



Claim My Soul

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Category: Erotic, Romance

Description: An unlikely alliance reveals a destined fate...

Herleif Aganarsson is a troll competing in the underground shifter fight club in New York City. Alexia Stavros guides the souls of fallen warriors to the afterlife.

Their initial meeting results in confrontation, so when they're tasked to work together against an evil foe, a partnership seems unlikely. But when respects grows and passion flares, their bond is undeniable.

Will these two complete their mission without losing their own souls in the process?

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Chapter One

Herleif Aganarsson began his night the same way he had for many nights the past year: annihilating monsters in the name of entertainment. Amusement for the rich, the elite shifters of New York, and the humans who were privy to the paranormal. Not that he gave a shit about entertaining the bastards, but he had no choice.

That's what happened when there was a debt to be paid. And a hefty one at that, thanks to his father's greed and ineptitude when it came to finances.

Herleif had struck a deal to pay that debt due to his aging father's decline in health as well as mental state. Thus, he began competing in the shifter fight club in the lower level of The Gin Room in New York City. Or rather, a suburb. Same difference in his mind. It was one of a handful of locations throughout the city.

To ensure his father, Agnar, made no more foolish decisions nor faced further temptations, he'd been forced to return to their homeland of Northern Denmark after making a rather large payment toward what he owed. Of course, he'd grumbled and protested, but at least Agnar still breathed.

There were times when Herleif himself had wanted to strangle his father for his fucking arrogance and brashness. But he was a devoted son and did what needed doing. His father seemed to take that for granted, but his mother had begged him for leniency and continued to express her gratitude. That eased his surly attitude for the most part. After all, there was little one could do when it came to failing mental capacities.

Then there were times his anger bubbled to the surface. That's when he'd channel that emotion and take his frustrations out on his opponents. And he never lost. That didn't stop other beasts or shifters from trying, thinking they'd best him. A few had come close, but at the end of the bout, he was always victorious, becoming a sure bet. Over the years, many had complained, and some had tried to prevent him from competing, but it'd been in vain.

Nothing and no one stopped Herleif the troll. Besides, he provided worthy performances for the viewers willing to toss an insane amount of money around.

If he had chosen to fight more often, he could've been done in less time. Good thing he hadn't been forced to pay the debt quicker, because even a battle-hungry troll couldn't stomach it every night. It lost its appeal. So, when he felt like it, he'd enter the club and go to work. Lately he'd been fighting more just to get the damn debt over and done with. He grew weary of this life and was ready to move on, doing what he wanted. What that was, he had yet to discover.

Per the rules of the club, he'd been rewarded handsomely, hence his decision to choose this activity to pay off the debt. Of course, he'd been allowed to keep a portion of the winnings in order to survive day-to-day. He hadn't needed much, living a minimalistic lifestyle by renting a hole-in-the-wall apartment located in the basement of a shifter-owned restaurant. A perk was all the leftover food that hadn't sold for the day, which was always plenty to fill his belly for the night.

"Harry! You're up!"

Herleif rolled his eyes at the shortened name, knowing nothing he said or did would change the action. In the beginning, he'd tried but soon realized it was a waste of his time and energy. Not that he had any shortage of energy. Trolls were notoriously known for their strength and stamina. He also had magical abilities, but it wasn't often Herleif needed to call upon that aspect of his being during a fight.

There were two arenas in this particular establishment where fights took place. The first being a roped section much like a boxing ring where competitors fought until one conceded. Then there was the pit which was exactly as one would think: a shallow hole in the rocky foundation where usually only one fighter exited alive.

Barbaric? Sure. But that was the way of it with many shifters. They needed an outlet, and this activity was regulated versus going out into the world and wreaking havoc among the humans. No one was forced to fight. It was always a choice.

Herleif was feeling especially surly tonight. He'd been on edge lately, angrier than usual, and he was ready to beat the shit out of someone. It was his nature, after all, and aggression was expected of him and his kind. But his father was setting him off. He'd been contacting Herleif more frequently, demanding he clear the debt and pave the way for him to return to the States. Agnar had become bored and restless, and he was ready for excitement.

Herleif's mother had no sway, and he felt sorry for her, living in committed misery to his bastard of a father. He'd tried ignoring Agnar but knew at some point he'd have to deal with him one way or another.

Lumbering his way to the pit, spectators—men and women alike—gave Herleif a wide berth while cheering as the announcer introduced him and his opponent. He paid them no heed as he focused on the man already standing in the shallow hole. He looked like an ordinary human, but Herleif knew looks were absolutely deceiving. He, for instance, had the ability to shift into human form, looking like a Viking of olden days, standing at nearly seven feet with dark blond hair and honed muscles from years of rigorous training and fighting. In his true form as a troll, he could double as the widely popular Green Giant from the comics. That is, if said giant had long hair, clawed hands, and tusks protruding from his mouth.

Leaping into the pit, the ground shook beneath Herleif's feet, causing his opponent to

stumble. But the man immediately shifted into a wolf, snarling and hissing as the crowd gathered closer, shouting with enthusiasm.

“Lycan, eh? Time to teach a dog to heel.” Herleif baited, knowing it’d irk the beast. He’d fought numerous shifters, from vampires to wraiths to a variety of animals, so he was no stranger to wolves. This one was the largest to date but still small compared to Herleif. Usually he fought with no weapons, using only his brute strength, and most bouts didn’t last long. On occasion, spears, clubs, and shields were thrown into the arena, and the fighters—even Herleif at times—took full advantage of their use.

The wolf prowled, jaw snapping and fur bristling as Herleif circled, watching and waiting for him to make the first move. After several moments, the crowd grew restless, taunting and growling almost as much as the Lycan, encouraging action. The beast shifted left then right, lunging at Herleif’s ankles, only to receive a kick for his efforts. Credit to the wolf, he didn’t whine but took the blow, rolling and springing up onto his paws. He snarled, lunged again, only to flip in midair, kicking out with his hind legs, catching Herleif on the arm. Scratches welled with blood and the crowd roared with excitement.

Herleif merely glanced at his arm then grinned at the Lycan. “First strike. It’ll be your last.” He feigned a lunge causing the wolf to jump back. That’s when Herleif made his move, punching the beast in his jaw. This time, the wolf couldn’t contain his cry, but he managed to scurry away before Herleif could land another blow.

The two circled one another, getting in strike after strike and each taking a few tumbles. Then with speed that impressed Herleif, his opponent jumped on his back and tried to latch onto his shoulder. But Herleif grabbed the Lycan and tossed him over his head so that he landed with a sickening thud against the rocky floor. Herleif inwardly winced at the impact but couldn’t show weakness. Instead, he merely smirked.

And why did that still leave a sour taste in his mouth?

The beast remained unmoving as Herleif approached with caution, knowing he could be faking unconsciousness to draw him closer before striking.

Labored breaths escaped the wolf's mouth along with a gurgling that probably meant internal bleeding. Herleif felt sorry for the creature. Suddenly, he transformed back into a man and began to spit up blood. When his gaze met Herleif's, he could barely keep his eyes open.

"Mercy. Don't let him take my soul," he croaked before a wracking cough overtook him, causing more blood to spew onto the ground.

Herleif stiffened at that remark. Who would take his soul? Wouldn't it ascend like all the others?

"Finish me," the Lycan rasped.

Herleif looked around at the cheering crowd as they yelled for the man's death. In that instance, he wanted to decimate the spectators, wipe them out for finding pleasure in his acts.

Seeing nothing or no one unusual, he kneeled, about to do something he'd never done before. Clasping his hands on either side of the warrior's head, Herleif met his gaze. "Till Valhalla," he whispered. Then snapped the man's neck, giving him a quick death.

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Herleif hung his head, letting his hands drop as he took a deep breath. For a brief moment, he tuned out the roar of the crowd and their gleeful delight over another kill, sending up a prayer for the shifter. He wasn't especially proud that he'd ended the lives of many over the years, and now he grew weary of it all, eager to leave this servitude in two months. Or less.

Gaining his feet, he threw his head back, releasing a bellow that rocked the room. The crowd roared, obviously thrilled with the battle, mistaking Herleif's grief for pride in his triumph. When he lowered his head, he met the gaze of emerald eyes filled with sorrow. A woman stood among the crowd in partial shadows, but her form was impossible to miss.

He'd never seen her before and briefly wondered who she was. Suddenly her eyes flared with a golden light, startling him with its intensity. But when another light caught Herleif's attention, he knew what he would see, as he'd seen it every time he ended a life. Looking down upon the man, a luminescent mist began rising from the body. It contained pinpoints of light, like a swarm of fireflies, and when he followed its path, it began to weave through the crowd. Herleif never knew if others ever saw it, or if they didn't care, because their focus always turned to the next shifters approaching the pit.

With a burst of speed he'd never seen before, the light shot straight for the woman. Herleif jerked, ready to shout a warning, but she simply absorbed the light, appearing unaffected. Then she blinked and tears from her green eyes tracked down her rounded cheeks.

What the hell?

Herleif made a move in her direction, but the sea of bodies swallowed her like a ship lost to a storm.

Chapter Two

Alexia Stavros pulled the hood of her coat over her head, fading into the background. She carefully yet quickly worked her way toward the stairs and when clear of everyone, used her magic to veil herself.

Tonight had been her first time in the fight club, and after being briefed, she thought she'd known what to expect. It certainly hadn't been to absorb the energy of the fallen shifter. Her purpose was to guide the souls to the afterlife, which she'd done countless times before. Well, before coming here. And she had been successful with the Lycan. But never before tonight had she felt a life force flow through her with such intensity before ascending.

Why had tonight been different?

And then to have the troll focus on her. Herleif. Had he been a factor?

There was no mistaking he had seen what arose from the Lycan. Had the others? It hadn't appeared so. Only Herleif had followed the spirit as it wound its way toward her while everyone else carried on as if nothing unusual were happening. For a fleeting moment, he had looked panicked, fearing something awful would happen to her. And when it was over, he had looked ...astonished.

Alexia's thoughts were interrupted by a deep shout. Heavy footfalls rattled the steps she'd begun to climb. Although still invisible, she didn't dare look behind her. Instead, she rushed up the remaining stairs and darted into a secret room she'd been shown when given a tour of the club. Darkness swallowed her as she carefully listened for any indication Herleif was trailing her.

Muffled voices and rushed footsteps made their way to her, but she wasn't discovered while tucked away. Even after it grew quiet, she continued to wait while her thoughts pondered what she'd been told regarding The Gin Room.

Not all were in agreement that the fight club should operate as it did or even at all. But it had been this way for nearly a century and didn't seem likely to change. Fighters had the choice of surrender or death. Some chose a fight to the death. Whether it was due to their brazenness, thinking they couldn't lose, or possibly out of desperation, not wanting to continue in this life, she couldn't say nor judge. Either way, the reward was great. For those who perished, a portion was paid to a person of their choosing, typically a family member.

She wondered about Herleif and his reason for fighting. For enjoyment? A release of his aggression? And how often did he compete?

From his impressive strength to surprising agility, Alexia could admit he'd been magnificent. His movements were fluid despite his size, and to watch his muscles flex with his competent display ...she felt herself blushing just thinking about the performance. His show of mercy had been commendable. His remorse tender. The crowd hadn't keyed in on that, but she certainly had.

Noise outside the door brought Alexia's attention back to her predicament. If Herleif had tried to locate her, she hoped she'd waited long enough that he'd given up or moved on. He didn't strike her as one to easily abandon a task, but she couldn't stay here all night.

Easing open the door, she listened for voices or movement. When nothing seemed amiss, she removed her cloak of magic and slid into the corridor. Remaining vigilant, she skirted the dance floor, winding her way around tables and toward the exit. A few steps from the door, her path was blocked, and when she looked up, it was her uncle, Nic Stavros. He placed a hand on her arm and gently guided her toward the back

where a table awaited with food and drink. She'd forgotten he requested to meet with her after she was done below. Without needing to be told, she took a seat as he did the same.

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“What happened?”he asked softly.“You weren’t down there very long.”

Her gaze flickered to the crowd before she met her uncle’s gaze.“The shifter’s soul was clearly seen leaving his body, but only by myself and the troll, Herleif.There was no reaction from anyone else, no indication they’d seen the beautiful light that shot straight through me.I’d never seen anything like it.I’d neverfeltanything like it.”

“And now?”

She shook her head.“I don’t feel any different now than any other time I’ve done this.”

“Something else happened.”

She gave a quick nod.“Herleif.He saw me.His gaze was intent as if he knew I had something to do with what happened.I think he tried to follow me.Did you see him come through here?”

Her uncle shook his head.“I did not.He may have gone out the back or simply given up.”

Alexia scoffed.“He does not strike me as a being that would give up on anything.”She took a drink of the water in front of her.“What do you know of him?”

“I know he’s been fighting for a year, paying off a debt owed by his father.”

“And the Lycan?His name is, orwas, Evan Hosten.Why was his death any different?”

“I don’t know anything about the wolf, but I’ll find out.”He paused, contemplating.“Maybe it had nothing to do with the wolf but with Herleif himself.What was he doing when it happened?”

“I wondered that very thing because it was what he’d donebeforeit happened that may have had an influence.He gave the werewolf a mercy killing.They were clearly fighting to the death, battling one another hard.When Herleif slammed the wolf to the ground, he’d done immense damage.Then the wolf shifted back to human form.Even amidst the noise of the crowd, I heard him say,finish me.Herleif framed his face and whispered,Till Valhallabefore snapping his neck.”

“Very admirable.”

“Uncle Nic,” she started again in a hushed voice, “something else was said by the wolf.Something disturbing.He said,Mercy, don’t let him take my soul.”

If her uncle was alarmed, he gave nothing away.

“You’re sure?”

She nodded.“I am.”

“Are you okay?”

“Just tired,” she sighed.

He reached across the table to take her hand.“Let me get someone to escort you home.I’d do it myself, but I have another matter with work to finish up.”

Her uncle worked for the Shifters Relations Agency in New York City, which regulated shifter activity.They also kept peace among their kind and the humans

who'd become aware of the paranormal. Alexia had only been in the city a handful of months, having come over from Greece at the insistence of her parents who thought she needed to experience the modern world. She had stayed with her uncle and his family for two months, becoming familiar with the city and this new way of life. Now she had a place of her own in Hunters Point which was across the East River from his townhouse in Manhattan. Her apartment was close to the local library where she spent a great deal of her leisure time. Even though she'd been enjoying this world, there were many days and nights when she missed the slower pace of life on her island of Karpathos.

"Alexia, don't fret about tonight. While it isn't a normal occurrence, it doesn't mean there's anything ominous about the event. I'll do some checking, and we'll talk tomorrow. Now, let me find someone—"

"It's okay, Uncle Nic, I'm fine to get home. I could use a walk. While I haven't had any concerns thus far, I'll veil myself just in case." Her place was only a half mile from The Gin Room which was located in Gotham Point just past the Midtown Tunnel. When he gave her a concerned look, she tried again to ease any worry. "Really, I'll be all right, and I'll contact you as soon as I'm safely locked away for the night."

"Okay, but be sure to text me the moment you get to your apartment."

She nodded. "Promise."

Both stood and embraced before Alexia headed for the door. She was stopped by the bouncer, Dax, who was a panther shifter and apparently a big, friendly flirt according to most of the waitresses.

"Leaving so soon?" he said. "I haven't had a chance to buy you a drink yet."

Alexia gave a weak smile. "Maybe another night."

Dax gently grasped her hand and kissed it before releasing. "I'll hold you to that." He winked. "Are you fine to get home alone or is your uncle escorting you?"

She shook her head. "I'm fine, truly. Uncle Nic has work to do and I'll be veiled."

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Dax nodded even though his look said he wasn't too happy about the decision. "Be vigilant. I'm sure you can handle yourself, but there's always strange activity during the full moon. And with Samhain upon us, it gets even stranger."

"Don't I know it." She chuckled. "But thank you for your concern. I'll be okay, and I promised Uncle Nic I'd text him as soon as I'm safely in my apartment."

He nodded. "Will I see you tomorrow night?"

"I'm not sure yet, but if so, I may take you up on that drink."

"You got it." He grinned, showing a perfect set of gleaming white teeth.

After a final good night, Alexia slipped out into the crisp yet humid October air. Ensuring no one was around to witness her magic, she cloaked herself and began to walk up 2nd Street. She'd take it until it ended then skirt the park before ending up at her apartment building.

She thought about the food she'd ignored. When her belly rumbled, she chuckled to herself, realizing she hadn't eaten all day and was suddenly famished.

With food on her mind, she'd walked a few blocks when she felt a presence. Freezing in place, an imposing figure stepped out of the shadows to loom in front of her.

"Care to explain what happened back there?"

Herleif.

Chapter Three

Herleif half expected the woman to startle or run or ...something. But she held herself still, as if doing so would mean he wouldn't know where she stood. She may have the ability to make herself invisible to others, but for whatever reason, he could still see her. Mostly. Her form was like an apparition slightly out of focus.

It still didn't prevent him from seeing just how alluring she was. Standing barely a foot shorter than him, she was taller than most women he'd met. Her hood covered what he knew was dark auburn hair, but he could clearly see her round face, full lips, and those emerald eyes that held strength and determination. And they bored into him with a look of suspicion.

He stepped into the meager light from a streetlamp. "You may as well drop your magic. I can see through your cloak."

She took a step back. "If you can see me, why bother to show myself? Maybe I don't want anyone else to see me." She spoke low in a calm manner, her sultry voice causing his blood to heat. But was it in lust or irritation?

"You mean you don't want anyone to see you speaking with me. A troll."

He watched her cute little nose wrinkle. "You being a troll has absolutely nothing to do with it. Maybe you shouldn't be seen speaking with a witch."

"Is that what you are? A witch?"

She lifted her shoulder in a careless shrug. "Some would call me that."

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He took a step closer, only to have her retreat that step. “And why should I not be seen speaking with you?”

She hesitated a moment before stepping further away from the light, causing her appearance to fade slightly. Herleif wanted to protest, wanted to beg her to show herself, but she began to speak again. “Even in today’s world of acceptance among the paranormal, witches are still given a wide berth, it seems. And I’m new here, most don’t know me, so they could be wary of me.”

“Have you given others a reason to be wary of you?”

“No,” she said, quickly defending herself.

“Then show yourself. While I appreciate you worrying about my reputation, I don’t give a fuck what anyone thinks.” When she narrowed her eyes but remained silent, he gave a low growl while stepping closer. “I want answers, woman. What happened back in the pit?”

“I don’t know,” she ground out.

Herleif boxed her in, staring down at her, and still she didn’t flinch. “You lie. You know exactly what happened.”

“S-step away from me.” Her voice was low, husky, and adamant, even with that little wobble.

“And if I don’t?” He goaded.

Before he could take his next breath, she had raised her hands and propelled him backward by an unseen force. He heard her gasp as he landed on his ass across the street from where she stood. When he looked up at her, she had dropped her veil, and her eyes were wide with surprise. Then there was the fact that a blue light glowed from her hands.

“I-it’s not my intent to harm you, but don’t ever call me a liar or intimidate me again. Next time, I won’t be so easy on you.”

Herleif stood and began to march toward her. He could’ve sworn he heard a growl of warning as if coming from a dog or wolf, but he saw neither. When the blue light in her hands changed to fireballs, he stopped and met her gaze, which now showed conviction.

“Do not challenge me, Herleif.”

“It seems unfair that you know my name, yet you failed to give me yours.”

“I failed at nothing. I only know your name because it was announced in the club. Giving you my name would imply a rather cordial relationship, when in fact there’s nothing cordial about this so far.”

“I want answers.” He growled again.

“So you said, and I have none for you. What happened earlier has never happened before. Maybe it’s you who has some explaining to do.” She continued to hold the fireballs in her palms while keeping a keen eye on him.

“Me? I had nothing to do with the light that came from the Lycan’s body. While I’ve seen the life force leave the fallen, I’ve never seen it target an individual. And before tonight, I’ve never seen you in the club. So, tell me, who should be doing the

explaining?”

“I owe you nothing, so it appears we’re at a standstill and have no need for further conversation.”

When she started to lower her hands, Herleif reacted, sprinting forward with a speed that surprised her. She grunted when he locked his hands around her wrists, pinning them above her head against the wall at her back. He crowded her body with his, so much that he felt every desirable inch of her curves.

“Release me,” she ground out.

Herleif had to commend her for her spirit, but he had no intention of releasing her until he got answers. He lowered his head so his mouth was next to her ear. “I don’t think I will.” He barely got the last word out when he received a brutal kick in the crotch. Fumbling backward, he released her hands and was once again shoved away by her magic, landing in the street. A bright light shone on him, yet he had no time to react to the vehicle barreling down on him.

Suddenly, he found himself hovering in the air while the truck sped by as if the driver hadn’t just seen a troll lying in its path. Seconds later, he was dropped across the street, and when he turned his head to look at the witch, she was nowhere to be seen.

Alexia leaned against the door inside her apartment, perplexed. Normally after teleporting, she would’ve been exhausted since it expended more energy than any other act she performed. It wasn’t often she had need of that power, but she didn’t want to hang around on the street and continue tangling with Herleif. Especially when he wouldn’t heed her warning.

She wasn't lying when she said she didn't want to hurt him, but she almost had. The burst of power she'd unleashed not only shocked him, but herself as well. She was powerful in her own right, but where had that extra intensity come from?

The energy of the Lycan she'd felt herself absorb? Had it become a part of her?

How? Why?

Even after that first push, Herleif wouldn't back down. Despite her anger with him, she'd reacted quickly enough to save him from that delivery truck. Then again, given his size, he might have been fine. The truck, probably not. But the last thing she wanted tonight was an incident involving a human which would've meant her uncle or someone else from the SRA showing up.

Making her way to the couch, she pulled her phone out of the pocket of her coat. She sent a text to her uncle, letting him know she was safely home and headed straight to bed. She absolutely would not worry him about her encounter with Herleif. She was fine, Herleif was fine, but neither were any closer to finding the answers they sought.

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Uncle Nic replied, wishing her a good night and that he'd contact her tomorrow.

Alexia dropped the phone beside her and closed her eyes as she leaned back against the cushions. She'd see what information, if any, her uncle could provide regarding the Lycan and Herleif before she considered telling him about tonight. She wouldn't have minded a civil conversation with the troll. Too bad he wasn't having it.

Her thoughts turned to their interaction mere moments ago and how quickly it'd escalated from almost polite to downright rude. The nerve of him, trying to intimidate her. And not believing her words. It's not like she could pull answers out of her ass hoping he'd be satisfied with them. She'd told the truth. She couldn't help it if he didn't like it any more than she didn't like what he'd had to say.

Alexia felt herself smile as she again thought of Herleif's surprise at her power and that she'd dared to use it on him. But once her own shock had worn off, she'd been adamant about him backing away. She would not allow him to assert any kind of authority over her.

"Ha, take that, you big oaf," she mumbled. "Like women should just roll over and be complacent to men. I don't think so," she said through a yawn.

Before she grew too tired to move, she forced herself to get up. Removing her coat, she hung it on a peg then walked to the kitchen. Her stomach made it known it wasn't pleased to have been neglected, so she ate enough to satisfy it before heading to her room. She tried to put thoughts of Herleif and the evening out of her mind, knowing she wouldn't get any more answers right now.

“A good night’s rest is what’s needed, then I’ll regroup tomorrow.”

She didn’t bother with her nighttime routine as she stripped off her clothes and crawled into bed. Burrowing under the covers, all thoughts of the evening vanished as sleep overtook her.

Chapter Four

“They need you, Alexia. You must save them.”

One moment Alexia was sound asleep, and the next, she was surrounded by a faint light, listening to the echo of a voice in distress. She knew she wasn’t here in physical form, more like her subconscious was here in a dreamlike state. But how? And where was she?

And who needed her?

“The souls need your guidance.”

Humans thought in simplistic terms. Heaven or Hell. That is, if they believed in an afterlife for their soul. But it wasn’t as simple as that. Oh, she wished it was, though. A soul’s journey didn’t end upon death. There were realms to negotiate based on an individual’s behavior in life. Her purpose was to guide souls on their destined path in the afterlife. More often than not, she hoped it was to Heaven, but that was up to Fate to decide. When guiding, she could feel their essence and knew where they were headed. Like the Lycan last night. Although his spirit felt disturbed at first, she knew he had gone to Heaven.

And it wasn’t often she’d been called upon to redirect a soul.

When first made aware of the powers she’d come into and her role in the cosmos, she

had asked why it was even necessary.

“Souls are like wayward children,” her mother had said. “When not anchored in a body, they know not of their purpose and therefore need instruction. It is as if their memories are wiped, not remembering their life in the physical world. It is your duty and others like you to move them in the direction Fate ordains.”

“Was that your role also?” she’d asked her mother.

“It was, but now it is time to pass that role onto you. Just as you will do with your daughter. Just as all the women in our line have done.”

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“But what if I don’t have a daughter?What if I don’t want a mate?”

Her mother had simply chuckled.“My dear, your fate is written, and our lineage will not end with you.”

Alexia had contemplated that and so began the deep discussion about fate versus choice and what is preordained.At the time, it’d been overwhelming.It still was, to be honest, but Alexia had learned there is always a choice, and whether one chose to believe that was the choice that was destined ...well, it made her head swim, so she didn’t dwell on it.All she knew was to make the best choice when faced with options and let what will be, be.

Now, to determine what she faced and why.

“You must free the souls.”

The disembodied voice came from all around her, and Alexia knew she wouldn’t find its source.Just as she wasn’t going to discover where she was.Didn’t seem to matter at this point.There were other pressing details to learn.

“Where are these souls and why must I free them?”

“They are not where they belong.A soul collector is at work, upsetting the balance.”

Soul collector?Alexia had never heard of such a thing.

“You are the guide.You have the power.But you will need help.”

“Help?From whom?If I have the power, why would I need help?”

“You will need the allegiance and protection of the one who sees the true you.”

That sent a little jolt through Alexia.“Sees the true me?”she murmured.“I don’t understand.Why do I need protection?”

“It is a perilous task, but he will not forsake you.”

“He?”Alexia felt as if she’d leave here with more questions than answers.“Who are you?Why aren’t you freeing the souls?”

“I am simply Fate’s messenger.The power is not within me.”

“Yet you had the power to summon me ...here.”

“I am a dream walker and do Fate’s bidding.”

“And Fate cannot intervene?”

“It has not come to that.Yet.”

Alexia knew Fate to be an impartial being.Had to be.But would there ever come a time when she’d have to step in?Apparently, Alexia and her mysterious partner, protector, or whatever she was to call him, were the first in line to undo the work of this soul collector.

“How am I to know who this partner will be, and how do we find the soul collector?”

“The one who sees you when others cannot.There is more to the troll than even he realizes.”

“Herleif? He is to be my protector?” Alexia wasn’t so much alarmed as she was annoyed. She had to work with that stubborn scoundrel?

“He will not forsake you.”

“Yes, you said that. I’m sure he’ll be just as thrilled as I am to learn about this arrangement,” she murmured. “Is there any more you can tell me? Where is this soul collector? How do we stop him?”

“Together, you’ll know what to do.”

“That’s it?” Alexia was met with silence. Before she could ask another question, a burst of light flashed as a soft whooshing popped her ears. She jerked upright in her bed, once again surrounded by darkness. Her breaths were quick, and it took a moment for her eyes to adjust and realize where she was. She started to reach out with her senses, but movement in the shadows had her hands flaring with her fireballs. She then felt the presence and heard the growls of her spirit companion, Nonia, a wolf-dog, who materialized at her side.

Raising a hand, the room illuminated, revealing a hulking figure in front of her balcony doors. The man had dark blond hair with braids framing his temples, and his face was covered with a mustache and beard. He wore a tan shirt and dark pants that molded to impressive muscles, while black boots covered his feet. When Alexia looked into his striking blue eyes, a hint of recognition had her frowning.

“Herleif?”

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Nonia barked, but it was one of excitement. Next thing Alexia knew, her wolf-dog leapt off the bed and raced to their uninvited visitor, or rather, intruder, in her eyes. Herleif knelt and greeted the beast no one else should have been able to see, much less touch. But he ran his hands over her head then back and forth across her sides, delighting Nonia.

Alexia softly harrumphed, only to hear the chuckle of the troll. Or man. And why was he in human form?

She used her magic to light several candles on her side tables before extinguishing her fireballs.

“Why are you here? And how did you get into my room?”

She heard the soft command of “Return” before he stood, his eyes locking on hers. Nonia returned to the bed, nestling against Alexia’s side. Herleif’s gaze roamed across her form, and she noticed his fists clenching at his sides. When his eyes met hers again, she felt her nipples tighten at the intensity, and only then did she remember she was naked.

She yanked the covers over her upper body and watched as Herleif flexed his hands again while keeping their gazes locked.

“Why are you here, Herleif, and why are you in human form?”

“I think you know why I’m here. Alexia.”

She sucked in her breath as her pulse accelerated. “How did you learn my name?”

He took a step closer causing Nonia’s tail-wagging to increase. “Stay,” Alexia commanded.

“Did you dream tonight, Alexia?”

She pinched her lips, knowing what he hinted at but hated his roundabout way of answering her. “What does that have to do with why you are here?”

More steps brought him to the edge of her bed. “Do not play dumb with me, woman.”

Now Nonia let out a soft whine, and Alexia sank her fingers into her fur, soothing her. “It’s okay,” she whispered to her companion before facing Herleif again. “Fine,” she bit out. “No, I did not dream, but I was pulled into a dreamlike consciousness.”

“And?” he prompted.

Alexia sighed. “And,” she drew out, “it seems we are tasked to work together to save souls.”

Chapter Five

Herleif tried to calm himself.

He was unsuccessful.

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Seeing Alexia's naked torso had him hard. Aching. Yearning.

He'd wanted to rip the covers from the bed in order to expose all of her glorious body. He'd wanted to drink in her beautiful sight before he claimed her, marked her, and made her his for all eternity.

Where the hell were these feelings coming from? He'd lusted after women simply for sex, but this intense, dare he say, emotion, was baffling. Disturbing.

Consuming.

"Herleif!"

The bark of his name pulled him out of his lust-induced haze to see her standing, fully clothed, two steps from him.

"Why are you in human form?" she asked again.

He smirked. "Is this not more appealing?" All other women he'd encountered preferred it.

She frowned. "No."

That one word gave him pause. Dare he believe she'd rather see him as a troll? He instantly shifted back to his true form, earning a happy yip from Nonia. He didn't know how he knew the wolf-dog's name, he just did. He'd learned Alexia's name from the dream walker who visited him earlier, no doubt the same one who had come

to her.

Herleif studied her face as her gaze raked over him, all expression masked. That is, until her emerald eyes met his, and in them he saw a flare of longing. But in the next instant, she blinked and turned away, hiding from him.

“Alexia,” he called, but received no response as she left the bedroom, Nonia at her heels. He followed her into the kitchen area where she’d turned on dim lighting.

“Would you care for anything? I’m having tea.”

“Being cordial now, are ya?” he teased as he leaned against the archway.

Alexia whirled and glared at him “Do not start with me, Herleif. You were disrespectful earlier, and now you come into my home uninvited as if you have every right to do so. I should put you out on your ass again, you big jerk.”

She’d marched right up into his personal space and poked him in the chest, not the least bit intimidated by him. He wanted to laugh at how cute he found it, instead he took hold of her hand, wrapped an arm around her waist, and hauled her against him. Her breath rushed out, and he felt its warmth on his chest. When she began to struggle, he groaned at the feel of her body wiggling against him. His cock ached and his grip tightened.

“Stop,” he barked.

She fought even more, trying to free herself. “Don’t yell at me!”

Nonia gave a low growl, but Herleif ignored her. “Then do as I say,” he ground out.

“Like hell I will. Let me go.”

He whispered in her ear, “And if I don’t want to?” Her movements stilled, but he felt the shiver run through her body. “I happen to like you right where you’re at. In my arms. Against my body.” He dared to lick the shell of her ear and delighted in her soft moan. His hand caressed her low back, and she pressed her body closer.

“W-what are you doing to me?” she whispered as her free hand clutched his shirt.

He leaned back to look at her face and saw no fear, only curiosity. “Seducing you. Trying hard not to ravage you like the beast I am.”

“You ...you want me?” Her face held genuine surprise, perplexing Herleif.

“Is that a joke?” When Alexia shook her head, he asked, “Has no one ever desired you? Stated their interest in you?”

“No. I...” She lowered her head. “I was never around men until I came to New York.”

Herleif gently touched her chin and raised her head so their eyes met. “How is that possible?”

“It just is. I remained close to my family, my parents, on our island.”

Nonia had settled, seemingly satisfied her mistress was fine.

Herleif stroked her cheek, loving the silky feel of her skin. “Were you never curious about men? About sex?”

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Alexia's cheeks blushed beautifully, and she tried to look away, but he held her chin and her gaze. "Alexia?"

"Of course, I was curious about s-sex. I guess I figured one day..."

"One day?" he prodded.

"That it'd happen," she blurted out, blushing a deeper red. "Silly, I know."

"Not silly," he said kindly, meaning it. "But in order for it to happen, there must be a male involved." He tried not to show his astonishment at realizing she was a virgin.

She narrowed her eyes. "I know that. I'm not clueless. It's not as if I haven't—" She suddenly clamped her mouth shut.

"Haven't what? Been educated? Read about it?" He lowered his voice. "Experimented by yourself?"

Her eyes widened as her mouth formed that perfect O, and all Herleif could think about was filling that cavity with his cock.

"Herleif!" she snapped.

"By the gods, I love when you say my name. Whether in anger or in question." He brought his face to her neck, inhaling her sweet scent of arousal that stirred his blood and caused his cock to become hard as granite. "How I'd love to hear you scream my name in ecstasy." He licked her galloping pulse. "Would you like that, Alexia? Would

you want your first time to be with me?A troll?”

She reared back, surprising him with the stern look on her face.“Why do you do that?Why must you be so self-loathing?”When he loosened his grip, she stepped back further, raking her gaze down his body then back up again.“Is there something wrong with you?Are you ashamed of who you are?”

He bristled.“Never.”

“Then stop making it sound as if being a troll is abhorrent.Because it’s not.”

Rather than think too hard about her words and how they warmed the depths of his soul, he reverted to his usual snarky arrogance.“Does that mean you’d welcome me in your bed?”

“Ugh!”She threw her hands up in exasperation and returned to the task of getting mugs and tea out of her cupboards.

Herleif held back a laugh as he watched her backside, enjoying the view of her curves and her long hair swaying with her movements.His mind took an erotic turn and quickly had to shut down those thoughts.Otherwise, he would have her on her hands and knees as he plowed into her from behind.

And that wouldn’t begin to slake his thirst for her.It certainly wouldn’t be what she deserved, which was to be cared for, treated with tenderness.To be loved.

Herleif didn’t know if he was capable of love.Lust, yes, most definitely.But love?That involved vulnerability.Trust.

“If you’re a coffee drinker, then too bad.Tea will have to do.”

Herleif's thoughts returned to Alexia's task. "Tea would be fine. Thank you."

She turned to face him, her brow raised as if she couldn't believe he'd been polite.

"What? I do have some manners." He grinned.

She scoffed, but he caught her grin as she turned to prepare the tea. Herleif moved closer and leaned against the counter, simply watching as she moved about, pulling food from the fridge while the water heated. Within moments, the drinks were ready, and she'd arranged meat, cheese, and fruit on a plate she set on the counter between them.

Her gaze met his and she smiled softly. "I figured food was also in order, given it's nearly dawn and time for breakfast. Are you hungry?"

"Famished," he said, and he wasn't talking about the need for food. But he reigned in his lust and thanked her for her efforts. "I rather like us being cordial to one another," he said, using her words, earning a grin.

"Well, Herleif Aganarsson, let's talk about our mission." She popped a grape in her mouth then smiled wider. "Am I correct that you were also visited by Fate's messenger and informed of what's expected of us?"

He nodded. "To save souls from a soul collector."

"I was told, together we'd know what to do. So, how do you propose we find this soul collector?"

Herleif frowned. "I have no idea. Why should I know what to do?"

"Because the dream walker said so."

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“Oh, well, in that case, I guess I should know what to do.” He gave Alexia a stony stare. “Anything else he said I should know about?”

“No.” She looked thoughtful for a moment then said, “It occurred to me we know little about one another, so let’s remedy that.”

Herleif cocked his head and felt his brows furrow. “And how is that supposed to help us?”

“Knowing lineage, background, abilities, it all matters, and it may give us a clue as to how we proceed with this mission.” She moved around the counter to stand by his side. Only she grabbed the tray of food and started to walk to the living room. “Nonia, say goodbye to Herleif and go rest. I’ll call you if I need you.”

The wolf-dog quickly nuzzled against him before disappearing.

Alexia then called out, “Please grab the mugs and join me on the couch. Might as well get comfortable.”

Herleif chuckled and did as asked, carefully handling the mugs with his beefy hands and bringing them to the table in front of the couch. After placing them down and not spilling a drop, he sat, watching Alexia as she picked up her tea. She then curled her legs beneath her bottom and seemed to relax.

“Now, tell me all I need to know about Herleif.”

Chapter Six

Alexia watched Herleif, his brow wrinkling once again, and oh, how she wanted to smooth those deep furrows.

She knew little about the many shifters and paranormals, having had minimal contact with any until she'd arrived in New York. Her knowledge came from her mother as well as reading, and even then, accurate information had been limited.

Trolls, for instance. She'd read they were usually large beasts, unappealing in appearance. They were known for their aggression and trickery, and most often solitary creatures living underground or in darkness.

Herleif was certainly large but in no way was his appearance unappealing. He was rather handsome in his brutish way. His hair was wild, and she longed to tangle her fingers in it. His skin reminded her of fresh spring grass—one of her favorite colors—and the marks and scars added to his ruggedness. Sure, he'd initially been rude, trying to intimidate her, but she was seeing a civil side to him, and she knew they'd be able to work together.

But the way he spoke about himself, as a troll, made Alexia wonder if there was something wrong with her in finding him physically attractive. When he'd been in human form, it'd been a striking form, but truth be told, she preferred him as his true self.

And when he'd said he was seducing her, had he been teasing? What purpose would that tactic serve? He couldn't have been serious, could he? In wanting her?

She silently chastised herself for doing nearly the same as Herleif had done. While there was no self-loathing, there was self-doubt. Other than being inexperienced, there was nothing wrong with her. She was caring, smart, and attractive. Wasn't she?

Maybe he was teasing and didn't want a human like her. Maybe—

“Why are you scowling?”

Herleif’s question snapped her out of her internal discussion. She met his curious gaze and tried to steer the topic back to him. “I’m just wondering why you’re delaying in telling me about you. We must trust one another if we’re going to work together.” She took a sip of her tea while he remained quiet. “If you’d rather I go first...” He still said nothing.

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She sighed and began. “I’m Alexia Stavros, born thirty years ago on Karpathos, a Greek Island. I’m an empath with the ability to influence others’ mood or feelings. I also guide souls to the afterlife on their destined paths. My mother has the ability, as did her mother, and so on, as did all the women in my family. Apparently, my mother’s line can be traced back to the Goddess, Hecate.”

“Impressive. Do you think that is why the dream walker came to you? Why you’re tasked with this mission?”

“Maybe. Hecate was extremely powerful, but I’m nowhere near her level.”

“Maybe you are and don’t yet realize.” When she remained quiet, he spoke again. “And why are you in New York?”

“My parents—mostly my mother—insisted I experience the modern world. She felt I was meant for more than my secluded life on Karpathos. My father’s brother, Uncle Nic, works for the SRA, um, the Shifters Relations Agency, and he asked if I’d like to try using my guiding ability on the shifters who fight in the club.”

“Try? Weren’t you already using your skills? You either do it or you don’t. There is no try.”

She chuckled. “Well, yes, you are correct. I suppose Uncle Nic wanted to see how I’d do in that savage environment. I assured him I could handle it.”

“Had you ever been around fighters? Any kind of battle?”

“No,” she scoffed. “Life on the Island was rather peaceful. If someone was ill or near the end of their life, I would stay with them until their death then guide their souls. On the occasions I went to the mainland, I’d never known of any activity like that.”

“And you said last night was your first in the club?”

“Not in that club, as in The Gin Room, but first in that fight club. Uncle Nic had taken me to The Gin Room in Manhattan close to where he lives and introduced me to shifters there. The co-owner is Oba Izem, a lion shifter whose name literally means king lion. He has the fight club set up similarly. I spent a few weeks there guiding souls before going to the Gotham Point club last night.

“Was there another such as you, before you came?”

“Interestingly enough, no, not that I know of. I presume there was a guide on the other side. It isn’t simply left up to—”

“Left up to Fate,” he stated at the same time. “Fickle bitch,” he mumbled.

“She may be, but such is the way of the cosmos.”

He cocked his head and gave Alexia another look. “You believe in that bullshit?”

She gave him a stern look. “It took me some time to come to terms with the thought that all is preordained, and there are still moments when it doesn’t sit well with me, so all I’ll say is life is a series of choices, and those choices lead to where you are supposed to be.”

Herleif snorted before leaning forward to pick up his mug, looking impossibly adorable to Alexia. She tried to stifle her giggle but failed.

“What?” She shook her head, but he persisted. “Do I amuse you?”

“In fact, you do. Now it’s your turn.”

“I’m still stuck on why your uncle, or anyone thought they needed you? What happened to make them decide your skill was needed with your physical presence rather than allowing a guide to do its work on the other side?”

“I was never told of anything happening, some strange occurrence that alerted them to concerns. Doesn’t mean something wasn’t happening but he felt it wasn’t pertinent. I’ll have to ask him specifically when he contacts me sometime today.” She took a drink, watching Herleif as he remained quiet. Contemplating. “Do you think it could have anything to do with it being Samhain?”

“When the veil thins, and spirits may be able to cross into this realm,” he said softly. “It’s possible. Did you see other spirits, those who shouldn’t have been here?”

Alexia shook her head. “No, and I’d have been able to see them since I have that ability. Even those who try to mask or veil themselves, I can see them.” She slanted her head. “You do as well,” she stated.

His head snapped up, pinning her with a startled look before quickly calming. “Why do you say that?”

“Pfft, come on, Herleif, don’t play me for a fool. You’re able to see me when I’m veiled. You can touch Nonia when no one should be able to. And she clearly trusts you, allowing you to be near me. You see the spirits leaving the body when no one else in that club can. Or at least, no one that makes it known they can. You have a power. And maybe you never thought it strange otherwise, but it’s an ability most others do not possess.”

“I’ve never known differently, and I learned that, yes, most others do not possess it. I also learned it doesn’t matter. So what if I can see spirits leaving the deceased? It has no bearing on who I am or how I live my life.”

“Fair enough,” she conceded.

He quirked a brow but didn’t respond to the topic. Instead he asked, “How long are you staying in New York?”

“I hadn’t made any decisions, and now with this going on, well, I certainly can’t leave until it’s resolved.”

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“You can do whatever you choose. You aren’t bound to help these souls. That is, if you believe what you were told.”

Alexia sat up straighter. “You don’t believe me?”

“I did not say that, Alexia. What if you weren’t told the truth? What if this is some elaborate ruse? A trap?”

“For what purpose?”

“That remains to be seen, now, doesn’t it?”

Alexia shook her head as she placed her mug on the table, the tea now cold and bitter. “And why involve both of us? Because I’m sure it does. Nothing like last night happened in the Manhattan club while I’d been there, so I believe you are a factor.” She sat back and pulled the fleece throw off the back of the couch to wrap around herself. “Tell me about Herleif Aganarsson. Please.”

His nose twitched. “There isn’t much to tell. Nothing extraordinary. My family hails from Northern Denmark. I am eighty years of age.” Alexia knew her eyes had widened. “Trolls tend to have a good lifespan. My father, who has lived nearly two hundred years, was involved in salt mining and when that went bust, he made the wild move to bring us to America two decades ago.”

“Versus remaining in Europe? Wasn’t there other work he could have engaged in?”

“Sure, plenty, but my father was impatient and greedy. Not a good combination.”

“Which led to this debt you’re paying off for him.”When his brow rose, Alexia explained.“My uncle knew of this, the reason you’re fighting in the club.He said he was going to see what else he could find out about you as well as Evan Hosten.”

“Evan?”

“The Lycan you fought and...”

“And killed,” he said, hanging his head.

“Herleif, he knew what he was getting into when he stepped into the pit.”She leaned closer, touching his arm.He jumped at the contact before his head snapped up, so their gazes locked.“It was a mercy killing and very commendable.”

He scoffed and shook his head.Alexia began to withdraw her hand but once again, Herleif surprised her with his speed, grasping her hand with his.The hold was gentle, his hand warm.

Did she see vulnerability in his eyes?

Alexia didn’t try to pull away, sensing he needed the contact.“How many do you have in your family?”she asked, wanting to keep him talking.

“Myself, Father, and Mother.”

“No extended family?”

“None.”

His fingers softly caressed hers and the tender action sent shivers through her.Still, she didn’t try to move away from his touch.“Do, or did you have a community in

Denmark?Other trolls?”

“A few I knew of, no relation, though. My mother tried to form friendships, but my father wanted nothing to do with them. Trolls tend to stick to themselves. My father viewed them as competition. Really, anyone was. As I said, he was greedy.”

Alexia shook her head. “Sad he wouldn’t want that relationship with his own kind. Have you made friends here?”

“Friends?” He laughed. “No. Trolls don’t make friends.”

“Why not? You know—or maybe you don’t—not everyone views the Jötnaras unfriendly or unapproachable. They were a significant presence in our history, many mating with gods.”

He grinned. “You think trolls descended from the Jötnar?”

“Yes. They were the original giants of the world and revered. Well, by most. Can your family trace their line back generations? Maybe to the days of Odin?”

“Doubtful. I was never told any of that, and it never crossed my mind to ask. Many still believe those tales are merely myth.”

“Pfft, you mean humans.” Alexia waved away that comment. “It is our history, our lineage. Let the humans, or most of them, believe what they will. There is no denying the presence of the paranormal, even if our kind prefer to limit that knowledge.”

“Would you prefer our kind make our presence known and fuck the consequences?”

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“Herleif, why must you be crude with your language?”

He threw his head back and bellowed with laughter. She startled at first then joined him. “I love your laugh. Shows you aren’t always the hardened brute you make yourself out to be.”

He quieted and pinned her with an intense stare while his grip on her hand tightened. “You have no idea the brute I am.”

Alexia wouldn’t be intimidated by him. “Is that so?” She sent a tiny surge of power through her hand, just enough so he’d feel a buzz. “Don’t think you know all about me either.”

Herleif retained his hold, using his thumb to stroke her knuckles. “I wouldn’t dream of underestimating you, Alexia. It’s my mission to discover everything about you.” He leaned closer while pulling her toward him, so they were inches apart. “How quickly will your skin flush when I see you fully naked?”

Alexia felt her eyes widen as she remained frozen while Herleif brought his mouth to her ear.

“How sweet will your pussy taste.” She gasped. He chuckled. “How loudly you’ll scream when my cock fills you and brings you ecstasy like you’ve never felt.”

Alexia couldn’t contain the whimper that escaped her, and she felt herself pressing closer to this dirty-talking beast she wished would at least kiss her. As for the other things he described, her body trembled at the thought, and it wasn’t in fear.

Herleif licked down the column of her neck then worked his way back up to suckle her ear. “Would you like that, Alexia? Would you like for this beast to spread you out and feast on you in every way imaginable?”

“Yes,” she moaned without hesitation. But when Herleif stilled, she suddenly wondered if he were simply teasing her. Testing her. She leaned back to look at his face but couldn’t discern his thoughts. She used her ability to read his emotions. “You don’t believe me.”

He frowned but remained silent.

“Why would you say such things, ask me these questions if you weren’t prepared for honesty?”

“Because no one wants me. The troll.”

She dared to gently place her palm against his cheek and watched his eyes become wary. “Then you’ve been asking the wrong women.” She then laced her fingers into his hair and pulled him to her, so their mouths met. Cautious of the sharp protrusions, Alexia kissed him. She wasn’t skilled in this activity at all, but that didn’t stop her from doing what she thought felt right.

Herleif stiffened for all of a split-second before he growled and took control. He cradled the back of her head while tipping her chin up, devouring her mouth, and all she felt was bliss.

And, oh gods, did she want more.

Chapter Seven

Herleif wanted desperately to believe her words. His hunger for her grew with every

passing minute he remained in her presence. Like a vine twisting around his heart, its hold, tenacious, but not strangling.

Oddly comforting. At least that's how he thought it felt, given he'd never experienced the feeling before. Somehow, he felt at peace. Didn't mean he hadn't liked their snarky banter toward one another. He rather liked the verbal sparring, seeing her strength, her daring, and what she was capable of.

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Right now, she was highly capable of fanning the flames of his desire. He feared he'd be too rough, too aggressive. Too much. And he wanted to, Gods, how he wanted to ravage her. Own her. But he didn't want to hurt her.

As he started to loosen his hold and gentle the kiss, Alexia whimpered and crawled into his lap, spearing her fingers in his hair and holding him to her. The kiss deepened and he took hold of her hips, grinding her body to his. She moaned into his mouth as she moved her body in time to his movements, and Herleif thought for sure he'd bust right there.

"Alexia," he groaned, pulling away with great effort.

"No, please, don't stop," she pleaded. "Don't tell me why this is a bad idea when it feels so right."

"Be sure of what you're saying, because once I start with you, I will not stop."

She framed his face and locked her eyes on him. "I'm sure."

There was no tremor in her voice, no hesitation. He saw truth in her eyes, and his heart truly skipped a beat at the wonder of her words.

"Then you are mine." He held her ass and stood. Her legs wrapped around him and her gaze never strayed from his.

"I'm yours."

He marched them down the only hallway to where he presumed her bedroom to be. When he found it, he stood short of the threshold and looked past Alexia to take in her space. Earthy colors in various tones of brown, green, orange, and yellow greeted him as the first morning light began to brighten the area. Herleif was surprised yet pleased to see the size of her bed filling the room. His mind conjured wicked thoughts about what he'd do to her in that bed. He looked at her and grinned. "Seems there's plenty of room for the both of us. I hope it's sturdy." He winked.

Her giggle was like fairy music, light and delicate. "It'll hold."

Ducking into the room and stepping to the edge of the bed, he loosened his grip, and she released her legs to stand before him. When she reached for the hem of her shirt, Herleif stopped her and brought her hands to his mouth to kiss. Then he said, "Let me." She nodded and he released her hands to take hold of the material, lifting it off. He took in the beautiful sight of her bare torso and generous breasts. The dark nipples peaked, and he desperately wanted his mouth on them. But first he needed to finish undressing her.

She wore a skirt that tied at her side and hung loosely to her ankles. Her pale bare feet with toenails painted bronze made a stark contrast to his large black boots. Herleif reached for the ties, pulling the ends which allowed the material to fall at her feet. Alexia stepped away from her skirt toward him, pressing her palms against his chest. She ran her fingers down the length of his torso until she reached the hem.

"May I?" she asked as she began to lift the material. But Herleif halted her movement.

"No." She began to frown, and he simply chuckled as he scooped her up, delighting in her squeal. He spread her out on the bed then stood, drinking in the sight of her beautiful body. "You are magnificent." He loved the blush of her cheeks.

Making quick work of shedding his boots and clothes, he watched as Alexia rose onto

her elbows to study him, scanning his body. Her perusal brought his cock to attention, and when she met his gaze, there was no mistaking her look of need. And when she licked her lips, Herleif groaned.

“I am going to thoroughly enjoy worshipping every inch of you.”

She smiled and drew her legs apart. “What’s stopping you?”

The sight of her damp curls and the scent of her arousal had Herleif clenching his hands at his sides. His erection hardened near the point of pain, the tip weeping with moisture.

“Herleif, don’t be afraid of hurting me. I’m prepared and know what to expect.”

“You may think you’re ready, but you aren’t yet, and I don’t want to hurt you.” He fisted his cock and gave it a squeeze. “This is more than most can handle, especially for a virgin pussy.”

“Do you expect me to watch you pleasure yourself and leave me wanting?” She trailed a hand down her abdomen and into her curls. “Or shall I join you in the self-pleasure?”

“Woman,” he growled.

“You did say you were going to enjoy worshipping every inch of me.” She swirled her fingers through her folds, causing herself to gasp. “Will you be true to your word, Herleif?”

Her breathy voice undid him, and he moved quickly, bracing himself above her. “I will. For you.” The softening look in her eyes eased the tightness in his chest, dispelling the uneasy feeling of expecting her to change her mind. But her warm smile

and welcoming arms cracked his hardened heart, bringing in a breath of life he never thought to feel.

He wouldn't get ahead of himself and think beyond the moment. For now, he'd gladly take whatever she offered.

Leaning down, he molded his mouth to hers, kissing her now with leisure and care. With reverence. She responded in-kind, relaxing beneath him just as she wound her arms around him, splaying her hands against his back. Herleif tried to restrain from pressing his full weight onto Alexia, but she pulled his body to hers, wrapping a leg across the back of his thighs. The feel of her against him, at his mercy, was heady, but he knew he was too much.

Herleif used his strength and speed to hold her and roll, bringing her on top of him. He loved seeing the delight in her eyes as she planted her hands on his chest and sat up. Her fingers traced the many dips and swells along with the scars across his flesh. He watched her closely, looking for any sign of disgust, but he saw only interest. Desire.

While she explored his body, he did the same, tracing her sides until his hands covered her breasts, kneading the generous mounds. Alexia let her head fall back as she moaned, pressing into his touch. She rocked her pelvis into his with a slow and steady rhythm that had her slick pussy sliding across his eager cock.

"Herleif," she moaned.

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He tweaked her nipples then flicked the rigid pebbles with a claw, causing her to squeak. When he did it again, she cried out before her gaze met his. He carefully worked his hands beneath her thighs and began to lift her. “You’re going to hold onto that frame while I devour that enticing pussy of yours.”

“Wh-what? No, you don’t—”

“Oh, but I do, Alexia. And I will. Now grab it.” He gave her no time as he shifted her body, positioning her sex above his face. Her arms flew forward to find purchase on the metal structure which banged against the wall. He then spread her legs wide and held her aloft as he dragged his tongue through her slit. The instant he tasted her juices he knew he was lost. He was tasting ambrosia. Heaven.

Alexia gasped as he repeated the action. Over and over, he lapped at her pussy, trying to quench his thirst, knowing he never would. Knowing he’d never have enough of her.

He lashed his tongue across her engorged clit, reveling in her noises. Her body seemed to want more as she tried to grind against his face, but he held her at his mercy, delivering unrelenting whips with his tongue. With each strike she shuddered and gasped as her thighs shook in his hands. He wrapped his lips around the bud, suckling, causing her to cry out his name. Her tremors increased as her skin grew dewy with sweat, and he knew she was close to release.

Herleif wanted this pleasure for her. Wanted to be the one to deliver it.

He knew an instant before she came as her body tightened and her breath

caught. Then she exploded, dancing frantically, rubbing her pussy against his face as he held her quaking body above him. His cock ached, longing to fill her, knowing it would do so very soon. Gripping her thighs, he knew for sure he'd leave bruises as if leaving his mark and staking his claim. But they wouldn't be the only marks he left on her. Before this morning ended, she'd know she belonged to no one but him.

He gently lapped at her sex, continuing to flick at her sensitized clit, feeling every twitch and spasm.

"Herleif, please," she pleaded. "I can't ...I don't..." Her body went limp, and he sat up, cradling her in his arms as she rode out the orgasm, panting into his neck. "That was ...I feel..."

"I'm hoping that was amazing and you feel euphoric."

"Yes." She lightly chuckled. "That's a decent start."

Herleif kissed the side of her head while kneading her shapely ass. "Oh, it's only the start. I have much more in store for you." To prove his point, he flexed his erect cock, slapping it against her rear. She started to laugh but it morphed into a squeal when he traced a digit through the crease and carefully teased her hole. Alexia squirmed and tried to move away, but that brought her sex in contact with Herleif's other hand he'd moved between them. He pressed his thumb to her clit as he slowly inserted a finger into her channel, causing her to cry out.

"Easy, relax," he cooed. "You can take it. And you'll take more."

"Herleif," she moaned while pumping her body with the thrusting of his finger. He added a second, stretching her, and her guttural sounds intensified. "So good," she drew out.

“It gets better,” he growled, feeling her tighten around his digits. Putting more pressure on her clit, he felt her close to another orgasm. She became wetter, coating his fingers and dripping between them.

It was time.

Pulling his hands away, he earned a gasp then a protest. But he gave her little time to speak as he once again used his speed and power to lift her and notch his erection at her opening. He locked eyes with her, giving her only a second to realize what came next.

“Take me, Alexia, as I claim you as mine.”

He drew her body down his length, breaking through her barrier, filling her completely. Her cry turned to a whimper as she clung to him, her pussy surrounding him with exquisite tightness. Herleif wrapped his arms around her, rubbing her back, soothing her while she adjusted to the invasion.

Seconds passed before Alexia leaned back and raised her face to look at him. Although her eyes shone with moisture, they also radiated trust and acceptance. She framed his face and drew him close for a kiss. His heart thundered in his chest as his cock pulsed, eager for movement. Without breaking contact, Herleif maneuvered their bodies so she lay beneath him. Bracing his forearms on either side of her head, he withdrew his cock to the tip, only to slide back inside. He captured her moans, kissing her deeply as he increased his pace, and she matched his movements to perfection. He then placed a hand beneath her ass, changing their angle, sliding in deeper, harder.

“So fucking good,” he groaned. “You were made for me, Alexia.”

“Yes,” she said, her voice breathy. “And you, for me.” She wrapped her legs around

his waist, meeting his thrusts, grinding herself against his groin.

He felt her tremors, and he couldn't contain his grunts as she gripped him impossibly tighter. "That's it, squeeze me, milk me. Come for me. Come with me." Each word was more difficult than the last as his control began to slip. He couldn't slow his pace, and she didn't seem to mind. Just the opposite—she spurred him on.

"Yes, Herleif," she cried just as she came, clamping down on him like a vise. Her eyes flashed the color of fire, burning with passion before returning to their original emerald. Herleif felt the rush of his orgasm overtake him, and he buried his face in the soft cradle of her shoulder as he hammered into her, spurting his seed. He couldn't stop himself from sinking his teeth into her tender flesh, causing her to cry out and send a rush of power sizzling through him.

Locked together, their orgasms seemed never-ending. And that was fine with Herleif. He could remain inside Alexia until the end of his days, which, God willing, would be a very long time. Eventually their tremors eased, and he removed his mouth from her shoulder, licking the punctures and using a bit of his own power to soothe the wounds. He then withdrew from her, earning a sigh.

"Rest," he whispered then kissed her temple. With more creative maneuvering, Herleif managed to get them beneath the covers, spooning her body as she instantly fell asleep.

Chapter Eight

Alexia felt as if she were floating on water, surrounded by warmth. And when she opened her eyes, that's exactly where she found herself—in her Jacuzzi tub with her and Herleif filling the space.

“How did I not wake before now?” she asked groggily.

Herleif was gently caressing her body, and she realized she felt more energized than she expected.

“I may have persuaded you to rest until your body was ready to wake. I didn't want you feeling any pain, and I also wanted to clean you.”

She covered his hands with hers, halting his movements and turning her head to look at him. “Thank you.” When he simply nodded, she continued. “For everything. You were ...well, you were wonderful. You made me feel amazing.” She turned her head forward. “I wish I had better words to describe it.”

Alexia felt Herleif move, his mouth at her ear. “It was exquisite. Intense. Exceptionally marvelous.” He ran his tongue down her neck then nuzzled a particularly soft and tender spot.

“Yes,” she said and chuckled. “All that and more.” Suddenly her hand flew to the base of her neck. “Did you ...did you bite me?” Her fingers found tiny indents.

“Yes. I soothed the bites so you wouldn't feel any residual pain. You will, however,

retain my mark.”

Alexia shifted her body to face him, her thighs bracketing his. She was completely comfortable with her nakedness, considering what they’d experienced together earlier.

“Are you claiming me as yours, Herleif Aganarsson?”

His strong hands held her waist, pulling her closer. “I am. I have.” He brought her sex against his growing erection. “I told you, you are mine, did I not?”

She smiled as she rested her hands atop his shoulders. “You did. And you are mine.” His only response was the brisk nod of his head, and Alexia’s pulse beat in double-time.

“Your eyes glowed like fire when you climaxed,” Herleif said while gently caressing her lower back.

“Is that so? Well, it was an extraordinary moment. Very powerful.” She smiled.

He grinned. “That it was.”

She leaned forward, looping her arms around his neck to kiss him, then drew back. “How am I only now realizing you morphed your mouth when kissing me? You made these disappear.” She ran a finger across an extended tooth, pressing against the sharp point and causing a droplet of blood to well.

Herleif took her finger, inserting it into his mouth to suck off the crimson liquid. “Yes, I did. Other than intentionally biting you, I did not want to harm you with my tusks.”

“Tusks,” she murmured. “Not canines?”

He shrugged. "Some call them that."

"Herleif? You don't have to alter who you are or what you have. I want it all." She began kissing him, working around his teeth and taking her time to thoroughly enjoy this moment.

But just as she began to grind herself against him, hoping for another joining, her phone blared, startling them.

"What is that godawful sound?" Herleif growled.

“My phone.It’s my uncle.”

Herleif pulled her even closer.“Ignore him.”He tried resuming the kiss, but she averted her face.

“I cannot.He’ll persist until I answer, or he’ll be at my door in less than thirty minutes.”

“Plenty of time for me to fuck you.”He grinned.

She gave him a playful glare even as she punched his shoulder.“Enough.”After a quick peck on the lips, she moved away and rose out of the tub.Wrapping herself in a towel, she stared down at his glorious body.“Might as well dry and dress.No doubt he’s called to tell me he’s on his way over.”

Alexia turned away to go to her bedroom, grinning at Herleif’s startled look.She heard him splashing about before stomping toward her.She quickly dried herself and began to pull clothes out when he arrived in her room.

“Do you wish me to leave?”

“No.Why would I want that?”Watching his face screw up in confusion, she marched to him.“Herleif, if I have to tell you one more time that I want you here, and that I am not ashamed of wanting you, you’re going to feel your ass zapped again.Is that clear?”

A slow grin spread across his handsome face as he palmed a cheek.“That is clear.”He

leaned down to give her a gentle kiss. When he pulled back, she smiled at him before spinning to get dressed. She received a swat on her rear, causing her to yelp and look back at him.

“I like you feisty.” He winked.

She scoffed and rolled her eyes as she resumed her task. “Then dry my floor.”

“Gladly,” he said and chuckled.

Moments later, dressed and the floor cleaned, they were back in the living room. She noticed the tray of food and mugs of tea were nowhere to be seen. She turned to Herleif. “Thank you for tidying up.” He merely smiled and dipped his head. Picking up her phone, they listened to her uncle’s message.

“I have news and am on my way over.”

Simple and direct.

Alexia put down her phone and headed to the kitchen. “Time for more food and tea.” She grinned.

Fifteen minutes later, she was opening the door to her Uncle Nic, welcoming him in, and taking his coat. He stopped short when Herleif stood, apparently ready to greet him. “You’re...”

“Herleif Aganarsson,” Herleif said, offering his hand. Uncle Nic hesitated a second before grasping it to shake. He then looked at Alexia in question.

“Sit, please,” she said, indicating to the chair flanking the couch. She then went to Herleif’s side, looping her arm with his and pulling him down on the couch beside

her. "Seems we both have news to share. Help yourself." She nodded to the food and drink while getting a mug and offering it to Herleif before grabbing one for herself.

"It would seem so," her uncle said. He then lifted a cup and took a drink, never taking his eyes off Herleif.

"Uncle Nic, no need to be wary or awkward. You can speak freely, and you can trust Herleif." She looked at her ...lover? While she wasn't going to divulge details, she also wasn't going to hide the fact that they were more than ...friends? Gah, it was all so new, and Alexia wasn't sure how to navigate this budding relationship. "He came to me this morning regarding a mutual visitor we both had."

"Visitor?"

"A dream walker on behalf of Fate," Alexia began then detailed her experience and conversation. Herleif added his as well with Uncle Nic interjecting at times with questions for clarification.

"And this messenger deemed you two would work together," he stated.

"Yes," Alexia answered. "He said there is more to Herleif than even he realizes." She faced her troll. "And that he would not forsake me."

"Never," Herleif whispered to her. "As for some hidden power or talent, he must be mistaken."

"I suppose we'll see."

Alexia turned back to her uncle who was watching their interaction with curiosity but remained quiet about it. "A fucking soul collector," he mumbled with disgust.

“Were you aware of this happening or has it happened before?” Herleif asked.

“No, I was not aware of it happening now or ever, but it could explain recent concerns with the fights.”

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“What concerns?” Alexia asked. “And which fights? Gotham Point or other locations?”

“All locations.”

“The Lycan said, ‘Don’t let him take my soul. Him,’” Herleif restated. “Who is he and is he somehow coercing shifters? If so, how? It was clear to me that Evan was fighting for his life in a way many others did not, and he did not want this soul collector to win.”

“I learned that Evan Hosten was a pack leader, fighting in place of his son. But I haven’t been able to find out why he fought instead of the son. And now the son has disappeared without a trace.”

“Where is his pack from?” Alexia asked. “How does no one have any information on his whereabouts?”

Her Uncle Nic sighed. “He is one shifter among thousands in New York City alone. Tens of thousands in the entire state. Their pack is located upstate near the Canadian border. I’ve sent an agent to investigate.”

“And what of these concerns in all The Gin Room locations?” Herleif asked.

Uncle Nic faced him. “Increased activity, more fights. Curiously enough, the majority of them involving Lycan. And they’ve been more aggressive fights at that. All within the past week. Of course, the spectators and bidders aren’t going to complain, but my agents have taken notice.”

“Leading up to Samhain, which is tonight,” Alexia said.

“Did Evan ascend?” Alexia’s uncle asked of her.

“He did. But when he did, he passed through me versus me simply guiding him, showing him the way. And somehow, a portion of his essence, his energy, remained with me.”

“What?” Both men shouted at the same time.

“Why did you not say something to me?” her uncle said.

“Or me?” Herleif groused.

“Because at the time we spoke, Uncle, I was unaware. It was only when I teleported back to my apartment after my first encounter with Herleif, did I realize it hadn’t taken as much energy as previous times.” She then turned to Herleif. “And, because the subject didn’t come up.” She cleared her throat, knowing she was blushing as she thought about what occurred during their recent encounter. “Now, whether that were to happen again, I cannot say. The only way to know is to return to the fights—the pit, to be exact—and guide the next soul.”

“No,” both men bellowed again.

Alexia felt herself scowl. “Neither of you can tell me no. It is what I do. It may even be the way to locate this soul collector. I have the ability to follow the soul, and I’ve no doubt the collector will be active tonight. Maybe even now.” She looked at her uncle. “Are there fights taking place now?”

“Yes. Usually, they’d only occur at night, but as I said, activity has increased and now they’re happening continuously.”

Alexia was on her feet, looking between the two men. “Then we must go. Now.”

“Alexia,” Herleif began as he took her hand in his. “Sit, eat. You need your strength. We ate nothing this morning.”

A quick glance at her uncle, and Alexia saw his brow quirk in question. She ignored it and sat, grabbing bites of the food and sipping her tea. “I wonder how long this soul collector has been active? And how he—if he is indeed a he—is getting away with it?” She looked at Herleif then at her uncle. “Mother never spoke to me about someone she or others before her had to answer to. Throughout history, there were and still are many psychopomps who—”

“I’m sorry, what?” Herleif interrupted. “Psychopomps?”

“It’s the term that describes a guider of souls. As I said, there were many, like Hecate herself, Charon, the ferryman, Anubis, the Egyptian god.”

“Valkyries,” he said softly.

“Exactly. Every religion, culture, aspect of humankind had their version of a soul guider. I am but one among an indeterminate amount. I never questioned my ability, and before last night, I was never visited by an entity regarding my skill or mission.” She took another sip of tea. “Why now is Fate sending someone to us, telling us we are to stop him?”

“I wish I had answers to those questions,” Herleif said.

“Ki ego,” her uncle mumbled. He then popped his head up and said, “Apologies, slipping back to my Greek. Me too, I said.” He looked at Herleif. “If you don’t mind telling me, what are your powers? Other than strength. Are you a shape-shifter?”

“I am, only to human form.”Without any effort at all, he shifted to his Viking then back again, causing Alexia’s uncle to startle.

“Wow, okay, impressive.”

Herleif simply chuckled.“And yes, I have my strength and speed, but I also have a limited ability to heal and influence others in subtle ways.”

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“Like ensuring I rested,” Alexia said. Herleif only nodded. “I too can influence most. But not you. I had to zap you to get my point across.”

They chuckled together for a moment until Alexia realized her uncle was staring again. She looped an arm around one of Herleif’s. “You may have surmised, Herleif and I are very comfortable with one another. In fact,” she glanced at Herleif before facing her uncle again, “we are lovers.” She felt the subtle tensing of Herleif but gave him a reassuring squeeze.

“Oh, I see.” His gaze toggled between the two. “That was quick.”

Alexia smiled up at Herleif and whispered, “It was Fate.” She winked, receiving an endearing smile from her troll. Her heart fluttered at the thought and at the feeling of rightness.

“Well then,” her uncle started, “what’s your plan?”

“We go to the fights,” Alexia said. “And we go now. We need to get a sense of any unease or the presence of this soul collector. If need be, as I said, I will follow a soul and see where, or to whom, it leads.”

“I do not like this,” Herleif stated. When Alexia started to protest, he held up a hand. “I realize this is your journey and you are fully capable, but something feels off. And don’t ask me to expand because I cannot. It’s just a feeling.”

“Then we will be vigilant, and we will stay together.”

“Are you able to call upon Nonia anywhere, anytime?” Herleif asked.

“I can. She’s never failed me.”

He nodded and stood, holding out his hand for her. “Then we go.”

Chapter Nine

Herleif walked into The Gin Room with a churning in his gut. More than a niggling that something about this entire situation wasn’t what it appeared to be. He wished he knew why, wished he could find a reason for the feeling, but nothing coalesced in his mind. Lately he’d been troubled in sleep, restless with dreams, but again, nothing remained in his memories. Nothing other than the recent visit from Fate’s messenger, and that had been troubling enough.

Not wanting to burden Alexia with his concerns, he kept it to himself, allowing her to concentrate on what she needed to do.

Herleif felt an instant calm as a warmth started in his hand, spread up his arm, and over his torso. He looked down at Alexia, knowing she was trying to soothe him. He also saw the questions in her eyes and a tight smile on her otherwise beautiful face.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

He stopped short when he heard her voice in his head.

“You heard me?”

He gave a brisk nod before leading them to a darkened corner. “How are you doing that?”

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“I honestly don’t know, given you seemed immune to my influence. I only thought to give it a try.” She remained quiet a moment as if thinking then opened her mouth but closed it again without saying a word.

“Tell me your thoughts, Alexia.”

“Maybe since our joining, since you bit me ...could that have altered something between us? Formed a bond?”

“Like vampires?” She gave a careless shrug. “Alexia.” Her bright eyes told him she’d heard him in her mind. “I rather like this and the idea we are ...bonding.”

She smiled broadly as she placed a hand on his chest. “I do as well.”

Before either could say more, a ruckus was heard in the corridor leading down to the fight club. Herleif watched Dax, the man he knew as a panther shifter, sprint in that direction.

“Let’s go,” Alexia said, pulling him in that direction. “Must be serious if Dax is headed down there.”

They moved through the growing crowd, making their way toward the steps when they saw two men fighting and Dax trying to break it up. Another joined the melee, and they all managed to tumble down the stairs, crashing to the floor below. Herleif removed himself from Alexia’s grasp and jumped down the stairwell. He saw Dax had shifted and was fighting a wolf while not far away were two more wolves biting and clawing one another.

Spectators began to form a semicircle around the fighters even as the two other arenas carried on as if nothing unusual was happening. Herleif shoved his way past the onlookers to grab ahold of the Lycan ready to jump Dax. Once held firmly, he commanded, "Shift."

Herleif found himself holding a burly man, but he was no match for troll strength. The guy continued to yell, fighting his restraint so that Herleif had no choice but to knock him out and let him crumple to the floor. Dax shifted back to human form just as Alexia reached Herleif's side.

The roar of the crowd drew their attention to the other two Lycan. The beasts, bloodied and ragged, were now circling one another, growling and snarling. No one seemed to mind that a third arena was now open for bets.

"Who are these wolves and why were they fighting above?" Herleif asked of Dax.

The panther shifter shook his head. "I have no idea who they are or what caused their fight. More and more Lycan have been showing up, causing trouble. Tonight, of all nights, we're packed to the rafters, and more than half the patrons are wolves. We've had to turn many away, and I'm sure you saw the waiting line out the door."

"Uncle said more of the fights lately have involved wolves. Are the other clubs experiencing the same?"

Dax nodded. "Yes, in fact, it was Tor, from Oba's Manhattan club, who contacted us to give us a heads-up. They had their share of instigators as well, said a group talked about making the rounds to all the clubs' parties before heading to the fights. So, we brought in even more help for the evening than we had already planned. Fucking Halloween." He swiped a hand through his hair and sighed.

Alexia stepped to him, touching his arm. "Dax, you're bleeding. That's a nasty looking

gash.”Dax turned his arm and cursed.“Go get that cleaned up.”

He looked at Alexia and grinned.“Yes, ma’am.Guess that’s another raincheck on the drinks.”Looking at Herleif, he asked, “Are you here to fight?”

“Hadn’t planned on it.”He looked at Alexia then back at Dax.“We have another mission tonight.”He wrapped his arm around Alexia’s waist, drawing her closer.

“Okay then, well, good luck.Catch up later.”

Herleif nodded then watched the man walk away before looking at Alexia again.“Shall we?”He indicated toward the wolves who were now locked together as one held the other’s throat.“Doesn’t look like it’s going to take long.”

Her eyes held sadness, and Herleif wished he could spare her the grief she felt.Yet he knew she was strong and didn’t need him sheltering her from experiences she’d dealt with before and would no doubt deal with again.

Alexia gave a nod and marched closer.They came to the edge of the crowd when howls split the air—one clearly in misery, the other louder, signaling victory.One of the wolves stood over the other, flesh hanging from his jowls as blood pooled around the prone wolf on the ground whose throat had been ripped out.The victor snarled and slung the trophy from his mouth, causing viewers to scream as they tried to avoid being hit.The wolf then seemed to lock eyes on its next victim, a woman who stood next to Herleif.

“Watch for the soul,” Herleif said to Alexia.“I’ll take care of this fucker.”

She looked as if she wanted to protest, but Herleif turned away and focused on the bloodthirsty Lycan.“Ready to face a worthy opponent?”He taunted, gaining the wolf’s attention.“That’s right, let’s go.Unless you’re too much of a pussy to fight

me.”

His words had the desired effect when the wolf bared his teeth and leapt at Herleif. He easily skirted the attack while landing a punishing blow to the animal’s skull, sending him crashing to the ground, whimpering. Herleif then caught sight of the expected light ascending from the first fallen wolf. Alexia stood over the creature as his soul wound its way toward her.

As with the first time he witnessed it, Herleif wanted to warn her, protect her, but knew he shouldn’t. Wouldn’t. He watched as Alexia absorbed the light, her eyes flashing as bright as the sun. Just as the soul began to spiral upward, a piercing screech jerked his attention to the wolf he thought he’d only knocked out. But an eerie light of murky gray oozed out of the body and blasted toward Alexia.

“No!” Herleif bellowed as he threw himself between it and his lover, wrapping his arms around his woman to shield her from the assault. Alexia tensed and screamed as he absorbed the impact of what felt like a bullet train slamming into him. The underground disappeared as they barreled through time and space, feeling as if they were being sucked through a vacuum.

They came to an abrupt halt, the sudden impact jarring their bodies, causing both to grunt. They lay in a tangle for a moment, getting their bearings before rising and remaining at each other’s side. Except for a hazy amber glow in the distance, darkness permeated the space around them, and the smell of sulfur filled the air.

“What the hell?” Herleif murmured.

“Exactly,” Alexia said as she looked up at him. “What happened? I remember the wolf’s soul seeking me out then you grabbing ahold of me.”

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She produced the blue light in her palm and held it high, illuminating the space. A rocky floor lay beneath their feet and stone walls dripping with brown sludge rose on both sides, creating a corridor as wide as a city street.

“The wolf I thought I knocked out apparently died. Only his soul that rose from the body wasn’t a light, it was more like ...like that.” He pointed to the wall. “Some gray glob of muck.” He looked at Alexia. “But it targeted you.”

“What? Me? Why?”

Herleif shook his head. “I don’t know, but it shot straight for you with surprising speed. I only meant to shield you. It must have propelled us, here.” He waved his hand about. “Wherever here is.”

“We’re in a realm in the Underworld, and you had nothing to do with getting us here. It was the demented soul of the wolf you killed. I feel it.” The blue light changed to a fireball just as whispers were heard echoing throughout the cavern. Soft at first, they grew louder until Herleif thought it almost unbearable.

“Souls?” he questioned in a raised voice.

“Yes. Many belong here. Others do not.” Nonia suddenly appeared at Alexia’s side, growling low, and the voices began to quiet. Herleif watched Alexia place her hand on the wolf-dog’s head, massaging through the fur, comforting her.

“And what of the other soul, did it ascend?”

“It did not.It’s trapped among those here that do not belong.”

“Who is doing this?”he practically shouted.Nonia’s growling grew louder just before a voice crackled around them.

“I’m so glad you asked.”

A giant wolf stepped out of the darkness, walking upright like a human.Ghostly apparitions trailed closely behind as torches suddenly came to life along the rocky walls.Alexia extinguished her fireball, but Herleif sensed she remained poised for anything.The figure was as tall as Herleif with the mangiest coating he’d ever seen.Black eyes gleamed with dark delight and jowls dripped with thick saliva while smiling with what could only be described as an evil grin.

“Fenrir?”Alexia said in shock.Nonia barked, causing the apparitions to cower, while the wolf merely laughed, instantly grating on Herleif’s nerves.

“None other, my dear.Welcome to my realm.”He raised his arms in a flourish.“I hope you’re prepared to stay a while.”

Chapter Ten

Like hell, Alexia thought but surely wasn’t going to voice that.The beast would never let her live that little pun down.

“Are you fucking kidding me?”Herleif said.

“She is not, my handsome troll,” Fenrir said.

Herleif practically growled.“I am not youranything.”

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This only seemed to delight the wolf as he threw his head back and laughed. “Oh, but you are going to be a fun addition to my realm.”

Herleif started forward, fists bunched, until Alexia placed her hand on his arm, stepping closer to his side. When Fenrir began approaching with confidence, making his way directly to her, Herleif put himself in between her and the beast.

“Ah, is someone being territorial?” His tongue whipped out to lick his snout while he rubbed his paws together as if they were hands.

“Touch her and die.” Those gruff words from her lover sent more than warmth through her entire being, confirming the bond forming between them. It was fortification.

Fenrir began to circle them as Alexia and Herleif countered, never letting him out of their site. He kept his distance. For now. But Alexia wouldn’t be fooled by his calm demeanor, knowing this beast was a trickster of the highest order. His father was Loki, after all, the most famous Jötnar in their history.

“What are you up to, Fenrir?” Alexia asked.

“Isn’t it obvious, my beauty?” Herleif growled once again but Fenrir wasn’t fazed in the least. He twisted his body, indicating toward the apparitions behind him. “I’m building my army.”

“You’re the soul collector,” she stated. Then asked, “Army? For what purpose?”

The beast tsked and shook his head as if disappointed. "Don't be obtuse, my dear. The only purpose for an army is battle and a war is coming. Sooner than you might think."

"Whose war? Yours?" Herleif scoffed. "And spirits are your soldiers? Good luck with that."

"Oh, I won't need luck. I have all I will need right here."

His gaze never strayed from Alexia, and she shivered at the dark feeling that overcame her. Nonia pushed against her leg while rumbling a warning as Herleif stepped as close as he could, brushing his body to hers. Alexia brought up a hand, calling upon her magic and producing a blue light darker than any she'd ever conjured.

Fenrir seemed to shiver. "Mmm, how I love your show of strength. Sadly, it does you no good." He drooled as if bored. "This is my realm, and my magic, my strength is the only one that will prevail. And with it, I will finally have my revenge and return the world to the old order. When wildness reigned and chaos ruled!" He raised his hands, and the souls drew closer to him, chanting his name.

"Ragnarok wasn't enough for you?" Alexia asked. "You were killed once, and you'll be defeated again. This time, for good."

The beast laughed. "Oh, such sweet innocence. That purity of power will certainly be of use. To me."

Alexia knew to react, pushing out her power to erect a protective shield around herself, Herleif, and Nonia. The force of Fenrir's magic thrown at them shook the cavern, but her shield held.

"By the gods," Herleif mumbled. "Can you hold him off?"

“I will do my best, but I do not know his strength.He’s been feeding off the souls, collecting their essence.And for how long?Your guess is as good as mine.”

“Can I move in and out of your shield?”

Alexia startled and snapped her gaze to Herleif.“Do not try, Herleif.His power is considerable, that I can feel.Even your speed and strength may be no match for him.”

“I must try something.”

Just as he spoke, the air around them sizzled and quaked as Fenrir roared, increasing his efforts and causing her shield to ripple.The souls condensed behind him, screeching.Nonia howled then broke through the barrier, charging.

“No!”Alexia yelled, ready to follow.

“Hold!”Herleif yelled as he threw up his arm to block her.“Look!”

A dozen more wolf-dogs materialized, followed by a dozen more, their manes aflame as they too charged the souls.They swiped, lashed out, and jumped through the spirits, causing them to dissipate.This only enraged Fenrir and he turned his attention to the animals.Propelling spheres of power at them, the dogs were knocked back, whining or disappearing altogether, only to have others take their place.

Alexia watched as Nonia circled, preparing to attack.She couldn’t stand by and do nothing, putting the burden on the wolf-dogs.Before Herleif could stop her, she dropped the shield and threw all her power into Fenrir, taking advantage of his back to them.He stumbled just as Nonia pounced, but the attack only seemed to annoy Fenrir as he batted the wolf-dog away, sending her crashing against the rock wall.

“Nonia!”

Herleif shouted for her, but Alexia moved to her companion's side, sending a wave of healing magic across her. She watched as Herleif sped toward Fenrir, pummeling him with all his might. The giant wolf was stunned but quickly recovered, battling Herleif with both power and punches. Round and round they went, exchanging blows until Fenrir began to gain the upper hand. With another blast of his magic, he sent Herleif flying right into the center of the souls. They scattered but their focus remained on her troll. She had no idea what they could do to him, given Fenrir's influence over them, but she took no chances.

Alexia threw up a protective shield around him, giving him time to recover, knowing he'd charge out again when ready. She watched as the wolf-dogs continued to attack, dispatching the spirits, then turned to face her foe.

"You only delay the inevitable," Fenrir said, his paws flexing as his mouth dripped with even more disgusting spittle. "Cease your fruitless efforts or prepare to witness the agony I can inflict."

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Alexia cocked her head, staring at him. “Tell me, how did you coerce the shifters to fight—to the death, no less—in order for you to take their souls? If you’re so powerful, why not simply, take their souls?” She tapped her finger against her chin in a mocking manner, delighting in Fenrir’s confusion at the sudden change in tactics. Snapping her fingers, Alexia smirked. “Oh, that’s right. Because you don’t have that kind of power.” She dropped her hands but prepared to call her own power, knowing she was inciting the beast.

Fenrir reared back, puffing his chest like a proud peacock as he snorted and sneered. “They are Lycan! It is their duty to sacrifice to me!”

“Huh. And did you falsely promise them glory in the afterlife, all the while gloating, knowing you’d take their souls and discard them like empty husks?”

Fenrir roared, once again shaking the walls, causing debris to tumble to the floor. The torches brightened and the spirits wailed. Alexia glanced beyond the beast to see Herleif stand, remaining within her shield.

“What are you doing, woman?”

“Trust me.”

“Alexia...”

Before more could be said, the monstrous wolf pinned her with a steely gaze as he thrust magic in her direction. Alexia teleported across the cavern to stand just beyond the gathering of spirits. Nonia stood at her side as the other wolf-dogs formed a

semicircle around her.Fenrir spun, bellowing his anger.

“You think to evade me but you’re no match for my power!”He sucked up soul after soul, their murky essence flowing into him.His eyes glowed like red-hot lava as his mangy fur grew longer, thicker like dead tangled weeds.Claws extended from his paws, and he threw his arms up as if in victory.Pinning Alexia with a demented stare, he snarled.“You will be mine!”

Reacting a millisecond too late, Alexia was forcibly drawn to the beast, caught in his putrid embrace.“Yes,” he purred while licking her cheek, and it took all her control not to puke.

“Get your fucking paws off her!”Herleif shouted as he raced toward them, only to be tossed back once again by Fenrir’s magic.Alexia managed to contain her cry of concern, not wanting the beast to inflict any more damage to her troll.

“That’s better.”Fenrir pierced her with his inky gaze.“When I syphon your power, I will rule.And I will keep you at my side, fucking you, watching your body swell with my seed.”He trailed a paw down her body and across her belly before cupping her sex.“You will build my brood.”

“I would rather die a million deaths,” she gritted out.

Alexia then called upon her magic to dislodge herself, only to get knocked back from the combined force of her and Fenrir’s power as he countered her attempt.The wolf-dogs howled as half disappeared.Dazed but not defeated, she stood just as Herleif and Nonia made it to her side.

“Shield yourself!”he shouted as her wolf-dog whined.

She knocked away another wave of power and listened as the souls began to moan.“I

have a plan!”

Herleif managed to dodge a blast but wasn't so lucky with another as he was launched against the wall at their backs. “Then execute it! I won't lose you!”

“Nor I, you!”

Alexia screamed like a banshee as she sent a blast toward Fenrir, sending him tumbling like a ragdoll across the rocky ground. He regained his feet and smiled. “Impressive. But it still won't be enough to save you.”

Just as he prepared for another attack, Alexia raised her hands and surrounded herself with white light. “Ela so menna! Xefygete apo to kako! T eleutheroso tis psyches sas!”

She called upon everything within her, everything from her Greek ancestors, beseeching the souls to come to her and escape the evil. Promising to free their souls.

The spirits' tone clearly changed to one less mournful as they transformed to a brighter essence, rushing toward her with urgency. She braced for the impact of power she knew she'd absorb while guiding them to their destined place in the afterlife.

Alexia barely registered the fury of Fenrir or the alarmed shout from Herleif. She held the power around her as her heart threatened to explode while every cell in her body became electrified. But she held true to her promise, completing what she'd always been tasked to do.

Alexia freed every soul from Fenrir's hold.

She then collapsed as her world went black.

Chapter Eleven

Herleif caught Alexia before she hit the ground, her body trembling yet burning like fire. Her skin was flush and slick with sweat. Nonia altered between crying and howling, but Herleif had no commands, no words to console the wolf-dog. He paid no heed to Fenrir who lay collapsed in a heap, moaning pitifully.

Alexia was his priority.

A quick glance around indicated every soul must have ascended since no apparitions remained. Herleif cradled Alexia in his arms murmuring to her, coaxing her to wake, but she didn't respond.

"Alexia, my love, you must wake. Only you can get us out of here. You don't want to remain trapped in this purgatory, or wherever in hell it is, do you?"

He smoothed the damp hair away from her face as she continued to burn. He'd never felt so helpless, not knowing what to do. There was no chance he'd find water in this godforsaken place, was there?

Herleif looked at the cowering beast who seemed to shrivel even more before his eyes. "Tell me how to get out of here!"

Fenrir attempted to laugh but instead produced a horrific cough that brought forth blood and phlegm. "As if ...I'd assist you," he said, struggling to speak as more coughing overtook him. "You both deserve to rot."

“I will end you for good!” Herleif roared. Nonia growled and started to approach the beast, but Herleif stopped her. “That scum isn’t worth it,” he sighed, knowing he’d get nothing from the despicable monster.

“Alexia, please, find your strength, it’s there. Return to me,” he pleaded, uncaring how desperate he sounded. Uncaring there was a tremor in his voice. “We’ve only found one another. It can’t end like this.”

“Oh, but it can,” Fenrir groaned low. “And it will.” He managed to giggle like a lunatic.

Herleif’s head snapped up as he retorted with a warrior’s cry. Although he didn’t want to release her, he carefully placed Alexia on the ground before stalking to the wolf. “Your days are over.” He proceeded to take out his aggressions on the foul creature, stomping and pummeling his body until only broken bones within a bloody heap remained. A dark gray mist rose from the pile, dispersing toward the ceiling before it vanished altogether.

Throwing his head back, he bellowed his fury and despair into the void. “If there is a God, hear my words! Bring Alexia back! She deserves her life, with or without me! I’ll pay any price! Ved gudene, spar henne!” By the gods, spare her, he beseeched.

“You know the price.”

Herleif stilled at the disembodied voice he knew. The dream walker. His gut clenched at the memory of all that had been told to him. Details he’d withheld from Alexia. Details he’d hoped wouldn’t come to fruition.

He hung his head as Nonia came beside him, whining as she rubbed her body against his legs, offering her support. Herleif sank his fingers into her coat in a selfish move to soothe himself, knowing the task that lay ahead would gut him. Nonia raised her

head to look up at him as if questioning.Or possibly offering help.

Giving her a brisk rub, he withdrew his hand from her soft coat to clench his fist at his side.“Return to your mistress.I’m going to save her and send her back.”Nonia gave another whine then a yip before padding to Alexia and resting at her side.Herleif gazed at the pair, noticing Alexia’s body appeared calm, her color almost returned to normal as if simply resting.Oh, how he longed to lay with her and never leave her.He wished he could experience once again the love Alexia had so willingly given to him.

He turned away before he changed his mind.She deserved to live a life for which she was meant.

When first visited by Fate’s messenger, he was told he’d have to make a difficult choice for those he loved.That his heart would guide him in making the decision.

If there was a sacrifice to be made in order to save Alexia, he’d gladly make it.

“Show me.”

A vision appeared, causing Herleif to bristle, every muscle in his body clenching.His father, Agnar, was shown speaking with a man as money changed hands—money being given to Agnar.Vision after vision flashed before Herleif as his father seemed to conduct business with many, the money beginning to flow both ways.He heard none of the conversations, but with each vision, his father appeared to look younger and younger.

“What the fuck is this?”Herleif murmured.

The next vision was Agnar and Herleif’s mother, Ida, who looked tired and worn down.They were at their home in Denmark and seemed to be arguing, his father becoming so enraged he struck his wife.Ida took the blow without cowering, without

shedding a tear. She simply looked at her husband with sadness and disappointment before turning and walking away.

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Herleif fisted his hands and clenched his teeth until his jaw throbbed. “Why am I being shown this? What does this have to do with Alexia?”

“A choice must be made.”

“What choice?” he yelled.

Suddenly, Herleif saw another figure with his father, a man who looked like a younger version of Evan Hosten, the Lycan who died at the hands of Herleif in the pit.

“What are you about, Father?”

The scene became clearer, and Herleif recognized the waterfront area beyond the Gotham Point Gin Room.

“How...” Herleif quieted when he was able to hear the conversation this time.

“Find the shifters, especially the Lycan,” Hosten said, handing Agnar a giant wad of money. “Entice them to fight with the promise of an even greater reward. Send them to the Manhattan or Gotham Point clubs.” He nodded his head in the direction of the nearby club where Herleif had been fighting.

“Just be sure you don’t forget about my reward,” Agnar said as he pocketed the cash.

“Oh, not to worry. This won’t go unnoticed.” Hosten smirked.

Agnar simply snorted before turning away. He shifted into human form and took to the streets. Hosten remained in the shadows until a few moments later, a figure materialized, similar to how Herleif viewed Alexia when veiled.

Fenrir.

Herleif growled as he listened to more conversation.

“He is doing my bidding?” the beast asked.

“Of course, the greedy bastard,” Hosten replied.

“And what of Alexia? You’ve seen her?”

“Yes, she’s toured the clubs and is expected at the Gotham Point fight club tomorrow. I take it her power is immense?”

Fenrir cackled. “Oh, you have no idea. I’ve watched her lineage for generations, and she is the strongest of all. She will serve me well. No longer will I have to wait until Samhain, until the veils thin. Soon I’ll be able to traverse the realms as I please.” He then stared at Hosten. “Continue your work and remain elusive.”

The young Lycan nodded. “Will do.” He walked away without a backward glance.

“Soon, my beauty, you will be mine and the world will be ours.” Fenrir’s image shimmered before disappearing altogether.

Herleif vibrated with rage, digging his claws into his palms until he bled. Obviously, this meeting occurred two nights ago and no doubt Agnar remained in the city. And of course, he wasn’t going to chance getting in touch with his own son and possibly ruin his mission for the unholy beast. The beast his father had no idea no longer lived.

“Father!” he roared. “You traitorous fool!”

“He has let his greed consume him, becoming a contributor to this imbalance. You have defeated the beast, but unfortunately your father is due a penalty.”

“He’s due more than that,” Herleif grumbled. “What must I do?” Herleif questioned, already knowing in his gut the choice he would be faced with. “And what of Hosten? He betrayed his own father, did he not?”

“He did and his kind have already dealt with him. Now it is time for you to deal with your father.”

“And how will that save Alexia?” Herleif received no answer as the wind suddenly stirred in the stifling cavern as air rushed about, lifting Herleif’s hair. A pop echoed before Agnar appeared, standing ten feet from his son. He spun, looking around in confusion before facing Herleif again, his eyes widening.

“How did I get here? What have you done?” He spotted the mangled pile of what was once Fenrir, blood seeping into the cracks of the rocky floor. “What is that?”

“That is the beast you conspired with. The one who fed your greed, never intending to do more for you, other than drain your soul.”

“What do you mean? I never conspired with a beast. I—” Agnar clamped his mouth shut, scowling.

“Say it, Father. Tell me how you were brought back to the States. Tell me how you were given funds after funds to not only entice shifters to fight, but to also pad your greedy pockets.”

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Agnar's eyes widened for a split second before narrowing. "How do you know of this?"

With each passing moment, Agnar began to revert to his aged form, losing whatever vitality he was spelled with. Was that because of Fenrir's demise?

"So, you do not deny my accusations? You admit to your abhorrent acts?"

"There is nothing abhorrent about wanting more, about wanting a good life with the ability to do anything I wish."

Herleif threw his head back and laughed. He then pinned his father with a hardened stare. "No, there is nothing wrong with wanting a good life, but you had that. A good wife and partner. An obedient son willing to sacrifice time from his life to pay your debt, all because I did not want your life ended. But that wasn't good enough, was it? You have forsaken your wife, and you have betrayed your son."

"How have I betrayed you?" He waved his hand carelessly at Herleif. "You still live and breathe, do you not? You still have the ability to fight and be rewarded handsomely, do you not?"

"Yes, Father, I still live and breathe, and I may have the ability to fight, but I'm done with that. I will never step foot in any fight club again."

"Then join me. I've been promised riches! I—"

"You will get nothing!" Herleif fisted his hands. "You. Were. Duped. Played a fool." He

pointed down at what remained of Fenrir. "This is the beast behind the false promises you were given. Behind any fleeting magic that even now no longer has power. Do you not feel it? Feel the spell waning?"

Agnar suddenly stooped as if his back couldn't hold his weight. He lifted his hands and watched them bend, contort, and wrinkle before his eyes. He looked at his son with fear.

"What is this trickery? What is happening?"

"It's not trickery, Father, it's the truth. The truth of who you are: an old troll who must now pay for his sins."

"No!"

"You will! Your actions contributed to lost lives." Herleif pointed to where Alexia lay, Nonia by her side, growling low as the wolf-dog stared in Agnar's direction. "I had just begun to discover love." The realization of that hit Herleif like a sucker punch to the gut. "She accepted me for me," Herleif said softly. "And now I may never know what it's like to live out the remainder of my days with someone who cares for me. With someone I came to care about in no time at all."

Agnar sank to his knees, his face even more aged and gaunt. "It can't end like this. It's not supposed to be like this," he whined. "It's not fair."

"Fair? You have the audacity to question what is not fair?" Herleif bellowed as he marched up to his father. "Look at her! Look at the woman I love who may have paid with her life to spare someone like you, so that you may live!"

When Agnar didn't lift his head to look at Alexia, Herleif stomped to him, bending down to grab his jaw and twist his head, so he had no choice but to see. "She had a

purpose and so much potential. She loved and was loved.” He then yanked his hand away, causing Agnar’s head to drop. “But you, someone who took for granted all they had, someone who wasn’t satisfied with their blessings. You threw it away all for greed and vanity.”

“I’m sorry, please believe me. I knew nothing of their intent. I never wanted anyone hurt or killed. Please spare me.”

Herleif could only shake his head in disappointment. “I cannot make that decision. It is up to Fate to decide.”

Agnar’s head snapped up, a glare on his wrinkled face. “We make our choices! What we want, we go after. There is no fate.”

A chuckle escaped Herleif. “I foolishly thought the same, but I was wrong. A wise woman once told me our choices lead us to where we’re supposed to be. So, Father, your choices led you to this point. You chose to lie, to let greed drive you. You have forsaken those who loved you and look where it’s gotten you. Alone, angry, bitter, and withering away.”

“No!” he cried once again. “Do something! I am your father! You owe me!”

“Do I?” Herleif laughed bitterly. “Shall I show the mercy you didn’t? Will it somehow save Alexia? I would, for her, not you.”

“Do you not care for me? Your own blood? I gave you everything!”

“You gave me grief! Blood means nothing when your actions are vile! You betrayed your blood. Your wife and your son. You are a disgrace.”

Agnar tried crawling to his son but only managed to fall on his face, berating

Herleif. Ignoring the man he could no longer call Father, he glanced at Alexia, now at peace.

Would she live? Her chest rose and fell with breath, but for how long?

Just as he took a step toward her, a more violent wind rent the air, so much that Herleif shielded his face with his forearm to block the debris flying around. A flash lit up the cavern and when the wind quieted, Herleif dropped his arm to stare in disbelief.

Astride an armored steed was a beautiful Valkyrie, her sky-blue eyes trained on him.

Chapter Twelve

Alexia heard everything around her. Nonia's soft pants next to her. The shockingly sad conversation between Herleif and Agnar. The declaration of Herleif's intent to save her. The despair in his voice. She tried to speak, move, anything, but nothing seemed to work. She even tried to communicate through their mental link, but it was blocked.

Why? What had happened?

She remembered battling with Fenrir then calling upon everything she had, urging the souls to go through her to the afterlife. She had absorbed their power and it'd been overwhelming. Phenomenal. Empowering.

Alexia knew she wasn't dead, so why couldn't she move? Why couldn't she speak?

And who was here, leaving Herleif speechless? Neither he nor Agnar had said a word for several moments. She felt a presence—two, in fact—but couldn't distinguish who or what had joined them. She felt certain if there was a threat, Herleif would have reacted accordingly.

"Nonia, can you hear me?"

Her wolf-dog nuzzled against her side and whined then licked her cheek.

Alexia laughed to herself. "At least you can hear me. I wish you could speak to me. And I wish I could move. I don't understand why I cannot. I need to know what's happening to Herleif."

A beautiful, lyrical voice rang out. Another woman was in their presence.

“Your want for justice is recognized, Herleif. Tell me, what would you sacrifice in order for Alexia to survive?”

“Anything,” he said immediately.

“Yourself?”

“If it were the only way.”

“And if there was another way? If sacrificing your father not only brought Alexia back, but also served as justifiable punishment for his sins, what say you?”

There was silence. Alexia heard no reply from Herleif, but she suddenly felt his emotions. As much as he wanted his father to pay, he couldn't bring himself to offer him up.

“I sense your hesitation. Even now, the compassion you feel in your heart is commendable.”

“It is not up to me to make that choice regarding his life, no matter how strongly I feel about the injustice he's done,” Herleif said.

His father continued to remain silent, simply whimpering to himself as if he'd lost the will to even counter with more argument. No doubt he realized it was futile.

“Yet you take a life in a fight?”

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“That was their choice to fight, and to fight to the death. Kill or be killed. I’ll take living, thank you very much.”

Sweet laughter rang out. “Such balance between brute and benevolence. It has served you well, and it will continue to serve you moving forward.”

“And what of Alexia? Please tell me how to save her. I don’t want to go on without her.”

“And you will not have to, loyal troll.”

Alexia’s pulse raced. Would they have a chance at a life together? “Herleif?”

“Alexia?”

He heard her! Footfalls sounded off, and Nonia yipped with joy. Alexia felt Herleif near, then he caressed her cheek.

“Can you wake, my love?”

“I’m trying. Why am I having trouble moving and speaking?”

“You went through a traumatic experience,” said the woman. “Your body is still processing the energy you absorbed and determining how to navigate the enormity of power without exploding.”

“Oh, well, I’d rather not explode.”

The woman let loose with a deep throaty laugh, so different from her speaking voice. "I promise you, that will not happen. Your strength and control are impressive."

"Thank you?"

"You're most welcome."

Alexia concentrated on that strength and control she had just been praised for. She was eager to remove herself from this almost catatonic state.

"Easy, Alexia," Herleif said. "I feel your desire to return. It will happen when ready."

"I'm ready now. Oh, I can speak again!" Herleif chuckled as she focused on movement, on opening her eyes and being able to at least sit up. When her lids opened, and her gaze connected with Herleif, she nearly cried with joy.

"Ah, there's my woman," he said.

"Here I am." Nonia yipped and sat up, waiting. "Yes, yes, I'm trying." Alexia directed her energy to her muscles, and she was able to sit. Then with the aid of Herleif, she stood. Her gaze shifted to the ethereal beauty of what could only be a Valkyrie atop a gorgeous horse.

"Oh, my! How beautiful you two are!"

The Valkyrie dipped her head, and the horse neighed. "As are you, Alexia Stavros. Now, I think it's time for you and Herleif to return to your realm while I take care of Agnar."

"What of my mother?" Herleif asked.

“She will be fine,” the Valkyrie said. “Better, in fact, and you will see her soon.”

“And Fenrir?” Alexia questioned. “He will no longer pose a threat?”

The Valkyrie shook her head. “His soul is bound in the depths of Hell and can never escape.”

Alexia bowed her head in gratitude.

“Herleif!” his father yelled, finding his voice. “Do not let this happen! It’s not my time!”

“But it is, and it is out of my hands. Your time for judgement has arrived.” Alexia took Herleif’s hand in hers to offer comfort, easing his grief. He gave a soft squeeze. “It’s time to go,” he said.

While Agnar continued to moan, the Valkyrie looked at Alexia and Herleif. “Till Valhalla, warrior and warrioress. May you enjoy a long life filled with love and purpose.”

“Takk,” Herleif said just as Alexia replied with “Eucharist,” both thanking her.

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In a flash, the Valkyrie scooped up Agnar and disappeared. Alexia felt Herleif's heart race as he took a deep breath.

"Time to return, my love," she said. And in a blink, she'd returned the two of them to her apartment while Nonia went to rest, knowing her mistress was safe. Alexia wound her arms around her troll and looked up at him. "You are an amazing being, Herleif."

"As are you." He leaned down to seal his lips to hers, kissing her gently as if she'd easily break. He broke the kiss too soon, causing her to frown.

"Herleif, I feel your hesitation. Why?"

"You've been through a lot. I'm sure you need rest." He started to pull away. "I—"

"Stop." He jerked to a halt, confusion on his handsome face. "Don't you dare go anywhere unless it's to my bed. Or here," she pointed to the floor. "This will do just as well."

"Alexia..."

"No, do not say another word if all you're going to do is provide excuses."

"You are still processing, healing. You need rest," he stated again.

"No. I need you." To prove her point—and truthfully, to show off—she used her magic to strip them both naked and have him on his back at her feet. Surprise flashed in his eyes before desire took its place. When he started to lift his hand, reaching for

her leg, she stepped away. "Lie still."

He quirked a brow but remained silent as he returned his hand to his side.

"Now, you aren't going to move, is that clear?"

"It is."

Alexia smiled as she used her foot to spread his legs apart before dropping to her knees between them. Herleif watched with what she knew was anticipation as she felt his entire body vibrate. Their bond was expanding, strengthening, and she had no doubt he could feel her excitement and desire as well.

She watched as his erection grew, its tip already moist with his cum. She hummed with delight, eager to taste him. To pleasure him. Crawling between his legs, she reached his cock, trailing a finger along its length as her other hand teased his balls. Herleif jerked and moaned, his hands clenching at his sides.

Alexia wasted no time, fisting the base of his erection while wrapping her lips around the head. His cock pulsed in her mouth as she swirled her tongue before suckling while also squeezing with her hand.

"Ahh, so good," he groaned.

She alternated between taking him deep and licking the head. Squeezing and stroking as he grew impossibly harder, his semen leaking in thick droplets along her tongue. His sounds of pleasure spurred her as she increased her actions, moving faster as she bobbed her head, taking as much of his length as she could. She felt his restraint ready to break, sensing he needed to touch her and take control. And she was ready for him to do just that.

Releasing his cock, she earned a moan of protest. “Not to worry, my handsome troll, I’m going to let you fuck me.” Herleif’s eyes widened causing her to laugh. “I’m learning a thing or two from you.” She winked and shifted her position, turning her back to him and going onto her hands and knees. Looking over her shoulder, she wiggled her ass and received a growl in return.

In a flurry of movement, Herleif was on his knees at her backside, spreading her legs. “Are you wet and aching for me, my love?”

“I am.”

“Let’s see,” he whispered as he held her hip with one hand while trailing the other through the crease of her ass, reaching her pussy.

Alexia lifted her rear, pressing closer to him as his fingers teased her clit. “Yes, Herleif, don’t deny me.”

“Never.” He continued to rub her clit as he fisted his cock, tracing between her cheeks before notching it at her opening. “Hold on,” he said, his voice raspy.

Without further warning, he shoved inside her, causing her to scream. But oh, it felt divine. He pulled back and slammed into her again. While teasing her clit, a hand pressed down on her back until her chest was on the floor and her ass remained in the air.

“So fucking sweet,” he cooed. “This cock was meant for you.”

“Yes,” she moaned. “Deeper, Herleif, I want it all.”

“And you shall have it.”

He moved faster, drove deeper, igniting all her nerve endings. She teetered on the brink of an orgasm, her body thrumming until she thought she'd explode.

“Herleif, so close, so close. Gods, you feel amazing.”

Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 8:35 am

“I feel it, your pussy squeezing me, getting tighter,” he gritted. “Come for me, Alexia. Now.”

He pressed hard on her clit as he rammed into her, and her world shattered. She cried out as she met him thrust for thrust, elation infusing her body. Herleif was close, she felt it, and she wanted him to unleash his passion upon her. “Now come for me, my love,” she said on shaky breaths. “Fill me with your seed.”

“Yes,” he groaned, pounding into her. “Take it, Alexia, take me,” he said, almost pleading.

As if she wouldn’t. She loved this troll, this beast, and she needed him to know the depths of her feelings. “I love you, Herleif. I want it all. All that you are.”

He roared as his orgasm consumed him, pulling her into another climax as well. Together they soared, sharing this moment that would only be the beginning of more. Herleif continued to pound into her, and she took all that he gave. And when their bodies began to descend from the high, he slipped free and took them onto their sides.

“I never thought to be blessed like this,” he whispered as he tightened his hold around her trembling body. “To hold someone such as you, love someone such as you, and to receive that love in return.”

Alexia lifted his hand that rested across her body, kissing it. “I too, am blessed. As surly as you were (he chuckled), I fell for you, you loveable beast. And now you are mine, my fated mate, as I am yours.” She moved his hand to rest across her

belly. “And she is ours.”

She felt Herleif freeze, his body rigid. “She? What? How?”

Alexia chuckled. “I think you know how.”

“But how can you be sure our joining has resulted in a pregnancy? And a girl?”

“I just know. She will be named Phoebe Stavros, for radiant, shining one, and she will carry on my lineage. And she won’t be the only one who will bless us.” She tightened her hold on his hand across her abdomen. “I will give you a son, and he will be named Bodvar. Bodvar Herleifsson.” Herleif sucked in his breath, and she felt his heart race. “For warrior, another who will be just as strong and admirable as his father, fighting for all that is right in this world.”

“Alexia,” he murmured with such reverence in his voice. “You honor me.” He kissed the back of her neck repeatedly until she rolled in his arms to face him.

“You are more than deserving, my troll. My warrior. My lover. And my mate.” She kissed him fervently, pouring all her emotions of love and joy and hope into the action. “You are stuck with me.”

Herleif laughed, the rich sound filling her with more happiness than she ever imagined.

“Well, if I’m going to be stuck with someone,” he nipped her mouth with his teeth before kissing her in return, “I thank the gods it is you. My love. My mate. Future mother of our barna.”

Alexia felt his cock stir, pressing into her belly, causing her to moan. Just as she lifted a leg over his hip, ready to be impaled by her beast, a jarring noise startled them both. Herleif pressed his face into her neck and groaned.

“Not again, the cock-blocker,” he groused, obviously remembering her uncle’s ringtone.

Alexia let loose with howling laughter. “This time, he can wait.” She raised a hand and flicked her wrist, silencing the phone. Herleif lifted his head to stare at her, and she gave him a grin. “Now, I believe you have plenty of time to fuck me. Again.”

His smile was filled with wicked promises, and she looked forward to all of them being fulfilled.

The End
