky waters of the bog to get to the lands where I used to live. They dropped me off in the southern hemisphere and it's taken me longer to walk back. *I'm coming for you, Wren.* Every day the sun sets, I miss my mate. Every morning it rises, I'm filled hoping I'm getting closer. I would even entertain the idea of leaving Crucis if we could find a better place to live.

Arik received Wren as a servant for his newborn. Bula died shortly after giving birth, probably around the time they dropped Wren on me. I don't even know where Arik lives. My parents banished Xutag and me before Arik and Bula's binding ceremony. The royal guard monitored me and told me of what was going on with my brothers.

I come around to the back of the mines instead of the royal entrance. Mother will have something to say about me coming back so quickly. I stop the first orc I see and ask where Lord Arik lived.

"Up in the top level, near the royal quarters. I hear he has an alien servant as his nanny. Some female from another star system."

My heart races at his words. Smiling, I thank him and head to the royal quarters. Of course, he obeyed and married Bula, though Bula wasn't his one true mate. He did it to make the queen happy. And it ended badly. That's what happens when you don't allow fate to take the lead.

The royal quarters will recognize me since I'm one of the seven sons of the queen. No disguise will work so I'll need to act as if I'm allowed to be there. The tunnel to the residence of the royal quarter bursts with life, people out doing their jobs, child orcs playing, and the light system making it appear like sunlight. It's the only way we thrive without being on the surface. I prefer the surface and the actual sun and fresh air, even though it's very warm and humid air. Some orcs thrive away from the mines, and I'm one of them.

"Which one is Lord Arik?" I ask a young orc who is heading to their lessons.

"That one." He points and smiles and walks on.

The door doesn't budge when I try it after knocking on it for five minutes. The neighbor comes out and steps up to me.

"Lord Cagan, I believe Lord Arik and his son and son's nanny are at the queen's quarters this morning. So terrible about Bula. But happy he's found another." She smiles and my eyes widen.

"Thank you," I mutter and hurry to Mother's throne, where I'm sure I won't be happy with whatever's going on.

Standing before the throne are Arik, Wren, and she's holding Borug. Wren is speaking animatedly. I hang back to get a handle on what's going on and listen.

“This is not his baby. I refuse to marry him!” Wren’s desperate words reach my ears like darts to the heart.

“She’s pregnant with an orc baby. It’s mine.” Arik’s jaw flexes and his fingers twitch. A sure sign he’s lying.

And Wren’s pregnant! It’s my baby, and she’ll marry Arik over my dead body. I step into the light and approach the throne, giving a quick bow to my mother. All eyes turn to me with shock and disgust, except for Wren. She wiggles out of Arik’s grip and runs to me, still holding Borug.

“Cagan! It’s your baby! I swear it. I’ve never been with anyone else except for you. Ask Oranz. He’ll vouch that I’m pregnant and was when I arrived here.”

“Arik, don’t do this. You know the truth. If she’s with a child, it’s mine. I resonated with her, not you.”

“Enough. Now, I have two brothers claiming this baby. We will need a DNA test.” Mother slams her hand on the arm of the chair.

I push Wren behind me and keep hold of her. “No, we won’t. If Wren says I’m the father, then she speaks the truth. I believe her and I trust her with my life. Arik, admit the truth, please. This is my mate and my baby, not yours. I’m sorry for what happened to Bula, but it’s an example of being mated to the wrong one.” My eyes cut to Mother.

Arik lowers his head. “Cagan is right. I’m sorry. I’m still so distraught without Bula, I just want a mate.”

I reach for my brother. “You need a nanny to help with Borug. But that nanny is not my mate.” I look at Mother. “Do the right thing for

once and find him a good nanny. Let my mate and I go.”

An orc runner comes in with a parchment and hands it to his queen. Mother opens it and skim it. “Cagan, you can leave once you seal your fate with Wren. I won’t have a grandchild, albeit a halfling, running around without bound parents.”

For the first time, Queen Sharn made a very good decree. Arik takes Borug from Wren, and I turn to my mate, grabbing her hand.

“Will you become my legal mate?”

She giggles. “I will.” Her head bobs as tears spring to her eyes.

“Bring in the officiant,” Mother demands.

“Right now?” Wren looks at me.

“Yes. Unless you object?” Mother interjects.

“No, I am fine with it.”

The officiant steps in wearing his royal robes. Wren and I approach, and he performs the binding ceremony. The golden chain wraps around our grasped hands, words of forever spoken over us, and we promise we’ll be there for each other for the rest of our lives.

Mother waves her hand. “You’re still not allowed to live here, Cagan. You defied me when you chose the surface over my original request.”

I smile because I’d rather be closer to the surface, where I’m sure my mate would rather be too since she’s human.

CHAPTER 15



When

It all happens so fast my head spins. When Arik learned of my pregnancy, he tricked me into thinking he'd found Cagan. It was a battle of his word against mine, and Queen Sharn took his word. True to fate, Cagan appeared and stopped what could have been one of the biggest disasters of my life. Now, I'm riding away from the mines to an entrance far from the royal quarters. Queen Sharn cares enough to want the baby and me safe, but she doesn't want the constant reminder of her son's disobedience, even though it's obvious Cagan is my fated mate.

The entrance has no pomp and circumstance about it. In fact, it's rather nondescript. It looks like the opening to a mine. Inside, it descends slightly to the first tunnel. The floor and a ceiling are clearly rough-hewn from the bedrock of the moon. Doors line the dimly lit tunnel and at the end, it turns and descends more and heads farther into the mines of Crucis.

The second door from the entrance is our new home. Cagan unlocks the door, and inside it's transformed from a cave into a true living space, with actual floors, walls and ceiling. The pretend windows are

actually lights that mimic the time of day. It's set on a timer and the light comes on with the rising of Tarka and turns off with the setting of the sun.

Comfortable furniture lines the living space with a sofa and two chairs, as well as end tables, and a bookcase filled with orc legends and history, all of which I can't read because it's written in their language.

"We can bring in someone to read these to you. Or you can learn our language."

I nod thoughtfully. "How about both?"

The home is very homey, with dark wood carved to frame the furniture. The bedroom matches the lovely living room with a very comfortable bed with patchwork linens. I love quilts, and it's nice to have something familiar here on Crucis. The second room is much smaller and will work perfectly for our little one. One bathroom with all the things there makes me happy. Living in the caves, I had to squat on the ground and bathe in the icy stream. Here, I have a bathtub and a toilet. And we have a washing facility for our clothes and linens. Speaking of clothes...

"I need clothes. I'm outgrowing what I have. Unless you want to get me more sheets to make togas." I grin.

"I'll send for a seamstress for you. Orc clothes won't fit you well."

"I've noticed. They altered the dress I wore when I first met your mother."

He takes me into his arms. "I will make sure you have plenty of clothes. And I'll make furniture for our little one and clothes and

blankets and diapers and everything you need.”

“Bottles and a carrier. Maybe a wrap I can put the baby in? I plan to breastfeed. Poor Borug doesn’t care much for the milk he has.”

“It’s all donated from new orc moms. It’s a part of what we do. I’m not sure they’ll want human milk in donation form?”

I make a face. “If I can even make enough. Who knows? I didn’t think it was possible to conceive. But I have and I’m thrilled. I love our new home. Love it!”

He pulls me to him, his face lowering to mine. Too much time has rolled by and we hunger for passion. Lifting me, he carries me to our bed and gently lays me on the thick quilts. I melt to him as he unties my toga. My body and plump belly draw his attention. His hand rubs over my tummy and he bends forth, putting his ear there.

“Hello, little one. Your papa here. Grow strong and healthy.”

I hug his head there, loving my new life. I’m a wife now and a soon-to-be mother. Things are changing. He lowers his face between my legs and I open for him. Immediately, heat floods into my pelvis with the attention as he laps at my slit, swirling his tongue over my swelling member.

My body trembles as the waves of pleasure pour over me. He pulls up and stands, pulling me to the edge of the bed. My feet wrap around his muscular body.

“I don’t want to hurt the baby, ever!”

I laugh. “I don’t think you will. Just be gentle.”

Proving he's every bit a gentle orc, he presses in through my soft warm folds, sinking into me, stretching my tunnel around him. Pleasure spurs again as his little cock presses into my already sensitive clit. We climb together, the pressure building, release is coming.

My nails dig into his side as he holds back, not pounding into me with all his strength. The last time he did, we conceived a baby. We ride through the waves of pleasure as the release happens quickly. He pounds harder into me and I cling to him, my back arching and body quaking. We come down and he climbs in bed with me, pulling me to him. Falling asleep in his arms brings sweet dreams of building a life and a family with my orc mate.

We finish our breakfast the next morning. Cagan stands and stretches. "I'm heading to the wood shop to make furniture. Be careful today."

I look around the home and realize we could use some fresh flowers. "Am I safe to go outside?"

"If you don't wander off too far. I don't believe the osciths come this close to the entrance. They aren't around the main entrance. Just always keep the entrance in view."

"I will. And I'm glad we live where it's safer for me to go outside and get fresh air."

He kisses me and walks out the door. I clean the apartment and wait for the seamstress to arrive. She finally shows up after I take a shower. I'm wearing nothing but a large towel, which is perfect. I ask her to make dresses I can wear throughout the pregnancy and after I

give birth. When she leaves, I dress in a toga and head outside, excited to explore the area.

CHAPTER 16



Wren

Sweltering heat surrounds me as I step outside of the cool air of the mines. The temperature range is amazing. No wonder most of the orcs live in the mines. Still, the sun shines hot, and the jungle is alive with creatures calling to one another, colorful birds flying around building nests, and I'm sure varmints slithering on the ground under the low-growing bushes.

Colorful flowers grow within small clearings in the jungle. It attracts these large bee-looking bugs. I don't want to disturb them. Moving along, I look back every once in a while to make sure I can see the mine entrance. Damn thing blends into the environment, and I have to squint to see it the farther I go into the jungle.

The trails twist and turn and I just want flowers for the apartment. I enjoy getting outside because being in the mines all the time gets to me. I don't know how the orcs do it, especially the ones who live down from the royal quarters. There isn't even an exit, except for going back up to the main entrance. The mines are a maze. The only things going for them are the cool air and the lights that look like daytime.

Rustling in the leaves behind me startles me. I stop and turn slowly, and an Oscith is standing within arm's reach. His face distorts, and he snarls, his lips flapping like a flag in the wind. I scream and turn to run farther into the jungle. It doesn't take long, and he grabs me. My hands pummel and I fight and struggle, but he drags me away.

"Help! Cagan! Help! Someone, help me!" I scream until I'm hoarse. It doesn't matter, he continues walking away, his grip iron on me. All the struggling and screaming doesn't loosen him from my body.

"Can you understand me?" I ask. He glances at me and his lips flop, with chirps and groans coming out. He doesn't act like he can understand what I'm saying.

My eyes fill with tears. The Oscith wants to eat me, but I'm carrying an orc's baby. Surely, that's some unspoken rule that they won't cross that line.

We stumble down the slope and I realize they live in deep ravines, open tops with crude shelters and nests. A female has just given birth, by the looks of it. A bloody stain on the nest and she's holding a tiny Oscith, her wild eyes looking at me. Oh, dear god! He brought me here as her meal for giving birth.

He lets go of me and stands in front of the steep sloped trail leading upward. I have no place to go except to remain in the ravine. No one else is here. The little baby cries, a high-pitched chirping that I've heard when with Cagan while we were staying in the caves.

I step to her, smiling. She balks and hisses, and the male grabs me, pulling me back roughly. I stare at the baby and squirm out of his grip. My hand rubs over my belly. "Baby." They don't understand me.

I'm not sure how intelligent they are. Intelligent enough to build space flight-worthy drones to capture their game for sport.

The male grabs me and I thrust my wrist under his nose. "Smell that? Lord Cagan, the orc, is my mate. I'm pregnant with his baby. If you harm me, he will cut the throats of your mate and baby," I say and step back from his hands.

Osciths call from the top of the ravine. The male turns quickly, his eyes widening. Three more scramble down the path. The male tries fighting them, and they try reaching for the female and the baby. I duck behind a pile of vines and hide, peeking out and watching. No one is looking for me. The three males grab the baby and the female and shove the male back as they drag her and the baby away.

He looks around for me. I step out and look up the hill. "Do you need my help to save her?"

I start up the hill to run after the beasts, not believing I'm helping him. He lunges for me, and I grab his slimy hand and pull him along with me. At the top, I turn to him. "Which way?" I hold my arms like I'm holding the baby and nod in the direction I think they went.

His hand grabs my wrist. "Look, I'm not running. I'll help you, but you'll have to let me go. Maybe you were going to barter with me. I don't know?"

His head shakes. I turn back toward the mines and pull my hand free and grab his wrist. "Cagan will help."

He keeps shaking his head. "Orcs will help." I make the sign of the baby and point to my belly so maybe he'll understand.

I take off running and gain a little headway. He chases me and I run dead for the mine entrance. He stops when he sees where I'm going. Feeling bad, I stop and turn to him.

"Cagan will help."

His head shakes, and he lurches for me again, trying to drag me back into the jungle. But I'm close enough that someone will hear me as I scream. He's trying to pull me away and I fight him. I stop struggling and dig my heels into the ground.

"Stop it! We will help you if you stop trying to drag me away!" I turn and shout as loud as I can. "Cagan!"

CHAPTER 17



Eagan

“Wren?” She’s nowhere in the apartment. My heart pounds, wondering if something happened to her. She’s not in the tunnels, and it’s a long walk to the businesses down below. I go outside and she’s not there either. Something’s not right.

“Wren!” I listen and hear nothing but the jungle and its normal wild sounds.

Heading back inside, I ask the neighbors if they’ve seen or heard from her today. They haven’t. Standing in the tunnel, I distinctly hear her voice screaming my name. Outside, she’s in the jungle, an Oscith holds onto her. I roar.

“Let her go!” Oddly, he does and stands back, his eyes wide. So uncharacteristic for the beast. Wren runs into my arms.

“I think he grabbed me to trade for the other osciths. His mate just had a baby, and he took me to her. They were very jumpy. Three more osciths came into their nest and I hid. They grabbed the baby and his mate and took off with her. It wasn’t good. I told him we’d help rescue them.”

My head shakes as I laugh. "Are you serious, Wren? They brought you here to chase you and kill you and eat you. Now, you want to help this thing?"

"Yes. I know. Odd. I don't think he would have grabbed me if he weren't desperate. Can't you communicate with him?"

"No. They are intelligent, but they won't allow the implants." I look at the Oscith. "Do you need and want my help?"

Wren holds her arms like she's cradling a baby and points to me and to him and into the jungle. "Yes, we'll help."

The oscith looks from me to her fast. I nod and grab Wren's hand and hold out the other for him to lead the way. He chatters and I shake my head and point to the implant behind my ear. He shakes his head. We communicate enough. I point to Wren's belly and then to me. Then I pull Wren to me and kiss her passionately on the lips, so he understands she's my mate. He nods curtly and leads the way.

"You amaze me," I say to Wren.

She grins at me. "You know, flowers are not safe for picking here without you with me."

"Flowers." I'm exasperated. "Yeah, maybe you shouldn't go outside at all without me."

"Maybe you should just take me with you when you go out. I don't want to go out all the time, but it would help me not feel so bored."

We arrive at a horrid scene. They tied the female to a tree near a cliff, dropping many stories below to a river raging through. The female is crying, and the baby is crying. They dangle the baby over the ledge, threatening to drop it.

Wren runs forth. “Stop! Don’t you dare drop that baby!”

I mutter under my breath. “Why not? It will just grow up to be a monster like these are.”

Wren shakes her head at the one holding the baby. I step up and roar. Making quick work of it, I lurch for the one holding the baby. He’s in my grip and Wren takes the baby from him. The female cries as Wren hands the baby to the male who had her. I shove hard and push the one threatening to drop the baby over the ledge. He lands with a death thud on the rocks below. Turning to the other two, I roar. I’d like to catch them and shove their carcasses over the edge too. They wave their hands and shake their heads. One approaches the female and I roar again. He quickly unties her and shoves her in my direction. I step to them, roaring. It’s enough to have them turn and run fast away.

Wren joins me as the family reunites. The male turns to us, his hands form a plea tip. He stands before us and bows on one knee, his head lowered. The female joins him, holding the baby and bows with him before us.

“I think they are paying allegiance to us.”

“I think they know we just saved them.” Wren touches them on the shoulders and smiles and nods. She then puts her hand on her belly and makes it look like it is growing. The female understands and nods with a smile.

“Never touch my mate again,” I say for good measure.

They walk off and as they do, they turn around and bow towards us.

“I think we just made friends with the enemies. I wonder why they wanted to kill the baby and harm her?”

“Could be a rivalry. Could be they’re just mean like this. The osciths aren’t known for being cordial with anyone, even within their own ranks.”

We head back home. They wore Wren out. She lies on the sofa and falls asleep while I cook dinner. I don’t wake her and let her nap as long as she wants. Pregnancy is tough on females.

Arik comes by with Borug.

Wren jumps up and gathers the baby in her arms. “Oh, sweet boy.” Her kisses rain over his head and face.

“I wanted to see how you were doing.” Arik isn’t one for sweet flourishing words.

“We’re fine.”

“Have you found a nanny yet?” Wren looks up from her perch on the sofa.

“I haven’t. But I’m looking. We receive visitors from all over at the royal quarters. I may put out the word that I have work for one that may want to stay.”

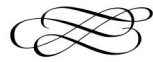
“Just don’t kidnap one.” Wren looks up at my brother.

His brow lifts. “No promises. We do things differently here on Crucis than on Daerr.”

He leaves us and Wren promises to visit soon. My head shakes. “I’m afraid he’s too far gone over the edge of rationality. He needs help, but he probably won’t get that help without a struggle.”

Wren sighs. Her hand rubs over her swelling belly. “I’m just glad I ran into you in the jungle. I’m thankful for the osciths. If they hadn't stolen me, I wouldn’t have met you.”

CHAPTER 18



Wren

I worry Arik will kidnap someone. And a thought occurs. “What about the osciths?”

“What about them?” Cagan makes a face.

“Can they become enslaved?”

“Those wild beasts? They would just as soon burn down the homes and kill the children as to work for the likes of an orc.”

“Wouldn’t that be wild, though? If Arik took in that family and they helped him take care of Borug?”

“Wren, not everyone has a giving and kind heart like you do. There’s a reason we haven’t mingled with them. The exception is the family of three we helped. And don’t put it past them to seek revenge on us.”

I shrug. “I don’t plan to go outside alone anymore. It’s too dangerous. And I never heard him coming until the last minute. I don’t want to do anything that may harm our baby, anyway.”

He draws me onto his lap. He's big and muscled and cares deeply for me and our baby. Tenderly, his hand rubs over my belly.

"The only things that matter to me are you and our baby. Nothing else matters. I don't care what my royal family are doing. I don't care what Arik may or may not do. If this place ever becomes too much for you, I'll take you anywhere you want to go. We could go back to Daerr or even to Earth."

"I'm happy right here with you, big fellow. Daerr would be interesting, but I don't think you'd like living behind the wall. Earth wouldn't accept you. They don't believe in anything of myths and legends. A big green orc would freak them out and probably land you in a lab somewhere for research. Nope. I'm happy right here with you."

His lips find mine in a sweet kiss. I love this time alone with him in comfortable surroundings. But we made our baby in the wilds of Crucis, in a cave on animal skins. Its fondness makes me yearn for those days, though they were fleeting. I rear back and smile into his face.

"We'll need to show our little one what it's like to rough it in the caves. I enjoy camping, remember?"

He chuckles. "You really like the apartment, though. All the comforts a creature like you deserves."

"It's wild, really. I feel as if I'm in a home on Earth or Daerr. The jungle world differs from living in the mines."

"You mean, it's wild that orcs are civilized? Most in Tarka think we are jungle beasts or cave beasts. Monsters."

I laugh. "Tarka is full of monsters! In fact, I'm utterly amazed by it. Someday, I'd like to see it. But from what I understand, travel tickets are really expensive."

"But I'm a lord and I have access to the space shuttles." His brow lifts.

"No shit? Can you take me flying around Tarka?"

"I can. We'll plan a trip once the baby arrives. It's safer for you to be here and give birth before flying."

He stands, carrying me to our bedroom. My mind swirls with all that's happened today. Gently, he lays me on the bed and crawls up next to me, our kisses growing with passion. We barely had time to get to know one another before I found out I was pregnant. Still, we take the time to make love.

"Wren, you are perfect. You will make a perfect mother." He kisses my bare belly. It swells with the little baby within.

Our bodies melt together perfectly. Soft caresses leave gooseflesh on my skin as Cagan takes excellent care while making love to me. I roll to my side, facing him. He draws me to him, his cock slipping between my legs. I moan as the smaller cock rubs against my clit when he's pushing in and out of me.

I push him until he's on his back and swing my leg over his body until I'm sitting on top. Lifting my body, I guide his cock through my soft warm folds; the smaller cock rubs against my clit. Instantly, heat floods into my pelvis. Being pregnant increases the sensations down there and I relish in the flow of pleasure building in my body.

On top, I'm in control. Cagan's muscular arms help me and our eyes lock as I move up and down over him. Leaning forward, the smaller cock vibrates against my clit and pleasure suddenly explodes in my pelvis. I rock over him, my back arching as the throes of orgasm rush through my body. He joins me, bucking up into me, our bodies moving as one. We slow down as the pleasure wanes, and I flop over onto his buff chest to catch my breath.

A popping sensation releases from the lower depths of my belly. A little one telling me I'm squishing them by lying on my stomach. I bolt up, a look of shock on my face.

"Did you feel that?"

He shakes his head. "No, are you okay?"

My hand moves to my swollen belly and I smile. "The baby moved! I just felt him."

"Or her." Cagan gently rolls me to the bed beside him and places his hand on my belly. "I think they're still too small for me to feel."

It's so nice to snuggle into his side, his arms protectively around me. Outside, a storm rages, the booming thunder barely heard. I nuzzle at Cagan's neck.

"I hope the Oscith family are okay."

He chuckles. "Look at you, being concerned for an oscith family."

"They are the only three on Crucis I am concerned about. The ones who mastermind the kidnappings, they can get struck by lightning for all I care."

He looks down at me sharply. “If they hadn’t kidnapped you, we wouldn’t be here like this.”

I lift my chin and grin. “I beg to differ. If we’re truly fated mates, then fate would have gotten us together, regardless.”

His mouth stretches into a brilliant smile. “I love you, my very smart mate.”

CHAPTER 19



Cagan

“Queen Sharn has requested our presence at a royal dinner.” Wren bounces around like it makes her happy. She holds up the invitation and waves it. “Of course, I couldn’t read it so I had the royal messenger read it.”

I grabbed the thick parchment. “Queen Sharn requests Cagan and his mate, Wren, at the royal apartments tomorrow for a meal. Hmph.” I pitch the paper to the table.

“What? You don’t want to go? I mean, these are my in-laws.”

“Your what?”

“In-laws. On Earth, that’s what we call the family of the one we marry. Your mom wasn’t too keen on me at first.”

“She has no choice. And you’re carrying her grandchild.”

“I don’t care if that’s what makes me have an in with them. I want to get to know them better.” Wren’s enthusiasm baffles me. I’d be happy to live the rest of my life seeing no one in my family again.

“Trust me, even I, as their son, don’t know them that well.”

She looks at me like she’s seeing me for the first time. “I guess I haven’t really thought about that. You were living in a cave when we met. I suppose you had nannies and others do things for you while your mother ruled Crucis, huh?”

“Something like that. Certainly, Queen Sharn didn’t bother with mothering things. She’d conceive us and the moment we were born, she’d go back to her royal duties. Very strict with that. I had a good childhood, but being a close warm family, we were not. Mother likes to rule everyone. Whatever you do, don’t agree to her decrees as far as how we raise our child and where we live. If it comes down to it, we’ll leave Crucis.”

“Wow, no love lost there. Well, thanks for going for me. I’m fascinated by your mother. She’s so regal and beautiful.”

I laugh. “If you say so. She had an iron fist when disciplining my brothers and me growing up. It warps one's view when that happens.”

“I’m so sorry, Cagan. I didn’t know. We don’t have to go if you want to keep your distance.” Her soft hand comes to rest on my arm.

We drive in a *shortcut* to the royal quarters, down through the tunnels on the tracks. Wren squeals as we go, no need for a protective roof, it’s all open.

“It’s like we live where there are amusement park rides just up the road.” Her joy in the smallest things lights my heart. I love seeing her living this life with me. It’s all new for her, and being a part of a family that I love is all new for me as well.

We arrive safely and I escort her into the royal chambers. Queen Sharn enters. We aren't the only ones invited to dinner. My six brothers and their families attend, including Xutag who had come in from the wilds, the lone banished Lord of Crucis. He sits alone, his arms folded over his chest.

"I see you've reentered the good graces of our fair queen," Xutag quips.

"I see you're here despite it." I laugh.

"More like coerced. One would think banishment would mean truly free." His head shakes.

"Never free, my brother. Not while living on Crucis." I laugh.

He eyes Wren. "I see you found a mate." He chuckles.

"Yes. Wren, this is Xutag, my youngest brother."

"Xutag, nice to meet you." She smiles, offering her sweetest expression.

Queen Sharn stands demanding our unprecedented attention. I was never one for all the royal ceremonies on which my parents stand. I didn't care about the throne or being sixth in line for it. It would take a catastrophic event for me to even sniff the throne as the king of Crucis. I don't want the job.

Wren watches with excitement, her eyes wide and glowing as she listens with rapt attention to my mother. Even Xutag seems bored as he's sitting at the table across from me, looking sorely out of place.

"Crucis has a problem with the Oscith kidnapping beings from around Tarka. We, as Crucis orcs, do not agree with their barbaric

ways. Nor do we want to annihilate them from Crucis since they are also indigenous beings to our jungles. However, we will not tolerate what they are doing. If we find out which ones are sending out the captured drones, we will deal with them swiftly. It is our goal to make Crucis a decent place for the others in Tarka to visit. We are opening the royal quarters for visitors starting next month. You are to treat visitors with kindness. Am I clear?"

We mutter our yes answers.

"Is this why she brought us here?" I look at my brother across the table.

"I don't know why. I'm not welcomed here, really."

"I don't think you're banned permanently," Wren says. I cast a glance at her and shake my head. What Mother does with us is of no concern to anyone but each of us individually.

Xutag squints at Wren. "How so?"

"Because they banished Cagan and now we live in the mines again."

"Good. He found his mate. I haven't. And I'm not willing to marry some orc female that Queen Sharn chooses. Look how miserable Arik is. No, I don't want that."

Arik sits with his son on his lap, staring off into space. He needs help, and he hasn't found a decent nanny yet.

Wren's face brightens as we stand around after the meal. Mother approaches. I wish Wren wasn't so infatuated with Mother like this. She does a slight bow and Mother approaches.

"How are you feeling?"

“I am good. Tired, but good.”

“It will be interesting to see what comes of a union between an orc and a Terran. Keep me posted,” Queen Sharn says and looks at me.

“We will, Momma Sharn.”

“You may call me Queen Mother.” She smiles curtly and walks on, leaving Wren looking after her with her mouth agape.

“Let’s head home. I’m tired of being here. I want to be where I can breathe without the public watching our every move.”

CHAPTER 20



When

Cagan thinks I have an unnatural affinity for his mother. To me, she's a celebrity. On Crucis, she's the queen. The ruler. Of course I want her to like me. I'm not sure if she does, but I respect Cagan's wishes to keep his distance from the royal quarters.

"I'm purchasing a small ship to travel through Tarka once the baby comes." Cagan smiles.

I jump into his arms and kiss his face. "You're so sweet, doing this just for me. Have you ever been off Crucis?"

"I have, as a child. Queen Sharn and King Narod partook in a royal Tarka meeting of the heads of each inhabitable celestial body in Tarka when I was a boy. We flew past the planets and many moons, but only stopped on a space station in a neutral zone. There is a meeting every year hosted by different places, but it hasn't come to Crucis yet. I believe that will happen soon though."

"It would be neat to see all the different creatures here."

He frowns. "I'm not comfortable around all that pomp. I'd rather be hunting in the jungle or on a private ship with my beautiful mate and child seeing the places first hand."

I know Tarka has many creatures. "What all is out there?"

"Well, anything you can imagine, I suppose. We have bear shifters on Narius, wolf shifters on Atan, and even dragon shifters on Agat. Cerbei has faeries."

"No shit! Real fairies?"

"They are called the fae. They have wings. And there are mages, gargoyles, mermaids, changelings too. And others, I even forget. We learned it in Tarka history."

Excitement floods my body. "Then it will be the first time for you too to see all the cool places and beings."

Cagan and I dream big. He's a big guy with a big heart. I lie beside him at night listening to his soft snores and enjoying his embrace when he comes to enough to pull me to him. I have the osciths to thank for it though. They brought me here as prey. And Cagan was the one that caught me and saved me from death.

"You know, all the people who disappear on Earth, I bet the same things happened to them as to me on Daerr. On Earth, we don't believe in aliens. In fact, we only believe we, as in humans, are the only beings in the universe."

He laughs heartily with me. "I guarantee, most of the beings in Tarka have been to Earth. Even my people."

"Oh, I'm sure. There are stories of orcs and shifters and such. Really, it's all myths and legends. But I suppose it's reality. Through the

years, the stories have stayed alive. Every once in a while, someone will pop up claiming they've seen one or know of one." I shrug.

Cagan's hand rests on my belly. He smiles as he feels the baby move within. "She's a kicker."

"Yes, he is." I smile. We have our banter back and forth about the gender of our little one.

"Truly, it doesn't matter to me which one we have, I shall be happy."

"You know my mother wanted a daughter after her first two sons. She sacrificed to the Crucis god for a daughter and never had one. I was told after the births of her third through seventh babies, she grew meaner in her role as queen."

I couldn't imagine, even if I had seven sons or seven daughters, I would love every single one. But there is clearly no love lost between Cagan and his parents. I feel sorry for him for not having a loving mom.

"My mom was a wonderful mom. I miss her."

Cagan's fingers weave through mine and he draws my hand to kiss it. "What happened?"

I shrug. "She got sick when I was ten. Cancer, a horrible disease. It had spread from her breast to her brain. It happened so quickly. My dad and her divorced when I was two, and he didn't live near. My grandmother raised me until I was eighteen and then she died of a heart attack. Rough life."

"Grandfather?"

“He died before I was born, I never knew him. My father had another family and didn’t really keep in touch with me. I flew to Romania at the invitation of Diona Ardelean. Imagine my surprise to learn she was a vampire and needed human blood. Not to kill us, but for us to donate every other month. It was a total rush, though, to go on a huge starship through wormholes and to the Tarka System. Cagan, I know fate had me in mind for you.”

He leans in, kissing me. I can’t say orcs are utterly handsome, but in his own way, he is in my eyes. The center of his world is me. And I am loved and cared for like I’ve never been.

The baby kicks, letting me know how happy they are too. Life will bring such joy when this little one is born. I’m looking forward to it.

EPILOGUE



Wren

Days later, Cagan shakes his head. “Seems there are more humans on Crucis. A pack of visitors landed and one went missing.”

I laugh. “Well, I hope she has as much luck as I did here.”

“Queen Sharn wants her found. She’s asked for my help since I know the jungles.”

I grab his hand and shake my head as my hand goes to my belly. “I can’t lose you now.”

Cagan sits beside me and tenderly takes me into his arms. “Yes, I know. I told Mother no. We have more pressing things happening right here.”

*BE sure to read *Orc’s Servant* and discover who has landed on Crucis and the exciting birth story of Wren and Cagan’s new baby.*

EDEN EMBER

Eden Ember found her passion in writing sci-fi romance. She spends her days either pounding on the keyboard or dreaming up the next stories. Her active imagination never lets up and the perfect outlet comes through in her books.

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