



Alien Huntsman

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Category: Romance, Fantasy, Science Fiction

Description: A beauty marked for death. An alien shifter determined to protect her.

Tessa pours her heart into her family's bakery, despite the constant demands from her cruel stepmother, Lenora. But when Lenora's jealousy turns deadly, Tessa finds herself at the mercy of Korrin, a terrifyingly attractive Vultor bounty hunter.

Korrin neither likes nor trusts humans, but even he has his limits. Hired to make a beautiful, curvy woman disappear, he chooses to protect her instead, hiding her in the wilds of Cresca. But Tessa's unexpected kindness and her determination to care for seven orphaned Adyani pups begin to thaw his icy heart.

A poisoned betrayal from someone Tessa once trusted forces Korrin to confront his deepest fears—and his growing feelings for the passionate woman who's turned his world upside down.

Can a woman with a tender heart and an alien hunter with a guarded soul find their happily ever after?

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CHAPTER 1

Tessa finished shaping the third batch of loaves, then covered them with a clean cloth and set them aside to rise a second time as she checked the big clock on the wall. Perfect. Another hour and she would have the bread in the bakery's brick ovens which meant she could let the ovens cool down by mid-morning. The warmth of the ovens was welcome in the chill before daybreak when she started work but it rapidly became oppressive now that summer had arrived.

In spite of the heat, the bakery kitchen was one of her favorite places in the world—the scent of fresh-baked bread mingling with the sweetness of the pastries cooling on the counters, the neat rows of pottery mixing bowls and copper saucepans gleaming on the wooden shelves her father had built, the coolness of marble slab she used for making confectionaries. She'd taken her first steps on the worn tile floor and spent countless hours of her childhood helping her father shape loaves or stir the sweet, yeasty dough, her fingers sticky and her cheeks covered in flour.

Her father had taught her how to bake when she was barely tall enough to reach the top of the heavy wooden tables.

“Don't worry, little one,” he'd say, laughing as she hopped impatiently from one foot to the other, anxious to see the results of their labors. “Everything happens in its own time.”

He'd been a patient teacher and she'd enjoyed working at his side. After her mother died when she was six, the bakery had become even more of a refuge. But that was before he married her stepmother; before he died and left everything to his new wife.

A wife who demanded more every year. The number of loaves Tessa baked every day kept increasing, but it was never enough for Lenora. She sighed and took a moment to stretch, trying to relieve the ache in her shoulders from the hours of repetitive motion. Still, there was something calming about the rhythmic press and fold of the dough beneath her palms, a small pocket of peace before the village—and her stepmother—awakened.

“Tessa! Are those honey cakes ready yet? Mrs. Jacobson’s maid will be here any minute!”

Her stepmother Lenora’s cold voice interrupted the rare moment of tranquility, and she sighed and reached for the cooling rack. “I’m just finishing the glaze now.”

“Well, hurry. And make sure you wrap them properly this time.”

Lenora swept into the kitchen, impeccably dressed as always. She was wearing another new dress—this one an embroidered pink silk which flattered her pale complexion—and her blonde hair was artfully arranged. Her stepmother often reminded her of a statue—beautiful but cold. There was certainly no trace of warmth on her face as she gave Tessa her usual icy stare.

“Your hair’s coming loose and there’s flour on your dress. You look like a vagrant.”

As she tucked a wayward curl back into her braid she tried to convince herself that her stepmother meant well, but the words rang hollow. As much as she tried to look for the good in people, she’d long ago given up on any hope of affection or even praise from the other woman. Lenora had made some effort while her father was alive—at least in his presence—but after his death she’d stopped even trying.

But she’s the only family I have left, she reminded herself, and nodded.

“I’ll clean up before the shop opens?—”

The bell above the door in the front room jingled.

“I’ve already opened it,” Lenora snapped. “We can’t afford to miss any business.”

Lenora urged her impatiently into the shop as Tessa bit back a retort. The bakery had always been successful, but her stepmother’s constant expenditures drained most of the profits and she was always trying to bring in more revenue.

Tessa’s stomach tightened as Edgar Thornfeld’s unmistakable cologne preceded him into the shop. He was the only man in the village to wear cologne, and it was undoubtedly expensive, but she’d always found it heavy and unpleasant.

Lenora’s demeanor transformed instantly. “Edgar! What a pleasant surprise.”

“Good morning, Lenora.” He paused, looking Tessa up and down in a way that made her skin crawl. Not for the first time, she was grateful that her stepmother insisted that she dress modestly—unlike her own much more revealing gowns. But even a high neck, long sleeves, and a voluminous apron couldn’t completely conceal her curves, and Edgar’s gaze lingered on her breasts. “And Tessa, my dear. You look quite... appetizing.”

Tessa forced a smile. “Thank you, Mr. Thornfeld. What can we do for you this morning?”

“I’ve come for something sweet,” he said, his gaze still crawling over her. “Though perhaps not bread.”

Keeping her voice as neutral as possible, she edged away from the counter as she gestured at the display.

“We have some excellent fruit tarts today.”

“Edgar, I just received that imported tea you recommended,” Lenora interrupted, touching his arm. “Won’t you join me in the parlor to try it?”

His eyes never left Tessa. “Perhaps another time, Lenora.”

She caught the flash of hatred in her stepmother’s eyes before Lenora masked it with a brittle smile.

“Tessa, don’t you have some errands to run?” Lenora’s words dripped with honeyed venom. “You can be so absent-minded, dear.”

“Yes, of course.”

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She grabbed her basket, grateful for the excuse to escape. Lenora only wanted to be alone with Edgar but for once, she welcomed her stepmother's scheming. Anything to escape the crawling sensation of Edgar's eyes on her.

"I'll be back in an hour," she murmured, slipping past them.

"Take your time, dear," Lenora called with false sweetness, already angling herself between Edgar and the door.

The still cool morning air felt like freedom as she stepped onto the dusty street. She had no critical errands, but she'd learned to enjoy these rare moments away from the shop. Most of the shopkeepers were just raising their shutters and the market vendors were still setting up their stalls, so she decided to take a quick walk.

When she passed her friend Scarlett's weaving studio, she stopped and gave it a wistful look. The small shop with its colorful sign was dark, the door locked. Her friend had disappeared into the woods and returned mated to a Vultor—the other alien race that had colonies on Cresca. The Vultor had a terrible reputation as vicious hunters and killers but Scarlett's grandmother Agatha had been effusive about Finnar, Scarlett's mate. She'd described how he'd come to her rescue and protected her from a villainous human.

Tessa knew there was more to the story, but Agatha's praise had eased the way and when Scarlett returned to the village with Finnar he had been regarded with suspicion but not hatred. They still whispered about "the beast" who had stolen her friend away but the story had the familiar comfort of a favorite bedtime story. It had certainly helped that Mrs. Jacobson, the village mayor, was negotiating a trade agreement with

the Vultor pack and spent a lot of time talking about how profitable it would be.

Despite that, Scarlett and Finnar spent most of their time at the Vultor enclave in the mountains to the north of the village and she missed her friend. But she couldn't blame Scarlett. She'd seen how Finnar looked at her friend—with a devotion that made her heart ache with longing. She couldn't begrudge her friend the happiness she'd found, even if it meant their stolen afternoons of shared tea and confidences had dwindled to rare occasions.

At least someone escaped.

Sighing, she continued walking. Between dawn-to-dusk work at the bakery and Lenora's increasing restrictions on her movements—"A proper young lady doesn't wander about unescorted"—she felt more isolated than ever. The few friends she'd maintained after her father's death had either married or moved away, leaving her with nothing but Lenora's cold scrutiny and constant criticism. And Edgar's unwanted attention.

By the time she returned to the market square it was bustling with activity, a welcome distraction from her thoughts. Her first stop was Willem's fruit stand, where baskets of apples and pears gleamed in the morning light. Willem had an orchard of hybrid fruit trees—modified from the original Earth planets to flourish on Cresca.

"Good morning, Tessa!" Willem's weathered face crinkled into a smile. "Nice to see you out so early."

"Good morning. Lenora sent me out to run errands." She returned his smile, examining the fruit. "These look wonderful."

A flash of sympathy crossed the old man's face before he nodded. "Your father always said you had an eye for quality. Remember how he'd bring you here when

you were knee-high, letting you pick out the fruit for your mother's pies?"

The unexpected mention of her father made her chest ache. "I remember," she said softly.

"Thomas Fairwind was a good man." He looked as if he wanted to add something else, but he only sighed and placed an extra pear in her basket. "This one's on the house, for old times' sake."

"Thank you."

She handed over her coins, blinking back sudden tears as he took them, then gently squeezed her hand with gnarled fingers. She managed a watery smile before she walked away, memories washing over her. Her father's deep laugh, the way he'd swing her onto his shoulders when she was small, his patient hands guiding hers as she learned to knead dough. Four years since the fever had taken him, yet the loss still felt raw some days.

Everything had changed after his death. Her stepmother had never shown her much affection, but there had been a grudging tolerance while her father lived. Lenora had at least maintained appearances then, limiting her criticisms to when they were alone.

But with no one to temper her, Lenora's true nature emerged. The thinly veiled insults. The increasing workload. The way she'd begun treating Tessa like a servant rather than family. Each day brought some new slight, some fresh reminder that she was unwanted in what had once been her home. Her father would barely recognize their lives now. The bakery still stood, but its heart was gone.

Doing her best to push the memories aside, she turned toward the flower stall. A flash of movement caught her eye—someone ducking behind the colorful display of blooms—and she immediately recognized the hunched shoulders and brown hair

pulled back from a pale face.

“Elli? Is that you?”

Elli Jacobson’s head popped up from behind a bucket of daisies, and the girl gave her a tentative smile.

“Good morning, Tessa.” Elli straightened, tugging nervously at her dress—a drab grey thing at least two sizes too large. “I was just... I delivered these for Aunt Margaret.”

“They’re beautiful,” she said, stepping closer and fingering a collection of huge pink blooms. “Especially these.”

Elli flashed her a quick smile, the expression transforming her face, then ducked her head.

“I’ve been experimenting with crossing some strains of the hybridized plants from Earth with native plants.” She glanced anxiously over her shoulder. “Aunt Margaret doesn’t know.”

She nodded understandingly. Some of the colonists did everything they could to make Cresca a new Earth, clinging to the notion that the hybrid plants and animals they’d brought with them were just like the originals. They even used Earth names to describe anything on Cresca that was remotely similar to something that had existed on Earth. She thought that what Elli was doing—mixing both together to create something new and beautiful—was far more impressive. It also required considerable skill, but then Elli had always loved their nature lessons before Mrs. Jacobson had declared school a waste of time for her niece.

“Your aunt doesn’t know what she’s missing. You always had the greenest thumb in

class.”

Elli blushed, fingers fidgeting with a loose thread on her sleeve. “I should go. Aunt Margaret wants me to polish the silver before the council meeting. She’d be furious if she knew I was talking instead of working.”

“It’s good to see you,” she said softly. “We miss you at the town festivals.”

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At least Lenora had let her attend those, knowing that the village would gossip about her absence, but she wondered how much longer that would last now that Edgar had set his sights on her.

“I miss them too, but Aunt Margaret says I’m too clumsy for dancing.” Elli’s gaze darted toward the mayor’s house at the end of the square as she attempted a smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “And too simple for conversation.”

She frowned. “That’s not true. You were always?—”

“Elli!” Mrs. Jacobson’s sharp voice cut through the market chatter. “What are you doing loitering about?”

Elli’s shoulders hunched instantly. “Coming, Aunt Margaret!”

The other girl quickly backed away from Tessa, nearly knocking over a bucket of roses in her haste. “I have to go. It was nice seeing you.”

As she watched Elli scurry away, her heart ached for her old schoolmate. If Lenora hadn’t needed her to run the bakery, she knew her stepmother would have kept her just as confined. Mrs. Jacobson’s voice carried across the square, sharp with disapproval as she scolded Elli for dawdling. The scolding attracted several sympathetic looks but no one seemed surprised.

She sighed, mentally calculating how much time she had left before Lenora would expect her return. Sammy, the part-time shop assistant that Lenora had very reluctantly been forced to hire, should be at the bakery by now, giving her a few more

moments of freedom.

Something small and fast suddenly collided with her legs, sending her stumbling. The basket tilted, and several apples tumbled onto the dusty ground along with two of Willem's prized pears.

"Oof!" A small boy sat sprawled in the dirt before her, tears already welling in his eyes. He couldn't have been more than five or six, with a mop of unruly brown hair and dirt-smudged cheeks, and she immediately recognized him. Tommy Edgerton, the miller's youngest son.

"I'm sorry!" he wailed, his bottom lip trembling. "I didn't mean to!"

Ignoring the fruit scattered around them, she kneeled down next to him. "Are you hurt, Tommy?"

The boy shook his head, but his lips continued to tremble as he looked at the spilled fruit. "Your apples..."

"They're just a bit dusty. Nothing a little polishing won't fix."

"Mama says I run too fast," he sniffled.

"Your mama might be right about that." She laughed and helped him to his feet, then gently brushed the dirt from his knees. "Where were you running to in such a hurry?"

"My friend has a new puppy." Tommy pointed toward the tanner's shop. "I wanted to see it before I had to go home."

Her heart softened at the mention of puppies, and she thought of her own secret charges hidden in the woods.

“Puppies are worth hurrying for,” she agreed, picking up the fallen fruit and brushing them off as she put them back in her basket. She selected the shiniest apple and handed it to him. “Here. A treat for your adventure.”

Tommy’s eyes widened. “Really? But I made you drop them.”

“Accidents happen.” Although she knew Lenora would scold her for the wasted coins, she couldn’t bring herself to care. “Now go see that puppy, but walk this time, alright?”

Tommy nodded vigorously, clutching the apple to his chest. “Thank you, Miss Tessa!”

He took three careful steps before breaking into another run, disappearing around the corner of the tanner’s shop, and she shook her head, smiling after him. His enthusiasm reminded her of the adyani pups she’d been raising in secret—all boundless energy and joyful chaos.

Trying to decide if she could use the bruised fruit in an apple cake instead of the tart she’d been planning, she turned to continue on her way—and slammed into what felt like a brick wall. Her basket tipped again, this time staying miraculously upright as strong hands gripped her shoulders, steadying her.

“I’m so sorry, I wasn’t—” Her apology died on her lips as she looked up. And up.

A Vultor male towered over her, his massive body blocking the sun. Although one or two Vultor occasionally appeared in the village now, they were still few and far between. Wild dark hair fell past his shoulders, accentuating the angular, lupine quality of his features, and the simple leather vest he wore revealed arms corded with muscle. But it was his eyes that trapped her—luminous amber, studying her with an intensity that made her skin prickle.

Time seemed to stretch between them. His hands remained on her shoulders, huge and warm and surprisingly gentle for their size. Something stirred in her chest—a strange flutter of recognition even though she knew she’d never seen him before.

The Vultor’s nostrils flared slightly, and his eyes widened, the amber glow intensifying to gold for a heartbeat. Then, as abruptly as he’d caught her, he released her and stepped back.

“Watch where you’re going,” he growled, his voice deep and rough, like stones tumbling down a mountainside.

Before she could respond, he turned and strode away, his powerful gait carrying him swiftly through the crowd. People parted before him, some with fearful glances, others with quickly masked hostility.

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She stood frozen, her heart racing for reasons she couldn't name as she watched him go. The encounter had lasted mere seconds, but she felt oddly unmoored, as if something fundamental had shifted inside her.

Taking a deep breath, she pressed a hand to her chest, willing her racing heart to slow. What was wrong with her? He was just a Vultor—admittedly an imposing one, but still. She had errands to finish and Lenora would be waiting, ready with criticism for any delay.

With a sigh, she adjusted her basket and turned toward the spice merchant's stall. Back to her humdrum life—one that had no place for mysterious Vultor with glowing eyes.

CHAPTER 2

Korrin strode through the crowded marketplace, scowling as humans instinctively moved out of his path. Their scent irritated his beast—except for hers. Her scent lingered, infuriatingly sweet and pleasant, like sun-warmed honey. His beast had wanted to lean closer, breathe in more of that sweetness.

He flexed his hands, still feeling the warmth where he'd steadied her. Small, soft, curvy in all the places that made his mouth go dry. Those big blue eyes looking up at him without fear, just surprise and... curiosity?

"Ridiculous," he muttered, shouldering past a merchant whose cart jutted too far into the lane. Damn humans. Always in the way.

The man started to protest then caught sight of his face. The complaint died in his throat.

Ignoring the merchant, he made his way towards the tavern at the edge of the marketplace, still unable to shake the image of the girl. The way she'd knelt to comfort that child who'd barreled into her, scattering her fruit across the dirt. No anger. No harsh words. Just gentle hands and a smile that had turned her already beautiful face radiant. He knew how rare it was for someone to show such concern for a child.

After his father died, his Vultor heritage made him a frequent target for adults as well as other children. Until he reached an age where that heritage made him bigger and stronger than any human male. The overt cruelty disappeared behind suspicious looks and nervous evasion.

She was only kind because it was a human child, he told himself, but the words didn't ring true. She hadn't looked up at him as if he were to be hated, or even feared.

He slammed open the tavern door harder than necessary, causing conversations to come to an abrupt halt as he entered. The familiar silence followed him to a corner table where he dropped into a chair, back to the wall, facing the entrance.

"Ale?" The barkeep called, after a nervous look around.

He gave a quick jerk of his head. The barkeep drew a glass and tried to hand it to the barmaid who immediately shook her head. Humans. His lip curled.

The barkeep brought the ale instead, depositing it on the table and immediately retreating. At least the ale was drinkable—their success with brewing was one of the few benefits of sharing the planet with humans. He sat back, sipping the ale slowly as he kept a watchful eye on the other patrons. Most of them were watching him just as

closely, although they tried to hide it.

The nature of his work—tracking down missing people—meant that he'd spent a considerable amount of time amongst humans, but he would never be foolish enough to trust them. It was easier in Port Cantor because the presence of the spaceport ensured a variety of alien races. Here in the hinterlands, the settlements were almost entirely human.

As he finished the ale, he wondered idly what this next job would entail. The specifics didn't particularly concern him—as long as the job paid well. Coin was coin, and humans were humans. Selfish, greedy, treacherous. He had no issue using his particular set of skills against them.

A pair of merchants at the bar kept glancing his way, whispering theories about his presence. He caught fragments—"bounty hunter" and "dangerous" and "should tell the mayor."

Let them talk. Their fear kept them at a distance—which did not bode well for Seren's current project. His alpha had been negotiating with the mayor for a formal trade agreement with the village. As if humans could ever see the Vultor as anything but monsters to be feared or resources to be exploited. Then again, the prospect of profit was a powerful motivator.

"It's better than more bloodshed," Seren had told him the last time they talked. "They need to understand that we're more than the stories they tell. And we—you—need to know that they're not all alike."

He'd merely grunted in response. He'd seen too much of human nature to share his hope. They smiled while plotting betrayal. They promised peace while sharpening knives.

The tavern door swung open, admitting a gust of warm air and the village's self-important mayor. The female paused, scanning the room until her gaze landed on him. Her mouth pinched into a thin line before she nodded stiffly and approached a table of well-dressed merchants.

Even the humans who sought Vultor assistance viewed them as tools, not allies. Necessary evils. Weapons to be aimed at problems then quickly dismissed.

And that suited him perfectly. He had no interest in Seren's dreams of cooperation. He'd take their coin, complete whatever tasks they couldn't handle themselves, and leave their petty settlements behind. The less time spent among humans, the better.

Yet the memory of warm blue eyes and a gentle smile tugged at him. One exception in a sea of contempt.

Annoyed at the direction of his thoughts, he tossed a few coins onto the scarred wooden table and pushed his chair away from the wall. He'd wasted enough time with these humans and their suspicious glances. The tavern air had grown too thick with their fear-scent and whispers.

Outside, the sun was halfway to its peak. Time for his meeting. He automatically dropped a hand to the knife on his belt, fingering the well-worn handle. His own natural weapons were usually more than sufficient, but it never hurt to be prepared.

The village marketplace still bustled with activity as vendors called out their wares and haggled with customers, and he found himself eyeing the fruit stall where the small human female had paused to talk to the vendor. Before he could question the impulse, his feet carried him toward the weathered wooden stand.

The vendor—a stocky old male with grey hair and weathered hands—looked up as he approached. Instead of the usual widening eyes and nervous fidgeting, the male

merely raised his eyebrows.

“What can I get for you?” the male asked, straightening a pile of apples.

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He studied the selection, feeling oddly self-conscious. “One of those,” he said, pointing to a ripe pear.

The vendor nodded, selecting a particularly large specimen and holding it out. “Good choice. Sweet as honey, this one.”

He reached for his coin pouch, but paused when the male chuckled.

“You’re the one who bumped into Tessa earlier, aren’t you?”

“Tessa?” he repeated blankly.

“Pretty girl with dark curls and blue eyes?” the vendor said, and his face must have betrayed his recognition because the old male laughed again. “She has that effect on people. Every unattached man in this village is half in love with her—and quite a few of the attached ones—and she never even notices. But she noticed you.”

“I am Vultor,” he growled, annoyed at his gratified reaction to the old male’s words.

“I’m pretty sure she noticed that,” the male said dryly. “But I don’t think that’s all she noticed.”

“Nonsense,” he snapped, dropping a coin into the vendor’s palm.

“Pleasure doing business with you,” the old male called after him.

The female—Tessa, her name was Tessa—was not his problem. The only human who

concerned him was the one waiting for him in one of the big houses behind the market square.

He bit into the fruit as he walked, sweet juice flooding his mouth. Would Tessa taste as sweet? No. Humans weren't sweet. He scowled at nothing in particular, annoyed at the direction of his thoughts. He was here on business, nothing more.

Following the directions in the message he'd received, he turned into the alley that ran between the back of the shops lining one side of the market square and the back of three large houses. Their windows gleamed with actual glass—a display of wealth in this backwater place.

He slipped in through the gate to the courtyard and crossed to the service entrance, noting the polished brass knocker and fresh paint on the door. Someone wanted to impress, even back here.

He rapped three times, sharp and deliberate.

Quiet footsteps approached from inside, then the door swung open to reveal a human female, tall and slender with pale blonde hair swept into an elaborate style. She was wearing an expensive dress that emphasized her figure and revealed the upper swell of her breasts.

She was attractive enough, but there was something cold in her beauty, something calculated that set his teeth on edge. His enhanced sense of smell picked up the scent of cosmetics beneath her heavy perfume. A closer look at her carefully made up face revealed that she would no longer be considered in the first flush of youth, especially out here in the settlements where females married young.

“You must be Korrin,” she said coolly, but her eyes trailed down over his body. He recognized the look—some human females were intrigued by Vultor males, even

though they considered them little better than wild beasts. This one was definitely interested, a sultry note entering her voice as she continued. “I’m Lenora. Do come in.”

He stepped past her into a well-appointed kitchen. This room also emphasized the owner’s wealth, appliances that must have been imported from Port Cantor mingling with the more usual wood-fired stove and hand pump. But he also noted a few cracks in the wealthy facade—the paint was fading and one of the expensive appliances was clearly broken. Not that he cared, as long as she still had enough coins to pay him.

He kept his expression neutral as she led him up a narrow servants’ staircase. Here the paint was not faded, but chipped and scuffed.

“I apologize for bringing you the back way, but I’d hate to cause any... gossip about your presence.”

She smiled at him, but there was an artificial quality to her smile, nothing like the soft smile of the girl in the marketplace. Fuck. Why was he thinking about her again? He only grunted in response, uninterested in human gossip.

The parlor she led him to was ostentatious—overstuffed furniture, heavy curtains, and shelves cluttered with useless trinkets. Humans and their need to display wealth. Pathetic.

“Please, sit.” She gestured to a chair that looked too delicate for his frame, but he remained where he was.

“I prefer to stand. Let’s discuss why you summoned me.”

Her smile faltered momentarily before she composed herself. She moved to a small cabinet and poured amber liquid into two crystal glasses.

“A drink?” She offered one to him.

“No.”

Her nostrils flared slightly at his refusal. “Very well.” She took a long sip from her own glass. “I’ll be direct. I have a... problem. My stepdaughter.”

He raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

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“She’s become... inconvenient,” the female continued, swirling her drink. “I need her gone. You understand?”

Gone? Usually he was sent to find someone, not to make them disappear.

“What you’re asking for comes at a price.”

He caught a creak from outside the door and held up his hand, then frowned as a delicious scent drifted in from the hallway.

“What is it?” she asked, but he ignored the question, listening to soft little footsteps hurry away as a terrible suspicion washed over him.

“Do you have an image of your stepdaughter? I need to know who you want me to deal with,” he added.

The female made a little moue of distaste, then pulled a small miniature from the back of a drawer.

“My late husband insisted. I only kept it because he seemed to think that the artist’s work would increase in value.”

He took the miniature, managing to avoid her hand in the process, and swore internally as the picture confirmed what he’d already suspected. The girl from the market—younger, but with the same dark curls and striking blue eyes.

“I can pay,” the female added. “I just need her to disappear.”

“Permanently?” He kept his voice flat, emotionless, even though his beast growled, and she waved a dismissive hand.

“I don’t need details. Just make her vanish. Take her deep into the forest. Leave her for the beasts. I don’t care how.”

She walked to a painting on the wall, swung it aside to reveal a small safe. After working the combination, she pulled out a velvet pouch and removed a delicate gold necklace. The small diamonds woven into the intricate setting caught the light as she held it up.

“I prefer gold,” he snapped, and she sighed.

“I am a little... short on disposable income right now, but I assure you it’s genuine, and quite valuable. It belonged to my late husband’s first wife.”

“Doesn’t it belong to her daughter?” The question emerged before he could prevent it and she shrugged.

“Unfortunately. I even suggested we have the jewels reset but he refused. But since he was so determined that she have it, it seems only fitting that it pay for her... removal.”

He took the necklace, holding it up to the light. He knew enough about jewels to recognize the value of the piece.

“Why her?” he asked, keeping his tone disinterested.

“Does it matter?” Her smile turned icy. “She’s in my way. That’s all you need to know.”

The girl was human, not his concern, but he remembered her gentle smile, the way she'd spoken to that child, her softness beneath his hands.

"I don't kill innocents," he said flatly, dropping the necklace back into the pouch and tossing it onto a nearby table. "Find someone else."

"I'm not asking you to kill her. Just... make her disappear." She stepped closer, her perfume assaulting his senses, and gave him a seductive smile. "Surely a big, strong Vultor like yourself would have no problem with that."

She placed a hand on his arm, trailing her fingers along his bicep, and his beast growled.

"I could make it worth your while in... other ways too. I know the stories. I know that a Vultor male can be quite... demanding?—"

This time the growl escaped and her eyes widened. For a moment, she looked uncertain but she didn't step away from him. Then her fingers slid lower and he lost the last shreds of his patience. Grabbing her wrist, he snarled in her face.

"You are not my female. Do not touch me."

Anger flashed in her eyes before she masked it with a cold smile. "Very well. If you won't help me, there are others who will. Men who don't share your... restraint."

He'd been about to stalk out, but her words made him pause. He'd met the type she meant—mercenaries who'd do anything for coin, who took pleasure in cruelty. Males who wouldn't just kill the girl but would enjoy hurting her first.

"I'd prefer not to involve a human man in this affair," she continued, seeing his hesitation. "They lack discretion. But if you refuse..."

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His jaw clenched. He wasn't responsible for this human girl. He owed her nothing.

And yet...

"Fine," he growled. "I'll take her away from here. But I choose where and when and how."

She smiled triumphantly. "Of course. I don't care about the method, only the result." She pushed the pouch back towards him. "Do we have a deal?"

He took it, hating himself even as he did. "Yes."

"You may choose the specific time, but it needs to be done as soon as possible." Her eyes gleamed with malicious satisfaction. "I'll simply say she ran away, and I'm sure no one will question it."

He nodded once, then turned to leave, already turning over plans in his head. No matter what he did with the girl, she'd be better off than remaining here with this vicious female.

CHAPTER 3

Tessa slipped out of the bakery and hurried across the alley to her house. Sammy had attempted to 'help' with the fruit filling she was making from the bruised apples and spilled half of it down Tessa's dress. He meant well, but he was a gangly young man who was awkward at the best of times. Lenora's constant criticism only made him worse despite—or perhaps because—he also had a schoolboy crush on her.

She'd tried explaining that to her stepmother, but the conversation had not gone well. Lenora told her that if Sammy wasn't up to the job, she would fire him. Since that would leave her without any help at all, she'd kept her mouth shut after that and did her best to shield Sammy from Lenora's wrath.

She slipped through the back door, grateful for the cool dimness of the kitchen. The house was unusually quiet. Lenora spent most of her mornings in the parlor, receiving visitors or ordering more luxuries. The silence felt wrong, and she hurried up the back stairs, then down the hall to the narrow staircase leading to the attic.

Just as she reached the stairs, a voice drifted out of the parlor—Lenora's, pitched low and urgent.

“—need her gone. You understand?”

She froze, one foot on the bottom step. The voice that answered was deep, measured. Male. It was too muffled to be sure, but something about it seemed familiar.

“What you're asking for comes at a price.”

A cold weight settled in her stomach. Who was Lenora speaking to? And who did she want gone? Her mind raced through possibilities. Lenora hadn't been happy when Mrs. Peterson started selling sweet fried dough in the market. And she'd been feuding with Mrs. Jacobson over an upcoming social event.

She bit her lip and inched closer to the parlor door, her heart hammering. But she'd forgotten the creaky floorboard outside the parlor and it squeaked as her foot touched it. Damn. She backed away as rapidly as she dared and fled up the stairs to the safety of her room.

The fruit stain on her dress had spread, dark and accusing. She changed quickly,

bundling the soiled garment into her washing basket. The conversation echoed in her mind as she scrubbed at her hands, trying to remove the sticky apple residue.

Need her gone. Permanently. A price.

The words chilled her more than the water from her basin. Whatever Lenora was planning, it couldn't be good. And she couldn't shake the feeling that she should recognize that man's voice.

The sound of the front door closing reached her and she peeked out of the window in time to see Lenora leaving the house, her mouth curved in a triumphant smile. Her stomach flipped. Nothing good ever happened when her stepmother looked like that. She kept watching but no one else emerged from the house. Where had that man gone? And had he agreed to do whatever Lenora wanted?

The questions continued to haunt her throughout the rest of the day. Lenora was unusually absent from the bakery and Sammy relaxed enough to produce an acceptable pie crust. He could be a half decent baker given sufficient time and patience, but patience was in short supply where Lenora was involved.

After pre-baking the pie crusts and kneading the dough for tomorrow's bread, she headed back to the house. The house was still quiet, the kitchen cold, and she sighed. That meant her stepmother would be dining out and Tessa would have to make do with whatever she could scavenge from the pantry.

She was chopping some rather withered carrots when the kitchen door swung open, and Lenora swept in wearing her best dress—a deep burgundy silk that rustled with every step. Her hair was arranged in a more than usually elaborate style, and she'd applied rouge to her cheeks and lips.

"I'm going out this evening," Lenora announced. "Mr. Thornfield has invited me to

dinner.”

She nodded, keeping her eyes on the carrots. “Yes, stepmother.”

“I doubt he’ll bother after tonight, but if he should happen to ask tomorrow, you were suddenly taken ill.”

That startled her into looking up. Something glittered at Lenora’s throat—a necklace Tessa’s father had given her mother, one Lenora had claimed for herself after his death—and the sight of it made her stomach clench.

“Will you be dining at the tavern?” she asked, doing her best to keep her voice neutral.

“My affairs are none of your concern, but I believe Mr. Thornfield prefers a more... intimate setting.”

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She managed to hide her shudder as Lenora checked her reflection in the small mirror by the door. Thank goodness the other woman's jealousy meant that she'd avoided the dinner invitation. Although she was sure it would be an elaborate meal, she preferred vegetable soup to dining with Edgar any day.

"Don't wait up," Lenora added triumphantly as she swept out the door, leaving Tessa staring after her. There was something different about her stepmother tonight—a brittle excitement that made her uneasy.

Need her gone. Permanently.

Who could she want gone? Mrs. Peterson? Mrs. Jacobson? The new girl in the tavern who had supposedly been the victim of Edgar's lechery?

Or... Her hands stilled on the cutting board. Could it be her? The thought sent ice through her veins. Lenora had never made a secret of her resentment, especially since Edgar had begun his unwanted attentions, but surely she wouldn't go that far.

Despite her attempt to reassure herself, the thought continued to haunt her as she picked at the thin vegetable soup she'd made. Her appetite had vanished, replaced by a gnawing anxiety that tightened her throat. Lenora's words and that strange man's deep voice kept replaying in her mind.

After washing her bowl and spoon, she climbed up to her attic room, the creak of the wooden steps echoing in the quiet house. She'd once had a proper bedroom on the second floor, but Lenora had claimed it shortly after Father died, declaring she needed more space for her growing collection of dresses.

The attic ceiling sloped sharply on both sides, but despite the cramped quarters she'd managed to make the space her own. Dried flowers hung from the rafters, filling the air with their subtle fragrance. A small bookshelf held the few volumes she'd managed to save from her father's collection before Lenora sold the rest. Her mother's handkerchief, carefully framed, hung on the wall beside her bed.

Tonight, however, the familiar comfort of her sanctuary failed to calm her. She paced the small open area in the center of the room, her thoughts tumbling over each other, before moving to the room's only window and looking out over the village. Lanterns glowed in windows, and smoke curled from chimneys into the night sky.

Moonlight spilled in through the glass, casting silver patterns across her faded quilt.

"What are you planning, Lenora?" she whispered, looking across to Edgar's house—the largest in the village.

The man Lenora had been speaking with—could he have been the Vultur she'd bumped into at the market? The voice had seemed familiar, but she couldn't be certain. She wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly cold despite the mild spring evening. If Lenora truly wanted her gone, what would stop her? With Father gone, there was no one to protect her, no one who would even notice if she disappeared.

"Stop it," she told herself. There was no point in borrowing trouble, and she had more important things to do tonight.

She changed into her darkest dress and wrapped a dark shawl around her shoulders, then hurried back down to the kitchen to collect the cloth sack of dried meat scraps she'd hidden away. The pups would be hungry by now.

Normally she had to wait until Lenora retired before sneaking out of the house, but with any luck her stepmother would be gone for hours. If Lenora happened to return

first, it wouldn't be the first time Tessa had climbed up the wooden lattice attached to the side of the house. The trellis, overgrown with ivy, had become her secret escape route over the past few weeks.

She ducked out into the alley, keeping to the shadows as she reached the lane leading out of the village. The abandoned woodshed lay at the far edge of the village, near the tree line where the forest began its climb up into the mountains. No one ventured there anymore—not since old Mr. Hemlock had died last winter and his property had fallen into disrepair.

The hairs on the back of her neck suddenly prickled, and she glanced over her shoulder. Nothing. Still, she couldn't shake the feeling of being watched, and she quickened her pace, slipping between two buildings and cutting across a small field.

The woodshed appeared ahead, a dark silhouette against the night sky. Her nerves still on edge, she approached cautiously, listening for any sound besides the gentle rustle of leaves in the breeze. Again, that strange sensation washed over her—eyes following her movements from somewhere in the darkness.

She hesitated, scanning the tree line. Was that a shadow moving among the pines? She tried desperately to penetrate the darkness beneath the trees but couldn't see anything. She decided she was letting her imagination get the better of her and hurried the rest of the way to the woodshed.

The door creaked as she eased it open. Inside, tiny whimpers greeted her, and seven pairs of eyes reflected the moonlight that streamed through gaps in the wooden walls. The adyani pups tumbled toward her, their small bodies vibrating with excitement.

“Hello, little ones,” she whispered, kneeling to meet them. “Did you miss me?”

They swarmed over her, their soft bodies warm against her hands as she laughed and

tried to pet each of them at once. A quick look around confirmed that the woodshed remained exactly as she'd left it that morning—half the roof sagging dangerously, moonlight streaming through the gaps in the weathered planks. She'd reinforced one corner with old blankets and straw, creating a nest where the pups could huddle together.

“Here you go,” she murmured, pulling the dried meat from her pocket. She tore it into smaller pieces, distributing it evenly among the seven hungry mouths. Their needle-sharp teeth grazed her fingertips as they snatched the offerings.

The smallest pup, whom she'd named Bashful, struggled to get his share. She scooped him up, cradling him against her chest while feeding him directly.

“You need to be quicker,” she whispered, stroking his silvery fur. “Your brothers won't always wait.”

Most villagers would be horrified to find her here. The adyani had a fearsome reputation—wild predators that occasionally descended from the mountains to prey on livestock. Stories of their viciousness circulated amongst the children, tales meant to keep them from wandering too far into the forest.

But when she'd found the pups, their eyes barely open and their mother dead, she couldn't leave them. They would have died without her help.

“You're not monsters,” she told them, watching as they finished their meal and began to play, tumbling over each other in mock battles. “You're just trying to survive, like the rest of us.”

The largest pup, Storm, bounded up to her, planting his front paws on her knee. His eyes glowed green in the darkness, intelligent and curious. She scratched behind his ears, smiling as he leaned into her touch. In taking care of the pups, she'd found

something she'd been missing since her father died—a sense of being needed, of having something to love.

The moonlight flickered outside one of the gaps in the woodshed wall, and her heart lurched against her ribs. She squinted into the darkness through the gap. Was that a shadow shifting between the trees? She held her breath, straining to hear any sound beyond the pups' playful growls.

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Nothing.

“Just my imagination,” she whispered, but the unease lingered.

Need her gone. You understand?

She shivered and glanced up at the moon’s position through the broken roof. It was getting late, and her day would start before dawn. Not to mention she’d prefer to be back before Lenora returned.

“Time to settle down, little ones.”

She guided the pups back to their nest, making sure they were comfortable. They were growing so quickly—soon they’d be too large to hide here. What would she do then? She couldn’t bear the thought of releasing them to fend for themselves, not when the villagers would shoot them on sight.

Storm nuzzled her hand, as if sensing her worry. “I’ll figure something out,” she promised, giving him a final pat. “I always do.”

As she rose to her feet, dusting straw from her skirt, the pups suddenly whimpered, their ears flattening against their heads as they stared past her toward the door.

“What’s wrong?”

She started to turn, but a strong arm wrapped around her from behind, pinning her arms to her sides. She opened her mouth to scream, but a cloth was pressed firmly

against her face, smothering the sound. A sickly sweet smell filled her nostrils—cloying, overwhelming.

She struggled, kicking backward, but her captor held firm. The pups' frightened whines grew distant as darkness crept in from the edges of her vision. Her limbs felt impossibly heavy, her thoughts scattering like leaves in a storm.

As the last of her consciousness slipped away, she caught a glimpse of her attacker's face, illuminated by a shaft of moonlight. A pair of glowing golden eyes stared down at her.

Then everything went black.

CHAPTER 4

Korrin cradled Tessa's limp body against his chest, her warmth seeping through his clothing. She weighed almost nothing in his arms, despite the lush curves hidden beneath her plain dress. The pups whined and pawed at his legs, clearly distressed by what he'd done to their caretaker.

"Back," he growled, and they retreated, ears flattened.

He looked down at her face, peaceful in unconsciousness. The moonlight streaming through the broken boards painted silver highlights across her dark curls. Something twisted in his chest—an unfamiliar sensation that he immediately tried to suppress.

This was a job. Nothing more.

But the sight of her caring for the adyani pups had caught him off guard. Humans hated their kind, feared them. Yet here was this small female, secretly nurturing the orphaned pups that any other villager would have killed without hesitation. Touching

them as gently as she'd touched the boy in the marketplace.

"Fuck," he muttered, shifting her weight in his arms.

His beast stirred beneath his skin, rumbling with satisfaction at holding her. Mine. He clenched his jaw against the thought. She wasn't his. She was just another human.

But he couldn't shake the memory of her gentle hands stroking the pups' fur, her soft voice as she spoke to them, the exhaustion evident in the slump of her shoulders as she'd trudged home earlier that evening.

He'd started tracking her as soon as he'd taken the assignment, watching as she worked quietly in the bakery despite her stepmother's constant criticism. He'd seen how the village men looked at her, even though she didn't notice their attention. Seen how kind she was to the inept young male working with her.

She's different.

The realization unsettled him. It was easier when humans were just humans—greedy, cruel, untrustworthy. This one made him doubt, and doubt was dangerous in his line of work.

He'd been reminding himself of that when Lenora emerged from the house in a gown far too elaborate for the village. She'd painted her face and doused herself in a cloying perfume that made his nose wrinkle even from where he was keeping watch. He pressed deeper into the shadows as she passed, that triumphant smile still on her face.

Perfect. With the stepmother gone, he could enter the house, take the girl, and have her far from the village by morning. Once he figured out the best place to leave her, he'd tell Lenora the job was done and be rid of this whole mess.

So why did the plan feel hollow?

Movement in an attic window caught his eye. A softly curved figure pacing back and forth in front of the window. Tessa. Even better—he wouldn't have to hunt for her. She paused at the window, and for a moment, he thought she was looking directly at him. His breath caught. Then she turned away, and the light in her room went dark.

He intended to wait until he was certain she'd be asleep, but he slipped from his hiding place and prowled quietly down the alley, testing the air for other scents. Finding none, he moved toward the back entrance of the house.

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A soft creak stopped him. The door opened, and she emerged, now dressed in a dark gown with a shawl over her head. She glanced nervously over her shoulder before hurrying away from the house, keeping to the shadows.

Where was she going?

Curiosity overrode his initial plan and he decided to follow her, matching her cautious pace and staying just far enough behind that she wouldn't notice him. She moved with surprising stealth for a human, sticking to darkened paths and pausing at intervals to check her surroundings. His curiosity deepened with each careful step she took.

What was his little baker hiding?

The village thinned out as they reached its outskirts, buildings giving way to scattered farmhouses. Moonlight spilled across the landscape, bathing everything in silver. Tessa slipped between two ancient oaks and disappeared into a thicket.

His nostrils flared as he caught a familiar scent on the breeze. Adyani. His muscles tensed instinctively. The native predators were one of the few brave enough to challenge even a Vultor. What business did this small human have with such dangerous creatures?

He crept forward, following her scent trail to a dilapidated woodshed nearly swallowed by undergrowth. The structure leaned precariously, half its roof caved in, walls gapped and weathered. The perfect place to hide something you didn't want found.

He edged closer, peering through one of the gaps in the wooden wall, and stared in shock.

She knelt on the dirt floor, surrounded by seven adyani pups, their silver-grey coats gleaming in the moonlight streaming through the damaged roof. They yipped and tumbled around her, nipping playfully at her fingers as she unpacked a bundle of meat scraps.

He watched, dumbfounded, as she fed each pup by hand, stroking their heads and speaking to them in gentle tones. These weren't domesticated animals—they were apex predators, feared throughout the mountains. Even as newborns, they possessed instincts that made them dangerous.

Yet they responded to her like pack members, trusting and affectionate.

This human girl was risking everything—her safety, her standing in the village—to care for orphaned adyani pups. Creatures that most humans would kill on sight.

He watched in fascination until she tucked the pups into the nest she'd created for them and he realized she was preparing to leave. Decision time. If he let her go now, she'd return to that house, to the female who wanted her dead. If he didn't take her, the stepmother would simply hire someone else—someone who wouldn't hesitate to end the girl's life. At least with him, she would be alive.

He moved silently to the shed's entrance, blocking the doorway just as she rose to her feet. The pups sensed him first, their playful yips shifting to uncertain whimpers. Before she could turn around, he pulled the cloth he'd prepared earlier out of his pocket and pressed it to her face. She tried to struggle but went limp almost immediately and he gathered her into his arms, trying to suppress the feeling of satisfaction in having her there.

One of the pups crept forward again, whimpering as it nudged at the girl's dangling hand.

"She'll be fine," he found himself saying, though he wasn't entirely sure why he felt the need to reassure the pup. "I'm not going to hurt her."

All he had to do was deliver her somewhere safe but far away, and leave her. Simple.

A sharp pain shot through his ankle, breaking his concentration. He looked down to find the runt of the litter—the one with the white streak—attached to his ankle, tiny teeth surprisingly sharp.

"Let go, you little pest." He shook his foot gently, but the pup growled and bit down harder, green eyes glaring up at him with fierce determination.

The other six pups circled him now, emboldened by their sibling's courage. They yipped and snarled, their fluffy little bodies not much larger than his boots. One particularly brave pup lunged at his other ankle, and he sighed heavily. He couldn't just leave them here. They were too young to hunt for themselves—barely weaned from the look of them. Without the girl's help, they'd starve within days. Or worse, some villager would find them and slaughter the entire litter.

"This wasn't part of the deal," he grumbled, carefully setting her down on the cleanest patch of straw he could find.

The white-streaked pup immediately abandoned him and scampered to her side, nudging her hand again with its muzzle. When she didn't respond, it let out a mournful howl that the others quickly echoed.

"She's just sleeping," he told them, feeling ridiculous for explaining himself to a bunch of pups. "Now come here before I change my mind."

He grabbed the worn blanket she had been using to line their nest, then gathered the corners to form a makeshift sack. Moving quickly, he gathered the squirming pups one by one, depositing them into the sack. They protested with high-pitched yelps, but he ignored them—they were safe in the blanket and should settle down in the darkness.

The white-streaked runt was the last and most difficult, refusing to leave Tessa's side until he physically pried it away. It nipped at his fingers, drawing blood.

"You're going to be trouble," he muttered, adding the pup to the writhing bundle.

Still holding the bundle of pups with one hand, he scooped her up with his other arm. Her head lolled against his chest, dark curls spilling over his forearm. She felt as right in his embrace as she had earlier, something his beast seemed all too pleased about.

"Quiet," he ordered the bundle as he tucked them between Tessa's body and his chest.

To his surprise, the pups settled almost immediately. The little runt with the white streak poked its head out from the blanket, green eyes watching him with what seemed like wary acceptance. He gently pulled the blanket back over its head and ducked through the woodshed door.

The village lights faded behind him as he moved deeper into the forest, his pace never slowing despite his burdens. He knew these woods better than the villagers who feared to venture beyond their fields after dark. Fools, the lot of them. The forest held far fewer dangers than their own kind.

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The familiar scents of damp earth and evergreens filled his lungs as he climbed higher into the foothills. Something tight in his chest began to unwind with each step that took him away from the human village. This was where he belonged—not brooding in village taverns or dealing with scheming women like Lenora.

One of the pups yipped softly, and Tessa stirred in his arms. He froze, but she merely sighed and pressed her face against his shoulder before falling still again. The warmth of her breath penetrated his vest, sending an unexpected shiver down his spine.

“What am I doing?” he muttered to himself, resuming his climb up the rocky path.

He still hadn’t decided exactly where to take her. Somewhere safe but distant, that had been the plan. Yet as the mountain trail opened before him, familiar peaks silhouetted against the star-filled sky, he felt an odd sense of rightness. As if bringing her here, to his territory, was exactly what he should be doing.

CHAPTER 5

Tessa drifted slowly back to consciousness. Her mouth felt dry, her tongue like sandpaper against the roof of her mouth, and her head felt fuzzy. She tried to move her hand to rub her temples, but her wrists refused to separate. Panic jolted through her body as she realized both her wrists and ankles were bound with strips of soft leather—tight, but not painful.

The night air carried a chill that hadn’t been present in the village. The clean scent of pine trees floated by on the breeze, and overhead, stars glittered more brilliantly than she’d ever seen them. She was somewhere in the mountains, far from home. But

where? And why?

The last thing she remembered was the woodshed, the pups, and then... golden eyes. Her heart hammered against her ribs as she blinked away the remnants of whatever had been used to render her unconscious.

A soft whimper drew her attention, and relief flooded her as she spotted the adyani pups huddled together in their blanket nearer her feet. All seven accounted for, their tiny bodies rising and falling with sleep. At least they were safe.

A sudden shower of sparks drew her attention to a campfire. Beyond the dancing flames sat a huge, broad-shouldered figure. His face was partially hidden in shadow, but there was no mistaking the golden eyes that seemed to glow in the firelight—the same eyes she’d seen in the village, the same eyes that had been the last thing she’d seen before darkness claimed her.

“You’re awake.” His deep voice carried across the small clearing, neither threatening nor particularly welcoming.

She struggled to sit up, her bound limbs making the task awkward. He neither objected nor offered to help, simply watching her with those unreadable eyes.

“Who are you? Why have you taken me?” she asked once she was upright, trying to fight back a wave of panic. She was afraid she already knew the answer.

“...need her gone. You understand?”

“What you’re asking for comes at a price.”

She was the one Lenora wanted gone. Her stepmother had hired this man—this Vultor—to get rid of her.

“You’re the one Lenora was speaking to. She paid you to take me, didn’t she?”

The Vultor’s expression remained impassive as he reached for something beside him. She tensed, fear momentarily overriding her anger. But instead of a weapon, he produced a small bundle wrapped in cloth.

“You should eat.”

“I don’t want food. I want answers.” She struggled against her bindings, wincing as the leather tightened and dug into her wrists. “Where are you taking me? What does Lenora expect you to do with me?”

Even as she asked the question, the realization washed over her, as chilling as winter rain.

“She hired you to kill me, didn’t she?” Her voice trembled despite her best efforts to control it..

The Vultor’s golden eyes reflected the firelight, his expression unreadable, but his silence was confirmation enough. Her stomach twisted into knots.

“How much?” she asked, anger giving her strength. “How much did my stepmother pay you to make me disappear?”

He ignored her questions, moving around the fire with a predatory grace that made her pulse race. She tried to scramble away as he kneeled beside her, but his big hand closed around her forearm, his palm warm against her chilled skin. He was so close she could feel the heat radiating from that big body and catch his scent, clean and somehow wild.

She started to pull away again, but his fingers tightened.

“Stop fighting me,” he said, his tone mild, as he extended his other hand. She gasped as sharp claws emerged from his fingertips. “Now hold still.”

She obeyed, her pulse hammering in her throat as he let go of her arm and reached for her bound wrists instead. He cradled them in one big warm hand, then sliced through the leather bindings with his other hand, his claws never once grazing her skin.

“Drink,” he ordered, handing her a waterskin.

She gave it a suspicious look but her mouth was too dry to resist. She drank thirstily while he watched.

“Now eat.”

He unwrapped the bundle, revealing dried meat, berries, and a small loaf of bread that looked suspiciously like one from her own bakery. He pushed the food towards her before returning to his place across the fire.

She rubbed her freed wrists, watching him warily as a fragile tendril of hope unfurled in her chest. If he'd wanted her dead, wouldn't he have killed her already? Why feed her? Why cut her bonds?

Her stomach growled traitorously and she reached for a handful of berries, then pulled off a hunk of bread. It would be foolish not to eat while she had the opportunity, but she only managed a few bites before her nerves got the better of her and she pushed the food away.

The pups stirred at her feet, one yawning widely before settling back down. At least he hadn't harmed them. They were alive. He could have killed them or simply left them to starve, but he'd brought them along. That had to count for something, didn't it?

“If you're going to kill me,” she continued, forcing herself to meet those intimidating golden eyes, “I'd like to know what will happen to them. They're too young to survive on their own.”

Another pup rolled over, exposing his soft belly in sleep. Such trust. Such vulnerability. She gently stroked his fur, drawing comfort from his warmth even as fear and uncertainty clawed at her insides.

The Vultor's face remained impassive, those golden eyes reflecting the firelight without revealing any of the thoughts behind them. He simply reached for a stick and prodded the fire, sending another shower of sparks spiraling into the night sky.

Anger flared inside her, hot and sudden. She'd spent years swallowing her words, keeping her head down, enduring Lenora's cruelty with quiet dignity. But not now. Not when her life had been snatched away from her.

"Look at me!" Her voice cracked through the night air. "I deserve to know why I've been taken from my home. What did she promise you? What's the price of my life?"

One of the pups startled at her outburst, letting out a tiny whimper. She immediately softened her tone, stroking his fur until he settled again.

"If I'm going to die," she continued, quieter now but no less determined, "I have a right to know why and how. And what will happen to them." She gestured to the sleeping pups. "They need care. They need protection."

The irony wasn't lost on her—pleading for the safety of creatures the village feared, while at the mercy of a predator the village feared even more. But these pups were innocent. They deserved a chance.

"Was it because of Edgar?" she pressed when he remained silent. "Did she think I was stealing him from her? Or was it just... me? Has she always hated me this much?"

Her voice faltered on the last question, years of rejection suddenly crashing down on her shoulders. She'd tried so hard to earn Lenora's approval, to be the perfect stepdaughter. Had it all been pointless from the start?

She watched his face, searching for any flicker of emotion. His features remained

carved from stone, but something in his eyes shifted—a subtle softness as he glanced at the pups curled beside her.

“Why did you bring them?” she asked, her voice softer now. “You could have left them behind. It would have been easier for you.”

For a long moment, she thought he wouldn’t answer this question either. Then he exhaled, a sound somewhere between resignation and irritation.

“They would have died.” His deep voice rumbled through the night air. “Without you.”

“You care what happens to them?” she pressed, hardly daring to hope.

Golden eyes flicked back to the sleeping pups. “They’re innocent. Not their fault what they are.”

A supposedly ruthless predator who had kidnapped her but saved orphaned pups he had no obligation towards. The contradiction made her head spin. A truly heartless killer wouldn’t have bothered with the pups at all.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “For not leaving them.”

He grunted, clearly uncomfortable with her gratitude. “Don’t thank me yet. You don’t know what comes next.”

But for the first time since waking with bound wrists, she relaxed a little. The Vultor had shown mercy to helpless creatures. Perhaps there was room for compassion in whatever fate awaited her.

One of the pups stretched in his sleep, tiny paws reaching toward the warmth of the

fire. He'd recognized her connection to them—had honored it even while carrying out Lenora's orders. That had to mean something.

"I'll keep taking care of them," she said quickly, the words tumbling out. "If... if you let me live, I promise I won't be a burden. I can cook, clean, mend clothes—whatever you need."

His expression hardened. "I don't need you."

The blunt response stung more than it should have. She swallowed, fighting back the ridiculous urge to cry. What had she expected? That he'd welcome her offer of domestic services after kidnapping her?

"Then why am I here?" she whispered.

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He ignored her question, pulling another strand of leather from his pocket. “Give me your hands.”

She hesitated, clutching her freed wrists protectively against her chest. The brief taste of freedom made the prospect of being bound again almost unbearable.

“Please,” she said. “I won’t run.”

“Your hands.” His voice left no room for argument.

Reluctantly, she extended her arms. His fingers were surprisingly gentle as he positioned her wrists together, careful not to pinch her skin as he wrapped the leather around them. The contradiction between his actions and his careful touch confused her.

As he secured the knot, he looked up. Their eyes met and the breath caught in her throat as that same strange sensation of recognition washed over her—a feeling of connection that made no sense. She’d never met him before yesterday, yet something about him felt... familiar.

His eyes widened slightly, as though he felt it too. For a heartbeat, neither of them moved.

Then he abruptly broke the contact, jerking his hands back with somewhat less than his usual grace. He rose to his feet in one fluid motion and stepped away from her.

“Stay put,” he ordered, already turning toward the trees. “I’ll be back.”

Without another word, he stalked off into the darkness of the forest, leaving her alone with the sleeping pups and her racing thoughts.

She let out a shaky breath. Whatever Lenora had paid him to do, he hadn't done it yet. For now, at least, she was still alive.

CHAPTER 6

Korrin stared across the flames at Tessa's sleeping body. He hadn't gone far, just out of sight amongst the trees, but he'd been unable to face any more of her questions. Especially when he didn't know the answers himself. He'd waited until she fell asleep again before returning. The firelight painted her skin gold, softening her features until she looked almost ethereal. One of the pups had wriggled free of its siblings and curled against her neck, its tiny body rising and falling with each breath she took.

His jaw clenched. She was human. Just another fragile, treacherous human. No matter what his instincts whispered, she wasn't his concern.

"Fuck," he muttered, running a hand through his hair.

He'd never been in such a position before. Usually his jobs were straightforward—find the target, complete the contract, collect payment. But this? This was a mess of his own making.

He couldn't take her back for the same reason he'd accepted the job in the first place. If he took her back, her stepmother would simply hire someone else, someone who wouldn't hesitate to complete the job properly. Someone who might make her suffer before the end.

The thought made his beast snarl possessively.

Even if he just let her go, he was sure she'd simply return to that pitiful village. To the stepmother who wanted her dead. To the pompous male who'd been leering at her.

The stick snapped in his hand.

She deserves more than that, he thought as one of the pups yipped in its sleep. She'd insisted on caring for creatures that most humans would have killed on sight.

"You're more trouble than you're worth," he told her sleeping body.

The wind shifted, carrying her sweet, intoxicating scent to him. His beast stirred, wanting to move closer, to wrap around her and keep her safe. The thought made him growl, low in his throat. This wasn't like him. He didn't care about humans. He didn't protect them. He certainly didn't feel this strange pull toward them.

But as he watched her sleep, her face soft and peaceful despite her circumstances, he knew he couldn't let her return to almost certain death. But where could he take her instead?

Taking her to the Vultor enclave seemed the most logical solution. He was sure that Seren would agree to protect her, at least temporarily. But his logic failed when he imagined Tessa amongst his kind.

Scarlett had been accepted, yes, but only because she was Finnar's mate. The bond between them was recognized and respected. But Tessa? An unattached human female with no ties to their pack? Some of them would reject her simply because she was human, but some of the males would see her as fair game.

The thought of another Vultor approaching her, catching her scent, touching her—his claws extended involuntarily, digging into his palms.

Ours,his beast whispered.Ours to protect.

“Shut up,” he muttered, shaking his head to clear it.

He glanced back at her. Another one of the pups had crawled up to nestle against her stomach, and even in sleep, her arm curled protectively around the small creature. The sight did nothing to calm his agitation.

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The other Vultor males would see her gentleness as weakness. They wouldn't understand how much courage it took for a human to care for creatures her kind feared and hated. They wouldn't see what he saw.

Because she's ours, the beast insisted, and he clenched his jaw. This possessiveness was dangerous and unwelcome. One soft little female with kind eyes and a gentle smile shouldn't be able to crack his foundations so easily.

Yet the thought of Daven or Larak or any of the other unmated males catching her scent made his hackles rise. They wouldn't understand her value beyond the obvious. They'd see her curves, her beauty, but miss the strength beneath her softness.

He forced himself to turn away from the sleeping woman, scanning the darkness beyond their small camp. The mountains loomed around them, dark against the stars. He needed a destination, somewhere to take her that wasn't the Vultor enclave.

The cabin.

Three winters ago, after Seren had found him half-starved and feral in the northern territories, Seren had taken him to a small hunter's cabin. His mother's death had been too fresh, the pain too raw to face a new pack with their curious eyes and probing questions. He'd needed solitude to lick his wounds.

Seren had respected his need for space but checked on him occasionally, bringing supplies and news of the pack. The Alpha had been patient, giving him time to come to terms with his grief before fully integrating him into the fold.

The cabin wasn't much—a single room with a fireplace and some basic furnishings. But it was sturdy, hidden in a small valley that few knew about, even though it wasn't that far from either the village or the Vultor enclave. It had a stream nearby for fresh water and was far enough from both human settlements and Vultor territory to provide some breathing room.

There would be dust and cobwebs, but the roof was sound. He'd reinforced the door and windows himself during those long, lonely nights and because he still returned occasionally, it was equipped with basic supplies. It wasn't perfect, but it would give him time to figure out what to do with her. And more importantly, it would keep her away from the other unmated males.

His beast rumbled with approval at the thought, and he scowled, irritated again by his beast's possessiveness. He didn't want the female. He just needed somewhere to stash her while he came up with a more permanent solution. The cabin would do. Remote enough to be safe from Lenora's reach, yet comfortable enough that she wouldn't suffer unnecessarily.

The only issue was that it might not be remote enough to stop her from finding her way back. He would have to confuse her, make her think it was much further away than it was. He moved back towards the fire, already planning their route.

A short time later he crossed over to where she still slept, curled protectively around the adyani pups. He bent down and sliced through her bindings, then nudged her gently with his boot. "Get up. We're moving."

She startled awake, confusion flashing across her face before recognition set in. The flash of fear that followed made his beast stir uncomfortably.

"It's still dark," she murmured, voice thick with sleep.

“That’s the point.” He placed the two pups that had arranged themselves next to her back with the other pups, then gathered the blanket back into a makeshift sack holding them. “We have a lot of ground to cover.”

He watched her struggle to her feet, clenching his fists to stop himself from helping her, then winced as she stretched stiff muscles. Humans were so fragile. This one had spent her life in a village, probably never sleeping on anything harder than a feather mattress.

“I can carry them,” she offered, reaching for the bundle.

“No.” The word came out sharper than he intended and she gave him a startled look. “I’ll take them.”

He deliberately chose a path that doubled back on itself multiple times. The cabin was less than an hour from their current location if they went directly, but he had no intention of letting her know that. Better she believe they were deep in Vultor territory, far from any hope of escape.

He led her across a shallow stream, then up a steep ridge only to descend again on the other side. The path was deliberately challenging—over fallen logs, through dense underbrush, across slippery rocks.

Yet she didn’t complain. Not once.

He found himself glancing back more often than necessary, expecting to find her lagging or in tears. Instead, she followed steadily, her face determined. Her shoes were impractical for the terrain, her dress caught on brambles, and her breathing grew labored on the steeper climbs—but she pressed on.

When she stumbled on a loose rock, catching herself against a tree trunk, he almost

went back to help. Almost. Instead, he waited silently until she righted herself and continued forward.

“How much farther?” she finally asked after they’d been walking for over an hour. There was no whine in her voice, just quiet inquiry.

“As far as it takes,” he answered gruffly.

The pups had begun to stir in their bundle, making soft whimpering sounds. Soon they’d need feeding.

He grudgingly admitted to himself that he was impressed. Most village humans would have broken down by now, demanding rest or comfort. This one had courage. It didn’t change anything—she was still human, still a complication he didn’t need—but it was... noteworthy.

A short time later he spotted the cabin through the trees and felt an unexpected rush of relief. She’d kept pace without complaint, but her steps had grown increasingly unsteady. Her face remained determined, but exhaustion had etched itself into every line of her body.

He’d intended to lead her in circles for another hour at least, but something made him cut the journey short. Not concern—definitely not concern—just practicality. She’d be useless if she collapsed.

“There.” He nodded toward the small structure nestled against the mountainside.

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The cabin stood exactly as he remembered—weathered logs darkened by seasons of rain and snow, a sturdy chimney of stacked stone rising from one end. The forest had crept closer over the years, branches stretching toward the roof like curious fingers.

He shifted the bundle of pups and strode forward. The door creaked as he pushed it open, revealing the single room beyond. Dust motes danced in the shafts of light filtering through the shuttered windows. A rough-hewn table with two chairs occupied one corner, a narrow bed the other. The stone fireplace dominated the far wall, cold ashes still piled in its hearth.

“It’s not much,” he muttered, setting the pups down in the box next to the fireplace intended to hold firewood.

She’d followed him inside, wandering slowly around the small space. She didn’t speak as she crossed to the bed, running her fingers over the worn quilt before she sighed and turned to face him.

“Why are you doing this?”

The question hung in the air between them. He stared at her, at this human female who should mean nothing to him. Her dark curls had escaped their braid, framing a face smudged with dirt from the journey but still undeniably appealing. Those blue eyes held no fear now, only questions.

Why was he doing this? He’d been paid to make her disappear. The simplest solution would have been to kill her quickly. Even taking her far into the mountains and abandoning her would have fulfilled his contract.

Instead, he'd brought her here. Brought her to a place where he'd once sought refuge himself.

He turned away from her probing gaze, unwilling to examine his own motives too closely. Instead he busied himself clearing the ashes from the fireplace.

"Your stepmother wants you dead," he said finally, avoiding the actual question. "I'm keeping you alive. For now."

Her silence felt heavy somehow. After a moment, he heard the soft rustle of her skirts as she turned away and he released a breath.

"I'll get you settled, then I'll leave. There's enough here to keep you alive. Food stores in the larder and root cellar. Creek for water about fifty paces west."

Once again she didn't answer and he couldn't prevent himself from turning to look at her. She was studying him, eyes wide and thoughtful.

"You're just going to abandon me here?"

"Better than the alternative." He moved toward the door, needing space to clear his head. "I'll get firewood."

Outside, the mountain air filled his lungs, crisp and clean. He followed a worn path to a small clearing where split logs had been stacked under a crude shelter. He'd left a decent supply last time he was here but she would need more if she were going to be here for any length of time.

He grabbed the axe stored under the shelter and swung it with practiced ease, splitting a log cleanly down the middle. The physical exertion felt good, channeling the restless energy that had been building inside him.

He'd leave her here. It was the sensible solution. The cabin was far enough from the village that Lenora would assume her stepdaughter was dead, but close enough to civilization that she could eventually find her way back if she chose. Or make a life here. Either way, his hands would be clean.

Another log split beneath his axe. And another.

The image of her face floated unwanted into his mind—her soft smile as she watched the pups, creatures most humans would have destroyed without hesitation. The determination in her eyes as she'd followed him through the forest without complaint.

He paused, axe raised mid-swing, as the truth hit him with unexpected force: he didn't want to leave her.

The realization unsettled him. He'd spent years keeping everyone at a distance, but especially humans, knowing their capacity for cruelty and betrayal. Yet something about this female pulled at him, awakening instincts he'd long suppressed.

His beast stirred restlessly beneath his skin, insistent and demanding. Ours. Stay. Protect.

He slowly lowered the axe. He was playing with fire and he knew it, and yet, the prospect of leaving her behind, alone in the mountains, made his chest ache.

He'd been alone like that. He knew what it was like.

Fuck.

The single curse seemed entirely inadequate for the mess of conflicting thoughts and feelings crashing through him.

She was human. Weak. Fragile. Yet somehow stronger than many of his kind.

And the way she'd looked at him just now, as though she understood his actions. As if she'd forgiven him for taking her from her home and delivering her to the edge of the wilderness.

"Fuck," he repeated, running a hand through his hair.

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If he stayed with her, he'd have to face the truth—that this human female meant something to him.

CHAPTER 7

Tessa blinked awake to sunlight streaming through the cabin's uncovered windows. For a moment, disorientation gripped her—the unfamiliar wooden beams overhead, the smell of pine instead of flour and sugar. Then the previous day's events came crashing back.

She sat up quickly, the rough blanket falling to her waist before she remembered that she'd stripped down to her chemise to sleep. She grabbed the blanket to pull it back up, but the cabin stood empty. No towering Vultor, no sign of him except for his lingering scent—wild and masculine, like the forest after a rainfall.

“Hello?”

Her voice echoed in the small space, and the pups stirred in their makeshift bed near the hearth, yawning and stretching. At least they were still here. She slipped from beneath the covers, her feet quiet on the cool wooden floor. The fire had burned low overnight, but the cabin retained a surprising amount of warmth.

Her dress hung next to the stove and when she went to retrieve it, she discovered that it was surprisingly clean. He must have washed it last night after she'd fallen asleep. The unexpected kindness made her chest ache as she pulled her dress back on. She'd been doing her own laundry since Lenora had decided she didn't want anything that smelled like the bakery included in the clothes she sent to be washed. This virtual

stranger had been kinder to her than her stepmother.

Once she was dressed she peered out of the window. A substantial woodpile stood stacked against the cabin wall—far more than had been there yesterday. He'd worked tirelessly throughout the day, his powerful arms swinging the axe with effortless precision. She'd watched him from the doorway, mesmerized by the fluid strength in every movement.

Near the woodpile hung two rabbits and what looked like a small deer, cleaned and ready for preservation. More of his handiwork. He'd disappeared into the forest twice, returning each time with fresh game, refusing her offers of help. He'd even made a surprisingly good stew from his catch, using the small wood stove in the corner next to the fireplace.

“Take the bed,” he'd growled when darkness fell, spreading his cloak on the floor near the door. “I sleep better knowing nothing can get in without going through me first.”

She'd tried to protest—it was his cabin after all—but the look in those amber eyes brooked no argument.

But where was he now? His cloak was gone. The floor where he'd slept showed no indication anyone had been there. A cold feeling settled in her stomach. He'd said he was going to leave her—had he left for good? Abandoned her here?

She checked the larder and found it surprisingly full. Root vegetables stored in boxes of hay. A basket of apples. Even a sack of flour and salt. Together with the rabbits and the deer, it was enough food to last for weeks.

“Why would you do all this just to leave?” she whispered to the empty cabin.

Bashful whined, pawing at her skirt, and she bent down and picked him up.

“Looks like it might just be us now,” she murmured, trying to ignore an unexpected pang of disappointment. But then she spotted his cloak on a peg on the wall next to the bed. He was coming back.

Her immediate rush of relief was so overwhelming that it startled her. What was she thinking? He’d kidnapped her and brought her here as a prisoner. She should be grateful that he was gone. In fact she should be using this opportunity to escape.

Except that escape meant leaving the pups. Her heart ached as she looked over at them tumbling around by the hearth. They played with such abandon, unaware of her plans or the dangers outside. She’d grown to love them in the short time she’d cared for them, their little bodies warm against her when she fed them, their tiny tongues licking her fingers in gratitude.

But she wasn’t a fool. Seven adyani pups would slow her down considerably. She’d never make it far carrying them all, and if they started yipping or crying, they’d give away her position instantly. She also wasn’t sure what she’d be facing if—when—she made it back to the village. She’d decided to go to Willem and ask his help. Hopefully he could make her stepmother understand she wasn’t going anywhere.

It’s for the best, she told herself sternly. She’d always known she wouldn’t be able to keep them in the village forever.

She put Bashful back with the others and knelt beside them, running her fingers through their soft fur.

“I’m sorry, little ones,” she whispered as tears welled up, blurring her vision. “I have to go alone.”

As much as she hated to leave them, she knew it was the right decision. She was sure that the Vultor would care for them. He could have left them to die in the woodshed, but instead, he'd gathered them up and brought them along. He'd even hunted for them yesterday, bringing back meat specifically for their growing bodies.

Whatever his intentions toward her, he wouldn't harm them—she was certain of that.

After one last stroke for each of the pups, she adjusted the blanket they slept on, making sure it was safely away from the dying embers in the fireplace. She filled their water bowl and filled another bowl with leftover stew.

“He'll be back for you,” she assured them, though her voice broke. “And maybe... maybe when I find my way back to the village, I can figure out a way to come back for you.”

The lie tasted bitter on her tongue. She knew once she left, she'd likely never see them again.

Even though she felt guilty about doing so, she grabbed the water skin and a couple of apples before heading for the door. It felt impossibly heavy as she pulled it open, taking one last look at the pups.

“Be good,” she whispered, then stepped outside, closing the door firmly behind her as more tears filled her eyes.

Dashing away the tears, she studied the terrain. Trees stretched in every direction, but the land sloped downwards to her right. Logic said going downhill would eventually lead to the base of the mountains, and from there she could find her way back to the village.

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Biting back another sob, she hurried into the forest and started downhill, her breath coming in short, panicked bursts. The morning sun filtered through the canopy above, creating dappled patterns that shifted with every breeze but she was too nervous to appreciate their beauty.

Every twig snap and rustle made her heart jump. She'd spent her life in kitchens and markets, not wilderness. The forest felt alive around her in a way that was both beautiful and terrifying. Birds called overhead in languages she couldn't understand, and unseen creatures scurried through the underbrush.

"Just keep moving," she muttered to herself. "Down means town."

She repeated the makeshift rhyme with each step, trying to ignore the growing ache in her legs and the scratches on her arms from pushing through brambles. A flash of movement caught her eye—something long and sinuous sliding through the fallen leaves to her right. She gasped and jumped sideways, her mind conjuring images of Cresca's version of a venomous snake.

Her foot landed on nothing.

The ground disappeared beneath her, and her stomach lurched as she began to fall. Her arms flailed, desperately seeking purchase. By some miracle, her fingers closed around a gnarled branch jutting from the edge of what she now realized was a steep ravine.

She dangled over the drop, her feet kicking uselessly in the air as the branch creaked ominously under her weight. Below her stretched a rocky slope that ended in a tangle

of fallen trees and sharp stones.

“Help!” she cried out, though she knew no one would hear. Her fingers began to slip on the rough bark, tiny splinters digging into her skin.

The branch dipped lower. Panic surged through her veins as she realized it was beginning to pull free from the earth. Dirt and small rocks showered down from where the root was slowly tearing away from the edge.

“Please,” she whispered, not even sure who she was begging. “I don’t want to die.”

Her arms trembled with the strain of holding her entire body weight. How long before they gave out completely? The drop below seemed to stretch endlessly, promising broken bones at best.

A shadow fell across her face, but before she could look up, strong hands clamped around her wrists. With a single powerful motion, she was hauled upwards as if she weighed nothing at all.

She found herself pressed against a solid chest, staring into furious amber eyes.

“What were you thinking?” he growled, his voice vibrating through her body.

She couldn’t answer, her heart still hammering too hard against her ribs. He’d appeared out of nowhere, like some forest spirit from the old tales.

Without waiting for a response, he scooped her into his arms. One moment she was trembling on the edge of the ravine, the next she was cradled against him, her feet dangling in the air.

“Put me down,” she protested weakly, though her body betrayed her with a wave of

relief.

“So you can find another cliff to fall from?” His jaw was tight, a muscle twitching beneath the skin.

As he carried her through the forest, she gradually caught her breath. She glanced around at the trees, suddenly realizing she had no idea which direction led to the cabin. Everything looked the same—endless trunks and undergrowth with no path in sight. Even if she’d escaped the ravine on her own, she would have been hopelessly lost. She’d rushed headlong into danger without any real plan.

I was a fool, she realized. But now I’m safe.

In spite of her Vultor’s anger, she had no doubt about that and she found herself relaxing against his chest. His stride was sure and steady, his arms warm and secure around her. Her cheek rested against his shoulder, and she could hear the steady beat of his heart beneath her ear.

It was... not unpleasant. The thought made her cheeks flush with heat. She shouldn’t feel safe in the arms of her captor, yet her body seemed to have its own opinion on the matter.

He carried her all the way back to the cabin and shouldered open the cabin door, still carrying Tessa. The pups immediately rushed toward them, yipping excitedly.

“You can put me down now,” she said quietly.

He lowered her to her feet but kept a hand on her arm until she was steady. The warmth of his touch lingered even after he released her.

“Don’t try that again.” His voice was hard but something else flickered in his

eyes—concern? “These mountains are dangerous. There are ravines, predators, hidden sinkholes. You wouldn’t survive a day.”

She wanted to argue, to insist she could manage on her own, but the memory of dangling over that ravine was too fresh. If he hadn’t found her when he did...

“You’re right,” she admitted, the words sticking in her throat. “I don’t know these woods. I would have gotten lost even if I hadn’t fallen.”

His eyebrows rose slightly, as if he hadn’t expected her to concede.

“I’ll stay,” she continued, crossing her arms. “For now.”

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The corner of his mouth twitched upward, not quite a smile but close. It transformed his face, softening the hard lines and making him look younger. She found herself staring at him, surprised by how that tiny expression affected her.

“In which case, don’t you think it’s time for introductions?” she added. “I’m Tessa.”

“I know.” She waited patiently until he sighed. “I’m Korrin.”

He turned away before she could respond, gathering ingredients from the larder. A rabbit he must have caught while he was out lay ready to be prepared. He cleaned it deftly enough but he didn’t prove as skilled when it came to the vegetables.

She watched him fumble with the knife for a moment, then sighed heavily.

“Let me do that before you ruin it,” she said, stepping forward and holding out her hand.

He hesitated, then handed over the knife. “You cook as well as bake?”

“I know my way around a kitchen. Before my father married Lenora, we often cooked together.” She started on the vegetables, taking comfort in the familiar process. “If I’m staying here, I might as well make myself useful.”

He stepped back, watching her work with those intense amber eyes. The silence between them felt different now—not comfortable exactly, but no longer fraught with tension.

But then their hands touched as he handed her an iron pot and an unexpected spark of warmth ignited within her. It was nothing, just a brief touch, but she felt... alive in a way she never had before.

For a heartbeat, their eyes met. Gold flared in his eyes as something passed between them, something hot and primal and full of promise.

Then the pot clattered to the floor, breaking the spell. She blinked as he bent down to retrieve the pot.

“You can cook,” he said gruffly, handing her the fallen pot. “I’ll check the fish trap.”

She stared at his broad back as he walked away.

“Be careful,” she murmured.

It wasn’t until he disappeared into the woods that she realized how much she’d meant the simple words.

CHAPTER 8

Korrin tracked the deer through the underbrush, moving silently despite his size. The doe paused at a small stream, ears twitching as she lowered her head to drink. He notched an arrow, drew back the bowstring, and released in one fluid motion. The arrow struck true, and the animal dropped without suffering. A clean kill.

“That makes three this week,” he muttered to himself as he approached the fallen deer.

He field-dressed the carcass with practiced efficiency, his mind wandering to the cabin where Tessa waited. His beast purred with satisfaction at the thought of

returning with meat, of seeing her smile at his offering. He scowled, trying to silence the primitive part of himself.

“I’m just making sure she has enough before I leave,” he told himself for the fifth time that day.

But three days had passed since he’d brought her to the cabin, and each morning he found a new excuse to stay. More firewood needed chopping. The roof had a small leak. The pups required fresh meat. All tasks that kept him near her.

Back at the cabin, he found her sitting cross-legged on the floor, playing with the adyani pups. One of them—the runt with the white streak—had claimed her lap and was gnawing playfully at her fingers.

“You’re back.” Her smile was warm and soft, and something in his chest tightened at the sight.

“Caught a deer.” He hefted the meat he’d wrapped in hide. “Should last a while.”

“Another one? The smokehouse is already full.”

He shrugged and moved to the small table, unwrapping his kill. “You’ll need provisions.”

“For when you leave?” Her voice was carefully neutral.

His hands stilled. He hadn’t mentioned leaving today, but they both knew he couldn’t stay forever. Shouldn’t stay.

“Yes.”

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He busied himself preparing the meat, aware of her watching him. His beast growled in displeasure at the thought of abandoning her here. It wanted to stay, to protect what it considered theirs.

“The meat should last a month, maybe more if you’re careful.” He glanced around the cabin, noting the neat piles of firewood, the herbs she’d gathered hanging from the rafters, the repaired chair. “You have everything you need.”

But even as he said it, his beast snarled in disagreement. She needed him. And perhaps, though he’d never admit it aloud, he needed her too.

No!

He sliced the venison with more force than necessary as he rejected the idea, the knife thudding against the wooden cutting board. Across the cabin, she hummed softly as she sorted through the herbs she’d gathered. The melody was simple but pleasant—some village tune he didn’t recognize—and his keen ears caught every note.

He ground his teeth, irritated by how much he enjoyed the sound.

“Must you do that?” he growled.

Her humming stopped abruptly. “Do what?”

“That... noise.”

“You mean singing?” Her brows furrowed. “I didn’t realize it bothered you.”

He grunted, returning to his task. The truth was, her singing didn’t bother him at all. That was the problem. He liked it too much—the way her voice rose and fell, how she sometimes whispered the words she couldn’t quite remember. It made the cabin feel... inhabited. Warm.

Dangerous.

The runt with the white streak tumbled over to her again, yipping for attention. She immediately scooped him up, pressing her nose to his fuzzy head.

“Who’s my brave little warrior?” she cooed. “Are you guarding me from the big bad wolf?”

The pup licked her chin, and her laughter filled the small cabin. Something inside his chest twisted painfully. He watched as she gently scratched behind the animal’s ears, her touch so tender it made his throat tighten.

He looked away, focusing on the meat before him. His beast stirred restlessly, drawn to her warmth, her gentleness. It wanted to cross the room, to feel that same tenderness directed at him.

“Foolish,” he muttered under his breath.

“Did you say something?” she asked, looking up.

“Nothing important.”

As soon as she set the pup down and resumed her work, her humming started again, softer this time. He found himself straining to hear it, missing the fuller sound from

before.

This attachment was growing dangerous. Every day he spent in this cabin with her chipped away at his walls. The way she cared for the pups, how she never complained about their circumstances, her quiet determination—all of it wormed beneath his defenses.

And then there were the nights, lying awake listening to her breathing and fighting the urge to join her in the narrow bed, to cradle her in his arms, to run his hands over those luscious curves...

The first night she'd spent in the cabin, she waited until she thought he was asleep before stripping down to the thin shift she wore beneath it. But he hadn't been asleep and his night vision was excellent. He'd seen every tempting detail as the moonlight turned the thin cloth translucent and that memory haunted his dreams.

He needed to leave. Soon. Before he did something truly foolish, like admit he'd started to care for her.

Despite his resolution, the next day he found himself slipping through the forest once more, alert for any sign of prey. A flash of red caught his attention, and he knelt to examine the bush. Plump berries hung heavy on the branches, their sweet scent filling his nostrils. His beast rumbled with satisfaction.

He hadn't planned on foraging for berries. It wasn't the sort of thing he typically bothered with. Yet here he was, picking fruit like some village boy trying to impress his sweetheart.

He scowled at the thought, even as he carefully plucked another berry. The image of her face when he'd sampled her bread yesterday lingered in his mind—how her eyes had lit up at his grudging compliment, her smile spreading slow and warm across her

face.

“This is ridiculous,” he muttered to himself, but continued filling the makeshift pouch he’d fashioned from a large leaf.

When he returned to the cabin, she was stirring something over the fire. The pups dozed in a pile near her feet, exhausted from their morning play. She looked up as he entered, pushing a stray curl from her forehead.

“I was beginning to wonder where you’d gone off to,” she said.

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He hesitated, suddenly feeling foolish. What was he doing, bringing her the berries? But it was too late to back out now. He stalked over and awkwardly thrust the leaf-wrapped bundle toward her.

“Thought you might use these,” he said gruffly.

Her eyes widened as she opened the package.

“Wild berries! Oh, they’re perfect!” She looked up at him, her blue eyes sparkling. “How did you know?”

He shrugged, uncomfortable with her delight. “Saw you looking at them in the market.”

“You remembered that?”

The wonder in her voice made his chest tighten, but before he could respond, she rose on her tiptoes and pressed a quick kiss to his cheek. The contact was brief—just the soft warmth of her lips against his skin—but it sent a shock through his entire body.

“Thank you,” she whispered, then spun away. “I’ll make a berry crumble. My father used to love those.”

He stood frozen, his hand rising unconsciously to touch the spot where her lips had been. His beast purred with satisfaction, while the rest of him remained stunned, utterly unprepared for the surge of emotions her gesture had unleashed.

That night he sat staring into the fire but he didn't see the flames, his thoughts far away. The cabin had grown quiet after their evening meal, with only the occasional pop from the burning wood breaking the silence. Across from him, she sat cross-legged on the floor, her fingers gently stroking two of the pups as they slept in her lap.

He shouldn't feel this comfortable. This... peaceful. Not with a human. Yet something about the scene—the warmth of the fire, the softness in her eyes when she looked at him—loosened something that had been knotted tight inside him for years.

“Do you have a family?” she asked quietly, her voice barely audible above the crackle of the fire.

He tensed. It wasn't something he spoke about. Ever. But the words came anyway.

“My mother died several years ago.” The admission hung in the air between them. He hadn't planned to say more, but when she remained silent, waiting without pushing, the rest spilled out. “Raiders. They came through our territory, taking whatever they wanted and killing anyone who stood in their way.”

His claws extended unconsciously, digging into his palms.

“She was never the same after my father died. Fragile. We lived in the city for a while but it was too much for her. I thought she'd be happier away from the city so we moved to the mountains. She wasn't ready to join a Pack again so I stayed close, hunted for her, protected her.” His voice roughened. “Except when she needed me most.”

He'd been tracking a deer, too far from home.

“I found her in the ruins of our home. She'd hidden, but they found her anyway.” He

swallowed hard. “She wasn’t a fighter. Never had been.”

Her eyes glistened in the firelight, but she didn’t offer empty platitudes or pity. Instead, she reached across the space between them and placed her hand on his. Her touch was light, almost tentative, but it anchored him to the present.

“That’s why you hate humans,” she whispered.

He looked down at her small hand covering his.

“Yes.” The single word contained years of rage and grief.

“I’m sorry,” she said simply. Not for all humans. Not trying to excuse what had been done. Just sorry for his loss.

He didn’t pull his hand away as he watched her face carefully, searching for judgment or fear. He found neither; just that quiet acceptance that continually threw him off balance. He didn’t tell her about the weeks he’d spent tracking the raiders, how he’d picked them off one by one, how their screams had done nothing to fill the hollow ache in his chest. Some things were better left unspoken, though something in her eyes told him she’d guessed at least part of it.

“After that, I wandered,” he said, his voice rough. “Couldn’t stand being around others.”

One of the pups in her lap stretched and yawned, tiny teeth gleaming in the firelight. She stroked its head with gentle fingers and it settled back down.

“Seren found me half-dead one winter. Hadn’t eaten in days.” His lips twisted in a humorless smile. “Too stubborn to hunt, too angry to care.”

“These mountains?” she asked softly.

He nodded. “Yes, but a long way to the north. He dragged me back here. Fed me. Talked at me for hours while I just... existed.” He remembered those days in fragments—the constant presence of the older Vultor, the patient way Seren had waited for him to speak again. “He’s a good alpha. Better than I deserved.”

“But you didn’t stay.”

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“Couldn’t.” He flexed his fingers, watching his claws extend and retract. “Too many memories. Too many ghosts.” He shrugged. “I took up bounty hunting. Turns out I’m good at tracking things that don’t want to be found.”

Hunting down his mother’s killers had taught him that.

“I stayed away for years. Moved from place to place. Job to job. The money was good and I liked being on the move.” He glanced around the cabin. “I used this place sometimes between contracts.”

“What made you come back?”

“Seren asked me to come back. He said he needed me.” It had been more complicated than that—messages passed through mutual contacts, rumors of growing tensions with humans, Seren’s vision for something better. “I figured I owed him that much.”

He felt her watching him, her gaze steady and unwavering. Most people looked away when he spoke of his past—uncomfortable with the darkness they glimpsed there. She didn’t.

“Do you still hate all humans?”

“Some days.”

“I’m sorry,” she said again, and he felt her start to withdraw,

He couldn’t prevent himself from taking her hand in his.

“You’re different.”

“Different how?”

His hand rose to his cheek, to the spot where her lips had touched earlier. The memory of that brief contact still burned hotter than it should have.

“You care. About those pups. About people who aren’t kind to you.” His voice roughened. “You see things others don’t. I don’t hate you.”

The confession hung in the air between them, raw and honest. She studied him silently, her fingers still warm against his.

“Do you think you can learn to live with humans?” she asked finally.

His first instinct was to deny it. Humans were violent, unpredictable creatures. He knew better than anyone that they brought death and destruction in their wake.

Yet sitting here in the quiet, holding her hand, the truth hit him with unexpected force.

“I already am.”

CHAPTER 9

Tessa smiled at Korrin, caught off guard by his statement.

“I suppose you are.”

She’d grown so used to him being there, to his brooding looks and growly commands—it was hard to imagine a time when he hadn’t been part of her life.

I don't want to imagine a time without him.

Her chest ached as she glanced at his profile, strong and sharp against the firelight. She shouldn't feel this way about the male who'd taken her from her home on her stepmother's orders. And yet... the gentleness with which he treated the pups, the way he'd saved her from the ravine, how he seemed so pleased to provide for her—those things spoke louder than his gruff exterior.

"You know," she said, keeping her voice light, "for someone who claims to despise humans, you've been remarkably patient with this one."

His mouth twitched. "I told you—you're not like the others."

"But I am human. Not all of us are the same, just as not all Vultor are the same." One of the pups scrambled down off her lap and climbed back into the basket with the others. "People are shaped by their experiences, their choices. What happened to your mother was terrible, but it doesn't define all of us."

His jaw tightened, and she wondered if she'd pushed too far. But she needed him to understand.

"The men who hurt your mother—they would have hurt me too. They're not my people any more than they're yours."

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He remained silent, but she felt his eyes on her. Studying. Considering.

“I don’t know that I’d like all Vultor, but I like who you are,” she admitted, her cheeks warming. “You’re protective and fierce. Honest. And you treat those adyani pups like they’re your children.”

The corner of his mouth curled up slightly at that. “They’re growing on me.”

“I’m glad.” She leaned forward, unable to resist reaching for his hand again. “Maybe it’s time you stopped trying to keep people at a distance.”

His fingers tightened on hers. The fire crackled as she watched him, his eyes reflecting the flickering light. Something about him called to her, stirred something deep inside.

“Maybe.”

It wasn’t much but it was a start.

The next morning she met him at the door when he returned from his morning hunt.

“I want you to teach me,” she said quickly, and he raised an eyebrow.

“Teach you what?”

“Everything. How to navigate the forest, find food, identify what’s safe to eat.” She gestured to the rabbits. “I can’t just wait here while you do everything. And if you’re

not here...”

He started to say something then changed his mind, studying her for a long moment, those amber eyes unreadable. “It’s dangerous out there.”

“Which is exactly why I need to learn. What if something happens to you?”

A flash of something—concern?—crossed his face before he nodded. “Fine. We’ll start today.”

The forest was transformed in daylight, less threatening and more magical. She listened carefully as he pointed out landmarks, teaching her how to orient herself.

“The moss grows thicker on the north side of trees,” he explained, his large hand brushing against the trunk. “And see how the branches grow? They reach toward the sun.”

When he showed her which berries were safe to eat, their fingers brushed as he placed them in her palm. A jolt of warmth shot up her arm, and she nearly dropped them. His eyes met hers, briefly flaring gold before he looked away.

“These mushrooms are poisonous,” he said later, crouching beside a cluster of red-capped fungi. She knelt beside him, their shoulders touching. “But these—” he reached for another variety nearby, “—are safe.”

She leaned closer to examine them, suddenly aware of how near his face was to hers. His wild clean scent filled her senses, and when she looked up, he was watching her and his heart raced at the hunger in his eyes.

“I—” she began, but the words died in her throat.

He very slowly lifted his hand and touched her cheek. Only the lightest touch but her whole being was focused on that one point of contact. She started to sway towards him, but then he was back on his feet and reaching down to help her up.

That night, she proudly stirred the stew, made almost entirely of her efforts in the forest. The savory aroma filled the small cabin, mingling with the scent of fresh bread she'd managed to bake in the crude oven. She glanced over to smile at Korrin and found him sprawled on the rug in front of the fire, surrounded by the adyani pups.

Storm was chewing on his vest while Bold tugged playfully at his boot. The remaining five tumbled around him in a squirming mass of fur and tiny teeth. What struck her most wasn't just that he allowed it, but that his usual stern expression had softened into something that almost resembled a smile.

"They're getting stronger," she observed, hiding her own smile behind the wooden spoon she was using.

He grunted as a pup nipped his finger. "And more troublesome."

But there was no heat in his words. His large hand carefully scooped up Bashful and tucked him against his shoulder. The tiny creature nuzzled against his neck, and her chest suddenly ached.

The cabin felt different tonight. The fire crackled, the stew bubbled, and the pups' playful yips filled the space between. As she moved around the small kitchen area, setting out the wooden bowls and spoons, she was aware of his eyes following her movements.

This felt like... home. Not the bakery with Lenora's constant criticism. Not even her father's house before his death. This was something new, something she'd craved without knowing it—a place where she belonged. Here, in this rustic cabin with a

man who'd kidnapped her and seven orphaned pups, she felt more at peace than she had in years. It was absurd. Dangerous, even. And yet...

She watched as he gently disentangled himself from the pups, careful not to hurt them. The fearsome bounty hunter who'd terrified her just days ago now looked almost... domestic.

The thought of family—something she hadn't truly had since her father died—bloomed warm and unexpected in her chest.

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He joined her as she ladled the steaming stew into wooden bowls. Their fingers brushed as she passed him a bowl, sending a now-familiar warmth up her arm. She settled on the rough-hewn chair across from him, watching as he took his first bite.

“Good?” she asked, oddly anxious for his approval.

He nodded, amber eyes catching the firelight. “Better than anything I’ve had in months.”

The compliment warmed her more than it should have. She busied herself with her own bowl, letting the rich flavors of rabbit and wild herbs fill her mouth. The pups had settled into a pile near the hearth, their tiny bodies rising and falling in synchronized sleep.

“I used to dream about having a mother,” she said suddenly, surprising herself with the admission. “My mother died when I was six and then it was just me and my father. I loved him very much, but I still wanted a mother.”

He put down his spoon, watching her.

“When my father brought Lenora home, I was so excited.” She stared into her stew, watching the steam curl upward. “I’d arranged flowers in her room, helped the cook prepare a special meal, I even made her a small cake.”

The memory stung, even now. “She took one look at it and said she didn’t eat sweets. Later, I found it tossed in the garbage.”

His jaw tightened, but he remained silent.

“She was never very nice but she kept up appearances—until my father died and the mask came off.” Her hand trembled slightly as she reached for her cup. “She wanted the bakery, the house, everything my father had built. But I was still useful to her. Until she changed her mind and hired you.”

“Why would she want you dead? What threat could you possibly pose to her?”

She swallowed hard, setting her spoon down as her appetite vanished. The question brought back memories she’d rather forget—Edgar’s clammy hands, his breath too close to her face, his eyes that followed her every movement.

“Edgar Thornfield,” she said, the name tasting bitter on her tongue. “He’s the wealthiest man in the village. Owns half the businesses, including the mill.”

She wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly cold despite the fire’s warmth.

“Lenora has been trying to catch his attention ever since my father died. But he...” She looked away, her cheeks heating. “He only had eyes for me.”

His expression darkened. “The male with the terrible scent?”

She nodded, surprised he’d noticed. “He comes to the bakery almost every day. Always finding reasons to brush against me or touch my hand.” She shuddered at the memory. “The night you... took me, I think he’d invited me to supper but Lenora went instead.”

“Your stepmother sees you as competition,” he concluded, his voice a low growl.

“Yes. Though I never wanted him. I don’t think Edgar even wants me

specifically—he wants a possession. Something pretty to display and control.” She looked up at him. “Lenora would happily play that role if it meant access to his money and status. But as long as I was there...”

“He wouldn’t look at her,” he finished.

“No. And he’s been getting more impatient. He told me that he was tired of waiting, that I’d come around eventually. That a girl in my position couldn’t afford to be choosy. I wasn’t sure at the time but now I think Lenora overheard our conversation and that’s when she decided I needed to disappear for good. If I wasn’t around, Edgar would have to settle for her.”

A low, rumbling growl erupted from his chest, vibrating through the small cabin. Her head snapped up, her eyes widening at the sound. It wasn’t just anger in that sound—there was something else, something primal and possessive that made her breath catch.

“Edgar will never touch you.” The words came out as a promise, each syllable punctuated with barely contained fury.

She stared at him, heart racing. She should have been frightened by the predatory gleam in his amber eyes, by the way his claws had partially extended, digging small grooves into the wooden tabletop. But instead of fear, a strange warmth bloomed in her chest.

“You’re not... scared of me?” he asked, seeming surprised by her reaction. His growl had tapered off, but tension still radiated from his powerful body.

“No,” she admitted softly, surprising herself with the truth of it. “I probably should be, but I’m not.”

He studied her face, confusion replacing some of the anger. “Most humans would be running for the door.”

“I’m not most humans,” she replied, daring to reach across the table. Her fingers hovered inches from his clenched fist. “And I think you know that.”

His eyes tracked her movement, the gold in them seeming to glow brighter. Slowly, deliberately, he uncurled his fingers and turned his palm upward, allowing her to place her small hand in his.

“No,” he agreed, his voice rough. “You’re not.”

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The heat of his skin against hers sent a shiver up her arm. There was something undeniably thrilling about the way he'd reacted to Edgar's treatment of her—not just protective anger, but something deeper, as though the very idea of another man claiming her was unthinkable.

“I didn't mean to frighten you,” he said, though his thumb was now tracing circles on her palm, seemingly unconsciously.

“You didn't,” she whispered, mesmerized by the gentle movement. “It's just... no one's ever been angry on my behalf before. Thank you.”

CHAPTER 10

Korrin stalked the edges of the clearing in front of the cabin as dawn broke over the mountains, his eyes scanning the treeline. The morning air carried a thousand scents—evergreens, soil, small game moving through the underbrush—but his attention kept returning to the cabin where Tessa slept.

He'd risen before first light, restless and agitated. The possessive growl that had escaped him last night still echoed in his mind. The way her eyes had widened, not with fear but with something that looked like... interest.

Dangerous. This was all dangerous.

A twig snapped beneath his boot as he completed another circuit. He'd told himself a hundred times he would leave once she was settled. The supplies were stocked, the cabin secure. There was no reason to stay.

Yet here he was, guarding the perimeter like a territorial male.

One of the pups tumbled out the half-open door, followed by its siblings. They spotted him and raced over, yipping and stumbling on oversized paws. Despite himself, he crouched down, letting them climb over his boots and nip at his fingers.

“You’re getting bolder,” he muttered, scratching behind a grey pup’s ears. “Going to be trouble soon.”

Movement at the doorway caught his eye. Tessa stood there, hair loose around her shoulders, watching him with the pups. His chest tightened at the sight of her.

She belonged here. The thought ambushed him, powerful and certain. Not just in the cabin or the clearing, but with him. The realization should have sent him running in the opposite direction. Instead, he found himself rising to his feet, drawn towards her like iron to a lodestone.

“You’re up early,” she said, smiling as he approached.

“Someone has to keep watch.”

“From what?” She gestured to the peaceful forest. “Deadly berry bushes?”

His lips twitched. “Funny.”

Her teasing smile was doing things to him he couldn’t explain. He’d spent years alone, convinced he preferred it that way. Now the thought of returning to that solitude felt hollow.

“I should check the fish trap,” he said, though he’d already done so at first light.

“I’ll come with you.” She stepped closer, and the morning sunlight caught in her dark curls. “Unless you’d rather be alone?”

He should say yes. Push her away. Remember what humans had done to his mother, to his kind.

“No,” he said instead. “I don’t want to be alone.”

She started to herd the pups back towards the cabin when the air shifted. His nostrils flared, catching an unfamiliar scent that hadn’t been there moments before.

Vultor. Male. In beast form.

The pups whimpered, pressing against her legs. Their instincts were sharper than any human’s—they’d sensed the threat as well.

“Get inside,” he growled, his voice dropping an octave as his beast rose to the surface.

She gave him a startled look, confusion crossing her face. “What’s wrong?”

The wind shifted again, carrying the scent stronger now. Too close. Too deliberate in its approach. This wasn’t a random encounter—the stranger was tracking something. Or someone.

He didn’t wait to explain. His protective instincts exploded through him, overwhelming all rational thought.

Protect her.

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He launched himself toward the treeline, his body already shifting mid-leap. Bones cracked and reformed, muscles stretched and bulged as fur erupted across his skin. The transformation was painful but quick—he'd learned long ago to embrace the pain rather than fight it.

His claws dug into the forest floor as he landed on all fours, now fully in his beast form. His senses sharpened further, the world around him becoming a vivid tapestry of scents and sounds. The stranger's trail was clear now—circling the clearing, watching, assessing.

He let loose a warning growl that rumbled through the forest. Mine. This territory, this woman, these pups—all under his protection.

He stalked forward, following the scent. Whoever this intruder was, they were about to learn a painful lesson about trespassing. His hackles rose as he detected a shift in the stranger's movement—no longer circling but approaching.

His vision turned red as he charged deeper into the forest, determined to meet the threat head-on before it could reach his mate. He burst through a thick patch of underbrush, snarling as he locked eyes with the intruder. The stranger stood in a small clearing, already fully shifted into beast form—and he was massive. Easily a head taller than him, with shoulders twice as broad and limbs corded with muscle beneath dark silver fur. Battle scars crisscrossed his muzzle and chest, telling stories of fights won against formidable opponents.

The stranger didn't attack immediately. Instead, he watched him with calculating yellow eyes, his posture neither submissive nor overtly aggressive. He tilted his head,

nostrils flaring as he took in Korrin's scent.

It didn't matter. This beast was too close to the cabin. Too close to Tessa.

His rational mind recognized the stranger wasn't actively threatening, but his beast didn't care. Someone had invaded his territory, endangered what was his. Blood roared in his ears, drowning out everything but the primal need to protect.

He launched himself at the larger Vultor, claws extended and jaws open in a savage roar. The stranger barely had time to brace himself before he slammed into him, driving him backward into a tree trunk that cracked under the impact.

The larger beast recovered quickly, swinging a massive paw that caught him across the shoulder. Pain exploded through his body as claws raked deep, but he twisted away before the stranger could get a grip on him. The wound would heal, but not if he gave his opponent time to press his advantage.

He darted in again, faster than the bulkier Vultor could counter. His jaws clamped down on the stranger's foreleg, teeth sinking through fur and muscle. The metallic taste of blood filled his mouth as he tore away, dancing back from the retaliatory swipe.

They circled each other, both bleeding now. The stranger growled, a sound that might have been meant to communicate, but he was beyond listening. His beast had taken control, driven by something more powerful than territorial instinct.

He was fighting for her. For Tessa.

The thought of her—her scent, her smile, the way she'd kissed his cheek—fueled him with renewed strength. He feinted left, then ducked under the stranger's guard to rake his claws across the beast's underbelly. The larger Vultor howled in pain and fury,

but Korrin was already moving again, too quick to catch despite his opponent's superior size and strength.

His claws dug into the stranger's chest, pinning the larger Vultor against the forest floor. Blood matted both their fur, but he barely felt his wounds through the haze of battle fury. The stranger thrashed beneath him, powerful but tiring. Victory surged through his veins as he lowered his head, jaws opening wide to clamp around the exposed throat.

One bite. One decisive move to end this threat.

A sudden cascade of icy water crashed over them both.

He reared back, sputtering and shaking his head as the cold shock yanked him from his battle trance.

“STOP IT! Both of you, stop right now!”

Tessa's voice cut through the fog of his rage. She stood a few feet away, empty bucket in hand, her face flushed with exertion and her eyes blazing. The pups clustered behind her legs, whimpering.

“I said STOP!”

The larger Vultor had gone still beneath him, making no move to capitalize on his distraction. Instead, those yellow eyes flicked between the two of them with what looked almost like... amusement?

Shame crashed through him as his rational mind reasserted control. He eased off the stranger and shifted back to human form, the transformation rippling painfully through his injured body. He crouched naked on the forest floor, chest heaving, water

dripping from his hair.

“What were you thinking?” Tessa demanded, her voice trembling. “You could have killed each other!”

He couldn’t meet her eyes. She’d seen him. Seen the beast in all its savage glory, teeth bared for the kill. Not the controlled predator he’d shown her before, but the monster—the part of himself he’d tried to keep hidden.

“I...” His voice came out rough. “He was too close. I thought...”

He’d thought what? That she was in danger? The stranger hadn’t even been moving toward the cabin. He’s simply reacted, his beast taking over at the first hint of another male near what it considered theirs.

The realization sickened him. He wasn’t protecting her. He was possessing her.

The larger Vultur remained in beast form, watching him.

His muscles remained coiled tight as the stranger lowered his massive head. The Vultur’s eyes—intelligent even in beast form—darted between him and Tessa.

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“No harm,” the stranger growled, his voice guttural but the words unmistakable.

Before he could respond, the massive creature turned and melted into the trees, his dark fur blending with the shadows until only the rustling of undergrowth marked his passage.

He remained frozen, every sense straining after the retreating Vultor. His beast prowled beneath his skin, urging him to pursue, to make absolutely certain the threat was gone. The scent of the stranger lingered in the clearing—unfamiliar, powerful, an intrusion on what his primal side had already marked as his territory.

A small, warm hand slipped into his.

The touch shocked him back to awareness. Tessa stood beside him, her fingers twining with his. Her skin felt impossibly soft against his calloused palm. Her sweet scent wrapped around him, calming, comforting.

“Are you okay?” she asked quietly, her eyes searching his face.

He swallowed hard. His beast, so agitated moments before, settled at her touch. The bloodlust receded, replaced by an entirely different hunger that he fought to suppress.

“I’m fine,” he managed, though his voice came out rougher than he intended.

He should pull away. Should put distance between them. Instead, his fingers tightened around hers.

“You’re bleeding,” she said, reaching up with her free hand to touch a gash on his shoulder.

The slight pressure of her fingertips sent a jolt through him. He sucked in a sharp breath, suddenly intensely aware of his nakedness, of her proximity, of how easily he could pull her against him. Every instinct screamed at him to pull her into his arms, to bury his face in her hair and breathe in her scent until the last traces of the intruder were gone from his senses. His fingers tightened around hers, his body swaying forward before he caught himself.

What was happening to him? This small human female had him fighting his own nature, desperate for her touch while simultaneously terrified by how much he needed it.

“You need to let me clean that,” she said, her eyes fixed on the gash across his shoulder. Blood trickled down his chest, but she showed no disgust, no fear of the crimson staining his skin or the violence she’d just witnessed. “Come inside.”

She tugged at his hand, trying to lead him toward the cabin. He remained rooted in place, his muscles locked as he struggled against the warring impulses inside him. His beast prowled restlessly beneath his skin, still agitated from the confrontation, demanding he sweep her up and claim what it already considered theirs.

“Korrin.” Her voice softened. “Please.”

That single word broke through his defenses. He allowed her to pull him forward, one reluctant step at a time. His senses remained on high alert, scanning the treeline, nostrils flaring for any hint the stranger might return.

Inside the cabin, she released his hand and moved to the stove where a pot of water simmered. He immediately felt the loss of her touch, an emptiness spreading through

him that made no sense. He'd survived alone for years. He didn't need anyone's comfort.

Yet he watched her every movement as she gathered clean cloths and herbs, his beast settling only when she returned to his side.

"Sit," she instructed, gesturing to a stool by the fire.

He had enough sense to pull on a pair of pants before he obeyed, his eyes never leaving her face as she dampened a cloth and began to clean the blood from his skin. Her touch was gentle but firm, and when she caught him watching her, she smiled at him.

How could she be so unafraid of the beast she'd seen emerge?

Because she's ours.

CHAPTER 11

Tessa's heart hammered against her ribs as she guided Korrin to the chair beside the hearth. Blood matted his hair and streaked across his powerful chest. His amber eyes still glowed with feral intensity, tracking her every movement as she gathered clean rags and water.

"You're a mess," she murmured, dipping a cloth into the basin. Her hands trembled slightly as she approached him.

He remained rigid, his muscles coiled tight beneath her touch as she began to clean a deep gash along his forearm. He flinched when she pressed the cloth to a particularly nasty wound.

“Sorry.” She gentled her touch, working methodically to wipe away the blood. “I don’t understand why you attacked him. He didn’t seem threatening.”

“He was too close.” The words came out as a low growl.

She paused, cloth suspended midair. “Too close to what?”

His eyes locked with hers, something primal and possessive burning in their golden depths. “To you.”

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The simple declaration stole her breath. She resumed cleaning his wounds to hide the flush creeping up her neck. His skin felt fever-hot beneath her fingertips, and each touch seemed to calm the wildness in him.

“I’ve never seen you shift before.” She traced a particularly long scratch across his shoulder, trying to distract herself from the way his proximity affected her. “It was... beautiful. Terrifying, but beautiful.”

His hand captured hers, stilling her movements. “You weren’t afraid.”

It wasn’t a question, but she answered anyway. “No.”

“Why not?” Genuine confusion wrinkled his brow.

She shrugged, her free hand coming up to brush a strand of dark hair from his face. “Because it’s still you. Beast or man, you wouldn’t hurt me.”

Something vulnerable flashed across his features before he looked away. She continued cleaning his wounds, her touch growing more confident. The pups had settled into their makeshift bed in the corner, no longer distressed now that the danger had passed.

Even though he’d calmed, he still hadn’t returned to his normal state. His claws remained extended, sharp and deadly at the tips of his fingers. The angular planes of his face seemed more pronounced, almost lupine, and his canines still protruded slightly when he spoke. Those amber eyes hadn’t lost their unearthly glow, tracking her movements with predatory focus.

She reached for a fresh cloth, her fingers brushing against his shoulder as she dabbed at a cut near his collarbone. He tensed at first, then gradually relaxed beneath her touch. On impulse, she let her hand linger, stroking down the muscled curve of his arm in a soothing motion.

A rumbling sound vibrated from his chest—not quite a growl, but something deeper, more contented. She smiled to herself and continued the gentle caress, fascinated by how it seemed to calm the beast still lurking beneath his skin.

“Does that help?” she whispered, fingers tracing patterns across his shoulder.

He nodded once, his eyes half-lidded now. The tension in his body ebbed with each stroke of her hand. Emboldened, she ran her palm across his chest, feeling the steady thump of his heart beneath her fingertips. His skin was hot to the touch, feverish almost, and surprisingly soft despite the hardness of the muscle beneath.

She found herself enjoying the contact more than she should. The way his breath caught when her fingers traced a particularly sensitive spot. How his skin pebbled with goosebumps in the wake of her touch. There was something intoxicating about having this powerful, dangerous male melting beneath her hands.

With each gentle stroke, his features softened further. The sharp angles of his face became less pronounced, his claws gradually receding. Yet she didn’t stop touching him, even when it was no longer necessary to calm him. She couldn’t bring herself to break the connection between them.

“Better?” she asked, her voice low and husky

His eyes, still glowing but now heavy-lidded, fixed on her face. “Don’t stop.”

Tessa’s heart fluttered as she continued her gentle ministrations, fascinated by how

her touch seemed to anchor him, drawing him back from the edge of his beast form. The wounds weren't as severe as she'd initially feared—already the smaller cuts were closing before her eyes, another reminder of how different he was from her.

“Who was that?” she asked softly, her fingers tracing the line of his shoulder. “The other Vultor.”

He tensed beneath her touch. His jaw tightened, and for a moment she thought he wouldn't answer.

“I don't know,” he muttered, turning his face away. “He shouldn't have been here.”

She frowned, her hand pausing on his arm. “He seemed different.”

A low growl rumbled in his chest, but it lacked the earlier ferocity. She held her ground, continuing to stroke his arm until he sighed, the sound heavy with resignation.

“He's lost to his beast form,” he finally admitted, his voice rough. “Sometimes, when a Vultor doesn't find their mate by a certain age, the beast starts to take over. The shift becomes harder to control.”

She gave him a horrified look. “You mean he's stuck like that?”

“Yes. He can't shift back at all anymore. The beast has consumed him.” He caught her hand in his, his thumb absently stroking her palm. “He's been living wild in these mountains for years. Hunting. Surviving. But he's more animal than Vultor now.”

A chill down her spine. “That's terrible. Isn't there anything that can be done for him?”

His expression turned grim. “No. Once the change becomes permanent, there’s no going back.” His eyes met hers, something vulnerable flickering in their depths. “It’s the fate many of us fear most.”

She couldn’t shake the image of the wild Vultor from her mind. Those haunted eyes, the way he’d growled “no harm” before disappearing into the forest. A creature trapped between worlds, neither fully beast nor man.

“Maybe he didn’t mean any harm,” she suggested, her fingers resuming their gentle path along his arm. “He said as much before he left.”

His entire body tensed beneath her touch. The muscles in his jaw clenched, and his amber eyes flashed with something primal. His hand tightened around hers, not painfully, but with enough pressure to convey his disagreement.

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“It doesn’t matter what he meant,” he growled. “He was too close to—” He cut himself off, looking away. “My instincts took over.”

Tessa studied his profile, the sharp angles of his face, the way he seemed to be fighting some internal battle. Her curiosity overcame her caution.

“What instincts?” she asked softly, her thumb tracing circles against his palm.

He went still, so still she wondered if he’d even heard her. When he finally turned to face her, his expression was guarded, but his eyes burned with an intensity that made her breath catch.

“Protective instincts,” he said, his voice low and rough. “Territorial instincts.”

The way he looked at her made her heart skip a beat. There was something possessive in his gaze, something that should have frightened her but instead sent a thrill through her body.

“Territorial?” she whispered, suddenly very aware of how close they were sitting, of his hand still holding hers.

His eyes dropped to where their hands were joined, then slowly traveled back up to her face. “Yes.”

“Over the cabin?” she asked, though some part of her already knew that wasn’t what he meant.

His lips quirked up at one corner, a fleeting almost-smile that vanished as quickly as it had appeared. “No, Tessa.” He hesitated, then seemed to make a decision. “Over you.”

Her heart hammered against her ribs as his words hung in the air between them. Over you. The simple phrase carried a weight that should have sent her running. Instead, it anchored her to this moment, to him.

“Tessa.” Her name sounded different on his lips, like a claim and a question wrapped into one. His amber eyes searched hers, looking for something—permission, perhaps, or rejection.

She gave him neither, frozen in the moment, afraid that any movement might shatter whatever was building between them.

He made the decision for her. His hands, warm and firm, gripped her waist and in one fluid motion, he pulled her onto his lap. The sudden closeness stole her breath—his heat surrounded her as his scent filled her lungs.

She should pull away. She should remember who he was, what he’d done—kidnapping her, keeping her here. But the hands that had tied her wrists now held her with such gentle strength, and the eyes that had once looked at her with cold calculation now burned with something far more dangerous.

She didn’t try to pull away. She didn’t want to pull away.

“These instincts,” he murmured, one hand sliding up her back to cradle the nape of her neck. “They’re telling me that you’re mine to protect. Mine to...” His voice trailed off, but his meaning was clear in the way his gaze dropped to her lips.

Time seemed to slow as he leaned forward, giving her every chance to retreat.

Instead, she found herself meeting him halfway, drawn by a force as inevitable as gravity.

When his lips finally met hers, the gentleness surprised her. This was not the kiss of a predator claiming prey, but something reverent, almost hesitant. His fingers threaded through her hair, holding her as though she might break or disappear.

Then something shifted. A soft sound escaped her throat, and the careful restraint in his kiss crumbled. His arms tightened around her, pulling her closer as his mouth moved against hers with newfound hunger.

Her world exploded in heat as he devoured her with his kiss. His hands tightened possessively around her waist, but she wasn't going anywhere. She wanted this. Wanted him. The realization crashed through her like a wave, washing away all her doubts and fears.

His mouth moved against hers with growing urgency, and she responded in kind, her fingers threading through his dark hair, pulling him closer. A low growl rumbled in his chest, vibrating against her body where they pressed together.

She'd never been kissed like this before—like she was air and he was drowning. Like she was the only thing that mattered in his world. Edgar's unwanted advances had always left her cold and uncomfortable, but Korrin's touch set her ablaze, igniting something primal and hungry inside her.

His hands roamed her back, tracing the curve of her spine through the thin fabric of her dress. When he pulled back slightly, his amber eyes had darkened to molten gold, pupils dilated with desire.

"Tessa," he breathed her name against her lips, his voice rough with need. "Tell me to stop."

She shook her head, her chest heaving. “Don’t stop.”

The words had barely left her mouth before he claimed her again, more demanding this time. One hand cupped her cheek, tilting her head to deepen the kiss while the other splayed across her lower back, pressing her closer to his hard chest.

Her hands explored the broad expanse of his shoulders, feeling the coiled strength beneath her fingertips. He was power and danger wrapped in warm skin, and yet she’d never felt safer than she did in his arms.

When his teeth gently caught her bottom lip, a soft moan escaped her throat. The sound seemed to unleash something in him—his kiss grew fiercer, more possessive, and his arms tightened around her as if he feared she might vanish.

CHAPTER 12

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Korrin was drowning in Tessa's taste, in her scent, in the softness of her lips against his. His hands slid up her back, one tangling in her dark curls as he deepened the kiss. She made a small sound in the back of her throat, her fingers digging into his shoulders, and the beast inside him roared in triumph.

Mine.

The possessive growl rumbled from deep in his chest, vibrating against her mouth. The primal sound shocked him back to awareness. He jerked away from her, his breath coming in harsh pants, his body burning with need.

"I shouldn't have—" He couldn't even finish the sentence. His hands were still on her, unwilling to let go despite his words.

Her eyes were midnight dark, her lips swollen from his kiss. She looked dazed, beautiful, her cheeks flushed with color. There was no fear on her face, only desire, and the sight of her like this—wanting him—nearly broke his control again.

"Why did you stop?" Her voice was husky, sending another bolt of desire through him.

He forced himself to set her gently aside, rising to put distance between them. His beast howled in protest, demanding he return to her, claim her fully.

"Because if I don't stop now, I won't stop at all." The raw honesty in his voice surprised even him. He ran a hand through his hair, trying to regain his composure. "You don't understand what you're doing to me."

She stood, taking a step toward him. “What if I don’t want you to stop?”

The words struck him so hard he could barely breathe. He closed his eyes, gripping the edge of the table until the wood creaked beneath his fingers.

“You don’t know what you’re asking for.” His voice was rough, strained. “I’m not... gentle. And you’re...” Human. Innocent. Too good for someone like me.

His beast clawed beneath his skin, demanding he close the distance between them again.

“It shouldn’t have happened,” he added roughly.

She tilted her head, studying him with an intensity that made him want to look away. But he couldn’t. Not from her.

“Why not?” she asked simply.

A dozen answers crashed through his mind. Because he was dangerous—he’d proven that today, shifting into a beast before her eyes, fighting like the animal he truly was. Because she didn’t belong to him—no matter what his instincts screamed. Because he had no right to want her this badly—this human woman with her gentle hands and brave heart.

His jaw clenched as he fought for control. The cabin suddenly felt too small, the air between them charged with something he couldn’t afford to name.

“It won’t happen again,” he said flatly, forcing the words past his teeth.

Liar.

His own mind betrayed him with the truth. Even as he spoke the words, he knew they were false. The taste of her lingered on his lips. The memory of her body pressed against his was branded into his skin. His beast knew the truth his rational side refused to acknowledge—he would kiss her again. He would claim her if she let him.

He turned away, unable to bear the hurt that flashed across her face. His claws threatened to emerge as he clenched his fists at his sides. He needed to get out, to run, to hunt—anything to escape the overwhelming need to go back to her.

Instead he retreated to the far side of the cabin, positioning himself by one of the windows where he could watch the clearing. His muscles remained coiled tight, his body still vibrating with the aftershocks of both the fight and that kiss. He needed to maintain control. To remember why he couldn't have her.

But his eyes betrayed him, tracking her every movement.

She knelt to tend the pups, her small fingers stroking their fur as they tumbled over each other to reach her. The sound of her soft humming drifted across the cabin, a melody he didn't recognize but found himself straining to hear. His beast purred in approval at how naturally she cared for the young creatures.

The cabin was saturated with her scent now—sun-warmed honey mixed with desire—tormenting him with every breath. When she reached up to place dried herbs on the high shelf, the curve of her waist made his mouth go dry. His claws emerged unbidden, sinking into the window sill where his hands rested.

She glanced over her shoulder, catching him staring. Instead of looking away, he held her gaze, unable to pretend disinterest any longer. A flush spread across her cheeks, but she didn't turn away either.

“I need to check the perimeter,” he growled, the words barely human.

He pushed away from the table, leaving deep gouges in the wood. The cabin was too small, too full of her. If he stayed, he would break his promise within minutes. His control hung by a thread, and that thread was unraveling with each moment in her presence.

As he reached the door, her voice stopped him.

“Korrin.”

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Just his name on her lips was enough to make his beast howl. He paused, one hand on the door frame, claws digging into the wood.

“Will you be gone long?” she asked, her voice soft but steady.

He should say yes. He should leave while there was still any hope of resisting her.

“No.”

Later that night he sat before the fire watching the flames. The cabin had grown quiet with nightfall, save for the occasional crackle of burning wood and the soft breathing of the pups curled together in their makeshift bed.

He should have left days ago. That had been the plan—deliver her somewhere safe, ensure she had supplies, and disappear. Simple. Clean. Instead, he remained, trapped by something more powerful than duty or obligation.

His enhanced hearing picked up Tessa’s movements from the bed across the cabin. The slight rustling of blankets, the subtle change in her breathing pattern. She wasn’t asleep, though she’d retired over an hour ago. He could feel her watching him, her gaze a tangible weight against his skin.

He kept his eyes fixed on the fire, unwilling to look over and break the fragile equilibrium they’d established after that kiss. If he turned, if he met those blue eyes again...

“You’ve been glaring at those flames like they’ve personally offended you,” her

voice drifted across the cabin, tinged with amusement.

Despite himself, he turned. She lay on her side, propped up on one elbow, hair loose around her shoulders in dark waves. The firelight cast a warm glow across her skin, softening her features and highlighting the curve of her lips.

“Always so broody,” she teased, her smile small but genuine. “What terrible thoughts are occupying that mind of yours tonight?”

His jaw tightened. If she knew the nature of his thoughts, she wouldn’t be smiling at him like that.

“You should sleep,” he said roughly.

“So should you,” she countered, holding his gaze without a trace of fear. “But I’m beginning to think you never do.”

A moment of silence stretched between them, filled only by the popping of the fire. Then, unexpectedly, her expression softened.

“You know something?” she said quietly. “I’m not sorry.”

He frowned. “About what?”

“That you kidnapped me.” Her eyes never left his. “I know I should be. But I’m not.”

He stared at her, her words hanging in the air between them. Not sorry. The admission struck something deep inside him, something primal and possessive that he’d been fighting to suppress.

Before he could formulate a response, a sudden howl of wind rattled the cabin’s

shutters. The temperature plummeted as if winter had descended in an instant. One of those rare mountain storms—violent and unpredictable, rolling in without warning.

The fire flickered wildly as cold air found every crack in the cabin's aging structure. He watched her pull the thin blanket tighter around herself, a visible shiver running through her body. Her teeth chattered slightly as another gust of wind battered the cabin.

His beast stirred, restless and agitated. Fix it. Protect. Warm.

Humans were fragile, their bodies poorly equipped for the mountains' harsh conditions. Even a summer storm could be dangerous. He'd seen what exposure could do, how quickly the cold could steal life.

She needs warmth. She needs us.

He tried to ignore the voice, to push back against the instinct driving him forward. But when another violent shiver wracked her body, something inside him snapped.

Before he could reconsider, he was on his feet, crossing the short distance to the bed. Her eyes widened as he lifted the edge of the blanket.

"Move over," he growled.

She studied his face and for a moment, he thought she might refuse, might push him away. Then, without a word, she shifted toward the wall, making space beside her.

He slid under the blanket, the narrow bed forcing them close together. His body heat—always running hotter than a human's—immediately created a pocket of warmth between them. Still, she trembled, whether from cold or proximity, he couldn't tell.

“Come here,” he murmured, opening his arms.

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This time she didn't hesitate, quickly tucking herself against him. Her softness molded against his harder body, fitting perfectly as she curled into his chest. Her cold nose pressed against his neck, sending a jolt through him that had nothing to do with temperature.

His beast roared with satisfaction, a rumble of approval vibrating through his chest. Mine. Protect. Warm.

He lay perfectly still, acutely aware of every point where her body touched his. Her head rested against his chest, her breathwarming his skin through the thin fabric of his shirt. The storm raged outside, rain lashing against the windows, wind howling through the trees, but inside the cabin, a strange peace had settled over them.

His heightened senses caught everything about her—the steady rhythm of her heart, the subtle floral scent of her hair, the softness of her curves pressed against him. His beast purred with contentment, satisfied to have her so close, safe in their arms.

Though her breathing had settled into a steady pattern, he knew she wasn't asleep. He could feel the tension in her muscles, the alertness in her body. She was thinking, considering something.

After several minutes of silence broken only by the storm's fury, Tessa shifted, tilting her head up to look at him. In the dim light from the dying fire, her eyes were luminous, searching his face with a curious intensity that made his pulse quicken.

“Are you afraid?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Of what?” he responded, though he suspected he knew.

“Of losing control. With me.”

The question struck a nerve. Of course he was afraid. He’d spent years mastering his beast, learning to keep the primal side of his nature leashed. But around her, those carefully constructed barriers were crumbling.

“Yes, and you should be as well,” he answered gruffly. “You should be terrified of what happens if I lose control.”

To his surprise, she smiled—a small, knowing curve of her lips that sent heat coursing through his veins.

“I’m not,” she said simply.

He stared at her, bewildered by her calm acceptance, her complete lack of fear. Didn’t she understand what he was? What he could do?

“You should be,” he repeated, his voice rougher. “You don’t know what I’m capable of.”

Her smile didn’t waver. “I’ve seen your beast, Korrin. I’ve watched you with the pups. I’ve felt your hands when you carried me. You’ve had a thousand chances to hurt me.”

She placed her palm against his chest, directly over his thundering heart. “I’m not afraid of you losing control.”

CHAPTER 13

Tessa woke slowly, enveloped in delicious warmth. The cabin was still dark, dawn barely creeping through the shutters. She blinked, disoriented for a moment before becoming acutely aware of the solid body pressed against her back, the heavy arm draped over her waist, the steady breath against her neck.

Korrin.

Her heart fluttered. She'd never felt so safe, so protected. She shifted carefully to look at him, not wanting to disturb his sleep. His face, usually so guarded and tense, was completely relaxed. The hard lines around his mouth had softened, his brow smooth instead of furrowed. He looked younger, vulnerable even.

A strand of dark hair had fallen across his face. Without thinking, she reached up and gently brushed it away, her fingertips grazing his cheekbone.

His eyes snapped open instantly, his eyes locking on to hers with startling intensity, already beginning to glow gold. For one breathless moment, neither moved. Heat pulsed low in her stomach at the raw hunger on his face, unmistakable and powerful. His gaze dropped to her lips, and she felt herself leaning toward him.

Then something shuttered behind his eyes. In one rapid motion, he pushed himself away from her and out of the bed, his movements abrupt and jerky, as if fighting against himself.

"Korrin?" she asked quietly.

He stood with his back to her, shoulders rigid, hands clenched at his sides. She could see the tension vibrating through him.

"You should get up. Day's wasting." His voice was as gravelly, as if he'd been shouting for hours.

She sat up, the blanket pooling around her waist, suddenly cold without his warmth. The pups stirred in their makeshift bed by the hearth, sensing the change in atmosphere.

“Did I do something wrong?” she asked.

He shook his head once, a sharp movement. “No. I did.”

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She watched him move around the cabin with mechanical precision, his shoulders stiff and his jaw set in a hard line. He hadn't looked at her once since leaping from the bed. She fed the pups while he built up the fire, the silence between them thick and uncomfortable.

Bashful nudged against Korrin's leg, whining softly. Instead of his usual gentle scratch behind the ears, he simply stepped away, pretending not to notice. Bashful whimpered louder, confused by the rejection.

"Even they know something's wrong," she said, scooping up the dejected pup.

He grunted, busying himself with arranging kindling that was already perfectly stacked.

"Are we really not going to talk about what happened?" she pressed, her patience wearing thin.

"Nothing happened." His voice was flat, emotionless.

Tessa felt heat rise to her cheeks. "Nothing? That kiss wasn't nothing, Korrin."

His shoulders tensed further, if that was even possible. "It was a mistake."

"Look at me." When he didn't turn, she stepped around him, forcing herself into his line of sight. "Look me in the eyes and tell me it was a mistake."

His eyes finally met hers, and what she saw there made her breath catch—conflict,

desire, and something deeper that he was desperately trying to hide.

“Is this your plan?” she asked quietly. “You’re just going to ignore what’s happening between us?”

“Yes.” The word came out clipped, final.

She shook her head, a small, sad smile touching her lips. “You’re lying to yourself.”

“I’m protecting you.” He moved past her, grabbing his bow from where it leaned against the wall.

“I don’t need protection from you.”

He paused at the door, his hand gripping the frame so tightly his knuckles whitened. For a moment, she thought he might turn back, might finally admit what she already knew—that kiss wasn’t a mistake. It was inevitable.

But he only shook his head and stepped outside, letting the door close behind him with quiet finality.

She busied herself with tidying the cabin. Part of her was hurt by his rejection, but she knew him well enough by now to know that it was driven by his fears, not by a lack of desire. The pups romped around her feet, more relaxed now that Korrin had left.

He hadn’t gone far. Through the window, she spotted him stalking back and forth at the edge of the clearing, bow in hand but seemingly forgotten as he paced. She caught him glancing toward the cabin—toward her—every few moments. His gaze would linger until he caught himself, then he’d jerk his attention away with a visible scowl.

A small, mischievous idea bloomed in her mind. If he was so determined to pretend nothing had happened, why did he keep watching her? Perhaps it was time to test his resolve.

She moved to the open doorway, stretching her arms above her head as if working out a kink in her back. She knew the movement would pull her dress taut across her curves. He froze mid-step, his eyes locking onto her before he wrenched his gaze away with a low growl she could hear even from this distance.

A flutter of excitement rippled through her. This was entirely new territory—she'd never deliberately tried to attract a man's attention before. With Edgar, she'd done everything possible to discourage him. But with Korrin... the power she felt was intoxicating.

She leaned against the doorframe, twirling a loose strand of hair around her finger. "Beautiful day, isn't it?" she called

across the clearing.

His shoulders tensed, and he gave a curt nod without looking at her.

"I was thinking of picking some of those berries we saw yesterday." She stepped out into the sunshine, making a show of stretching again. "Unless you'd rather I stay close to the cabin?"

This time he did look, and the intensity in his gaze sent a shiver down her spine. His eyes had taken on that golden glow, and even from this distance, she could see his claws extend before he clenched his fists, forcing them to retract.

"Do what you want," he growled, but his voice had dropped an octave lower than usual.

She smiled, letting her fingers trail along the rough wood of the cabin wall as she walked toward him with deliberate slowness. “What I want...” she repeated thoughtfully, watching his claws extend and retract with each step she took.

When she was only a few paces away, she stopped, meeting his eyes. The glow had brightened, and his expression was fierce.

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“I want... you,” she whispered.

“Tessa,” he warned, her name a low rumble in his throat.

“Yes?” She kept her voice light, but her pulse was pounding so hard she was sure he could hear it.

His claws slid out, sinking deep into the tree’s bark beside him.

“Go.” He sounded almost like he was in pain.

She stepped closer. His eyes burned with a combination of desire and anger, and she realized that he wasn’t angry at her, not really. He was angry at himself. At the feelings he couldn’t deny.

She took another step forward, bringing her close enough to touch.

“Why are you doing this?” he ground out, his jaw tight.

“You said to do what I want.”

For a moment she thought he was going to give in, but then he turned and stalked off into the woods.

Once again he didn’t go far and he continued to track her every movement throughout the day. He finally returned to the cabin when night fell, the air between them growing thick with unspoken tension. Every time she passed him, his nostrils would

flare, catching her scent. His hands would clench, claws appearing then disappearing as he fought for control.

She'd never felt so desired—it was a heady feeling, knowing she affected this powerful, dangerous man so deeply. Yet for all his obvious hunger, he kept his distance—circling her like a predator unwilling to pounce.

When their fingers brushed as she handed him a cup of water, she heard his sharp intake of breath. His eyes flashed gold, pupils narrowing to slits before he turned away.

“I wish you'd stop fighting it,” she murmured, emboldened by the heat in his gaze.

He set the cup down with such force that water sloshed over the rim. “Don't.”

“Don't what?” She stepped closer, close enough to feel the warmth radiating from his body. “Don't notice how you watch me? Don't feel what's happening between us?”

His jaw clenched, a muscle ticking at the corner. “It's not real.”

“It feels real to me.” She reached up, fingers hovering near his face without touching.

His breathing quickened. His eyes burned into hers, desire and restraint warring in this amber depths. The pups sensed the tension, retreating to their makeshift bed in the corner with soft whines.

“Korrin,” she whispered, his name a question and invitation, but he jerked back as if she'd struck him.

“We need more firewood.” He turned abruptly toward the door, his body stiff.

She darted forward, catching his arm before he could escape. His muscles tensed beneath her fingers, but he didn't pull away.

“Why are you running?” she asked softly, holding his gaze. “What are you so afraid of?”

She held her breath as he turned to face her, his eyes burning with an intensity that made her heart race. She'd never been so bold with anyone before, but something about him made her brave. Made her want to push past his defenses.

“You know what I want,” she said softly, not releasing his arm. “And I think you want it too. So why are you fighting it?”

His muscles tensed beneath her fingers, the heat of his skin almost scorching. For a moment, she thought he might pull away, but instead, he remained frozen in place, like a predator caught between lunging and retreating.

“You don't understand what you're asking,” he growled, his voice deeper than she'd ever heard it.

“Then help me understand.”

His gaze dropped to her lips, then back to her eyes. The hunger there made her breath catch. He swallowed hard, his chest rising and falling in quick, shallow breaths.

“I'm fighting it because...” He paused, seeming to struggle with the words. His jaw clenched, the muscles in his neck straining. “Because I'm afraid that if I stop fighting, I won't be able to stop at all.”

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The raw honesty in his voice sent a shiver down her spine. His words weren't a warning—they were a confession. One that made her heart race not with fear, but with anticipation.

“Then stop fighting,” she whispered, her voice steadier than she felt. “I’m not afraid of you, Korrin.”

He froze, desperately searching her face. She held his gaze, refusing to look away, wanting him to see the truth in her eyes. This wasn't impulsive or reckless—she'd never been more certain of anything.

The cabin fell silent except for the crackling of the fire and their mingled breathing. Even the pups seemed to sense the gravity of the moment, watching quietly from their corner.

With excruciating slowness, he lifted his free hand. She held perfectly still as he placed it on her shoulder, his touch feather-light as if he expected her to bolt. His fingers were warm through the thin fabric of her dress, sending tingles across her skin.

When he pulled her toward him, she went willingly, her body moving to meet his without hesitation. The corner of his mouth twitched, almost a smile, as she tilted her face up to his. Her pulse raced wildly, but she smiled back, wanting him to know she was sure.

“Tessa,” he breathed, her name a prayer on his lips.

Then his mouth was on hers, and everything else faded away. This kiss wasn't like their first—tentative and questioning. This was claiming, consuming. His arms wrapped around her, pulling her flush against his chest as his lips moved against hers with a hunger that matched her own.

She melted into him, her hands sliding up to tangle in his hair. He growled against her mouth, the sound vibrating through her body and igniting a fire in her veins. She'd never felt anything like this—this perfect storm of tenderness and passion that made her feel both protected and desired.

And this time, neither of them pulled away.

CHAPTER 14

Korrin stared down at Tessa, his breath coming in harsh pants. Her lips were swollen from his kisses, her eyes luminous in the cabin's dim light. She was smiling up at him—a smile that reached deep inside him and made his chest ache, and her eyes were full of love.

“Fuck,” he growled, pressing his forehead against hers. His claws had extended, and he carefully kept them from digging into her soft skin

His beast paced within him, hungry and demanding. Take her. Make her ours. The urge to claim was overwhelming, a need he'd never experienced before. The scent of her desire drove him to the edge of madness.

“Tessa.” Her name came out ragged. “You don't know what you're asking for.”

She ran her fingers through his hair, sending shivers down his spine. “I think I do.”

“I won't be gentle,” he warned, his voice rough with need. “Not the first time.”

“I don’t want gentle,” she whispered against his mouth.

The last threads of his restraint snapped. He lifted her, wrapping her legs around his waist, and carried her to the bed. She weighed nothing in his arms, this small human who’d somehow become his entire world.

He laid her down, hovering above her. Her dark curls spread across the pillow, her blue eyes trusting and wanting. She was so fucking beautiful it hurt to look at her.

“Are you sure?” he asked, giving her one last chance to turn back.

Instead of answering, she pulled him down to her, capturing his mouth with hers. Her hands slid under his shirt, exploring the ridged muscles of his back, tracing old scars with gentle fingers.

His claws dug into the mattress, ripping the fabric as he struggled to maintain control. Her body molded to his, soft curves pressed against hard planes, and his beast snarled with hunger. His fangs had descended, sharp and aching with the primal need to mark her as his. The urge to sink them into the soft curve where her neck met her shoulder was almost overwhelming. To taste her, to claim her as his mate forever.

Her eyes widened when his fangs emerged, but instead of fear, desire burned in her gaze. “Is that normal?”

He nodded, struggling to get his beast back under control.

“I—we—want to claim you.”

But even through the haze of desire, he knew that wasn’t his choice to make. Mating was permanent, irreversible. She had to choose it, understand what it meant to be bound to a Vultur.

“Okay,” she whispered, and his claws dug into the mattress again.

She didn’t know what he meant and, gods help him, he couldn’t find the words. Not now when she was so soft and warm beneath him, the scent of her arousal making his head spin.

“Later,” he growled, lowering his head to trail kisses down the column of her throat.
“I’ll tell you everything later.”

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His beast roared in approval as she arched beneath him, offering herself to him with complete trust. He'd never wanted anyone the way he wanted her—not just with his body, but with something deeper, more primal. More permanent.

He pushed the thought away, focusing instead on the softness of her skin under his fingertips as he traced the curve of her neck. She was still fully clothed, and his beast snarled in frustration.

“Too many clothes,” he muttered.

He lifted his hand, claws extended, but she gave a breathless laugh and reached for her button.

“My only dress, remember?”

As much as he wanted her, there was something intoxicating about watching her strip away her clothes, her eyes on his face the entire time.

“Fuck, you’re beautiful,” he growled as her chemise slid away, leaving her naked in his arms.

Pink flooded her cheeks but she didn’t look away.

“You make me feel that way.”

She held out her hand to him and he took it, pressing a kiss against her palm. When her fingers traced the curve of his jaw, then drifted lower, his breath caught in his

throat. He couldn't bear her touch. It was too tender, too sweet. Too intimate.

"Let me touch you," she whispered, her fingers following the lines of his muscles.

He shook his head, but her touch sent waves of desire crashing through him.

"Not this time."

He kissed her again, hard and deep, his tongue plunging into her mouth. She tasted like honey and summer, a sweetness he wanted to devour.

When her hand moved lower, he caught it. His grip tightened, holding her wrist gently but firmly.

"This isn't going to be slow or gentle, Tessa. Do you understand that?"

Her blue eyes met his, and her expression was steady. "Yes. I want you, Korrin."

His beast howled in triumph, a primal growl rumbling from deep within his chest.

"Then let me take you."

Her consent was everything he needed. He let go of her wrist, his claws retracting so he could finally, fully touch her. His hand roamed her body, exploring every inch, committing her soft curves to memory.

She writhed beneath him, her soft whimpers and sighs filling his ears, urging him on. Her breasts were perfect in his hands, her nipples hardening as he stroked them with his thumb. When his mouth closed over one, her back arched, her fingers threading through his hair and holding him against her.

He could feel her arousal growing, the heat from her core calling to him like a siren song. But this time he didn't listen. He would take her, claim her, but he would give her pleasure first.

Her cries grew louder as his fingers found the heat between her thighs. He explored her slick folds, learning the places that made her gasp, that made her hips arch off the bed.

"Gods, Tessa," he muttered. "You're so fucking wet."

She didn't respond, her eyes fluttering closed as his fingers stroked her. He could feel her approaching the edge, and his cock twitched, aching for release.

"Look at me."

Her eyes opened, clouded with desire. Her fingers clutched the sheets, her body tensing.

"Korrin." His name was a moan on her lips, and it nearly undid him.

He leaned down, pressing his lips to her ear, his fingers still stroking her.

"Come for me, Tessa."

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The command was soft, but his voice was deep, rumbling through her. With a cry, she shattered beneath him, her body shuddering.

He continued to stroke her, his lips caressing her neck, her shoulders, her collarbone, as her body came down from the peak. The sight of her face, dazed with pleasure, made his beastpurr contentedly despite the need roaring through his veins. He wanted more, needed more.

He slid down her body, leaving a trail of kisses until his head was between her legs. His fangs were aching, his cock hard and ready, but he wasn't done with her yet.

When his tongue found her clit, her hands tangled in his hair. Her moans and gasps were the most erotic sounds he'd ever heard, and his cock twitched with anticipation.

Her legs wrapped around his shoulders, her heels digging into his back as her body tensed again. He could feel her approaching another peak, her body writhing beneath his mouth, his hands, his lips.

He tried to slip a finger inside her, but her body resisted and he groaned. She was so small, so tight, so... innocent.

That thought penetrated his lust enough got him to raise his head despite her protests.

"Are you untouched?" he demanded, and her cheeks grew even pinker."

"I told you I wasn't interested in anyone in the village." She squirmed impatiently.

"Don't stop."

Something powerful stirred inside him at the knowledge that he would be her first. And her only, if he had his way. But not tonight. He would have to prepare her first.

He dropped his head again, focusing on her clit as he slowly, carefully, worked one finger inside that narrow channel. She gasped, but her hips lifted off the bed.

“Korrin, please,” she moaned, her fingers tightening in his hair.

He worshipped her with his mouth until she gave another startled cry and quivered beneath him, milking his finger with tight little pulses. His own need was driving him wild, but he couldn’t take her yet. He slowed his strokes, soothing her with his tongue until her body relaxed.

She looked up at him, her eyes dazed and happy, then frowned.

“I don’t understand. You didn’t...”

“Not tonight, love. We have time,” he added when she started to protest, and a sudden smile lit her face.

“Time. I like the sound of that.”

So did he.

She curled against him, her breathing slowly returning to normal, her body warm and pliant in his arms. Despite the persistent ache in his cock, his beast purred in satisfaction, content in a way he’d never experienced before. She was safe. She was pleased. She was his.

Tomorrow he would worry about what came next. Tonight he would allow himself to relish this moment.

Unfortunately his worries returned in full force the next morning. He sought refuge in chopping wood, swinging the axe with more force than necessary, sending splinters flying as the log split cleanly in two. But the physical exertion did nothing to quiet his mind. All he could think about was Tessa—her scent still lingered on his skin, a constant reminder of what they'd shared.

He paused, wiping sweat from his brow, and caught her watching him from the cabin doorway. She smiled softly before returning back inside, not demanding anything from him. Not pushing for answers he wasn't ready to give.

His beast rumbled with satisfaction. She was perfect. Patient. Understanding.

Dangerous.

He returned to his task, methodically splitting log after log, building a woodpile that would last them weeks. As if they had weeks. As if this fragile peace could somehow stretch into something permanent.

The memory of her taste flooded his senses—sweet and intoxicating. The softness of her skin beneath his hands. The way she'd whispered his name when she came apart. His claws extended involuntarily, scoring the wooden handle of the axe.

Inside, he could hear her humming as she prepared lunch, the pups yipping happily as they played at her feet. The domestic sounds pierced something in his chest, a longing he'd never acknowledged before.

He finally set down the axe and gathered an armful of split wood. As he approached the cabin, he caught her scent on the breeze and his beast stirred again, urging him to go to her, to claim her properly.

But he couldn't. Not yet. Not until he figured out how to keep her safe.

She looked up when he entered, her smile warming him more effectively than any fire. She didn't mention last night, just handed him a cup of water, her fingers brushing his deliberately. The simple touch sent heat racing through him.

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“Dinner is almost ready,” she said, turning back to the pot bubbling on the back of the stove.

He ate hungrily, then stared down at his empty bowl, acutely aware of Tessa’s presence across the small table. The silence between them stretched, broken only by the crackling fire and the occasional scrape of spoon against wood. He’d barely tasted the food, his mind too full of her—of them—to focus.

He gathered their dishes, needing something to do with his hands that didn’t involve reaching for her. When he turned back from setting them in the wash basin, he found her on the floor, surrounded by the adyani pups. They tumbled over her lap, playfully nipping at her fingers as she laughed.

The sight twisted something in his chest—a sharp, sweet ache he couldn’t name. Her dark curls had escaped their braid, framing her face in wild tendrils. The firelight caught the curve of her cheek, the fullness of her lips. His beast rumbled with possessive satisfaction.

Something about the way she sat there, surrounded by the pups, looking so damned content—it reached into the darkest parts of him and soothed the jagged edges he’d carried for years.

She belonged here. The realization hit him with unexpected force. Not just in his cabin, but in his life.

His claws extended and retracted against his palms as he fought the urge to cross the room and pull her into his arms. Last night hadn’t been enough. Nothing would ever

be enough where she was concerned. That was what terrified him.

He'd spent so long defining himself by his rage, by the blood on his hands, by the darkness that had consumed him after his mother's death. The bounty hunter. The killer. The lone wolf who needed no one.

Yet watching Tessa now, laughing as one of the pups tumbled over her lap, he realized he wanted something he'd never allowed himself to want before. Her happiness. Her safety. Her light.

Could a male like him give her that? He'd been alone so long, carried so much darkness. The blood on his hands would never fully wash away. He'd been shaped by violence, molded by loss.

But when she looked up at him, her blue eyes reflecting the firelight, all his doubts seemed suddenly insignificant against the weight of his need for her. Her smile was knowing, confident in a way that made his blood heat.

"Are you going to keep avoiding me all night?" she asked, scratching behind a pup's ears.

"I'm not avoiding you." The lie fell flat even to his own ears.

She laughed, the sound light and teasing. "You spent the entire day chopping wood. We have enough to last through winter." She tilted her head. "And you've barely said two words to me since breakfast."

He crossed his arms, leaning against the wall. "The cabin needed wood."

"The cabin needed about a quarter of what you chopped." She scooped up a squirming pup, pressing a kiss to its fuzzy head. "If you regret last night, you could

just say so.”

“I don’t,” he said roughly, honestly.

Her eyes softened, and she set the pup down gently. “Then why are you all the way over there?”

CHAPTER 15

Two days later Tessa hummed softly to herself as she moved through the dappled shadows of the forest, her basket already half-filled with plump berries. The morning sun filtered through the canopy above, creating shifting patterns of light across the forest floor. She paused to pluck another handful of berries, her fingers already stained purple with juice.

Last night’s memories warmed her from the inside out. Korrin’s hands and mouth had been everywhere, driving her to heights of pleasure she hadn’t known existed. Each night he’d prepared her a little more, so focused on her enjoyment that when she’d tried to touch him in return, he’d gently caught her wrists and pinned them above her head.

“Not yet,” he’d whispered against her skin, his amber eyes glowing gold in the darkness.

She understood his hesitation. For all his physical strength, there was something fragile in the way he held himself back. Each time he let her see more of him—his past, his desires, his fears—it cost him something. Vulnerability didn’t come easily to a man who’d spent his life keeping others at a distance.

She smiled to herself, reaching for another cluster of berries. She could be patient—at least a little longer. After all, what they shared now was already more than she’d ever

dreamed of finding. The way he looked at her sometimes, like she was something precious and rare, made her heart flutter wildly in her chest. But she was greedy enough to want it all, to be joined to him in every way.

A nearby bush rustled, startling her from her thoughts, and Storm bounded out. He must have escaped the outdoor pen that Korrin had built and followed her. She laughed as he circled her feet, yipping excitedly.

“You’re supposed to be with your brothers,” she scolded gently, crouching down to scratch behind his ears. He leaned into her touch, eyes closing in contentment.

This is happiness, she realized. Not the grand, dramatic kind from storybooks, but something quieter and more profound. The simple joy of gathering food that would nourish them both, of caring for creatures that depended on her, of knowing that someone waited for her return.

A branch snapped behind her and she let out a startled cry.

She jerked around, nearly dropping her basket. Her heart hammered against her ribs as she scanned the trees, expecting to see the feral Vultor or perhaps some other forest predator.

Instead, she found herself staring at a small elderly woman with silver hair and sharp brown eyes. Agatha Ashworth stood with her hands resting on a gnarled walking stick, dressed in practical clothes that had seen better days. Scarlett’s grandmother looked completely at ease in the wilderness, and strangest of all, she didn’t appear surprised in the slightest to find Tessa here.

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“There you are,” Agatha said cheerfully. “I was beginning to think I’d have to come look for you myself.”

Her mouth dropped open. She blinked several times, wondering if the woman was a hallucination brought on by too much sun. But no—the elderly woman was undeniably real, from her weathered boots to the knowing glint in her eyes.

“Grandmother Agatha? How—what are you doing here?” She clutched her basket tighter, suddenly aware of how far she’d wandered from the cabin. “Did Scarlett send you?”

Sensing her nerves, Storm growled softly, positioning himself between her and the newcomer. Agatha glanced down at the pup with a raised eyebrow.

“Well now, that’s an interesting companion you’ve found.” She crouched down, extending her hand to the pup with no sign of fear. “Adyani, if I’m not mistaken. Rare to see one so young away from its pack.”

She stared in astonishment as the pup sniffed Agatha’s fingers cautiously before allowing the old woman to scratch under its chin.

“How did you find me?” she whispered, her mind racing. “Everyone thinks I’m dead or missing, don’t they?”

Agatha straightened, her knees cracking with the effort. Her eyes, sharp and knowing, met Tessa’s.

“Not everyone, dear. Some of us knew exactly where to look.”

The elderly woman seemed so at ease, as though finding Tessa in the middle of the forest was entirely expected. But why was she here?

“Were you looking for me?” she asked, clutching her basket of berries tighter. “How did you know I was here?”

Agatha chuckled, the sound warm and rich against the backdrop of rustling leaves. “Looking for you? Heavens, no. I’m on my way to visit Scarlett and Finnar. I always take the mountain path—easier on these old bones than the road.”

“Visit Scarlett?” She blinked in confusion. “But that would mean...”

“That you’re quite close to the Vultor enclave?” Agatha’s eyes twinkled with amusement. “Indeed you are, dear. It’s just beyond that ridge to the north.” She pointed with her walking stick. “And the village is barely an hour’s walk in the opposite direction, though the path is a bit steep.”

Her jaw dropped again. All this time, she’d believed Korrin had taken her deep into the wilderness, far from civilization. The realization that she’d been so close to both the village and the Vultor settlement was both shocking and oddly amusing.

“You mean I could have—” She stopped herself, remembering her failed escape attempt. If she’d only gone in the right direction that day...

“Your Vultor chose this spot quite deliberately, I imagine,” Agatha said, her gaze knowing. “Close enough to keep an eye on things, far enough to feel safe.”

She felt heat rise to her cheeks. “He’s not exactly my—” She paused, unsure how to define what Korrin was to her now. “How do you know about him?”

“These mountains hold few secrets from those who know how to listen.” Agatha bent down to scratch the pup’s ears again. “I’ve walked these paths longer than most remember.”

She shifted her weight nervously, unsure what to make of Agatha’s unexpected appearance. The old woman’s knowing eyes seemed to see right through her, as though all her secrets were laid bare.

“There’s been quite an uproar in the village since you vanished,” Agatha added, leaning on her walking stick. “Caused quite a stir, you did.”

“They noticed I was gone?” she asked, surprised. She’d always felt so invisible in the village, just the baker’s daughter who kept to herself.

“Noticed? My dear, it’s been the talk of the town.” Agatha’s eyes crinkled at the corners. “Your stepmother tried telling everyone you’d run off—claimed you left a note saying you couldn’t bear village life anymore and needed adventure.”

“That’s ridiculous. I would never abandon?—”

“Of course it’s ridiculous,” Agatha interrupted with a dismissive wave. “Most folks didn’t believe a word of it. Especially not when Edgar started making a fuss about searching for you.”

The mention of Edgar made her skin crawl. She wrapped her arms around herself, grateful for the distance between them now.

“The bakery has suffered terribly,” Agatha continued. “Lenora hired some fellow from the next town over, but his bread is like eating rocks, and his pastries...” She made a face. “Well, let’s just say people are remembering your light touch with great fondness.”

A pang of regret shot through her chest. The bakery had been her father's pride, his legacy. Though Lenora had made working there miserable, Tessa had always taken pride in maintaining its reputation. Now it was falling apart without her.

"My father worked so hard to build that business," she said quietly. "People relied on us."

"They did," Agatha agreed. "Mrs. Jacobson complained just yesterday that she can't serve proper tea anymore without your currant scones. And old Mr. Thatcher says his mornings aren't the same without your cinnamon bread."

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A conflicting mix of emotions swept over her—satisfaction that she was missed, guilt that the village was suffering, and a strange sense of loss for the life she'd left behind, however imperfect it had been.

Agatha's gaze sharpened, her eyes suddenly piercing as she studied Tessa's face. "So, do you plan to come back to the village, then? People are worried, you know."

The question caught her off guard. She'd been so focused on their day to day life that she hadn't really considered her future. Did she want to return to the village? To Lenora's coldness, Edgar's unwanted attention, the constant feeling of being trapped?

She thought about the cabin, about waking up in Korrin's arms, about the freedom she'd found in this simple life. The pups, growing stronger every day. The way he looked at her when he thought she wouldn't notice.

"No," Tessa said, surprising herself with the certainty in her voice. "I don't think I do."

Agatha raised an eyebrow but didn't seem particularly shocked.

"I've been happier this past week than I've been since my father died," Tessa continued, the truth of it washing over her. "Here, I can breathe. I'm not constantly walking on eggshells or trying to please someone who will never be pleased. I'm not..." She hesitated. "I'm not afraid anymore."

The realization settled in her chest like a warm stone. She hadn't even recognized how much fear she'd been carrying until it was gone.

“I see,” Agatha said, nodding slowly. “And what of this Vultor male you’re staying with?”

Heat rushed to her cheeks again. “Korrin is... he’s not what I expected. He’s protective and kind in his own way.”

“Hmm.” Agatha’s expression gave nothing away.

“Could you let people know I’m all right?” she asked. “I don’t want anyone to worry. Just tell them I’m safe and happy. They don’t need to know where I am or who I’m with.”

She was about to ask Agatha how she knew Korrin when a thunderous crash erupted from the bushes behind them. She whirled around to see him burst through the undergrowth, his eyes wild and glowing gold. His chest heaved as he took in the scene, claws extended at his sides.

“You can’t have her,” he snarled at Agatha, positioning himself between them with a feral growl rumbling from his chest. “She stays with me.”

Her heart hammered against her ribs. She’d never seen him this frantic before, not even during the fight with the stranger. He looked ready to tear through anything that threatened to separate them.

To her astonishment, Agatha merely clicked her tongue and shook a bony finger at him. “Control yourself, young man. You’re making a spectacle of yourself.” Her voice carried the same tone she might use to scold a child for tracking mud across a clean floor.

Korrin faltered, clearly thrown by the elderly woman’s complete lack of fear.

“Besides,” Agatha continued, brushing a leaf from her sleeve, “Tessa has already told me she wants to stay with you. Quite adamant about it, actually.”

His head snapped toward her, the desperate hope in his eyes making her breath catch. “Is that true?” His voice was rough, vulnerable in a way she’d never heard before.

“Yes,” she said firmly. “I want to stay with you.”

Something primal and possessive flashed in his eyes. Before she could blink, he closed the distance between them, sweeping her up into his powerful arms. She gasped, instinctively wrapping her arms around his neck as he clutched her against his chest.

“Mine,” he growled against her hair. Storm dropped into her arms a moment later, and then they were moving, Korrin racing through the forest with the two of them secured tightly in his embrace.

Agatha’s laughter trailed after them, carried on the breeze. “Young love,” Tessa heard her call out. “So dramatic!”

She smiled and buried her face against Korrin’s neck as the trees blurred around them, her basket of berries forgotten.

He didn’t slow down until they reached the cabin. Without releasing her, he shouldered the door open and kicked it shut behind him. Then he finally set her down, his eyes burning as he scanned her body.

“Are you hurt?”

“No,” she managed, breathless from their mad dash. “I’m fine.”

“And the pups?” His eyes were still bright, his muscles tense.

“Storm’s the only one who followed me into the woods,” she admitted. “But he’s fine, too.”

He let out a long exhale, his shoulders finally relaxing.

“I heard you scream,” he muttered.

“Agatha startled me, that’s all.”

“Did you mean it?” he demanded.

CHAPTER 16

Korrin’s heart thundered in his chest as he raced through the forest, Tessa clutched against him. She hadn’t struggled when he’d snatched her away from the old woman. Instead, she’d wrapped her arms around his neck, her face pressed against his chest.

He burst into the clearing around the cabin, not slowing until he was inside with the door kicked shut behind them. Only then did he set her down, his hands lingering on her waist.

“Did you mean it?” The words tore from his throat, rougher than he intended.

Tessa looked up at him, those blue eyes clear and steady. No fear. Just that quiet determination that had captivated him from the start.

“That I want to stay with you? Yes.”

He circled her, unable to remain still. His beast paced beneath his skin, demanding he claim her properly, make her his in every way. He curled his hands into fists, claws digging into his palms.

“Why?” He stopped in front of her. “I kidnapped you. I was paid to make you disappear.”

“And yet here I am.” A small smile played at her lips. “Safe. With the pups. With you.”

He shook his head, unable to comprehend how she could look at him with such warmth. “I’m not a good person, Tessa.”

“Nonsense.” She stepped closer, eliminating the distance between them. Her hand came up to rest against his chest, directly over his hammering heart. “I don’t care what you think you are—I know what I’ve seen.”

He caught her face between his hands, tilting it up. “And what have you seen?”

“Someone who cared about saving orphaned pups. Who made sure I was warm. Who hunts for me and teaches me to survive.” Her fingers curled into his shirt. “Someone who touches me like I’m precious.”

His thumb traced her cheekbone, marveling at her softness.

“I don’t deserve you,” he whispered.

“I’m not asking what you deserve.” She rose onto her tiptoes, her lips a breath away from his. “I’m telling you this is where I want to be.”

He stared down at her, his beast rumbling with satisfaction at her words. She wanted to stay with him. Him—not the village, not some human male who could give her a normal life.

“But as much as I want to be with you,” she added, her fingers tracing the sharp line

of his jaw. “I’ll need to visit the village sometimes. I have friends there. The bakery...”

His grip on her tightened instinctively. The thought of her returning to the place where Lenora had tried to have her killed made his hackles rise.

“It’s not safe,” he growled.

“Not now,” she agreed, her thumb brushing across his lower lip, instantly derailing his train of thought. “But eventually. With you beside me.”

With him. The implication that she saw a future where they moved together between his world and hers silenced his objections. Her trust in him to keep her safe made his chest swell with fierce pride.

“But that’s for later,” she continued, her voice dropping to a whisper that sent heat coursing through his veins. Her scent changed, sweetening with desire. “Right now, I want you to stop holding back.”

He inhaled sharply. “Tessa?—”

“I’m tired of you pleasuring me and then pulling away.” She pressed her body against his, soft curves fitting perfectly against his hard planes. “I want all of you, Korrin. I want you to make love to me. I’m ready.”

He growled and reached for the buttons on her dress. She beat him to it, unfastening them rapidly and letting it slip to the ground. He snatched her up in his arms, relishing the feel of her naked skin against his.

“Are you certain?” he asked, as he placed her on the bed.

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Her answer was to pull him down to her, her mouth finding his in a kiss that burned away the last of his doubts. The sight of her beneath him—trusting, wanting—struck him with an emotion so powerful it nearly stole his breath.

“I will make you happy,” he vowed, the words rough with sincerity. “For as long as you’ll have me.”

She gave him a radiant smile. “I’m already happy.”

He kissed her then, pouring everything he couldn’t say into the gentle press of his lips against hers. His hands trembled slightly as they traced the contours of her face, memorizing every curve, every plane. The beast within him, usually so wild and demanding, moved with careful restraint.

She sighed against his mouth, her fingers threading through his hair, pulling him closer. The sweet scent of her filled his senses, drowning out everything else until there was only her—her warmth, her softness, the steady rhythm of her heartbeat calling to his own.

“I never thought I’d find someone like you,” he murmured against her skin, and she arched into his touch.

“I never thought I’d be kidnapped by someone like you,” she teased, then gasped as his lips found a sensitive spot on her neck.

The sound ignited something primal within him. His restraint began to slip, passion overtaking tenderness as he claimed her mouth more fiercely. Her eager response

only fueled his desire, her hands exploring the planes of his back, tracing old scars with gentle fingertips.

When her hands found the laces of his pants, he stilled. His eyes searched hers, his beast rumbling at the lust he found reflected in her gaze.

“Are you certain?” His voice was tight, the effort of holding back taking its toll.

“Yes,” she whispered, her hands pushing his pants away. “I’m yours, Korrin. Now and always.”

The words sent a rush of possessive hunger through him.

“Then you’re mine,” he growled, the last of his control shattering.

His mouth crashed down on hers, hot and demanding. Her hands gripped his shoulders, her hips lifting against him.

“Now,” she pleaded. “I want you now.”

He didn’t bother removing his pants. He’d spent so long preparing her, making sure her body could accommodate him, and his restraint was at its limit. He pulled her to the edge of the bed, then lifted her legs, her ankles resting on his shoulders.

He was already rock hard and aching for her.

“Last chance to turn back,” he rumbled, positioning himself at her entrance.

“No turning back,” she whispered, her breath coming fast.

He eased forward, groaning as the head of his cock entered her tight heat. She

whimpered, her fingernails digging into his forearms, and he forced himself to go slowly. Inch by inch, he entered her, fighting the urge to plunge into her with abandon.

When his cock hit her barrier, he paused, giving her a moment to adjust. Her face was flushed, her blue eyes hazy with pleasure, her lips swollen from his kisses.

“More,” she demanded, her fingers clutching his shoulders.

He pressed forward, a low growl escaping his throat as her tight passage gripped him. She was so small, so delicate beneath him, but her hands were insistent, urging him forward.

He pushed deeper, until his cock was buried inside her. She let out a sharp cry, and he froze.

“Don’t stop,” she gasped, her fingers digging into his skin.

He held perfectly still, trying to calm his beast. Her inner walls quivered around his cock, her body adjusting to his size. When her muscles relaxed, he withdrew a fraction, then pressed back into her, eliciting another whimper.

“Fuck, Tessa. You’re so tight,” he muttered, his cock pulsing with the effort of restraining himself.

She made a noise that was part moan, part sob, and his beast snarled, desperate to claim her. But he refused to let it out. This first time, she needed him, not the animal.

He moved slowly at first, letting her body become accustomed to his presence. Each small movement brought a new gasp or whimper, and her hands clung to his shoulders as if he was the only thing keeping her tethered to the earth.

“Are you all right?” he rasped, struggling to maintain his control.

“More,” she demanded, her back arching. “Please.”

Her words sent him into a frenzy. His hips surged forward, her tightness and wetness driving him wild. She cried out, her fingernails scoring his shoulders, her legs tightening around him.

“Mine,” he snarled, the primal sound tearing from his throat. “Mine.”

Her head thrashed on the pillow, her curls spilling across the blankets. “Yes.”

He could feel her approaching her peak, the scent of her arousal driving him on. She was his. She was finally his. He needed her pleasure almost as much as his own.

His hips thrust harder, his cock surging into her again and again. Her cries grew louder, her body meeting his every stroke.

When her inner walls began to flutter, his thrusts became more erratic, his own climax approaching. His fangs emerged, his beast snarling with the need to claim her properly.

“Korrin,” she whimpered, her fingers gripping his shoulders tightly.

“Look at me,” he demanded, and her eyes fluttered open.

Their gazes locked, and his climax roared over him, his seed erupting in long helpless pulses as his knot expanded, locking them together. She cried out again, her body gripping him so tightly that he could barely breathe.

It felt like hours passed before his release finally ebbed. He collapsed onto the bed beside her, pulling her into his arms. She burrowed into him, her breathing still uneven, her body trembling.

He stroked her hair, murmuring reassurances, his heart swelling with emotions he'd never experienced before. She belonged to him now, bound to him irrevocably. And he'd finally found a place where he could belong, too.

He had no idea how long they lay there, tangled together, his fingers stroking her soft skin. When his knot finally receded, she shifted, her lips curving into a small smile.

"That was... wow."

"Yeah." He grinned. "Wow."

She laughed, a sound of pure happiness, and he tightened his grip, unable to resist the temptation of her mouth. He kissed her slowly, thoroughly, savoring the sweetness of her taste.

He didn't know how long they stayed like that, but when the sun began to dip below the horizon, he reluctantly broke the kiss.

"We should get some food," he murmured. "You'll need your strength."

She raised an eyebrow. "My strength?"

"For the next time. And the time after that."

She shivered, her body pressing closer, and his cock hardened, ready for another round.

“Hmm. Is that so?”

He nodded, his eyes traveling lower, to the smooth expanse of her neck and shoulders. To the soft curve where her neck met her shoulder. His beast clawed at his consciousness, demanding he sink his teeth into the unmarked flesh.

Mark her. Claim her.

He groaned, burying his face against her neck, inhaling her intoxicating scent. His lips brushed over her pulse point, feeling the rapid flutter beneath her skin. It would be so easy. One swift movement and she would be his forever.

But he pulled back.

No matter how right it felt, no matter how desperately his beast howled for completion, he couldn't do it. Not yet. Not until she understood exactly what it meant.

A mating bite wasn't just a passionate gesture—it was permanent, irreversible. It would bind them together for life, changing her in ways she couldn't possibly comprehend. She deserved to make that choice with full knowledge of what she was agreeing to, not in the heat of passion.

But for now, she was warm and willing in his arms and that was enough.

CHAPTER 17

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Tessa hummed softly as she mixed fresh berries with a few spices she'd found tucked away in Korrin's sparse pantry and spooned them into a baking dish. Sunlight streamed through the cabin's windows, casting golden patterns across the wooden floor where the pups tumbled and played. Every few minutes, she'd glance over at them and smile.

Her body ached pleasantly, reminding her of the night before. The memory of Korrin's hands on her skin, his mouth trailing fire across her body, sent heat flooding through her. She pressed her thighs together, biting her lip as she worked the crumble topping between her fingers.

"Behave," she whispered to herself, but she couldn't stop smiling.

When Korrin had mentioned going to speak with Seren about her, a flicker of anxiety had passed through her, but he'd kissed it away.

"Stay here," he'd murmured against her lips. "Let me make sure they're prepared to welcome you properly."

The pups whined, sensing her distraction, and she knelt to give them a quick cuddle. "He'll be back soon enough," she assured them, though the words were as much for herself as for them.

Rising to her feet, she washed her hands, then slid the crumble into the small oven. The cabin felt different without Korrin—quieter, smaller somehow. But it still felt like home in a way the bakery never had, even before Lenora.

She stretched, wincing slightly at the twinge between her thighs. Worth it, she thought with a private smile. She moved to the window, gazing out at the forest. Somewhere beyond those trees was the Vultor enclave, where Korrin was telling his pack leader about her. About them.

“I wonder what they’ll think of me,” she mused aloud, not particularly worried but curious. The pups crowded around her ankles, demanding attention, and she laughed.

“You’re right. I shouldn’t worry.” She bent to pick up Storm, cradling him against her chest. “If they’re anything like your grumpy guardian, they’ll pretend not to like me at first, then won’t be able to resist.”

She was just pulling the berry crumble from the oven when the pups’ playful tumbling abruptly ceased. Their ears pricked up, bodies tensing as they crowded together near the door. A low, collective growl rose from their throats.

“What is it?” she whispered, setting the hot dish on the table.

The growling intensified. Bashful backed up against her legs, trembling but still making that threatening sound.

Something moved outside. Footsteps, heavy and unfamiliar, crashing through the woods.

Her heart jumped into her throat. It wasn’t Korrin—she’d recognize his purposeful stride anywhere. Besides, the pups would be yipping with excitement, not growling in alarm.

She grabbed the iron poker from beside the fireplace, clutching it tightly as she approached the door. The pups followed, their small bodies vibrating with tension.

“Stay behind me,” she murmured, though she wasn’t sure what protection she could offer them if danger lurked outside.

Taking a deep breath, she pushed open the door and stepped onto the porch, poker raised defensively.

Edgar Thornfield stumbled out of the tree line, his fine clothing snagged and dirty, face flushed with exertion. Sweat plastered his thinning hair to his forehead, and his breath came in labored gasps. When he spotted her, his irritated expression immediately transformed into what she supposed was meant to be a charming smile.

“Tessa! Thank heavens I’ve found you!” He straightened his jacket, trying to recover some dignity despite his disheveled appearance.

The poker nearly slipped from her suddenly numb fingers. “Edgar?” she managed, her voice faint. “What are you doing here?”

Behind her, the pups crowded the doorway, their growls growing louder as they sensed her distress.

His gaze flicked to them, his smile faltering for a second before he fixed it back in place. “I’ve come to rescue you, of course.” He took a step toward the porch, extending his hand. “The whole village has been in an uproar since you disappeared. When I heard you might be up in these mountains, I knew I had to come for you myself.”

“I don’t need rescuing. And you can stay right where you are.”

She tightened her grip on the poker as Edgar ignored her, and the pups huddled protectively around her ankles, their growls intensifying.

“How did you find me anyway?” she demanded.

Edgar smiled, the expression not quite reaching his eyes. “Your friend Scarlett’s grandmother has been telling everyone you’re alive and well, somewhere near the village.” He pressed a hand to his chest. “You can imagine my relief. I’ve been beside myself with worry.”

His concern rang hollow. There was something calculating in his gaze that made her skin crawl.

“Well, as you can see, I’m perfectly fine.” She gestured towards the place where he’d emerged from the woods. “You can head back now and let everyone know.”

Edgar’s smile faltered. His eyes swept over the rustic cabin with undisguised disdain. “Surely you don’t intend to stay in this... hovel?” He laughed as though the very idea was absurd. “Come back with me, Tessa. Lenora has been absolutely distraught.”

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She couldn't suppress her snort of disbelief. "Lenora? Distraught? The woman who paid to have me kidnapped?"

Edgar waved a dismissive hand. "Rumors and misunderstandings. She's your stepmother—she loves you."

"She does not." Her voice hardened. "And neither do you."

His expression darkened momentarily before smoothing into something placating. "Don't be ridiculous. I've come all this way for you." He gestured grandly toward the forest. "If you married me, you'd have the finest house in the village. Servants. Beautiful clothes. Everything you could ever want."

The pups growled louder, sensing her growing anger. One of them—Bold, she called him—stepped forward, hackles raised.

"I have everything I want right here," she said firmly. "I'm not going anywhere with you, Edgar."

"Not even to regain control of the bakery and your house?"

"What?"

He smirked at her.

"Did you ever actually see the will?"

The implications of his question stunned her so much that he took another two steps towards the porch before she came to her senses.

“Stop right there,” she ordered him.

Her stomach knotted as Edgar took another step forward anyway. The pups pressed against her legs, their growls vibrating through her ankles.

“I appreciate your concern about my inheritance,” she said, keeping her voice steady, “but it makes no difference. I have no interest in your house or in marrying you. I’m staying here.”

Edgar’s face transformed. The practiced smile vanished, replaced by a flash of naked rage that made her grip the porch railing. His eyes narrowed, nostrils flaring, before he seemed to catch himself. The mask slipped back into place with frightening speed.

“You can’t be serious.” He forced a laugh that sounded more like a bark. “Living out here in the wilderness? With... what, these mangy little beasts for company?”

“They’re not mangy,” she snapped. “And I’m not alone.”

Edgar sighed dramatically, shoulders slumping in apparent defeat. “Agatha said you’d say that. She warned Lenora you were... enchanted with this place.” He lifted a wicker basket she hadn’t noticed before. “Your stepmother sent some of your clothes and personal items. A peace offering, of sorts.”

She eyed the basket suspiciously. It seemed an unlikely gesture from Lenora, who had never shown her a moment’s kindness since her father died.

“How thoughtful,” she said, not bothering to hide her skepticism.

Edgar stepped forward, extending the basket. “Here, take it. There are some of your mother’s things in there too, I believe.”

The moment he moved closer, all seven pups lunged forward, their growls transforming into snarls. Bold and Storm snapped at Edgar’s ankles while the others formed a protective semicircle in front of her.

He stumbled backwards, nearly dropping the basket. “Control these wild animals!”

“They’re excellent judges of character,” she said, making no move to call them back. “You can leave the basket there.” She pointed to a spot several feet away.

Edgar set the basket down with exaggerated care, his eyes never leaving the growling pups. He took three deliberate steps backwards, making a vain attempt to brush the dirt from his expensive jacket.

“Are you absolutely certain you won’t reconsider?” His voice softened, taking on the honeyed tone he used when trying to charm the village women. “This is madness, Tessa. Living out here with wild animals, far from civilization. What kind of life is that?”

She stroked Bold’s head as he returned to her side, his small body still tense with protective energy. The simple gesture calmed her more than Edgar could know.

“It’s the life I want,” she said firmly. “I’m happier here than I’ve been since my father died.”

Something flickered across Edgar’s face—disappointment, anger, calculation—before settling into resignation. He shrugged, spreading his hands wide.

“Very well. Your decision.” His tone suggested she was making a terrible mistake.

“Should you change your mind, my offer remains open. The village isn’t the same without your pretty face... or your baking.”

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He turned and disappeared into the trees without another word, his expensive boots crunching through the underbrush.

Tessa waited until she could no longer hear him before approaching the basket. The pups circled it suspiciously, sniffing and pawing at the wicker. She knelt beside them, cautiously lifting the cloth covering.

Inside lay several of her dresses, neatly folded, along with her hairbrush and a small wooden box that had belonged to her mother. Her throat tightened at the sight of it. Whatever Lenora's motives, having these familiar items felt unexpectedly comforting.

She carried the basket inside, the pups trailing after her. A change of clothes would be welcome after days of washing and rewearing the same dress. She filled the basin with water from the pump and washed quickly, excitement building at the thought of Korrin returning to find her in something other than her now-shabby navy dress.

She chose a simple white dress with a red sash, then brushed her hair until it shone. She placed her mother's box on the mantelpiece, happy with the home-like air it added to the cabin.

Rummaging deeper into the basket, she discovered something cool and smooth—a small glass jar nestled at the bottom. She pulled it out, a smile spreading across her face as she recognized the distinctive amber liquid inside. One of Agatha's honey jars, with its hand-drawn label featuring a sprig of lavender.

“What a lovely surprise,” she murmured to the pups, who had lost interest in the

basket and were now wrestling near the fireplace. “Agatha must have slipped this in.”

The thought warmed her. It seemed everyone knew where she was now—everyone except Lenora, hopefully. Though if Edgar had brought the basket on Lenora’s behalf...

She quickly pushed the troubling thought away. She wouldn’t let her stepmother’s shadow darken the day.

Cutting a thick slice of the bread she’d baked that morning, she drizzled the golden honey generously across it. The scent was intoxicating—sweet with a hint of wildflowers. Taking her treat, she settled on the porch steps to watch for Korrin’s return while enjoying her impromptu snack.

The honey tasted even better than it smelled, rich and complex on her tongue. She savored each bite, licking a stray drop from her finger. The sun felt wonderful on her face, and she closed her eyes, enjoying the peaceful moment.

A strange heaviness began to creep through her limbs. She had to force her eyes open, then blinked, finding it difficult to focus on the tree line. The forest seemed to waver, edges blurring like watercolors in the rain.

“That’s odd,” she whispered, her tongue feeling thick in her mouth.

She tried to stand, to go inside for water, but her legs wouldn’t cooperate. Her body felt impossibly heavy, as though she’d been sewn to the porch steps.

The pups began to growl from inside the cabin, the sound reaching her as if through water. She turned her head with tremendous effort, seeing them gathered at the doorway, hackles raised.

Through blurred eyes, she made out a figure emerging from the trees. Edgar. His smug smile was unmistakable even as her sight dimmed at the edges.

“You should have accepted my offer,” his voice drifted to her, distorted and far away.

She tried to call for help, but her voice failed her. The world tilted sideways as darkness rushed in.

CHAPTER 18

Korrin stalked through the woods toward the Vultor enclave, his mind racing with everything that had happened in the past few days. Tessa wanted to stay with him. The knowledge still stunned him, filling his chest with an unfamiliar warmth.

He found Seren at the edge of the enclave, examining tracks in the soft earth. The pack leader straightened as he approached, his expression curious.

“I didn’t expect to see you back so soon.” Seren’s eyes narrowed. “The human female?”

“Her name is Tessa,” he said, his voice low but firm. “And I intend to take her as my mate.”

He braced himself for disapproval, arguments about how humans couldn’t be trusted, how they were different. Instead, Seren’s expression softened into something almost wistful.

“You wouldn’t be the first to find himself captivated by a human female.” Seren looked away, his gaze distant. “They have a certain... resilience that can be quite compelling.”

He studied his alpha's face. There was something in his tone, a hint of personal experience that made him wonder if Seren was referring to someone specific.

"You sound like you speak from experience," he ventured.

Seren's lips curved in a half-smile. "Perhaps. But that's a story for another time." He clasped Korrin's shoulder. "Is she worthy of you?"

"I'm not worthy of her," he admitted. "She's kind, even to those who don't deserve it. Strong in ways I never expected."

"And she accepts what you are? All of it?"

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He remembered how Tessa had looked at him after seeing his beast form, without a trace of fear. “She does.”

Seren nodded slowly. “Then bring her to meet the pack. We’ll welcome her.”

Relief flooded him. He hadn’t realized how much he’d needed Seren’s approval until he had it.

“Thank you,” he said simply.

“Don’t thank me yet,” Seren warned. “Not everyone will be as accepting. There will be challenges.”

“I can handle them.”

“I believe you can.” Seren’s expression grew serious. “But don’t take too long to bring her. The unclaimed males grow restless in spring.”

He hesitated, shifting his weight. “There’s something else. I encountered a beast Vultor near the cabin a few days ago. He came too close to Tessa.”

Seren’s expression darkened immediately. “You fought him?”

“Yes.” His claws extended involuntarily at the memory. “He was massive. Scarred. I would have killed him, but Tessa stopped me. He growled ‘no harm’ before disappearing.”

Seren turned away, his shoulders tense. “You met Malrik.”

“You know him?”

“I knew him.” Seren’s voice was heavy with regret. “He was the descendant of a noble house back on our original planet. Always arrogant, believed himself above our customs, our ways.” He shook his head. “Thought he could defy nature itself.”

“The curse of the unmated?”

“Yes. He didn’t believe he would succumb to it.” Seren ran a hand through his hair. “Malrik believed himself stronger than the beast within. By the time he realized his mistake, it was too late. The transformation had begun.”

“Could nothing be done?” he asked, though he already knew the answer.

“I tried reaching out to him. We all did.” Seren’s eyes reflected old pain. “But he rejected our help, disappeared into the mountains. By the time we found him again, his mind was nearly gone. Now he roams, more beast than Vultor.”

Korrin thought of the creature’s eyes—still holding a flicker of intelligence despite the bestial form. “He seemed to understand Tessa meant something to me. He backed down.”

“Then perhaps there’s still something of Malrik left in there.” Seren looked thoughtful. “That he approached your female at all is concerning, though. The beasts are usually solitary, avoiding contact with others.”

A chill ran down his spine. “I should get back to her.”

Korrin loped through the forest, his spirits higher than they’d been in years. Seren’s

approval had been unexpected but welcome. The alpha had even seemed pleased by the news, though there had been something wistful in his eyes that made him wonder if Seren himself harbored feelings for a human female.

The thought of Tessa waiting for him quickened his pace. His beast prowled restlessly beneath his skin, eager to return to her. He would ask her tonight, explain what it meant to be marked as his mate. The idea of her wearing his mark sent a thrill of possessive pleasure through him.

He was halfway back to the cabin when a dark shape exploded from the trees. Malrik. The beast Vultor's eyes blazed with frantic urgency as he skidded to a halt before Korrin.

"Female," Malrik growled, the word guttural and rough, as though he hadn't spoken in years. "Danger."

Ice flooded his veins. "Tessa?"

Malrik's massive head jerked in what might have been a nod. "Male. Human."

He didn't wait for more. He shifted in mid-stride, clothes tearing as his body contorted and expanded. Pain lanced through him, but he welcomed it, channeled it into rage. His beast erupted, fur rippling over muscle, claws extending as he dropped to all fours.

He tore through the forest, Malrik keeping pace beside him. Trees blurred past as they raced toward the cabin. Korrin's heart hammered against his ribs. Tessa. His Tessa. If anything happened to her?—

The scent hit him first. Wrong. Something chemical and sweet beneath the familiar scent of honey. Then Edgar's stink, a mixture of sweat and cologne that made his

nose burn. And beneath it all, the terrifying absence of Tessa's usual vibrant scent.

A roar built in his chest, exploding from him as they burst into the clearing. The cabin door stood open. The pups were growling, circling around something on the porch.

Tessa. Limp and unmoving.

The world narrowed to that single point—Tessa’s crumpled form on the porch, the pups forming a protective circle around her.

Time slowed as he bounded forward. She lay so still, her skin alabaster against the dark wood of the porch. His heart seized in his chest. No. Not her. Not when he’d finally found something worth living for.

He shifted back to human form as he reached her, heedless of his nakedness. His hands trembled as he touched her face. She was cold. Too cold.

“Tessa.” His voice broke on her name.

The pups whined, pressing against his legs. One of them nudged the half-eaten bread beside her. Korrin caught the scent again—honey laced with something bitter and wrong.

He pressed his fingers to her throat, holding his breath until he felt it—the faint flutter of her pulse. Relief crashed through him, followed immediately by fear. Her heartbeat was too slow, too weak.

“Tessa, wake up.” He gathered her into his arms, cradling her against his chest. Her head lolled lifelessly against his shoulder. “Please, my love.”

Edgar’s scent trail led back toward the village. Rage surged through Korrin, his beast howling for blood. Later. He would hunt the man later. Tessa needed help now.

But where could he take her? The village? They'd blame him for her condition. The Vultor enclave? Too far, and they had no healers skilled with human physiology.

Agatha. The old woman knew herbs and healing. But he couldn't leave Tessa alone, not when Edgar might return. And he feared moving her might make things worse.

Malrik paced at the edge of the clearing, his massive form restless. The beast Vultor's eyes fixed on Tessa, then shifted to the forest, as if suggesting a direction.

"Can you find help?" he asked desperately.

Malrik's ears flattened, then perked. He sniffed the air, then looked toward the village.

"Please," he said, the word foreign on his tongue. He couldn't remember the last time he'd begged for anything. "Find Agatha. The old woman. She can help."

Malrik's ears twitched, his bestial features unreadable. For a terrible moment, Korrin thought he would refuse—or worse, that he didn't understand. The beast Vultor had been trapped in his animal form for so long, perhaps language itself had abandoned him.

His arms tightened around Tessa's limp body. Her breathing had grown more labored, each inhale a shallow gasp that tore at his soul. He'd only just found her. He couldn't lose her now.

"Agatha," he repeated, the name a plea. "The old woman who smells of herbs and smoke.."

Malrik's nostrils flared. Recognition flickered in those feral eyes. With a short, sharp nod that seemed almost human, the beast turned and bounded into the forest, his

massive form disappearing among the trees with surprising grace.

He exhaled shakily. He'd sent his message with a creature he'd tried to kill days before—a desperate gamble. But Malrik had seemed genuinely concerned about Tessa. Perhaps the beast remembered what it was to care for someone, even locked in his animal form.

Turning his attention back to Tessa, he carried her inside the cabin. He laid her gently on the bed, arranging her limbs with care. Her skin felt clammy under his touch, her normally rosy complexion ashen.

“Don't leave me,” he whispered, brushing hair from her face. “I've only just found you.”

The pups scrambled onto the bed, whining as they nudged at her still form. One of them carried the remnant of bread in its mouth, dropping it beside Korrin with a plaintive whimper.

Korrin picked up the morsel, sniffing it carefully. Beneath the sweetness of honey lurked something acrid and wrong—a poison he didn't recognize. His claws extended involuntarily, rage building in his chest. Edgar had done this. The coward hadn't been able to take her by force, so he'd tried to steal her through treachery.

He'd never prayed before. The gods of his people were distant figures, unconcerned with the struggles of mortals. But now, with Tessa's life slipping away in his arms, Korrin found himself bargaining with any deity who might listen.

“Take me instead,” he murmured, rocking her gently. “If someone must pay for my sins, let it be me.”

The thought of losing her carved a hollow space in his chest. He'd survived his

mother's death, survived the loneliness of years as an outcast, but this—this would break him. Without Tessa, the fragile humanity he'd reclaimed would shatter. He would become like Malrik, lost to the beast, a creature of instinct and rage with no memory of the man he'd once been.

“I love you,” he whispered, the words he'd been too afraid to speak now tumbling from his lips. “I've never loved anyone before. I don't know how to do this right, but I know I can't lose you.”

He inhaled her fading scent, memorizing it. If she died, he would hunt Edgar to the ends of the earth. He would tear the human apart with his bare hands. And then he would surrender to the beast, let it consume what remained of his soul.

The pups sensed his despair, climbing onto the bed to press their warm bodies against Tessa. One of them licked her hand, as if trying to wake her.

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“She saved you,” he told them, his voice breaking. “And now I can’t save her.”

His claws extended, then retracted, the beast within him surging against his control. He felt the change threatening to overtake him—the shift that came from rage or fear. But he fought it back. Tessa needed him human now, needed his mind clear.

“Hold on,” he begged, brushing his lips across her forehead. “Just hold on.”

CHAPTER 19

The darkness engulfed Tessa like frigid water, dragging her down into its depths. She couldn’t move, couldn’t scream, couldn’t even remember how she’d gotten here. Time stretched and contracted around her—had she been floating in this void for minutes or years?

Cold seeped into her bones, her blood, her very essence. She tried to fight against it, to push back against the heaviness pressing down on her chest, but her limbs refused to obey. Her thoughts moved sluggishly, like honey frozen in winter.

Let go, the darkness seemed to whisper. Rest now. Sleep forever.

Part of her wanted to surrender, to sink deeper into the nothingness where pain and fear couldn’t reach. It would be so easy to let the darkness claim her completely.

But something tugged at the edges of her consciousness—a flicker of warmth, distant but persistent. She couldn’t see it or touch it, but she felt its presence like a beacon calling her home.

Tessa.

Her name drifted through the void, carried on a current of desperation and love. The voice was familiar, though she couldn't place it through the fog clouding her mind.

Come back to me.

The warmth grew stronger, pushing back against the cold that had settled in her chest. It wasn't enough to break the darkness's hold, but it gave her something to focus on, something to fight for.

Memories flickered at the edges of her consciousness—berry crumble baking in an oven, playful wolf pups tumbling at her feet, strong arms holding her close, amber eyes watching her with hunger and tenderness.

Korrin.

The name formed in her mind, bringing with it a surge of longing so powerful it briefly cut through the numbness. She tried to reach toward the warmth, toward him, but the darkness pulled her back, jealously guarding its prize.

Not yet, it seemed to say. You belong to me now.

The cold intensified, driving deep into her core. She felt herself slipping further away from that precious warmth, that connection to life and love. The darkness swallowed her screams, her tears, her desperate struggle to hold onto the memory of amber eyes and gentle hands.

Then, cutting through the silence, a voice reached her. Soft but insistent, it tugged at her consciousness.

“Tessa, child. Come back now.”

The voice was aching familiar—the gentle cadence, the slight rasp that came with age, the underlying steel that brooked no argument.

Agatha?

It couldn't be. Grandmother Agatha was back in the village, not here in this empty void. And yet the warmth of her voice felt real, like sunlight breaking through storm clouds after endless rain.

“You have to wake up, Tessa. He needs you.”

The words drifted through her mind, elusive and teasing. Who needed her? Images flickered behind her closed eyelids—amber eyes wild with fear, strong hands trembling as they cradled her.

Korrin.

Something sparked inside her—a fragile thread of awareness. Tessa reached for it desperately, clinging to this tenuous connection to the world beyond the darkness.

“That's it, child. Fight. The poison wants to take you, but you're stronger than it thinks.”

Poison? The word stirred a memory—the sweet taste of honey, the dizziness that followed, Edgar's face swimming before her eyes.

“He's going mad with worry, your Vultor. Never seen one of them so undone. If you don't come back to him, I fear what he'll become.”

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Agatha's voice grew clearer, as if she were drawing closer. Tessa strained toward the sound, using it as an anchor against the pull of the darkness.

The ice surrounding her began to crack, hairline fractures spreading across her frozen prison. Warmth seeped through these tiny fissures, tentative at first, then growing stronger. A steady, insistent pressure at her side anchored her to the world of the living—something solid and real amid the void.

It wasn't just warmth—it was him. Korrin.

His presence resonated through her like a heartbeat, powerful and familiar. She could feel him now, his large hand wrapped around hers, his thumb tracing anxious circles on her palm. The sensation sent ripples of awareness through her, each one pushing back the cold a little more.

"Tessa." His voice was raw, stripped of its usual arrogance. "Come back to me."

She struggled toward it, toward him, clawing her way through layers of darkness. Each movement was agony, her mind sluggish and uncooperative, but she pushed forward. Korrin was waiting. Korrin needed her.

His scent reached her now—that indefinable wildness that was uniquely his. She drew it in, let it fill her lungs and chase away the numbness.

"Please," he whispered, the word so soft she almost missed it. "I can't lose you."

Exhaustion tried to pull her under again, the poison in her veins whispering

seductively of rest and release. It would be so easy to surrender, to slip back into the darkness where nothing hurt and nothing mattered. But Korrin's grip tightened, as if he sensed her slipping away.

"Fight, little baker," he growled, the command laced with desperation. "You're stronger than this."

She focused on his voice, used it as a lifeline. Each syllable drew her closer to the surface, each word another crack in the ice. She was so tired, but she couldn't give up—not when he was waiting, not when she'd finally found where she belonged.

She felt a firm arm around her, his body wrapped around hers as if trying to shield her from the cold that had settled deep in her bones. Despite her weakness, she registered the warmth of him seeping into her, fighting back the chill that had nearly claimed her.

His breath was hot against her temple, stirring loose strands of her hair. "Stay with me, Tessa. Don't you dare leave me." The raw desperation in his tone sent a pang through her chest. Korrin, always so controlled, sounded broken. She'd never heard him like this—vulnerable, afraid.

She wanted to respond, to squeeze his hand, to open her eyes—anything to ease his suffering. But her body refused to cooperate, heavy and unresponsive as if weighted down with stones. The poison still coursed through her veins, dulling her senses and draining her strength.

Still, something inside her stirred at his plea. The fierce protectiveness in his voice wrapped around her heart, giving her something to fight for. She focused on that feeling, using it to pull herself toward the surface of consciousness.

With monumental effort, she managed to twitch her fingers against his palm. The

movement was tiny, barely perceptible, but she felt Korrin go utterly still against her.

“Tessa?” His voice was rough with hope and disbelief. “Can you hear me?”

She struggled to part her lips, to make any sound at all. A faint moan escaped her, the best she could manage, but it was enough.

“She’s responding,” she heard him say to someone else in the room. “Agatha, she moved her hand.”

Her eyelids fluttered, heavy as stone, but she forced them open. At first, everything was blurred—shifting shadows, indistinct light—and her head pounded with each heartbeat. She blinked slowly, trying to clear her vision as the world gradually came into focus around her.

Golden eyes. Burning bright with intensity, they were the first thing she truly saw. Korrin’s face swam into view, tight with worry, his features carved into harsh lines of fear and exhaustion. His jaw was clenched, his brow furrowed, but those eyes—they burned with something that made her heart clench.

“Tessa.” Her name on his lips sounded like both a prayer and a plea.

His hands were on her, gripping her like he was afraid she’d disappear if he loosened his hold even slightly. One large palm cupped her face, his thumb brushing over her cheek, tracing warmth into her frozen skin. The gentle gesture contrasted sharply with the desperate strength in his grip.

She tried to speak, but her throat felt raw and parched. Her tongue was thick and unwieldy in her mouth. She wanted to reassure him, to tell him she was still here, that she wasn’t going anywhere. The fear in his eyes was unbearable—she’d never seen him look so vulnerable, so utterly terrified.

She managed to lift her hand, her movements weak and uncoordinated. Her fingers brushed against his chest, feeling the thunderous beating of his heart beneath her palm. She drew in a shallow, painful breath.

“Korrin,” she whispered, her voice barely audible. The single word seemed to take all her strength, but she needed to say more. Needed him to know the one truth that had anchored her, that had pulled her back from the darkness.

“I love you.”

She saw his expression shift—shock washing over his features, followed by wonder, and then something even deeper, more primal. His golden eyes widened, pupils dilating until they nearly swallowed the amber. The hands that had been gripping her so desperately trembled against her skin.

For one breathless moment, he seemed frozen, as if her words had turned him to stone. Then his face transformed, the harsh lines of fear melting into something she’d never seen before—a vulnerability so raw it made her heart ache.

“Tessa,” he whispered, her name sounding different on his lips now, like it held some sacred meaning.

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She wanted to say more, to tell him everything she felt, but her body betrayed her. The momentary strength that had allowed her to speak those three words faded, leaving her drained. Her eyelids grew heavy again, too heavy to keep open despite her desire to keep looking at him.

His arms tightened around her, pulling her closer against the solid warmth of his chest. The steady rhythm of his heartbeat echoed against her ear, strong and sure. She could feel the slight tremor that ran through his powerful body, belying the control he always maintained.

“Rest now,” he murmured, his breath warm against her hair. “You’re safe.”

She let herself sink into his embrace, no longer fighting the exhaustion that pulled at her. This time, she didn’t fear the darkness. This wasn’t the cold void that had tried to claim her before—this was different. This was warmth and safety and Korrin.

As consciousness slipped away, she felt the gentle press of his lips against her forehead, the lightest touch that somehow anchored her to the world. She drifted, not into emptiness, but into the sanctuary of his arms, knowing he would be waiting for her when she woke.

CHAPTER 20

Korrin’s heart lurched as Tessa’s eyes fluttered closed again. Her words—those three impossible words—still hung in the air between them, but panic overrode everything else as her body went limp in his arms.

“Tessa?” He shook her gently, then looked up at Agatha with wild eyes. “She’s not?—”

“She’s sleeping now.” Agatha’s weathered hand came to rest on his forearm, steady and sure. “A natural sleep. Her body needs time to recover.”

The relief hit him like a physical blow. He pulled Tessa closer, burying his face in her hair, inhaling her scent to reassure himself she was still there. When he looked up again, his voice was rough with emotion.

“What happened to her?”

Agatha’s expression darkened as she pointed to the jar she’d found on the table.

“Poison. Someone doctored this honey—my honey.” Fury flashed in the old woman’s eyes. “They used my own goods to do this.”

Korrin’s beast surged forward, a growl rumbling deep in his chest. “Edgar brought it, brought the basket. I recognize his scent.”

“That miserable little worm.” Agatha set the jar down with deliberate care, but her hands trembled with rage. “If I’d known he planned this, I would have broken both his legs before he made it out of the village.”

He glanced down at Tessa’s pale face, then back to Agatha. “Will she recover completely?”

“Yes. I’ve given her what she needs to flush the poison. I believe it was meant to weaken her, make her compliant—not kill her.” Agatha’s lips pressed into a thin line. “I think he wanted her alive. Follow me—there’s something you need to see.”

He reluctantly followed Agatha onto the porch, his gaze lingering on Tessa's sleeping form. Every instinct screamed at him not to leave her side, but the old woman's insistent tug on his arm brooked no argument.

"She'll be fine for a few minutes," Agatha whispered. "I need to show you something."

Outside, the afternoon sun cast long shadows across the clearing. Agatha led him to the edge of the porch steps, her voice dropping to ensure they wouldn't be overheard.

"You owe those pups a debt of gratitude," she said, pointing to a spot near the bushes where the undergrowth had been disturbed.

Korrin frowned, scanning the area. "What do you mean?"

Agatha reached into her pocket and pulled out a scrap of expensive fabric. "Found this caught on a branch. And look there." She gestured to the ground where several sets of small paw prints circled a larger boot print.

His beast surged forward, scenting the air. A faint trace of unpleasant cologne mingled with something else—fear and anger.

"Someone came back while she was unconscious," Agatha continued. "Edgar, I think. The boot is pointed, impractical, and this—" she rubbed the fabric between her fingers, "—is from a man's garment. High quality."

"Edgar," Korrin growled, the name like poison on his tongue.

Agatha nodded. "Those pups of yours formed a defensive ring around Tessa. I found blood too—quite a few drops. Looks like at least one of them got a good bite in."

Korrin's gaze shifted to the adyani pups now curled protectively around Tessa inside the cabin. Even from here, he could see them watching the doorway with alert eyes.

"They protected her when I couldn't," he said, something tight constricting his chest.

"They love her," Agatha said simply. "As do you."

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Korrin didn't deny it. Couldn't deny it anymore. The thought of losing Tessa had torn something open inside him—something he'd kept locked away for too long.

"I should have been here," he said, his voice rough with self-recrimination.

"Who?" Korrin asked grimly, though his beast already knew the answer, had caught the scent of the one who dared threaten what was his.

Agatha silently handed him the scraps of fabric. He took them, bringing them to his nose. The cologne was stronger now—cloying, expensive, with undertones of something bitter. Beneath it all lingered the unmistakable scent of Tessa's blood, faint but present.

His claws extended involuntarily, puncturing the leather. The beast within him snarled, demanding retribution, demanding blood for blood.

"He drugged her with the poisoned honey, knowing it would kill her. But the sick bastard intended to rape her while she was dying."

Agatha's weathered face hardened, her eyes sharp as flint.

"He can't be allowed to get away with what he did," she said grimly. "This wasn't just an attempt to remove an inconvenience—this was calculated murder."

His gaze drifted back to the cabin where Tessa lay sleeping. She'd said she loved him. The words echoed in his mind, precious and terrifying. She'd offered him her heart even as the poison was trying to still hers.

“No,” he agreed, his voice dropping to a dangerous rumble. “He won’t get away with it.”

He crushed the fabric in his fist, his decision made. Edgar had tried to take what was his—what he now acknowledged was the most important thing in his world. His mate. The word resonated through him with absolute certainty.

He looked back at the cabin, his chest tight with an unfamiliar ache. He could still see Tessa’s pale face, hear the whispered “I love you” that had slipped from her lips before she’d drifted back to sleep.

“How long will she sleep?” he asked, struggling to keep his voice steady.

Agatha’s knowing eyes studied him. “At least a few more hours. The worst is past, but her body needs time to recover.”

“And you’re certain she’ll be all right?” He couldn’t keep the edge of desperation from his voice.

“I’ve treated poison victims for fifty years,” Agatha said firmly. “She’ll live, though she’ll be weak for a day or two.” She placed a weathered hand on his arm. “Go. Do what you must. I’ll remain at her side until you return.”

Korrin hesitated, torn between the need to hunt down those who had harmed Tessa and the desire to be there when she opened her eyes again.

“The longer you wait,” Agatha said quietly, “the more time they have to prepare another attempt.”

That decided him. With a curt nod, he turned and disappeared into the trees. Night had fallen, but his Vultor eyes pierced the darkness easily. The forest opened before

him, familiar and welcoming. He moved swiftly, silently, his body shifting partially as he ran—not fully beast, but something between, faster and more lethal than either form alone.

The rage he'd been suppressing boiled beneath his skin. Lenora had sent Edgar to poison Tessa, then attempted to finish the job herself. The thought of either of them touching her, hurting her, made his beast howl for blood.

His claws extended as he ran, his fangs lengthening in his mouth. He'd been hired to make Tessa disappear, but instead, she'd made him feel something he'd thought impossible. She'd shown him kindness, acceptance—love. And they had tried to take that from him.

He'd always been a hunter, but tonight he was something more primal. Tonight, he was vengeance.

His senses led him unerringly through the forest toward the village. The scent of Edgar—that mixture of expensive cologne, sweat, and the bitter tang of human greed—was easy to track. His beast snarled beneath his skin, demanding retribution.

The lights of the village appeared through the trees, and he slowed his pace. He knew Edgar's home—the largest in the village, a two-story monstrosity with ornate trim and manicured gardens. It stood separate from the other houses, as if Edgar couldn't bear to have neighbors too close—perfect for his purposes.

He circled the property, staying in the shadows. The house was dark except for a single light on the ground floor. A servant's entrance at the rear stood unguarded. Pathetic. The man had wealth but no sense. Any decent predator would know to secure all entry points.

He tested the door handle. Locked, but that meant nothing to him. Korrin extended a

claw and worked it into the mechanism, feeling for the tumblers. A quick twist, and the lock gave way with a soft click. He slipped inside, silent as a shadow.

The scent of blood hit him immediately—fresh, human blood. His nostrils flared as he followed it through the darkened kitchen and down a hallway. The light he'd seen came from beneath a door at the end.

He moved closer, his hearing picking up muttered curses from within. He eased the door open just enough to see inside.

Edgar sat in a plush chair, his trousers rolled up to expose his ankles. Both were marked with deep, ragged scratches—clearly the work of small, sharp teeth. The pups had defended Tessa well. The man dabbed at the wounds with a cloth, wincing.

“Damned mongrels,” Edgar muttered. “Should have killed them first.”

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His vision went red. This male had poisoned Tessa. Had tried to take her while she was defenseless. Would have harmed the pups she loved.

The door creaked as his claws dug into the wood. Edgar's head snapped up, his eyes widening as they met his.

His beast roared for blood as Edgar's expression transformed from shock to terror. The human scrambled backward in his chair, nearly toppling it.

"You—what are you doing here?" Edgar's voice cracked. His eyes darted to the door behind Korrin, calculating escape routes.

He stepped fully into the room, allowing the door to swing shut behind him. "You know why I'm here."

Recognition dawned on Edgar's face.

"Because of Tessa? Listen, there's been a misunderstanding." He raised his hands, palms out. "I only wanted to help her. She doesn't belong in the wilderness with—with your kind."

Korrin moved closer, each step deliberate. The stench of Edgar's fear filled the room, sharp and acrid.

"Please," Edgar whispered, backing against the wall. "I have money. Lots of it. Name your price."

“My price?” His voice was dangerously soft.

“Anything. Gold, jewels, property. I’ll make you rich beyond your wildest dreams.” Edgar’s eyes brightened with desperate hope. “You’re a bounty hunter, right? You work for coin. I can pay you ten times what Lenora offered.”

Korrin’s lips curled back, revealing his fangs. “There’s only one thing I want in this world.”

“What? Tell me—I’ll get it for you!”

“Tessa.” The name felt sacred on his tongue. “And you tried to take her from me.”

Edgar’s face drained of color. “No, I just?—”

“You poisoned her.” His claws extended fully. “You would have violated her while she lay helpless.”

“I wouldn’t have?—”

“Don’t lie to me.” He could smell the truth on the other male, the lingering scent of lust and malice. “I can smell your intentions.”

Edgar lunged for a drawer in his desk, but Korrin was faster. He seized the human by the throat, lifting him off the ground with one hand. Edgar clawed at his grip, eyes bulging.

“The world will be better without you in it,” he growled.

With one swift, precise movement, he slashed his claws across Edgar’s throat. Blood sprayed in a hot arc as the human’s eyes widened in shock. He dropped him,

watching dispassionately as Edgar clutched at his neck, making wet, gurgling sounds.

He felt no remorse as the light faded from the human's eyes. Only a grim satisfaction that one threat to his mate was eliminated.

He slipped out the way he had come, vanishing into the night. His thoughts turned immediately to Tessa, his need to return to her side overwhelming everything else. His mate needed him, and nothing would keep him from her now.

CHAPTER 21

Tessa's eyelids fluttered open, the dim light of the cabin casting everything in a soft glow. The first thing she felt was warmth—Bashful was curled against her side, his tiny body a comforting weight. Then she noticed the larger presence beside her bed. Korrin. His hand was wrapped around hers, his head bowed, golden eyes closed as if he was willing her to wake. She watched him for a moment, memorizing the way his lashes fanned against his cheeks, the tension still lining his features even in rest.

Her body felt heavy, as if she'd been sleeping for days. Her mouth was dry, her tongue sticking to the roof of her mouth. Gathering what little strength she had, she squeezed his hand. The response was instant—his eyes flew open, sharp and alert, searching her face. Then, his expression softened in a way she'd never seen before. Relief washed over his features, and a slow, almost disbelieving smile curved his lips as he whispered her name.

“Tessa.”

The way he said it—like a prayer, like salvation—made her heart flutter. She'd never heard such tenderness in his voice before, never seen him look so vulnerable. His fingers tightened around hers, warm and strong, his thumb tracing small circles against her palm.

“You came back,” he murmured, his voice rough with emotion. “I thought I’d lost you.”

She tried to sit up, wincing as her muscles protested. Korrin was there instantly, his arm sliding behind her back to support her weight. The heat of him seeped through her thin nightgown, and she leaned into his strength, grateful for his steadiness.

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“Water,” she croaked, her voice a raspy whisper.

He quickly reached for a cup next to the bed, supporting her head with one hand while bringing a cup to her lips with the other.

“Slow,” he murmured as she gulped greedily. “Easy, love.”

The endearment warmed her more than the blankets piled on top of her. When she finished drinking, he set the cup aside but didn’t release her, his thumb stroking her cheek as if reassuring himself she was real.

“How long?” she asked.

“Two days.” His voice was rough, haunted. “You’ve been sleeping for two days.”

“What happened?” she asked, fragments of memory swirling through her mind. “I remember the honey... and Edgar...”

A shadow crossed his face, something dark and dangerous flashing in his eyes before he carefully masked it. “The honey was poisoned. Edgar brought it, claiming it was from Lenora.”

She shuddered, remembering Edgar’s smile as he’d handed her the basket. How he’d looked at the cabin with such disdain, as if he couldn’t imagine why she’d choose this life over what he offered. The realization that he’d tried to kill her—or worse—made her stomach churn.

“The pups,” she said suddenly, looking around the cabin. “They were growling at him.”

“Safe. They protected you.” His jaw clenched, a muscle ticking along its edge. “If they hadn’t been there... They kept him away until Malrik found you.”

“Malrik?”

“The beast Vultor. He came to find me.”

She reached up, her fingers trembling as they traced the dark circles under his eyes. “You look like you haven’t slept.”

“I couldn’t.” His admission was simple, devastating in its honesty. “Not until I knew you’d wake up.”

He lifted their joined hands to his mouth, his eyes never leaving hers. The brush of his lips against her skin sent a tremor through her body that had nothing to do with her weakened state. His touch was reverent, careful, as if she might shatter beneath his fingers.

“I love you,” he said, the words hanging in the air between them. “I should have told you before the poison. Before everything. I’ve never said those words to anyone, but they’ve been true since I first saw you caring for those damn pups.”

Relief flooded through her. She’d thought she’d heard him whisper it while she drifted in that cold darkness, but memory and dreams had tangled together, leaving her uncertain.

“I love you too,” she whispered back, her voice still raspy. The admission felt like releasing a breath she’d been holding for too long. “I think I have since you brought

me here. Since you showed me who you really are beneath all that growling.”

His lips quirked up at that, and he pressed another kiss to her palm, this one lingering. The tenderness of the gesture made her heart swell. This was the real Korrin—not the cold bounty hunter or the fierce warrior, but the man who’d carried orphaned pups through the forest, who’d taught her to survive, who’d held her through the night as if she were something precious.

“I thought I was going to lose you,” he said, his voice rough with emotion. “When I found you on the porch, so still and cold...”

She squeezed his hand. “I’m still here. I’m not going anywhere.”

His golden eyes darkened with an emotion so intense it stole her breath.

“No,” he agreed. “You’re not.”

He leaned closer, his thumb tracing the curve of her cheek.

“I want to claim you as my mate,” he said, his voice low and fervent. “I want everyone to know you’re mine, and I’m yours.” His expression softened, vulnerability flickering across his features. “But only if that’s what would make you happy.”

The words sent a rush of warmth through her body. She’d learned enough about Vultor customs to understand what he was asking. This wasn’t just a proposal—it was something deeper, more permanent. A bond that would tie them together in ways she was only beginning to understand.

She didn’t hesitate.

“Yes,” she whispered, reaching up to touch his face. “That would make me very happy.”

His eyes flared gold, and the smile that spread across his face was breathtaking in its joy. He bent down, capturing her lips with his. The kiss was tender at first, but quickly deepened as his hand slid into her hair, cradling the back of her head. Heat bloomed between them, familiar yet somehow new with the promise of forever hanging between them.

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She wound her arms around his neck, trying to pull him closer despite her weakened state. His body pressed against hers, and she felt the rumble of a growl vibrating through his chest. His fangs grazed her bottom lip, and she gasped, her body responding eagerly to his touch.

The sound of someone pointedly clearing their throat broke them apart.

“That’s quite enough of that,” Agatha said firmly from the doorway, hands on her hips. “The girl nearly died yesterday. You’ll have plenty of time for that sort of thing when she’s properly recovered.”

Heat flooded her cheeks as Korrin reluctantly pulled away, though his hand remained firmly clasped around hers.

“Sorry, Agatha,” she murmured, not feeling sorry at all.

Agatha’s stern expression softened slightly as she looked between them. “You’ll need to wait until she’s stronger before any claiming happens, boy. I won’t have you risking her health, no matter how eager you both are.”

Two days later, Tessa hummed contentedly as she stirred the pot of soup simmering on the wood stove. Her strength had returned quickly under Agatha’s watchful care—a combination of the old woman’s herbal remedies and Korrin’s relentless attention. The last traces of weakness had finally faded, leaving her feeling more alive than she had in years.

The door swung open, and Korrin stepped inside, a brace of rabbits slung over his

shoulder. His eyes immediately swept the cabin, narrowing when he found her alone.

“Where’s Agatha?” he growled, dropping his catch on the table.

She gave him a teasing grin. “She left about an hour ago. Said I’m all better now.”

His nostrils flared as he stalked toward her, his eyes flashing gold. “All better?”

“Mmm-hmm.” She tilted her head and deliberately ran a finger down the curve of her neck. “Which means…”

He froze mid-step, his expression shifting from irritation to something far more intense. The air between them seemed to crackle with electricity as understanding dawned in his eyes.

“Are you certain?” he asked, his voice dropping to that deep rumble that always sent shivers down her spine.

She nodded, her heart racing as she closed the distance between them.

“Agatha said I’m completely recovered. She even gave me her blessing before she left.” She reached up, tracing the strong line of his jaw with her fingertips. “I’m ready, Korrin. I want to be your mate. Today.”

A shudder ran through his powerful body as he caught her hand in his, pressing a kiss to her palm. His eyes never left hers, burning with an intensity that took her breath away.

“Do you understand what that means?” he asked. “Once I claim you, there’s no going back. You’ll be mine, and I’ll be yours. Forever.”

His words sent a thrill of anticipation through her.

“Forever,” she repeated, winding her arms around his neck. “That sounds perfect to me.”

His hands slid to her waist, tugging her flush against him. Her breath caught as she felt the hard length of his arousal pressed against her hip.

“Are you certain, little baker?” he murmured, his voice rumbling through her chest. “I’ve waited so long for you. I can wait longer, if that’s what you need.”

“I don’t want to wait any longer.” She tugged his head down until his forehead rested against hers, her fingers tangling in his thick, dark hair. “Make me yours, Korrin. Please.”

He needed no further urging. With a low growl, his lips crashed into hers, searing and demanding. She opened to him, welcoming the possessive thrust of his tongue. His hands tightened around her waist, lifting her easily as he deepened the kiss. Her feet left the floor, and she clung to him, dizzy with desire.

When he finally broke the kiss, they were both breathing hard. She felt light-headed, her body thrumming with need.

“Bed,” he rasped, his voice thick with lust.

“Bed,” she agreed, tightening her arms around his neck.

He carried her to the bed, his mouth never leaving hers. Her legs wrapped around his waist, and she gasped as his erection pressed against her through their clothing. Arousal flared through her, hot and urgent, and she rocked her hips, desperate for more friction.

“Eager, little baker?” he teased, his lips brushing against the sensitive skin of her neck.

“Please, Korrin,” she breathed, her fingers tugging at his shirt.

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“Anything,” he murmured. “Everything.”

He lowered her onto the mattress, following her down, his body pressing her into the soft blankets. She moaned, arching up to meet him. He braced himself on his elbows, framing her face with his hands.

“Tell me what you want, my mate.”

“You,” she said, her voice ragged with desire. “I want you, Korrin. All of you.”

He growled, a low, primal sound that sent a bolt of pleasure through her. “You have me. Forever.”

She kissed him again, the taste of him sending a surge of heat through her body. His hands were everywhere, touching, caressing, driving her mad with need. She could feel his claws extend and retract as his control slipped, the sensation thrilling and dangerous.

Her own hands were just as eager, sliding beneath his shirt to explore the hard planes of his chest and abdomen. His muscles tensed beneath her touch, and his kisses grew more insistent, his fangs grazing her lips.

“Tessa,” he murmured, his voice strained. “Are you sure?”

“More than anything.”

He pulled back slightly, his gaze locking with hers. The hunger in his eyes sent a

shiver through her.

“I’ve waited so long for you,” he whispered, his voice rough with emotion. “You’re all I’ve ever wanted.”

She smiled up at him, her heart full. “Then take me, Korrin. Make me yours.”

He growled, the sound feral and possessive. “Always.”

His hands made quick work of their clothing, and soon they were both naked, skin against skin. She gasped as his cock brushed against her core, hot and heavy. She rocked her hips, craving more friction.

“Please,” she begged. “I need you.”

He groaned as his cock lodged against her entrance, and his hips jerked forward, the thick head starting to stretch her open. His eyes fluttered closed. “Tessa. Gods, you feel so good.”

“So do you,” she panted, her nails digging into his back. “More, Korrin. I need more.”

“As my mate commands,” he growled, slowly pushing deeper.

Despite her willingness he had to work his way into her, the overwhelming stretch almost too much to bear, and they were both panting by the time he was fully lodged. He paused to let her adjust, his big body taut with strain, but she didn’t want to wait.

She wiggled impatiently, and he began to move, thrusting slowly, drawing out the pleasure. Each stroke sent sparks of ecstasy through her, and she moaned, arching her back. She felt his claws prick her skin, but the slight sting only heightened her desire.

She writhed beneath him, meeting his every thrust, lost in the pleasure of his body against hers.

“Tessa,” he groaned, his voice raw. “You’re mine. Mine forever.”

“Yours,” she breathed, her climax building with each movement.

His fangs scraped her neck, and she tilted her head to allow him better access. His mouth closed over her neck and then he bit down, pushing her over the edge. She cried out, her body clenching around him as her release washed over her. Stars danced before her eyes as wave after wave of ecstasy surged through her, until she was trembling with pleasure.

“Mine,” he growled, his pace increasing. “My mate. My love.”

She felt him go rigid, his cock pulsing inside her as his knot expanded, locking them together. The sudden rush of sensation sent her straight into another climax, and she clung to him, her body quivering with pleasure.

“Yours,” she managed, her voice ragged. “Always.”

His shoulders slumped, and he nuzzled her neck, sending little shivers of pleasure down her spine each time he brushed the mating mark. She felt a sense of calm settle over her, a rightness she’d never known before. She was home, here in his arms, and she knew she would never want to be anywhere else.

“I love you,” she murmured, trailing her fingers along his spine.

He raised his head, his eyes glowing gold. “I love you too. I’m the luckiest beast in the universe.”

She grinned up at him, so happy she felt like she was floating.

“Yes,” she agreed. “You are.”

CHAPTER 22

Korrin watched as Tessa’s eyelids fluttered open, revealing those warm blue eyes that had somehow worked their way into his soul. She gave him a sleepy smile that sent a rush of possessive pleasure through him. His mate. His to protect, his to cherish.

He leaned down and pressed his lips to hers, tasting her sweetness, breathing in her scent. The mark on her neck pulsed between them, their newly formed bond humming with energy. He could feel her heartbeat alongside his own, a steady rhythm that grounded him.

When he pulled back, the contentment on her face made his chest tighten. He traced a finger along her jaw, memorizing every detail of this moment before reality intruded.

“We need to talk about Lenora,” he said, his voice low and rough.

Her smile faded. She sat up, pulling the blanket with her, and sighed. “I know.”

“She’s tried to kill you twice. She’ll try again.” His beast prowled restlessly beneath his skin at the thought. “As long as she thinks she has something to gain from your death, you’re in danger.”

The unspoken implication hung between them. He’d already killed for her—Edgar’s blood still lingered in his memory—and he would do it again without hesitation. But was that the only way?

“What are you thinking?” she asked, studying his face.

“I’m thinking I need to end this.” His jaw tightened. “Permanently.”

She sighed, but she didn’t argue, staring up at the ceiling.

He took her hand, squeezing it gently. “I’ll handle it. You don’t have to be involved.”

“No.” She shook her head, determination hardening her features. “We do this together. She’s my stepmother. My responsibility too.”

Something fierce and proud swelled in his chest. This was why she was his perfect match—soft where he was hard, but with a core of steel that matched his own.

“Together, then,” he agreed, pressing his forehead to hers.

Korrin watched Tessa’s face as she stared into the distance, her expression a mixture of determination and old pain. The morning light filtered through the cabin’s small window, highlighting the curve of her cheek, the delicate line of her jaw. His beast stirred protectively, wanting to shelter her from anything that might hurt her, but he knew this was something she needed to voice.

“I wanted her to love me so badly,” Tessa said quietly, her fingers absently tracing patterns on the blanket. “When Father brought Lenora home, I thought—” Her voice caught. “I thought I was getting a second chance at having a mother.”

He gently stroked her knuckles, but he remained silent, giving her the space to continue.

“I tried so hard to please her. I learned to bake the things she liked. I kept the house clean. I never complained when she started treating me more like a servant than a

daughter.” A bitter smile twisted her lips. “I told myself she just needed time to warm up to me.”

His jaw clenched, anger building at the thought of Tessa—his Tessa—bending over backward for a woman who never deserved her.

“But she was never going to love me, was she?” She looked up at him, her blue eyes clear and steady. “She saw me as competition from the beginning. For Father’s affection. For the bakery. For Edgar’s attention, though I never wanted that.”

“She’s poison,” he growled, unable to keep the contempt from his voice. “She doesn’t know how to love anyone but herself.”

She nodded, a strange calm settling over her features. “I know that now. I’ve known it for years, really. But I kept hoping... kept making excuses.” She squared her shoulders. “It’s time to stop pretending. Time to face the truth about who she really is.”

He cupped her face, his chest swelling with pride at her strength. “You deserved better,” he said roughly. “You always did.”

“Maybe.” She leaned into his touch. “But I had a lot of happy years with my father. And then I found you. And these littleones.” She glanced at the pups sleeping in their makeshift bed by the fire. “That’s more family than I ever thought I’d have.”

His chest tightened at the trust in her eyes and his beast purred in satisfaction at the sight of her—their mate—looking up at him with such open affection.

“I’ll be with you every step,” he promised, his voice low and rough. “Whatever you need to do, whatever happens with Lenora, I’m at your side.”

Her smile bloomed slowly, transforming her face. Even after everything—the kidnapping, the poison, the danger—she smiled at him like he was something precious. His beast preened under her attention, even though his rational side still struggled to believe he deserved it.

“I know,” she said simply, reaching up to trace the line of his jaw with gentle fingers. “And that’s why I’m not afraid anymore.” Her touch drifted lower, trailing down his neck to rest against his chest, right over his heart. “But Lenora can wait.”

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Her scent changed subtly, warming with hints of desire that made his nostrils flare. His claws extended slightly in response, and he curled his fingers to keep from grabbing her.

“Can she?” he asked, voice dropping to a rumble.

Her eyes darkened, and she shifted closer, trailing her fingers down his chest. “Mmm. Right now, I’m only interested in you.”

The open hunger in her eyes threatened his control, and he growled softly, his hand sliding down to squeeze her luscious little ass. “Is that so?”

“Very much so,” she whispered, leaning up to brush her lips against his. “Unless you have other plans for the morning?”

The teasing lilt in her voice was his undoing. He swept her up against him, claiming her mouth in a kiss that left no doubt about his own desires. His mate. His miracle. His everything.

A considerable time later, he held her against his chest, his fingers tracing lazy patterns along her bare back. Morning sunlight streamed through the cabin windows, bathing her skin in golden warmth. Her breathing had deepened into sleep, her body still flushed from their lovemaking.

He couldn’t stop looking at her—this small, fierce human who had somehow claimed every part of him. The mating mark on her shoulder was still fresh, the imprint of his teeth a permanent symbol of their bond. His beast rumbled with satisfaction at the

sight of it.

She shifted in her sleep, nestling closer to him. Even asleep, she sought him out and the trust in that simple movement humbled him. For so long, he'd been alone, convinced that solitude was his fate. Now he couldn't imagine returning to that emptiness.

He tucked a stray curl behind her ear, his touch gentle enough not to wake her. She needed this rest before they faced what was coming. Despite everything, she'd once hoped for the woman's love—a hope that had been crushed again and again. Confronting Lenora wouldn't be easy for her, but he knew she needed to face her stepmother herself, to close that chapter of her life on her own terms.

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His jaw tightened. He would have gladly handled Lenora himself, the same way he'd dealt with Edgar. A quick, silent end in the darkness. Instead he would stand beside his mate, ready to protect but allowing her the strength of her own confrontation. It was a different kind of protection than his beast wanted to provide, but he had to balance those instincts with what she truly needed.

For now, though, he would let her have this moment of peace. Let her gather her strength in the safety of his arms. The world, with all its dangers and complications, could wait a little longer.

CHAPTER 23

Tessa's pulse started to speed up as they approached the village outskirts. She tightened her grip on Korrin's hand, drawing strength from his solid presence beside her. The afternoon sun cast long shadows across the familiar path, one she'd walked countless times before—but never with a Vultor mate at her side.

“Are you certain about this?” he asked quietly as he scanned the village ahead, muscles tense and ready.

“Yes,” she said, more firmly than she felt. “It’s time.”

As they passed the first cluster of houses, she braced herself for fearful stares or hostile whispers. Instead, Mrs. Peterson, hanging laundry in her yard, spotted her and broke into a wide smile.

“Tessa! Thank the stars you’re alright!” The older woman hurried over, wiping her hands on her apron. Her eyes flickered briefly to Korrin, but her gaze was more curious than hostile. “We’ve been worried sick about you, dear.”

“I’m fine, Mrs. Peterson. Better than fine, actually. This is my mate, Korrin.”

He darted her a quick look, but Mrs. Peterson only beamed at her.

“Agatha told us. About time, I say. A pretty young thing like you shouldn’t be alone.”

They continued toward the village square, where the morning market was in full swing. Despite Mrs. Peterson’s friendliness, Korrin’s alertness didn’t ease, and he loomed next to her like a protective shadow. Despite that, several villagers called out greetings.

“Welcome back, Tessa!” Mr. Finch waved from his vegetable stall.

“We’ve missed your bread something terrible,” called someone else.

“That new baker Lenora hired couldn’t rise a loaf if his life depended on it,” grumbled old Mr. Warner, making several nearby villagers laugh.

Willem emerged from behind his fruit stall and hurried over. Ignoring Korrin's warning growl, he hugged her.

“Agatha told us you were all right but I'm delighted to see for myself.” He stepped back and grinned up at a frowning Korrin. “I told you she noticed you.”

To her surprise, her mate nodded at the old man.

“Come by later,” Willem urged before they continued on their way.

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Each friendly face eased the knot in her stomach. She'd expected judgment, not this warm reception. Even with Korrin's intimidating presence, people seemed genuinely happy to see her.

Elli gave her a shy smile from behind the flower stall and beckoned her over.

"Aunt Margaret's been talking about your stepmother. She said she's been acting strange since you disappeared. And even stranger when word got out about Edgar?—"

She stopped abruptly, looking uncertainly at Korrin. She could feel his tension through their joined hands, but his face remained impassive.

"We heard about it," she said calmly. "And we're headed to the bakery now."

"Good luck," Elli whispered, then vanished back into the crowd.

A few minutes later they were standing outside the bakery. She took a deep breath, inhaling the familiar scent of fresh-baked bread and sweet pastries, so familiar it made her chest ache. This place had been her sanctuary once—her father's legacy. Now it felt like stepping into someone else's memory.

She pushed the door open, the little bell above it announcing her arrival with a cheerful jingle that felt jarringly out of place. Korrin's presence at her back gave her courage as she stepped inside.

Lenora stood behind the counter, hair escaping from her usually perfect coiffure,

flour smudged across her expensive blouse. She looked... old and worn, her expression morphing from irritation to shock as she registered who had entered.

“Tessa?” she whispered. Her gaze darted to Korrin, then back to Tessa. “What are you doing here?”

The bakery was empty of customers. Perfect. She moved forward, stopping at the counter that had once been her domain. The wood was sticky with spilled syrup, and only a few sad-looking pastries occupied the display case.

“Hello, Lenora.” She kept her voice steady, even as her heart hammered against her ribs. “The place looks... different.”

Lenora’s mouth tightened. “If you’ve come to gloat about the state of things, you can leave. I’ve had enough troubles without you showing up.”

“Troubles?” She tilted her head. “Like Edgar being found dead? Or the fact that your plan to have me killed failed?”

Lenora’s face paled. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t you?” Tessa leaned forward. “I know what you did, Lenora. I know you hired Korrin to make me ‘disappear.’ I know you sent Edgar with poisoned honey when that didn’t work.”

Lenora’s eyes darted to the door, calculating an escape, but Korrin shifted slightly, blocking the exit.

“I didn’t want you killed. I just wanted you gone. And I don’t know anything about poisoned honey.”

The last part had the ring of truth, and she supposed it was possible that Edgar had concocted that part of the plan himself. It wouldn't surprise her if he'd decided that if he couldn't have her, no one would.

"That doesn't change the fact that you wanted me eliminated."

"You have no proof."

"I don't need proof." Her voice remained calm, though inside she was shaking. "Everyone in this village knows what kind of woman you are now. And they know what kind of woman I am."

She watched Lenora's face, noting how her stepmother's eyes darted past her toward the bakery windows. Following her gaze, she realized a small crowd had gathered outside, faces pressed against the glass, watching the confrontation unfold. Mrs. Jacobson stood front and center, her severe expression fixed on Lenora.

Lenora's demeanor shifted instantly. Her spine straightened, and she forced a tremulous smile. "What ridiculous accusations! I would never harm my dear stepdaughter." She raised her voice, clearly performing for their audience. "Tessa, darling, I've been sick with worry since you disappeared!"

The falseness of it turned Tessa's stomach. All those years of pretending, of enduring Lenora's cruelty behind closed doors while she played the grieving widow and devoted stepmother in public.

"Is that so?" she asked, her voice still calm as Korrin moved closer, his warm presence steadying her. "Then perhaps you'd like to explain why you hired a bounty hunter to make me disappear?"

Lenora's laugh was brittle. "What an imagination you have! Always making up

stories?—”

“She offered me gold. More specifically a necklace that Tessa’s father left to her.” Korrin’s deep voice cut through Lenora’s protests. He stepped forward, a predatory gleam in his eyes as he studied Lenora. “A very valuable necklace to ensure Tessa vanished without a trace.”

The crowd outside gasped. Someone pushed open the bakery door, and suddenly the onlookers were no longer content to watch from outside. They filed in, silent and watchful.

“You wanted me gone so badly you were willing to have me killed,” Tessa said, her voice carrying clearly through the now-crowded bakery. “When that failed, you sent Edgar with poisoned honey.”

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“I told you I have nothing to do with that.” Lenora’s face contorted. “And you can’t prove any of this! It’s your word against mine, and who would believe?—”

“I would,” Mayor Jacobson said sternly. “I always thought there was something not right about how you treated that girl after her father died.”

Murmurs of agreement rippled through the gathered villagers. So many familiar faces were now looking at Lenora with newly suspicious eyes.

She drew in a deep breath, feeling Korrin’s solid presence beside her. The familiar scents of the bakery—yeast, sugar, and warmth—wrapped around her, but they no longer felt like home. That was elsewhere now, in a cabin in the woods with the male she loved. But she had no intention of leaving the bakery in Lenora’s hands.

“You have no future here, Lenora,” she said, her voice steadier than she’d expected. “Not after what you’ve done.”

Lenora’s eyes narrowed, her lips pressing into a thin line. For a moment, vulnerability flickered across her face before hardening into defiance.

“Fine with me,” she snapped, tossing her head. “I’ll sell this pathetic little shop and that dreary house. I never wanted to be stuck in this backwater village anyway.”

“No.” She stepped forward, feeling a strength she’d never known before flowing through her. “You won’t be selling anything.”

“Excuse me?” Lenora’s voice rose sharply.

“The bakery and the house were my father’s. They should have been mine all along.” She placed her palm flat on the counter, the wood smooth and familiar beneath her fingers. “You will leave and you will take nothing but your clothes.”

Lenora’s face flushed crimson. “How dare you! I’m entitled to?—”

“Nothing else. That includes my mother’s jewelry,” she cut in, thinking of the delicate pieces her father had cherished, the ones Lenora had claimed as her own the moment he was gone. “Those were meant for me.”

The bakery had fallen completely silent. The villagers watched, wide-eyed, as Lenora’s composure cracked. She looked around wildly, searching for an ally and finding none.

“You can’t do this to me,” Lenora hissed, her voice dropping to a venomous whisper. “I am your stepmother.”

“You tried to have me killed. Twice.” She didn’t flinch at the venom in her stepmother’s voice. “You were certainly never a mother to me.”

Korrin’s hand settled at the small of her back, warm and reassuring. She didn’t need to look up at him to know his eyes were fixed on Lenora, daring her to make a move against his mate.

Lenora’s face crumpled, the fight visibly draining from her. For a fleeting moment, Tessa glimpsed something almost like regret in her stepmother’s eyes before it vanished behind a wall of cold dignity.

“Fine,” Lenora said, her voice brittle. “I’ll be gone by sunset.”

Without another word, she untied her apron, placed it on the counter with

exaggerated care, and walked out. The bell above the door jingled cheerfully, a stark contrast to the tension of the moment.

As the door closed behind Lenora, Tessa felt a weight lift from her shoulders. The bakery itself seemed to exhale, the air suddenly lighter, sweeter. Sunlight streamed through the windows, illuminating the worn wooden floors and familiar counters in a warm glow.

“Well,” Mrs. Davenport said, breaking the silence, “that’s long overdue.” She stepped forward and wrapped Tessa in a tight hug. “Welcome home, dear.”

The floodgates opened. Villagers pressed forward, surrounding Tessa with warm embraces and kind words. Mr. Wilkins patted her shoulder awkwardly, confessing how much he’d missed her bread. The Cooper twins, who’d been in school with her, wanted to know all about the Vultor she’d brought back with her. Mayor Jacobson promised her full support in sorting out the legal matters of ownership. Tessa was grateful for her support, but she didn’t entirely trust the triumphant gleam in the older woman’s eyes. The mayor always had some scheme in mind.

Their kindness overwhelmed her, tears pricking at her eyes. Korrin remained at her side, his presence steady and protective. Though he didn’t speak, she noticed how his posture gradually relaxed as it became clear these people meant her no harm.

“We’ve missed you something terrible,” old Mr. Fletcher said, his weathered face creasing into a smile. “That woman Lenora hired couldn’t bake to save her life. Bread hard as rocks, it was!”

Laughter rippled through the crowd, and Tessa found herself joining in, the sound strange but welcome after so much tension.

“When will you reopen?” someone called from the back.

She glanced up at Korrin. This bakery was her heritage, her birthright—but her home was with him now.

“We’ll just have to see,” she said lightly as she turned to another well-wisher.

CHAPTER 24

Korrin leaned against the bakery counter, arms crossed over his chest as he watched Tessa move around the space with effortless grace, a smudge of flour on her cheek and happiness radiating from her like sunlight. She’d insisted on making a few quick treats for the villagers who had been so supportive and she’d clearly enjoyed every moment. Something in his chest tightened, an unfamiliar ache that wasn’t entirely unpleasant.

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Life in the village wasn't what he would have chosen. The constant press of humans, their curious glances, their whispers when they thought he couldn't hear them – it all grated against his instincts. The beast inside him remained wary, restless. But then she would look up, catch his eye across the room, and smile that smile that was meant only for him, and his beast would settle.

If it made her happy, he would adapt.

“What are you thinking about, looking so serious over there?”

Her voice pulled him from his thoughts as she wiped her hands on her apron, those blue eyes studying him with gentle concern.

“Nothing important.” His lips curved slightly. “Just that you belong here.”

It was true. She moved through the bakery as if the space had been waiting for her return, filling it with warmth and life. The villagers were clearly overjoyed by her presence as well.

“So do you,” she said softly, crossing to him and rising on her toes to press a kiss to his jaw. “Belong here, I mean.”

He didn't correct her, though he doubted he'd ever truly belong among humans. But he belonged with her, and that was enough. He'd learn to tolerate the rest.

He watched as Tessa graciously but firmly ushered the last of the well-wishers toward the door. Her patience with the villagers impressed him—he'd have growled

them out an hour ago. The scent of fresh bread and Tessa's happiness filled the small shop, but beneath it all, he caught the faint trace of her fatigue. She'd been on her feet all day.

"Thank you all for coming," she said, her voice warm but final as she closed the door behind the last villager. The bell jingled softly, and then blessed silence fell.

She turned the sign to "Closed" and leaned against the door with a sigh. For a moment, she just stood there, eyes closed, the weight of the day visible in the slight slump of her shoulders. Then she straightened, crossed the room, and came to his side.

The beast inside him stirred as she approached, that primal part that recognized her as his mate. It had been restless all day, surrounded by so many unfamiliar humans, but now it settled, pleased to have her attention again.

She reached up, sliding her hands around his neck, and kissed him. Her lips were soft, tasting of sugar and warmth. He pulled her closer, one hand at the small of her back, breathing in her scent, reminding himself that she was safe, she was his, and no one would ever threaten her again.

When she pulled back, her blue eyes sparkled up at him, a smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

"When can we go home?" she asked, her voice low and intimate.

He stared down at her, certain he'd misheard her. He'd spent the entire day mentally preparing himself for village life—for the suspicious glances, the whispers behind his back, the constant restraint he'd need to show. He'd been ready to endure it all for her sake.

“You want to go back to the cabin?” he asked roughly.

She tilted her head, a small crease forming between her brows. “Of course. It’s our home. Did you think I wanted to stay here?”

Home. Not the village, not the bakery, but their cabin in the woods. The simple space they’d claimed as their own. Something tight in his chest loosened. He glanced around at the bakery—her inheritance, her father’s legacy—with its warm, honey-colored walls and familiar comforts.

“I thought... this is your home.” He gestured at their surroundings. “Your father’s shop. Your life before.”

She took his hand as she smiled up at him. “This is my past. You’re my future.”

The simple declaration hit him with unexpected force. He’d been prepared to sacrifice, to adapt, to become something he wasn’t—all to ensure her happiness. The realization that she wanted what he wanted left him momentarily speechless.

“Are you sure?” he finally managed. “The bakery?”

“Can wait,” she finished. “I’m not prepared to give it up entirely, but I thought I would only work a few days each week. Mrs. Hadley’s daughter has been looking for employment, and she has a decent hand with pastry. Without Lenora around to terrorize him, I think Sammy could actually be helpful as well.”

He considered the arrangement, turning it over in his mind. Part of him—the possessive, protective part—wanted her all to himself in their mountain home. But he knew that wasn’t fair. She wasn’t meant to be caged, even in a cage of his making.

“We could come down together on your baking days,” he suggested. “I could help

carry supplies, or hunt while you work.”

The idea appealed to him more than he’d expected—a balance between their lives, a bridge between his world and hers. His beast rumbled with approval.

“You’d do that?” Her eyes searched his face.

“I would.” He pulled her closer, breathing in her scent. “As long as we go home together at the end of the day.”

He watched her face, still not quite believing what he was hearing. A part of him had been certain she would want to reclaim her old life—the bakery, the house, the place where she’d grown up. The thought of her choosing him, choosing their life together in the woods, filled him with joy.

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“What about the house? It was your childhood home.”

She shrugged. “You know, Lenora actually had one good idea—selling it.” She leaned against the counter, her eyes distant with memory. “I loved that house once, but it hasn’t been a home since Father died. Just a place where I existed.”

He nodded—he understood all too well what it meant to exist in a place without belonging to it.

“My home is with you now,” she continued, her voice soft but certain. “In our cabin, with our pups.” She reached for his hand again, her fingers warm against his. “I don’t need those walls to remember my father. I carry those memories with me.”

He pulled her closer, wrapping his arms around her. Her certainty was a gift he hadn’t expected—one he wasn’t sure he deserved but would fight to be worthy of. His beast rumbled with contentment.

“We can visit whenever you want,” he promised, pressing his lips to her temple. “The bakery, the village. It doesn’t have to be all or nothing.”

She nodded against his chest. “I know. But right now, I just want to go home. To our home in the woods with the pups and each other.”

Our home. Two simple words that carried such weight. He pulled her closer, breathing in her scent, letting his forehead rest against hers.

“I was ready to stay,” he admitted quietly. “If that’s what you wanted.”

She leaned back just enough to meet his eyes, her face soft. “I know you were. That’s one of the reasons I love you. But I don’t belong here anymore. I belong with you.”

“Whenever you want,” he replied, his thumb tracing the curve of her cheek, wiping away a smudge of flour. “Right now, if you’re ready.”

He couldn’t hold back any longer. The joy bubbling up inside him was too powerful to contain, bursting through the careful control he’d maintained his entire life. With a delighted growl that rumbled from deep in his chest, he swept her off her feet, lifting her into the air and twirling her around. Her laughter rang through the bakery like the sweetest music he’d ever heard, each note striking something primal within him.

The scent of her happiness wrapped around him, intoxicating and pure. His beast preened with satisfaction, reveling in her joy. This was what it meant to truly live—not merely survive, but to feel this overwhelming contentment.

He set her down gently, but kept his arms around her waist, unwilling to let go. The afternoon light streaming through the bakery windows caught in her dark curls, highlighting the warmth in her blue eyes. She was looking at him with such open affection that it made his chest ache.

“What did I ever do to deserve you?” The words escaped before he could stop them, raw and honest.

Her smile softened. She reached up, her small hands cupping his face with a tenderness that still surprised him. Her thumb brushed against his cheek, tracing the line of his jaw as if memorizing every contour.

“You love me,” she said simply. “That’s all I ever wanted.”

EPILOGUE

Two weeks later...

Tessa stood in front of the small, cracked mirror, barely recognizing the woman who stared back at her. The pale blue dress flowed around her like water, catching the late afternoon light filling the tent erected for the ceremony. Her fingers traced the delicate gold necklace at her throat—the same one Lenora had tried to bribe Korrin with.

“Stop fidgeting,” Agatha scolded, though her eyes were warm with affection. “You’ll wrinkle the fabric.”

“I can’t help it.” Her hands dropped to smooth the skirt for the dozenth time. “I’ve never worn anything this beautiful.”

The bracelet on her wrist caught the light as she moved—her mother’s bracelet, simple silver links that had somehow survived all these years in a small box hidden beneath the floorboards of her childhood home. She’d found it last week when clearing out the last of her belongings.

“You look stunning,” Scarlett said, adjusting a strand of Tessa’s dark hair that had escaped its arrangement. “Korrin won’t know what hit him.”

Heat rushed to her cheeks. “Do you really think so?”

“I know so.” Scarlett winked at her. “Trust me, I remember how Finnar looked at me on our mating day.”

“The boy won’t be able to form a coherent sentence,” Agatha added with a snort. “Not that he’s exactly verbose at the best of times.”

She laughed, some of her nervousness melting away. “He’s not that bad.”

“No,” Agatha agreed, her expression softening. “He’s not. Especially when he’s with you.”

Tessa turned back to the mirror, studying her reflection once more. The weeks since confronting Lenora had passed in a whirlwind of happiness. The village had embraced her return, the bakery was thriving under her part-time care, and both of her assistants were working out well. But her greatest joy was returning each day to the cabin in the woods, to Korrin and their family of mischievous pups.

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“Do you think...” She hesitated, meeting Scarlett’s eyes in the mirror. “Do you think my father would have approved?”

Scarlett squeezed her shoulder. “He would have adored Korrin. Not right away, mind you—he’d have made him work for it. But he would have seen how happy you are.”

“Both your parents would be proud,” Agatha said firmly. “Now, are you ready? We can’t keep everyone waiting all day.”

She took a deep breath and nodded. “I’m ready.”

“The final touch,” Scarlett murmured, adjusting the small crown of flowers that Elli had sent on her dark curls.

Her friend wasn’t attending—her aunt had insisted that the girl was too shy to enjoy such social situations. She didn’t like it, but she couldn’t argue about Elli’s shyness. The flower crown was the perfect finishing touch to her outfit, composed of the same blossoms she’d admired that day in the market..

Her heart skipped a beat as Scarlett went to open the tent flaps. She still couldn’t believe Korrin had proposed a public bonding ceremony—a ceremony combining human and Vultor traditions. The fierce, private man who’d once kidnapped her now wanted to declare their bond before both their peoples.

“A public ceremony?” she’d asked when he first suggested it, certain she’d misheard.

His amber eyes had held hers steadily. “I want everyone to know you’re mine. And

I'm yours. No secrets, no hiding."

She understood what he was trying to accomplish beyond their personal happiness. Their union was another bridge between humans and Vultor. Seren had immediately given his blessing, and Mayor Jacobson had followed suit. The two of them were still working on a trade agreement and they were both looking at ways to ease the old tensions between their species.

Despite the mayor's cooperation, she still had her doubts about the woman. Something about the woman's practiced smiles and calculating eyes bothered her. But that was a concern for another day.

"Ready?" Scarlett asked, breaking into her thoughts.

She nodded, taking a deep breath. Outside, she could hear the murmur of voices—villagers she'd known all her life mingling with Vultor who were still mostly strangers. Two worlds coming together because of love.

"I'm ready," she whispered, smoothing her dress one final time.

As she stepped out of the tent, the late afternoon sun bathed everything in golden light. At the far end of the clearing, she spotted Korrin standing tall and proud, more handsome than she'd ever seen him in formal Vultor attire. His eyes found hers instantly, and the naked adoration in them made her breath catch.

For a moment, everything else faded away—the guests, the decorations, the significance of what they were doing for their communities. All that mattered was that she would be joined with the male she loved, the male who had changed her life in ways she never could have imagined when he'd first carried her away from everything she knew.

“Ready, my dear?”

Willem came to her side and offered her his arm. The kind old man had been one of her father’s closest friends and it seemed only fitting that he escort her down the aisle.

She nodded, her throat too tight for words, and took his arm, clutching it more tightly as they approached the flower-lined path. Willem patted her hand reassuringly.

“Your father would be proud,” he whispered, and tears pricked her eyes.

The clearing looked magical as sunset approached. Lanterns hung from tree branches, already casting a warm glow over the gathered guests. Someone had woven wildflowers into delicate arches marking the path. On one side stood the villagers in their finest clothes, on the other the Vultor, tall and imposing yet oddly respectful in their ceremonial attire.

But she barely registered any of it—all she could see was Korrin.

He stood waiting for her, his powerful frame draped in traditional Vultor garments—dark fabrics with intricate silver embroidery that caught the fading light. His black hair was pulled back, revealing the sharp angles of his face. The face that had once terrified her now represented everything she loved in this world.

Gold flames glowed in his eyes as he watched her walk towards him, filled with such naked longing that her breath caught. The rest of the world fell away—the murmuring crowd, the rustling leaves, even Willem’s steady presence beside her. There was only Korrin, her fierce protector, her passionate lover, her future.

His claws extended and retracted at his sides, a sure sign he was fighting for control. She smiled at him, feeling a rush of excitement at the knowledge that she affected him so deeply. The man who had once kidnapped her now looked at her as though

she were his salvation.

As Willem guided her forward, she felt a curious lightness. The path she walked wasn't just toward Korrin, but toward a future neither of them could have imagined. A human baker and a Vultor warrior, another couple helping to bridge two worlds that had been separated by fear and misunderstanding for generations.

When they reached the end of the aisle, Willem placed her hand in Korrin's much larger one. She trembled as Korrin's warmfingers closed around hers. The rough calluses on his palms reminded her of everything they'd been through—his protection, his strength, his unwavering devotion. When Willem stepped back, leaving them alone before the gathered witnesses, her heart raced with anticipation.

Seren stepped forward first, his presence commanding respect from both sides of the gathering. As the alpha of the Vultor pack, he would perform that portion of the ceremony.

"Today we witness the joining of two souls," Seren's deep voice carried across the clearing. "In our tradition, a mating is sacred and eternal. It binds not just bodies, but spirits."

She heard what he was saying but all she really cared about was the male holding her hand so tightly. Seren spoke of loyalty, protection, and the sacred bond of mates, and then Mayor Jacobson stepped forward, speaking of partnership and shared lives.

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“Korrin,” Seren prompted, “speak your vow to your mate.”

Korrin’s eyes glowed as he held her gaze. His voice, usually so controlled, wavered slightly with emotion.

“Tessa Fairwind, I claim you as mine to protect, to cherish, to honor. My strength is yours. My life is yours.” His thumb brushed across her knuckles. “Before I found you, I was lost in darkness. You brought light where there was none. I vow that no harm will come to you while I draw breath. I vow to stand beside you through all the seasons of our lives.”

The raw honesty in his words made her eyes sting with tears. This wasn’t just a ceremony—it was the truth, spoken from the depths of his soul.

When her turn came, her voice emerged clear and steady despite her racing heart.

“Korrin Dain, I choose you as my partner, my protector, my love. I vow to stand with you against whatever challenges we face. I vow to make a home with you that bridges both our worlds.” She squeezed his hands. “You found me when I was alone, and showed me what it means to be truly seen. My heart is yours, now and always.”

The rest of the ceremony passed in a blur of happiness. The exchange of rings in human tradition, followed by the Vultor custom where Korrin gently tilted her head to expose her mating bite. He’d told her that in previous times, the male would have claimed his mate in front of the pack. All he did now was to graze his fangs across the sensitive mark—sending a shiver of pleasure down her spine.

The rest of the celebration unfolded around them, but all that really mattered was the male holding her hand, gripping it as if he too couldn't believe that it was all real.

The clearing had been transformed into a feast hall under the stars, with long tables laden with food—contributions from both the village and the Vultor enclave. A central area had been cleared for dancing and to her surprise, Korrin proved to be an excellent dancer.

After several energetic dances that left her breathless, she sank onto a bench at the edge of the celebration. Her cheeks flushed with exertion, she fanned herself with her hand and watched Korrin as he spoke with Finnar. Even now, her heart skipped when she looked at him—her husband, her mate.

“I think this is the first time I've seen you stop moving all night,” Scarlett said, sliding onto the bench beside her. “Happy?”

“More than I ever thought possible,” she admitted, leaning against her friend's shoulder. “Thank you for helping with everything.”

Scarlett smiled. “What are friends for? Besides, I'm just glad to see you both so content. It suits you.”

They sat in comfortable silence for a moment, watching the dancers. Scarlett suddenly nudged her. “Have you noticed who Seren's been dancing with all night?”

She followed her friend's gaze to where Seren moved gracefully with a woman in a stunning emerald gown. His usual stern expression had softened, his eyes never leaving his partner's face.

“No, who is she?” She squinted, trying to get a better look. There was something familiar about the woman's elegant posture, the way she carried herself with quiet

dignity, but she was wearing a light sparkling veil that concealed just enough of her features to make it difficult to determine her identity. “I feel like I should know her, but I can’t place her.”

“Neither can I,” Scarlett confessed. “She arrived just before the ceremony, and Seren hasn’t left her side since. I’ve never seen him look at anyone that way before.”

The woman laughed at something Seren said, the sound carrying across the clearing. When she turned slightly, the lantern light illuminated her profile, and she felt an even stronger tug of recognition.

“She’s beautiful,” she murmured, still trying to place the familiar stranger. “And Seren certainly seems captivated.”

She was still trying to identify the mysterious woman when a crash shattered the peaceful atmosphere. She turned to see two young Vultor males squaring off near the refreshment table, one of them bleeding from a split lip while the other bared his fangs. Several humans backed away nervously as dishes clattered to the ground.

Before Korrin could leave his conversation with Finnar, Seren was there. The Vultor alpha didn’t raise his voice, but power radiated from him like heat from a furnace.

“Enough.” The single word carried such authority that both young males immediately dropped their aggressive stances, heads bowing in submission.

She watched, fascinated. She’d heard about alpha power but had never witnessed it firsthand. The effect was immediate—not just on the two troublemakers, but on every Vultor present. Even Korrin had straightened slightly across the clearing, though he hadn’t been part of the confrontation.

“This is a celebration of unity,” Seren continued, his voice level but carrying to every

corner of the clearing. “You dishonor us all with this display.”

The two young males mumbled apologies, looking thoroughly chastised. With a dismissive gesture, Seren sent them to opposite sides of the gathering with older Vultor to keep them in line.

Crisis averted, Seren turned back toward the dance floor—and froze. The spot where his elegant partner had stood moments before was empty. He scanned the crowd, his posture growing more rigid with each passing second.

When he realized she was truly gone, the controlled, diplomatic alpha vanished, replaced by something primal and wounded. The howl that tore from his throat made her skin prickle with goosebumps—it wasn’t anger but raw anguish that filled the sound.

The celebration ground to a halt. Humans exchanged worried glances while the Vultor shifted uncomfortably, some looking ready to flee, others glancing toward Korrin as if seeking guidance. The fragile peace that had been building all evening suddenly felt at risk of shattering.

She clutched Scarlett’s hand, her heart racing as Seren’s howl echoed through the trees. “What’s happening?” she whispered.

“I don’t know. I’ve never seen him like this.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:14 am

Seren stood alone in the middle of the now abandoned dance floor, scanning the treeline. His claws flexed as Korrin's did when he was fighting for control. Several of his pack members approached him cautiously, only to back away when he growled.

Before she could respond, Korrin joined her, sliding his arm around her waist and pulling her close against him. His eyes were fixed on Seren, his face worried.

"I think it's time we made our exit," he murmured into her ear, his breath warm against her skin.

She looked up at him questioningly. "Already? But?—"

"The pups need feeding," he said, his voice low enough that only she could hear. "We've been gone for hours."

Since she knew perfectly well that they'd fed the pups generously before leaving them safely ensconced in their cabin, it was just an excuse to slip away from the growing tension. His protective instincts made her smile, but she was more than happy to be alone with her mate.

"Of course," she agreed, rising to her feet. "We shouldn't keep them waiting."

The chaos behind them was growing—humans whispering nervously among themselves, Vultor moving in agitated patterns as Seren stalked towards the trees. Mayor Jacobson was attempting to restore order while casting anxious glances at the Vultor alpha.

None of it mattered. Not tonight.

Korrin swept her up into his arms without warning, cradling her against his chest as if she weighed nothing. The sudden movement made her laugh, wrapping her arms around his neck.

“Was that necessary?” she asked, though she wasn’t complaining.

His amber eyes gleamed in the darkness, a mixture of mischief and possessiveness that made her heart race. “Absolutely. It’s tradition to carry one’s mate away from the celebration.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Is this a Vultor tradition?”

“It is now,” he replied with a cocky grin that melted her heart.

As he carried her away from the clearing, the sounds of confusion faded behind them. She rested her head against his shoulder, breathing in his scent—her husband, her mate, her protector. Whatever storm was brewing with Seren and his mysterious dance partner would have to wait.

Tonight belonged to them alone.