



Big, Bad Alien (Alien Wolf Tales #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Scarlett has never heard anything good about the Vultor but when she encounters one on her way to her grandmother's house, he is nothing like she expects. She should be afraid especially when he threatens to keep her forever but what if she doesn't want him to let her go?

Humans took everything from Finnar, and he is determined to make them pay. When a pretty little human stumbles into his path she seems like the perfect target for his revenge. If only she didn't awaken feelings he'd thought gone forever...

Total Pages (Source): 30

CHAPTER 1

Scarlett bent over her loom, hemstitching the end of the length of fabric with practiced ease. She carefully cut the warp threads, then sat back with a satisfied sigh, brushing her curls away from her damp forehead. The day was already promising to be hot even though summer had yet to arrive. Outside the open window, the muted hum of a typical village morning drifted past.

She scanned the cloth, the evenness of the weave a testament to years of discipline and care, and nodded approvingly. It was thick and sturdy, dyed in earthen tones perfect for market trade. Not an exciting job but a practical one which should bring a decent profit.

The baskets of colorful yarn stacked on the wooden shelves lining one wall of the cottage promised a more interesting project. Mrs. Jacobson, the village mayor, had ordered her to use only the finest yarns and normally she would have been anxious to get started, but she didn't feel her usual enthusiasm today. The loom that dominated her living space suddenly felt too large, too confining. She'd been cooped up for days working on this length of cloth.

A breeze swept in through the open window, carrying the scent of pine and moss from the nearby mountains and adding to her sudden restlessness. She stretched and rose, her muscles protesting from being bent over the loom since first light. Wandering over to the window she looked up at the mountain peaks, still snow-capped even though they were well into spring. When she was a little girl she'd dreamed of exploring them, but that was a long-forgotten fantasy, buried under years of responsibility and routine.

She sighed and ran her fingers along the windowsill, tracing the cool grain of the wood. Her restlessness was about more than just needing a break from weaving. It was something deeper, an itch she couldn't quite reach. The day was still young and suddenly the sunlight seemed too bright, too inviting, to ignore. Mrs. Jacobson could wait a little longer.

As she turned away from the window, her gaze snagged on the red cloak hanging on the hook by the door. Her grandmother had made it for her several years ago—a practical thing, warm and sturdy, but the color blazed like autumn leaves, like the sunset, like her own untamable hair. It always made her feel braver, more alive. That feeling was exactly what she needed now.

A visit to her grandmother was long overdue. The thought struck her with a pang of guilt—had it really been a month? The old cottage in the woods would be draped in morning glory by now, their purple flowers climbing the timbered walls just as they did every year. If she set out now, she could be there by early afternoon and they would have plenty of time to visit.

Her wicker basket hung by the door, the handle worn smooth from years of use, and she grabbed it, taking a quick look around the cottage. What could she take with her? She wrapped the loaf of bread she'd baked the day before in a clean cloth and tucked it into the basket, along with the canister of tea she'd bought from a passing trader. How many afternoons had she spent at her grandmother's side, drinking tea and listening to her stories as her nimble fingers wove intricate patterns into the cloth?

Grabbing her red cloak from the peg by the door, she swung it over her shoulders, the fabric swirling around her like a flash of flame as she took her basket and headed through the cottage door into the bustling village square.

Fortunately Mrs. Jacobson was nowhere in sight as she headed over to the bakery and ducked inside, breathing in the heavenly aroma of fresh-baked bread and sweet

pastries. Behind the counter, her friend Tessa's dark curls bobbed as she bent a tray of fruit-filled tarts.

"Well, if it isn't my favorite weaver." Tessa grinned at her as she straightened, absently swiping at the flour dusting her face. Even flushed from the heat of the ovens and sprinkled with flour, she was still the prettiest girl in the village. "What brings you out of your cottage?"

"I'm going to visit Grandmother so I thought I'd bring her some treats. What do you suggest?"

Tessa lifted a cloth to reveal a batch of sticky buns, their tops glistening with honey. "Fresh from the oven. Want some for your basket?"

"You know me too well." She peered into the display case and pointed. "I'll also take two of those cream buns, and two of those berry tarts."

Her friend wrapped the pastries in parchment paper, then tucked them carefully into her basket before giving her a warning look.

"If you're going alone, you'd better not take the forest path. I hear there are monsters lurking in the woods these days."

"Monsters?" She raised a skeptical eyebrow. "What have you been drinking with your morning tea?"

"I'm serious!" Tessa protested, but she couldn't hide her smile. "Mrs. Peterson swears she saw something huge moving through the trees yesterday. Said it had glowing eyes and everything."

"Mrs. Peterson also claims her cat can predict the weather," she said, shaking her

head as she placed a few coins on the counter. “I think she’s been into her special elderberry wine again.”

Tessa pushed the coins back again.

“A gift for your grandmother.” She held up her hand when Scarlett tried to object. “If she makes too much of a fuss, bring me back some of her hand salve.”

Scarlett sighed and gave in.

“If you insist.”

“I do. And you be careful out there.” Tessa gestured at her cloak. “That color might attract attention.”

“From what? A fashion-conscious monster?” She picked up her basket and grinned at her friend. “The worst thing in those woods is probably my grandmother’s cooking. But if you’re worried, you could come with me. I know Grandmother would love to see you.”

Tessa’s smile faded as she looked past her to the sunlit village square outside the shop, and Scarlett immediately regretted making the suggestion.

“You know Lenora would never let me do that,” Tessa said quietly.

Scarlett followed her gaze and saw Tessa’s stepmother standing near the fountain talking to Mr. Gosling while the delivery boy from the general store stood behind her, laden with packages. Lenora was a beautiful woman and both Mr. Gosling and young Billy were gazing at her with foolishly besotted expressions, but Scarlett knew that beneath Lenora’s outward beauty was a vain, malicious woman who kept Tessa tethered to her duties at the bakery.

“I know,” she said gently, squeezing her friend’s hand. “Another time, then. I’ll give Grandmother your love.”

Tessa’s smile returned, albeit smaller, as she plucked at the hem of her apron.

“Thank you. And seriously, watch yourself. Even if the monsters are just stories, those woods can be dangerous.”

“Don’t worry. I grew up running through those trees. I know how to take care of myself.”

She settled her basket on her arm and gave Tessa a reassuring smile as she left the bakery. The villagers were out in full force as midday approached. Merchants called out their wares, children darted about with laughter in the air, and the blacksmith’s hammer rang out from across the square. She caught a glimpse of Mrs. Jacobson, scanning the activity in the square, her mouth pursed as if she’d just eaten a sour fruit. Fortunately she managed to turn down one of the lanes leading out of the village before the other woman saw her.

As she reached the outskirts of the village she hesitated. The wide road that led past her grandmother’s house curved along the edge of the forest, dry and dusty beneath the hot sun. The shorter path wound through the heart of the forest, cool and shadowed.

The smart choice would probably be the main road—it was safe and well-traveled and she might even catch a ride from a passing merchant—but nothing about the dusty track appealed to her. Instead the forest path whispered to the restless side of her. She’d crossed the road and entered the woods before she’d even made a conscious decision.

As soon as she stepped beneath the trees, the temperature dropped, the air cool and

tinged with the scent of damp earth and evergreens. The morning sun filtered through the canopy of leaves overhead, dappling the ground with patches of gold. She adjusted the basket on her arm and pulled her cloak closer, the red fabric bright against the muted hues of the forest as she set off.

The forest welcomed her with its familiar symphony—a bird calling from high in the branches, leaves rustling in the breeze, the distant burble of a stream that wound its way through the woods. She tilted her head, smiling as she tried to spot the bird, calling on the skills she'd learned as a child running through these same woods. It had been far too long since she'd been this way.

The restlessness she'd felt earlier began to fade as she fell into an easy rhythm, humming an old tune under her breath, one Grandmother had taught her about travelers and the paths they chose. Her feet knew this route by heart—past the split oak, around the moss-covered boulder, across the wooden bridge that spanned the narrow part of the river.

A rabbit darted across her path, disappearing into a thicket of ferns, and she smiled again. Her grandmother had told her the furry little creatures with the long ears weren't really rabbits, not the kind that had once existed on Earth, but the colonists had chosen familiar names for everything they encountered on Cresca. The thought of her grandmother's cottage, with its herb garden and welcoming hearth, quickened her steps.

It had been too long since her last visit. Grandmother would probably scold her for staying away, but then serve her tea in those delicate cups painted with roses while asking about every detail of village life. The familiar routine was as comforting as the soft wool of her cloak.

The path curved ahead, following the contours of the land. She breathed deeply, taking in the scent of pine and moss and wild mushrooms. The forest felt alive around

her, vibrant with late spring growth. Even the shadows between the trees seemed to dance with possibility rather than threat. She'd been right to take this path.

But just as she crested a rise in the path, a distant sound reached her ears—a howl, faint and mournful. Her heart gave a sharp thud as the sound whispered beneath the trees and her steps faltered. Goosebumps prickled along her arms despite the warmth of her cloak as she froze, her fingers tightening on the basket handle.

Vultor.

The name floated unbidden to the surface, but she immediately dismissed it. The Vultor were a race of aliens who had also established colonies on Cresca, although unlike the human settlers, they preferred to stay deep within the wilderness. They had clashed with humans several times in the early years and the stories painted them as violent predators, little more than animals, but it had been a long time since there were any incidents. She remembered winter nights by the hearth, listening to tales of the Vultor—their razor-sharp claws, their ability to shift between forms, their superhuman strength.

Her heart quickened, but not entirely from fear. The stories had always fascinated her, even as others shuddered at their telling. What were they really like, these beings who shared their world? The howl came again, closer this time, and there was something almost musical in its otherworldly timber, a complexity that made her wonder if it carried meaning beyond what human ears could comprehend.

While the village children traded tales of the Vultor in the dark, trying to spook each other, the adults spoke of them only in passing, their jaws tight and their eyes grim. Her grandmother had always been more matter-of-fact about them.

“They’re not beasts,” she’d told Scarlett once, her voice calm as she bent over her sewing. “But they’re not like us, either. They have their own ways, their own truths.

Best to leave them be, child.”

She’d always listened carefully to her grandmother’s words, and now, standing alone on the forest path, her skin tingling from the eerie howl, she took comfort from them. She glanced around, trying to penetrate the shifting shadows cast by the swaying branches above.

“Probably just an adyani,” she muttered under her breath. The adyani were one of the few predators native to Cresca, but they preferred the high mountain ranges. “Sound travels in the mountains.”

She adjusted her basket, the rustle of the parchment-wrapped treats reassuringly normal as she resumed her walk. The path beneath her feet was still familiar, the trees still the same ones she had climbed as a child. Nothing had truly changed even if the subtle shifts in sound and light, the gentle movement of the leaves, and the way her own breath stirred the stillness seemed charged with an odd kind of expectation.

Then another sound broke the stillness. This time it wasn’t a howl, but something gentler—quieter, even. A rustle of leaves, too deliberate to be the wind. She should have been frightened, should have hurried along the path towards the safety of her grandmother’s cottage. Instead, she found herself moving slower, more deliberately, scanning the tree line for any sign of movement.

“Hello?” The word slipped out before she could stop it, soft and tentative. She felt foolish the moment she spoke—if there really was a Vultor out there, what did she expect? That it would step out and introduce itself?

There was no answer, but the sense that she was being watched refused to leave her. She told herself it was nothing—just her imagination playing tricks on her. But she couldn’t shake the sensation, that creeping tension prickling at the nape of her neck.

The path took a sharp turn ahead, twisting deeper into a thicket where the trees stood closer together, their branches weaving into a canopy that cast the ground in dappled shadow. She hesitated for a heartbeat before marching onwards. The earthy smell of the woods grew stronger here, thick with the scent of moss and damp bark.

A flash of movement caught her eye—just a shadow, there and gone between the trees—but her breath caught. She turned her head slowly, scanning the undergrowth, but saw nothing except shifting patterns of light and shade.

The sensation of being observed intensified. It wasn't like being stalked by a predator—this felt more... deliberate. Like she was being studied. The presence seemed to move with her, keeping pace somewhere in the shadows.

She squared her shoulders and lifted her chin.

“I know you're there.” Her voice came out steadier than she expected. “I can feel you watching.”

The forest absorbed her words without echo. But something changed in the quality of the silence—it became heavier, more focused. The invisible observer had heard her, she was certain of it.

She continued forward, forcing herself to maintain an even pace despite the urge to either run or freeze in place. Every few steps, she caught glimpses of something moving in her peripheral vision, but whenever she turned to look directly, there was nothing there but dancing shadows and swaying branches. When a bird startled from a low bush, she flinched despite herself. It darted up into the canopy, and she exhaled with a nervous laugh.

“I'm being ridiculous. It's just a bird.”

Yet even as she tried to convince herself nothing was wrong, she heard that same deliberate rustle in the bushes. She spun sharply, searching along the trail behind her. Nothing. But she was convinced it wasn't her imagination. Someone, or something, was following her.

"Show yourself!" she demanded as she turned a slow circle, scanning the woods.

For a long, breathless moment, she heard nothing but the low shrill of insects and the distant chirp of birds. Then, from the shadows where two great trunks leaned close together, a pair of luminous blue eyes blinked to life and she froze, rooted to the spot. Those eyes weren't human.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:29 am

CHAPTER 2

Finnar's claws dug into the bark of the fallen log on which he was perched, leaving deep grooves in the weathered wood. The ancient trees towered above him, their thick canopy casting dappled shadows across the moss-covered ground. This was his home, his territory, but the familiar surroundings brought no comfort. The rage that always lived inside him swirled through his veins, demanding vengeance. A vengeance he'd been denied.

"Stay away from the humans."

He snarled as the memory of Seren's words echoed in his mind. His alpha's order had come after Finnar's last... incident with a human. He'd expected, perhaps even hoped, to be punished. Had waited for the alpha's teeth at his neck.

Instead Seren had only studied him with eyes that saw far too much.

"Your anger blinds you. It makes you dangerous to everyone, including yourself."

His jaw clenched. The alpha didn't understand. Couldn't understand. He hadn't lost anyone to human violence.

"I am not concerned about myself," he muttered.

"You should be." Seren regarded him a moment longer, then sighed. "You will not leave these mountains. Is that understood?"

The order was imbued with the alpha's power and he had no choice but to agree. He'd spent the winter on the outskirts of the Vultor enclave, healing and brooding. Very few members of the pack approached him and he'd rejected those who did. When spring came he left, he'd started spending long periods in the woods even though Seren had asked him to stay close. But he hadn't made it an order and he'd ignored the request.

But changing his location hadn't helped. His rage simmered in his veins like a living thing but there was no outlet for his anger. He'd drifted restlessly through the forest until he found himself at the base of the mountains, close to a human settlement.

The other Vultor stayed away from this side of the mountains, but he'd found himself watching the settlement, tempted by thoughts of revenge. But the settlement was outside the boundaries of the mountains and Seren had ordered him not to leave them.

His need for vengeance warred with the compulsion to obey his alpha's orders and he finally gave way to a frustrated howl. But when it emerged, it was marked more by loneliness than rage. He had no one. His family was gone, torn away from him by human scum, and it had become clear over the winter that his pack didn't trust him. They thought he was too dangerous, too volatile, even for a Vultor, and they were right.

A scent drifted past him, carried on the breeze that rustled through the leaves. Sweet, like summer berries, but underlaid with something richer, more complex. A human. Female. Young.

In my territory .

His ears pricked forward, catching the faint sound of footsteps on the forest path. The human was alone, her tread light and quick. He inhaled deeply, tasting her scent on the air. There was something about it that caught his attention, pricked at instincts he

tried to deny. The urge to investigate tugged at him, a restless energy thrumming beneath his skin.

The scent shifted direction. She was moving closer to his position. His claws extended further, scraping against the log. He could intercept her path. Show these humans they weren't as safe in these woods as they thought.

Seren would not approve. The alpha's words rang in his ears again.

"We need peace with the humans, not more bloodshed. Your vendetta will only bring more pain to our people."

Another howl escaped as his body trembled with the effort to remain still. To honor his alpha's command. To push down the rage that threatened to consume him. The beast within him paced, hungry for release. For revenge.

Unable to remain still, he finally rose, his bare feet silent against the moss-covered earth. The human's scent pulled at him, a reminder of that last failed attempt at vengeance against a human female. He'd set fire to her home but when it came right down to it, he'd been unable to kill her.

Weak , his beast snarled.

Unable to resist he began tracking the human, every sense razor sharp as he moved through the shadows of the ancient trees. Every snapped twig and flutter of leaves registered with crystal clarity. A cottma darted out of his path and into its burrow—smart creature. Birds went quiet in the branches above. Even the insects stilled at his passing.

The wind shifted, her scent clearer now. Beneath the sweetness of berries and spice lay something else. Something that made his hackles rise. No fear. This human

walked through Vultor territory without the proper terror such foolishness deserved. And yet... that scent intrigued him in a way he couldn't define.

No. Focus on our prey.

His claws extended, then retracted. Extended. Retracted. The motion matched his breathing as he prowled between the trees. Last time, he'd let rage rule him. This time he would be smarter.

A branch creaked overhead and his head snapped up, enhanced vision cutting through the shadows. Just a small rodent scurrying up the tree trunk. His lip curled. He was jumping at shadows now, like some green pup on his first hunt.

The human's path wound ahead of him, obvious to the rest of his senses even though he had yet to see her. She kept to the trail, unaware of the predator tracking her movements, alone, unprotected. Her scent grew stronger, carried on a playful breeze that mocked his dark mood.

His muscles bunched, ready to spring out of the shadows. To take what revenge he could. But Seren's words coiled around his throat like a noose, holding him back. A small part of him knew that the alpha was right—that attacking random humans wouldn't bring his sister back, bring his family back. Wouldn't balance the scales.

Still, he followed. Listened. Cataloged every detail of her journey through his territory. His territory. His woods. How dare this human walk through them as if she had any right to be here?

A flash of red through the trees caught his eye. He was close enough now that he could hear the soft crunch of her boots on fallen leaves and the quiet humming that spoke of her complete unconcern for the dangers that lurked in these woods.

His lip curled again. Stupid, reckless human. He should teach her a lesson about wandering where she didn't belong. But he hesitated, constrained not only by his alpha's command but by something in that distinctive scent, so different from the usual stink of fear that clung to humans who ventured this deep into the woods. A growl built in his chest as his claws flexed against the tree trunk, leaving deep grooves in the wood. How dare she act so... carefree?

He drew even closer, close enough to pick out details through the shadows beneath the trees. A cloak, rich as fresh blood, draped over slender shoulders. Hair only slightly darker than the cloak spilled down her back, catching glints of sunlight that filtered through the canopy. His enhanced vision picked out the scatter of freckles across her nose, the curve of pretty red lips as she hummed an unfamiliar tune. For a human, she was unusually attractive.

The thought horrified him and he immediately rejected it. He had no interest in human females. No curiosity about the slender body beneath the cloak.

His muscles coiled with predatory tension. One leap would close the distance between them. He could end this maddening curiosity, teach this human the proper fear these woods deserved. But his body refused to move, trapped between his usual rage and this odd fascination.

The red cloak disappeared behind a thick stand of evergreens, and he followed, his instincts drowning out the last whispers of his alpha's warnings. The scent pulled him forward like a hook buried deep in his chest, following her as she moved easily down the path.

She has no idea how vulnerable she looks.

His beast stirred within him, and with it came the restless, possessive growl he'd been grappling with since first catching her scent. How could a human stir something deep

within him? Something he'd thought long dead?

She stopped suddenly, her head snapping toward a nearby rustle in the bushes. He should have been pleased by the sudden tension in her posture, but something unfamiliar unfurled in his chest. Sympathy? No, that was too human a word for it—this was something deeper. Even though he'd wanted it, the hint of fear in her scent made his beast uneasy.

She was everything he despised—fragile, soft, human. Yet he found himself studying the curve of her neck, the way her fingers gripped the handle of her basket as she scanned the woods. The sight of her stirred something primal in his chest, something that had nothing to do with hunting or killing.

The realization sent another surge of fury through his veins. He bared his teeth, tasting the metallic tang of rage on his tongue. How dare this human make him feel this way? Make him question everything he felt?

“Hello?” she asked tentatively, her voice low and musical, and he had to clench his fists to keep from answering her.

After a moment, she started walking again. Her humming resumed, the melody weaving through the trees like a spell. His anger clashed with his fascination, leaving him dizzy with conflict. He should leave. He should turn back. Instead, his feet carried him forward, following her path like a shadow.

Even though her pathetic human senses couldn't have detected his presence, he was sure she knew he was there. She walked more slowly, scanning the woods, then whirled around, her chin lifted defiantly.

“I know you're there.”

Once again he bit back the urge to answer her and she finally started moving again. The hint of fear remained and he had the oddest urge to ease her concerns. But no. Fear was what she should feel in his presence. It was what she deserved. What all humans deserved.

He watched her stumble as a bird took flight nearby, an unexpected smile twitching at the corners of his mouth. She was skittish, like a new pup, and the thought both pleased and troubled him.

“I’m being ridiculous,” he heard her mutter, and his smile grew.

Yes, you are , he silently agreed, although wasn’t he being just as foolish?

But her next words, a sharp demand for him to show himself, surprised him. He had to give her credit. She had bravery—or perhaps just foolishness. She didn’t truly expect him to come out of hiding, did she? Just because she demanded it?

Yes , his beast urged.

Another rustle in the bushes made her flinch again and he automatically took a half step forwards. Her head swung towards him and he heard her breath catch. He knew he’d revealed his location. It wasn’t too late—he could still slip away. He knew Seren would have ordered him to leave. Instead he found himself moving out of the shadows and stalking towards her.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:29 am

CHAPTER 3

Scarlett's heart thudded against her ribs so rapidly she felt sick as she stared at those luminescent blue eyes. Then they blinked and a figure emerged from the shadows beneath the ancient trees. He was tall—inhumanly tall—with sharp, angular features. Silvery grey skin covered a big, powerful body, his shoulders broad enough to block out the forest behind him.

He was wearing nothing but a pair of dark pants, leaving an intimidating amount of muscular chest on display. He prowled towards her with an easy, casual grace, but he was looming over her before she could blink.

Vultor.

Her fascination with them seemed incredibly foolish now. Those icy blue eyes raked over her with predatory intensity, and his face twisted into a smile that was both menacing and oddly alluring.

“Lost your way, little red?” he asked, his deep voice mocking.

Her legs trembled, but she lifted her chin. This close, she could see the golden highlights in the wild tangle of dark hair. And those eyes... they glowed, even in the dappled sunlight filtering through the trees.

“I... I'm not lost. I'm going to visit my g-grandmother.” She stumbled over the words, cursing the slight tremor in her voice.

“Your grandmother?” His gaze slid past her to the narrow trail. “This way?”

When he stepped closer, she instinctively took a step back and he laughed, the sound low and dangerous, as he matched her step, closing the distance between them.

“Didn’t anyone warn you to stay out of my woods?”

She swallowed hard, fighting to keep her voice steady.

“These aren’t your woods.”

His eyes narrowed to dangerous slits as he bent towards her.

“What did you say?”

His scent surrounded her—pine and smoke with something wild beneath it—and she had the foolish impulse to lean closer, to breathe it in. Instead she stood her ground and did her best to return that intimidating stare.

“You heard me. These woods don’t belong to anyone.”

“Naive little human.” He circled her, his movements fluid and predatory. “You have no idea what lurks in these shadows.”

She turned with him, unwilling to let him out of her sight, even though her head barely reached his chest. His massive arms looked as if they were hewn from stone, and she could easily imagine him ripping a tree from the ground with his bare hands. He came to a halt again directly in front of her and she tilted her head back to meet his gaze, her heart pounding even faster when he smiled down at her.

There was no amusement on his face, and her gaze snagged on the gleaming white

fangs revealed by that sardonic smile, but she refused to cower.

“Yes, I do. I grew up here. I’ve played in these woods since I could walk. If anyone’s a stranger here, it’s you.”

Something flickered across his face—surprise, perhaps even a hint of respect—before the mockery returned.

“Bold words for someone so…” His gaze swept over her dismissively, “small.”

“Size isn’t everything.” She lifted her chin higher, even as her heart thundered in her chest. “And intimidation only works on people who are willing to be intimidated.”

“Such a brave little female. But I know the truth.” His voice dropped to a low growl. “You’re terrified.”

Her tongue darted out to moisten her lips before she could stop it and his eyes followed the movement. Her heart gave an odd little skip, but his attention was already focused back on her face.

“Aren’t you?” he demanded.

“Of course I am. I’m not stupid.” Her words came out breathless, and she cursed herself silently. “But that doesn’t change anything.”

“It should. Turn back now. Before it’s too late.”

A chill crept down her spine at his words, but she refused to let him see her unease. The path ahead beckoned through the trees—sunlit and familiar.

“No. I’m going to visit my grandmother, and I’m already halfway there.”

His features twisted, a flash of raw pain crossing his face before it vanished behind a mask of contempt.

“Must be nice.” The words dripped with bitterness. “Having a family to visit.”

The bitterness in his voice couldn’t quite disguise the underlying pain and she felt a pang of unwilling sympathy. Who had he lost?

Before she could ask, his lips curled into a predatory smile that emphasized those gleaming white fangs. Her heart hammered against her ribs as she stared up at him. She should be afraid—and she was—but there was something exhilarating about their encounter.

Those icy blue eyes suddenly focused on something behind her, and then his massive form rushed towards her with impossible speed. She stumbled backwards, her basket falling from nerveless fingers as her back hit rough bark.

His arm shot towards her, claws extended, and she was too terrified to even scream.

But death didn’t come. Instead, he withdrew his arm and showed her the serpent dangling from his long, black claws—its scaled body still twitching. She recognized the markings. Poisonous.

It must have been right behind her. If he hadn’t moved when he did...

She opened her mouth to thank him but he gave her a mocking look as he flicked the serpent into the undergrowth.

“It appears you don’t know these woods as well as you think. That siskar could have killed you before you even noticed it.”

Heat rushed to her cheeks. She'd traveled these woods dozens of times without incident but this arrogant male acted as if she was some helpless child who needed saving.

"I've managed just fine until now?—"

"Clearly not." He scowled at her. "I will tell you one more time to turn back."

"No."

Something she couldn't read flickered across his face at her refusal.

"Then since I'm not in the mood to find your corpse in my territory later, I'll escort you to wherever you're going. The sooner you're out of these woods, the better."

"That's not necessary?—"

"Turn back or start walking," he ordered.

Who did he think he was? She opened her mouth to tell him exactly where he could stick his unwanted protection, but the dangerous glint in those ice-blue eyes made her pause.

Instead she snatched up her fallen basket and glared at him.

"Fine. If you want to waste your day accompanying me, that's your choice." Her chin lifted as she met his gaze. "But I won't be intimidated by you."

"Little red, you have no idea what true terror feels like. At least, not yet. But you're tempting the gods to find out."

With that, he spun on his heel and stalked off down the path, moving with a predatory grace that made her breath catch, muscles rippling beneath that silvery grey skin. Should she turn back?

No.

For all his threatening talk, he hadn't hurt her. He'd even saved her from the serpent. Apparently his bark was worse than his bite. The thought of a bite from those gleaming white fangs sent a shiver down her spine, but it wasn't entirely from fear.

Hoping she wouldn't regret her decision, she hurried to catch up with him. Those piercing blue eyes focused on her for a second and for some reason heat flooded her cheeks. She cleared her throat and gave him a determined smile.

"So, do you spend all your time lurking in these woods waiting to rescue helpless travelers?"

A grunt was her only response.

"I suppose I should thank you for taking care of the serpent. Even if you're being rather dramatic about the whole escorting business."

Another grunt, and her trepidation was suddenly replaced by amusement.

"Do you actually speak, or is growling your primary form of communication?"

His jaw tightened. "Finnar."

"What?"

"My name. Since you seem determined to chatter endlessly, you might as well use

it.”

“Finnar,” she tested the name. “I’m Scarlett.”

“I didn’t ask.”

“Well, now you know anyway.” She stepped over a fallen branch. “So, Finnar, how long have you lived in these woods?”

He shot her an irritated glance but remained silent.

“The trees are beautiful here. I especially love how the sunlight filters through the leaves. Though I suppose you prefer the darker parts of the forest, being a Vultor and all...”

His only response was a low rumble in his chest.

She bit back a smile. His obvious annoyance at her attempts at conversation only made her want to prod him more. There was something oddly entertaining about trying to crack that stoic facade. This trip was turning out to be far more interesting than she’d anticipated.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:29 am

CHAPTER 4

Finnar's fists clenched and unclenched as the small redhead continued to talk. Her constant stream of words crashed against his ears like waves—stories about her weaving, village gossip, observations about the forest path. His jaw clenched as he caught himself slowing his natural stride yet again to match her shorter steps.

“And then Tessa—she's the baker—told me about this new recipe she's trying with honey and lavender...”

A growl built in his chest. He should have left her to the siskar. Or worse. His claws itched with remembered bloodlust, yet somehow her soft voice dissipated the red haze of his anger.

“Did you know that some insects actually dance to tell each other where to find flowers?”

His lip curled. “Fascinating.”

The word dripped with sarcasm, but she beamed up at him as if he'd offered genuine praise. The sweet scent that had first drawn him grew stronger and his nostrils flared. Why the fuck was it so enticing?

“You're not much for conversation, are you?” She tilted her head, studying him with big brown eyes.

“No.”

He focused on the path, ignoring how the sunlight caught the copper highlights in her hair.

What was wrong with him? He should be plotting revenge, not noticing how her freckles scattered across her nose like stars. The alpha was right—he'd grown dangerous, uncontrollable. Yet here he walked, playing escort to this chattering human who seemed to have lost all fear of him. There was no trace of it in her scent—just curiosity and... was that amusement?

His scowl deepened. This situation had spiraled out of his control, and he had no one to blame but himself.

The path led through a more open area of the forest and sunlight broke through the thinning canopy, warming the path ahead. His steps faltered as a shaft of light caught her hair, transforming the copper strands into liquid fire. The breeze picked up, and she pushed her cloak back with an impatient hand. The movement drew his gaze to the curve of her waist, the fabric of her dress clinging to?—

He bit back a growl, his fangs pressing against his lower lip. What was he doing? She was human. The enemy.

Her head snapped up at the sound, those dark eyes searching his face.

“Did you say something?” she asked innocently, closing the distance between them.

He stepped sideways, maintaining the gap. “No.”

But her scent followed, wrapping around him like silk, the sweetness making his mouth water. He forced himself to breathe shallowly, fighting the urge to lean closer, to inhale more of that tantalizing aroma.

“You know, most people actually respond when someone talks to them.” Her voice held more amusement than reproach. “Or at least pretend to listen.”

“I’m not most people.”

He forced himself to eyes on the path, though every nerve in his body tracked her movements.

“No, you certainly aren’t.”

The warmth in her tone dragged his attention back to her face.

She met his gaze without flinching, a slight smile playing at the corners of her pretty little mouth. His fingers twitched with the sudden urge to trace that smile, to discover if her lips were as soft as they looked...

Rage surged through him at the thought. He was supposed to hate humans, not fantasize about kissing them. He lengthened his stride, trying to put more distance between them. But her quiet laugh behind him only intensified the war raging in his chest.

The path narrowed as the woods grew thicker, threading between gnarled tree roots that broke through the soil like ancient bones. He had no trouble avoiding them, but she seemed determined to stumble over every one.

A loose stone rolled beneath her boot and she pitched forward with a startled gasp. His hand shot out, catching her elbow before she could fall. Heat blazed through his palm where it met her skin, and something electric raced up his arm straight to his chest.

He jerked away as if burned. “Watch where you’re walking.”

“Thank you.” She straightened, adjusting her basket. That smile again, bright and genuine despite his harsh tone. “As I was saying, before the ground tried to trip me...”

She launched back into her tale about some village festival, but he couldn’t focus on her words. Her scent had changed, the sweetness underlaid with something warmer, headier. He drew more of it into his lungs before he could stop himself and almost stumbled when he recognized the new note.

Attraction. The scent of it curled around him like a trap, awakening a dark hunger that clawed at his insides. How could she possibly be attracted to him? And why did his body respond with such visceral need?

She tripped over a root and his hand shot out again to steady her. The same spark of electricity raced up his arm, stronger this time, and he fought the urge to pull her closer. To see if she felt it too...

No. Impossible. She couldn’t be attracted to him. He was Vultor—a monster in human eyes. The enemy. She was probably just overheated from the walk, or...

Her shoulder brushed his arm as she gestured, describing some dance, and she didn’t flinch away from the contact.

He clenched his teeth again, his jaw beginning to ache from his efforts to restrain himself. It didn’t matter what her scent suggested. He wouldn’t—couldn’t—allow himself to consider such nonsense. He was here to ensure she left his territory, nothing more.

But her laughter rang through the trees, and something inside him ached to hear it again. Instead he focused on the path.

He heard the roar of rushing water long before they reached the bridge—or rather what was left of the bridge. Just a few posts jutting from the riverbank like broken teeth. The spring floods had torn through here with brutal force, leaving nothing but memories of the structure that once spanned the gap.

“Oh no. The bridge...” She moved closer to the edge, peering down at the churning water below, as worry threaded through the sweetness that had been tormenting him.

His hands twitched with the urge to pull her back from the precipice. He crossed his arms instead, forcing ice into his voice.

“Looks like your journey ends here.”

He watched her survey the damage, noting how the wind whipped strands of fire-bright hair across her face, fighting the impulse to brush them away. Now he could send her back to her village, away from his territory. Away from him. The thought should have brought satisfaction—or at least relief. Instead, something cold and heavy settled in his chest.

What if I don't send her away?

His beast rumbled approvingly at the thought but he ignored it.

Revenge. That's why he wanted her to stay. The perfect opportunity to make a human pay for what other humans had done to his family. It had nothing to do with the way her eyes lit up when she smiled, or how her voice had started to ease the silence he'd wrapped around himself like armor.

His chest tightened as she edged closer to the river's edge, eyeing the scattered rocks breaking through the rushing water speculatively. The current swirled and foamed around them, deceptively shallow but hiding deadly currents beneath.

“Maybe I could?—”

“No.” The word ripped from his throat before she finished the thought. His hand shot out, gripping her arm and pulling her back from the edge. The contact sent another jolt through his body, and he dropped her arm as if her skin burned.

The mere thought of her attempting to cross those treacherous rocks made his stomach twist. She’d slip, the current would drag her under, and she’d-

No. He cut off that line of thinking, furious at the surge of protectiveness that accompanied it.

She rubbed her arm where he’d grabbed her, but her expression held curiosity rather than fear.

“There has to be some way across.”

He knew there was—a fallen tree stretched across a narrower part of the river about a mile upstream. But that way also led deeper into Vultor territory. Into his territory. And once she was there...

“You won’t turn back?”

She shook her head. “I’m not giving up that easily.”

“Then come with me.”

The thought of her refusing, of walking away, made his claws itch beneath his skin, but he forced himself to give her one last chance. His muscles tensed as he waited for her decision. The intensity of his reaction unsettled him—he shouldn’t care what she chose to do.

But she surprised him again and gave him a radiant smile.

“All right. Thank you for helping me, Finnar.”

The genuine warmth in her voice twisted something in his chest. Here she was, thanking him, while dark thoughts of revenge lurked in the corners of his mind. His jaw clenched against a surge of unfamiliar emotion.

He turned away from her, unable to face that bright smile any longer.

“This way.” He pushed through the undergrowth, automatically holding the branches aside for her.

The forest closed around them, shadows deepening as they left the river behind. Guilt—he recognized the emotion now—made his stomach churn with each step. He shouldn’t be leading her deeper into his territory. Shouldn’t be playing this dangerous game where he couldn’t tell if he wanted to protect her or harm her.

But he kept walking, and she kept following, trusting him in a way no human should.

CHAPTER 5

Scarlett followed Finnar as he picked his way up the narrow trail, his steps as silent and sure as the shadows themselves. She ducked under a low-hanging branch, her eyes drawn to the way his muscles rippled with each fluid movement and she found herself smiling. His presence should have terrified her—and it still did, a little—but it was the good kind of terror, the kind that sent a pleasant shiver up her spine. Like a ghost story told on a winter's night, the flicker of fear adding a delicious spice to the warmth of the fire.

And if she were honest, she couldn't deny the spark of attraction that ran through her whenever they touched. He was the most captivating male she'd ever seen, all raw power and barely contained ferocity.

He's a Vultor, she reminded herself, but she no longer found the idea terrifying. Whatever his reasons, he was helping her, and she was far too intrigued to turn back now. Besides, she'd promised Grandmother she'd visit, and nothing would keep her from her promise.

"Do you make a habit of rescuing lost humans in these woods?" A smile tugged at her lips when those broad shoulders stiffened. "Or am I special?"

His steps faltered for just a moment before he continued forward without responding. The silence only sparked her curiosity further.

"I bet you're actually quite nice under all that brooding." She stepped over a fallen log, her red cloak catching on a thorny branch. "Like one of those prickly fruits that's

soft inside once you get past all the sharp bits.”

A low growl rumbled in his chest, but she caught the slightest twitch at the corner of his mouth.

“You know, most people would consider this conversation rather one-sided.” She hopped from one moss-covered stone to another, following in his footsteps. “Though I suppose your growls are quite expressive. That last one definitely meant ‘please continue talking, I’m thoroughly enjoying your company.’”

His head snapped around, those ice-blue eyes narrowing at her, but she met his gaze with an innocent smile. The tension in his jaw only made her want to prod him more.

“Or perhaps it meant ‘silly human, stop trying to make me laugh.’ But I saw that almost-smile earlier, so I know you’re capable of it.”

He turned back to the path, but not before she caught another slight quirk of his lips. The victory, small as it was, sent a flutter through her chest.

The path ahead twisted up through a maze of weathered boulders and gnarled roots and her legs burned from the climb, each step becoming more treacherous. She did her best to follow his sure-footed movements, but her shorter stride made it difficult.

A massive root blocked the trail, its twisted surface rising to her waist. He vaulted over it without hesitating and she sighed. She planted one foot on the rough bark as she attempted to climb over it and her boot immediately slipped on the damp surface.

Strong hands suddenly gripped her waist. Her breath caught as he lifted her effortlessly, his touch sending sparks of electricity racing through her body. He held her suspended in the air for a moment, and she found herself staring into those piercing blue eyes. He was so close she could see flecks of gold in his dark hair.

His hands stayed on her waist even after he'd set her down on the other side, and the heat of his grip burned through her dress, making her pulse race. His fingers flexed slightly against her sides before he seemed to realize what he was doing.

"Watch where you put your feet," he said roughly as he released her. "The trail only gets worse from here."

Without waiting for her response, he turned and continued up the path leaving her staring after him. She pressed a hand to her thundering heart, still feeling the phantom pressure of his touch, then hurried to catch up, her skin tingling where his hands had been.

He was right about the trail growing worse. Branches reached across the narrow path like grasping fingers and when she tried to duck beneath them, her boots slid on the carpet of wet leaves. The path grew steeper, winding between moss-covered rocks that seemed to multiply with each step.

Her foot caught on another root and she stumbled forward. His arm shot out, catching her around the waist. His touch sent a jolt through her body, stealing her breath. He pulled her against him, steadying her, and she felt the solid warmth of his hard body through her dress.

"You're worse than a newborn pup," he growled, but his arm stayed wrapped around her.

Heat flooded her cheeks as she stared up at him, hyper aware of how close they stood. His wild scent surrounded her, making her head spin. He looked down at her with an inscrutable expression, his eyes searching her face. His arm tightened around her, pulling her even closer and her tongue flicked out to lick suddenly dry lips.

His nostrils flared and he abruptly released her.

“Stay close to me,” he ordered. “There are many dangers in these woods.”

His voice was low and rough, and his eyes seemed to glow in the shadows.

The path narrowed further, forcing them to navigate between two towering boulders, and he reached out to steady her as she squeezed between the damp rocks. His touch burned through her dress, and she couldn’t stop herself from leaning into him, the heat of his body a tempting contrast to the cold rock.

He froze as if he could feel it too, his hands gripping her waist tighter. A strange look crossed his face and for a moment, she thought he might kiss her but then she was left staring at his back as he moved away.

What’s wrong with me?

She shouldn’t be contemplating kisses from a Vultur—she hadn’t even enjoyed the few clumsy attempts from some of the boys in the village. Why did she think it would be entirely different to have that hard mouth closing over hers?

Though the air grew even cooler as they climbed, warmth bloomed wherever his hands touched her. Each time he reached out to steady her or lift her over an obstacle, the contact seemed to last a heartbeat longer and he seemed to draw her a fraction closer. But his face remained hard and unreadable, those striking blue eyes giving nothing away.

She was so distracted by those touches that it took a long time for her to notice how much the forest around them had changed. The trees pressed closer than ever, their trunks ancient and gnarled. Shafts of sunlight barely penetrated the thick canopy. They’d been climbing for what felt like hours. It seemed like an awfully long way to go just to find a place to cross the river.

“How much longer?” she asked, breathless from the climb.

He turned, those ice-blue eyes fixing on her face. His lips curved into a slow smile that sent her pulse racing—not from fear, but something else entirely. That predatory look should have frightened her. Instead, heat pooled low in her stomach.

“Not long,” he growled, then spun back around and continued up the path. Despite his size, the movement was so fluid, so graceful that it took her a moment to shake herself from her daze.

Her heart hammered against her ribs as she hurried after him, her questions almost forgotten in the wake of that smile. What’s wrong with me , she wondered again. She should be worried about where he was leading her, not admiring the way his body moved or remembering the feeling of his hands on her waist.

The path finally leveled out and the dense trees gave way to an unexpected clearing. She blinked at the sudden brightness, and it took her a moment to notice a low stone cottage nestled against the base of a towering cliff. Nature had claimed the structure as its own—thick carpets of emerald moss draped across the domed roof and stubborn vines crept up the ancient stones. The whole building seemed to have sprouted from the rock itself, worn and wild and somehow beautiful.

A crumbling stone wall encircled the cottage. Behind it, a tangled mass of vegetation fought for space in what might once have been ordered garden beds. Wild flowers climbed over themselves while tall grasses swayed in the gentle breeze.

There was something magical about it. The cottage felt both abandoned and alive at the same time, as if it held secrets in its worn stones.

“What is this place?” she whispered.

“My den,” he said gruffly, but there was an oddly vulnerable note in his voice.

She moved closer, running her fingers along the rough stone wall, tracing the patterns of lichen that decorated its surface.

“It’s lovely,” she said, meaning it despite the wild abandon of the place. “But...” She turned and gave him a confused look. “Why are we here?”

The clearing fell silent. Even the birds seemed to pause their songs, and a shiver skated down her spine.

“Do you want something?” she asked, her voice small and uncertain.

His lips curled into that predatory smile that sent her pulse racing, but this time fear threatened to edge out the excitement. He stalked towards her with his usual fluid grace, closing the distance between them in a blink of an eye.

“Oh yes, little red, I want something.” His voice dropped to a silky purr that made her skin prickle. The playfulness she’d glimpsed during their journey was gone, replaced by something darker, hungrier. “And now I have it.”

She backed up until the stone wall pressed against her spine but he kept advancing, his massive frame blocking out the sunlight.

“I warned you there would be consequences if you didn’t turn back.” His eyes gleamed with triumph as he caged her against the wall. “You’re mine now.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:29 am

CHAPTER 6

Finnar towered over Scarlett, his shadow enveloping her. The scent of her fear mingled with something else—something that made his beast pace restlessly inside him, eager to claim its prize. He should feel victorious, having a human in his power, but his stomach twisted when she shrank back from him. His fingers flexed, claws digging into his palms as he fought the urge to reach for her.

“I’ll leave,” she said quickly, her voice quivering. “Go back the way we came.”

“Too late for that.” The words rumbled from deep in his chest. “You belong to me now.”

His beast purred in satisfaction at the declaration. The sound vibrated through him, primitive and possessive. Seren’s warnings faded to meaningless whispers—this felt right. Natural. Inevitable.

“Belong to you?” she repeated, her eyes impossibly wide in her pale face. “What do you mean? You can’t keep me here.”

“Watch me.”

He stepped closer, drinking in her scent. His beast demanded that he mark her, claim her. The urge shocked him—he’d brought her here for revenge, hadn’t he? To make a human suffer as he had suffered. But something had shifted during their journey through the woods. Each time he’d touched her, helped her over obstacles, breathed in her intoxicating scent...

“Please.” She pressed her back against the stone wall. “My grandmother is expecting me.”

“She’ll have to keep expecting.”

His voice came out rougher than he intended. Part of him wanted to comfort her, to explain that he wouldn’t really hurt her. But that would mean admitting things to himself he wasn’t ready to face. Better to let her fear him. Safer.

His beast disagreed, whining at her distress. The sound almost escaped his throat before he caught it, transforming it into a growl. “You’re staying here.”

She lifted her chin defiantly, but her pulse fluttered at her throat like a trapped bird.

“Why?”

The simple question triggered something deep inside him. Years of rage and pain burst forth before he could stop them.

“Why? Because humans destroyed everything. Murdered my family. Burned our home. Drove me from our land.” His voice grew hoarse, the words bitter on his tongue. “Left me without hope. Without a mate.”

Her face drained of color. She tried to take a step backwards, but the wall blocked her retreat.

“Mate?” she whispered. “You want...”

She shook her head as if the thought was impossible to contemplate. And perhaps it was. The humans thought they were monsters, didn’t they? Creatures to be feared.

He fought back the sudden, irrational urge to comfort her, to explain that he'd never force himself on anyone. His beast whined at her fear, but he silenced it. Let her be afraid. It was better that way.

He leaned closer, crowding her against the wall. A single claw extended, the sharp tip barely grazing her skin as he trailed it down the graceful curve of her neck to that wildly fluttering pulse. The scent of her fear mingled with something else—something that made his blood burn.

His claw continued its path, tracing the neckline of her dress. Her breath caught, a tiny gasp that shot straight through him. But she didn't try to pull away. Instead she stared up at him, her pretty lips parted, and he realized that her nipples had stiffened, pressing against the thin fabric of her dress.

Her warmth, her scent, the way her body responded to his touch—it awakened something primal inside him and he was suddenly, achingly erect.

Mate, his beast growled, anxious to claim what it saw as theirs.

Blood rushed through his veins, his body tightening with unwanted desire. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been this close to anyone. Couldn't remember wanting anyone like this.

Shocked by the rush of desire he stumbled backwards. His heart hammered against his ribs, his beast howling in protest at the sudden distance between them. What was he doing? He'd brought her here for revenge, not... this.

He forced himself to curl his lip, baring his fangs.

“Don't flatter yourself. I would never mate with a human.” The words tasted like ash in his mouth, his beast snarling its disagreement.

Mate, it growled again. Ours .

He shoved the thought aside, focusing on his anger instead. But his treacherous eyes kept drifting to the delicate curve of her neck, to the gentle swell of her breasts, to the fullness of those soft lips...

“I don’t understand,” she whispered. “Why bring me here if not to...?”

“Justice,” he growled. “For everything humans have taken from me.” The memory of that terrible night seared through him—the screaming, the flames, his family trapped in the burning building. “Now get inside.”

He gestured sharply towards the door of his den, needing space between them before he did something foolish.

The scent of her fear faded, replaced by something that made him even more uncomfortable—a thoughtful look that suggested she saw right through his harsh facade. She studied him for a long moment, head tilted slightly.

The urge to touch her again clawed at his insides. He clenched his fists, fighting back the need to grab her, to pull her close and bury his face in her neck where her scent was strongest.

Then she straightened her spine and lifted her chin, somehow managing to look regal despite being his prisoner. Without a word, she turned and walked toward his den, her movements graceful and unhurried.

His beast preened at her show of spirit even as he tried to convince himself it meant nothing. She was just another human. His enemy. Nothing more.

The lie felt hollow even in his own mind as he followed her inside.

He watched her eyes try and adjust to the gloom. The shuttered windows blocked most of the daylight, leaving only a few thin strips of sunlight to slice through the darkness. His enhanced vision picked up every detail of her face—the slight parting of her lips, the way her pulse fluttered at her throat.

He prowled around her, trying to recapture his earlier menace.

“You’ll serve me here. Cook. Clean. Obey.”

Her scent grew stronger in the confined space, drifting across him like a physical touch. He forced himself to keep moving, to maintain distance between them. But his traitorous eyes kept returning to her face, drawn by that contemplative look that made him feel so exposed.

“And if I refuse?” Her voice held no fear now, only curiosity.

The question brought him to a sudden halt. What would he do if she refused? He hadn’t thought that far ahead. His claws threatened to emerge at the thought of her leaving, but the idea of forcing her compliance made his stomach turn.

“You won’t.” He injected steel into his tone, hoping she couldn’t hear the uncertainty beneath.

Those big brown eyes tracked his movement through the shadows. Did she realize he could see her clearly even if she could barely make out his features? The thought of this small advantage helped steady him.

But then she took a step towards him rather than away, and his carefully constructed control threatened to shatter.

“Won’t I?” she whispered.

The intimacy of the dark room surrounded them, the air charged with something he refused to name. His beast stirred restlessly, urging him to close the distance, to claim her as theirs.

But then she turned away and went to the window. Light flooded the room as she yanked open the shutter, destroying the protective darkness. The harsh daylight exposed every flaw. Cobwebs draped the corners like tattered curtains. Dust coated the sparse furniture—a rough-hewn table, three mismatched chairs, the wide bench next to the hearth. His winter nest of furs lay in a tangled heap in the bed alcove, evidence of restless nights spent alone.

A half-empty bowl crusted with dried porridge sat abandoned on the table. Dead leaves skittered across the floor, blown in through the gap under the door he'd never bothered to fix. The evidence of his neglect made his ears burn with shame.

His claws dug into his palms as she turned to face him. He expected disgust, judgment, perhaps even pity. Instead, she retained that maddeningly calm expression.

“What do you want me to do?” she asked quietly.

CHAPTER 7

Scarlett continued to study the interior of the cottage as she waited for Finnar to respond. Wooden beams stretched overhead, higher than she'd expected, creating deep shadows in the domed ceiling. The space felt both confined and oddly spacious—built to accommodate someone of his size.

Everything looked so abandoned, so uncared for, so solitary, that she felt a pang of unwilling sympathy.

She turned back to find him still watching her, his blue eyes glowing slightly. For just a moment, his mask slipped. In place of the predatory creature who'd brought her here, she glimpsed something else—uncertainty, perhaps even vulnerability. It vanished quickly, but that brief glimpse confirmed what she'd begun to suspect during their journey. His fearsome exterior protected something far more complex within.

When he remained silent, her earlier question unanswered, she gathered her courage and asked softly, "Are you going to hurt me?"

His head snapped back as if she'd struck him.

"No," he growled, the word sharp and decisive.

The last threads of fear loosened their grip on her heart. Whatever his intentions in bringing her here, whatever revenge he sought against humans, she believed him. He wouldn't harm her.

Which doesn't mean he isn't dangerous.

The memory of that dangerous claw traveling over her skin, so unexpectedly arousing, sent another rush of heat through her body. She hastily returned to her examination, noticing the differences between a Vultor home and a human home. A small kitchen area nestled beneath another shuttered window, its familiar arrangement of shelves and work surfaces comforting despite the layer of dust and dirty dishes. Her fingers itched to bring order to the chaos.

A circular hearth dominated the center of the room, crafted with careful precision, river stones arranged in concentric circles. It wasn't a design she'd ever seen before but she could easily imagine it spreading warmth throughout the space.

Beneath yet another window stood a heavy wooden table, its surface barely visible beneath a cluttered array of items. The windows themselves were different—round and smaller than she was used to, but cleverly positioned to capture sunlight throughout the day.

She looked for a bed and didn't see one at first, then noticed the curtains flanking a large alcove with a raised platform within. A sleeping area, she realized, large enough to accommodate even Finnar's big body. One sleeping area.

Heat crept into her cheeks as she quickly looked away. The cottage had an unexpected charm beneath its current state of neglect. Sunlight streamed in through the round window, highlighting the fine craftsmanship of the wooden beams overhead and the careful stonework of the walls.

A collection of dried herbs hung from hooks near the kitchen area, their scents mingling with the earthier notes of the cottage. Though dusty and tangled now, she recognized several varieties her grandmother grew. The shelves held an assortment of clay pots and wooden bowls, their surfaces showing signs of careful decoration

despite their current grimy state.

“Well,” she said, keeping her voice light as she turned back to face him. “If I’m to serve you, I’d better start by making this place livable.”

His eyes narrowed, but she didn’t wait for his response. She shrugged off her red cloak, feeling oddly exposed as the fabric slipped from her shoulders, and hung it carefully on a wooden peg near the door, aware of him watching every movement. The weight of his stare made her skin tingle, but she forced herself to focus on the task at hand.

Rolling up her sleeves, she went to the sink nestled beneath one of the round windows. Dust coated the wooden counter, and dishes were stacked haphazardly, some still bearing traces of long-dried food. She reached for the shutters, throwing them open to let more light spill into the dim space. She quickly sorted the dishes, arranging them in neat piles, the familiar process helping her think.

She could do this. Play along, stay calm, and look for an opportunity to escape. And if she happened to improve things while she was here... well, she’d always found satisfaction in bringing order to chaos. The cottage deserved better than its current state of neglect.

She paused to study an intricately carved wooden spoon before she placed it with its fellows. Someone had taken great care with these items once.

“Have you lived here a long time?”

“No,” he snapped. “It belonged to my mother’s mother,” he added reluctantly.

When she glanced over her shoulder, he stood exactly where she’d left him, his big body dominating the room. He studied her with an expression she couldn’t quite

read—part suspicion, part curiosity, and part something that made her heart skip.

“You’ve certainly let this place go,” she said, keeping her tone light despite the odd flutter in her chest. The kitchen’s state suggested weeks of neglect, perhaps longer. “Do you have any hot water? I’d like to start with the dishes.”

His eyebrows lifted slightly—surprise breaking through that stoic mask for just a moment before he gave a short nod.

“I’ll start the boiler,” he said, his deep voice sending a shiver down her spine.

A short time later she plunged her hands into a sink full of steaming water, grateful for its warmth as she scrubbed at the dishes. She could feel his presence behind her—a looming shadow against the wall, his arms crossed over his broad chest.

“These dishes are beautiful,” she said, running her fingers over the intricate patterns etched into a bowl. “The glaze has such depth to it.”

He shifted against the wall. “One of the females in the... village makes them.”

The admission startled her into turning around.

“You have a village?”

He shrugged, his face impassive.

“Of a sort.”

She nodded and returned to her task, filing away that small piece of information. The stories about the Vultor painted them as roaming animals. No one had ever mentioned a village before.

“My friend Tessa makes pottery too, but nothing quite like this. See how the rim curves just so?” She held up another bowl, watching the light catch its surface. “Perfect for soup, I’d imagine.”

Just as she had on the trail, she kept up a steady stream of chatter as she worked, commenting on the craftsmanship of various items, sharing stories about her own attempts at pottery. He remained silent, but he didn’t leave.

When the last plate settled into the wooden dish rack, she moved to the table, attacking the dust with determined swipes of her cloth. The wood beneath proved to be a deep, warm red and she paused a moment to admire it, tracing the grain with her fingertips and appreciating the rich color. She looked up to find him watching her.

“It’s starting to look better already,” he said gruffly.

The unexpected praise sent a wave of warmth through her chest. She caught herself smiling and quickly looked down, reminding herself that this was all part of her plan to lower his guard. Still, she couldn’t quite suppress the pleased flutter in her stomach as she returned to work.

“Isn’t that why you brought me here?” she asked lightly. “To clean and cook for you?”

His gaze locked onto hers, intense and unreadable.

“Among other things.”

Her pulse quickened at the suggestive tone but she ignored it, turning back to the task of wiping down the table. He’d made it clear he wasn’t interested in her physically. Or at least that’s what he’d said. She couldn’t help remembering the way his hands had lingered around her waist during the climb. How his touch had left her skin

tingling and her pulse racing—and she didn't think it was just on her side.

Not that his attraction to her—or lack thereof—made any difference, she told herself firmly. She needed to focus on finding a way out of this mess and back to her grandmother, not thinking about a moody male and his mixed signals.

With a sigh, she picked up the cloth and moved towards the hearth, but his deep voice stopped her.

“No.” A large hand caught hers, pulling her back. She froze at his closeness, her skin prickling with awareness. “Leave that.”

“But... the dust and the ashes?—”

“Leave it,” he growled, his fingers still wrapped around her wrist.

She blinked at him in confusion, then nodded. His hand fell from her wrist, the skin there feeling suddenly cold without his touch. Heat prickled across her cheeks and she quickly turned away, going to fetch a broom instead.

She needed to get away from this strange male as soon as possible.

CHAPTER 8

Finnar watched Scarlett move about the den, her movements graceful and purposeful, her scent filling the space. He'd intended to leave her to her own devices as soon as she started cleaning, but his feet seemed glued to the spot, his eyes drawn to her delicate form. This wasn't what he'd imagined when he'd brought her here. Where was the terror? The begging? The satisfaction he'd expected to feel at having a human at his mercy?

Instead, she hummed while she worked, her small hands moving with practiced efficiency as she restored order to his chaos. The table gleamed now, and she'd moved on to sweeping, raising little clouds of dust that caught the sunlight streaming through the windows she'd opened.

His beast paced restlessly, drawn not only to her beauty, but the quiet strength in the way she held herself. She acted like she owned the place, not like someone who'd been captured against their will. The thought should have angered him, but instead he found himself fighting back a reluctant admiration. His beast rumbled its approval, and the word 'mate' echoed through his mind again.

A strand of that vibrant hair fell across her face and she pushed it back with the back of her wrist, leaving a smudge of dirt on her cheek. His fingers twitched with the urge to wipe it away.

"You know, this really is a lovely space." She paused in her sweeping to study the curved ceiling. "Though I'd suggest some curtains for these windows. Something to soften the light rather than?"

“I didn’t bring you here for decorating advice,” he growled, but his words lacked their intended bite.

She just shrugged and resumed sweeping.

“No, you brought me here for revenge. But since I’m here anyway...”

The calm acceptance in her voice twisted something in his chest. This wasn’t how it was supposed to go. He wanted to make a human suffer the way he had suffered.

But is that what I want?

When he’d decided to bring her here instead of showing her the way across the river, he’d convinced himself it was because he wanted to punish her, make her pay for her species’ crimes. Now he wondered uneasily if he’d also been swayed by his reluctance to let her go, by the fact that he’d be alone otherwise.

Alone. Always alone.

The sound of her humming filled the air, drawing his attention back to her. Her hips swayed slightly as she swept, and he felt another reluctant surge of arousal. No. He didn’t feel desire. Not for anyone. Certainly not for a human.

He forced himself to look away, grateful when she finished the task and glanced around the room. Her dark eyes settled on the empty hearth.

“Where’s your woodpile?” The question came out casual, matter-of-fact, like she asked him such things every day.

Still irritated by his reaction to her, his first impulse was to snap at her—he wasn’t her servant. But something in her practical tone stopped him. She hadn’t demanded

he fetch wood. Hadn't even asked him to get it. Just wanted to know where it was kept.

"Next to the den," he said stiffly, then shifted his weight, torn between his instinct to maintain his distance and an unfamiliar urge to help. "I'll get some."

Her smile hit him like a ray of sunlight, and he turned away before she could see how it affected him.

The path to the woodshed was worn smooth from years of use. Inside, split logs were stacked nearly to the ceiling—one of the few tasks he'd maintained through the dark winter months. The physical labor had helped quiet his mind when memories threatened to overwhelm him.

He gathered an armload of logs, breathing in the fresh scent of split wood. Such a simple thing, bringing in firewood. Yet as he walked back to the house, the weight felt good in his arms. Purposeful. When was the last time he'd done something so... normal?

His beast, usually so restless, settled into an almost peaceful state, content to be providing for their mate. Mate. The word whispered through his mind before he could stop it. He shoved the thought aside, but couldn't quite suppress the warm feeling in his chest as he shouldered his way through the door.

He looked over and found her teetering under the weight of his bed furs, her small body nearly disappearing beneath the mass of pelts. Her face glowed pink with exertion as she attempted to maneuver them down from the platform.

"They need fresh air," she panted, struggling to keep her balance. "When was the last time you?—"

He dropped the wood into the woodbox with a loud clatter and crossed the room in two strides. “Give me those.”

His hands closed around the furs, accidentally brushing against her breasts as he took them from her. Her soft gasp shot straight through him, and he jerked back.

“I’ll handle it,” he growled.

He couldn’t meet her eyes, didn’t want to see her reaction to his touch. Instead he focused on the furs, shame creeping through him as he caught the musty scent clinging to them. How long had he lived like this? He’d stopped caring about such things, but now with her here...

“You shouldn’t have to deal with these.” The admission slipped out before he could stop it.

“I don’t mind.” Her voice sounded a little breathless. “I was going to hang them on the clothesline and shake out the dust.”

He scowled. “You’re not here to deal with my bedding.”

“I’m here because you want me to serve you,” she said softly.

“Not in this.”

He stalked outside, the furs bundled in his arms, trying to escape the lingering memory of those soft curves brushing against his hands. The image of her flushed face and disheveled appearance haunted him. Would she look like that if he took her to his bed?

He shook his head sharply. These thoughts were dangerous. Unacceptable. He’d

brought her here for revenge. Justice. Not whatever this was becoming.

The old clothesline had rotted away months ago. He'd never bothered to replace it—what use did he have for such things? Now he yanked down the frayed remains and strung up a new rope between two sturdy posts, his movements jerky with suppressed emotion.

The first fur hit the line with enough force to make the post creak. Dust exploded outward as he swung his fist into the thick pelt. Again. Again. Each impact matched the rhythm of his troubled thoughts.

She was human. The enemy. He should hate her.

Another blow landed. The fur shuddered.

But her skin had felt like satin against his rough hands. So delicate. So alive.

He snarled and struck harder, raising clouds of debris that made his eyes water. The physical effort did nothing to dispel the memory of those wide brown eyes looking up at him, or the way her body felt beneath his hands—warm and soft and...

His claws threatened to emerge. He forced them back, channeling his frustration into beating the furs until his arms ached. But even that couldn't drive away the maddening sweetness of her scent or the sound of her voice.

Leaving the furs to air in the sunshine, he returned to his den. It already felt different—brighter, fresher. She'd thrown open all the shutters, letting sunlight pour across the newly cleaned surfaces.

“What should I do next?” The question slipped out before he could stop it.

She glanced up through dark lashes, a small smile playing at her lips. “The dish cupboard could use a good wipe down.”

He crossed to the cupboard, pulling out a clean cloth. The familiar scents of soap and water mixed with her sweet fragrance as they worked side by side. The simple domesticity of the moment felt natural, right. When was the last time he’d shared space like this with anyone? His chest tightened at the thought.

She hummed softly while she worked, an oddly soothing melody. Their movements fell into an easy rhythm—him washing down the shelves, her drying them, both of them carefully navigating the small space. But not carefully enough. Her hip bumped his thigh as she turned, and heat blazed through him at the brief contact.

He gripped the edge of the counter, struggling to control his reaction.

“Sorry,” she murmured, her cheeks flushing a becoming pink.

He grunted an acknowledgement, unwilling to trust his voice, then stepped away, putting space between them.

“What next?”

They worked together until he noticed the light beginning to fade, shadows lengthening across the newly cleaned floor. He retrieved one of the oil lamps he rarely used from a shelf, brushing off a layer of dust before lighting it. The lamp cast a warm glow as he set it in the center of the gleaming table.

“I should start on supper,” she said lightly. “Do you have any meat?”

His first impulse was to go out into the forest and hunt for her, to bring down fresh prey and impress her with his ability to provide for her.

Then reality crashed in. She was still his captive, even if his easy domesticity had lulled him into a false sense of security. His eyes narrowed as he studied her. Was this part of some plan? Get him to leave so she could escape?

Her scent still held no trace of fear, which only confused him further. She simply stood there, hands on her hips, waiting for his answer about the meat. The lamplight caught the red highlights in her hair, making them dance like flames. He forced himself to look away, unsettled by how much he wanted to reach out and touch those silken strands.

“I’m not leaving you alone,” he growled, his voice rough with suspicion. But underneath lay a hint of disappointment that surprised him. His beast whined, wanting to prove their worth as a provider. “You’ll have to make do with what we have.”

CHAPTER 9

S carlett shrugged, keeping the gesture light and casual. She'd suspected it was too soon.

“That’s fine. Let’s see what you have in the pantry.”

A quick glance revealed a sparse assortment of dried meat and some rather shriveled root vegetables—basic supplies but enough to work with.

She inspected the jars of preserved foods as she considered her options. The fading daylight caught the glass, creating patterns on the newly cleaned shelves. She pulled out a jar of dried meat and some wrinkled potatoes, pleased to find they were still firm.

“Do you have any seasonings?” she asked, peering into the darker corners of the shelves.

A grunt answered her before he reached past her, his chest brushing against her back as he retrieved a small cloth bag from a high shelf. The brief contact sent a shiver of excitement down her spine.

“Salt and wild garlic.” His deep voice rumbled close to her ear.

She busied herself with examining the contents of the bag, trying to ignore how his proximity affected her.

“This will work perfectly. I can make a stew.”

Her hands moved with practiced efficiency as she assembled ingredients. The kitchen might be unfamiliar but cooking always centered her, gave her time to think. She'd expected to feel trapped, terrified even. Instead, she felt... intrigued. The way he watched her, those flashes of vulnerability beneath his gruff exterior—it stirred something in her she couldn't quite name.

“Where do you keep your cooking pot?” she asked, turning to find him still hovering nearby. His blue eyes gleamed in the lamplight as he studied her, making her heart skip.

“Under the counter.” He moved to retrieve it, his movements fluid despite his size, then studied her face again as he handed it to her. “You're... different than I expected.”

The admission seemed to surprise him as much as it did her. She blushed and focused on filling the pot with water, hiding her smile.

He went to fetch more wood for the stove before she could ask him, then returned to her side. His presence should have made her nervous, but instead she found herself relaxing into their shared domesticity.

“Could you slice these?”

She pushed the remaining root vegetables toward him as he picked up a knife. She stole glances at him while she worked, fascinated by the precise control with which he handled the knife.

The stew began to bubble, the aroma of the aroma of garlic and herbs filling the small kitchen. Leaving it to simmer, she opened the cupboard where she'd stored the

beautiful dishes she'd admired earlier, running her fingers over the delicate pottery.

"These are too pretty to leave hidden away." She selected two bowls, their glazed surfaces decorated with swirling patterns that reminded her of wind through trees. "We should use them."

He gave her an unreadable look as she placed the bowls on the table, but he didn't object. She added two carved wooden spoons and arranged everything just so, smoothing out the clean cloth she'd found earlier to serve as a tablecloth.

"There."

She stepped back to survey her work. The table looked inviting in the warm glow of the lamp, transforming the once-dusty cottage into something that felt like home. The thought startled her—she shouldn't be thinking of this place that way. She was a captive, wasn't she? But as he moved around her to stir the stew, his movements perfectly coordinated with hers, it didn't feel like imprisonment at all.

"Just one more thing," she said thoughtfully and headed for the door, aware of his eyes following her every move.

The evening air carried a hint of spring chill as she picked her way across the overgrown courtyard to the purple and white wildflowers she'd spotted earlier. As she selected the prettiest blooms, she heard his footsteps behind her. He filled the doorway, arms crossed over his broad chest, watching her with narrowed eyes. The suspicion in his stance made her want to laugh—as if she'd try to escape when dinner was almost ready.

Instead, she flashed him her brightest smile as she returned with an armful of flowers. His expression didn't change, but something in his posture softened slightly.

Back inside, she arranged the wildflowers in a clay pitcher she'd washed earlier. The white blooms caught the lamplight, casting subtle shadows across the table's surface. She stepped back, pleased with how the simple addition transformed the space from merely clean to welcoming.

"Perfect. Now we can eat."

She ladled the fragrant stew into the beautiful bowls, the steam rising between them like a veil. After she placed them on the table she hesitated, then went to her basket and retrieved the loaf of bread, a tacit acknowledgement of the change in her plans. Her stomach growled as she sat down. She hadn't realized how hungry she'd become after the long climb and the afternoon of cleaning. The stew wasn't fancy but it smelled wonderful.

He sat opposite her, his big body dwarfing his chair. His spoon looked equally tiny in his huge hand, but he handled it with his usual grace. The lamplight cast shadows across his angular features, softening them.

The silence between them felt comfortable rather than strained. Still, she couldn't help sneaking glances at him between bites. Twice their eyes met across the table, and her heart skipped a beat, the intensity in his gaze heating her cheeks.

After they finished, she brought out the berry tarts while he poured them each a glass of cider from a dusty bottle he'd brought to the table, the amber liquid catching the light as she swirled it in her glass. Neither of them moved to clear the dishes. Instead, they sat back in their chairs, the moment stretching out between them like honey dripping from a spoon.

She found herself studying the way his hands curled around his glass, those deadly claws retracted. When she looked up, she caught him watching her again, his blue eyes gleaming in the lamplight.

“Tell me about your grandmother,” he said, his deep voice breaking the silence. “The one you were going to visit.”

She blinked, surprised by his request, and traced her finger around the rim of her glass.

“We were always close but she raised me after my mother died.” That loss still closed her throat, but Grandmother had always been there for her. “She left her home and moved into my mother’s cottage in the village until I was old enough to manage on my own.”

Happy memories flooded back—her grandmother teaching her to work the loom, the scent of fresh bread in their tiny kitchen, the sound of her humming as she worked in the garden. “We didn’t have much, but we were happy. She taught me everything I know.”

“But she doesn’t live in your village?”

“No, she lives at the edge of the woods on the far side of the mountain.”

He frowned at her. “That’s Vultor territory.”

“Well, she’s lived there for as long as I can remember. I told you I used to play in these woods as a child—I used to visit her all the time. She stayed with me as long as I needed her, then returned to her own home. She prefers living on her own.”

“But why in Vultor territory?”

She rolled her eyes at him.

“You’re the only one who seems to call it that. And she told me something

once—that the Vultor don't believe they own the land, that anyone actually owns the lands.”

“To a certain extent that's true. But we do claim our territory.” His eyes glowed very blue in the lamplight. “And protect it from those who would try to take it from us.”

She looked down, toying with her cider.

“But you couldn't protect it from the humans who came after your family.”

The words hung in the air, heavy with the weight of his past.

“I tried,” he said bitterly.

“What happened?”

His jaw clenched, but to her surprise, he answered.

“My mother...” He paused, his claws spring out. “She tried to negotiate. Thought we could share the land.”

The pain in his voice made her stomach clench as she waited for him to continue.

“But they wanted it all. They torched our den. Tortured my family and left them to die in the fire. My sister...”

His words ended in a growl that vibrated through her bones as he surged to his feet, the chair scraping against the floor. He snatched up their empty bowls, the muscles in his arms rigid.

“Enough talking.”

She sat frozen, her heart pounding as she watched him stack the dishes with controlled movements that barely contained his rage. The story fragments he'd shared painted a very different picture than the tales she'd heard about the savage Vultor who'd terrorized innocent villagers. Her heart ached for him.

She took a deep breath and pushed back her chair, ready to help with the cleanup, but his growl stopped her.

"Stay. You've done enough." His gruff tone contrasted with the careful way he gathered the remaining dishes.

She settled back, unable to keep her eyes off him as he moved around the small kitchen space. Even though his muscles were still rigid from their discussion, he moved with his usual grace.

A yawn escaped before she could stifle it, and he turned, catching her mid-stretch.

"Time for bed," he ordered.

Her gaze darted to the curtained alcove where the bed platform lay hidden in shadows. It was the only sleeping space in the entire cottage. Heat crept up her neck as she remembered how the furs had felt in her arms, imagining their softness against bare skin.

"I..." The word caught in her throat as she looked back at him, suddenly very aware of their isolation and the growing intimacy between them.

"You'll sleep on the bench by the fire," he snapped.

She gave it a doubtful look but nodded. It wasn't padded but it was wide enough, and it would definitely be... safer than sleeping with him.

Sternly suppressing an unexpected pang of disappointment, she rose to her feet.

“I’ll get ready for bed.”

She’d only taken two steps towards the small bathroom before he stopped her, tossing her a worn but clean linen shirt, one of his by the size of it.

“In case you want something to sleep in,” he said gruffly.

She whispered a quick thank you and fled to the bathroom, closing the door behind her. The small mirror over the washbasin showed a woman with flushed cheeks and bright eyes, her red hair tumbling wildly around her face. She looked alive, vibrant. Happy, even.

That was ridiculous. She’d been kidnapped. Brought to the middle of the wilderness by a huge male who claimed she was his captive. So why was her heart fluttering like this? Why was her skin tingling at the thought of him sleeping just beyond a curtain? Why did the sight of the big, cozy pile of furs suddenly make her think of sharing it with him?

Stop it . She splashed cold water on her face and forced herself to take slow, calming breaths. This was crazy. He was a Vultor, and she was human. Their species were enemies, weren’t they? His people had killed hers, and her people had killed his. It was an endless cycle of violence that left nothing but destruction in its wake.

The bathroom was small but perfectly functional and she took a quick shower, washing away the exertion of the day before slipping into his oversized shirt, the worn fabric soft against her skin. The hem fell almost to her knees, and the collar hung loosely over her collarbone. It was like being wrapped in his scent, and she felt a rush of pleasure at the thought.

Then she took a deep breath and returned to the main room.

CHAPTER 10

Finnar stared at the bathroom door as it closed behind Scarlett, then found his gaze drifting to the bed platform. The alcove beckoned with its thick furs and intimate shadows. It wasn't uncommon for an entire family to share that space—it didn't have to mean anything. He could invite—order—her to join him. He could tell her he didn't want to make her sleep on the bench, that he wasn't comfortable making her sleep in front of the fire.

But it wasn't that simple. His blood heated at the thought of her curled up in his bed, her scent mingling with his own. His beast clawed at his insides, insisting he claim her.

The intensity of his reaction shocked him. He'd meant to keep her as a servant, not... this. The memory of working beside her throughout the day, those casual touches that set his skin aflame, the way she'd transformed his den into something that felt like home again—it all threatened to shatter his carefully constructed walls.

No. The bench was a much safer choice. But at least he could make it more comfortable.

He yanked blankets and furs from a storage chest, layering the thick furs to cushion the hard wooden surface. The blankets would keep her warm enough—warmer than she deserved as his captive. But he couldn't stop himself from taking two of the furs from his bed and adding them as well, telling himself it was only because he didn't want to listen to her complain of being cold during the night.

His claws threatened to emerge each time he caught her scent, his beast still raging at his decision to banish her from his bed, but he did his best to ignore it.

The sound of running water reached his sensitive ears as he finished with the makeshift bed, and his imagination tortured him with images of water sliding down her pale skin. His shaft stiffened as he pictured her naked form, and he paced the room, trying to banish the thoughts.

When she emerged, his breath caught. The shirt hung loose on her small frame, falling to mid-thigh. Damp patches darkened the fabric where her wet hair dripped onto her shoulders. His scent would cover her now, marking her as his. His beast rumbled in approval. but he ignored it just as he ignored the satisfaction that coursed through him at the sight of her in his clothing.

“You should be warm enough,” he growled, stepping away from the transformed bench as she gave it a startled glance. The words came out harsher than he intended, his frustration with himself bleeding into his tone.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

The soft gratitude in her voice sent an unwelcome pang through his chest. He turned away, unable to face the genuine appreciation in her expression. She had no right to thank him. No right to make him feel this confusing mix of guilt and protectiveness.

His beast snarled its disapproval, but he held firm. He wouldn’t give in to these unsettling urges. She was human. His prisoner. Nothing more.

“Go to bed,” he ordered, his voice rough. “And don’t try to escape. I’ll hear you if you do.”

Retreating to his bed alcove, he yanked the curtains closed with more force than

necessary. The rustle of blankets reached his sensitive ears as she settled onto the bench. Her presence filled his home with an unfamiliar warmth that both pleased and unsettled him. He shouldn't feel this contentment knowing she was here, safe in his den. And he definitely shouldn't regret putting her on the bench instead of in his bed.

He'd brought her dress and cloak into the alcove. He'd told himself it was just another precaution—without her clothes she couldn't leave—but he found himself clutching her dress, inhaling her lingering scent. Her sweet fragrance wrapped around him, calming the restless thoughts that usually plagued his nights. His beast purred in contentment as he buried his face in the fabric, letting her scent envelop him.

Sleep claimed him quickly, drawing him into dreams filled with domestic contentment. The den transformed into a warm, welcoming home. Scarlett moved through the room with graceful efficiency, her presence bringing order to his chaos. They worked side by side, their bodies moving in perfect synchronization. Her laughter echoed off the walls as she teased him, erasing years of loneliness.

The dream shifted. They sat across from each other at a table laden with steaming dishes. Flowers spilled from the pitcher between them, catching the golden lamplight. Her eyes sparkled as she smiled at him, then rose to her feet. She wore only his shirt, the hem barely skimming her thighs. Her fingers toyed with the buttons, slowly unfastening them one by one. The shirt slipped from her shoulders, pooling at her feet, revealing pale skin dusted with freckles, pretty pink nipples, and a small patch of fiery curls. His shaft stiffened, straining against his pants as she stepped towards him.

“Finnar...” The word came out as a whisper, a caress of breath that sent shivers down his spine.

She knelt before him, her small hands tugging at his pants. His cock sprang free, hard and aching for her touch. Her delicate fingers circled his girth, her soft gasp sending a rush of desire through his veins.

“I need you,” she murmured, looking up at him with a mixture of desire and innocence that shattered his control. “I need to taste you.”

His hand tangled in her hair as she lowered her mouth to his tip, her tongue flicking out to taste him. His hips jerked, seeking more. She opened for him, her lips parting as he slid into her hot little mouth. He growled in pleasure, his claws scraping her scalp.

She worked him with a combination of eagerness and hesitancy, as if unsure of herself. The thought that she’d never done this before pleased his beast. She was his, untouched by anyone else.

His hips rocked in time with her movements as she took him deeper, her tongue swirling around his sensitive base. Pleasure rippled through him, building to a crescendo that threatened to consume him. He fought for control, not wanting this moment to end. But then she looked up at him and smiled and he exploded with guttural cry—only to jerk awake, shocked at the wetness on his stomach and the throbbing of his cock.

He couldn’t remember ever having a dream like that before, couldn’t remember ever feeling this need. But it wasn’t a dream, was it? She was here. In his house. His beast clawed at him to claim her.

She’d been so eager in his dream. So willing.

Was it possible... could she want him too? No. It wasn’t possible. He shouldn’t even want it to be possible.

He sat up and threw back the bed curtains, desperate to escape the lingering effects of the dream. Moonlight flooded through the windows—the windows she’d stripped of their shutters, letting light into his darkness—and his gaze was drawn inexorably to

the sleeping figure by the fire.

She lay curled on her side, one hand tucked beneath her cheek, dark lashes fanned against her skin. One of the furs had ridden up, exposing a length of bare leg that made his mouth go dry. The fire had burned low, casting flickering shadows across her peaceful face.

Before he realized what he was doing, he'd crossed the room. His bare feet made no sound on the wooden floor as he drew closer. She stirred slightly, mumbling something in her sleep, and his beast stretched and purred. Mate.

He shook his head sharply, rejecting the very idea. She was human. The enemy. The source of all his pain and loss. And yet... watching her sleep, he couldn't summon the familiar rage. Instead, an unfamiliar warmth spread through his chest.

His fingers itched to brush back the strand of hair that had fallen across her face. To trace the curve of her cheek, the fullness of her lips. To gather her into his arms and carry her to his bed where she belonged.

Mate , his beast insisted again, more forcefully.

"Impossible," he growled under his breath, but even he heard the lack of conviction in his voice. How could this small human female have wormed her way past his defenses so quickly? In just one day she'd brought light and warmth back into his den—and his life.

He took a step back, then another, fighting the urge to touch her. She was human. It could never work. The sooner he accepted that, the better.

But before he could return to his bed, a small whimper pierced the silence. His head snapped around to see her face twisted in distress, caught in some nightmare. His

protective instincts flared before he could stop them.

He dropped to one knee beside her, his hand moving of its own accord to cup her cheek. The softness of her skin stole his breath. His thumb traced gentle circles against her cheek, trying to soothe away whatever darkness plagued her dreams.

Her sigh ghosted across his wrist as she pressed into his touch. The simple gesture of trust knocked the air from his lungs. No one had trusted him like this in years. Not since...

She nuzzled against his palm, her features smoothing into peaceful contentment. His chest ached at the sight. How long had it been since anyone had accepted his touch without fear? Since he'd wanted to offer comfort instead of pain?

The moonlight caught the copper highlights in her hair, turning them to liquid fire. His fingers itched to run through those silken strands. To pull her close and breathe in her sweet scent. To protect her from whatever haunted her dreams.

But the scars of his past burned cold against his skin. Humans had destroyed everything he loved. He couldn't let himself forget that. No matter how much his beast yearned for her warmth.

With an effort that felt like tearing open a wound, he pulled his hand away and rose to his feet. Each step back to his bed felt heavier than the last, leaving him more alone than ever in his nest of furs.

CHAPTER 11

S carlett's eyes fluttered open, her lips curved in a lingering smile from a dream that slipped away like morning mist. All she remembered was feeling safe. Content. Warmth filled her body, but then reality came crashing back and she bolted upright on the bench. Damn. She'd meant to escape during the night, to slip away while Finnar slept.

Early morning sunlight spilled through the round windows, painting patterns across the newly cleaned floor. Her gaze darted to the bed alcove. The curtains hung partially open, revealing Finnar's massive form sprawled across the furs. His chest rose and fell in the deep, steady rhythm of sleep.

Her clothes. She needed her clothes first. Heat crept into her cheeks as she looked down at his oversized shirt draped over her body. The hem brushed her thighs as she swung her legs off the bench, careful not to disturb the furs.

The floorboards might creak. She'd noticed a few loose ones yesterday while cleaning. She held her breath and placed one bare foot on the floor, then the other. The wood felt cool beneath her feet as she rose, testing each step before putting her full weight down.

A bird called outside and she froze, but Finnar didn't stir. She crept closer to the bed alcove, drawn despite herself to the sight of him in repose. His powerful form lay sprawled across the furs, one arm flung wide as if reaching for something, and she had the brief, foolish impulse to snuggle under that powerful arm. The morning light softened his fierce features, and her heart gave an unexpected squeeze. She'd

glimpsed something in him yesterday, beneath that hard exterior—a loneliness that matched her own.

No. She shook her head sharply. Whatever vulnerability he'd shown, whatever connection she'd imagined while they worked together, he'd still kidnapped her. She couldn't let herself forget that.

Backing carefully away from the alcove, she scanned the room for any sign of her dress or cloak. Nothing. The hem of his shirt brushed against her thighs as she walked, making her all too aware of how exposed she felt.

A cool breeze drifted through the window, raising goosebumps on her bare legs, but the shirt would have to do—she couldn't waste more precious minutes searching when he might wake at any moment.

The wooden floor felt cool beneath her bare feet as she crept toward the door. Her basket waited where she'd left it. At least she'd have something to carry, even if she had to make her way through the forest in nothing but his shirt.

She cast one final glance at his sleeping body. At least the shirt would serve as a reminder of their strange day together—not that she was likely to forget him. The thought sent an odd pang through her chest, but she pushed it aside. It was time to leave.

Her fingers trembled as she reached for the door latch. The metal felt cool against her skin, morning light spilling through the gap beneath the door, painting a golden path to escape.

“And where do you think you're going, little red?”

Her heart lurched at the sound of that deep, mocking voice, but she forced herself not

to flinch. Drawing on every ounce of composure she possessed, she turned to face him. He was leaning on one elbow, the predatory gleam in those ice-blue eyes a startling contrast to the apparently relaxed pose.

She lifted her chin, willing her voice to remain steady.

“I noticed some wild berries growing in the garden yesterday. I thought they’d make a nice breakfast.” The lie rolled off her tongue with surprising ease as she gestured toward the overgrown courtyard. “Unless you’d prefer something else?”

“You were going out dressed like that?”

His skeptical gaze traveled down her body, lingering on her bare legs. Heat bloomed across her skin, her heart skipping at the intensity of his stare. She tugged at the hem of the borrowed shirt, desperately wishing it was longer.

“I-I can’t find my clothes.” The words came out more breathless than she’d hoped. She cleared her throat, trying to sound more dignified despite her burning cheeks. “I’d planned to change first, but...”

A knowing smirk curved his lips as he reached beneath his furs. With an exaggerated flourish, he pulled out her neatly folded dress and cloak.

“Had to keep them safe.” His voice held a mocking note that made her pulse quicken. “Couldn’t have you running off in the night, could I?”

She stared at her clothes tucked in his large hands, trying to process the fact that he’d actually slept with them. In his bed. Where she wasn’t. The thought sent an unexpected thrill through her body, followed by a wave of confusion at her own reaction.

She swallowed hard, fighting to keep her voice steady. “You... slept with my clothes?”

His smirk widened, but something flickered in his eyes—an emotion she couldn’t quite read.

“Just a precaution,” he said as he rose from the bed, and her mouth went dry at the sight of his naked body, all rippling muscle and raw power.

She and Tessa had dared each other into spying on some of the village boys at the swimming hole one summer but other than that, she’d never seen a naked man. Those brief glimpses certainly hadn’t prepared her for the sight of him. She knew she should look away, but her eyes traced the lines of his broad shoulders, traveled down his chest to his narrow waist. The morning light played across his silvery-grey skin, highlighting the subtle shift of muscles as he moved. She’d never seen anything so beautiful, so dangerous

“We Vultor don’t share human foolishness about nudity.”

His voice held that familiar mocking tone, but something darker lurked beneath it. He stood there, completely at ease in his nakedness, radiating a predatory confidence that made her pulse race.

Her gaze drifted lower before she could stop herself. Heat pooled low in her stomach as she took in every magnificent inch of him. He wasn’t erect but his cock was still huge, a long thick column hanging halfway down his thigh, a shade darker than the rest of his skin with a darker band around the base.

Her fingers twitched at her side. What would it feel like beneath her hands?

The air grew thick between them, and her breath came faster. Time stretched like

honey, sweet and slow. His own breathing changed, grew heavier.

Then he turned away abruptly, but not before she glimpsed his body's response to her attention. The sight sent a jolt of electricity through her core.

He tossed her clothes to her over his shoulder, then muttered something about needing a shower, his broad back still turned to her as he strode into the bathroom. The door closed with a decisive click, followed by the sound of running water.

Her heart still racing, she glanced over at the cottage door—this might be her best chance to slip away. But the memory of his supernatural speed made her pause. He'd catch her before she made it halfway down the mountain.

The sound of splashing water drifted from the bathroom. She pressed her lips together, considering her options. Better to wait, to make him lower his guard. Tonight would be better—darkness would give her cover, and she'd have time to prepare.

She slipped into her clothes, the fabric cool against her heated skin. Her fingers trembled slightly as she did up the buttons, still affected by the sight of his magnificent body, and she shook her head sharply, trying to clear it. She couldn't let attraction cloud her judgment, no matter how compelling he was.

The bathroom door remained firmly closed, steam curling beneath it. She smoothed down her skirt and moved to the kitchen area. She'd make breakfast, play the dutiful servant. Let him think she'd accepted her captivity. The more comfortable he became with her presence, the better her chances of escape would be.

CHAPTER 12

Finnar watched Scarlett bustle around his den, her energy and enthusiasm undiminished despite what he was sure was a failed escape attempt. The sight of her in her own clothes sparked an odd mix of disappointment and relief. His beast grumbled at the loss of seeing her in his shirt, but he pushed the thought aside.

She attacked the remaining chaos with determination, sorting through the clutter that had accumulated over the winter. His muscles tensed each time she discovered another forgotten item, but instead of mockery, she met each discovery with genuine interest. When she found an old carved box, she held it up with reverent hands, admiring the intricate designs before carefully placing it on a newly cleaned shelf.

The morning light streamed through the spotless windows, highlighting the growing order. His den had been transformed under her touch, becoming something he barely recognized—warm, inviting, alive. He found himself following her lead just as he had yesterday, moving furniture at her direction and reaching the high shelves she couldn't manage.

But his skin prickled with awareness every time she passed close by. Her sweet scent filled his nose, making his claws prick his fingertips, desperate to emerge. His beast prowled restlessly beneath his skin, desperate to reach for her, to pull her against him and bury his face in her hair. The urge to touch her grew stronger with each passing moment until he could barely keep his hands to himself.

She glanced up at him, those dark eyes seeing too much.

“Why don’t you work in the garden for a while? See if you can find it beneath the weeds.”

The suggestion surprised him—both that she would make it and that he found himself nodding. He needed the escape, needed distance from the overwhelming temptation she presented. Without a word, he strode outside into the overgrown courtyard, grateful for a task that would occupy his hands and hopefully quiet his beast’s demands.

The remnants of the garden had been there when he arrived, but he’d never paid any attention to it and she was right, it needed work. Vines curled around the stone well and a tangle of weeds choked the herb beds. Dead leaves rustled as he moved, the once carefully pruned bushes now wild and overgrown. His hands flexed at his sides, eager for a distraction, and he set to work, hacking back the worst of the growth.

As he yanked another weed from the soil, its roots clinging stubbornly before finally releasing their hold, the familiar motion triggered an unexpected memory—his younger brother Marcus laughing as they raced to clear their rows in their family’s garden, competing to see who could pull the most weeds.

He found himself smiling at the memory. Marcus had always made everything into a game, even the most mundane chores. He’d dance between the neat rows of vegetables, singing made-up songs about the plants while their mother pretended to scold him for disturbing them.

His hands stilled in the dirt as more memories surfaced. His mother showing him how to identify healing herbs. He and Marcus sneaking fresh peas straight from the pod. Teaching his sister to dance. Their father showing them how to prepare the soil each spring, his strong hands gentle as they planted tiny seeds.

For the first time in years, the memories came without the usual accompanying surge

of rage. Instead the garden around him blurred as tears pricked his eyes. He'd forgotten how bright Marcus's smile had been, How his sister had loved to paint, how their mother's eyes crinkled when she laughed, how their father's voice deepened with pride when speaking of his sons.

The shadow of their loss hovered at the edges of his mind, threatening to overwhelm these precious recovered moments, and for a moment grief threatened to choke him. His claws dug into the earth as he wrestled for control but despite his sorrow he realized he didn't want to lose this. For the first time in a long time, he welcomed these memories of his family. It felt good to remember them as they had been, before their lives were shattered.

It was all because of her, he realized. Scarlett. She'd brought warmth and light back into his home. She'd reminded him there was more to life than his quest for revenge.

The kitchen door swung open, interrupting his reverie. She emerged, an empty basket balanced on her hip, and his breath caught. She looked so right standing in his doorway, her face flushed and her eyes bright. The morning light caught the copper highlights in her hair, turning them to liquid fire. She was so fucking beautiful, and he ached with the need to touch her.

Instead he forced himself to focus on the task at hand, methodically attacking the weeds that had claimed the abandoned garden. The physical labor helped ground him, keeping his beast from surging forward and doing something foolish. But his eyes kept drifting back to her, watching her face as she began to help, gathering up the weeds he'd cleared.

She stumbled over a half concealed paving stone. He automatically reached out to steady her and she gave him a rueful smile.

"I guess it's obvious that Grace is not my middle name."

Her hand lingered in his a moment longer than necessary, her delicate fingers dwarfed by his rough palm. He could feel her pulse racing beneath his thumb, her soft skin warming beneath his touch. The urge to pull her closer, to drag her into his arms and claim her mouth nearly overwhelmed him, and he had to force himself to release her before his claws emerged.

“Maybe I should start on dinner instead,” she said, her voice low and breathless.

“I’ll help you.”

“You don’t have to?—”

“I’ll help.”

He followed her back inside and they both paused for a moment to study the results of their work. His den had been transformed under her touch. Sunlight streamed through clean windows, dancing across polished surfaces. The musty darkness that had matched his mood for so long had vanished.

“We should cover those cushions with some fabric,” she said, gesturing to the worn cushions on his chair. “I wove some cloth which would be perfect?—”

She stopped abruptly, color flooding her cheeks. The words hung between them, heavy with possibility. For a moment, he let himself imagine it—coming home to find her at her loom, working together to make this space truly theirs, falling asleep with her scent surrounding him. His beast rumbled in approval.

He wanted that future with an intensity that scared him. But she was human. His enemy. The very thing he’d sworn to hate.

She seemed to sense his confusion, resting her fingers lightly on his arm before

heading to the kitchen area. He took a few deep, calming breaths and followed her. Without discussion, they fell into the same rhythm as the previous evening—him chopping while she stirred the pot, their bodies moving in an effortless dance around the small kitchen space.

The domesticity of it all should have grated on him. Instead, warmth spread through his chest each time she brushed past him or their fingers touched as she took ingredients from his hands.

At the table, she tried to draw him out about his past again.

“Did you plant that garden?”

“No.” He kept his voice flat, unwilling to discuss it, but she pursued the question.

“Did your grandmother?”

“I assume so,” he said reluctantly. “I grew up far to the north of here. I didn’t come here until... after.”

After he’d lost everything else.

Her eyes softened with understanding, and she changed the topic.

“The red-leafed vine you were pulling up—you don’t have any use for it?”

“No. Why?”

“I was wondering if it would make a good dye. I don’t spin my own yarn but I like experimenting with different dyes.”

Ignoring the wave of guilt that washed over him at the knowledge that he'd taken that from her, he said gruffly, "You're welcome to use whatever you want."

Her cheeks colored at the simple words, a reaction he didn't understand, but he liked the sight. He liked it far too much.

"Thank you." She smiled at him, her expression warm and open.

"Tell me more about your weaving," he said before he could think better of it.

She happily complied, her hands dancing through the air as she illustrated the movement of threads on the loom. Her eyes lit up as she explained how changing the order of lifted threads could create entirely different patterns. He found himself entranced not just by her words, but by the passion in her voice, the way her whole face came alive.

He could imagine her at her loom, creating beauty from simple threads. The thought of more evenings like this, filled with her voice and her smile, tugged at something deep inside him. His beast purred with contentment, and for once, he didn't try to silence it, even though she gave him a curious look.

She described more of the process and he found himself wondering if he could build her a loom, if he could find the right wood, and how difficult it would be to get the materials for her dyes...

The realization that he was actually thinking of keeping her here hit him like a physical blow.

He pushed back his chair, rising to his feet so quickly that she started, her eyes going wide. He couldn't do this. This was wrong—she was a human and he was a Vultor. It was impossible.

“You should prepare for bed,” he said gruffly. “I’ll take care of the dishes.”

She opened her mouth as if to say something, then simply nodded and rose.

He finished the dishes far too quickly, then had to listen to the tantalizing sounds of her shower. His enhanced hearing picked up every splash, every shift of her body. Steam curled under the bathroom door, carrying her scent—soap mixed with her natural sweetness.

His claws threatened to emerge as he imagined water flowing down her curves, of joining her under the water and running his hands over her wet naked body. Would she be afraid, or would she welcome him? How easy it would be just to open that door and find out.

He paced the den, straightening items that didn’t need straightening. His beast prowled beneath his skin, urging him to go to her. To claim her.

Growling, he snatched up the blankets and furs, arranging them on the bench with more force than necessary. The memory of her sleeping there the previous night, wearing his shirt, haunted him. He’d wanted to gather her into his arms then. Now the urge was even stronger.

The water stopped. His hands clenched into fists as he waited for her to emerge, every muscle taut with tension. When she finally came out, she was only wrapped in a towel and the sight nearly broke his control. Droplets traced paths down her neck, disappearing beneath the towel. Her skin glowed pink from the heat.

“Would... would it be all right if I wore your shirt again?”

Fuck yes .

He tossed it to her, turning away before he did something foolish like follow the path of those water droplets with his tongue. The sweet scent of her clean skin filled his nose, making his beast howl with frustrated desire.

She murmured a quiet thanks, and he heard the rustle of fabric as she pulled on the shirt. His imagination provided vivid images of her sliding his shirt over her naked body, and he had to bite back another growl.

“Time for bed,” he snapped, and stalked over to the bed alcove without looking back. Afraid to look back and give in to temptation.

Not looking at her didn’t help. He found himself burying his head in her dress again, letting her scent wrap around him like a blanket. His beast rumbled in contentment, but his mind took a long time to quiet.

Sleep crept up on him between one breath and the next. The peaceful darkness shattered as flames erupted behind his eyes. Heat scorched his skin as he watched his family’s den burn. His mother’s screams pierced the air. His father’s body lay broken on blood-stained ground.

The smoke choked him, thick and acrid. He couldn’t reach them. His legs wouldn’t move.

Then Scarlett appeared in the midst of the inferno, her red hair blazing like the flames around her, her dark eyes reflecting the fire. She reached for him, but the flames consumed her.

“No!” The word tore from his throat as he tried to reach her, the stench of smoke filling his head.

CHAPTER 13

Scarlett lay quietly on her makeshift bed, listening to the night sounds filtering through the windows as she bided her time. The fire had burned down to glowing embers that cast a faint reddish glow. She knew she had to leave but it was harder than she'd anticipated. Her heart ached at the thought of leaving, but she couldn't stay here as his prisoner, no matter how much he intrigued her, no matter how much of a connection she felt to him.

A low moan drifted from the bed alcove. She froze, worried he'd caught her still awake, but the sound came again—distressed rather than threatening. The curtains rustled as he tossed restlessly.

"No... please..." His voice was rough with anguish.

Her chest tightened. She should take advantage of his distraction to slip away, but something in his broken tone drew her to her feet. She padded closer to the alcove, his shirt brushing against her thighs. The wooden planks creaked softly beneath her steps but he remained trapped in whatever nightmare gripped him.

"No!" The cry tore from his throat.

Before she could stop herself, she pushed aside the curtain. Moonlight spilled across his face, twisted in grief. His powerful body trembled as he fought whatever demons haunted his dreams.

Her grandmother would be worried sick by now. She needed to leave while she had

the chance. But as another whimper escaped him, she couldn't bring herself to abandon him to his nightmares.

He started to thrash beneath the covers, his powerful body twisting as if trying to fight off an unseen enemy. Moonlight caught the sheen of sweat on his skin, highlighting the anguish etched across his face. Another cry tore from his throat, raw and wounded.

She reached out, hesitating for just a moment before laying her hand on his shoulder. His skin burned beneath her palm, feverish and slick with sweat.

"Finnar," she whispered, keeping her voice gentle. "Finnar, wake up. It's just a dream."

His muscles bunched beneath her touch, tension radiating through his massive frame. Up close, she could make out more words mixed in with the desperate sounds—"No" and "Please" and what might have been names, though she couldn't quite catch them.

She squeezed his shoulder, speaking his name again, wanting to chase away whatever horrors plagued him. For all his strength and fierce demeanor, he seemed terribly vulnerable in that moment. Not the fearsome creature who'd captured her, but someone who'd suffered devastating loss.

"Wake up," she urged again and this time he heard her.

She barely had time to register his eyes snapping open before his arm shot out. In one fluid motion, he yanked her onto the bed platform. Her breath caught as he pulled her beneath him, his mouth claiming hers in a fierce, demanding kiss.

The shock of it froze her for a heartbeat—the heat of his body, the desperate way he held her, the intensity of his need washing over her. Then her body responded,

melting against him as she parted her lips to his searching tongue. The kiss deepened, becoming something more than comfort, something primal and urgent that set her blood on fire.

She was supposed to be leaving—she couldn't do this! But his touch was everything she'd dreamed of and more. The feel of his bare skin against hers made her head swim, desire coursing through her veins with each stroke of his tongue. He kissed her as if he wanted to devour her, his hunger igniting her own. Her fingers twined in his hair as she arched against him, responding with equal passion.

When he finally broke the kiss, she gasped for air, her heart pounding in her chest. His breath came in ragged pants, his arms still tight around her. He stared down at her with those intense eyes of his, the blue almost swallowed by the black of his pupils, and her stomach clenched at the raw need she saw there. Need for her. A shiver ran down her spine as she realized she wanted this just as much as he did.

She didn't care that she was meant to escape, that she was supposed to be running. She didn't care that he was a Vultor and she was a human. All that mattered was the way his touch made her feel alive, desired, needed. His mouth crashed down on hers again and she opened to him eagerly, her fingers digging into his shoulders as he explored her mouth with his tongue.

His hand slid beneath her shirt, calloused fingers skimming over the curve of her waist, making her shiver with delight. He cupped her breast, teasing her nipple until she moaned into his mouth. She'd never felt like this before—wild and reckless and free. She wanted him to touch her everywhere, to ease the ache between her legs.

But as he shifted above her, the massive ridge of her erection lodging against her core, a flash of uncertainty pierced the fog of desire. This was all happening so fast. He was so big and powerful, dwarfing her completely. Panic flared in her chest and she pushed uselessly at his chest as she tore her mouth away from his.

“I can’t—” Her voice cracked, barely a whisper. “I’ve never...”

He immediately wrenched away from her. The sudden loss of contact left her dizzy, her lips still tingling. Her heart hammered against her ribs as she struggled to catch her breath.

A harsh growl ripped through the darkness. Her eyes widened as he staggered back from the bed platform. Moonlight streaming through the window illuminated his face, and her breath caught in her throat. His features had shifted, becoming sharper, more predatory. His usual icy blue eyes now blazed with a luminescent glow, and elongated fangs glinted as his lips pulled back in a snarl.

The sight should have terrified her. This was the monster from childhood stories, the beast that haunted the darkest parts of the forest. But her panic had subsided as soon as he’d released her, and now fascination overpowered her fear. This was still Finnar—the man who’d helped her clean his den, who’d shared meals with her, whose kiss had just set her soul on fire.

His tortured gaze met hers for one endless moment. The raw anguish in his expression made her reach out instinctively, but before she could touch him, he spun away. The door crashed open and he vanished into the night, leaving her alone with the echo of his growl and the lingering heat of his kiss.

She stared at the open doorway, her fingers pressed against her still-tingling lips. The stories she’d dismissed as mere tales whispered through her mind—warnings of the Vultor’s true nature, their ability to shift between forms. The proof had been right there in Finnar’s transformed features, in those glowing eyes that had fixed on her with such raw emotion.

Another howl pierced the night, further away this time. Her skin prickled with awareness, and she found herself drawn towards the sound. The urge to follow him

into the darkness, to comfort him, was almost overwhelming. Despite his fearsome appearance, despite her momentary flash of panic, she'd seen the vulnerability in his eyes before he fled.

The cool night air brushed against her bare legs, reminding her that she wore only his shirt. But more importantly, reminding her that she was alone. Unguarded. The opportunity she'd been waiting for had arrived.

Her heart twisted as she glanced toward the forest. The kiss still burned in her memory, along with all the quiet moments they'd shared over the past two days. The growing connection between them was undeniable. Was that what had frightened him? Had he run because he felt it too?

She shook her head, forcing herself to focus. This wasn't about Finnar or the way he made her feel. Her grandmother would be sick with worry by now. She had to leave while she had the chance.

Yet her feet remained rooted to the spot, her body refusing to move. Another howl echoed through the trees, mournful and alone. The sound tugged at something deep inside her, making her question everything she thought she knew about the Vultor. About Finnar.

Taking a deep breath, she squared her shoulders. She couldn't let these new feelings cloud her judgment. This might be her only chance to escape. Time to go.

CHAPTER 14

Finnar's bones cracked and reshaped as he surrendered to the change, his body morphing into his more primal form. Fur rippled across his skin, claws extended from his fingertips, and his jaw elongated as his fangs grew. The transformation sent waves of raw energy coursing through him, heightening every sensation.

The forest opened up before him in startling clarity—each leaf, each branch etched in perfect detail despite the darkness. Scarlett's lingering scent tormented him as he ran, sweet and intoxicating. His beast howled in protest at leaving her behind, urging him to return and claim her.

He only pushed himself harder, branches whipping past as he tore through the undergrowth. But no matter how fast he ran, he couldn't escape the pull she had on him. The taste of her lips haunted him, the memory of her soft body pressed against his making his blood burn.

Mate, his beast insisted with growing urgency. The primal call resonated through every fiber of his being, threatening to overwhelm his rational mind. He'd fought so long against forming attachments, against letting anyone close enough to matter. Yet somehow this human female had slipped past his defenses.

But she rejected me. Pushed me away.

Another howl escaped at the knowledge, along with a confused mixture of guilt and longing. She had been so warmly responsive to his kiss, matching his hunger, that he'd forgotten himself. The memory of the panic on her face twisted his stomach,

leaving him cold and hollow. He would never take from her what she didn't offer freely.

And he couldn't offer her what she needed either. He was a monster, broken and tainted by his quest for vengeance. He could never give her the love she deserved. She was better off without him.

He skidded to a halt at the edge of a cliff, chest heaving as he struggled for control. The mountains spread out before him, bathed in moonlight. The same moonlight that was streaming through his den's windows, illuminating her beautiful face. The image sent another wave of longing through him.

His claws dug into the earth as he fought the instinct to return to her. She was human. The enemy. He couldn't trust her, couldn't allow himself to feel anything for her. But his beast knew better, recognizing what his human side refused to acknowledge—she was his perfect match, the missing piece he'd been searching for.

A frustrated growl rumbled from his chest as he paced along the cliff edge, caught between his need for vengeance and the undeniable bond forming between them.

His beast clawed at him, each step away from the den feeling like a physical wound.

Mate , it snarled. Return. Protect.

“No,” he growled, his thoughts a chaotic blend of reasoning and instinct. She was too delicate, too pure for his darkness. Those small hands that had brought order to his den, that gentle smile as she'd arranged wildflowers on his table—they belonged to a world he'd lost the right to enter.

His paws pounded against the earth as he ran, as he pushed himself harder, desperate to outrun the pull of her presence. But his beast wouldn't relent, bombarding him

with images of her sleeping body, the trust in her eyes when she'd touched his shoulder, the way she'd melted into his kiss, her small perfect breast beneath his hand.

Too soft. Too vulnerable. The words became a mantra as he tried to drown out his beast's demands. Everything about her radiated an innocence he'd lost long ago.

The memory of his nightmare flashed through his mind—her face surrounded by flames, just like his family. His chest constricted as the images overlapped—the burning of his childhood home, Scarlett's features twisted in terror. He couldn't protect them then. He couldn't protect her now.

He launched himself over a fallen log, his muscles burning as he tried to push himself into exhaustion. But no matter how fast he ran, he couldn't escape the truth his beast already knew—she'd awakened something in him he'd thought long dead. Hope. And that made her more dangerous than any enemy he'd faced before.

He wasn't sure how far he traveled before he finally accepted that he couldn't outrun his feelings. He gave into his beast's urging and turned back towards his den. He still had no intention of claiming her but he shouldn't have left her alone and unprotected. He should have assured her that he would never hurt her—human or not, captive or not, she was his to protect, and he would do whatever it took to make sure she felt safe.

His racing heartbeat finally slowed as he approached his den, though he refused to acknowledge why her scent called him home. He had returned to his normal form, the beast within settling into an uneasy quiet, no longer fighting against his control.

The moment he crossed the threshold, his nostrils flared. Something was wrong. Her sweet scent had grown lighter, no longer carrying the warmth of her presence. His eyes swept the room, taking in the empty bench where she should have been sleeping.

Gone.

The knowledge almost brought him to his knees. His beast erupted with a fury that shattered his human form. Bones cracked and reformed as fur rippled across his skin once more. He made no attempt to fight the transformation—he welcomed it. The beast’s heightened senses would help track her.

Her scent trail led to the door. How long ago had she fled? Hours? Minutes? The night held too many dangers for a human woman alone. Serpents. Cliff edges. Another Vultor who wouldn’t show her mercy.

Images of her broken body at the bottom of a ravine or torn apart by predators flooded his mind. His beast howled in anguish, the sound echoing off the stone walls. The need to find her, to protect her, overwhelmed every other thought.

All his earlier doubts about keeping her close vanished beneath the crushing weight of his fear for her safety. He’d been a selfish fool to leave her alone. To think he could resist what was growing between them.

He burst out the door, his enhanced vision cutting through the darkness as he searched for signs of her passage. There—crushed grass where she’d fled down the mountain path. His muscles bunched as he prepared to give chase.

The forest blurred past as he raced down the mountainside, his powerful muscles propelling him through the darkness. His enhanced senses filtered through the cacophony of night sounds—the rustle of leaves, small creatures scurrying away from his approach, the distant call of a night bird—searching for any sign of her.

There! A trace of her sweetness lingered in the air, drawing him forward like a hook in his chest. His claws dug into the earth as he changed direction, following that enticing scent. She’d chosen the steeper path, likely hoping the treacherous terrain

would slow his pursuit.

For the first time in years, the ghosts of his past didn't crowd his mind. No visions of flames consuming his family's home. No echoes of screams. The desperate need to find her pushed everything else aside, leaving only the hunt.

Her scent grew stronger, fresher. She couldn't have passed this way more than minutes ago. His beast growled in satisfaction—she was close. A branch snapped somewhere ahead and his ears swiveled toward the sound.

The wind shifted, bringing him a stronger wave of her scent mixed with fear and exhaustion. His beast whined, unhappy that their mate was afraid. He ran faster, eating up the distance between them. He had to reach her before she hurt herself on the dangerous path or attracted the attention of less friendly predators.

The path dropped away sharply ahead, forcing him to slow his headlong rush. Her scent trail wandered dangerously close to the edge, freezing his blood as he remembered all the times she'd stumbled on the climb. His heart clenched at the thought of her navigating this stretch in darkness, with only his shirt to protect her from the chill night air.

He burst out of the undergrowth into a moonlit clearing, his heart seizing at the scene before him. Scarlett stood backed against a rock face, her slender form trembling in his oversized shirt. The acrid stench of her terror filled his nostrils, but she held her ground, a rock clutched in her white-knuckled grip.

An adyani stalked toward her, its massive form casting a dark shadow across the moonlit ground. The beast's muscled shoulders rolled as it moved, yellow eyes fixed on its prey. A deep growl rumbled from its chest as it edged closer.

Raw fury exploded through his body, his claws extending as he launched himself

across the clearing. The adyani's head whipped around at his approach, but too late. His claws sank deep into the thick fur at its neck, and he used his momentum to wrench the predator away from her.

The bitter taste of the adyani's blood filled his mouth as his fangs found purchase. How dare this creature threaten his mate? He tightened his grip, determined to eliminate this threat to her safety.

The adyani twisted in his grip, its claws raking across his shoulder. Pain flared, but he barely registered it—his entire being focused on protecting her. The predator's muscles bunched as it tried to break free, its teeth snapping at his face.

Blood matted his fur where the adyani's claws had struck, but the injury only fueled his rage. His beast howled in triumph as they rolled across the forest floor, leaves and dirt flying. The adyani was strong, but his determination made him stronger. His claws dug deeper into its flesh as they grappled.

In one fluid motion, he locked his hands around the creature's head. The crack of its neck breaking echoed through the clearing like a gunshot. The massive body went limp, and he let it drop to the ground.

Blood dripped from his claws as he turned towards her. Halfway back to her, reality crashed in—he was still transformed, his beast form on full display. He froze, suddenly aware of how terrifying he must look with his elongated fangs and blood-matted fur.

But before he could retreat, she was running toward him. Her bare feet flew across the ground and then she was there, launching herself into his arms. Her small body pressed against his chest, her arms wrapping around his neck despite his fearsome appearance. Her sweet scent enveloped him, chasing away the metallic tang of blood and violence as he gave a great shuddering sigh of relief. She was safe in his arms at

last.

CHAPTER 15

Scarlett clung to Finnar, her heart still hammering against her ribs. She'd been halfway down the mountain when she began to think something was following her. She briefly considered the idea that it was Finnar and immediately dismissed it. He wouldn't bother hiding. She tried to tell herself it was only her imagination but then she heard a low growl—and not the kind made by a Vultor.

She'd searched desperately for a weapon, but all she'd been able to find was a rock, picking it up just as the adyani stalked into the clearing. The rock felt pathetically small, its rough edges biting into her palm, but it was all she had. Her back pressed against the cold stone as the predator inched closer, its yellow eyes fixed on her with deadly intent.

But then Finnar had burst in the clearing, the sight of him stealing her breath away. Gone was the male she'd spent the last two days with—in his place stood a magnificent beast. Silvery-grey fur covered his massive form, the moonlight catching each ripple of powerful muscle as he moved. His face had transformed into something wild and fierce, with a pronounced muzzle and gleaming fangs. Yet those striking blue eyes remained unchanged, burning with protective fury as he launched himself at the adyani.

The rock slipped from her trembling fingers as she watched him battle the mountain predator, every move as graceful as it was lethal. She bit back a cry when the adyani's claws raked across his shoulder, drawing blood, but he seemed oblivious to the injury. He fought with terrifying efficiency, his own claws finding purchase in the adyani's throat. The sound of breaking bone echoed through the clearing as he

snapped the creature's neck.

The fight ended as swiftly as it began. He dropped the lifeless body and turned towards her. Blood matted his fur, but fear was the furthest thing from her mind. It was still him—the same male who'd helped her clean his den, who'd slept with her clothes to keep her from running, who'd kissed her with such passion before fleeing into the night.

She didn't hesitate to launch herself across the clearing and throw herself into his arms. His arms wrapped around her protectively, but she felt the tension in his muscles, in the rigid way he held himself.

"You came for me," she whispered into his fur, impossibly soft against her face. His heart thundered beneath her cheek, matching the wild beating of her own. The metallic scent of blood mixed with his familiar wild scent, and she pressed closer, overwhelmed by the knowledge that he'd risked himself to protect her.

The night air felt cool against her legs, reminding her that she wore only his shirt, but his body radiated heat. She should have been terrified—of the adyani, of his transformation, of the blood still staining his claws—but instead she felt safe. Protected.

He took a deep breath but the tension in his muscles didn't lessen. Was he fighting his beast? She didn't care about his fearsome appearance or the violence he'd displayed. The change in his outward appearance didn't change who he was.

She pulled back just enough to look up at his face. The fur had receded, leaving his familiar features, though his fangs still extended past his lips and his eyes blazed with blue fire. Something electric crackled between them, making her skin tingle where his claws pressed against her back. Her heart skipped, but not from fear.

“You ran from me.”

His voice was deeper than usual, rougher, sending shivers down her spine.

“I know it was stupid.” She wet her lips, trying to explain. “I shouldn’t have done it.”

But he wasn’t listening. Those glowing eyes locked onto hers with predatory intensity, making her breath catch. Her pulse quickened as he leaned closer, his presence overwhelming her senses.

“Do you know what happens when you run from a predator?” The low, dangerous tone of his voice made her shiver again, but this time with a thrill of anticipation that pooled low in her belly. “You get eaten.”

The words rumbled from deep in his chest. Before she could process their meaning, he spun her around and pressed her against the rough bark of a tree. His mouth claimed hers in a searing kiss that stole her breath and scattered her thoughts. Heat flooded through her body as she melted against him, lost to the fierce passion of his embrace.

His kiss deepened, his fangs grazing her bottom lip as he pressed her more firmly against the tree. His wild, untamed scent surrounded her, mixing with the earthy aroma of the forest and the metallic tang of blood from the fight.

Her fingers tangled in his hair as she pulled him closer, matching his urgency with her own. The rough bark pressed against her back through the thin fabric of his borrowed shirt, but she barely noticed. All she could focus on was the scorching heat of his body against hers, the demanding pressure of his mouth, the way his claws pricked deliciously at her skin through the fabric.

The world around them faded into nothing—the forest, the dead adyani, her earlier

fear—all of it disappeared. There was only this moment, this kiss, this overwhelming need that consumed her. Her heart thundered in her chest as his hands slid down her sides to grip her hips, pulling her even more tightly against him.

A soft moan escaped her as his mouth left hers to trail heated kisses down her neck. She arched into him, desperate for more contact, more of his touch, more of everything he offered. Her fingers clutched at his shoulders as passion blazed between them, burning away any remaining doubts or hesitation.

“I want you,” he growled against her skin, his voice strained with need. “I’ve wanted you since the moment I saw you in the forest.”

“Yes,” she gasped, her body aching with desire. “Please, yes.”

With a low growl, he tore open the remaining buttons of the shirt, exposing her breasts to the night air. She barely had time to register the cool kiss of the breeze before his hot mouth covered one taut peak, his tongue swirling around the sensitive nipple. She cried out at the rush of sensation, her fingers digging into his shoulders as she arched against him, offering him better access.

He lifted her higher against the tree as his mouth moved to her other breast, teasing and tasting until she thought she’d go mad from pleasure. Her legs wrapped around his waist, drawing a groan from him as her heated core pressed against the hard length of his erection. Even through their clothing, she could feel the heat emanating from him, the evidence of his arousal making her inner walls clench with anticipation. There was no fear this time, only need.

“More,” she demanded, writhing against him.

With another low growl, his mouth captured hers again as his hands slid beneath her to cup her ass, squeezing and kneading the soft flesh as he pulled her even tighter

against his throbbing erection. She could feel her wetness soaking through the fabric separating them as she writhed against him, desperate for something she didn't fully understand.

His head dropped to the curve of her neck, his fangs scraping the sensitive area beneath her ear.

"Tell me to stop." The words were a rough growl, half plea, half command.

"I... I don't want you to stop."

It was foolish, reckless, but she'd never wanted anything more. His mouth clamped down on her neck, his prick of his fangs a threat and a promise. She gasped, her body arching against him.

"Stop." The deep commanding voice cut through the night air like a blade. "Put her down, Finnar."

His body went rigid against hers, then she was back on her feet as he crouched in front of her, growling. She clutched the edges of her shirt together as she peered around his broad shoulders.

Two Vultor emerged from the shadows. The taller one radiated authority, his silver-streaked hair gleaming in the moonlight. He appeared older than Finnar, but power emanated from his muscular frame. The second male prowled at his side, younger and leaner, with cold amber eyes that sent chills down her spine.

She pressed closer to Finnar's back, gripping the waistband of his pants. His muscles were coiled tight beneath her touch, ready to spring. A low rumbling growl vibrated through his chest as the newcomers approached slowly, stopping a careful distance away.

The commanding Vultor's gaze swept over them both, taking in her disheveled appearance and Finnar's protective stance. His face remained neutral, but she could almost feel the disapproval radiating from him. The younger male raised an arrogant eyebrow, no hint of concern in his expression.

She tightened her grip, drawing comfort from his presence. He was still growling, fierce and protective, yet he made no move to attack the newcomers, and that steadied her racing heart. If these males meant her harm, she knew without doubt that he would already be fighting them.

Despite the older male's disapproval, he seemed concerned rather than angry. The younger male felt more dangerous, even though he didn't make any threatening moves.

She put her other hand on Finnar's back, seeking reassurance. To her surprise, that contact seemed to affect him as well. The continuous growl began to fade, his rigid muscles relaxing slightly beneath her hand, although his protective stance didn't change.

"It's all right," she whispered, praying she was right.

CHAPTER 16

Finnar's instincts screamed at him to grab Scarlett and run, to protect what was his. His claws flexed, ready to fight if necessary. The beast within him snarled at the presence of other males so close to her. Even Seren alone would have been difficult, but the presence of Korrin, a newcomer to the pack, made it even worse.

"Calm yourself, Finnar," Seren ordered.

His body trembled, fighting the command. Scarlett gently stroked his back, her touch both soothing and maddening. Lingering traces of fear in her sweet scent made it even more difficult to control his protective urges.

"Now." Seren's voice rang with alpha power.

His fangs elongated, but he forced himself to lower his head slightly. His beast reluctantly submitted, recognizing their Alpha, but his eyes never left the two males. Scarlett's touch was his only anchor, her presence keeping him from giving in to his more primitive instincts.

Korrin's gaze drifted to Scarlett, and his growl returned. To his surprise, Korrin's mouth curved into a small smile, his eyes flicking up to meet Finnar's, and he gave a slow, deliberate nod of acknowledgement.

He managed to wrestle himself under control as Korrin moved to the adyani's body and bent down, giving his back to Finnar.

“A clean kill, although I wonder why it was in our territory.”

“I will order a patrol,” Seren said, his focus still on Finnar. “I ordered you to stay away from humans.”

The alpha’s power pressed down on him. He fought against it, his need to protect Scarlett warring with the ingrained instinct to submit to his alpha. Sweat broke out across his skin as he struggled to maintain control.

“Please,” he whispered, the word foreign on his tongue. “Don’t take her away from me.”

His vulnerability surprised even himself, but he couldn’t stop the words. The thought of losing her made something deep inside him crack. His chest heaved as he waited for Seren’s response, every muscle straining with the effort to remain still. The disappointment in his alpha’s eyes sent a wave of shame crashing through his body, warring with his need to protect Scarlett.

“You disobeyed me. You didn’t stay away from humans and even worse, you took a female.”

His throat constricted. He thought he detected a flicker of sorrow in Seren’s expression, but it was gone so quickly he might have imagined it, replaced by the cold mask of the alpha.

“You leave me no choice except to exile you from our territory.”

The ground seemed to shift beneath his feet as Seren’s words sank in. Exile. His last tenuous connection to his past, to his people, severed. His chest tightened until he could barely breathe.

Before he could respond, Scarlett stepped out from behind him, clutching her shirt together. His hand shot out to pull her back but she evaded his grasp.

“You’re wrong,” she said fiercely. “I was lost in the woods when Finnar found me. He protected me.”

Seren’s skeptical gaze drifted down over her torn clothing, and he had to fight back another growl.

“He saved my life tonight,” she added, gesturing toward the dead adyani. “He’s done nothing wrong.”

“Why were you in the woods?” Seren asked, clearly unconvinced.

“I was on my way to my grandmother’s house but the bridge was washed out and I foolishly tried to find a way around it.”

His beast purred, impressed by her courage and her cleverness. Seren would have been able to detect a lie but she was telling the truth, if not all of it.

“Then we will escort you to your grandmother’s house while I consider the matter,” Seren said firmly, his tone brooking no argument.

No! His muscles tensed, ready to challenge the command, but then her small hand slipped into his, her fingers intertwining with his own. The simple touch helped calm the rage that threatened to overwhelm him. Her thumb brushed across his knuckles in a gentle caress as she looked up at him, her eyes wide and dark. Trusting.

Guilt filled him as the full force of his actions crashed down over him. No matter what she’d said to Seren, he had stolen her away from her life, from someone who meant so much to her—from her family.

Ignoring his beast's howl of protest, he nodded.

"Now," Seren commanded, already turning to lead the way.

He swallowed back his protest, even knowing that each step would take him closer to losing her. But her hand remained firmly in his as they began to walk, her warmth a lifeline in the darkness that threatened to consume him.

The forest gradually lightened around them as dawn crept in, but he barely noticed the changing light. His entire being was focused on her presence beside him, the warmth of her small hand nestled in his own. Her scent wrapped around him, sweet and intoxicating, making his chest ache with longing.

She stole another glance up at him, those dark eyes filled with something that made his breath catch. He wanted to pull her close, to bury his face in her hair and breathe in her essence. Instead, he forced himself to keep walking, hyper-aware of Seren and Korrin's presence ahead of them.

Their shoulders brushed as they navigated a particularly narrow section of the trail, sending a jolt of electricity through his body. Her breath hitched at the contact, and his beast stirred, responding to the subtle signs of her attraction.

If things had been different... if he hadn't let his bitterness drive him to take her... if he'd met her under other circumstances... The possibilities tormented him as they walked. He could have courted her properly, shown her male he could have been.

Her fingers shifted against his, and he tightened his grip reflexively, not ready to let go. Not yet. Each step down the mountain brought them closer to their inevitable separation, and the thought made his chest constrict painfully. He'd spent years nurturing his hatred of humans, but now this one small female had upended everything he thought he knew.

She stumbled slightly on a loose stone, and he steadied her automatically, his free hand catching her elbow. The contact sent another wave of awareness through him, and he caught a glimpse of pink staining her cheeks before she looked away. Even that small reaction affected him more than he wanted to admit.

The cottage materialized through the trees, the timbered walls glowing in the first rays of dawn, surrounded by a lush, colorful garden. His chest ached at the sight—it looked exactly like the kind of place that would nurture someone like Scarlett, peaceful and welcoming. The kind of home he'd never be able to offer her.

His fingers tightened involuntarily around her hand, memorizing the feel of her soft skin against his calloused palm. He needed to let go. Should let go. But his muscles refused to cooperate.

Before he could force himself to release her, she turned to him, those dark eyes searching his face.

“Come and meet my grandmother.”

The invitation caught him off guard. She wanted him here, wanted to introduce him to her family despite everything that had happened between them?

“Are you sure?”

The fierce nod she gave him made his chest ache even more.

Her gaze shifted uncertainly to where Seren and Korrin stood watching, but the alpha shook his head before she could speak.

“We'll wait for you in the forest,” Seren said, an unmistakable warning in his voice.

He swallowed hard, all too aware that this might be his last chance to be near her. His beast howled in protest at the thought, but he pushed the sound down deep inside where it couldn't escape, and forced himself to nod.

His legs felt like lead as they approached the cottage door. The scent of fresh-baked bread wafted through the air, mingling with herbs and flowers in the neatly tended garden. The scene reminded him of everything he had lost and his muscles tensed, old instincts screaming at him to retreat back into the familiar darkness of the forest.

But her hand was still tucked in his, her eyes warm as she smiled up at him.

“Come on,” she whispered, “She’ll love you.”

Love. When was the last time anyone had loved him? The memories of his family’s warmth had grown dim, overshadowed by flames and screams. Even his pack had been reluctant to accept him, wary of his anger and pain. But she wasn’t afraid of him. She looked at him like he mattered.

His gaze swept over her grandmother’s home again, noticing the careful mending of the thatch, the neat herb garden, the cheerful curtains in the windows. She belonged in this gentle world—but could there ever be a place for him here?

“Finnar?” She squeezed his hand, her dark eyes full of understanding. “You don’t have to do this if you’re not ready.”

The fact that she understood, that she would give him that choice, helped ease his doubts. He nodded and allowed himself to be drawn up onto the porch, casting a quick glance back towards the trees that concealed Seren and Korrin. Whatever welcome he might find here would be brief, but at least he would be able to remember her happy and content in this cozy home.

CHAPTER 17

Scarlett's hand trembled as she reached for the familiar brass doorknob. The familiar comfort of her grandmother's cottage beckoned, but her heart ached at the thought of what—who—she would leave behind. She glanced back at Finnar, his powerful frame outlined against the forest's edge, and her chest tightened.

The door swung open before she could turn the handle. Her grandmother gave the torn shirt a horrified look before wrapping her arms around her.

"Scarlett! Oh, thank goodness. I've been so worried." Her grandmother pulled back to look at her, dark eyes bright with tears. "Are you all right? Where have you been!"

"I'm fine, Grandmother."

She returned the hug, then looked over at Finnar. He looked as fierce and intimidating as he had when she'd first met him but she knew him so well now. She could see the uncertainty beneath that hard mask.

"And who is this?" her grandmother asked, following her gaze. There was a note in her grandmother's voice that she couldn't quite read.

"This is Finnar. He..."

The words caught in her throat. How could she explain everything that had happened? How could she describe the way her world had shifted in just two days?

“He found me in the woods,” she said at last, and took his hand again, tugging him into the cottage.

Her grandmother’s cottage looked exactly as it always had—the loom by the window facing south, the carefully tended herbs hanging from the rafters, the comfortable chairs pulled close to the hearth. But she felt different, changed. The familiar space no longer seemed to fit as well, like a dress she’d outgrown.

And Finnar... he looked so out of place here, so huge and powerful among her grandmother’s delicate furniture. But his presence brought a sense of security and warmth that she hadn’t realized was missing until now.

She watched her grandmother study him, noting the way her keen eyes took in his imposing height, his alien features. Instead of fear, there was something like recognition in her expression. But she barely had time to wonder about it before her grandmother pulled her into another fierce hug.

“I’m so glad you’re safe,” her grandmother whispered against her hair, but even as she said the words, she could feel the tension in her grandmother’s body. “You’ll tell me what happened?”

She nodded, but she kept her eyes on Finnar. He looked as uncomfortable as he had the first time she’d entered his den, but he didn’t try and leave. Her grandmother’s eyes flicked between the two of them and then she sighed.

“But first, let’s have some tea. Come on, both of you.”

Her grandmother disappeared into the kitchen and she could hear the sound of pots clanking together and water running. Finnar still stood awkwardly by the door, and she took his hand again, leading him into the kitchen

“Tessa came by yesterday because she was worried when you didn’t return. She was the one who told me you were missing.” Her grandmother’s sharp eyes darted between her and Finnar. “She said she’d warned you about monsters in the woods.”

How long ago that seemed.

“The bridge was washed out in the spring floods. I got lost trying to find another way across.” She twisted her fingers together, avoiding that knowing look. “Finnar found me and brought me back.”

“Did he now?” Her grandmother’s tone held an odd note as she gestured towards the kitchen table. “Then I owe you my thanks.”

His shoulders stiffened, but he followed them to the table. The wooden chair creaked beneath his weight as he perched awkwardly on its edge.

“And what were you doing in the forest?”

“Grandmother, don’t interrogate him.”

“I’m not. I’m simply curious.” But her grandmother’s voice gentled. “I’m sorry, Finnar. You’ll forgive an old lady’s concern for her granddaughter.”

“I live in the woods,” he said gruffly, his deep voice resonating in the small room.

“That must be lonely, especially with winter coming on. Where’s your pack? Your family?”

She could see the pain flicker in his eyes at the question, and she quickly interrupted before he could respond, “Finnar has been very kind to me.”

She squeezed his hand. Her grandmother noticed the gesture and her lips pursed.

“I can see that. Scarlett, why don’t you fetch the tea while I speak to our guest?”

Scarlett opened her mouth to object, but her grandmother gave her a firm look. Reluctantly, she stood and went to the stove to prepare the tea.

“I thought the Vultor agreed to stay away from the village,” her grandmother said in a low voice.

They had? And how did her grandmother know that?

She paused in the act of lifting the kettle, straining her ears to catch his response.

“I brought Scarlett home.”

“Did you? That was very generous of you.” There was an undertone in her grandmother’s voice that she couldn’t read. “I thought the old alliances still held.”

“They do,” he said stiffly.

Annoyed by the cryptic conversation she placed the tea tray on the table with a little more force than necessary. For once her grandmother didn’t reprimand her, continuing a light stream of talk as she poured the tea. Everything she said seemed innocuous enough, but she was clearly referencing things that Finnar understood. His jaw grew tighter and tighter until he finally pushed back from the table.

“I have to go.” His gruff words cut through her grandmother’s meandering conversation.

Her heart plummeted. She jumped up from her chair, following him as he strode out

of the house. The morning air hit her face, sharp and crisp, making her shiver—or perhaps it was the thought of watching him walk away.

“Wait.” Her voice came out smaller than she intended, but he paused at the edge of the porch and turned to face her, his broad shoulders tense. “Can I... will I see you again?”

For a heartbeat, his face softened, hope lighting those striking blue eyes. Then darkness swept over his features like storm clouds blotting out the sun. He shook his head, dark hair falling across his face.

“Our worlds are too far apart, little red.” The pain in his voice made her own chest ache. “They always have been.”

Her throat tightened at the finality in his tone. She wanted to argue, to tell him that worlds could be bridged, but the words stuck in her throat.

He made a low anguished sound and then his mouth crashed down over hers. The kiss stole her breath, fierce and demanding, filled with raw need that set her blood on fire. His lips moved against hers with desperate intensity, as if he was trying to memorize every moment.

Her hands clutched at his shoulders as she kissed him back with equal fervor, pouring all her unspoken feelings into that single burning moment. The world fell away until there was nothing but the heat of his mouth, the strength of his hands, the solid warmth of his body pressed against hers.

When he finally broke away, his eyes blazed with such torment that her heart cracked. He traced her cheek with trembling fingers, then spun away and disappeared into the forest with inhuman speed, leaving her gasping and alone in the cold morning air.

She stumbled back inside, her lips still tingling from his kiss. The cozy cottage that had always been her sanctuary now felt hollow, the cheerful clutter unable to fill the emptiness expanding inside her chest. Her throat closed up and tears spilled down her cheeks before she could stop them.

Her legs gave out and she collapsed into the nearest chair, wrapping her arms around herself as if she could hold back the tide of grief. The hole inside her grew wider with each shuddering breath. How could someone she'd known for such a short time leave such a gaping wound?

She gripped the shirt she was wearing in trembling hands, desperate to hold onto this last piece of him, but it only made the tears fall faster. The memory of his tortured expression before he'd run away played over and over in her mind.

"Oh, my dear."

Her grandmother's voice seemed to come from far away and then familiar arms wrapped around her, warm and comforting. She buried her face against her grandmother's shoulder as the sobs that wracked her body gradually subsided into hiccups.

"What happened, dear one?" Her grandmother's voice was gentle, patient.

She pulled back slightly, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand.

"I don't know how to explain it." Her voice came out scratchy. "There was just something about him. Even when he was trying to be fierce, I could see the pain underneath." Fresh tears welled up. "And now he's gone."

Her grandmother's arms tightened around her.

“Oh, my sweet girl.”

The sympathy in her voice made Scarlett’s heart ache even more.

“I know it sounds crazy,” she sniffled. “We barely knew each other. But it felt like... like we’d known each other forever. Like we were meant to...” She couldn’t finish the thought.

Her grandmother stroked her hair, the familiar gesture soothing some of the raw edges of her pain. But who would comfort Finnar? Would he retreat into the darkness again? And if he did, would he ever be able to find his way back?

CHAPTER 18

Finnar's body trembled as he raced away from Scarlett's grandmother's cottage, his beast clawing its way to the surface. His bones cracked and reformed, muscles rippling as thick grey fur sprouted across his skin. The transformation did nothing to ease the hollow ache in his chest.

He burst through the tree line, a snarl ripping from his throat as he spotted Korrin's lean form waiting in the shadows. The other male's eyes gleamed, but instead of returning Finnar's aggression, his lips curved into an unexpected smirk.

"Race you to Thunder Peak? Unless you're afraid you can't keep up with me."

His ears flicked forward in surprise. He hadn't heard that playful tone from another Vultor since... since before. The prospect of physical exertion, of pushing his body to its limits, called to his aching heart. Perhaps it would help quiet the overwhelming need to return to her.

He snapped his teeth at Korrin, accepting the challenge. Korrin crouched, then exploded into motion, transforming as he ran, and Finnar chased him. Their powerful legs ate up the ground as they raced up through the forest, weaving between ancient trees and leaping over fallen logs.

The wind whipped through his fur as he stretched out his stride. Korrin matched him pace for pace, their bodies moving in perfect synchronization as they climbed higher into the mountains. The physical demands of the race forced him to focus on each breath, each placement of his paws, leaving no room for thoughts of warm brown

eyes or soft lips.

For a few precious seconds, he lost himself in the pure joy of running, of testing his strength against another of his kind. It reminded him of racing his younger brother through a different set of woods, back when the world had been simpler. Back before humans had destroyed everything.

By the time he and Korrin burst through the tree line onto the cliff's edge, his lungs burned and his muscles ached. He dropped onto his haunches, chest heaving, staring out at the mountains ahead of them, a patchwork of dark forest and misty meadows painted in the soft colors of dawn.

Despite the physical exhaustion, his mind refused to quiet. In an attempt to overcome the overwhelming need to return to Scarlett, he found himself replaying the conversation in the kitchen. Her grandmother spoke as if she were familiar with things that only Vultor knew—old alliances and sacred peaks. How had she known about them? And why had she mentioned them?

Korrin shifted beside him, his breathing already steadying. "Good run."

He grunted in response, his thoughts still circling around the old woman's knowing looks. She must have recognized what he was immediately. But why had she seemed so calm about finding her granddaughter in the company of a Vultor?

The morning breeze carried the sweet scent of wildflowers up from the valley, reminding him painfully of Scarlett's scent. But mixed with those memories came the unsettling feeling that there was far more to her grandmother than he knew. Perhaps he should mention it to Seren. Perhaps Seren would send him back to talk to her again and he could see Scarlett again...

No. He slammed the door against a flood of hope. Seren was going to exile him. Was

that why the alpha hadn't been waiting for him? Because he'd already dismissed him?

"Where's Seren?" he asked. "I thought he'd have been waiting."

"He said he had somewhere he had to be," Korrin said slowly. "He told me to talk to you about the human female."

Amber eyes studied him with unsettling intensity.

"Don't." His claws scraped against stone.

"You act as if she's your mate."

He couldn't bring himself to deny it so he whirled to face Korrin, fangs bared.

"I said don't."

The other male held up his hands, but a hint of amusement played across his features. He forced his claws to retract, frowning at Korrin. He knew nothing about him other than that he'd only shown up a few months ago.

"Where did you come from?" he asked.

"Northern territories." Korrin stretched, muscles rippling beneath his sleek fur.

"Seren found me three winters ago after mother died."

The shared weight of loss hung between them. He recognized the shadows in Korrin's eyes—he saw them in his own reflection often enough.

"Humans?" he asked, though he already knew the answer.

“Raiders.” Korrin’s voice went flat. “Took everything.”

He nodded, unwilling to speak of his own losses, but his usual rage didn’t consume him. Instead he saw Scarlett’s face, so different from the humans who’d destroyed his family. He shoved the thoughts aside.

“How did you find Seren?”

“He found me. Half-dead in the snow, mad with grief.” Korrin’s lip curled. “Wouldn’t let me die.”

The words struck uncomfortably close to his own experience. He remembered Seren dragging him from the ashes of his former life, forcing him to keep living when all he’d wanted was to follow his family into death.

“I found a new occupation after that. Bounty hunting.” The other male’s eyes gleamed. “It turns out there’s good coin in tracking down those who need finding.”

The words pulled him from thoughts of soft brown eyes and the lingering sweetness of her scent.

“Who do you work for?”

“Whoever can afford to hire me.”

“Even humans?”

“If they can afford my rates.” A cold smile crossed Korrin’s face. “They can’t even hunt down their own kind without help. But their gold spends just as well as anyone’s.”

The casual contempt in the other male's voice bothered him more than it should have. A week ago, he would have agreed without hesitation.

"Is that what brought you here?" he asked, trying to focus on the conversation rather than memories of Scarlett's fierce defense of him before Seren.

Another cold smile.

"I came to see Seren, but it turns out there's plenty of work for someone with my skills."

He barely heard the response, his mind drifting back to the way Scarlett had returned his kisses, how right she'd felt in his arms. He forced himself to nod at whatever Korrin was saying about his latest contract, but his thoughts remained trapped in that moonlit clearing.

He pushed himself to his feet, muscles still burning from their run. One last visit to his den, empty and cold without her presence.

"Wait." Korrin's voice cut through his brooding. "I told you Seren wanted me to talk to you about the human female."

He paused, his body tensing.

"He was impressed by her defense of you and admitted that she didn't seem scared or harmed. He is willing to admit that there might have been... circumstances that brought the two of you together." Amber eyes narrowed. "But it can't continue—it's too dangerous. Stay away from humans. All of them. Especially the female."

The pain of his words was sharp and immediate. Never seeing her again... the thought alone made his beast howl in protest.

“That’s his condition?” The words came out rough, his throat tight.

Korrin nodded. “Accept it or leave the territory. Your choice.”

He turned away, unable to bear the knowing look in the other Vultor’s eyes.

“Tell Seren I understand.”

He left without another word, each step carrying him further from the cliff’s edge. The forest blurred past as he ran, but distance couldn’t ease the ache in his chest. His den waited ahead, the one place he’d finally started to think of as home again. But what was the point now? The warmth Scarlett had brought to those cold stone walls would fade, leaving only memories of her smile, her touch, her scent.

This pain cut deeper than any thoughts of revenge ever had. His hatred of humans had driven him for years, given him purpose. But losing Scarlett... that loss carved into his soul, leaving him hollow.

He pushed open the door to his den, his footsteps echoing in the silence. Her scent still lingered, sweet and tempting, mixing with the fresh scents of soap and herbs. Everything gleamed with the results of their shared labor—the polished dishes stacked neatly on the shelves, the swept floors, even the cushions arranged just so on the chair by the fire.

His claws extended involuntarily as memories flooded back. The way she’d hummed while working. How naturally they’d moved together in the small kitchen. The flash of her smile when he’d brought in wood. The sound of her laughter.

He crossed to the table, touching the flowers she’d arranged, remembering their shared meals, their conversations. He’d watched her eyes sparkle as she described her weaving, imagined more evenings filled with her presence.

His beast stirred restlessly. Mate , it insisted. The word echoed through him, impossible to deny. The connection between them had sparked instantly, growing stronger with every moment they'd shared. Even now, he felt the pull drawing him back to her.

Could he really walk away from her? The thought of never seeing her again made his chest ache. Years of isolation suddenly seemed unbearable now that he knew what he was missing. The warmth of her touch. The way she'd thrown herself into his arms, accepting both man and beast. The fierce way she'd defended him to Seren.

He sank onto the bench, inhaling her lingering scent. He could submit to Seren's command or risk everything in pursuit of what they could have together. His fingers traced the fabric where she'd slept as the magnitude of the decision weighed on him.

The pack was his last connection to his past, but Scarlett... she represented a future he'd never dared imagine. One filled with warmth and purpose instead of bitter revenge. In the end, it wasn't a difficult choice.

CHAPTER 19

Scarlett let her grandmother guide her into the kitchen, her body moving mechanically, her mind still fixed on Finnar. The familiar warmth of the kitchen failed to relieve the hollow ache in her chest.

Her hands trembled as she wrapped them around the steaming cup of tea her grandmother placed in front of her, trying to focus on the smooth ceramic rather than the raw pain threatening to overwhelm her again.

“Do you want to talk about it?” her grandmother asked gently.

She shook her head, not trusting herself to speak. How could she explain the connection she’d felt with Finnar? The vulnerability beneath that gruff exterior. The gentleness in his hands despite his strength. The passion in his kiss that had awakened something deep within her.

Fresh tears welled up but she blinked them back. The memory of his tortured expression before he’d disappeared into the forest was still too vivid, too painful. Her fingers tightened around the cup as she struggled to contain the sob building in her throat.

Her grandmother sighed, and she looked up to see her staring into her own tea cup, her eyes distant.

“I was only a girl when I met him,” her grandmother said softly. “His name was Arden. He had the most beautiful golden eyes I’d ever seen.”

Her breath caught. “A Vultor?”

“Yes. We met in secret, deep in the woods. He’d leave signs for me—a flower here, a stone formation there. My heart would race every time I spotted one.” A wistful smile crossed her face. “Everything felt so magical back then, so full of possibility.”

Magical. Yes, that was how it felt with Finnar.

“What happened?” she asked, though part of her dreaded the answer.

“He found his true mate.” Her grandmother’s fingers tightened around her cup. “A Vultor female. He tried to let me down gently, but...” She shook her head. “That kind of emptiness never really goes away.”

“But you moved on.”

“I did, and I loved your grandfather, but a part of me always belonged to Arden.”

Just as part of her would always belong to Finnar.

“What do you mean by a true mate?”

“The Vultor experience a... bond with their true mate. The way Arden explained it to me is that it is instantaneous, unbreakable. As if they were made for each other.”

Her throat went dry. “Can they only form that kind of bond with another Vultor?”

The question hung in the air between them, and her grandmother’s hesitation seemed to stretch forever before she finally spoke.

“I don’t know, dear. They say we humans don’t feel such things.”

But something in her grandmother's expression made her heart skip. The older woman's eyes held a knowing glint that contradicted her words.

All those moments with Finnar—the spark when their hands touched, the way her body had hummed with awareness whenever he was near. The fierce protectiveness in his eyes when he'd saved her from the adyani. That kiss in the forest that had set her whole world ablaze.

The connection between them had ignited so quickly, burned so bright. It defied explanation—unless...

But even if it did exist, could he accept it? His bitterness toward humans ran deep, carved by loss and betrayal. But the pain in his eyes when he left her seemed just as deep.

Her thoughts chased each in endless circles before exhaustion crashed over her like a wave, her whole body suddenly limp and heavy. The emotional turmoil of the past days combined with her failed escape attempt and the encounter with the adyani had drained her completely.

Her grandmother put a gentle hand on her shoulder.

“Go and rest, dear. Everything will sort itself out.”

She nodded, too tired to argue. As she climbed the familiar narrow stairs to the bedroom she'd stayed in so often as a child, each step felt like climbing a mountain. The room remained exactly as she'd left it—the same patchwork quilt on the bed, the same dried flowers hanging from the rafters, the same view of the forest through the window.

She sank onto the bed, not bothering to change out of her torn and dirty clothes. The

morning sun filtered through the curtains, casting dappled shadows across the floor. Her body ached for sleep but her mind refused to quiet, filled with thoughts of Finnar. She could still feel the ghost of his lips on hers, hear the rough edge in his voice when he'd called her little red.

She sighed.

“Grandmother was wrong. Not everything will sort itself out.”

Her eyes eventually grew too heavy to remain open. There had to be a way to see him again, to make him understand that what lay between them was stronger than the difference between their worlds. As sleep finally claimed her, her last conscious thought was of finding a path back to him, back to that connection that had blazed between them with such unexpected intensity.

She jerked awake sometime later to find her grandmother standing over her, her face lined with concern. The angle of the sun had changed, casting long shadows across the room.

“How long did I sleep?”

She pushed herself up, still dazed from the long nap.

“Most of the day.” Her grandmother perched on the edge of the bed and gave her a troubled look. “I hated to wake you, but I’ve had another message from Tessa.”

Something in her grandmother’s tone sent a chill down her spine. “What is it?”

“A hunter arrived in the village this morning. A bounty hunter.” Her grandmother’s fingers twisted in her apron. “He was asking questions about you. But Tessa said he seemed more interested in the monsters in the woods.”

“The monsters?”

“Yes.” Her grandmother hesitated. “I think he might be searching for the Vultor.”

Horror crashed through her at the thought of someone hurting Finnar. Of taking more from him.

“No.” The word came out as barely more than a whisper. Images of Finnar alone in his den, unaware of the danger, flooded her mind. “I have to warn him.”

“Scarlett—”

But she was already on her feet, shoving them into her boots. Her body protested, still stiff from her forest ordeal, but she ignored it. All she could think about was Finnar, and the hunter who might even now be closing in on him.

“You can’t go out like that,” her grandmother protested. “You need clothes.”

She wanted to argue, but she knew her grandmother was right. She nodded impatiently and grabbed the first thing she could find in the wardrobe, an old dress she’d left there months ago. She stripped off Finnar’s shirt, her fingers lingering briefly on the fabric before pulling the dress over her head.

“Please, just think this through.” Her grandmother blocked the doorway. “The forest isn’t safe right now.”

“I don’t care. I have to go. He needs to know. If that hunter finds him first—” Her voice broke. The thought of Finnar in danger made her chest ache.

“You’re as stubborn as your mother.” Her grandmother sighed and reached behind the door. “Here.”

Scarlett stared at the worn leather satchel her grandmother held out. “What’s this?”

“Food, water, a blanket—everything you might need.” Her grandmother’s eyes softened. “I know better than to try to stop you.”

Warmth filled her as she took the satchel. Her grandmother had known she would go, had prepared for it. She threw her arms around the older woman’s neck, breathing in the familiar scent of herbs. “Thank you.”

Her grandmother returned the hug. “Be careful.”

She nodded, then raced down the stairs, slinging the satchel across her body as she headed for the door. The forest stretched before her, dark and mysterious in the late afternoon light, but she didn’t hesitate. Somewhere in those woods, Finnar waited, unaware of the danger hunting him. She had to reach him first.

CHAPTER 20

Once more Finnar sat brooding on a fallen log, but this time his thoughts were haunted not by thoughts of revenge, but thoughts of Scarlett. The forest whispered its secrets around him, but for once, he paid no attention to the sounds that usually kept him alert. His thoughts kept circling back to Scarlett—her smile, her fearlessness, the way her small hand felt in his.

His need for her threatened to consume him. His beast paced restlessly within, demanding they return to their mate. But she wasn't Vultor = could she truly be his mate, no matter how right it felt?

A pang of guilt stabbed through his chest. Here he sat, dreaming of a future with a human while the ashes of his family's home still haunted his dreams. The faces of his family floated before him—his younger brother's infectious laugh, his sister's radiant smile, his mother's gentle touch, his father's strong face.

His claws extended involuntarily, digging into the bark beneath his hands. How could he contemplate happiness when they had suffered such cruel deaths? But the anger that had sustained him for so long felt hollow now, replaced by an ache that had nothing to do with vengeance.

Scarlett's warmth had begun to thaw something inside him he'd thought frozen forever. The way she'd transformed his den from a dark cave of misery into something that felt like... home. The easy rhythm they'd fallen into as they worked together. The peace he'd felt in her presence.

His brother would have liked her, he realized with a start. The thought sent fresh waves of guilt crashing through him. Was it betrayal to move past his anger? To want something more than revenge?

He dropped his head into his hands, his emotions warring within him. The forest continued its gentle song around him, offering no answers to his troubled heart.

A familiar scent drifted on the breeze. His head snapped up to find Seren leaning against a nearby oak, watching him with those calm, knowing eyes.

“You wanted to see me?”

“I think she’s my mate.”

The words burst from his throat before he could stop them. His voice cracked on the last word, raw with emotion.

Seren gave a thoughtful nod, his expression neutral as he waited for him to continue.

“But she’s human. How can that be?”

“It’s rare but not unheard of,” Seren said quietly, an odd note in his voice. “But it’s... difficult. Humans fear us. Our own kind may reject you both. You’ll face prejudice from all sides.”

The alpha’s words only confirmed his fears—not for himself but for her.

“I would be willing to risk it, but it also feels like...” His claws dug into his palms. “Like I’m betraying them. My family. How can I want this when they?—”

He broke off, unable to finish.

“Would they want you to live in anger?” Seren’s voice was gentle, lacking its usual commanding tone. “Or would they want you to find happiness?”

The question wasn’t new—Seren had asked it before, many times over the years. But for the first time, he let himself really consider it. He remembered his mother’s smile when she spoke of finding his father, the way his brother used to tease him about being too serious.

The memory of his brother’s laughter echoed in his mind, free from the usual taint of rage and loss. Would they really want him to spend his life consumed by vengeance?

“They would want me to be happy,” he said slowly. “And I could be. With her. Even without my pack.”

He studied Seren’s face, searching for signs of judgment or disapproval, but found only understanding.

“I see. The path won’t be easy,” Seren said, his voice low. “But I know of at least one case where it worked. Where love overcame those barriers.”

The revelation stunned him. He’d never heard of such a union, but then he would never have considered it before he met her.

“If you’re certain she’s your mate...” Seren’s voice trailed off. “I won’t stand in your way. I won’t exile you. But be absolutely sure of your feelings first. The consequences of being wrong would be devastating—for both of you.”

Something in Seren’s tone caught Finnar’s attention. A hint of longing, quickly masked but unmistakable. He looked at his alpha with new eyes, realizing that Seren was well past the age when most unmated Vultor succumbed to their beast side. Yet here he stood, perfectly controlled, leading their pack with unwavering strength—and

completely alone.

How many years had Seren spent watching others find their mates while he remained solitary? Yet he'd never shown any sign of losing control, never let his own loneliness affect his leadership.

He was not as strong. He didn't want to live alone, didn't want to live without his mate.

"I'm sure," he said firmly.

"Then go to her."

He was moving before Seren finished speaking, his heart lighter than it had been in years. The forest welcomed him with its familiar scents—pine, earth, and the crisp mountain air. He bounded down the path, each step bringing him closer to his mate.

Halfway down the mountainside, he froze. Her scent drifted up from below—that intoxicating sweetness that had first drawn him to her. But something was wrong. Fear tinged the edges of her usual warm fragrance, along with uncertainty and worry.

His beast surged forward, claws threatening to emerge. What was she doing back in these woods? His protective instincts flared as he picked up his pace, moving swiftly but silently through the underbrush.

The forest blurred around him as he raced downhill, following her scent. Despite his worry about what had brought her back to the woods, his heart quickened at the prospect of being with her again. He'd been a fool to think he could stay away from her.

The slope grew steeper, but he barely noticed, his focus entirely on reaching her. Her

scent grew stronger with each stride, pulling him forward like an invisible thread connecting them. Whatever had brought her back into these woods, he would protect her from it. And this time, he wouldn't let her go.

He burst through a curtain of hanging vines into a secluded clearing. At one end water cascaded over moss-covered rocks into a crystal-clear pool. Ferns swayed gently in the mountain breeze, their delicate fronds casting intricate shadows across the ground.

Just as he started across the clearing, she emerged from between two ancient pines, her red hair gleaming like fire in the dappled sunlight. Their eyes met across the pool and his breath caught in his throat.

Her face lit up with that radiant smile he'd been dreaming about since they parted and she ran towards him. His beast roared to life, but this time with joy rather than anger.

She threw herself into his arms and he caught her, lifting her off her feet. Having her in his arms felt so right, so perfect. His beast purred contentedly as he buried his face in her hair, breathing in her sweet scent. The truth he'd tried to fight crashed over him with absolute certainty. It didn't matter that she was human. She was his mate. The one person in all the world meant for him alone.

He'd been such a fool, letting his bitterness blind him to what was right in front of him. But now, with her warm and real in his arms, he finally understood. This was what he'd been missing, what he'd been searching for all along.

He pulled back just enough to study her face, relishing every detail—the slight flush across her cheeks, the way her dark eyes sparkled with joy, even the tiny freckles scattered across her nose. His beast rumbled with satisfaction at the certainty he saw reflected in her gaze.

“I thought I’d lost you,” she whispered, her voice catching.

The pain in her voice tore at something deep inside him. He cupped her face with one hand, his thumb brushing across her soft skin. His claws threatened to emerge but he kept them carefully retracted, unwilling to risk marking her perfect face.

“You’ll never lose me,” he promised, the words emerging as a low growl.

He captured her lips with his, pouring all his longing and certainty into the kiss. Her mouth was soft and yielding beneath his, and she melted against him with a small sigh that made his beast purr with satisfaction. The taste of her, the feel of her pressed against him, the sweet scent that filled his senses—everything about this moment felt absolutely right.

Her fingers slid into his hair, holding him close as the kiss deepened. She fit perfectly against him, her slender curves soft and welcoming. He wanted to stay in this moment forever, to hold her and kiss her until the world faded away. But eventually the need to breathe forced them apart.

He drew back just far enough to rest his forehead against hers, their breath mingling in the space between them. He could feel her heart beating in time with his, their rhythms perfectly matched. His mate. The knowledge settled over him like a warm cloak, bringing with it a sense of peace he’d never known.

She pulled back, her small hands cradling his face, a worried frown replacing her smile. “Finnar, there’s something I have to tell you. There’s a hunter in the woods. I think he’s looking for the Vultor.”

He considered, then dismissed her concern. “Don’t worry, little red. I can handle myself against any hunter foolish enough to come after me. Right now I have something far more important on my mind.”

“What’s that?”

“Claiming you as my mate.”

CHAPTER 21

Scarlett melted into Finnar's arms as his lips claimed hers again. The kiss was different from their previous ones—deeper, more possessive, filled with a raw need that set her blood on fire. His fangs grazed her bottom lip, sending tingles of electricity through her body. The forest around them faded away until all she could feel was the heat of his body pressed against hers, the strength of his arms holding her close.

She needed to see his face, to read the emotions in those striking blue eyes. As she started to pull back, a rumbling growl vibrated through his chest. The primal sound should have frightened her, but instead it awakened something wild within her, making her pulse race faster.

"You're mine," he growled, his voice rough with possession. His eyes blazed with an intensity that stole her breath away. A delicious shiver raced down her spine at his words, at the way he held her like he'd never let her go. Her heart thundered in her chest, excitement and desire coursing through her veins.

She'd never felt anything like this before—this all-consuming connection that seemed to bind them together. Every touch, every kiss only strengthened the bond between them. His possessiveness should have bothered her independent nature, but instead it felt right. Natural. As if she'd been waiting for him all along without even knowing it.

His hand tangled in her hair, tilting her head back as his mouth reclaimed hers. The kiss deepened, grew more demanding. Heat bloomed wherever their bodies touched, spreading through her like wildfire. She pressed closer, wanting more, needing more.

He finally let her pull back enough to look into his eyes, her heart still racing from their passionate kiss. Her grandmother's words echoed in her mind—the story of impossible love and true mates. Taking a deep breath, she gathered her courage.

“Am I...” She paused, suddenly uncertain how to phrase the question. “Do you mean your true mate?”

“Yes.” The word came out instantly, fierce and certain. But then she caught a flicker of something else on his face—a shadow of worry that made her chest tighten. “I know it's not the same for humans,” he added, his voice rougher.

“No, you don't understand.” She pressed her palm against his chest, feeling his heart beating as wildly as her own. “I feel it too.”

She struggled to find the right words to describe the magnetic pull that drew them together, the way her body sang at his touch, how complete she felt in his arms.

“It's more than attraction or desire. It's like... like I've found a piece of myself I didn't even know was missing.”

His eyes glowed at her words, the worry dissolving into something warmer, deeper. His hand came up to cover hers where it rested against his chest, and that simple touch sent another wave of awareness through her body.

He kissed her with a hunger that made her whole body tremble. His mouth moved against hers with fierce possession, yet his hands were infinitely gentle as he lowered her onto the grass beside the pool.

She was vaguely aware of the golden glow of the sky through the trees, the dampness of the grass beneath her, but they were nothing to the overwhelming awareness of his body pressing against hers, the taste of his kiss, the way his scent surrounded her.

The rest of the world blurred away until nothing existed except the two of them. His hands tangled in her hair as the kiss deepened, and she arched up against him, wanting to be closer. A small sound escaped her throat as desire spiraled through her body. She surrendered completely to the passion between them, letting it sweep away all thought, all hesitation.

When his lips finally broke from hers, she was gasping for breath. She stared up into his eyes, blazing blue fire, and saw the same intense longing reflected in their depths.

His hand stroked down her side, leaving trails of heat in its wake. The desire to touch him in return overwhelmed her and she let her own hands roam over the hard planes of his chest, exploring the taut muscles hidden beneath his shirt. The heat of his skin radiated through the thin fabric, tempting her to tear it away.

His head dipped to the curve of her neck, and the brush of his mouth on her sensitive skin made her shiver. The prickle of his fangs sent another shiver down her spine, but this time from awareness, not fear. He paused, his teeth grazing her flesh, his breath hot against her throat.

“Do you want me to claim you, Scarlett? Make you mine in all ways?”

The rough need in his voice made her stomach flip but she didn’t hesitate.

“Yes.”

He gave a low growl and kissed her again, the primal sound making her pulse leap. His hands slid down her body to grip her hips, pressing her harder into the soft grass. She could feel the rigid length of his erection through their clothing, and the thought of taking him inside her sent a fresh wave of heat through her veins. She tried to reach for him but he caught her hand, raising his head again.

“You are untouched, are you not?”

She blushed and nodded, remembering her previous panic.

“Then we will take this slowly.”

“I don’t want to take it slowly,” she said impatiently, reaching for him again, but he gave a low, dark chuckle.

“Trust me. I need to prepare your body to accept me. And you will enjoy it very much.”

The dark hunger on his face made her breath catch, her stomach clenching with anticipation. Before she could respond, his mouth covered hers again, his tongue sliding between her lips to stroke against hers, slow and sensual.

She lost herself in the kiss, her body relaxing beneath his, yielding to his touch. His hands moved down the front of her dress, slowly unbuttoning each tiny button until cool air caressed her skin. The contrast between the chill of the air and the heat of his body made her shiver, her nipples tightening into stiff little points.

His mouth trailed from hers, leaving a path of fire down her throat to the curve of her breast. His fangs grazed her skin, making her gasp at the exquisite combination of pleasure and danger. His hand closed over her breast, his thumb brushing across the taut peak, and a jolt of pure need shot through her. Her back arched instinctively, pressing into his touch.

“Beautiful,” he murmured, his breath hot against her skin. His mouth captured her nipple, his tongue flicking against the sensitive bud, and she cried out as sensation crashed over her. His hand slid lower, tracing the curve of her waist, the swell of her hip. Her heart pounded in her chest as his fingers slipped between her thighs, finding

her slick and aching for him.

The first brush of his fingers against her folds made her moan and when he carefully dipped a finger into her untried entrance, she clutched his shoulders. He growled with pleasure, and the sound sent a shiver of delight over her skin. He stroked her gently, his touch both teasing and tantalizing. She writhed against his hand, desperate for more, and he rewarded her by quickening his pace, his thumb circling the tiny bud at the apex of her thighs.

Her breath came in ragged pants as he pushed her higher, the tension inside her winding tighter and tighter. His mouth returned to hers as his fingers worked their magic, and she was dimly aware of his fang scraping her lip, the sharp, sweet taste of blood on her tongue. He growled again, the sound vibrating through her, pushing her to the edge.

The world exploded around her in a shower of sparks, her senses overwhelmed by the power of her release. He held her close, his touch anchoring her as wave after wave of pleasure swept over her. It was unlike anything she'd ever experienced—raw, primal, overwhelming.

As she came back to herself, she found she was cradled in his arms, her cheek pressed against the steady beat of his heart. She looked up to find his eyes glowing down at her, a mixture of pride and desire on his face.

“I told you you would enjoy that.”

She couldn't help but laugh. “Yes, you did. Now take off your clothes. I want to feel you.”

He chuckled, his hands slipping from her body just long enough to strip off his shirt. She ran her fingers over the hard muscles of his chest, marveling at the strength in his

powerful body. Then he was pulling her close again, his mouth covering hers.

She was already growing slick again as his tongue explored her mouth, teasing and caressing, his taste flooding her senses. His skin was impossibly warm beneath her fingers, and she couldn't resist reaching down to cup the hard, thick length of his erection.

He growled against her mouth, his hips surging towards her hand, and she smiled to herself. He might be determined to take it slow, but she could tell how much he wanted her. She squeezed gently, relishing the way his big body shuddered at her touch.

"Patience, my eager mate," he murmured, capturing her hand. "There is another pleasure you must know first."

He moved down her body, settling back on his heels as he cradled her hips. She opened her mouth to question him, but then his hands were spreading her legs, exposing her most sensitive flesh. Before she could react, he lowered his head, his tongue flicking over the swollen bud at her core.

Her entire body jolted, her fingers digging into his hair. He gave a low rumble of satisfaction and licked again, slower and more deliberately this time, the heat of his mouth searing her. A tremor went through her body as pleasure flooded her veins.

"What are you doing?" she gasped, even as her legs parted further, opening herself completely to him.

"Tasting my mate," he said, lifting his head to give her a wicked look. His eyes glowed down at her, darkened with desire. "Showing you what it means to be claimed."

He lowered his head again and she could do nothing but cling to him as he devoured her. The feel of his tongue on her flesh was indescribable—hot, demanding, and shockingly intimate. Her fingers tightened in his hair, urging him closer, needing more. His tongue slid lower, probing at her entrance, and her head fell back, her eyes closing in ecstasy.

“So sweet,” he growled. “My delicious little mate.”

The vibration of his voice against her sensitive flesh made her tremble, every nerve ending on fire. She couldn’t think, could barely breathe as his mouth moved over her, exploring and teasing. His tongue delved inside her, stroking her inner walls, and she cried out as a second climax hit her, even more intense than the first.

He held her through it, his strong arms supporting her as she shook with pleasure. As the last shudders subsided, he raised his head again, and she saw her own pleasure reflected in his face.

“Now you are ready,” he said softly, leaning back. He quickly stripped off the rest of his clothes, his erection jutting towards her, thick and proud. Her heart raced as she took in the size of him, but there was no trace of her previous panic—only eagerness to be joined with him.

He positioned himself between her thighs, his hands stroking down her sides as he lined himself up with her entrance. She could feel the thick tip pressing against her, hot and slick with her own juices. He hesitated, searching her face, and she reached up to touch his cheek.

“I want this,” she told him. “I want you.”

The tension in his shoulders eased at her words, and she felt a surge of love for her big, protective Vultur. Then he was pushing into her, stretching her with his girth, and

her eyes widened as pleasure and pain entwined in a dizzying spiral. Her body tightened instinctively, resisting the invasion and he groaned.

He reached between them, stroking the swollen bud at her core. Pleasure shot through her and her body softened, allowing him to slide deeper. His thumb circled her clit as he worked his way into her, inch by agonizing inch, until finally he was fully seated inside her.

She was so incredibly full. She could feel her body clenching around him, trying to adjust to his size. She clung to him, her nails digging into his shoulders as she tried to breathe through the overpowering stretch.

For a long moment they were still, connected in the most intimate way possible. He kissed her again, his mouth gentle, and she felt her body relax around him. The pain eased, leaving only pleasure in its wake.

When he began to move, she was lost. Each thrust sent shockwaves of pleasure through her body, his thickness dragging against her sensitive inner walls. His mouth never left hers as he rocked into her, his tongue sliding against hers in a sensual dance. He was claiming her in every way, marking her as his, and she reveled in it.

She could feel another climax building, coiling tighter and tighter with each thrust. Her hands roamed over the hard planes of his back, tracing the scars that marked his skin. He growled into her mouth and increased his pace, his hips surging against hers. His fangs scraped over her bottom lip and she shuddered at the sharp sting.

Her nails dug into his back as he drove them both higher, their bodies moving together in perfect rhythm. She was so close, hovering on the brink, when he suddenly pulled back, his eyes glowing down at her.

“Look at me, Scarlett,” he commanded, his voice rough. “I want to watch you come

apart for me.”

She met his gaze, their eyes locked together, and then he was moving again, pounding into her with wild abandon. She cried out as the tension shattered, her body convulsing around him as wave after wave of ecstasy crashed over her.

His head went back, his powerful body tensing above her, and then he was growing even larger, the base of his cock expanding with a knot that stretched her to her limit. He shuddered with pleasure, his seed filling her as he roared out his release. They were locked together, unable to separate, and the thought sent a surge of satisfaction through her exhausted body.

He slowly lowered himself until he covered her, supporting his weight on his forearms. He pressed a tender kiss to her lips before raising his head to smile down at her. She smiled back, happiness bubbling up inside her like a fountain.

“My mate,” he murmured, brushing a sweaty strand of hair back from her forehead.

“My mate,” she echoed, and felt him flex inside her. “That was...”

“Perfect.”

“Yes.” She snuggled closer, her body still trembling from the aftershocks of her climax. “Do all Vultor do that? Expand at the end?”

“No.” He nuzzled her cheek, his breath warm against her skin. “Only when we find our true mates.”

Joy flooded her heart, and she turned her head to kiss him again. She never dreamed she could feel this way, so complete, so loved. They lay there for a long time, his knot keeping them connected until it eventually eased. When he finally slipped free,

she mewled softly at the sudden emptiness.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he promised, gathering her into his arms. “You’re mine, my little red. Forever.”

“Forever,” she whispered, and knew that it was true.

CHAPTER 22

Finnar gazed down at Scarlett, her red hair spread across the grass like flames, her smile radiant in the late afternoon sunlight. The sight of her filled his chest with a warmth he'd forgotten could exist. His beast rumbled in contentment, finally at peace after years of restless rage.

He traced his finger along the sensitive curve of her neck, marveling at the softness of her skin. His mouth watered with the need to taste her, to mark her as his for everyone to see, but her skin was so fragile, so delicate. He would have to be satisfied with the knowledge of their bond.

The happiness in her dark eyes stripped away the layers of bitterness that had encrusted his soul. She reached up and touched his face, her fingers gentle against his jaw. and he turned his head to kiss her fingers.

"I never thought I could feel this way," he murmured.

But even as the words left his lips, a shadow of doubt crept in. Did he deserve this? After all the darkness that had consumed him, the hatred that had driven him for so long—could he truly claim this kind of joy?

The memory of his past deeds weighed heavily on him. He'd let vengeance rule him, had been willing to hurt an innocent just to satisfy his need for revenge. The fact that she'd somehow seen past that darkness to find something worth loving seemed impossible.

Her fingers traced patterns on his chest, unknowingly soothing the ache of his uncertainty. The pure acceptance in her eyes both healed and haunted him. How could he be worthy of such trust after harboring such darkness for so long?

He sighed, pulling his thoughts away from darker paths as he remembered her earlier warning about the hunter. Even though he'd dismissed it at the time, he remembered Seren's concerns about violent encounters between humans and Vultor. The contentment of their joining still hummed through his body, but duty pressed at him.

"I think I need to warn the others about this hunter," he said, brushing a strand of hair from her face. His beast growled at the thought of leaving her, even briefly.

Her eyes widened.

"I thought you said he wasn't a threat."

"I honestly do not believe that a single human poses any real threat, but..." He struggled to explain himself. "Do you remember what I said before about our worlds being too far apart?"

"They're not very far apart now," she murmured, running a teasing finger down his hip, and he couldn't resist dropping a kiss on her pretty red lips.

"They aren't, but one of the things Seren has been trying to achieve since he became alpha is a more... cordial relationship between our species. A violent encounter with a human, even one who poses a threat, could shatter that peace."

She sighed and nodded.

"I suppose you're right. What do you want to do?"

“I should let Seren know,” he said. “He’ll want to keep the pack clear until this hunter moves on.”

He caressed her cheek again, reluctant to break contact.

“Will you come with me?”

She hesitated, then shook her head, her red hair catching the sunlight.

“I don’t think I’m ready to face him yet. And you’ll move faster alone. Why don’t I wait here? Then when you get back we can go home. Together.”

As much as he liked the sound of that, the thought of leaving her, even briefly, made his chest ache.

“The sooner you warn them, the sooner you can return,” she said softly.

His jaw clenched. She was right, but that didn’t make it any easier. His enhanced speed would let him cover more ground, reach Seren faster. But leaving her vulnerable...

“I don’t want to leave you unprotected.”

“Protected from what?” She gestured at the empty clearing. “There’s nothing to protect me from.”

“What if the hunter finds you?”

Her laugh sparkled through the air. “I wouldn’t be much of a trophy.” She pushed at his chest playfully. “Go. I’ll be fine.”

His beast prowled restlessly, fighting the logic of her words. Every instinct screamed at him to stay, to protect what was his. The mate bond hummed between them, still new and raw.

“Finnar.” She touched his face, drawing his attention back to her. “The faster you leave, the faster you return.”

He caught her hand, pressing a kiss to her palm. She was right. Of course she was right. But that didn’t make it any easier to rise to his feet. He drank in the sight of her one last time, memorizing the way sunlight caught her hair, the glow of contentment on her face. His heart swelled with a fierce possessiveness. She was his now. His mate.

“I’ll return as soon as I can.” His voice came out rough with emotion as he pulled on his clothes.

Her smile lit up her whole face, chasing away the lingering darkness in his soul. Even his beast settled, satisfied now that they’d claimed her. He forced himself to turn away, each step harder than the last. But once he entered the deeper shadows of the forest, his instincts took over. His muscles rippled as he shifted, taking advantage of his beast’s speed.

His paws carried him swiftly through the forest, enhanced senses alert for any sign of the hunter. Evergreen branches released their sharp scent as he brushed against them. Birds scattered at his passing. His beast urged him on, already yearning to return to their mate.

He’d spent so many years consumed by vengeance, letting it drive him. Now that darkness had been replaced by something brighter, more powerful. A future with Scarlett. He couldn’t wait to get started.

CHAPTER 23

Scarlett watched admiringly as Finnar's powerful form melted into the shadows of the forest. As much as she hated his swift departure, anticipation of his return already fluttered in her chest. Their connection thrummed through her veins, a constant reminder that what they shared was real and precious.

Her lips curved into a smile, the memory of their passion still tingling through her body. The dappled sunlight painted patterns across her skin as she stretched, savoring the lingering warmth of his touch. The small pool beckoned, its surface sparkling. She rose to her feet, wincing a little at the tenderness between her thighs, a reminder of the new intimacy between them. The water would feel wonderful.

She dipped her toe in and found it surprisingly warm. Sliding into the inviting depths, she immersed herself in the soothing water. It washed away the evidence of their lovemaking while leaving the glow of their connection intact.

The forest surrounded her in peaceful silence, broken only by birdsong and the gentle splash of water. She ducked beneath the surface, the world fading into muted sounds and hushed echoes. She surfaced with a smile, thinking about the future. Finnar's den already felt like home, but she had a sudden wave of longing for her own cottage—the familiar walls, her beloved loom, the rhythm of village life. She didn't want to abandon her weaving or her friendship with Tessa or even the weekly market where she sold her cloth.

Would the villagers accept Finnar? She traced patterns in the water, considering their likely reactions. Some would certainly fear him at first—his imposing height and

fierce appearance were enough to give anyone pause. But surely they would come to see past that, to recognize the gentle heart that beat beneath his protective exterior. Just as she had.

Not that she thought it would be an easy task. The villagers' fear of the Vultor ran deep—generations of stories and warnings wouldn't fade overnight. Perhaps they could spend time in both places? The den when he wanted to run free, her cottage when she needed to work on a commission.

Her fingers had started to prune, and she waded toward the shore. She sluiced as much water off her skin as possible, then pulled on her dress, the fabric still warm from lying in the sun. The idea of returning to the village nagged at her. She could only imagine the rumors swirling around. A few days of normal interactions might ease their fears.

If she went alone, she could explain things gradually, help them understand that the Vultor weren't the monsters they believed. Her fingers fumbled with the buttons of her bodice as she thought about the best way to make them understand. But her chest tightened at the thought of leaving him, even temporarily. The mate bond hummed between them, still new and precious.

And Finnar... Even if he did agree to let her return alone—which was by no means a sure thing—she knew how much it would hurt him. He'd already lost so much—she couldn't bear to cause him more pain.

She retrieved her boots and sat on a sun-warmed rock to pull them on. The leather was still damp from her earlier trek through the woods, but she barely noticed the discomfort. Her thoughts kept circling back to Finnar, to the way he'd looked at her as if she was the answer to every question he'd ever asked. No. She dismissed the idea with a sigh of relief. The villagers would have to accept them together or not at all.

She started to stand and realized she was no longer alone.

A man stood under the trees, his clothing rough and stained, a wide brimmed hat on his head. A long scar marred one cheek, twisting his smile into a menacing smirk. One of his eyes was milky white, and the other, dark and cold, stared at her. A crossbow hung at his side, the metal fittings gleaming dully.

“You must be Scarlett.” His voice was smooth, cultured. Wrong somehow. “The whole village is quite concerned about you.”

There was nothing overtly threatening in his words, but her heart started to race anyway. She forced her lips into what she hoped was a casual smile, fighting to keep her voice steady.

“That’s very kind, but they didn’t need to worry. I’m perfectly fine.”

He took a step closer, and she had to resist the urge to back away.

“Are you? There are some rather disturbing stories circulating.” His hand rested on the crossbow. “About a monster that took you.”

“There aren’t any monsters here,” she said sharply, then tried to soften her tone. “Just a misunderstanding. I got lost when the bridge was out, that’s all. But I’m sure you’ll still get your reward.”

“The reward for returning you safely?” He waved his hand dismissively. “Hardly worth my time. A few coins at best.”

Her heart hammered against her ribs. “Then why are you here?”

His smile turned predatory, reminding her of a snake about to strike.

“The bounty on a Vultor, now that’s considerably more interesting.” He patted the crossbow at his side. “Especially one that’s been causing trouble in these parts.”

She fought to keep her expression neutral even as her hands trembled. The hunter’s casual mention of the bounty made her blood run cold. How many others like him were out there? How many would come hunting Finnar?

“There aren’t any Vultor nearby,” she said quickly, her voice higher than usual. “I haven’t seen any at all.”

“Really? Because I’ve been tracking something very interesting through these woods. Something not human.”

The hunter’s cold smile widened as his gaze swept over her—taking in her damp hair, her rumpled clothing, the grass stains on her dress. Heat crept up her neck as his eyes lingered.

“Perfect,” he drawled. “Simply perfect. Your... disheveled state tells quite a story.” He circled her slowly, like a predator sizing up its prey. “You’ll make the perfect bait.”

Her stomach clenched. The way he said ‘bait’ made her skin crawl. She wanted to deny it, to protest, but her appearance betrayed the truth of what had happened between her and Finnar. She prayed Finnar wouldn’t sense her distress and come racing back.

The hunter stopped in front of her, his expression calculating. “A Vultor’s protective instincts are legendary, especially toward their...” His lip curled. “...chosen females. Yes, I think you’ll do very nicely indeed.”

CHAPTER 24

Finnar's paws pounded against the earth as he raced through the forest towards the Vultor enclave. His beast whined anxiously as having left their mate behind but she couldn't have achieved the same speed.

The enclave sprawled across a hidden valley close to his den. He'd told her truthfully that it wasn't quite like a human village. The houses were tucked amidst the trees, blending seamlessly into their surroundings. Humans built for show. Vultor built for concealment. But his pack was there.

His paws were a blur as he passed the first scattered homes. He knew that Scarlett would have found it beautiful—the way the wood and stone of the dwellings blended seamlessly with the natural landscape. His chest ached with longing to share it with her, to watch her eyes light up and see that infectious smile on her face.

But not yet. Not until he was sure it was safe. He refused to put her in any danger. His beast snarled its agreement and pushed for even greater speed.

As he approached the center of the enclave, several Vultor glanced up at his passing. He ignored them, focusing only on his mission to find Seren. He needed to pass on the warning as soon as possible, and then return to his mate. A larger group was sprawled around the communal fire pit and they looked up as he approached. The distrust he'd expected to see was oddly muted.

"I need to find Seren," he said sharply.

“He’s at home,” Tavar said, pointing at Seren’s cabin.

It looked the same as any of the other homes, no larger or more impressive despite his position as alpha.

He nodded his thanks and kept moving, but he caught fragments of conversation behind him.

“...with the human female...”

“...alpha allowed it...”

“...changed somehow...”

They sounded almost... approving. The acceptance felt foreign after years of isolation, but he pushed aside the unfamiliar warmth blooming in his chest. There would be time later to contemplate what it meant.

Right now, he needed to find Seren and warn him about the hunter. The possibility of finally belonging, of having both a mate and a pack, would have to wait.

He found Seren sorting seed packets—not something he’s ever expected to see—but the alpha quickly pushed them to one side as he entered.

“There’s a hunter in the woods,” he said quickly. “And he may be a bounty hunter. After Vultor.”

Seren’s expression darkened as he told him what Scarlett had said, his claws drumming on the rough wooden table.

His alpha sighed heavily when he finished his report. “Thank you for bringing this to

my attention. The last thing we need right now is conflict between humans and Vultor.”

“Agreed. I need to get back.” He shifted his weight, his beast already urging him to return. “My mate is waiting. She has accepted my claim.”

The words felt right on his tongue, pride swelling in his chest as he claimed her.

A genuine smile crossed Seren’s face.

“I’m happy for you, Finnar. Truly.”

But despite the sincerity of the congratulations, he caught that flicker of longing in the alpha’s eyes—the same look he’d seen earlier when they’d discussed mates. It was the expression of someone who understood exactly what Finnar had found, and yearned for it himself.

He wished he could offer some comfort but he knew only too well there was none. Instead he bowed his head and left, racing back through the forest, his long strides eating up the distance. The sun was approaching the horizon, the last rays of daylight slanting through the trees, but he barely noticed the play of shadows across his path. His thoughts were centered on his mate, replaying the sweetness of their joining, anticipating holding her again.

A breeze rustled through the trees and his steps faltered. Her scent reached him, carried on the wind, but something was wrong. The usual honeyed sweetness was there, but underneath lay the sharp, acrid taste of fear.

His beast surged forward, claws threatening to emerge as panic clawed at his chest. No. He forced himself to breathe deeply, to think clearly. The hunter. Had the hunter found her? He should never have left her alone.

Each step brought her scent closer, the fear growing more pronounced. His muscles bunched and flexed as he fought against the urge to transform completely. He needed to maintain control, to assess the situation before charging in blindly.

But his beast prowled restlessly beneath his skin, demanding action. Their mate was in danger. Their mate needed them. The sound of his heartbeat thundered in his ears as he pushed himself faster, following her scent through the darkening woods.

When he finally reached the clearing, he found her bound against a large boulder, her wrists and ankles secured with thick rope that bit into her delicate skin. Her face was streaked with tears, but her eyes lit up when she saw him.

His vision went red. The beast inside him roared, demanding retribution for anyone who dared harm their mate. He knew it was probably a trap—the hunter had to be nearby—but he couldn't stop himself from charging forward. Nothing mattered except getting to her.

“Finnar!”

The relief in her voice tore at his heart as he reached her. He extended his claws and began slicing through the ropes binding her wrists, careful not to nick her skin despite his rage.

“The hunter's watching,” she whispered urgently, her voice trembling. “He's out there somewhere.”

He growled low in his throat but didn't stop freeing her. Let the hunter come. He'd tear him apart for daring to touch what was his. The second rope fell away and he reached for the bindings at her ankles.

“Look out!” Her cry pierced the air just as he heard the whisper of an arrow cutting

through the air toward him.

He spun to one side but the arrow struck his shoulder with brutal force. White-hot pain exploded through his body, and his beast seized control. Bones cracked and reformed as his muscles rippled and expanded. Coarse fur erupted across his skin as his face elongated into as his fangs grew.

The transformation complete, he spun toward the threat. The hunter stood at the edge of the clearing, his face draining of color as he took in Finnar's massive beast form. The man's hands shook as he dropped his bow and drew a long hunting knife from his belt.

His enhanced senses picked up the acrid stench of the hunter's fear, mixing with his mate's lingering distress. The combination drove his beast into a frenzy. This human had dared to harm his mate, to use her as bait. The thought sent fresh rage coursing through his veins.

A deep, menacing growl rumbled from his chest as he crouched, muscles bunching. The hunter took an unsteady step backward, knife wavering in his grip.

He launched himself across the clearing, claws extended and fangs bared. His only thought was to eliminate the threat to his mate. Nothing else mattered except tearing apart the one who had dared to hurt what was his.

CHAPTER 25

S carlett's heart leaped as Finnar burst into the clearing, his powerful form little more than a blur as he raced towards her. Relief flooded her, but it was quickly followed by fear as she remembered the hunter's cold smile when he'd tied her to the boulder.

"Careful," she whispered as Finnar's claws sliced through the ropes binding her wrists. "He's watching."

She glimpsed movement in the bushes behind him—the hunter rising to his feet, bow already drawn.

"Look out!" she screamed.

Finnar started to turn, but not quite fast enough. The arrow that had been intended for his heart struck his shoulder with a sickening thud. Blood immediately began to stain his shirt, spreading outward from the wound in an alarming crimson circle.

A gasp escaped her throat as his features contorted, his transformation triggered by the pain and threat. His face elongated, fangs extending as grey fur rippled across his skin. The sight both terrified and fascinated her—this was her mate in his true form, defending her.

His snarl echoed through the clearing as he whirled to face the hunter. The man had turned deathly pale but was already drawing his knife. She struggled against the remaining ropes binding her ankles, desperate to help somehow, but they were too tight and she couldn't free herself before he launched himself at the hunter with

terrifying speed.

Her fingers trembled as she worked at the knots binding her ankles. The sound of Finnar's howl sent chills down her spine—not from fear of him, but from the raw power and rage contained in that sound. The arrow still protruded from his shoulder, but he moved as if he couldn't feel it, his muscles rippling beneath his grey fur as he charged at the hunter.

The ropes finally gave way and she stumbled to her feet, her heart pounding against her ribs as she raced after him. The hunter's knife glinted in the sunlight as he slashed wildly at Finnar, but her mate was too fast, too strong. In one fluid motion, he knocked the blade away and slammed the hunter to the ground.

Blood trickled down his arm from the arrow wound as he pinned the hunter beneath him. He raised his hand, claws extended, ready to tear out the hunter's throat. The hunter's eyes widened in terror, his breath coming in sharp gasps.

"No!" She grabbed his arm, feeling the tension beneath her fingers. "Please don't."

His head snapped around, those glowing blue eyes fixed on her face. Up close, she could see the way his features had shifted— more lupine than Vultor—but she wasn't afraid. This was still her Finnar.

"If you kill him, others will come," she said softly. "They'll hunt you down."

A low growl rumbled from his chest, his clawed hand still raised. The hunter whimpered beneath him.

"Please," she whispered, tightening her grip on his arm. "Don't let him make you into what he thinks you are."

She kept her hand on Finnar's arm, feeling the tension in his muscles. His fur was surprisingly soft beneath her fingers, but she could sense the deadly power coiled beneath.

"If you kill him they'll come after you," she repeated. "They won't stop until they hunt you down."

Another growl rumbled through his chest, his claws still poised over the hunter's throat. The hunter had gone completely still, barely breathing.

"Please." She pressed closer, sliding her hand up to his shoulder. "Don't give them a reason."

His eyes remained fixed on the hunter, but she saw the flicker of conflict cross his face. His features shifted slightly, caught between his two forms as he struggled with the decision. She knew that his need to protect her warred with his more rational side—she could see it in the way his jaw clenched, in the slight tremor that ran through his body.

"I won't let him hurt you again," he growled, his voice deeper and rougher in this form.

"I know." She stroked his arm gently. "But killing him isn't the answer."

His chest heaved as he drew in a ragged breath. The strain showed clearly on his face now as he fought against his beast's instincts. She held her breath, hoping she'd gotten through to him.

Her heart pounded as he slowly lowered his claws. His muscles were still rigid beneath her touch, but the murderous rage had faded from his eyes. He kept his gaze locked on the hunter as he rose to his feet, pulling her protectively behind him.

With swift, precise movements, he gathered the hunter's remaining arrows, snapping each one in half, the sharp crack of breaking wood punctuating the tense silence. The knife followed, the metal shrieking as Finnar's claws shredded it into useless fragments.

"Leave." His voice was still rough, more beast than human. "If you ever return to these woods, I won't be so merciful."

The hunter scrambled backwards, his earlier bravado completely vanished. His face had gone chalk-white, his eyes wide with terror as he stared up at Finnar. He nodded frantically, stumbling to his feet.

"I-I won't come back," he stammered. "I swear."

They watched as the hunter limped away, occasionally glancing over his shoulder as if afraid Finnar would change his mind. His footsteps faded into the distance until only the sounds of the forest remained, and her shoulders sagged with relief. Her hands were still trembling from the aftermath of fear and adrenaline.

Finnar turned towards her, his features softening as he reached for her. A sharp hiss escaped through his teeth as the movement jarred his shoulder. Blood had soaked through his shirt around the arrow wound, the fabric glistening wetly in the fading light.

"We need to get back to your den." She examined the injury with growing concern. The arrow had gone all the way through the thick muscle. "That needs to be cleaned and bandaged properly."

"It's nothing," he growled, but she saw the way his jaw clenched, betraying his pain.

"Don't be stubborn." She touched his uninjured arm gently. "Please. Let me help

you.”

His expression wavered between pride and need before he gave a short nod. The fact that he didn’t argue further told her just how much the wound hurt him.

The path back to his den seemed longer than before. She kept close to his side, watching for any sign that he might stumble. His movements were still graceful but she could see the tension in his body, the careful way he held himself to avoid jarring his shoulder.

By the time they reached the den, her heart was pounding with fear. His skin had taken on an ashen tone, and his steps had grown increasingly unsteady. She’d never seen him look vulnerable before, and it terrified her.

He stumbled through the doorway, collapsing onto the bed platform. His breath came in shallow gasps, his eyes glazed with pain.

“The arrow.” His voice was barely a whisper. “Cut off the head. Pull it straight out.”

Her stomach lurched at the thought, but she nodded. “I understand.”

“Have to be quick,” he mumbled, his eyes starting to close. “Before it heals wrong.”

She grabbed her satchel with trembling hands, pulling out the small knife her grandmother had packed. The metal gleamed in the dim light as she approached the bed.

His eyes had already closed, his breathing ragged but steady. Blood had spread across his shirt, the arrow shaft protruding at an awkward angle.

Taking a deep breath, she grasped the arrow shaft. Her hands shook as she positioned

the knife against the wood, just above where it disappeared into his flesh. The thought of causing him more pain made her feel ill, but she couldn't hesitate. Not now.

CHAPTER 26

F innar drifted back to consciousness, drawn by a soft melodic humming. His beast stirred at the familiar sound. Scarlett. He turned his head, fighting an unusual weakness, but instead of his mate's fiery hair, he saw her grandmother's silver head bent over a steaming pot.

She looked up and gave him a bright smile. "Ah, you're finally awake. You look much better."

His muscles tensed despite the pain that shot through his shoulder. What was she doing in his den? And where was his mate? He tried to push himself up but fell back against the pillows.

"Don't try to move yet." Her tone was oddly commanding for such a small woman. "That arrow was poisoned. You're lucky Scarlett knew enough to send for me."

"Where is she?" His voice came out as a rough growl.

"Getting fresh herbs from the stream." The old woman stirred whatever was in the pot. "Fortunately the ones I need grow wild around here."

He shifted uncomfortably under her sharp gaze. Something about the way she looked at him... "You know about the Vultor."

"More than most." She ladled the contents of the pot into a cup. "Here, drink this. It will help with the healing."

The liquid had an odd, bitter taste that sparked a memory. He'd tasted something similar once before, when his mother... His eyes narrowed.

"Where did you learn about Vultor healing?"

Her eyes sparkled.

"That's a story for another time." She patted his hand. "For now, just know that Scarlett comes by her attraction to the Vultor naturally."

His beast prowled restlessly, anxious about Scarlett's absence but somehow not viewing her grandmother as a threat.

"Scarlett asked Seren to bring me," she explained, returning to the stove. "She knew I could help."

His eyes narrowed. The alpha had brought this human?

"Why would Seren do that?"

She gave him an amused look. "He and I are... old acquaintances."

The casual way she mentioned the alpha set off warning bells in his mind. No human should speak of a Vultor leader with such familiarity. But before he could question her further, she frowned.

"The poison on that arrow was a nasty blend—meant to kill slowly," she said. "You're fortunate Scarlett knew to send for me."

Not just a hunter then, but one who knew how to kill Vultor. Who had planned to kill Vultor. His muscles tensed as anger flooded through him, but the movement sent

fresh pain shooting through his shoulder.

“Easy now.” Her voice was surprisingly gentle. “The poison’s mostly neutralized, but you need to rest.”

He forced himself to relax against the pillows, his mind racing. How many hunters were out there with poisoned weapons? How many of his kind had already fallen to such treachery? But beneath his anger lay a deeper concern—what if the hunter returned while he was weakened? What if Scarlett...

“Stop fretting,” the old woman chided, somehow reading his thoughts. “Seren has warriors watching the area. No one will harm either of you.”

He tried to sit up again but his muscles refused to cooperate. The sheet slipped down his chest in the process and he realized he was completely naked. Not that nudity bothered him, but combined with his weakness, it left him feeling oddly vulnerable.

His arms trembled with the effort of trying to rise and frustration coursed through him. He’d survived worse injuries—why was this one affecting him so severely? His beast stirred restlessly, equally unsettled by their weakness.

“Stop that.” Her grandmother’s voice carried the same authority he’d heard in Seren’s. “The poison needs time to clear your system.”

He growled, fighting against the heaviness in his limbs. “I need to?—”

“You need to stay put.” She pressed him back against the pillows with surprising strength. “The healing process can’t be rushed, no matter how badly you want to see her.”

The old woman’s knowing look made him want to argue, but exhaustion crashed over

him in a wave. Even his beast seemed drained, their usual strength sapped by whatever toxin the hunter had used.

He sank back into the bed, hating how easily she'd subdued him. His mate was out there somewhere and he couldn't even sit up to go find her. The thought burned worse than the wound in his shoulder.

The door opened and Scarlett hurried in, her face lighting up when she saw him. She threw herself into his arms, and he caught her despite his weakness, his beast purring at her presence. Her lips found his and he kissed her hungrily, his body responding despite his exhaustion.

The kiss deepened as she pressed against him, but his arms trembled from the effort of holding her. She finally pulled back, her cheeks flushed, and glanced around the room. The empty chair beside the bed confirmed that her grandmother had left.

She started to move away, but he tightened his grip.

"Stay," he said. "I might be too weak to do anything else, but I can still hold you."

She smiled and settled against him, careful to avoid his injured shoulder. Her sweet scent wrapped around him, more potent than any medicine. His beast relaxed, content now that their mate was where she belonged.

He stroked her hair as she nestled against him, her body fitting perfectly against his. She told him how terrified she'd been when the poison took hold, his temperature soaring as he thrashed in delirium.

"Seren brought Grandmother straight away," she said. "He's been checking on you every day."

That didn't really surprise him. Seren cared for everyone in his pack.

"I think he likes you," she added, smiling. "He said he wants you to be happy."

He grunted noncommittally, but warmth spread through his chest that had nothing to do with lingering fever. He'd spent so long isolating himself, consumed by anger and grief. Now he had a mate, and maybe even a pack again.

Her fingers traced patterns on his chest, but she didn't look at him.

"You talked about them while you were feverish," she said softly. "Your family."

His body tensed. The memories that had haunted him for so long crashed over him—the way they'd died, trapped in their burning home while humans laughed.

But her presence anchored him, keeping the rage at bay. Her gentle touch soothed the old wounds that had festered for so long.

"You called out for your sister," she whispered. "Said you were sorry you couldn't save her."

Pain lanced through his chest, sharper than the arrow wound. He'd never told anyone about that night, about how he'd tried to reach them through the flames but failed.

He pulled her closer, drawing strength from her presence. The words he'd kept locked inside for so long spilled out.

"I was there when they burned the house." His voice came out rough. "I'd gone hunting in the high peaks. When I saw the smoke I came back, but it was too late." He swallowed hard. "My father was dead, my brother almost so. They... hurt my mother, my sister, then threw them into the den and set it on fire. They'd barred the

doors from the outside. The humans stood there watching, laughing as my family burned.”

Her arms tightened around him but she remained silent, letting him continue.

“They shot me when I tried to get through the flames...” He closed his eyes, remembering the searing heat, the screams. “They must have thought I was dead, but I survived.”

No matter how much he’d wished he hadn’t.

“After that, I lost myself. Ran deep into the mountains. Stayed in beast form for years—two, maybe three. Time meant nothing. I was little more than an animal.”

He stroked her hair, anchoring himself in the present. “Eventually the need for revenge pulled me back. Gave me purpose again. But it was a hollow thing that ate at my soul.”

Tears filled her eyes as she looked up at him. He brushed them away with his thumb.

“The loss will always be there,” he said softly. “But you’ve helped me find peace with it. Given me something to live for besides vengeance.”

Her smile lit up her face, chasing away the last of the darkness that had lingered in his heart. He captured her lips again, needing to feel her, to taste her. She was his light, his hope.

When he finally broke the kiss, he rested his forehead against hers.

“I love you, little red,” he murmured, stroking her cheek.

“I love you too.” Her eyes sparkled with happiness. “My big bad alien.”

He laughed, the sound unfamiliar but welcome. For the first time since he’d lost everything, the future held promise.

“I’m not so sure about the big part,” he said ruefully, glancing at his still too-weak body.

“You will be,” she promised. “Grandmother knows what she’s doing.”

“I think she knows a lot more than she lets on.”

She laughed, the sound like sunlight breaking through clouds. “That wouldn’t surprise me at all.”

He tugged her closer, relishing the feel of her soft curves against him.

“And when I’m healed,” he murmured in her ear, his voice dropping into a growl. “I’ll show you exactly how big and bad I can be.”

CHAPTER 27

Scarlett sat next to the window, enjoying the warmth of the afternoon sun as she worked the small hand loom. The rhythmic motion of passing the shuttle back and forth soothed her, bringing a sense of normalcy to her new life. She smiled, remembering Nyra's infectious laugh when she'd offered to lend her the loom.

"You humans always need something to keep your hands busy," Nyra had teased, her fangs flashing in an oddly endearing grin. Despite her fierce appearance—she was as tall as Finnar and her shifted form was a magnificent silver-white—the female Vultor had shown unexpected kindness.

The weaving took shape beneath Scarlett's fingers, the pattern emerging with each pass of the shuttle. Most of the Vultor pack still watched her with wary eyes when she ventured out of the den, their gazes a mixture of distrust and curiosity. A few had even growled at her, but Seren had been particularly supportive of their mating and he quickly put an end to it.

Her fingers paused on the shuttle as she remembered Nyra's latest visit. The female had sprawled in one of the chairs, managing to look both dangerous and completely at ease as she regaled her with stories about the pack. Her dry observations about pack politics had Scarlett laughing despite herself.

"You're not what I expected," Nyra had admitted, studying her with those intense silver eyes. "Maybe there's hope for us yet."

The sound of the shuttle clicking against the frame filled the silence as she considered

those words. Perhaps there was hope—not just for her and Finnar, but for both their peoples. The thought warmed her even more than the sunlight streaming through the window.

She set down her loom and walked over to the open doorway, watching Finnar work in the garden. His muscles rippled as he pulled weeds, but she noticed he favored his right side slightly. Despite his claims of being fully recovered, she wasn't convinced.

He'd been oddly distant since he'd regained consciousness. Oh, he still held her close at night, his body curled protectively around hers, and she'd wake to find him hard against her. But whenever she'd turn to him, eager to explore that passion, he'd give her a quick kiss and practically leap from their bed.

At first she'd thought it was because her grandmother was staying with them, but she'd been gone for two days now and he still hadn't made love to her.

Last night she'd finally managed to coax him into a deeper kiss. The heat between them had flared instantly, his fingers finding her breast, teasing her nipple until she was gasping with need. Then he'd suddenly pulled away, muttering something about going for a run.

Now she sighed as she watched him bend to pull another weed, remembering the way his hands had felt on her body. A flush of heat washed over her and she pressed her thighs together. What was holding him back? Before she'd left, her grandmother had assured her the poison was completely gone from his system.

Maybe he was worried about hurting her? She'd noticed his claws had emerged last night just before he'd pulled away. But surely he knew she trusted him completely?

He straightened and caught her watching. His eyes gleamed that intense blue that made her heart race, but then he quickly looked away and resumed his work.

Damn. She decided the half-finished cloth could wait. She grabbed her red cloak from its peg by the door and called out to Finnar.

“I’m going to visit Nyra.”

He looked up from his weeding, a frown crossing his face, but she hurried away before he could object. She’d been shocked to realize how close they were to the Vultor village—and how concealed it was. The path to Nyra’s cottage wound through a patch of wild roses, their sweet scent filling the air. The Vultor female had planted them herself, telling her that beauty was just as important as practicality.

Nyra was in her potting shed when she arrived, her strong hands expertly shaping clay on the wheel. She looked up with a welcoming smile, her silver eyes warm despite her fierce appearance.

“What brings you here, little one?”

She settled onto a bench, watching Nyra’s hands move over the clay. “It’s Finnar. He’s been... distant since the injury. Every time things start to get heated between us, he pulls away.”

Nyra’s hands stilled on the wheel. “Ah. And this troubles you?”

“I don’t understand what’s wrong. My grandmother says the poison is gone.”

“Mmm.” Nyra resumed her work, smoothing the sides of the bowl. “Perhaps he feels as if he failed you.”

“Failed me? But he saved me!”

“After letting you be captured. After being wounded.” Nyra shot her a quick look.

“For a Vultor male, especially one as strong as Finnar, being unable to protect his mate... it would be a deep wound to his pride.”

“So what should I do?” she asked.

A wicked grin spread across the other female’s face. “Run from him.”

“What?”

“Trust me.” Nyra’s silver eyes sparkled with mischief. “His beast won’t be able to resist the chase. And once he catches you...” She let the words trail off suggestively.

That evening, after they finished their simple supper, she slipped into the bathroom with the package Nyra had given her. A white nightgown made of some whisper-soft fabric that floated around her curves. It was far shorter than anything she’d ever worn. Nyra had suggested running naked like the Vultor did, but her courage didn’t stretch quite that far.

She emerged from the bathroom, conscious of the way the fabric molded to her body. His eyes locked onto her immediately, blazing with heat. His nostrils flared as he caught her scent and she saw his claws start to emerge before he clenched his fists.

“What are you wearing?” His voice was rough, almost a growl.

“Do you like it?” She gave him what she hoped was a sultry look. “Nyra gave it to me.”

Her heart raced at the hunger in his eyes. Despite his attempt to look away, she caught the flash of heat before his expression hardened.

Ignoring him she walked towards the door, letting her hips sway. The soft fabric of

the nightgown whispered against her skin with each step.

“Where are you going?” he demanded.

“For a walk.” She kept her tone light and innocent even as excitement fluttered in her stomach.

“Absolutely not.” He crossed his arms, his muscles flexing. “Not dressed like that.”

A thrill ran through her at the possessive note in his voice. The beast was definitely stirring beneath his controlled exterior. Nyra was right—his protective instincts were warring with his desire. She could see it in the way his hands clenched, the way his eyes kept darting to her barely covered legs despite his attempts to look away.

She pulled open the door, the silvery moonlight flooding the room and turning the thin fabric of her nightgown almost transparent. Her skin tingled with awareness as she felt his gaze burning into her.

“I’m going.” She tossed the words over her shoulder. “You’ll have to catch me if you want to stop me.”

His growl sent a shiver of anticipation down her spine. She laughed, the sound carrying on the night breeze, and darted out the door. Her bare feet touched cool grass as she raced across the courtyard, her heart pounding with exhilaration. The night air caressed her skin through the flimsy fabric, and she knew he would be able to see every curve, every movement of her body in the bright moonlight.

She heard the door slam behind her, followed by another growl—deeper this time, more primal. The sound made her pulse race faster, but she didn’t look back. If she wanted to break through his self-imposed restraint, she had to make him chase her.

Her nightgown fluttered around her thighs as she headed for the trees, the fabric dancing in the moonlight. She laughed again, and ran.

CHAPTER 28

Finnar's beast surged to the surface as he watched Scarlett disappear into the moonlit forest. The thin fabric of her nightgown did little to conceal her curves, and the sight of her body silhouetted against the silvery light ignited something primal within him.

He ripped off his clothes, not caring where they landed, and charged after her. Her sweet scent filled his nostrils, leading him deeper into the woods. His enhanced vision caught glimpses of white fabric fluttering between the trees, teasing him with fleeting glimpses of her body.

The sound of her laughter floated back to him, playful and enticing. His beast growled in approval—their mate wanted to play. His self-imposed restraint crumbled as instinct took over.

He could have caught her easily, but he found himself wanting to prolong the chase. Each flash of her body through the trees, each echo of her laughter, each trace of her scent drove his arousal higher. His blood burned hot in his veins as he pursued her, letting her stay just ahead of him.

The moonlight painted everything in shades of silver and shadow as he tracked her through the forest. Her scent grew stronger, sweeter, telling him she was just as aroused as he was. The knowledge that she wanted this—wanted him—as much as he wanted her swept away the last of his doubts.

His blood surged with primal energy as he tracked her through the moonlit forest. Her scent wrapped around him like an invisible thread, sweet and irresistible, drawing

him deeper into their intimate game of pursuit. Each breath filled his lungs with her essence, stoking the fire of his need.

The silvery light revealed teasing glimpses that made his beast growl with approval. His enhanced vision picked up every detail—the way the thin fabric clung to her curves, how her hair gleamed like copper in the moonlight, the graceful way she moved through the shadows.

His muscles bunched and flexed as he ran, purposefully holding back just enough to prolong the chase. The forest floor felt cool beneath his bare feet, but his skin burned with desire. Her laughter floated back to him, sending shivers of anticipation down his spine.

The distance between them shortened with each stride as he finally gave in to the urge to catch her. His heart hammered against his ribs, not from exertion but from the intoxicating knowledge that she wanted this—wanted him—as much as he did. The beast within him reveled in her playful surrender, recognizing it as the gift it was.

But instead of claiming her immediately, he slowed his pace to match hers, savoring the thrill of pursuit. His heightened senses caught every detail—her quickened breath, the rapid beat of her heart, the way her nightgown shimmered in the moonlight.

She glanced over her shoulder, her dark eyes sparkling with mischief, and his chest tightened at her radiant smile. Her laughter rang through the trees as she darted away again, and he found himself chuckling in response. The sound surprised him—he couldn't remember the last time he'd laughed before meeting her.

He followed her zigzagging path through the trees, letting her stay just ahead of him. The sweet scent of her arousal mingled with her natural fragrance, flooding his senses and making his blood burn hotter. His beast growled appreciatively as desire coursed through him, but he held back, prolonging the game.

Each time she looked back at him, her eyes growing darker with need, his own arousal intensified. The moonlight caught the curves of her body through the thin fabric, and his hands itched to touch her. But still he waited, letting the anticipation build between them as she led him deeper into the forest.

He surged forward at last, his superior speed finally unleashed as he caught her against a moss-covered boulder. The impact knocked a breathless laugh from her lips, and his heart clenched at the sound. Her dark eyes sparkled up at him, filled with joy and desire, her cheeks flushed from their chase.

The thin fabric of her nightgown did nothing to hide the rapid rise and fall of her chest. His gaze fixed on her hardened nipples pressing against the delicate material, and a low growl rumbled in his throat. The sweet scent of her arousal filled his nostrils, making his beast stir restlessly beneath his skin.

He braced his hands on either side of her head, caging her between his body and the boulder. The moonlight bathed her face in silvery light, highlighting her parted lips. His enhanced vision caught every detail—the slight tremble of those tempting lips, the way her pulse fluttered at her throat, the darkness of desire in her eyes.

The beast inside him purred with satisfaction at having caught their mate, but for once its urgency was tempered by the need to savor this moment. She was his—willing, wanting, and completely perfect.

“What did I say would happen to prey when it ran from a predator, especially such pretty prey?” he growled playfully.

“You said it would get eaten,” she teased.

He growled again and spun her around, bending her over the boulder as he went to his knees behind her.

“Is that a promise?” she asked breathlessly, arching her ass towards him.

The nightgown slid up to reveal her perfect ass and unable to resist, he leaned forward and bit it, just hard enough to make her squeak, then licked soothingly at the spot. She wiggled impatiently, but he took his time, kissing and licking every inch of soft skin. When her legs parted, he turned his attention to her inner thighs, working his way up to her perfect little cunt. He could see her arousal glistening on the swollen lips and inhaled deeply, his cock throbbing at the delicious scent.

She arched her back again, trying to bring her clit closer to his mouth but he ignored the invitation. Instead, he took his time, kissing and nibbling his way along the sensitive creases where her thighs met her body, careful not to touch anywhere else.

“Are you trying to kill me?” she complained.

“You were the one who decided to run away from me,” he reminded her. “Now you have to wait for your reward.”

She huffed but subsided, her body trembling with need. He continued to tease her, kissing the luscious curve of her ass, biting gently at the soft skin until she moaned. When his tongue finally traced the delicate folds of her sex, she quivered, a rush of liquid heat greeting his mouth. He took his time, licking every inch of her pretty pink flesh before circling the swollen nub of her clit. She gasped and pushed back towards him, and he rewarded her with a long, hard lick that left her shaking.

He brought her to the brink of climax over and over, never letting her go over. Her cries grew increasingly frantic as he worked her with his lips and tongue. When he slid two fingers inside her, curling them upwards to stroke that sensitive place high inside her walls, her entire body tightened. A muffled wail escaped her lips, and then she was coming around his fingers, her body clenching helplessly as she shuddered through her release.

CHAPTER 29

S carlett was still quivering helplessly when Finnar rose to his feet behind her. He gripped her hips with his big hands as his cock nudged at her entrance, then entered her in one long hard stroke, stretching her wide and sending her soaring straight into another climax. He stayed buried deep inside her, holding her in place as her body convulsed helplessly. Once her tremors had calmed, he started to move. Each powerful thrust pushed her against the rock, the hard surface abrading her sensitive nipples and adding to her pleasure.

It felt like his cock was even bigger than usual, the wide head rubbing against her in just the right places, and she found herself climaxing again. He growled, his hands tightening on her hips as she convulsed helplessly, and she welcomed the additional sensation as the firestorm of pleasure swept over her again.

When the wave finally subsided enough for her to think, she looked back at him over her shoulder. His eyes were blazing blue, hints of his beast showing on his face, his expression taut with strain as he held himself in place.

She smiled at him and swept the hair away from her neck.

“My what big teeth you have,” she teased. “Perfect for giving me a mating bite.”

Nyra had educated her about that too, telling her how important it was to a Vultor male. His eyes blazed even brighter but he shook his head.

“I can’t. You are human, fragile.”

“Not that fragile,” she insisted, tightening her inner muscles around his embedded shaft. “Don’t you want to bite me?”

“Goddess, yes.”

“Then do it. I want everyone to know I’m yours.”

He growled, and then he was bending over her, his mouth at her neck. She felt the scrape of his fangs against her skin and she shuddered with nervous anticipation.

He bit down. Her body exploded, coming harder than she ever had before even as a strange warmth spread out from the bite, washing through her entire body and setting every nerve on fire. It was as if his teeth were connected directly to her clit. She could feel her pussy quivering and tightening around him, demanding that he join her.

He roared, the sound echoing through the forest as his seed finally filled her. His knot expanded, stretching her almost to the point of pain as their bodies locked together and small tremors kept sweeping over her. His teeth remained buried in her skin, each tiny movement sending another ripple of fire across her nerve endings.

The feeling seemed to go on and on, the warmth from his bite continued to pulse through her veins, but at last, her body relaxed, and she collapsed limply over the stone, still filled with his cock.

As the heat from the bite finally began to fade, he slowly released her neck, his tongue swiping soothingly across the bite but even that gentle touch threatened to bring on another climax.

“How do you feel?” he whispered.

“Wonderful. I had no idea it would be like that.”

“Neither did I,” he admitted, his voice sounding awed.

“Are you sorry you did it?”

“Fuck no,” he growled, licking the bite mark again.

“Good.” She wiggled a little, testing the feel of his knot and he groaned.

“You keep that up and we may never leave this forest.”

“That’s fine with me,” she murmured contentedly. “As long as I’m with you.”

“You will be, my mate. Forever.” He stroked her back. “But I would like to move somewhere a little more comfortable.”

“Are you sure?” She managed to lift her head and look back at him, giving him a teasing smile. “Aren’t you worried I’ll run again?”

“I’m counting on it, little red.” His eyes blazed. “I’ll never get tired of chasing you—or of catching you.”

She smiled as her eyes drifted closed. She was almost asleep when his knot finally subsided and he slid free, sending another quiver through her exhausted body.

“Home,” he said firmly, lifting her into his arms and carrying her back towards their den.

“I love you,” she murmured, reaching up to trace his jaw with gentle fingers.

“And I love you, little red,” he whispered back, his voice rough with emotion. She smiled at the nickname that had started as a taunt but had become an endearment.

Her hand fell back to her side as he carried her home. Home to the den they had created together and would fill with love and happiness and children. And perhaps a few wild chases... She smiled sleepily and gave into the lingering effects of pleasure, knowing that he would always be there to watch over her.

The next time her eyes opened they were back in their den. He had settled in the chair next to the fire, still holding her cradled against his chest. He was staring into the flames, a thoughtful expression on his face. She let herself admire those strong, determined features until he became aware of her gaze and looked down at her.

“Why were you holding back these past few days?” she asked softly.

His arms tightened around her. “I failed to protect you from that hunter.”

“That wasn’t your fault.” She traced the fresh scar on his shoulder. “You saved me.”

“After letting you get captured in the first place.” He shuddered. “But that’s not the only thing.”

She waited patiently as he struggled to find the right words.

“Being with me... it changes everything for you. The villagers may turn against you once they know. And the pack—” He swallowed hard. “Some of them still see humans as enemies. You’ll be caught between two worlds, belonging to neither.”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” she said slowly. “I would like to spend some of our time in the village.”

He tensed beneath her.

“In the village? Why?”

“Several reasons. First of all, I have a home there, my loom, my supplies. A market. I have friends like Tessa.”

He was already shaking his head.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea. They all never accept me.”

“I don’t think that’s true, especially once they get to know you.” She cut off his protest. “It’s much easier to be afraid of things you don’t know. I doubt anyone in the village had ever met a Vultor before. I want them to get to know you.”

He didn’t look convinced, but then she hadn’t expected him to agree immediately. For now she was content just to have planted the seed.

“I know the risks,” she added, pressing her palm against his chest. “Some people will never accept us—in either world. But that’s all right.”

“It does not trouble you?”

“Not really. Grandmother likes you. Seren seems to like me.” She grinned at him. “Nyra treats me like family and I’m sure Tessa will like you. We’ll gather friends who see past the differences, who understand what we mean to each other. We’ll create our own community, one that bridges both worlds. It may take time, but we’ll do it together.”

Finnar smiled as Scarlett snuggled against him, pressing her face against his neck. The trust in that simple gesture made his throat tight. After years of isolation and anger, he’d found not just acceptance but pure, unconditional love. His mate’s happiness radiated through their newly forged bond, mirroring his own joy. His beast purred with satisfaction at the sight of their mate, safe and cherished.

“Our own community,” he echoed, tasting the promise in those words. A smile tugged at his lips as he looked down at her. “I like the sound of that. Even if it was just the two of us, it would be enough.”

The truth of it resonated deep within him. After years of isolation and rage, the simple act of holding her felt like coming home. His beast rumbled in agreement—they needed no one else, though he was grateful for those who had already accepted them.

He traced the mating mark on her neck, still amazed she’d wanted his bite. That she understood the depth of what it meant—not just to him, but to their future. She shivered at his touch but kept her gaze locked with his, letting him see her unwavering commitment to their path forward.

Her scent wrapped around him, her usual sweetness now marked with his claim, and he pulled her closer. The firelight played across her skin, highlighting the contentment in her expression. How had he gotten so lucky? This fierce, determined female who faced down his darkness without flinching, who saw past his harsh exterior to the wounded soul beneath.

She relaxed against his chest with a soft sigh, and his heart swelled. Yes, this was all he needed—this connection, this sense of belonging. Everything else would fall into place around the foundation they’d built together.

EPILOGUE

S ix weeks later...

Scarlett ran her fingers over the newly woven cloth, admiring the way the colors blended together—a blue that reminded her of Finnar’s eyes and a deep green like the leaves of the trees surrounding them. She added it to the growing pile by the door, ready to take to the market on their next visit to the village.

He had eventually—reluctantly—agreed to accompany her back to the village. She smiled as she remembered the way the villagers had reacted, their eyes wide and shocked, edging nervously towards their houses. But Grandmother had been at work, happily telling people about the Vultor who had saved her granddaughter, and that had helped soften their reaction.

Tessa had also accepted him readily enough. But maybe that wasn’t so surprising, she thought, her lips curving into a smile.

The fact that the mayor was proposing what she promised would be a profitable trade alliance with the Vultor had also helped. It was amazing how many people were able to overcome prejudice in the name of profit. Admittedly most of the villagers remained hesitant around Finnar, their ingrained fears hard to overcome. Yet even there, progress emerged in small ways—a nod here, a careful greeting there.

Each visit had been a little easier, but she was always happy to return to their den, especially since he’d added a weaving studio. Sunlight streamed through the large windows he’d insisted on installing, filling the space with warmth. She smiled,

remembering how he'd worked alongside the other Vultor males to build this sanctuary for her, even though some had initially grumbled about helping a human.

She started to pull out the yarn she needed for her next commission, then realized the specific shade she needed was still at the village cottage. A rueful laugh escaped her—it seemed she was forever shuttling supplies between her two workspaces. But it was worth it to maintain relationships in both locations.

The Vultor pack had actually accepted her more readily. Oh, some still watched her warily, but others like Nyra had become true friends. She glanced out the window at the lengthening shadows. Tonight would put that delicate balance to the test.

And she had news of her own. Her stomach fluttered with nervous anticipation as she headed into the den to prepare. She touched the mating mark on her neck, drawing strength from the bond it represented.

Moonlight filtered through the trees later that night as they walked home. The end of the evening had been a little... unexpected but on the whole it had gone well—both Vultor and humans mingling cautiously but peacefully.

“That was... interesting,” he said dryly.

She laughed. “It certainly was.”

“Perhaps we should have a bonding ceremony of our own,” he suggested carefully.

She shook her head and reached up to touch her mating mark. “I don’t need that. This is all the ceremony I want.”

His eyes blazed that familiar electric blue as he watched her fingers trace the mark. Heat pooled in her belly at his intense gaze.

“Still so possessive,” she teased, then darted away into the woods, her laughter trailing behind her.

She heard his growl of pursuit, excitement racing through her veins. Sometimes he liked to draw out the chase but tonight he caught her quickly, spinning her around and pressing her against a tree. She gasped at the impact, her body already aching for him.

She clutched his shoulders, loving the feel of the hard muscles beneath his shirt. His eyes burned into hers before he leaned down and kissed her fiercely, his tongue sweeping into her mouth with a hunger she felt deep within. She arched against him as he kissed her, his cock like a steel rod against her stomach.

He broke the kiss far too soon, and she whimpered in protest. He chuckled, a dark, hungry sound.

“Shh, little red. I know what you need.”

He spun her around and pushed her gently but firmly until she was bent over, hands against the rough bark of the tree trunk.

“Spread your legs for me,” he growled, and she complied, her breath coming in quick, excited pants.

He slowly pulled her long skirt up her legs, the silk caressing her sensitive skin.

“Did I mention how much I liked this dress?” he murmured. “But then I always did like you in red.”

She wiggled impatiently and he laughed, but he kept going until her ass was bare and the evening air drifted across her damp flesh. His big hands squeezed the soft flesh before a thick finger slid between her folds. She quivered, her clit already aching and swollen.

“So wet for me, my beautiful little red.” He teased the opening of her cunt with a thick finger, sliding it slowly back and forth until she was lifting into his hand, begging for more. “So eager to take me.”

“Please, Finnar,” she whispered.

He gave a satisfied growl and she felt the broad head of his cock replace his fingers. He kept teasing, pushing just far enough that she’d start to stretch open around him, then withdrawing to torment her further. He loved playing with her like this, seeing how long he could draw out the teasing until she begged him to fill her, but tonight she wanted him too badly.

Instead of begging, she pushed back against him next time he entered her, drawing him deeper. His groan rumbled over her, sending a wave of pleasure down her spine. She flexed her inner muscles, trying to pull him deeper, but he resisted, gripping her hips tightly to hold her in place.

“Greedy little female,” he growled, and she smiled, her heart overflowing.

He used his grip on her hips to pull them higher, lifting her until only the tips of her toes touched the ground. The position left her completely at his command, unable to move, unable to do anything except take him. And take her, he did, with slow, deep thrusts that filled and stretched every inch of her channel.

One hand slipped beneath her and found her clit, stroking the swollen bud, and her body tightened, already on the edge of climax. She cried out as the pleasure washed over her, her pussy rippling helplessly around the thick invader, and then his knot swelled, stretching her even further and sending her into a second, more powerful climax that had her shaking and quivering in his arms.

Her body continued to flutter around him as his hips jerked against her ass and he flooded her with his seed. The thought sent a last tremor of pleasure through her

body. He held her close, supporting her until his knot released and he slipped free.

She sighed happily and let her head drop back against his chest. He brushed a gentle kiss to her mating mark and she decided it was the perfect time.

She turned around in his arms to look up at him and all of a sudden her carefully prepared speech deserted her.

“I’m pregnant,” she blurted out.

His eyes widened, blazing blue as he stared down at her.

“Are you sure?” he asked, his voice hoarse with emotion. “We’re going to have... a child?”

“Yes. Are you pleased?” she whispered.

He dropped to his knees before her, pressing his forehead to her stomach. She ran her fingers through his hair as he murmured soft words she couldn’t quite hear, but she felt the love in every syllable. When he finally rose, she was crying, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Why are you crying?” He brushed the dampness from her face.

“Because I’m happy,” she said simply.

“I will never take your happiness for granted, little red,” he vowed as he bent down and gathered her into his arms, lifting her easily against his broad chest. He buried his face in her neck, nuzzling the mating mark and sending shivers of pleasure down her spine. “I will always strive to be worthy of you and the miracle you’ve given me. A family.”

She stroked her fingers gently down his cheek.

“You don’t have to strive for anything. You’re perfect just the way you are.” She grinned at him, her heart overflowing with happiness. “Especially when you chase me.”

“No more chasing tonight,” he said firmly.

She gave him a playful pout and his lips curved in a slow, sensuous smile.

“Don’t worry, little red. We have the rest of our lives for me to catch you.” He pressed a kiss to her mating mark and she shivered helplessly. “Over and over again.”

He started for the den and she snuggled against his chest, her heart filled with joy. She couldn’t wait to tell their children the tale of how he’d found her in the woods and claimed her heart, and how together, they’d built a home and a family. A true happily ever after.

Korrin’s story is up next in Alien Huntsman!