



# Cursed Alien (Alien Wolf Tales #4)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Can a stubborn human free a cursed alien shifter?

Once upon a time Malrik was cold, wealthy, and arrogant. Convinced he was too important to ever fall victim to the curse of the unmated Vultor, he dismissed every female brought before him. Now he roams the mountains, locked in his beast form. Until one day he catches an unfamiliar scent one that awakens a part of him he'd thought lost forever. A scent belonging to a pretty little human he will do anything to claim.

Bella is perfectly content living on the outskirts of the village with her eccentric father. When he fails to return from a trip, she goes in search of him only to find herself in the hands of a massive, scarred beast. She should be terrified, but despite his fearsome appearance and growled commands, she is more intrigued than scared.

Can she reach the male hidden inside the beast? Or is Malrik lost forever?

**Total Pages (Source):** 26

## CHAPTER 1

The beast's claws dug into earth as he stalked silently through the forest. Only the scent of evergreens and the distant rush of water registered as he slipped through the shadows, his massive form blending easily with the darkness between trees.

The cottma he was tracking suddenly paused, head up and long ears twitching, as it became aware of his presence. It tried to dart into the undergrowth but it was too late. He pounced, claws extended, and ended the chase in an instant. His jaws snapped and blood filled his mouth, hot and satisfying. He tore into the flesh, consuming the meat with savage efficiency.

This was his existence now. Hunt. Kill. Eat. Defend his territory. Sleep. A simple cycle with no past or future, only the endless present of instinct and survival.

A breeze shifted through the trees, carrying something new, and he paused mid-bite. His nostrils flared, drawing in a scent unlike anything in his mountain domain. Sweet, like the wildflowers that bloomed in hidden valleys, yet with an undertone of metal and oil. The combination tugged at something buried deep within his consciousness.

The half-eaten cottma forgotten, he raised his head and inhaled deeply. The scent called to him, not to his hunger but to something else—something lost beneath fur and fang and claw.

Female.

The word surfaced unbidden, a fragment from another existence. Not prey. Not

enemy. Something else.

Something important.

Images flashed through his mind—hands instead of paws, words instead of growls. He shook his head, disoriented by these foreign thoughts.

Malrik.

Another word, this one more troubling. A name. His name? He snarled, confused by the intrusion of this other consciousness. He was beast, nothing more. This... Malrik... was a threat to the simplicity of his existence.

Yet the scent pulled at him, awakening hunger of a different kind. He stored the remains of his kill and set off through the trees, tracking the elusive fragrance, drawn by an instinct stronger than his resistance. It led him down the mountain's slope, towards a village nestled amongst the foothills.

He crested a ridge and froze. Below, a small figure walked briskly along the road that skirted the edge of the forest. Small, but not a child. Her soft curves were evident despite the heavy clothing she wore, and wild blonde curls glittered in the sunlight like precious metal. She carried a heavy pack on her back and a tool belt slung around her hips.

Female. Human.

Beautiful.

The thought was not the beast's. It belonged to the other—to Malrik—who stirred more insistently now. The beast growled low in his throat, fighting against the intrusion.

The female looked up, scanning the ridge. For a moment, her gaze seemed to meet his, even though he knew his fur blended perfectly with the rocks. She couldn't see him, yet something passed between them—a connection that made his heart pound in an unfamiliar rhythm.

Mine.

This thought belonged to both beast and male, a rare moment of alignment between the dual aspects of his fractured self. The realization startled him enough that he retreated a step, claws scraping against stone.

The female heard the sound. Her body tensed, hand moving to something at her belt. He recognized the posture of a creature preparing to defend itself. He should retreat—humans brought danger, brought memories. The beast recoiled from these images, from the pain they carried, and he snarled, backing away.

“Hello?”

Her soft musical voice carried clearly across the distance between them, but the beast was already retreating, fleeing not from her but from the memories her presence evoked. Only when he reached the dense forest again did he slow, his breathing harsh and labored not from exertion but from the internal struggle. The other—Malrik—had retreated again, driven back into the recesses of his consciousness, but the beast remained aware of his presence.

As he went to retrieve the remains of his meal, the female's scent lingered in his memory. Something had changed within him, a door cracked open that could never fully close again. In the darkness of his mind, Malrik now waited.

The beast lifted his muzzle to the sky and howled—a sound of warning, of claiming, of longing. The sound echoed across his mountain domain, carrying with it a promise

that neither beast nor male fully understood.

Mine.

### CHAPTER 2

Two months later...

Bella tightened the last bolt on the wagon's engine compartment with a satisfying twist of her wrench, and ran her hand across the gleaming metal surface, proud of their work. The motorized wagon had been a labor of love for months—salvaged parts, rebuilt systems, and countless late nights hunched over schematics by the light of an artificial lantern.

Its copper-plated exterior gleamed in the early morning light, giving it an appearance far more elegant than its cobbled-together innards deserved. The mismatched gears and repurposed valves beneath that shiny surface told the true story of their financial situation—making do with whatever they could find or afford.

“All set,” she called, wiping her hands on a rag tucked into her belt.

Her father emerged from their workshop, the morning light accentuating the lines on his weathered face. He carried another wooden crate filled with their inventions—small mechanical toys, practical tools, and a few experimental gadgets they hoped would impress the northern villagers.

“Are you sure about this?” she asked, unable to keep the worry from her voice. “We can just wait and send these with the traders to Port Cantor as we usually do?—”

“And lose half our profits to them,” he said dryly. “I know we don't want to take the long trip to Port Cantor, but if we can find markets closer to home, we won't have to

rely on traders.”

She pretended to fidget with the bolt again so her father couldn’t see the look on her face. He was right that it was a long journey overland to the spaceport—a three month round trip by horse-drawn wagon—but he was wrong in assuming she didn’t want to go. She would have loved to have had the opportunity to interact with the type of technology that didn’t exist outside of the city.

Just because she could repair and construct almost anything didn’t mean she had the opportunity to do so. Instead, she was stuck in this village, fixing the same things over and over again. Her skills were being wasted here, but she could never tell her father that. Not when she knew how much he hated the city. Not when it was just the two of them.

She folded her arms across her chest, the worn fabric of her overalls pulling tight across her shoulders as she turned back to face him. “You know the mountains are Vultor territory.”

The Vultor were another race that had settled on Cresca, although they preferred the wild mountain regions to the farms and pastures most humans chose. Those differences had not prevented violent incidents between the two races, and she’d spent most of her childhood listening to tales that painted the Vultor as ruthless predators.

Her father finished securing the crate to the wagon bed and waved a dismissive hand.

“The mayor’s been negotiating with them for months.”

“Negotiations aren’t the same as agreements,” she countered, glancing up at the horizon where the mountains rose like jagged teeth against the sky.

“Perhaps, but two of your school friends have chosen Vultor husbands. You’ve seen Vultor in the village. If we can accept them in our territory, I’m sure they will accept a harmless old man in theirs.”

She wasn’t convinced that it was that easy. The Vultor who had visited their village were very different from the wild creatures who had haunted her nightmares, but they were huge, muscular, and intimidating, moving with a predator’s grace even when they were simply walking down the street—and predators defended their territory.

“Then I should go with you. I’m the one who fixed the compression chamber. If anything goes wrong with the engine—and you know something always does—I can repair it faster than you can.”

“You worry too much. Always have. Even when you were knee-high to a grasshopper.”

She rolled her eyes at the old Earth expression and managed a smile. “One of us has to.”

“Nothing is going to go wrong.” He placed his hands on her shoulders, and she felt the slight tremor in his fingers that he tried so hard to hide. “The shop needs you. Mrs. Holloway’s water pump won’t fix itself, and we can’t afford to lose her business. And Tessa would never forgive you for missing her bonding ceremony.”

She sighed again. “I doubt Tessa would notice—she’s too focused on her new mate.”

Her father raised an eyebrow at the edge to her voice and she winced. She knew she wasn’t being fair to Tessa. Her friend was still the same sweet, cheerful person she’d always been, but she spent less and less time in the village these days.

After a mysterious disappearance, Tessa had returned with a Vultor mate in



tow—much to the shock of the villagers. While Bella had no interest in a husband, she found herself envying her friend’s radiant happiness—as well as her adventure outside the narrow confines of village life.

“All the more reason to spend time with her.” Her father turned to load the last crate of mechanical trinkets into the wagon’s bed, wincing slightly as his back protested. At fifty-three, he wasn’t as spry as he once was, a fact he stubbornly refused to acknowledge. “Three days to the fair, two days of selling, three days back. I’ll return with enough coin to buy those specialized tools you’ve been eyeing. Maybe even that imported compression gauge you’ve been dreaming about.”

She made one last attempt. “You don’t even know if the pass really exists. No one has been that way for years.”

He pulled the faded map out of his pocket and waved it at her.

“It exists. It’s clearly marked on this map.”

Looking at the stubborn set of his chin, she abandoned her attempt to talk him out of the trip. Instead, she started going through the supplies he was taking with him.

“You’ve packed enough food? And the thermal blanket?” she asked, mentally checking off her list. “I packed some of Agatha’s medicinal tea for your joints, too. It’s in the blue tin.”

“Yes, and yes.” He pulled her into a quick hug. “I’ll be back before you miss me.”

“I already miss you and you haven’t left yet,” she replied, forcing a smile as she helped him into the driver’s seat, adjusting his traveling cloak around his shoulders. “Promise you’ll be careful.”

“Always am.” He kissed her forehead. “Don’t worry so much. You’re too young for worry lines.”

The engine hummed to life, vibrating beneath her palm as she rested it on the wagon’s side. Her father checked the navigation system one last time, then waved cheerfully before steering the vehicle towards the outskirts of the village and the mountains that seemed to watch with ancient, patient eyes. A chill breeze swept down from them, carrying the scent of rain and the faintest touch of wildness. Of freedom.

She stood there until the wagon disappeared around a bend, her hand raised in farewell long after he was gone from sight. Only when the sound of the motor had faded completely did she lower her arm, the worry settling back into place. She’d checked and double-checked the engine, reinforced the wheels, and packed extra supplies, but even if the Vultor didn’t object to his presence, the mountains remained an unpredictable threat.

“Well, there goes Elias, off to peddle his contraptions again.”

The voice came from behind her, deliberately pitched loud enough to carry. She didn’t need to turn to know it was Mrs. Winters speaking to her constant companion, Mrs. Finch.

“And leaving his poor daughter to mind that dreadful shop all alone,” Mrs. Finch replied with exaggerated concern. “It’s not proper, not proper at all.”

“A grown woman in men’s clothes, covered in grease. No wonder she’s still unmarried.”

“And likely to stay that way,” Mrs. Finch added. “Though I hear Ned from the lumber mill asked her to the harvest dance last year.”

“Poor man must have been desperate.”

Ned was actually an old friend from her school days who’d always had a crush on her. He’d been a kind boy who’d grown into a kind man, but one whose interests didn’t extend beyond the village. She’d turned him down as gently as possible, and she’d been genuinely happy for him when he became engaged to Lydia Peterson.

That didn’t stop the words from stinging, but she kept her face blank and her posture relaxed, refusing to let the old biddies see that their comments had hit their mark. She turned slowly, fixing both women with a polite smile that didn’t reach her eyes.

“Good morning, Mrs. Winters, Mrs. Finch,” she called cheerfully. “Can I help you with something? Perhaps one of your ovens needs repair?”

The women exchanged glances, Mrs. Finch’s lips pursing like she’d bitten into something sour.

“No, thank you,” Mrs. Winters replied stiffly. “We were just passing by.”

“I see. Well, don’t let me keep you from your important business.”

She turned her back on them and strode toward the shop, well aware of their disapproving gazes tracking the oil stains on her coveralls and the tool rag holding back her unruly blonde curls.

“Such a shame,” Mrs. Winters’s voice drifted after her. “She could be quite pretty if she tried.”

“If only her mother had lived,” Mrs. Finch agreed. “No feminine influence at all.”

Her jaw tightened, but she kept walking. Their words were nothing she hadn’t heard a

hundred times before—whispered at market days, muttered at village gatherings, clucked over at festivals. The disapproval of the village matrons was as predictable as the sunrise—just the background noise of village life, like the constant clucking of the neighbor’s chickens or the distant sound of the lumber mill. At least their whispers were honest, unlike Mayor Jacobson’s false smiles and calculated politeness.

The workshop stood to one side of their modest home, a sturdy stone building with large windows that let in ample light. She pushed open the heavy wooden door and inhaled deeply, breathing in the familiar scents of machine oil and metal. A half-dismantled irrigation pump sat on her workbench, surrounded by neatly arranged tools. Everything had its place, even if that place made sense only to her. Three more repair jobs waited in the corner, promised to anxious farmers before the week’s end.

“Let them talk,” she muttered. “I’d rather fix engines than gossip any day.”

She studied the irrigation pump’s corroded valve as she reached for her wrench, already mapping out the repair in her mind. The quiet of the shop settled around her, broken only by the ticking of the large clock her father had built. Normally, she found peace in this solitude, in the freedom to work without interruption, but today the silence seemed heavier somehow. The workshop suddenly felt too small, the walls pressing in around her. Sunlight streamed through the dusty windows, illuminating dancing motes in the air and highlighting the same tools she’d used thousands of times before.

She sighed, setting down her wrench with more force than necessary.

Was this it? Was this all her life would ever be? Fixing the same machines for the same people who whispered the same judgments behind her back?

She moved to the window, gazing out at the village. Outside, the village continued its

predictable rhythm—Mrs. Harrow gossiping at the well, the blacksmith hammering at his forge, children playing the same games she'd played as a girl. Nothing ever changed here.

In the distance, the mountains loomed, wild and mysterious, hiding the northern villages—and the Vultor territories—behind their rugged peaks. Not just places, but possibilities. Challenges worthy of her skills.

Soon her father would be driving their precious wagon through lands where humans were still viewed with suspicion. The knot of worry tightened, but she forced herself to return to her workbench and pick up her tools. Work would keep her mind occupied. It always did.

But as she bent over the valve, her thoughts continued to drift. Was this all there was? Days spent fixing other people's broken things, nights spent sketching designs that might never see completion, years passing in this village where she never quite fit in?

She glanced at her mother's portrait hanging on the wall. Helena Fletcher had been brilliant—an engineer from Port Cantor who'd fallen in love with a small-town mechanic. She'd brought knowledge and books and dreams to the marriage, all of which she'd passed to Bella before illness took her fifteen years ago.

After that, her father had moved them back here, to this quiet village where technology was simple and life predictable.

Safe, her father called it.

Stifling, it sometimes felt.

"I'm not unhappy," she told the portrait quietly. "I love the work. I love Papa. It's just..."

Just what? She couldn't quite name the restlessness that had been growing inside her lately. A hunger for something beyond fixing broken pumps and mending farm equipment. Beyond the disapproving glances and whispered criticisms.

She picked up a small mechanical toy they'd built for the fair—a delicate bird that flapped its wings when wound. The craftsmanship was excellent; her father had taught her well. But she'd learned everything he knew years ago.

There's nothing new here.

The irrigation pump waited patiently on her bench, surrounded by farmers' plows and simple kitchen appliances. She could fix them all in her sleep. When had the work that once fascinated her become so... routine?

She moved to her father's desk and opened the drawer where he kept their small collection of technical manuals and pulled out "Advanced Mechanical Engineering," a text from her mother's library. The diagrams inside showed complex systems she'd never had the chance to work on—elegant solutions to problems she'd never encountered in this village.

The village bell tolled nine times, startling her from her thoughts. Customers would be arriving soon. Mrs. Winslow would be expecting her valve, and Mr. Cooper needed his irrigation timer by midday.

She straightened her shoulders and picked up her wrench again. Whatever lay beyond the village would have to wait. For now, there was work to be done.

But as she bent over her bench, she couldn't help glancing once more towards the mountains, wondering what secrets they held and if she'd ever discover them for herself.

### CHAPTER 3

The stone beneath the beast's claws was cool, the late afternoon sun not quite reaching the shadowed ledge where he crouched. His massive body remained perfectly still, only his eyes moving as he watched the activity below.

Something had changed in the Vultor encampment, and the beast bristled at the unusual patterns, instinctively wary of change. Vultor moved with purpose, carrying items down the path to an open clearing. Some constructed a central pavilion with branches woven into intricate patterns. The scent of ceremonial herbs reached him.

A bonding ceremony. The knowledge came unbidden, as if someone else had placed it in his mind.

He shifted his weight, a low growl building in his chest. Two moons had passed since that sweet scent had pierced his consciousness, bringing flashes of... something else. Something that wasn't beast. Those moments had grown more frequent, more intrusive—painful fragments of thought breaking through the simpler existence of hunt and territory and survival.

Protect. Mine. Territory.

The concepts were clear enough to the beast. But other thoughts came now, unbidden and unwelcome.

Who am I? What happened to me?

Another memory surfaced—sharp-edged and disorienting. Standing before a mirror, adjusting ceremonial robes across broad shoulders. Slate-grey skin rather than fur. Hands with retractable claws instead of these permanent weapons. Pride in his reflection. Arrogance.

The memory shattered as quickly as it had formed, leaving him disoriented and angry. He dug his claws into the stone, gouging deep furrows as he fought the urge to howl his frustration.

As much as he'd tried to force himself deeper into the mountains, he'd remained in this area, moving between the Vultor enclave and the human village, watching, listening. Only a few weeks ago, he'd come to the aid of a human female. Her presence in Vultor territory confused him—why was a human here?—but when she was threatened, he'd brought her mate to her. He'd even brought an old healer to them.

Why had he done that? The beast had no answer, only the lingering echo of a thought: Not right. Protect.

The sun dipped lower, casting long shadows across the valley, and he rose to his full height, stretching muscles that had grown stiff from stillness. Time to hunt. Time to?—

A new scent caught his attention. Faint but familiar. He turned his head, nostrils flaring.

Not the sweet, enticing scent that had first awakened him, but something older. Something that tugged at deeper memories.

Without conscious decision, he abandoned his perch and moved through the trees at the edge of the encampment, following the scent. His big body blended with the



deepening shadows as he circled closer to the source.

Two female figures emerged from the trees ahead, walking along a narrow path that wound towards the clearing between the Vultur enclave and the human village. One young, one old. The younger female walked with a fluid grace, wrapped in a flowing blue green gown edged with silver embroidery. A bonding dress .

The elder's scent reached him first and triggered another flash of memory—a small woman with fierce eyes, speaking words he couldn't recall. Her scent was the one he had recognized—herbs and smoke. The healer. Agatha.

The younger female turned, laughing at something the older one had said, but her scent... there was none. Not human. Not Vultur. Nothing.

His beast-mind couldn't comprehend this absence, but something deeper recognized it as significant. He stared, transfixed, as they passed.

Mine?

He took an involuntary step forward, leaves crunching beneath his weight, but something else stirred in the depths of his mind. Not my female. Not the one whose scent had awakened him.

Agatha tilted her head at the sound, but didn't look in his direction as she sent the young female up the path. The younger female hesitated, then nodded and continued down the path, casting one worried glance over her shoulder before disappearing around a bend.

He remained motionless, fighting the urge to go after her. Even though she was not his female, something about her called to him—the gown, perhaps, or the way she held herself.

A memory flashed: another female in a similar gown, presented to him in a grand hall. He had rejected her with casual cruelty, dismissing her as unworthy.

The memory vanished, leaving only confusion in its wake. He took another step forward, drawn by the need to understand, and Agatha turned towards him, her eyes, sharp and knowing, scanning the shadows where he stood. For a moment, he thought she couldn't see him—but then her gaze locked with his, and recognition flickered across her features.

“Come out,” she said quietly. “I know you’re there.”

He hesitated, then stepped forward. The last rays of sunlight caught his fur, turning the dark-grey to burnished silver along his arms, but she showed no fear, only a deep sadness.

“Malrik.”

His name. Spoken aloud, it unlocked something—a cascade of fractured memories. A noble house. A betrayal. Pride before a fall.

The beast—Malrik—moved closer, drawn by the sound of his name on familiar lips.

“Agatha,” he growled, the word rough and malformed in his beast throat.

“You remember.”

Did he? Fragments only. This woman. Warnings unheeded. Something about a curse. He growled low in his throat and took another step forward. His gaze followed the path where the younger female had disappeared, and he made a questioning sound.

Agatha shook her head. “No, Malrik. She is not for you.”

He growled again, taking another step towards the path, but Agatha stepped in front of him, her small body somehow blocking his way.

“She is not yours,” she repeated, her voice gentler now. “The one you seek is elsewhere.”

Confusion gave way to rage—hot and sudden. The beast reared up to his full height, towering over her, but she didn’t retreat, just studied him with knowing eyes.

“Your anger changes nothing,” she said firmly. “You made your choice long ago, when you let your pride consume you.” Her voice softened. “But there may yet be hope for you, if you can find your way back.”

He snarled, frustrated by words he half-understood and memories that slipped through his grasp like water. Something about her words struck deep—a truth he didn’t want to acknowledge.

Lost. Alone. Cursed.

The words echoed in his mind, bringing with them a wave of grief and rage so intense that his vision blurred. He threw back his head and howled, a sound of such raw anguish that birds exploded from nearby trees in panicked flight.

When the sound died away, he found Agatha still standing before him, a single tear glistening on her cheek.

“Go home, Malrik,” she whispered. “Wait. Your time will come.”

But the beast had taken control again, driven by a pain it couldn’t understand. With another snarl, he turned and crashed back into the forest, running blindly through the gathering darkness, trying to outpace the grief that followed like a shadow.

Trees whipped past, branches tearing at his fur. He ran until his lungs burned and his muscles screamed for rest, but still he pushed on, driven by an agony that had no name.

Only when the moon had risen high above the mountains did he finally slow, his chest heaving with exertion. He must have circled back because he found himself in front of a familiar building—the overgrown remains of what had once been his home. The keep rose against the starlit sky, its towers like accusing fingers pointing toward the heavens.

Something about it both repelled him and called to him. A sanctuary and a prison.

With a last mournful howl that echoed across the valley, he padded towards the ruins, disappearing into the shadows of what had once been his domain.

### CHAPTER 4

B ella cursed as her wrench slipped, skinning her knuckles against the sharp edge of the generator housing. She sucked at the beads of blood, tasting metal and frustration.

“Come on, you stubborn piece of junk,” she muttered, wiping her hand on her already stained coveralls.

The small generator had been giving her trouble all morning. Normally, she’d lose herself in the work, finding peace in the logical puzzles of gears and circuits. But today, her mind kept wandering to the mountains.

Papa should have been back three days ago.

She set down her wrench and rubbed her eyes, leaving a smudge of grease across her cheek. The annual fair only lasted two days. Even if he’d stayed for the entire event and taken his time on the return journey, he should have made it back by now.

The workshop felt too quiet without him. No humming as he tinkered with inventions, no gentle teasing about her single-minded focus when she worked, no discussions of their latest projects over shared meals.

“Maybe the wagon broke down,” she said to the empty room. “Or he sold everything and decided to stay an extra day to celebrate.”

The excuses sounded hollow even to her own ears.

She paced restlessly to the front window, scanning the road that led to the village center. A few villagers milled about, going about their daily business. Mrs. Holden and her daughter carried baskets from the market. Two farmers whose names she couldn't remember paused their conversation to stare at her workshop before continuing on their way, heads bent close together.

Her lips thinned. The village had been buzzing with tension since the bonding ceremony between Korrin and Tessa. The negotiations with the Vultor had stalled afterward, and rumors spread faster than wildfire. Some claimed the Vultor had shown their true nature during the ceremony, others insisted they'd been insulted by some human misstep.

She hadn't been there. She'd intended to go—she'd even pulled out her one good dress—but something had stopped her. Maybe it was the thought of all the stares and whispers from the other villagers at seeing her in a dress. Or maybe it was simply that witnessing her friend's happiness would only make her own loneliness more acute. Instead she'd sat in her darkened room and watched the villagers stream by, full of excited chatter.

Whatever the truth about what had happened there, the timing couldn't be worse. If she mentioned her father had gone through Vultor territory and hadn't returned, it would only fuel the fire.

I have to go after him.

The only problem was the route. She gave the crude map she'd made of the region a worried look. Her father had taken the detailed one he'd found with him, but she'd sketched out what she remembered. Unfortunately the area where the road entered the mountains and which pass it took remained frustratingly vague.

"I should have gone with him," she said, tracing the line of the road with her fingertip

until it disappeared into the blank space representing the mountains. She'd never traveled that way herself, and asking around would only raise questions she didn't want to answer.

She paced the workshop, her boots scuffing against the worn floorboards. In addition to the generator, a pile of half-finished projects cluttered her workbench—repairs for villagers that would have to wait. The copper wings of the small mechanical bird gleamed in the sunlight.

“What would you do, Papa?” she whispered.

Movement outside caught her attention. Peering through the window, she spotted a small, silver-haired figure making her way down the village path. Agatha Ashworth, her back straight despite her years, a basket over one arm.

Her pulse quickened as an idea struck her. Agatha had lived in the village longer than anyone else, and unlike most humans, she seemed comfortable around the Vultor. More than once, Bella had spotted her in conversation with one of them during the negotiations, speaking with an ease that suggested familiarity.

She wiped her hands on a rag and hurried to the door.

“Mrs. Ashworth!” she called, stepping onto the porch. “Could I trouble you for a moment?”

Agatha paused, sharp brown eyes assessing Bella with unsettling directness before her face softened into a smile. “Bella. It's been some time since we've spoken.”

“I was wondering if you might come in for tea,” she said awkwardly. She rarely entertained visitors, and domestic skills had never been her strong suit.

“Tea would be welcome after my journey. Lead the way, child,” Agatha replied, climbing the steps with surprising agility for her age. “And you can tell me what’s troubling you.”

She blinked. “How did you?—”

“You have grease on your face, dear,” Agatha interrupted gently. “And you’re fidgeting with your hands. You only do that when you’re worried.”

Heat filled her cheeks as she led the older woman back into the workshop and hurriedly cleared space on a small table tucked in the corner. “I didn’t realize I was so transparent.”

Agatha smiled as she placed her basket on the table. “Only to those who pay attention.”

She set water to boil, conscious of the old woman’s assessing gaze taking in the organized chaos of the workshop.

“You keep a tidy shop,” Agatha added, settling into the chair Bella offered. “Your father trained you well.”

“He did,” she agreed, fishing out the least-chipped mugs she could find. “Though I’m afraid housekeeping isn’t my strong suit.”

“Overrated skill,” Agatha said with a dismissive wave. “My late husband always said a clean floor never fixed a broken wheel.”

She smiled despite her worries. She’d always liked Agatha, though they’d rarely spoken at length. The old woman had a reputation for speaking her mind regardless of who might be offended—a quality she respected.



“I’m afraid I don’t have any proper snacks to offer,” she admitted.

Agatha waved away her concern. “I’ve just come from the baker’s. I have more than enough to share.” She pulled a cloth-wrapped bundle from her basket and revealed several fresh pastries. Bella smiled at her but shook her head. Her stomach was too uneasy for food.

“Now, tell me what’s on your mind while the water boils,” Agatha continued.

She hesitated, measuring her words carefully. “My father went to the northern fair to sell some of our inventions.”

“Through the mountains,” Agatha stated rather than asked.

“Yes. He’d traded for a box of books from one of the passing traders this spring. One of the books claimed to be a history of Cresca, although it read more like a fairy tale. But it contained a map of this area, and the map showed the road through the mountains. When we heard that the mayor was negotiating a trade route through the mountains, he was sure she was referring to that old road.”

Agatha snorted. “That woman is blinded by her own greed.”

She couldn’t argue, but it didn’t help her immediate concern.

“Papa decided to use the road, but he should have been back by now.” She twisted her fingers. “I’m worried something might have happened to him on the journey.”

“And you’re planning to go after him.”

The old woman’s perceptiveness didn’t surprise her. “I am. The problem is that he took the map with him. I know the general direction, but…”

“But the mountains are treacherous for those who don’t know the way,” Agatha finished. The kettle whistled, and Bella poured the hot water into the cups.

“I was hoping you might know the path since you’ve lived here longer than anyone else,” she said, setting a steaming cup in front of Agatha. “And even though it goes through Vultor territory, I don’t think that would bother you.”

Agatha’s eyes narrowed slightly. “What makes you say that?”

“Well your granddaughter has a Vultor mate now, but it’s more than that. I’ve seen you talking with the Vultor during the negotiations and it’s not just polite conversation—you talk to them as if you know them.”

“We’ve had... encounters over the years.”

She leaned forward eagerly. “Then you do know the way?”

“I know many things about those mountains,” Agatha said slowly. “Including that they’re dangerous, especially now.”

“I don’t have a choice. My father?—”

“Might be perfectly fine, child. The wagon could have broken down. The fair might have run longer than expected.”

“Or he could be hurt, or lost. Please, Mrs. Ashworth. I need to find him.”

Agatha sipped her tea, considering. “I know the road,” she said finally. “Though I haven’t traveled it myself in many years.”

“Could you tell me how to find it?”

“I could, but are you certain this is wise? The mountains are treacherous even in good weather. And with the negotiations stalled...”

“I have to find him,” she said simply. “He’s all I have.”

Agatha studied her for a long moment, then nodded as if coming to a decision. “Very well. Go past my cottage to where the eastern road crosses the river but instead of going over the bridge and continuing down the road, follow the river back into the mountains. Turn east where the river forks. There’s a stone marker there—can’t miss it. The road climbs from there, winding up to Raven’s Pass.”

She quickly pulled out her crude map, sketching as Agatha spoke.

“On the other side of the pass, the road descends through a dense forest before reaching the northern valley.” Agatha paused. “But there’s something you should know. The road passes close to an old keep—abandoned now, but once the home of a Vultor noble family.”

“Abandoned?” She looked up from her map and frowned at the old woman. “Is it dangerous?”

“The stones themselves? No more than any crumbling structure. But the place has a reputation. Some say it’s haunted.”

She couldn’t help a small smile. “By ghosts?”

“By something,” Agatha said, her tone unexpectedly serious. “Even the Vultor give it a wide berth.”

Her heart skipped a beat. “You think my father might have run into trouble there?”

“I think,” Agatha said carefully, “that if your father strayed from the main path for any reason, that area would be... unpredictable.”

A chill ran down her spine despite the warm tea in her hands. She wasn’t superstitious by nature—mechanical problems had logical solutions—but Agatha’s warning carried weight.

“I still have to go,” she said firmly as she set down her mug.

Agatha sighed and withdrew a small object from her pocket, placing it on the table between them. It was a compass, its brass case tarnished with age but the needle still swinging true. “In that case, take this with you. It belonged to my husband.”

“Mrs. Ashworth, I couldn’t?—”

“You can and you will,” Agatha said firmly. “The mountains can disorient even experienced travelers. This compass has never failed.”

Hesitantly, she picked up the compass. It was heavier than it looked, the brass warm from Agatha’s pocket. “Thank you. I’ll return it when I come back.”

“See that you do,” Agatha said, rising from her chair. “And Bella?”

“Yes?”

“If you encounter any Vultor, remember they’re people, not monsters. Speak clearly, meet their eyes, and show no fear. Fear is what they smell first.”

She nodded, tucking the compass carefully into her pocket. “I’ll remember.”

Agatha moved toward the door, then paused.

“One last thing. The keep I mentioned—it stands on a ridge overlooking the river. Be particularly cautious as you pass. The one who dwells there is... not as he once was.”

Before Bella could ask what she meant, Agatha continued: “Follow the main path. Look for your father along the way. But if you must approach the keep, do so in daylight, and make your presence known before you enter.”

She frowned at the old woman. “You speak as if someone still lives there, but I thought you said it was abandoned.”

“An abandoned building can still be inhabited,” Agatha replied cryptically as she stood. “Safe journey, Bella. I hope you find what you seek.”

Picking up her basket, Agatha walked briskly to the door, then paused on the threshold. “One last thing. If you find yourself at the keep, remember that appearances can deceive. Not all monsters are what they seem.”

Then Agatha was gone, leaving behind only the lingering scent of herbs and the echo of her cryptic warning. The old woman knew more than she was saying—that much was clear. But she’d given her directions, and for now, that would have to be enough.

She took a quick look at the clock and sighed. It was already past midday, but although it might have been wiser to wait and set out in the morning, her increasing feeling of urgency wouldn’t permit it.

“Hold on, Papa,” she murmured as she began to gather supplies for the journey ahead. “I’m coming to find you.”

### CHAPTER 5

The beast paced the cold stone floors of the keep, his claws scraping against the smooth flagstones. Rain lashed against the high windows, the storm's fury matching the turmoil in his fragmented mind. Lightning flashed, illuminating the grand hall for brief moments—revealing crumbling tapestries, overturned furniture, and the wreckage of what had once been a noble home.

My home.

The thought came unbidden, a flash of clarity in the beast's chaotic consciousness. This place belonged to him, yet he couldn't recall why. Images flickered through his mind: banners hanging from these walls, voices echoing in these halls, laughter, argument, pride.

Pride. The word resonated, triggering a fresh wave of pain behind his eyes. He snarled, shaking his head in a vain attempt to dislodge the memory.

Thunder boomed, distracting him. The storm had blown in suddenly, battering the mountains with unexpected fury. It was during this tempest that the human male had arrived, driving through the gates in a motorized wagon that sputtered and died in the courtyard.

A male who carried her scent.

The memory of that first moment sent a growl rumbling through his chest. His beast had emerged fully then, raging at the intruder who dared to carry the scent of his

female. He'd dragged the struggling human to one of the towers, locking him behind a door with functioning tech—one of the few systems that still worked in the decaying keep.

Three days had passed since then. He had provided water, had even dragged a freshly killed grazing animal to the male's cell, but the male had refused to eat it. Instead, he shouted demands and pleas that stirred uncomfortable fragments of memory.

Lightning flashed again, and in that instant, he caught his reflection in a shattered mirror mounted on the wall—massive shoulders hunched, fangs gleaming in the dim light, yellow eyes glowing with an unnatural fire. The sight triggered another memory—of looking into a different mirror and seeing a different face. A face with smooth grey skin instead of fur, and sharp aristocratic features instead of a snarling muzzle.

Malrik.

The thought formed with surprising clarity, and he pressed a clawed hand against the wall, steadying himself as the realization washed over him. He had been Malrik. He had been a warrior, a leader, a prince among his people.

Now he was... this.

A growl rumbled from deep in his chest, and he slashed at the mirror, sending the remaining fragments scattering across the stone floor. The brief moment of clarity receded, leaving him caught between two worlds, two minds.

The human in the tower was connected to her. He didn't understand how he knew this, but the certainty drove him to keep the human alive despite his initial instinct to eliminate any male who might be a rival.

Thunder crashed overhead, and he moved to one of the arched windows. It was barely past noon, but the cloud cover was so dense that it could have been evening. Rain streamed down the cracked glass as he gazed out at the dark forest surrounding his keep. His territory. His prison.

The wind shifted, and something new caught his attention—a scent carried on the damp air. Fresh, sweet, distinctive.

Her.

His nostrils flared, his muscles tensing. It was impossible. Yet there it was again, stronger now. The scent that had haunted him for the past two months.

His beast surged forward, eager to claim, to possess, but the rational part of him—the part that had been emerging more frequently since catching her scent that first time—held him back. Instead of charging towards her, he melted into the shadows, moving silently through hidden passages until he reached the main courtyard. He pressed himself back into a shadowed alcove as he watched the entrance. Minutes passed, marked only by the storm's rhythm and the pounding of his heart.

The massive wooden doors that opened into the courtyard hung askew on rusted hinges. Rain and wind swirled through the opening, but with them came that scent—unmistakable now.

She was here.

From his concealed position, he watched her slip through the doors. She was smaller than he remembered, but her drenched clothes clung to her soft curves. Lightning flashed, illuminating her face for an instant—round cheeks, determined jaw, intelligent eyes scanning the shadows of the courtyard.



“Hello?” she called, her voice steady despite the tremor in her hands. The same soft musical voice that had haunted his dreams. “Is anyone here? I’m looking for my father.”

Father. The word connected in his mind. The male in the tower—he was her father. Not a rival. Relief flooded him.

When she spotted the wagon, she froze. Recognition flashed across her face, followed immediately by horror.

“Papa!” she gasped, rushing towards the vehicle. Fear sharpened her scent when she found no sign of the male. She spun around, scanning the shadows with increasing desperation. “Papa! Can you hear me?”

He watched as she traced her father’s path, following footprints in the mud to the keep’s entrance. She moved cautiously but without hesitation, determination overriding her obvious fear. Her courage stirred something in him—admiration, respect.

She disappeared inside, and he followed, keeping to the shadows as she searched room after room. Her calls grew more desperate with each empty chamber. Finally, a sound from above caught her attention—the weak cry that his sensitive ears had been hearing for days.

When she discovered the stairs leading to the east tower, her pace quickened. He tensed, knowing what she would find. Part of him wanted to reveal himself, to explain, but the words wouldn’t form. The beast still held too much control.

She climbed the winding stairs, calling for her father with increasing volume. Halfway up, a male voice responded—weak but unmistakable.

“Bella? Bella, is that you?”

“Papa!” She raced up the remaining stairs, her footsteps echoing against the stone walls.

Bella. The name resonated in his mind like the toll of a distant bell. Bella. The female had a name now, and somehow that made her more real, more dangerous to the fragile balance within him.

He followed her up the stairs, moving with preternatural quiet despite his size. At the top, he watched as she discovered the heavy wooden door that imprisoned her father.

“Papa? Are you in there?” Her hands pressed against the wood as if she could reach through it by sheer force of will.

“Bella?” The male’s voice was weak and hoarse. “Bella, get away from here! There’s a monster?—”

“I don’t care. I’m not leaving without you.”

She found the electronic lock and started examining it, her fingers probing the mechanism before reaching for one of the small tools at her waist

“Bella, you need to leave. Now,” the male said urgently. “There’s something here—some kind of monster. It brought me here three days ago.”

“I’m getting you out,” she said, already working on bypassing the lock. “Just hold on.”

“You don’t understand. It’s not a normal animal. It’s—” The male broke off, his voice dropping to a whisper. “It’s one of them. A Vultor. But wrong somehow.

Cursed.”

He flinched at the word. Cursed. Yes, that was the right word for what had happened to him. Memories threatened to surface—a woman’s voice warning him, his own arrogant dismissal—but he pushed them away. Now was not the time.

He watched her slender fingers move over the control panel, impressed despite himself at her skill with the technology. She was close to solving it when something in him rebelled at the thought of losing her—a surge of the beast’s territorial instinct mixed with a deeper, more rational fear. He couldn’t let her take the male. Not yet. Not until he understood why her presence affected him so strongly.

“Stop.” The word emerged as a growl, echoing through the corridor.

She whirled, eyes wide, searching the shadows where he stood concealed, but her hands remained defiantly on the lock.

“Who’s there?” she demanded, voice steady despite the fear he could smell on her. “Show yourself.”

He remained hidden, watching as she turned back to the lock, working even faster now.

“Stop.” His voice was deeper this time, more commanding. When she continued, he stepped partially from the shadows, not enough to reveal his features but enough to let her glimpse his size. “He stays.”

### CHAPTER 6

B ella scanned the shadows, desperately trying to make out the figure behind the voice but all she could see was a pair of glowing yellow eyes. Based on their position high above her head, he must be over seven feet tall. Her father had said there was a monster, and Agatha had warned her about one as well, but Agatha had also said that appearances could be deceptive.

“Let my father go. He’s done nothing to you.” Her voice came out remarkably calm even though her knees were shaking. She was cold and tired and wet, but the storm hadn’t prevented her from finding her father and neither would this mysterious male.

The rain had reached her almost as soon as she turned off the main road to follow the river, but she’d refused to turn back and she’d managed to reach the stone marker before it grew too dark to continue. She’d spent a miserable, sleepless night huddled under the doubtful protection of a thick evergreen bush and set out again as soon as it was light enough to see. Even though it was overgrown, the road leading up to the pass was wider and smoother than she’d expected and she’d made good time until she reached the keep Agatha had mentioned.

The word keep had conjured up the image of something square and fortified, but the elegant lines of the huge building sprawled along the ridge above the road were clear, despite the vines beginning to enshroud it. Huge arched windows and steep roof lines gave it an unexpected grace and argued a level of building skill that was rarely seen outside Port Cantor.

Despite her curiosity, she would have passed it by if she hadn’t seen what might have

been faint wagon tracks in the wide path leading up to the broken gates. The ground was so soggy it was hard to tell, but her instincts had urged her to follow them. Her instincts had been right—her father was here, locked away by the huge male lurking in the shadows.

Inside the room, her father called out frantically, “Bella! Run!”

But she didn’t run. She stood her ground, letting one hand move slowly to the knife at her belt. A laughably inadequate weapon against someone of his size but it was all she had.

“Please let him go,” she said, quietly. “He’s all I have.”

He shifted restlessly, but then she thought he shook his head.

“No.”

“Why are you keeping him here?” she asked, her hand still on the knife. “He was just passing through.”

Behind the door, her father had fallen silent. She prayed it was only because he was listening to their exchange. The weakness in his voice worried her.

“Mine,” the monster growled.

She frowned at him, trying to figure out what he meant. “Your what?”

“Territory,” he finally added.

“This keep is your territory?” she asked, understanding dawning. “Then I’m sorry we’re trespassing. I’m sure my father just needed shelter. We’ll leave as soon as I

release him.”

She turned back to the lock, fingers flying over the controls with increased urgency. The tech behind it was surprisingly sophisticated but she was sure she could override it.

“No.”

His voice sounded closer and she whirled around, placing herself between him and the door, arms spread wide. She still couldn’t see much other than his outline as those glowing yellow eyes focused on her face.

“You’ll have to go through me to get to him,” she said firmly.

“No harm,” he said, his voice less guttural than before.

“If you mean that, then let him go,” she said, but he shook his massive head.

“No. Payment.”

“Payment? You mean for trespassing” She frowned up at him. “What kind of payment?”

He gestured around them at the crumbling keep. “This place... broken. Tech fails. You fix.”

She followed the gesture, taking in the deteriorating structure with new understanding. “You want me to repair your keep?”

He nodded.

“If I fix your tech, you’ll let my father go?”

“Yes.”

A weak protest came from behind the door. “Bella, no! Don’t trust it?—”

“Him,” she corrected automatically, still focused on the huge figure in front of her. “I think he’s a Vultor.”

“All the more reason to run!” her father called. “The Vultor are dangerous!”

The male growled low in his throat, but the sound held no real threat.

“I’ll make you a deal,” she said. “I’ll fix your tech if you let my father go now.”

“No,” he growled. “Fix first.”

“Let me see him,” she demanded. “I need to know he’s unharmed.”

He hesitated, then she caught a flash of claws as he waved a hand. Taking the gesture as acquiescence, she turned back to the lock and this time he didn’t object. She manipulated the controls again and the lock mechanism finally yielded, the door swinging open to reveal a circular chamber beyond.

She stood frozen at the threshold for a moment, her eyes struggling to adjust to the dim light. The air hung heavy with dampness and decay, yet beneath it all was a faint electrical hum—the unmistakable signature of powered tech.

“Papa?” she called, her voice echoing against stone walls.

A weak cough answered from the shadows.

She rushed forward, nearly tripping over fallen debris. Her father sat huddled in a corner, his clothes still damp, face pale in the meager light filtering through a narrow window. A thin blanket—little more than a rag—was wrapped around his shoulders.

“What are you doing here?” he wheezed, attempting to stand but falling back with a grimace. “You shouldn’t have come.”

“Did you think I’d just sit at home when you didn’t return?” She knelt beside him, pressing her palm to his forehead. He was burning up. “You’re sick.”

“It’s nothing.” He tried to wave her concern away, but another coughing fit doubled him over.

She put her arm around his shoulders as she scanned the room, taking in details her panic had initially obscured. Despite its dilapidated state, this was no ordinary ruin. An occasional light blinked on a faded control panel next to the door. Conduits ran along the ceiling, disappearing into the stonework. The tech might be old, but it was far more sophisticated than anything she’d seen since they left the city.

“We need to get you home.” She helped him to his feet, supporting his weight as they shuffled towards the door. He felt impossibly fragile beneath her hands. “The wagon’s still outside?—”

A low growl stopped her mid-sentence, reverberating through the chamber like distant thunder.

“No.”

“My father is sick,” she insisted. “He needs medicine, warmth. If you keep him here, he might die. Then what good is your bargain?”



She gave the male still swathed in shadow a pleading look.

“You stay,” he finally said. “Fix tech. Father goes.”

Hope flickered in her chest. “You’ll let him go if I promise to stay and make repairs?”

He nodded, then added with a growl, “Mine until fixed.”

“Bella, you can’t trust this... this thing,” her father wheezed. “It’s a trap.”

But she was already considering the proposal. Her father wouldn’t survive much longer without proper care. And this place—a fortress filled with advanced technology—was an opportunity she’d never imagined possible. The tech alone could advance her understanding by decades.

“How do I know you’ll keep your word?” she asked the Vultor.

“Vultor... honor,” he said, the words clearly difficult. “Promise.”

She studied those inhuman eyes, searching for deception. Despite her fear, she sensed no malice—only a strange, desperate intensity. She took a deep breath and nodded.

“Deal. But I won’t be locked up. I need freedom to move around, to assess what needs fixing.”

To her surprise, he didn’t argue.

“Agreed.”

“Bella, no!” Her father’s voice was stronger this time, but she suspected it was from

fear rather than because he was regaining his strength. “You can’t stay with this... this...”

“I’ll be fine, Papa,” she said, turning to the door. “He needs help with repairs, that’s all. I’ll come home when the work is done.”

Her father’s gaze fixed on the monster in the shadows with undisguised terror. “Bella, please?—”

“I made a deal,” she said firmly. “You’re going home to get better. I’ll be fine.”

Her father tried to protest again, but a fit of coughing overtook him. She put his arm around her shoulders and helped him down the stairs, somehow managing to support his weight. She knew the Vultor was following them, but he remained out of sight.

Thankfully the rain had stopped by the time they reached the courtyard and the sky had started to lighten. She helped her father into the wagon and wrapped the thermal blanket around him. The thin silver sheets were surprisingly effective and his shivering immediately began to slow. He slumped down in the seat, clutching the blanket around him while she bent over the engine compartment. A wire had come loose but she couldn’t find any other damage. As soon as she repaired the connection, the engine hummed to life, lights flickering across the dashboard as the autopilot engaged.

She adjusted the navigation system, then wrote a quick note and tucked it into her father’s pocket.

“I’ve programmed the wagon to take you to Agatha’s,” she explained. “She’ll know what to do for you.”

“I can’t leave you here,” he argued weakly.

“Yes, you can,” she said, kissing his forehead. “I promised to fix some tech, that’s all. I’ll be home before you know it.”

With a final adjustment to the wagon’s controls, she stepped back. The wagon lurched and began to move, carrying her protesting father out of the courtyard and down the mountainside toward the village.

She bit her lip as she watched the wagon leave, praying she was doing the right thing.

Agatha will help him , she told herself firmly, then turned to face her captor. He was standing in the doorway, his massive form silhouetted against the dim interior light, and her breath caught. She still couldn’t make out his features but his size alone was terrifying.

“Well,” she said, squaring her shoulders and pushing down her fear. “Show me what needs fixing.”

The beast regarded her for a long moment, then stepped back into the shadows to let her pass. As she moved past him into the entrance hall, she caught a hint of his scent—wild and musky but layered with the clean scent of the evergreens that climbed the mountainside.

Inside, she took a proper look at her surroundings for the first time. The entrance hall stretched upward into darkness, its ceiling lost in shadow. Corridors branched off in multiple directions, and everywhere were signs of once-great technology fallen into disrepair. Lights flickered erratically, and somewhere deep in the structure, machinery groaned in protest.

“This place is incredible,” she breathed, professional curiosity momentarily overshadowing her fear.

The Vultor made a sound—not quite a growl, almost a huff. “Broken.”

“Yes, but fixable.” She approached a nearby control panel, fingers hovering over its surface. “I’ll need tools, materials. And I need to understand the systems before I start tearing into anything.”

An arm emerged from the shadows—a huge, muscular arm covered with dark silver fur—and pointed down one of the corridors.

As she walked deeper into the fortress, she felt a strange mix of terror and exhilaration. She was essentially a prisoner, yet surrounded by technology beyond her wildest dreams. And her captor—this terrifying Vultor—seemed less interested in harming her than in securing her expertise.

The hairs on the back of her neck prickled and she knew he was following her, even though he made no sound. She came to an abrupt stop and turned around in time to catch another glimpse of fur before he drew back into the shadows.

“Do you have a name?” she asked, the question escaping before she could consider its wisdom.

There was a long moment of silence and she was about to give up when he finally spoke.

“Mal...rik,” he growled, the name emerging as if from very far away.

“Malrik,” she repeated. “I’m Bella.”

As she resumed her exploration, she couldn’t shake the feeling that there was more to her situation than a simple bargain. The way Malrik had hesitated over his own name, the strange intensity with which he watched her... Something deeper was at play

here.

But for now, she had a job to do. Her father was safely on his way to Agatha, and she had ancient technology to explore. Whatever game Malrik was playing, she would deal with it as it came.

After all, she thought with grim determination, she'd made a bargain with a beast. And she intended to see it through.

### CHAPTER 7

M alrik followed Bella, watching from the shadows as she moved through his domain. The beast in him purred with satisfaction at her presence. Her scent filled the empty halls, marking them as occupied once more. She belonged here with him in his territory—the bargain had been struck—but his emerging rational side felt a prickle of unease.

What had he done? Trapped a female here? The thought disturbed the Vultur part of him that struggled toward consciousness.

The beast growled. Mine. Here. Safe .

He kept his distance as she explored, moving silently through hidden passages and darkened corners. The massive claws that tipped his paws made no sound on the stone floors. Years of hunting had taught him to be silent, even in this monstrous form.

The rational part of him wondered why he didn't simply walk with her, show her what needed repair. But the beast was content to observe from a distance, to ensure she remained.

She stopped to study a control panel, her expression brightening as she studied its design. "This isn't like anything we have in the village," she murmured to herself. "The integration of organic components with the standard tech... fascinating."

Something stirred in him at her words. Pride? He had commanded this place be built

with the finest technology available, hadn't he? Yes... yes, that memory was clear now. Standing tall in his humanoid form, gesturing at plans spread across a table, demanding only the best.

"The other clans build simple dwellings that blend with the forest," a voice had argued. "This display of wealth and technology goes against our ways since settling on Cresca."

But he had dismissed those concerns. He was Malrik, son of the High Alpha. He would have a dwelling that showcased his status, that impressed any who visited.

The beast growled softly at the memory, unsettled by its clarity. These flashes had been coming ever since he caught her scent for the first time, but they have never been this vivid.

He pushed the memories aside as he followed her. The beast wanted to curl around her, to mark her with his scent. His rational side wanted to understand why she fascinated him so.

She found the main power junction and knelt before it, pulling tools from her belt. Her fingers moved with surprising confidence over circuits that had been dead for years. He tilted his head, watching as she muttered to herself.

"Primitive routing system, but the core architecture is solid. Just needs..." She twisted something, and a section of lights flickered weakly before dying again. "Almost. Not enough power distribution yet."

Another memory flashed through his mind—standing in this very corridor, towering over a cowering architect.

"Higher ceilings. More grandeur. I want every Vultor who enters to feel my power."

“But Lord Malrik, the others have chosen simpler dwellings. They say we should adapt to Cresca, not ? —”

“The others lack vision. Build it as I command.”

The memory vanished as quickly as it had come, leaving him disoriented. He flexed his claws, watching them extend and retract as he fought to hold onto the thought.

When she discovered the grand staircase—its sweeping curve designed to impress visitors as they ascended to the upper levels—another memory surfaced. He had commissioned artisans to carve the stone balustrades with scenes of Vultor history. The work had taken months, and he had paid handsomely for it.

“Such extravagance,” a voice had chided. “While your people struggle to establish themselves on this new world.”

His people. Yes, he had responsibilities to them, hadn’t he? Responsibilities he had neglected in favor of... what? The memory slipped away before he could grasp it.

She ran her hand along the intricate carvings, studying the scenes depicted. “These tell a story,” she said softly. “A journey... a war... and then coming here, to Cresca.”

She was clever, this human female.

“Someone had quite the ego,” she added, and he growled softly. Had he truly been so vain?

She continued her exploration, pushing open a set of massive double doors. They creaked in protest, but opened to reveal a vast, empty ballroom. Grey light streamed through tall windows, illuminating the inlaid floor and the remains of crystal chandeliers that had crashed to the ground long ago. Though many of the windows



were now cracked or broken, enough remained to showcase the breathtaking view. The wooden floor, once polished to a high shine, was now warped and stained from years of exposure to the elements.

She stepped inside, her footsteps echoing. “This is incredible.”

He hesitated at the threshold. This room held... something. Something he didn’t want to remember.

She walked to the center of the space, turning slowly to take it all in. “What was this place? Some kind of gathering hall?”

Females lined up before him, one after another. Each dressed in elaborate finery, each hoping to catch his eye. A succession of potential mates, brought to his fortress to be inspected, evaluated, chosen or rejected.

And he had rejected them all.

“You cannot continue this way, Malrik,” the voice—his advisor, his friend—had warned. “The elders grow impatient. You must choose a mate, strengthen the bloodlines.”

“None are worthy,” he had replied dismissively. “I will not bind myself to one who does not meet my standards.”

“Your standards or your pride? The curse ? —”

“Do not speak to me of superstitions! I am Malrik, son of ? —”

The memory fractured, slipping away before he could grasp its full meaning. Frustration boiled up inside him, and a growl rumbled from deep in his chest.

She spun around, peering into the shadows where he lurked.

“I know you’re there,” she said firmly. “Show yourself. If we’re going to be stuck together while I fix your tech, the least you can do is stop skulking around.”

He remained motionless. The beast wanted to retreat, to watch from safety. The rational side...

“I said show yourself.” She planted her hands on her hips. “I’m not afraid of you.”

She was lying. He could smell the sharp tang of fear beneath her bravado. But there was something else too—curiosity.

He stepped forward, allowing the dim light to illuminate his massive form. Eight feet of corded muscle and dark silver fur etched with scars. Fangs that could tear through flesh. Claws that could rend metal.

She inhaled sharply but held her ground.

“There. That wasn’t so hard, was it?” Her voice had the slightest tremor.

He tilted his head, studying her. Most humans would have fled screaming by now. She was... unusual.

“What is this place?” she asked, gesturing around the ballroom. “It’s not like any Vultor dwelling I’ve heard about. They usually prefer smaller spaces hidden amongst the trees.”

“Mine,” he growled, the word coming out harsh and guttural.

“Yes, I gathered that part.” She rolled her eyes. “But why so... elaborate? It’s like a

human palace from ancient Earth.”

Another memory flickered—the architect again, showing him designs based on historical human structures. He had been fascinated by them, and had insisted on incorporating elements that the other Vultor considered wasteful.

“Show... power,” he managed, the words feeling strange in his mouth.

She nodded slowly. “You wanted to impress people.”

He growled, not liking how accurately she’d assessed him.

Another memory surfaced—standing alone in this very room after all the guests had departed, staring out at the night sky, feeling... what? Not satisfaction. Not happiness. Something else. Something hollow.

“You surround yourself with beauty but remain empty inside,” that same voice had said from the doorway. “All this grandeur cannot fill the void where your heart should be.”

“Leave me,” he had commanded, not turning to face his friend. “I tire of your moralizing.”

“The elders say the curse finds those who ? —”

“Enough! I will hear no more of curses and prophecies. Go, before I forget our friendship entirely.”

Footsteps retreating. Then silence. Always, in the end, silence.

The memory faded, leaving him disoriented. The beast whined, confused by the

emotions the male experienced. Regret. Shame. Loneliness.

“Are you all right?” she asked, taking a step toward him.

He backed away instinctively.

“Yes,” he lied. Then, “No.”

She stopped, respecting his retreat.

“Let’s focus on what we can fix,” she suggested gently. “The power core first. I’ll need to understand how it works before I start making repairs.”

The practicality of her approach steadied him. This, at least, was simple. A problem to be solved, not a past to be unraveled.

The memory returned, stronger this time.

“The curse of the unmated...” His advisor’s voice echoed in his mind, warning him of something he’d refused to hear.

What curse? The thought slipped away, leaving only frustration in its wake. He growled again, louder this time.

She sighed and put her hands on her hips again.

“Listen, if we’re going to make this work, you need to use your words. Growling isn’t communication.” She took a step toward him, fearless now. “What do you want from me, exactly? You said fix the tech, but which systems? What’s the priority?”

He stared at her, caught between beast and rationality. What did he want? The beast

knew—it wanted her here, in his territory, her scent mingling with his. But the emerging Vultor wanted...

“Light,” he rumbled. “Heat.”

She nodded. “Basics first. That makes sense. The power distribution system needs work before we can get to anything fancy.” She glanced around the ballroom again. “Though I’d love to see this place lit up properly.”

An image flashed in his mind—the ballroom ablaze with light, music playing, the floor filled with dancers. Himself standing apart, watching, always apart.

She was still talking, making plans, listing the tools and equipment she’d need. Her confidence soothed something in him. She wasn’t cowering or fleeing. She was... helping.

“You’ll need to show me around properly,” she said. “I need to see the central power core, any backup generators, and the main junction boxes.”

He nodded, oddly pleased by her competence. He gestured toward the door, indicating she should precede him.

As they left the ballroom, he cast one last look over his shoulder. The memory of his advisor’s warning nagged at him, but the details remained frustratingly out of reach.

The curse of the unmated...

What had he forgotten? And why did it feel so important now, with this human female in his keep?

The beast didn’t care about the past. It lived in the now, and now, the female was

here. His territory felt right with her in it.

But as more of his rational side surfaced, he couldn't shake the feeling that he'd made this mistake before—letting pride rule him, rejecting what he needed most.

As they walked, the beast and the male warred within him. The beast wanted only to keep her in his territory, to guard her presence. The male wanted... what? To understand? To remember? To be free of this form that trapped him between worlds?

Or perhaps, most disturbing of all, to be seen as something more than a monster by the female who now walked these halls with him.

He watched as she examined everything with keen interest, her hands quick and sure as she tested connections and traced power lines.

Watching her work, he felt something he hadn't experienced in what must have been years—a sense of purpose. Of possibility. The fortress had been a prison of his own making, even before he lost himself to the beast. Now, with her presence, it felt different. Alive again, in a way it hadn't been since...

Since when?

The memory wouldn't come. But for the first time, that didn't fill him with rage or frustration. Instead, he felt a strange sort of patience. The answers would come, or they wouldn't. For now, it was enough to watch her plan to bring light back to his darkened halls.

For now, it was enough that she was here.

### CHAPTER 8

B ella looked up from the junction box she was studying to see Malrik standing over her. It was the first time he'd come this close to her and her heart hammered against her ribs, still shaken by his appearance.

He was huge and powerful, but his face was the most unsettling part—unmistakably wolf-like with a long muzzle and sharp fangs, yet with an unsettling intelligence in those glowing yellow eyes that no animal possessed.

He wasn't just some wild creature. He was a Vultor in full transformation.

She'd heard the stories all her life—whispered tales of the Vultor's ability to shift between forms—but most humans dismissed them as exaggerations or folklore. Even those who believed rarely saw the transformation. The Vultor kept to themselves, appearing in their more humanoid forms when they conducted business with the settlements.

“What's next on the tour?” She gestured to the crumbling grandeur around them. “This place is enormous, and I'm not wandering around blind.”

His massive head tilted slightly, as though surprised by her directness. A low rumble emerged from his chest, but it wasn't aggressive. After a moment, he turned and made a sweeping gesture with one clawed hand toward the doorway.

“I'll take that as a 'follow me,'” she muttered, falling into step behind him.

The keep was larger than it had appeared from outside, with high ceilings and wide corridors clearly designed for beings of Malrik's size. Everything was built on a grand scale—doorways twice the height necessary for humans, windows stretching from floor to ceiling, staircases with steps so deep she had to stretch her legs to climb them comfortably.

Yet despite the impressive architecture, the place felt hollow. Dust covered every surface, and the few pieces of furniture they passed were broken or decayed beyond recognition. Here and there, she spotted signs of violence—deep gouges in the walls, shattered remains of what might have been statues or decorative items.

They passed what must have been a dining hall, with a table long enough to seat twenty. Most of the chairs were broken, and the table itself was deeply scored with claw marks. A parlor contained the shredded remains of couches and the splintered frames of side tables. A study held a desk that had been split clean in two.

“Did you do all this?” she asked, gesturing at the destruction.

Malrik paused, looking back at her. His ears flattened against his head, and he gave a short nod.

“Bad day?” she quipped.

To her surprise, something like a snort escaped him—almost a laugh. He shook his massive head and continued walking.

“Not much of a talker, are you?” She sighed. “That’s fine. I can talk enough for both of us.”

As they moved deeper into the keep, she noticed the tech integration more clearly. What had appeared to be stone walls occasionally revealed seams of dark metal.



Panels that might once have glowed with information displays were now dull and lifeless. In one corridor, she spotted what looked like environmental controls, far more advanced than anything in her village.

“This is incredible,” she murmured, pausing to examine a panel. “We’ve got nothing like this back home. The mayor’s house has some basic tech, but this...” She whistled low. “This is something else.”

Malrik watched her with those unnerving eyes, something almost like pride flickering in their depths before he turned away.

As they turned down another corridor, he slowed, then came to a halt before a set of double doors, even larger and more ornate than the others they’d passed. After a moment’s hesitation, he pushed the doors open.

The room beyond was enormous, clearly a master chamber. A raised dais dominated one wall, supporting what had once been a massive bed frame. The frame itself was broken, the mattress long gone, but in its place was a nest of furs and fabrics—some looking quite new.

“This is where you sleep,” she said softly, not a question.

He rumbled in confirmation, watching her face.

She stepped further into the room, taking in the details. Unlike the other spaces they’d toured, this one showed signs of current use. The dust was disturbed in patterns that suggested regular movement. A few personal items were scattered about—a broken piece of armor hung on one wall, and what looked like a collection of interesting stones sat on a shelf.

The remains of a grand wardrobe stood against one wall, its doors hanging open to

reveal empty space. Nearby, a shattered mirror reflected her image in fractured pieces.

“It must have been beautiful once,” she said, turning slowly to take in the whole space.

He made a sound that might have been agreement or dismissal. He moved to a set of huge windows that looked out over the mountains, still remarkably intact, and stared into the distance.

Something about his posture struck her. Despite his fearsome appearance, there was a profound loneliness to him as he gazed out at the world beyond his crumbling domain. The intelligence in those eyes wasn’t just predatory calculation—there was something deeper there, something wounded.

A sudden thought struck her, and her stomach tightened with uncertainty. “Where am I supposed to sleep?”

He turned to face her, tilting his head again as if he didn’t understand the question.

“I mean, I need somewhere to sleep while I’m working on your tech,” she clarified. “I can’t exactly curl up on the floor.”

His gaze moved to the nest of furs, then back to her. He pointed a lethal looking claw at the furs.

“Oh no,” she said, taking a step back. “That’s your… your nest. I’ll need my own room.”

A low growl rumbled from his chest, and he shook his head firmly.

“Look, I agreed to fix your tech, not to share your bed,” she said, crossing her arms and glaring at him. “There must be other bedrooms in this place.”

His eyes flashed, and he took a step toward her, but she held her ground, even though her heart was racing. He leaned down until his face was level with hers, those glowing eyes boring into her.

“Safe,” he growled, the word clearly costing him effort. “With me.”

She blinked, surprised. “You’re worried about my safety?”

He hesitated, then nodded, gesturing around the keep with a sweeping motion of his arm.

“Dangerous,” he managed, the word guttural but clear.

She considered the idea. The keep was in ruins, with who knew what structural issues. There could be vermin, or worse things hiding in the dark corners. And she was in unknown territory, far from help if anything went wrong.

“All right,” she said finally. “But we’re going to set some ground rules. I’ll sleep in your... nest, but you keep your distance. Deal?”

He stared at her for a long moment, then gave a single, curt nod.

“Good. Now, how about showing me the rest of this place? I want to see what I’m working with before I can start fixing anything.”

Malrik turned and led her from the bedroom, continuing their tour through the massive keep. They passed through more grand rooms, all in similar states of disrepair—a music room with a shattered piano, a gallery with torn paintings, a

conservatory with broken glass and withered plants.

The scale of the place was overwhelming. It would take weeks, maybe months, to restore even the basic systems. And that was assuming she could figure out how Vultor technology worked.

As they walked, she found herself stealing glances at her bestial guide. Despite his fearsome appearance, there was something oddly compelling about him. The way he moved with such controlled power, the intelligence that shone in those glowing eyes, the glimpses of the person trapped inside the beast.

What had happened to him? And why was he alone in this crumbling monument to past glory?

She wasn't sure why she cared. She should be focusing on fixing the tech and getting back to her father. But something about Malrik's solitude called to her. She knew what it was like to be different, to be judged and found wanting by those around you.

Maybe that's why she'd agreed to stay. Not just for the chance to work with advanced tech, but because for the first time in her life, she'd met someone who might understand what it felt like to be an outsider.

As they continued their exploration of the vast, decaying keep, she found herself less afraid of the beast at her side and more curious about the male he might once have been—and might still be, somewhere beneath the fur and fangs.

### CHAPTER 9

As they continued their tour of the keep, Malrik kept thinking about having Bella in his nest. His beast purred with satisfaction at the idea. The thought of her scent mingling with his, of having her curled against him in sleep, sent a wave of possessive pleasure through him. His rational side recognized this feeling as dangerous, but the beast didn't care.

After they had explored most of the main rooms, he led her down a long corridor that opened into a different wing of the keep. This area felt unfamiliar to his beast, yet memory tugged at him—servants hurrying through these halls, the clatter of dishes, voices calling orders.

The kitchens were vast, designed to feed hundreds. Multiple hearths lined one wall, massive tables filled the center space, and rows of cabinets and storage areas stretched into shadowed corners. Everything lay under a thick blanket of dust.

She paused in the center of the main kitchen, running her finger through the dust that coated a large preparation table. She frowned, looking around at the abandoned space.

“What do you eat?” she asked, turning to face him.

The beast's mind flashed immediately to the hunt—the thrill of the chase, the hot satisfaction of tearing into fresh prey, the copper taste of blood. His mouth watered at the thought.

But then another image surfaced, unbidden. A grand hall filled with light. Himself, seated at the head of a long table, dressed in formal Vultor attire. Servants parading before him with elaborate dishes, each more extravagant than the last. His own hand, waving them away with disdain.

“Not enough spice,” he heard himself say. “Take it away. All of it.”

The memory was so vivid, so unexpected, that he shook his head violently, trying to dislodge it. His beast snarled in confusion and distress. These periods of rational thought were becoming more frequent since the female had arrived, but they brought discomfort with them—as though his mind was being stretched in two directions at once.

He looked at her—small, fragile by Vultor standards, yet fearless as she explored his territory. The thought of her going hungry disturbed both sides of him. His beast wanted to hunt for her, to provide, to prove his worth as a mate. The rational part that was surfacing wanted... something else. Something more.

With a grunt, he moved to one wall where a row of machines was built in. He tapped one with a claw, then gestured for her to look.

Her eyes widened with excitement. “Is this what I think it is?” She stepped closer, running her hands over the sleek panel on the front. “A replicator! I haven’t seen one of these since I was a little girl in Port Cantor.”

The word struck a chord of recognition. Replicator. Yes.

“POTTS,” he managed to growl, the word feeling strange in his mouth.

“Personal Organic Taste and Texture Synthesizer,” she agreed, looking at him with surprise. “You remember what it’s called?”

He nodded once, pleased at her reaction.

She pressed a button, but nothing happened. “No power,” she murmured, then looked at him expectantly. “Is there a control room?”

He turned and led her through a small door at the back of the kitchen into a narrow service corridor. At the end was a room filled with control panels, screens, and monitoring equipment. Unlike the other rooms, this room showed no signs of destruction—only the inevitable dust of neglect.

She moved immediately to the main console, her fingers hovering over the controls. Every label, every readout was in the Vultor language.

“This might take me a while,” she muttered, already examining connections and tracing power lines with her eyes. “I can figure out the basic systems, but the language barrier will slow things down.”

He watched her, his beast growing impatient. She needed to eat. He needed to provide. The thought of her working for hours without food bothered him deeply.

“Hunt,” he growled abruptly, the word tearing from his throat.

Before she could respond, he turned and loped away, moving swiftly through the keep and out into the forest beyond. The beast took over completely as he ran, instinct guiding him through familiar hunting grounds.

The forest welcomed him with its symphony of scents and sounds. He moved silently despite his size, tracking the movements of small game. Within minutes, he had located a warren of cottmas.

As he stalked his prey, his thoughts remained unusually clear. Usually, hunting drove

all conscious thought from his mind, leaving only predatory instinct. But now, images of Bella kept intruding—her smile when she recognized the replicator, the way her eyes lit up at the challenge of fixing it, the delicate curve of her neck as she bent over the control panel.

The distraction nearly cost him his quarry, but his reflexes were too fast. He caught two plump cottmas in quick succession, killing them cleanly with a swift bite.

Carrying his prizes, he made his way back to the keep. The rational part of him was growing stronger, bringing with it uncomfortable questions. What was he doing, bringing this human female into his territory? Why did her presence calm his beast while simultaneously awakening his dormant Vultor self?

And most troubling—what would happen when she finished the repairs and wanted to leave?

The beast snarled at that thought, rejecting it completely. She would not leave. She was his.

His... what? Not quite mate, not yet. But something. Something important.

He found her still in the control room, kneeling on the floor with her head inside an access panel. Tools and components were scattered around her, and she was humming softly to herself. The sound stirred something in him—a memory of music in the grand hall, perhaps.

He dropped the cottma at her feet, a primal offering of sustenance.

She pulled her head out of the panel, face smudged with dust and grease, and looked down at the dead animals. Her expression shifted from surprise to dismay.



“Oh,” she said, sitting back on her heels. “That’s... thoughtful. But I have no idea how to prepare them. I get my meat from the butcher in the village.”

He stared at her, uncomprehending for a moment. Then understanding dawned. Of course. She was a human from a settlement. She wouldn’t know how to dress game.

His beast growled in frustration, but his rational side was emerging more strongly now. He picked up one of the cottmas and with practiced movements, gutted it cleanly. He removed the heart—the most nutritious part—and offered it to her on the tip of his claw.

She paled visibly and waved it away. “No, no thank you.”

Another growl rumbled through him, deeper this time. Why would she refuse his offering? The heart was the best part, the most honorable gift a hunter could present.

But then another memory surfaced—humans cooked their meat. Civilized Vultor did as well, though many preferred it raw when in beast form.

He turned and stalked back to the main kitchen, his movements jerky with frustration. Behind him, he heard Bella scrambling to follow.

In the kitchen, he cleared the hearth with a sweep of his arm and quickly built a fire from the dry wood stacked nearby. As the flames caught, he cleaned the cottmas thoroughly, working with surprising dexterity despite his claws. He found a metal spit among the cooking implements and mounted the cottmas on it, positioning them over the fire.

The fat began to sizzle, droplets falling into the fire with sharp hisses. The scent of cooking meat filled the kitchen, rich and savory, and he became aware of his own hunger. He hadn’t eaten since the previous day, too distracted by Bella’s presence in

his territory to hunt for himself.

He sat back on his haunches, watching the meat brown. The fire's warmth penetrated his fur, soothing. For a moment, the constant war between beast and man subsided into something like peace.

Time passed. He rotated the spit occasionally, ensuring the meat cooked evenly. When the skin had crisped to a golden brown and the juices ran clear, he deemed it ready. He was removing the cottmas from the spit when he caught her scent again.

Her expression had shifted from dismay to fascination.

When the cottmas were done, he removed them from the fire. He placed one on a dusty but intact plate he found in a cabinet and offered it to her.

She approached cautiously, then broke into a delighted smile. "Thank you," she said, reaching out to take the plate. As she did, her fingers brushed against his hand.

The touch sent a shock of awareness through his entire body. It was like being struck by lightning—painful and exhilarating at once. His beast roared in his mind, but not in anger. In recognition. In need.

To his shock, he felt his claws retract slightly, his hand becoming more Vultur than beast for a brief moment.

Confused and alarmed by his body's response, he started to turn away. But her hand settled on his arm, small and warm.

"Won't you join me?" she asked, her voice soft. "It seems silly to eat alone when there's plenty for both of us."

The request struck him as oddly formal, triggering another memory. Himself, escorting a female to a table, pulling out her chair with courtly grace, the movements part of an elaborate social dance.

Without thinking, he guided her to the table. He pulled out a chair for her, the gesture automatic, born of muscle memory rather than conscious thought. He seated her carefully, then took his own place across from her.

The beast watched through his eyes, confused by these formal behaviors but willing to allow them as long as it meant staying close to her. His rational side felt a strange pride in remembering these courtesies, as though they connected him to something important he had lost.

As they ate in the firelit kitchen, Malrik found himself caught between two worlds—the primal existence of his beast and the civilized life he once knew. And for the first time since his transformation, he wasn't sure which one he preferred.

### CHAPTER 10

B ella watched Malrik from under her lashes, fascinated by the contrast between his ferocious appearance and his unexpected courtesies. He tore into his portion of rabbit with primitive fervor, those deadly claws making quick work of the meat, yet minutes earlier he'd pulled out her chair with a formal gesture that seemed ingrained rather than learned.

The firelight played across his features, highlighting the powerful curve of his jaw and the intensity in his eyes. His fur looked soft in this light, the dark silver taking on amber highlights. and she caught herself wondering what it would feel like beneath her fingers. Every so often, as she chatted about her progress with the repairs, his face seemed to flicker—a momentary shift towards something more humanoid before returning to beast form.

“I think I can get the main power conduits working tomorrow,” she said, keeping her tone cheerful and conversational. “The connections aren’t as damaged as I thought. Whoever designed this place built it to last.”

He grunted in response, but his eyes remained fixed on her.

“Did you design it?” she asked, remembering how he’d seemed to know every corner of the keep.

“Mine,” he growled, then paused as if searching for words. “Built for... me.”

“This entire place was built for you? It seems awfully big for one... person. All this

space, the grand rooms—you must have been important.”

He looked away, something like shame crossing his features.

“Pride,” he muttered, the word sounding rusty, as if it had been long unused.

How had someone so powerful and wealthy become the male he was today?

“Even with all the tech, you must have had an army of servants. Didn’t any of them stay?”

He paused mid-bite, yellow eyes flashing with something unreadable. A low rumble emanated from his chest before he repeated, “Mine.”

“I understood that part,” she said dryly. “When did you build it?”

His features seemed to flicker again before he answered.

“Long... ago,” he growled, then shook his massive head as if to clear it.

“It must have been magnificent,” she said softly, looking around at what remained of the grand kitchen. Even covered in dust and decay, the scale and craftsmanship were impressive. “I’d love to see it restored someday.”

Something in his posture shifted—a slight straightening of his shoulders, a lifting of his head. Pride, perhaps? But it vanished as quickly as it had appeared, replaced by the wary tension that seemed to be his default state.

“I’ve been thinking about what systems to prioritize,” she continued, sensing his discomfort with the previous topic. “Power is obviously critical, but we should also get the water filtration working properly. I noticed some of the pipes are corroded.”

He grunted in what she took for agreement.

“And maybe some basic communications? I don’t know if any of that infrastructure still exists, but?—”

“No,” he interrupted sharply. “No... signals. No others.”

She held up her hands in a placating gesture. “Okay, no communications. Got it.” She filed his reaction away for future consideration. Why was he so adamant about isolation?

As they continued eating, night fell completely outside the windows. The kitchen grew darker until the only illumination came from the hearth fire, casting everything in flickering orange light and deep shadow.

She squinted at her plate, barely able to make out what remained of her meal. “Do you have any candles? Or working lights? It’s getting hard to see in here.”

He shook his head, the firelight reflecting in his eyes like twin yellow flames. Of course, she realized. With those eyes, he probably had excellent night vision. She’d need to add lighting to her growing list of repairs.

She leaned back in her chair with a tired sigh. The day’s events were catching up with her—the worry about her father, the shock of finding him imprisoned, the bargain she’d struck, and the subsequent discoveries about her unusual host. Her muscles ached from both the journey and crawling around in the control room, and her skin felt gritty with dust and sweat.

“I don’t suppose you have a bath?” she joked, running a hand through her dust-streaked hair. “I must look a fright after crawling around those control panels.”

His eyes glowed as he studied her and she felt the warmth rising to her cheeks. Then to her surprise, he nodded and rose from his seat, gesturing for her to follow. He moved toward the doorway, his massive body blending with the shadows.

She stood and followed him, but as soon as they left the kitchen, she realized that the corridor ahead was pitch black. She could hear Malrik moving ahead of her, but she couldn't see a thing.

"Wait," she called. "I can't see in the dark like you can."

She didn't hear him return but she felt the heat radiating from that big body and reached out blindly. She found his arm and wrapped her fingers around his forearm. The fur there was as soft as she'd speculated, despite the hard muscle beneath. Something electric passed between them at the contact, and she felt a flutter in her stomach that had nothing to do with fear.

His muscles flexed beneath her hand, and he pulled away. Before she could apologize, his arm came around her shoulders instead, drawing her against his side with exquisite gentleness.

"I'll need you to lead me," she said, her voice sounding breathless even to her own ears.

His only response was to pull her closer, guiding her through the darkness. Despite his gentleness, she was overwhelmingly aware of his size and strength as they walked. His body radiated heat, and that wild masculine scent filled her senses.

They passed through several corridors, and she tried to memorize the turns, but soon lost track. Finally, they entered the room she recognized as his sleeping chamber, with the nest of furs on the raised dais. But instead of stopping, he guided her toward a doorway on the far side that she hadn't noticed before.

The room beyond was bathed in silvery light. Moonbeams streamed through tall windows, illuminating what could only be described as a bathing chamber fit for royalty. The centerpiece was an enormous sunken tub built into a window enclosure, allowing the bather to look out over the mountains while soaking. The stone surrounding it was veined with something that sparkled in the moonlight, and elaborate mosaics decorated the walls.

“This is beautiful,” she whispered, moving forward to examine the tub. It was carved from a single piece of stone, smooth and cool beneath her fingertips.

Feeling hopeful, she turned one of the ornate taps. For a moment nothing happened, then water began to flow—not the rusty trickle she’d expected, but a clear, steady stream of steaming hot water, filling the air with warmth and moisture.

“Hot springs,” he said, his voice surprisingly clear. “Piped through the walls.”

She blinked at him, startled by the relative eloquence of his words. His eyes seemed more focused, his posture less bestial. It was as though another personality had briefly surfaced through the feral exterior.

Before she could say anything, he turned abruptly and strode toward the door.

“Where are you going?”

He paused at the threshold but didn’t turn around. “Privacy,” he growled, the word sounding more strained than his previous speech.

With that, he disappeared into the darkened bedroom beyond, leaving her alone with the steaming bath and her confused thoughts.

She stood motionless for a moment, processing what had just happened. That brief



glimpse of... something else behind Malrik's eyes had unsettled her. There was more to him than the beast he appeared to be—she'd suspected as much from the beginning, but now she was certain.

The interaction had felt charged with something she couldn't quite name—something that made her heart beat faster and her skin tingle where he'd touched her.

She shook her head, trying to clear it. She was being ridiculous. He was a Vultor—a beast-form Vultor at that—and she was his... what? Prisoner? Guest? Repair technician?

Whatever she was, she should focus on the task at hand. And right now, that task was getting clean.

Shaking off her reverie, she investigated the rest of the bathing chamber. She found what appeared to be soap in a stone niche—ancient and dried out, but still recognizable. There were large cloths folded on shelves that might serve as towels, though they were dusty with disuse. She shook out a few and draped them over the ornate rack next to the tub.

Then she stripped off her muddy coveralls. Her skin prickled in the cool air as she tested the water with her toes. The perfect temperature. She slid into the tub with a sigh of pure pleasure. The hot water enveloped her, immediately easing the ache in her muscles. She ducked her head under, letting the water soak her hair and wash away the day's grime.

When she surfaced, she noticed a shelf of stone bottles near the tub. She reached for one and uncorked it, sniffing cautiously. The scent of something like lavender filled her nose. Bath oil, perhaps? She poured a small amount into the water and was rewarded with fragrant bubbles.

As she soaked, her thoughts kept returning to Malrik. Who had he been, before whatever tragedy had transformed him to his current state? And why did she feel such an inexplicable pull toward him, despite his fearsome appearance? Was it the way he looked at her sometimes, with a hunger that had nothing to do with food...

She sank deeper into the water, feeling her face grow hot. She was being foolish. Whatever Malrik was—beast, Vultor, or something in between—she was here to fix his keep and then return to her father. Nothing more.

What had happened to him? Even though the Vultor were rumored to shift between forms, she'd never heard of one being stuck in beast form. And this place—he'd said it was built for him. That suggested he had once been someone of importance, perhaps even wealth or nobility.

"Curiouser and curiouser," she murmured, echoing a line from one of her father's old storybooks.

Her father. Worry pierced through her momentary contentment. Had he made it to Agatha's cottage safely? Would Agatha understand her note and reassure him? She'd programmed the wagon's autopilot as best she could, but technology could be unpredictable, especially the older models.

She forced herself to take a deep breath. There was nothing she could do about it now. She'd made her choice, struck her bargain. All she could do was fulfill her end of it and hope her father was safe.

She poured more of the fragrant oil into her hand and started to scrub away all traces of her journey. Why had Malrik departed so abruptly. Had he left to give her privacy, as he'd claimed? Or had he been uncomfortable with their proximity? Perhaps both.

"Focus on the repairs," she told herself firmly. "That's why you're here. Fix what

needs fixing, fulfill your bargain, then go home.”

But as she sank deeper into the warm water, she couldn't shake the feeling that her task might be more complicated than she'd initially thought. There was more broken in this keep than just its technology.

And somewhere in the darkness beyond the door, a beast with a man's eyes was waiting.

When she was as clean as she could be, she reluctantly left the warmth of the tub. As she dried herself on one of the large cloth towels, she realized she had nothing clean to wear. Her coveralls were filthy, and she'd left her pack with her spare clothes in the kitchen.

A wardrobe stood against one wall, and she opened it hesitantly. Inside hung several garments that must have belonged to Malrik in his more humanoid form. She selected what appeared to be a robe, enormous by her standards but better than nothing.

She slipped it on, the soft fabric enveloping her completely. It smelled faintly of him—that wild, earthy scent—and the thought sent another inexplicable flutter through her stomach.

Gathering her dirty clothes, she opened the door to find Malrik standing just outside, his massive form silhouetted against the dim light from his bedroom. He seemed to be breathing heavily, as though he'd been running, and his eyes glowed like embers in the darkness, fixed on her with an intensity that left her breathless.

### CHAPTER 11

Malrik stood rigid outside the bathing chamber, his massive body trembling with the effort of remaining still. Each breath drew her scent deeper into his lungs—clean skin, warm water, and beneath it all, that intoxicating sweetness that had awoken that dormant part of him. His claws extended, then retracted, then extended again as he fought for control.

The beast wanted to return to her, to claim what it considered his. The emerging male—the part of him that remembered words and courtesy and the concept of privacy—struggled to maintain his distance.

He flexed his hand, watching with fascination as his claws appeared and disappeared. This hadn't happened before her arrival. For years—how many, he couldn't recall—he had been locked in beast form, his thoughts fragmented and primitive. Now, with each hour in her presence, more of his rational mind surfaced.

With rationality came memory...

A grand hall. He was seated on an elevated chair and a female Vultor stood before him, her eyes flashing angrily.

“You dare reject me? Do you know who my father is?”

He sneered and gave a dismissive flick of his wrist. “Another tedious noble with more pride than sense. Like his daughter.”

Her growl rose to a shriek of rage, and his guards moved to escort her out.

“You’ll regret this,” she hissed. “The curse will find you, as it finds all who refuse their mate without cause.”

He laughed. “Superstitious nonsense. I am Malrik of House Vantar. I choose my own fate.”

The memory dissolved, leaving him confused and troubled. There was that word again— curse . It stirred something in his mind, but the thought remained elusive.

A waft of steam escaped from under the door, carrying her scent more strongly, and he groaned, pressing his forehead against the stone wall. The cold surface did nothing to cool the fever building inside him. He shouldn’t be here. Shouldn’t be waiting. Shouldn’t be imagining her in his bath, skin flushed and hair darkened by water. To his shock, his body began to respond to the image.

For the first time in his long isolation, he felt a deep, primal need that had nothing to do with hunger or thirst. He wanted. Wanted to taste her wet skin, to feel her breath against his fur, to hear her gasp his name. And beneath that want, buried so deeply he almost didn’t recognize it, was an older, more complex emotion. Something that went beyond desire.

He shook his head violently. These thoughts were dangerous. He was a beast, not a male. She was not his to claim, no matter what the beast believed. She was an intelligent being with her own desires and needs. Desires and needs that didn’t involve him, he reminded himself firmly.

When she finally emerged from the bathing room, she was wrapped in a robe that dwarfed her smaller frame. It was his—he recognized the deep blue fabric with silver embroidery along the edges, though it was faded now. Her hair hung in damp curls

around her shoulders, and her skin glowed pink from the heat of the bath. She looked impossibly soft, impossibly fragile.

She startled when she saw him, one hand flying to her throat where the robe gaped open. Her cheeks, already flushed from the bath, darkened further.

“Oh! I—I didn’t know you were waiting.” She clutched the robe tighter. “I found this hanging on a hook. I hope it’s all right that I borrowed it?”

He couldn’t form words. The sight of her in his garment stirred something primal and possessive in him. His scent would now mingle with hers. The beast purred its approval and he surged forward, unable to stop himself, and pressed her against the wall. His body surrounded her, his claws digging into the stone on either side of her head. His breathing was heavy, his chest rising and falling against hers, separated only by the thin layer of the robe.

He should apologize, back away, give her the space she surely needed. But all rational thought was drowned out by the thundering of his blood and the scent of her filling his nostrils.

Her eyes were wide, her pulse fluttering at her throat. Fear, he told himself harshly. But there was something else in her gaze, something he couldn’t identify. Her small hands came to rest on his chest, not pushing him away but just... resting there, as if absorbing the heat of his body.

He wanted to kiss her. The desire hit him with startling intensity. He’d never wanted someone this way, never felt that electric spark of attraction. And beneath the desire, that other emotion, the one he could barely remember the name of, the one he’d denied himself for too long.

“Beautiful,” he rasped, the words scraping out of his throat. “So... beautiful.”

She blinked up at him, her cheeks flushed. “What did you say?”

He couldn't answer. The words wouldn't come. Instead, he dipped his head, inhaling her scent, then brushed his muzzle against her cheek in a slow, deliberate movement that was both question and caress.

Her breath caught, and for a moment he thought she'd push him away. But then her hands slid upwards, burying themselves in the fur of his neck. He growled at the sensation, a deep rumble of pleasure that vibrated through his entire body. He pressed closer, wanting more of her touch, wanting to feel all of her against him.

Her fingers curled, gripping his fur tightly as her breathing quickened. He could feel the pounding of her heart against his chest, but it wasn't fear driving it. Her lips parted slightly, and he couldn't resist. He had to taste her.

He claimed her mouth with his, the kiss awkward at first as he adjusted to the shape of her lips. But then her tongue darted out, tentatively brushing against his, and he groaned at the sensation. His hands moved to her waist, lifting her into his arms and pulling her tightly against him as the kiss deepened.

It was unlike any kiss he could remember. There was an urgency to it, a hunger that went beyond the physical, a need to connect on a level deeper than lust. He wanted to claim her, to mark her, to make her his in every way. His fangs grazed her lower lip, drawing a drop of blood, and he shuddered at the taste.

But even in his haze of desire, a small part of his mind cried out for him to stop. She was not his to claim. She was here by necessity, not choice. He didn't know if he could ever truly deserve her. He had to let her go. Had to...

Her hands returned to his chest and this time she was pushing him away. He forced himself to break the kiss and lower her back to her feet. She was panting, her lips

swollen and red from his kisses, her eyes bright.

“I...” she said, licking her lips nervously. “I can’t. Not like this.”

He nodded, unable to speak. She was right. Of course she was right. But his beast howled in frustration.

“Your robe...” she whispered. “That’s all I have to wear. I didn’t mean...”

He forced himself to step back, giving her space, and she shifted uncomfortably under his stare. “I should, um, find somewhere to sleep.”

“Stay.” The word came out as a rumbling growl as he pointed at his nest of furs.

She bit her lip. “I really don’t think that’s a good?—”

He didn’t wait for her to finish. He closed the distance between them and scooped her into his arms, cradling her soft body against his chest.

“What are you doing?” she gasped, her hands instinctively gripping his fur. “Put me down!”

He ignored her protests, carrying her over to the nest of furs. He deposited her gently in the center of the nest, then curled his big body around hers, effectively caging her with his bulk.

She immediately tried to wiggle away, pushing against his chest. “This is not appropriate! We can’t—I can’t?—”

He tightened his grip, careful not to hurt her but making escape impossible.



“Agreed.”

She stilled, looking up at him with wide, uncertain eyes. “That was before we kissed.”

“Safe,” he growled, the word vibrating through his chest. “You... safe... here.”

“Safe from what?”

He didn’t answer, unsure himself what he meant. Safe from the cold? From loneliness? From him? All he knew was that having her here, in his nest, surrounded by his scent, felt right. Necessary.

“I... won’t... harm... you,” he said carefully, the words coming more easily this time. Her closeness made speech less of a struggle.

She remained tense for several long moments, her heart racing so fast he could feel it against his chest. Gradually, though, her muscles relaxed and her breathing slowed. The fear-scent that had spiked when he grabbed her began to fade.

“This is still inappropriate,” she muttered, but there was less conviction in her voice.

He rumbled a sound that wasn’t quite a laugh. Inappropriate . As if such human concepts applied to him anymore. As if anything mattered beyond keeping her close, keeping her safe.

He watched as her eyelids grew heavy, her body surrendering to exhaustion despite her apparent determination to remain alert. When she finally drifted off to sleep, her head pillowed on his arm, satisfaction filled him.

The beast purred, a deep, vibrating sound of contentment. He buried his nose in her

hair, inhaling the sweet scent of her, letting it fill his senses and quiet his usual restlessness. For the first time in memory, he felt something like peace.

Sleep claimed him soon after, pulling him down into dreams long denied.

He stood in the grand hall of his keep, but it was different—pristine, filled with light and music. Vultor nobles in their finest garments danced and conversed, goblets of wine in hand. He was in his humanoid form, dressed in ceremonial robes of deep green with silver embroidery.

Before him stood Tarek, his eldest advisor, his expression grave beneath his silver-streaked fur.

“My lord, you must reconsider,” Tarek urged. “The curse of the unmated is no mere superstition. It has claimed many of our kind.”

He waved a dismissive hand, irritation flaring. “Old wives’ tales to frighten cubs into making hasty matches. I am no green youth to be swayed by such nonsense.”

“The evidence is there for those with eyes to see,” Tarek persisted. “Those who reach maturity and refuse to bond grow increasingly unstable. The beast side strengthens while the rational mind weakens. Eventually, nothing remains but the beast.”

“Then I shall be the exception,” he replied coldly. “I have no intention of binding myself to a female who seeks only my position and wealth. When I find one worthy of being my mate, I will consider it. Until then, I will hear no more of this curse.”

Tarek’s eyes flashed with frustration. “My lord, the signs are already present. Your temper grows shorter, your control more tenuous. The beast stirs more frequently now.”

“Enough!” he roared, feeling his fangs lengthen as rage surged through him. The familiar heat of transformation prickled along his spine, and he fought to contain it.

Tarek took a step back, his ears flattening in submission, but his eyes remained resolute. “As you command, my lord. But remember my words when the beast begins to take control.”

“I am Malrik of House Vantar,” he declared arrogantly. “My will is stronger than any supposed curse. I will bond when I find a worthy mate, not before. Now enough of this. The celebration awaits.”

He turned away, dismissing both the advisor and his warnings. But as he moved through the crowd, the lights began to dim. The music became discordant. The guests’ faces blurred, their features melting away until only their glowing eyes remained, all fixed accusingly on him.

Pain lanced through his body. He doubled over, gasping, as his bones began to crack and reshape themselves. Fur sprouted from his skin. His hands twisted into claws. He’d transformed before, but it had never been like this.

“The curse finds you,” a chorus of voices intoned. “As it finds all who refuse a mate.”

He tried to deny it, to fight the transformation, but the beast was too strong. It consumed him, shredding his rational mind, leaving only hunger and rage and loneliness. Endless loneliness.

Then, through the darkness, a scent. Sweet, unfamiliar, compelling. Human. A flash of blonde curls. Hazel eyes that showed no fear.

Bella.

The beast stilled. Listened. Something long dormant stirred within it.

Hope.

He jerked awake, a soft whine escaping his throat. The dream clung to him, more vivid and coherent than any he'd experienced since his transformation. Was it memory or merely his fractured mind attempting to make sense of his condition?

He didn't know. But as he looked down at the small human female sleeping peacefully in his arms, he felt certain of one thing: she was important. Her presence was changing him, awakening parts of himself he'd thought lost forever.

She stirred slightly in her sleep, murmuring something unintelligible. Without thinking, he stroked her hair, his claws retracting to allow the gentle touch. She sighed and nestled closer to his warmth.

Mine , the beast insisted.

Not yet , his rational side countered. Perhaps never. She is human. Free. Not bound by our ways.

But as moonlight shone through the windows, illuminating her peaceful face, both sides of his nature agreed on one thing: whatever happened next, he would protect her. From others, from himself if necessary.

Even if it meant eventually letting her go.

### CHAPTER 12

B ella woke gradually, enveloped in unexpected warmth. She'd spent enough nights in her father's drafty workshop to appreciate good heat, and this was luxurious—like being wrapped in a living furnace. She sighed contentedly before her eyes snapped open as memory returned.

The keep. The beast. Malrik .

She lay perfectly still, taking inventory of her situation. One massive arm was draped over her waist, heavy but not crushing. His chest pressed against her back, rising and falling with deep, even breaths. The robe she wore had twisted during the night, bunching uncomfortably at her waist.

She glanced down at the arm holding her and froze. The limb looked almost... normal. Well, not normal exactly—it was still massive, corded with muscle that no human could match. But the dark silver fur had receded, revealing slate-colored skin. Most startling of all, where fearsome claws had been, there were now fingers. Large strong fingers, but recognizably a hand rather than a beast's paw.

What did it mean? Was he changing somehow?

Her scientific curiosity flared to life, but was immediately derailed when she shifted slightly and felt something hard pressing against her lower back. Heat flooded her face as she realized what it was.

Oh.

Well. That was... interesting. And potentially problematic.

He'd promised she was safe, and she believed him—or at least, she believed he meant it. But he was also clearly not entirely in control of himself. Best not to tempt fate.

She began to inch away, trying to extricate herself without waking him. She'd almost made it to the edge of the nest when a low growl rumbled through the chamber. Before she could react, his arm tightened around her waist. In one fluid motion, he rolled her onto her back and came down on top of her.

The transformation was immediate and shocking. The arm that had appeared almost human was once again covered in thick fur. Claws extended from his fingertips, digging into the furs beside her head. His face, which she hadn't seen clearly in the darkness, was fully bestial—muzzle elongated, ears pointed, fangs gleaming.

Only his eyes remained the same—that intense, intelligent yellow that had haunted her thoughts since their first encounter.

Those eyes now traveled down her body, darkening as they fixed on where the oversized robe had fallen open, exposing the curve of her breast and the plane of her stomach. The glow in his eyes intensified, turning almost incandescent.

A shiver ran through her body, not entirely from fear. Something hot and unfamiliar coiled in her belly, a response she hadn't anticipated and wasn't sure how to process.

“You promised,” she whispered, finding her voice. “You said I'd be safe.”

His gaze snapped back to her face. Something like confusion flickered across his features, as if he were struggling to remember who or what he was.

He lowered his head slowly toward her neck, and she held her breath, her heart

hammering against her ribs. His breath was hot against the sensitive skin of her throat.

“Mate,” he growled, the word barely recognizable as speech.

Before she could respond, his lips—softer than she would have imagined—pressed against her pulse point. The delicate scrape of fangs followed, not breaking the skin but letting her feel their presence, their potential.

Heat surged through her body, pooling low in her abdomen. This was nothing like the awkward fumbling she’d experienced with the village boys. This was primal, dangerous, and inexplicably compelling.

Then, as suddenly as he’d pinned her, Malrik leapt away. He stood at the edge of the nest, chest heaving, eyes wild. Without another sound, he turned and stalked from the room, his massive form disappearing into the shadows of the corridor.

She lay frozen for several heartbeats, staring at the empty doorway. Her hand drifted to her neck, fingers tracing where his mouth had been. She could still feel the phantom pressure of his body against hers, the weight of him both frightening and thrilling.

“What the hell was that?” she murmured to the empty room.

She sat up slowly, pulling the robe closed with trembling hands. The logical part of her brain—the part that methodically solved mechanical problems and never panicked when things went wrong—tried to make sense of what had just happened.

He’d called her “mate.” The word echoed in her mind, stirring something unexpected. She knew little about Vultor customs, but even she understood the significance of that term. Mates were for life among their kind. It wasn’t some casual designation.

And then there was his transformation—the way his arm had appeared almost normal while he slept, only to revert when he woke. Was the beast form something he could control? Or was it controlling him?

She sighed and swung her legs over the edge of the nest. Whatever was happening with Malrik would have to wait. She had work to do, and dwelling on the confusing mix of fear and attraction she'd just experienced wouldn't help either of them.

She was about to go in search of her pack when she spotted it outside the bathing room door. He must have retrieved it sometime during the night. Touched by his thoughtfulness, she pulled out a clean coverall. The familiar garment comforted her—practical, functional, with no ambiguity about its purpose. Unlike everything else in this strange situation.

As she fastened the front clasps, she tried to organize her thoughts. The keep needed power, which meant getting the generators running again. Once she had power, she could work on the replicator system so they wouldn't have to rely on Malrik's hunting. And somewhere in all of that, she needed to figure out what was happening with her host.

“One problem at a time,” she told herself firmly. “Fix what you can fix.”

She tied her hair back with a strip of cloth from her pack and headed for the control room she'd discovered yesterday. The corridors were silent, with no sign of Malrik. Part of her was relieved; another part was inexplicably disappointed.

The control room was just as she'd left it—dusty, dim, but full of promise. She knelt beside the main panel and resumed her work, grateful for the distraction of mechanical systems that, while complex, followed logical rules.

Unlike the creature whose keep she now shared.



Hours passed as she immersed herself in her work. She traced circuits, cleaned connections, and did her best to decipher the Vultor writing on various components. Their language was surprisingly systematic, making it possible to guess at meanings based on context and repetition.

By midday, she'd identified the main power coupling and determined that the issue was primarily neglect rather than damage. The generators themselves appeared intact—they just needed to be reactivated and properly calibrated.

“Just need to reconnect this final circuit and...” she muttered, reaching deep into the panel.

A spark jumped between two connections, making her yelp and jerk her hand back. But before she could curse her carelessness, the panel hummed to life. Lights flickered on overhead, and a low vibration spread through the floor as dormant systems began to wake.

“Yes!” She pumped her fist triumphantly. “That’s what I’m talking about!”

She scrambled to her feet, wiping grimy hands on her coverall as she watched the control room transform. Displays illuminated, showing schematics of the keep’s various systems. The air circulation kicked in, stirring the dust that had settled over everything.

Excitement bubbled through her. With power restored, she could explore the keep’s full potential. The replicator could be next, then maybe the communications system. There might even be information stored in the computers about the Vultor, about Malrik himself.

Speaking of whom...

“Malrik?” she called out, suddenly wanting to share her success. “The power’s back on! Malrik?”

No answer came. The keep remained silent save for the gentle hum of machinery.

Her enthusiasm dimmed slightly. Where was he? Had he left the keep entirely? Was he avoiding her after what happened last night and this morning?

Telling herself she was just checking for any damage from the returning power, she wandered through the keep. As she looked into the grand hall, movement caught her eye—a shadow shifting near one of the massive windows that overlooked the mountains.

Malrik stood with his back to her, silhouetted against the afternoon light. His posture was rigid, hands clenched at his sides. Even from a distance, she could see the tension radiating from him.

She hesitated, unsure whether to approach or leave him to his thoughts. The memory of his body pressed against hers flashed unbidden through her mind, sending a fresh wave of heat through her.

“I got the power working,” she said finally, keeping her voice casual. “The replicator should be operational soon.”

He didn’t turn, didn’t acknowledge her presence. But his ears—still pointed and covered with fur—twitched slightly.

“Look, about this morning...” she began, then faltered. What could she possibly say? Sorry your bestial side finds me attractive? Thanks for not eating me?

“I’m not afraid of you,” she said instead, surprising herself with the truth of it. “I

should be, probably. But I'm not."

His shoulders tensed further, the muscles bunching visibly beneath his fur.

"Maybe we should talk about what's happening to you," she continued, taking a cautious step forward. "The way your arm changed while you were sleeping. I think there might be?—"

"No." The word came out as a growl, but it was clear enough.

"But if we could understand?—"

"Leave it." He turned his head just enough for her to see his profile, the gleam of one yellow eye. "Dangerous."

"For you or for me?" she asked softly.

He didn't answer, just turned back to the window.

She sighed. She'd never been good at emotional conversations—machines were so much more straightforward. But something told her that whatever was happening with Malrik was the key to everything else in this strange situation.

"I'll be in the kitchen if you change your mind," she said finally. "About talking. Or food. Or anything."

She turned and walked away, feeling his gaze follow her but refusing to look back. Whatever was happening between them—whatever he'd meant by calling her "mate"—would have to wait. For now, she had a replicator to fix and a bargain to fulfill.

But as she made her way to the kitchen, she couldn't help wondering if there was more to their arrangement than either of them had initially understood. The keep was coming back to life around her, systems awakening after years of dormancy.

She couldn't shake the feeling that something similar was happening with its master.

### CHAPTER 13

Malrik ran through the forest, branches whipping past his face, paws digging into the soft earth. His breath came in heavy pants, lungs burning as he pushed himself harder, faster. He wasn't running towards anything—he was running away. Away from the keep. Away from her.

Her scent clung to his fur, embedded in his senses. Bella. The human female who smelled of metal and lightning and something indefinably sweet. His beast howled inside him, demanding he turn back, return to their territory, to their mate.

Mate.

The word sent a shock through him, momentarily breaking the beast's hold. He stumbled, nearly falling as his stride faltered. Memories flickered through his mind again—fractured, disjointed, but undeniably his own. A grand hall filled with courtiers. Vultur females presented before him, each one rejected with casual disdain. A voice warning him of consequences.

The curse of the unmated Vultur.

Malrik shook his massive head, trying to clear it. These flashes of lucidity were becoming more frequent, more insistent. The beast still controlled his body, but something else—someone else—was awakening inside.

He reached a high ridge overlooking the valley and stopped, chest heaving. From this vantage point, he could see for miles. The mountains rising to the north. The human

settlement to the south. The thick forest spreading between them.

His territory.

No—his land. His property. The distinction felt important somehow. The beast knew only territory, instinctively marked and defended. But Malrik—the male he had once been—understood ownership. Boundaries. Maps.

His gaze drifted to a seemingly unremarkable section of forest to the east. Nothing distinguished it from the surrounding woodland, yet he knew what lay concealed there. The Vultur enclave. His... people.

Seren would be there. The alpha. Not the strongest of the Vultur who had settled on Cresca, but the most balanced. The most controlled. Malrik had kept himself apart from the pack, too proud to submit to another's leadership, but he remembered Seren. Respected him, even.

Perhaps Seren could help him. The alpha might know something about this curse, about why Malrik's rational side was resurfacing now after being lost to the beast for so long.

The thought had barely formed when his beast reared up in violent protest. A snarl ripped from his throat, echoing across the valley. His claws dug into the rocky ground, gouging deep furrows.

No! The alpha would take their mate. Would claim what belonged to them.

Images flashed through his mind—Bella in Seren's arms, Bella submitting to the alpha, Bella leaving the keep forever—and his thoughts dissolved in a red haze of fury. The beast took control again, turning him back toward the keep, driving him forward with single-minded purpose.

Mine. Mine. MINE.

The journey back passed in a blur of motion and primal need. He burst through the keep's entrance, skidding across the stone floor, claws scrabbling for purchase. Her scent was stronger now, guiding him through the corridors. He followed it to the kitchen, heart pounding against his ribs.

Bella stood with her back to him, hair pulled up in a messy knot, coverall streaked with grease. She was humming to herself, fingers dancing across the replicator's control panel. The machine emitted a series of soft beeps in response to her commands.

She must have sensed his presence because she turned, a triumphant smile lighting her face. "I fixed it! The POTTs is operational. I had to bypass the original power coupling and?—"

Her words ended in a breathless squeak as he crossed the room in two strides, pulling her into his arms. He buried his face in the curve of her neck, inhaling deeply, letting her scent wash over him. The beast inside him calmed immediately, the frantic energy draining away, replaced by a purring satisfaction.

She's here. She's safe. She's ours.

It took him several moments to realize she wasn't struggling. Her body was tense, yes, but she wasn't trying to escape his embrace. Slowly, cautiously, he pulled back enough to look down at her.

Her eyes were wide, but not with fear. She studied his face with open curiosity, her head tilted slightly to one side. "You're different," she murmured.

She lifted a hand, hesitated, then touched his cheek. His bare cheek.

He froze. The sensation of her fingers against his skin sent a shock through his entire body. Not fur. Skin. He raised his own hand to his face, feeling smooth flesh where there had been coarse fur just hours before.

He had partially transformed back to his Vultur form.

His mind raced, trying to process what was happening. The beast was still present—he could feel it coiled inside him—but it no longer controlled him completely. His thoughts were clearer than they had been in... how long? Years? Decades?

Her fingers traced the line of his jaw, feather-light. “Your eyes are still the same,” she whispered. “Still yellow. Still... you.”

Something in her voice, in her touch, broke through the last of his hesitation. He leaned down, drawn by an instinct more powerful than the beast’s hunger had ever been.

Their lips touched.

The contact was gentle at first, tentative. Her lips were soft, warm. She made a small sound in the back of her throat—surprise or pleasure, he couldn’t tell—and then she was kissing him back, her hand sliding to the nape of his neck.

The beast inside him surged forward, not fighting for control but demanding more. The kiss deepened and became hungry, desperate. His arms tightened around her waist, lifting her off the ground. Her body pressed against his, soft curves against hard muscle.

Claim her. Mark her. Make her ours forever.



The intensity of his need shocked him. Horrified, he wrenched himself away, setting her back on her feet and stepping backwards until he hit the opposite wall. His chest heaved as if he'd been running for miles again. His claws—still present despite his partial transformation—had extended, nearly piercing the fabric of her coverall.

He could have hurt her. Could still hurt her.

She stood where he'd left her, cheeks flushed, lips slightly parted. She looked dazed, breathless. Beautiful.

"I'm sorry," he managed, his voice a rough approximation of speech after so long communicating only in growls. "I shouldn't have?—"

"Don't." She took a step toward him, then stopped when he flinched back. "Don't apologize."

"Dangerous." The word came easier this time. "I'm dangerous."

"You won't hurt me." She said it with such conviction, such certainty.

If only she knew how close he'd come. How the beast inside him had howled for him to claim her, to sink his teeth into the soft skin of her neck, to mark her as his mate for all to see.

"You don't understand," he growled, frustration mounting as he struggled to form the words, to make her see. "The beast—it wants—I want?—"

He couldn't finish. Couldn't tell her what he wanted to do to her. With her.

She took another step towards him, her expression softening. "I think I understand more than you realize." She gestured to his face, his partially transformed body. "This

is happening because of me, isn't it? I'm affecting you somehow."

He closed his eyes, unable to look at her. She was too perceptive, too unafraid. And she was right. Her presence was changing him, awakening parts of himself he'd thought lost forever.

"The curse," he said finally, the words dragged from some deep part of his memory. "Unmated Vultor. Beast takes over."

Her sharp intake of breath told him she understood the implications. "And I'm... what? Breaking the curse?"

"Or making it worse." He opened his eyes, forcing himself to meet her gaze. "The beast wants you. Wants to claim you. As mate."

The word hung between them, heavy with meaning. Her eyes widened, but she didn't back away. Didn't run. Instead, she took another step toward him, close enough now that he could feel the warmth radiating from her body.

"And what do you want, Malrik?" she asked softly. "Not the beast. You."

What did he want? He barely remembered how to want anything beyond the beast's primal needs. Territory. Food. Safety.

But looking at Bella—brave, brilliant Bella with her grease-stained coverall and questioning eyes—he found he did want. Wanted with an intensity that had nothing to do with the beast and everything to do with the male he had once been.

He wanted her smile, her touch, her mind. Wanted to hear her talk about machines and replicators and all the things she loved. Wanted to protect her, provide for her, prove himself worthy of her.

“Everything,” he whispered, the truth torn from him. “I want everything.”

Her expression softened, a small smile curving her lips. She reached for him again, but he caught her wrist before she could touch him.

“Not like this,” he said, voice rough with restraint. “Not with the beast still so close. Not until I understand what’s happening to me.”

Disappointment flickered across her face, quickly replaced by determination. “Then we’ll figure it out together.”

### CHAPTER 14

B ella stepped back from the small cleaning robot, wiping her hands on her coveralls and admiring her handiwork as the little machine whirred to life, its sensors blinking as it oriented itself to the dusty room. It wasn't much—just a basic maintenance unit she'd cobbled together from parts she'd found in a storage closet—but it was a start.

“Come on, little guy,” she encouraged as it made its first tentative movements across the floor, leaving a clean path in its wake. “That's it.”

It wasn't much—just one small robot tackling a fortress-sized cleaning job—but it represented days of work, and she couldn't help feeling a surge of pride. The keep was slowly coming back to life, one system at a time. First the POTTs, then some of the lighting in the main areas, and now this little worker.

“One down, about twenty more to go,” she murmured to herself.

The thought of how long it would take to clean the entire fortress with just this little helper made her laugh.

“Malrik!” she called out, knowing he was nearby. He always was. “Come see what I made!”

It had been four days since their conversation in the kitchen. Four days of working side by side, of careful touches and heated glances, of sleeping wrapped in his arms each night. Four days of watching his features shift between beast and Vultor, never quite settling into either form completely.

A shadow darkened the doorway, and she turned to find Malrik watching her. His eyes glowed softly in the dim light, his massive form filling the frame. He'd been in his beast form when she woke this morning, though she'd caught glimpses of his Vultor features throughout the day—moments when his fur receded, when his face became more defined, when words came more easily.

“Look,” she said, gesturing to the robot busily cleaning the floor. “I got it working.”

He stepped into the room, moving with that strange grace that still surprised her. For someone so large, he could be remarkably silent when he chose. He crouched beside the robot, studying it with an intensity that made her smile. Everything he did, he did with his whole being.

He watched the machine's methodical movements, his glowing yellow eyes tracking its path across the floor. After a moment, he nodded his approval.

“It cleans,” he said, his voice a low rumble that sent a pleasant shiver down her spine.

“It does,” she agreed. “Not fast, but it's better than nothing. I found some parts for more, but they'll take time.”

“Come,” he ordered, his voice rough but clear. He gestured toward the corridor with one clawed hand.

She smiled, long past being bothered by his brusque commands. She'd quickly learned that while he might be bossy, he never forced her to do anything she didn't want to do. She could do whatever she pleased—as long as she stayed with him.

“Where are we going?” she asked, joining him.

“Show you something.” His words were clipped, but she'd learned that wasn't from

anger or impatience—it was simply difficult for him to speak when the beast was close to the surface.

“All right.”

As she reached his side, she deliberately placed her hand on his arm. She’d been initiating these casual touches more frequently, determined to understand the connection between them and the effect she seemed to have on his transformations.

His muscles tensed beneath her touch, as they always did initially. She’d been deliberately increasing these casual contacts, trying to get him accustomed to her touch. After that first moment of tension, he relaxed and shifted, pulling her closer to his side with one powerful arm. Also predictable.

These little rituals had become familiar over the past few days. She could touch him, talk to him, work alongside him—but any hint that she might try to leave sent the beast surging forward. She had freedom within the keep, but only as long as she stayed with him.

Strangely, she didn’t mind as much as she probably should have. There was something comforting about his constant presence, his unwavering attention. No one had ever focused on her so completely before.

He led her through corridors that were marginally cleaner than they had been when she arrived. She’d managed to get some of the lighting working in the main areas, casting a soft glow over the cold stone and metal. They passed through the ballroom, now clean and empty.

“You’ve been busy,” she observed, noting the swept floors and the absence of cobwebs in the corners.

He made a noncommittal sound, but she caught the hint of pride in his posture. He'd made himself useful during the hours she spent working on the tech systems—hauling away shattered tables and chairs, sweeping up the remnants of what must have once been magnificent crystal chandeliers.

They stepped through tall glass doors at the far end of the room and out onto a wide stone terrace. The afternoon sun bathed everything in golden light, and she blinked as her eyes adjusted, then gasped softly. The terrace overlooked what must have once been a formal garden. Most of it remained wild and overgrown, tangles of vines and shrubs competing for space, but she could see areas where Malrik had clearly been working—patches where weeds had been pulled, where stone paths had been uncovered, where flowering plants had been freed from choking vines.

“You did this?” she asked, moving to the edge of the terrace. “It’s beautiful.”

Malrik followed, his massive body oddly graceful as he moved to stand beside her, watching her reaction with an intensity that made her skin tingle.

“Flowers,” he said gruffly. “You like.”

She had mentioned it, offhandedly, a few days ago while they were eating. She'd been chattering about her childhood, about the little garden her mother had kept before she died, about how the village where she and her father lived now had little space for ornamental plants.

He'd remembered. Not only remembered, but acted on it.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice thick with emotion. “Can we go down?”

He nodded, offering his arm with unexpected formality. She took it, allowing him to guide her down the wide stone steps to the garden below.

The garden smelled of rich earth and green growing things. Up close, she could see how much work he'd done. He'd cleared away years of overgrowth to reveal a formal pattern of beds and walkways. The paths were still cracked in places, with weeds sprouting between stones, but they were passable. The flower beds closest to the keep were filled with a riot of colors she wouldn't have expected to find in this harsh mountain climate. Their scents mingled in the air, sweet and spicy and earthy.

"How do they survive up here?" she asked him as she bent to examine a cluster of vibrant pink flowers.

"Special varieties," he said, the words seeming to come more easily than usual. "Bred for mountain climate. Self-sustaining."

"It must have been magnificent when it was properly tended," she said, trying to imagine the garden in its prime.

He nodded, his eyes distant. "It was... a point of pride. For me. Before."

Before the curse. Before he became trapped in his beast form. The pieces were starting to fit together—the grandeur of the keep, his possessiveness of it, the way he moved through it with familiarity despite its state of disrepair.

She wandered along the path, admiring his work. In one bed, tall spikes of blue flowers swayed in the gentle breeze. Their color reminded her of the summer sky, intense and vibrant against the weathered stone of the keep.

"These are beautiful," she said, bending to examine them more closely.

He stepped forward, his movements deliberate and careful, and reached out with one massive hand—his claws partially retracted—and delicately plucked one of the blue blossoms from its stem.



Then, to her surprise, he executed a formal bow, extending the flower to her with a flourish that seemed to belong to another time, another life.

The gesture was so unexpected, so at odds with his fearsome appearance, that she felt her heart constrict in her chest. This was Malrik—the real Malrik—shining through.

She accepted the flower with a smile, bringing it to her nose to inhale its subtle fragrance. When she looked up, he was watching her, his eyes glowing with an emotion she was beginning to recognize.

Without thinking, she rose on her tiptoes and pressed her lips to his. She meant it as a simple thank you, but the moment their lips touched, something shifted between them.

His arms came around her, gentle despite their strength, and he deepened the kiss. His mouth was warm against hers, the slight pressure of his fangs adding an edge of danger that only heightened the sensation.

She wound her arms around his neck, the blue flower still clutched in her fingers as she pressed herself closer to him. His fur was soft against her skin, his body radiating heat that seemed to seep into her very bones.

When they finally broke apart, she was breathless. Malrik's eyes glowed more intensely than she'd ever seen, and patches of slate-grey skin had appeared on his face and neck where the fur had receded.

"Thank you," she whispered, her voice unsteady. "For the garden. For the flower. For everything."

He nodded, one clawed hand coming up to touch her cheek with exquisite gentleness. "Mine," he said, the word both possessive and questioning.

“Yes,” she agreed, surprising herself with how right it felt to say it. “Yours.”

His arms tightened around her briefly before he released her, stepping back to give her space. But his eyes never left her face, tracking her movements as she tucked the blue flower behind her ear.

“Show me the rest,” she said, gesturing to the garden. “I want to see everything you’ve done.”

As they walked the paths together, her hand once again found its way to his arm. This time, there was no tension when she touched him—only a sense of rightness, of belonging, that made her wonder how she’d ever lived without this connection.

The sun warmed her shoulders as they explored the reclaimed garden, and for the first time since she’d arrived at the keep, she didn’t think about her father or the village or the bargain that had brought her here. She thought only of the present moment—of blue flowers and stone pathways, of gentle hands and glowing eyes, of a connection that seemed to grow stronger with each passing day.

She didn’t know what tomorrow would bring, but today, in this garden with Malrik, she was exactly where she wanted to be. Whatever happened next—whether they broke his curse or not—she was no longer simply fulfilling an obligation. She was discovering something new, something unexpected.

Something that felt remarkably like the beginning of love.

When they paused at the far end of the garden and she looked up to find him watching her, it seemed completely natural to reach for him, to pull his head down and lose herself in the pleasure of his kiss.

### CHAPTER 15

Malrik's beast surged with satisfaction as Bella's lips parted beneath his. The kiss deepened, her taste intoxicating—sweet with a hint of the wild berries they'd found in the garden. His arms tightened around her, claws retracting instinctively to avoid hurting her delicate skin.

The rational part of his mind—growing stronger each day—flashed a warning. Too much. Too fast. She's human. She's afraid.

But her body told a different story. Her hands slid up his chest, fingers curling into the fur that was rapidly receding as his Vultor form emerged. She wasn't pulling away. She was pulling him closer.

The warning voice in his head grew fainter with each passing second. Why should he stop? The female in his arms was soft and sweet and willing.

Willing.

That thought penetrated the haze of desire. How could she be willing? How could someone like her want someone—something—like him?

He wrenched himself back, chest heaving. His beast howled in protest, but he held firm, searching her face for signs of fear or revulsion.

Instead, she smiled up at him with kiss-swollen lips, cheeks flushed and eyes bright.

“We should celebrate,” she said, her voice slightly breathless. “The garden, the cleaning robot, the POTTS... we’ve accomplished so much.”

She traced a finger along his jaw, her touch feather-light against his skin—not fur, he realized with a jolt. More of his Vultor form had emerged during their kiss.

“I’ll program the POTTS for a special dinner,” she continued. “Something better than the basic meals we’ve been having.”

Her enthusiasm was infectious, but he couldn’t form the words to respond. He nodded instead, and she rose on her tiptoes to press another quick kiss to his lips, then slipped from his grasp and headed back towards the keep.

He watched her go, fighting the urge to follow. His beast whined in protest at the increasing distance between them, but he forced himself to remain in the garden. He’d spent days shadowing her, never letting her stray far. But this time, he forced himself to let her go. She wasn’t running. She’d be there when he returned.

In the meantime, there was more work to be done here, and he needed the physical exertion to clear his head. He attacked a particularly stubborn section of overgrowth, tearing out dead vines and clearing space for new growth. The physical exertion helped calm his racing thoughts, though her taste lingered on his lips.

As the afternoon wore on, he found himself thinking of her with increasing frequency. The way her eyes lit up when she solved a problem. The musical sound of her laughter. The feel of her body pressed against his.

When the sun began to set, he returned to the keep, his thoughts still consumed by her. He made his way back to his chambers, shedding dirt and sweat under the same hot spring water that fed his bathing pool. As he scrubbed his skin—more skin than fur today, he noted with surprise—his thoughts turned to her again.

The way she looked at him had changed. At first, there had been fear, then curiosity. Now there was something else—something that made his chest tighten and his pulse quicken. His shaft began to stiffen, as it did so often these days when he thought of her.

He wrapped a hand around it, stroking slowly. It had been so long since he'd felt this, he'd thought the urge was lost forever. But now...

He imagined how her fingers would feel on his heated skin, how her lips would part as she took him into her mouth. He imagined her on her knees in front of him, her pretty little ass in the air as he drove into her from behind, her soft cries of pleasure filling the chamber.

His strokes quickened, his grip tightening as the fantasy took hold. He could almost hear her voice calling his name, begging for more, for everything he could give her. The pressure built inside him, coiling tighter and tighter until, with a guttural groan, he found his release.

He stood under the cascading water, panting as his seed swirling down the drain. His knees felt weak, so he braced one hand against the wall until his heart slowed and his breathing returned to normal. In spite of the intensity of his release, it wasn't enough. He didn't want his hand or his imagination. He craved the real Bella, the one whose scent haunted him and whose voice sent shivers down his spine.

He dried off, then, struck by a sudden impulse, he went to his wardrobe and searched through the contents. Most of the clothing had been shredded in his early rages, but he found a pair of pants that were still intact, if somewhat dusty. They were too tight, straining against his thighs, but he managed to fasten them.

He also found a vest made of some dark, supple material that he could just manage to stretch over his shoulders, though he couldn't close it over his chest. It would have to

do.

He approached the mirror—another item he'd avoided for years—and studied his reflection. His face was more Vultor than beast now, though his eyes still glowed with primal intensity. His hair, once neatly groomed, hung in wild tangles down his back, streaked with silver.

He looked nothing like the polished noble he'd once been, but neither was he the mindless beast that had roamed these halls for so long. He was... something in between. Someone new.

When he entered the dining room, she was already there, and the sight of her stole his breath. She'd repurposed one of his old tunics, belting it at the waist to create a makeshift dress. Her hair was loose around her shoulders, gleaming like liquid gold in the light from the lanterns she'd placed around the room.

She turned at his approach, and her eyes widened as she took him in.

"You look very dashing," she said with a smile.

The compliment stirred something in him—a memory of a time when such praise had been commonplace, expected even. He'd once spent hours on his appearance, reveling in the admiration of others.

Now, he simply inclined his head in acknowledgment, uncomfortable with the praise but warmed by it nonetheless.

The meal she'd programmed was far more elaborate than their usual fare. Dishes appeared one after another from the POTTS, each more flavorful than the last. She'd even managed to program a bottle of wine, which they shared as they ate.

She chatted happily as they dined, telling him about her plans for the keep, asking questions about the garden. He found himself responding more than usual, his words coming more easily in this form.

But as the meal progressed, her cheerful demeanor began to fade. Her smile grew forced, her laughter less frequent. She fell silent for long stretches, staring into her wine with a distant expression.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, the words emerging as a growl despite his efforts to modulate his voice.

She sighed, setting down her glass. “I’m worried about my father. I know I told him that I’d return once I was done here, but I was sure he’d come back anyway once he recovered. But he hasn’t.” She twisted her napkin in her hands. “What if he’s still sick? What if he needs me?”

Guilt lanced through him. His Vultur side recognized the wrongness of keeping her from her family. But his beast snarled at the mere thought of letting her go, even temporarily.

Mine. Keep. Protect.

He struggled to find a compromise that would ease her worry without triggering his beast’s territorial rage. The sight of her unhappiness was unbearable. He needed to find another way to comfort her, to make her smile again.

An idea struck him, and he rose from the table, picking up one of the portable lanterns she’d repaired.

“Come,” he said, extending his hand to her.

She placed her hand in his without hesitation—a simple gesture that never failed to astonish him—and allowed him to lead her through the keep.

He took her to a part of the fortress she hadn't yet explored, a wing that had remained mostly untouched during his rages. At the end of a long corridor they reached a set of double doors, ornately carved with scenes of Vultor history. He pushed them open, revealing a vast room lined with shelves from floor to ceiling. Books filled every available space—bound volumes of various sizes and materials, some ancient, some newer, and data crystals glittered amongst the shelves.

She gasped in delight, stepping into the room with wide eyes.

“A library!” She turned in a slow circle, taking in the extent of the collection. “I had no idea this was here.”

He watched her reaction with satisfaction. His beast had never been interested in this room, preferring to rage through the more opulent spaces that reminded him of his former glory. But he remembered spending time here in his youth, before ambition had consumed him. Dust covered everything, but the room had escaped most of his destructive rage.

She ran her fingers along the spines of several volumes, then selected one bound in dark leather. “Do you read these?” she asked, turning to him.

He shook his head. “Not anymore.”

The beast found written language difficult to process, the symbols meaningless and frustrating. Even now, looking at the page she'd opened made his head ache slightly.

“Yours,” he said, gesturing around the room. “All of it.”



Her eyes widened. “Really? But these must be valuable?—”

“Yours,” he repeated firmly.

Her face lit up with such joy that his breath caught. “Really? I can read any of these?”

He nodded, something warm unfurling in his chest at her delight. This was better than the garden, better than the mechanical systems she’d repaired. This was something that spoke to her soul. She beamed at him, her earlier melancholy momentarily forgotten, and his chest swelled with satisfaction. This was what he wanted—to see her happy, to be the cause of that happiness.

She pulled another volume from a shelf, carefully opening the aged cover.

“I wish I could read your language,” she said wistfully, showing him a page of elegant script.

“Perhaps I can...” He paused, uncertain if the offer was wise. “I can read to you. Someday.” When his mind was clear enough, he meant.

Her smile was radiant. “I’d like that.”

She moved deeper into the library, lantern held high as she explored and he followed, content to watch her excitement as she explored the library, pulling books from shelves and examining them with reverent hands. Most were in the Vultor language, but some were in the common trade tongue that humans used.

She found one that particularly interested her and looked up to find him still watching her. Something in his expression must have revealed his thoughts, because her smile softened.

“Thank you,” she said quietly. “This means more to me than you know.”

He nodded, unable to find words for the emotions churning within him. The sight of her surrounded by his books, her face alight with curiosity and pleasure, stirred something deep and primal in him—not just desire, but a profound sense of rightness.

This was where she belonged. Where they both belonged.

She stopped at a section where maps were stored in long drawers.

“Maps of what?” she asked, pulling one out and unrolling it carefully.

“Cresca,” he said, recognizing the detailed rendering of the continent. “And others.”

She studied the map, tracing the mountain range where his keep was located, then the valley where her village lay. Her finger lingered there, and her expression grew wistful.

The sight pierced him. She was thinking of home, of her father. His beast stirred, possessive and angry, but he pushed it down.

“You miss him,” he said, the words difficult to form through his beast’s resistance.

She nodded, not looking up from the map. “He’s all I have. And he wasn’t well when he left.”

He fought an internal battle, his rational side arguing against his beast’s possessiveness. He couldn’t keep her prisoner forever. She had come willingly, had stayed willingly, but that didn’t make her his property.

“We could...” He struggled with the concept, with the words. “Send message.”

Her head snapped up, eyes wide with hope. “Really? You’d let me contact him?”

The beast howled in protest, but he nodded stiffly. “Small message. Not leave.” He couldn’t bear the thought of her leaving, not yet. Perhaps not ever.

She set the map aside and approached him, reaching up to touch his face. Her fingers traced the line of his jaw, now more defined as his fur continued to recede.

“Thank you,” she said softly. “That would make me feel so much better.”

The simple touch, the gratitude in her eyes, soothed his beast’s agitation. She wasn’t trying to escape. She was acknowledging his concession, his gift.

“Tomorrow,” he promised. “Find way.”

She smiled, and the last of his tension eased. She returned to exploring the library, pulling out more books that caught her interest, exclaiming over illustrations and maps.

He leaned against the wall, content to watch her. The library had never been his favorite place in the keep, but seeing it through her eyes transformed it into something magical.

As she moved through the stacks, lantern light casting her shadow against the shelves, he realized something had shifted between them. The bargain that had brought her here—her service in exchange for her father’s freedom—no longer defined their relationship.

What they were building now was something else entirely. Something his beast craved and his Vultur side had long forgotten how to seek.

### CHAPTER 16

B ella wandered through the shelves, fingers trailing along the spines of countless volumes. His collection was even larger than she'd first realized—hundreds of volumes filled the tall shelves that lined the walls. She pulled out several books at random, discovering that while many were written in the Vultor language with its elegant, flowing script, others were in the common trade language she'd learned as a child.

“You have books in the trade language,” she called over her shoulder, unable to hide her excitement. “Did you collect these yourself?”

He made a low sound that might have been affirmation. He remained by the doorway, watching her with those intense yellow eyes that seemed to track her every movement.

“This is incredible,” she murmured, pulling a slim volume from the shelf. The cover was embossed with intricate designs, the leather soft from age but still intact. She flipped it open, delighted to find she could read it. “It’s a collection of folk tales from the early settlement days.”

When he didn’t respond, she glanced up. He stood watching her from across the room, his massive form half-shadowed. The lantern light caught his eyes, making them glow softly. There was something in his expression that made her heart twist—a profound loneliness, a sadness that seemed etched into his features.

“I’m going to read to you,” she announced, closing the book with a decisive snap.

His brow furrowed in confusion. “Why?”

“Because stories are meant to be shared.” She looked around the room and spotted a massive wooden chair in the corner—carved from a single piece of dark wood with ornate armrests and a high back. Though battered and scratched in places, it had survived whatever rage had destroyed so much of the keep.

“Come here,” she said, walking toward the chair. “This looks big enough for two.”

He hesitated, then came to join her, moving with that fluid, predatory grace that still made her breath catch. He eyed the chair dubiously.

“Sit,” she instructed, patting the seat.

With obvious reluctance, he lowered himself into the chair, his big body filling most of the available space. Before she could decide where to position herself, he reached out and pulled her onto his lap.

“Oh!” The book nearly slipped from her fingers as she found herself settled firmly against him, her side pressed to his chest, his arm a secure band around her.

He made a sound that was half-growl, half-purr. “Better.”

The warmth of his body enveloped her, and she couldn’t disagree. She wiggled slightly to get comfortable, then opened the book, holding it where the lantern light fell across the pages. “These are stories from when humans first came to Cresca,” she explained. “Before the tensions with the Vultor, when everything was new and strange.”

She began to read, her voice soft in the quiet library. The first tale was about a young woman who’d followed mysterious lights into the forest and found herself in a hidden

grove where the trees sang. She slipped into the rhythm of the story, her voice rising and falling with the narrative.

As she read, Malrik gradually relaxed beneath her. His breathing deepened, his chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm against her back. Occasionally, when the story mentioned something familiar to him, he would make a small sound of recognition or his fingers would tighten slightly where they rested against her.

She finished the first story and moved to the second, about a settler who befriended a mountain creature that guarded a pass through the peaks. The parallels to her own situation weren't lost on her, and she wondered if Malrik noticed them too.

His arms had shifted as she read, holding her more securely. One large hand now rested on her hip, thumb occasionally stroking small circles through the fabric of her makeshift dress. The casual intimacy of it sent pleasant shivers through her.

When she finished the chapter, she marked their place and closed the book. "That's enough for tonight, I think. My voice is getting tired."

She turned slightly to look up at him and found his gaze fixed on her face. Her breath caught. She'd seen this look before, felt the pull of it, but never quite so intensely. In the quiet intimacy of the library, with his arms around her and his warmth seeping into her bones, it felt different. Significant. His eyes glowed in the dim light of the lantern, pupils dilated until only a thin ring of yellow remained.

She knew that look by now—hunger, need, desire barely contained. It sent a thrill through her, knowing she could affect this powerful creature so deeply with just her presence, her voice. The beast was there, watching her through those eyes, but so was the male.

Her gaze dropped to his mouth. Without conscious thought, she reached up and

traced the curve of his lower lip with her thumb. His breath hitched, a small sound escaping him that was neither human nor beast.

Time seemed to stop as they stared at each other.

“Malrik,” she whispered, not sure what she meant to say.

He didn’t respond with words. His hand came up to cup her cheek, fingers surprisingly gentle for their size. He mimicked her gesture, his thumb brushing across her lower lip, the touch feather-light but electric.

She hesitated only a moment before leaning up to press her lips to his.

The kiss started softly, a tentative exploration, but then his arms tightened around her, drawing her closer as the kiss deepened. She felt the careful scrape of his fangs against her lip, followed by the soothing stroke of his tongue. Heat pooled low in her belly, and she twisted in his lap to face him more fully, one hand coming up to tangle in his hair.

He growled, the sound vibrating through his chest and into hers. His hand slid up her back to cradle her head, supporting her as he took control of the kiss. It was rougher now, wilder, his fangs and tongue teasing her with a promise of something darker, more primal.

She lost herself in the sensation, in the taste and feel of him. His scent surrounded her—wild and masculine and intoxicating. She wanted more. Needed more.

Her fingers found the opening of his vest, brushing over the exposed skin of his chest before sliding up to his shoulders. She could feel the powerful muscles flexing as he held her close. His skin was hot, almost scorching to the touch. The heat seemed to flow from him to her, igniting a fire in her core that spread through her limbs.

She moaned against his lips, her fingers tightening on his shoulders. Some distant part of her mind marveled at how his form seemed to shift beneath her touch—sometimes fur, sometimes smooth skin, as though his body couldn't decide which shape to hold.

But it didn't matter. This was Malrik—her protector, her companion, her... She couldn't complete the thought, overwhelmed by sensation as his mouth left hers to trail hot kisses down her neck.

His teeth grazed the sensitive spot where her neck met her shoulder, and she gasped, arching against him. The sound that rumbled from his chest was pure beast—possessive and primal.

“Mine,” he growled against her skin.

“Yes,” she whispered, her voice barely audible even to her own ears. “Yours.”

His hands roamed her body, leaving trails of heat wherever they touched. When a big hand closed over her breast she gave a startled cry and he raised his head to look at her, his face etched in harsh lines.

“Touch?”

“Yes,” she whispered again, and his claws sliced through the thin fabric of her makeshift gown before his hand returned to her breast. His touch was gentle despite his strength, and she arched into him, seeking more. He teased her nipples with the rough pads of his fingers, sending jolts of pleasure through her.

The heat between her legs was becoming unbearable. She needed something, something she couldn't put a name to. But she needed it desperately. She shifted in his lap, feeling the hard length of him pressing against her bottom, and a bolt of



desire shot through her, leaving her breathless.

He made that low, rumbling sound again, the vibration resonating deep inside her. His hands were at her waist now, fingers curling around the thin material of her dress, claws poised to tear it away. But he paused, looking up at her as though waiting for permission.

“Yes,” she said again, her voice trembling. “Yes, please.”

He needed no further encouragement. A quick twist of his powerful wrists and the dress fell away, leaving her naked in his lap. Cool air washed over her skin, tightening her nipples and making her shiver with anticipation.

He froze, his eyes locked on her exposed body. His expression was almost reverent as he drank her in, his gaze traveling from her flushed face to the tips of her toes and back again.

“Beautiful,” he growled, the word halting but deliberate. His voice was thick with emotion, and something in her chest tightened at the sound.

“Touch me,” she whispered, not sure exactly what she was asking for.

But he seemed to understand. One large hand came up to cup her breast again, and he flicked his thumb over her nipple, sending a shock of pleasure through her. Then he dipped his head and took the sensitive peak into his mouth, suckling gently.

She cried out, burying her fingers in his hair and pressing herself closer. He moved to her other breast, lavishing attention on it, teasing the nipple with his tongue until she was writhing in his lap. Her hips rocked instinctively, seeking friction to ease the ache building between her thighs. He responded by shifting his grip, one hand sliding down her belly and between her legs.

She tensed, a sudden surge of uncertainty making her hesitate. No male had ever touched her so intimately before. But the hesitation lasted only a moment. She was safe with Malrik. She knew that as surely as she knew her own name. She parted her thighs, granting him access, and he growled his approval.

He gently explored her folds, stroking and teasing until she thought she might go mad from the pleasure. He found a spot that made her gasp and cry out and focused on that, circling it with his thumb while he slipped a thick finger inside her.

It was too much, yet not enough. She clutched at his shoulders, nails digging into his skin as she rocked against his hand. The pressure was building, coiling tighter and tighter within her. His finger moved faster, his thumb pressed harder, and then she was falling, crying out his name as her body shattered in ecstasy.

As she floated down from her release, she opened her eyes to find him watching her intently, his eyes glowing in the dim light. He looked almost... awestruck. As if he'd just witnessed something miraculous and couldn't quite believe it.

"Beautiful," he repeated, his voice even rougher than before. "My Bella. Mine."

Her name sounded like a prayer on his lips.

She smiled up at him, suddenly shy despite the intimacy they'd just shared. "That wasn't exactly what I had in mind when I suggested reading to you."

His answering smile transformed his face, softening the harsh lines and revealing a glimpse of the male he must have been before the curse. "Better," he said simply.

A wave of contentment washed over her, followed by a drowsy warmth that made her eyelids heavy. She yawned, unable to help herself, and nestled closer against his chest.

“Tired,” he observed, his voice a low rumble she could feel through his ribs.

“Mmm,” she agreed, her eyes already closing. “Just need to rest a minute.”

His arms tightened around her, secure and protective. “Sleep.”

She meant to protest that they should return to their nest, but the steady rhythm of his heartbeat beneath her ear was too soothing. The last thing she remembered was the sensation of being lifted, cradled against his broad chest as he carried her from the library.

### CHAPTER 17

Malrik paced the length of his bedchamber, his movements restless and agitated. The moonlight streaming through the windows cast long shadows across the floor, but his eyes adjusted easily to the darkness. Every few steps, he paused to glance over at Bella. The sight of her in his furs—peaceful, trusting, utterly vulnerable—filled him with a potent mixture of possessive satisfaction and gnawing guilt.

She looked so small against the vastness of his nest. Her golden curls spilled across the dark furs, and one hand was tucked beneath her cheek while the other reached toward the empty space where he should be lying. The memory of her body against his, the sweet sounds she'd made as he'd brought her pleasure, burned through him like wildfire.

His claws flexed and retracted as he walked, a physical manifestation of his internal struggle. With each passing day, more of his rational mind returned. He could feel his thoughts clarifying, memories crystallizing from the fog that had enveloped him for so long. The beast remained, prowling beneath his skin, but it no longer consumed him entirely.

And therein lay the problem.

The more his Vultor side reasserted itself, the more clearly he understood the magnitude of what he'd done. He'd taken her from her father, from her life, and kept her prisoner in his broken fortress. The fact that she seemed content, even happy, only intensified his shame. She deserved better than a half-beast who couldn't even maintain his true form.

He ran a hand over his face, surprised to find smooth skin where fur had been. Looking down at his arms, he saw the transformation had progressed further than ever before. His form was almost entirely Vultor now—muscled and powerful, but no longer monstrous.

The beast within him growled its displeasure, fighting to resurface. It didn't trust this change, didn't understand why their mate should want them in this form when the beast was stronger, more capable of protecting her.

He moved to the window, staring out at the mountains silhouetted against the night sky. The borders of his territory stretched before him, but for the first time in years, he found himself thinking beyond those boundaries. To the Vultor enclave. To responsibilities abandoned.

To all he had lost.

Bella shifted, her eyes blinking open to find him. She pushed herself up on one elbow, hair tousled from sleep.

“Malrik?” Her voice was husky, confused. “Why are you over there?”

He didn't answer, transfixed by the sight of the furs falling away to reveal the curve of her shoulder. His beast growled with satisfaction at the mark he'd left there—not a true claiming bite since he hadn't broken the skin, but dark enough to be unmistakable.

She patted the furs beside her, a simple invitation that twisted something in his chest. As if he belonged there. As if she wanted him there.

He hesitated, torn between desire and the growing certainty that he should let her go. She deserved better than a cursed male who couldn't even maintain his true form.

“Come back to bed,” she murmured, eyes already drooping. “It’s cold without you.”

The beast surged forward at her words, possessive and pleased. Mine , it growled. Needs me .

Despite his misgivings, he couldn’t resist her call. The beast wouldn’t allow it, and truthfully, neither would the male. He crossed the room in three long strides and slid beneath the furs, curling his larger body around her smaller one, and gathering her against his chest with a low rumble of contentment.

She nestled against him, fitting perfectly within his arms. Her scent—warm and sweet, now mingled with his own—filled his nostrils, and he buried his face in her hair, inhaling deeply.

“That’s better,” she sighed, already drifting back toward sleep. “You think too much when you’re over there.”

A ghost of a smile touched his lips. She knew him better than anyone ever had, this tiny human female who had somehow reached past the beast to find the male beneath.

He didn’t fall asleep immediately, savoring the weight of her against him, the trust implicit in the way she slept so peacefully in his arms. Both sides of his nature—Vultor and beast—were momentarily soothed by her closeness.

Eventually, his own eyes grew heavy and sleep claimed him.

He stood before the grand mirror in his chambers, adjusting the formal robes that marked him as a noble of the highest rank. The fabric was rich, the design elegant, but his attention was on his face.

Something was wrong with his eyes. The usual green had changed to an odd yellow,

and the pupils seemed more elongated than they should be. He blinked, and for a moment, they flashed with an animal glow.

“A trick of the light,” he muttered, turning away.

But it wasn't. He'd been experiencing moments of disorientation, flashes of rage that seemed to come from nowhere. His control was slipping.

The warning signs had been there for months. His temper, always quick, had become unpredictable. He'd found himself drawn to the forest more often, hunting not for sport but from some primal need. And the dreams—dreams of running on four legs, of tearing into prey with fangs and claws.

He'd dismissed it all. He was Malrik, son of the High Alpha. He was stronger than some primitive curse.

Until the night of the diplomatic reception, when one of his guests had made some perceived slight, and Malrik had nearly transformed in front of the entire assembly. Only his advisor's swift intervention had prevented disaster.

“It is the curse of the unmated,” his advisor had said later, voice low and urgent. “You must find a mate, my lord. Someone to anchor your soul before it is too late.”

He'd sneered at the other male. “Superstitious nonsense. I will master this... inconvenience.”

But as the days passed, the episodes grew worse. His servants began to avoid him. Even his most loyal guards kept their distance.

“Bring me candidates,” he finally ordered, desperation overcoming pride. “Females suitable for mating.”

They came—the daughters of other noble houses, beautiful and accomplished. But none stirred anything in him beyond irritation. Each rejection seemed to accelerate his decline.

The last candidate had been different—not a noble, but a healer’s daughter with quiet dignity and kind eyes. Something in him had responded to her, a flicker of hope.

But that night, the beast had surged forward with unprecedented strength. He’d destroyed his chambers in a blind rage, terrified by his loss of control.

By morning, he knew what he had to do.

“Leave,” he told his household. “All of you. This keep is no longer safe.”

They obeyed, fear overcoming loyalty. Only his advisor remained, standing at the gate as Malrik retreated into the shadows of his home.

“Find her,” his advisor had called after him. “Find your mate before it’s too late.”

But it was already too late. The transformation took him that night, his human consciousness submerged beneath the beast’s instincts. Malrik was gone, and only the beast remained...

He jerked awake, his heart pounding. The dream—no, the memory—lingered, sharp and clear. He’d forgotten so much, buried beneath years of animal existence.

But now he remembered. All of it.

He carefully disentangled himself from her and sat up, raising a hand to rub his face. The sensation of skin against skin—not fur, not claws—made him freeze.



Slowly, disbelievingly, he looked down at his hands. grey-skinned, strong-fingered hands. Vultor hands. His gaze traveled up his arms—muscle but smooth, bearing only the normal amount of hair a Vultor male should have.

He rose silently from the bed and moved to the wardrobe where a cracked mirror still hung. The face that looked back at him was his own—not the beast's, but the face he had worn for most of his life. Angular jaw, high cheekbones, pointed ears that swept back against his skull. His eyes still held an unnatural yellow glow, but they were Vultor eyes, not the beast's.

He was himself again. Whole. The realization made him stagger, and he gripped the edge of the wardrobe to steady himself.

How? Why now? The answer came immediately: Bella. Their connection, their intimacy, had somehow broken through the final barriers of the curse. She had called him back to himself.

A wild, desperate hope surged through him. If he could maintain this form, perhaps he could truly be what she deserved. They could build a life together, not as beast and captive, but as partners.

Even as the thought formed, he felt the transformation beginning—a prickling sensation beneath his skin, a pressure building in his skull. The beast, sensing his moment of weakness, pushed forward.

No. Not now. Not when he was so close.

He fought it, concentrating on Bella, on the memory of her touch, her smile, the sound of her voice reading to him. For a moment, the pressure receded.

Then it surged back, stronger than before. His bones began to shift, muscles

stretching painfully as fur erupted across his skin. He gripped the edge of the dresser, feeling the wood splinter beneath his strengthening claws.

The hope that had flared so brightly moments before collapsed into ash. This was his punishment—to be given glimpses of what he had lost, only to have it snatched away again.

And now there was Bella—beautiful, brave Bella who had kissed him, who had looked at him without fear. What would happen when the beast fully returned? He would never hurt her, but he'd never let her go.

Despair washed over him. He would never be free. Never be worthy of her.

A low, mournful sound built in his throat, rising until it burst from him in a howl of anguish that echoed through the keep.

She bolted upright in bed, eyes wide with alarm. “Malrik? What’s wrong?”

He turned to her, knowing she could see the transformation progressing—fur already covering his arms, his face elongating into a muzzle. But his eyes—his eyes were still his own.

“Cursed,” he managed to say, the word guttural but clear. “I am cursed.”

She slid from the bed, reaching for him. “Malrik, wait?—”

But he couldn't bear her touch—not now, when he understood exactly what he was denying her. Before she could reach him, he turned and fled, racing through the corridors of the keep and out into the night, across the terrace, and into the garden he'd begun to restore for her.

The cool night air hit his lungs as he raced into the forest beyond, the transformation completing with each powerful stride. His consciousness receded as the beast surged forward, drawn by the scent of prey and the freedom of the wild.

But not completely. Not this time.

Even as the beast reveled in its strength, a part of Malrik remained aware. Watching. Remembering.

Remembering Bella.

The beast paused atop a ridge, lifting its muzzle to the sky. Another howl tore from its throat—not of anguish this time, but of determination.

The curse would not win. Not again. Not when he had finally found something worth fighting for.

Someone worth becoming whole for.

The beast turned back toward the keep, toward the female who smelled of sunshine and metal and home. It would return to her. He would find a way to break the curse. He had to.

Because for the first time in years, he wanted more than survival. He wanted a future.

A future with Bella.

### CHAPTER 18

B ella stood frozen at the window long after Malrik's howl had faded into the night. The word "cursed" echoed in her mind, his anguish so raw it had left her shaken.

She wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly cold despite the warmth of the keep. The nest of furs behind her still held their combined scent and body heat, but without him, it felt empty.

"What happened to you?" she whispered to the darkness.

Part of her wanted to follow him, but the practical side of her brain knew better. The mountains were treacherous at night, even for someone who knew them well. And if Malrik didn't want to be found, she wouldn't find him.

She crawled back into the furs, burying her face in the spot where he usually slept. She kept expecting to hear him return, to feel his weight settle beside her on the furs. But the minutes stretched into hours, and still he didn't come back.

The vast bedroom felt empty without his presence. She'd grown accustomed to his warmth, the rhythmic sound of his breathing, even his occasional growls and snuffles in sleep. Without him, the silence pressed in on her from all sides.

"He'll come back," she told herself firmly. "He always does."

But as the night deepened, doubt crept in. What if this time was different? What if whatever had happened to him tonight had driven him away for good?

Sleep came in fitful bursts, interrupted by every sound from outside. Each time she jerked awake, hoping to hear his return, only to be met with silence.

Dawn arrived with pale fingers of light stretching across the room, and still no Malrik. She got up, splashed water on her face, and pulled on her coveralls. The familiar routine should have been comforting, but her hands moved mechanically, her mind elsewhere.

She wandered through the keep, touching the walls as she passed. It was remarkable how much they'd accomplished in such a short time. The main corridors were clear of debris, several rooms had been restored to functionality, and the little cleaning robot whirred along diligently, scrubbing away years of grime.

In the kitchen, she programmed the POTTs for breakfast but found she had no appetite. She left the food untouched and continued her aimless circuit of the keep.

The ballroom looked different today—less imposing, more melancholy. Dust motes danced in the sunbeams that streamed through the high windows. She remembered how Malrik had watched her explore this room, his eyes reflecting something like nostalgia.

Had he hosted balls here? The thought of him in formal attire, moving with his usual grace, made her smile despite her worry.

She crossed to the terrace doors and looked out at the garden. The stark contrast between the wild, overgrown sections and the areas Malrik had cleared made her chest ache. He'd worked so hard to create something beautiful for her.

"Where are you?" she murmured, scanning the tree line for any sign of movement.

Back inside, she tried to focus on work. The lighting system was her current project,

but after dropping the same circuit board three times, she set it aside with a frustrated sigh. She couldn't concentrate. Every few minutes, she found herself looking up, expecting to see Malrik's huge body filling the doorway.

The thought suddenly struck her that she could leave. The outer doors weren't locked. The path back to the village was straightforward enough. Her father was probably worried sick. She could walk away right now.

The idea lasted exactly three seconds before she dismissed it.

She told herself it was because she'd made a promise to repair the keep. She'd given her word, and she didn't break her promises. That was all.

But even as she thought it, she knew it was a lie. She wasn't staying because of some bargain. She was staying because the thought of leaving Malrik alone in his pain was unbearable.

"Cursed," he'd said. What did that mean? Was it just a figure of speech, or something more literal? She decided to return to the library. If Malrik couldn't—or wouldn't—explain what was happening to him, perhaps she could find some answers there.

The room was exactly as they'd left it the night before—the massive chair still pulled toward the center of the room, the book they'd been reading still open on the small table beside it. She ran her fingers over the leather binding, remembering the warmth of his body as she'd sat on his lap, the rumble of his chest as he'd occasionally commented on the story, the pleasure he'd brought her.

Setting that memory aside, she began searching the shelves methodically. Most of the books were in Vultor, but there were several sections with texts in the common trade language.

She ran her fingers along the spines, looking for anything that might help. A thick volume caught her eye—"Vultor Physiology and Social Structures." She pulled it down and settled into the massive chair they'd shared just yesterday.

Hours passed as she flipped through pages, absorbing information about Vultor biology, their dual forms, their pack hierarchies. Some of it she knew from general knowledge, but much was new to her.

It wasn't until early afternoon that she found something promising. A section titled "Mating Bonds and Biological Imperatives."

"The mating bond is sacred among the Vultor," she read aloud, her voice hushed in the quiet room. "Once a Vultor recognizes their true mate, a biological imperative activates, compelling them to complete the bond. Separation from a recognized mate causes extreme distress."

Her heart quickened as she read, learning how mated pairs shared a deep connection, how they balanced each other's beast and Vultor sides.

Then she found it—a small section at the chapter's end, titled "The Curse of the Unmated."

"Vultor who reach maturity without finding a mate may experience periods of instability between their dual natures. As the years pass, this can develop into what is colloquially known as 'the curse of the unmated.' The beast side gradually dominates, suppressing the Vultor consciousness until it is completely subsumed."

Her hands trembled as she continued reading.

"Once fully manifested, the curse is considered irreversible. The afflicted becomes permanently trapped in beast form, with only primitive instincts remaining. Such

cases are rare but documented throughout Vultor history, often in individuals who rejected potential mates out of pride or ambition.”

She closed the book with a snap. That couldn’t be right. Malrik wasn’t permanently trapped—she’d seen his Vultor side emerging more frequently, heard him speaking in complete sentences. He was fighting his way back.

But the text had said the curse was irreversible.

She stared into space, thinking back over their time together. Malrik had been almost completely beast when she’d first arrived. Then, gradually, he’d begun to change. His speech had improved. He’d shown more control, more awareness of his surroundings.

What had caused that change? Her presence?

A memory surfaced—that first morning together, when she’d woken in his arms. The feel of his body against hers, his hand no longer furred and clawed. The word he’d growled against her neck.

“Mate.”

Was that it? Was she truly his mate? Was that why his Vultor side was emerging?

It seemed impossible. She was human, not Vultor. And yet...it would explain so much. His possessiveness. His refusal to let her leave. The way he always needed to be near her, touching her.

The way she felt drawn to him, despite everything.

She leaned back in the chair, mind racing. If she was his mate—if her presence was helping him break free of this curse—what did that mean for them? For her?



Could that be it? Was she somehow his mate? Was that why his Vultor side was emerging more frequently when he was with her?

The idea should have frightened her, but instead, a warm feeling spread through her chest. If she was his mate—his true mate—then perhaps she could help him break this curse.

The sound of movement in the corridor outside jerked her from her thoughts. Her heart leaped as she recognized the familiar cadence.

Malrik.

She rushed to the doorway just as he appeared at the end of the hall. The sight of him made her breath catch. His clothes—the pants and vest he'd worn for their dinner—hung in tatters from his body. Blood seeped from dozens of scratches across his chest and arms, as though he'd fought his way through a thornbush. His fur was matted with dirt and leaves.

But it was his eyes that held her—wild and glowing with an intensity that sent a shiver down her spine. Not with fear, she realized, but anticipation.

He stalked toward her, his movements fluid despite his obvious exhaustion. There was purpose in every step, a determination that made her pulse quicken.

“I thought you weren't coming back,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

He didn't respond, but each step brought him closer, his huge body seeming to fill the corridor. There was something different about him—not fully beast, not fully Vultor, but something in between. The intelligence in his eyes was unmistakable, but so was the primal hunger.

When he reached her, he stopped, looming over her. His chest heaved with each breath, and she could smell the forest on him—pine and earth and something uniquely him.

“Malrik,” she whispered. “What happened to you?”

He didn’t answer. Instead, he reached for her, one clawed hand cupping her face with exquisite gentleness. His eyes searched hers, looking for something she couldn’t name.

“Mine,” he growled, the word rumbling from deep in his chest.

The book’s words echoed in her mind. Once a Vultor recognizes their true mate, a biological imperative activates. The mating bond is sacred.

In that moment, she understood. This wasn’t just about a bargain or repairs or even friendship. This was about belonging. About finding the one person in the universe who saw past the beast to the soul beneath.

“Yes,” she whispered, reaching up to touch his face. “Yes, I am.”

With a sound that was half growl, half moan, he swept her into his arms. She went willingly, wrapping her arms around his neck as he cradled her against his chest. Despite his intimidating appearance, his hold was gentle, reverent even.

As he carried her through the keep, she knew they were heading towards his chamber—towards the nest of furs that had become theirs. She should have been nervous, perhaps even afraid, but all she felt was a profound sense of rightness.

“Yours,” she whispered against his neck, feeling his arms tighten around her in response. “And you’re mine.”

The curse of the unmated, the book had called it. But Malrik wasn't unmated anymore.

He had her.

And she, against all odds and expectations, had found exactly where she belonged.

### CHAPTER 19

M alrik's beast roared in triumph as he carried Bella back to their nest. Her scent filled his nostrils—sweet, intoxicating, and now tinged with desire. His. She was his. The knowledge thundered through his blood, drowning out all other thoughts.

The journey through the corridors of the keep passed in a blur. His beast cared nothing for the repairs they'd made together, the spaces they'd cleaned, the small victories they'd celebrated. It wanted only the safety of their den, the privacy of their nest.

When he shouldered open the door to their chamber, the afternoon sunlight spilled across the nest of furs. He laid her down as gently as he could considering the tremors of need that shook his body.

She gazed up at him, her eyes wide but unafraid. Her hair spread across the furs like liquid gold, and her chest rose and fell with quick, shallow breaths.

Something primal and possessive surged through him. With one swift movement, he tore away the fabric of her clothes, shredding them as if they were made of paper. His claws retracted just in time to avoid marking her skin. Her beauty had stunned him the night before, but she looked even more beautiful now, her pale skin glowing in the golden sunlight.

He bent his head to the hollow of her throat, inhaling deeply. Her scent intoxicated him, stirring his desire even higher. The need to claim her, to mark her as his, beat like a drum in his veins.

But beneath the hunger and instinct, a fragment of his rational mind remained. The memory of her gentle touch, her laughter, her trust—his Vultor side recognized the precious gift she offered.

“Mine,” he growled again, the word barely recognizable through his fangs.

She didn’t flinch. Instead, she reached for him, her slender fingers tracing the contours of his face.

“Yours,” she agreed, her voice steady despite the flush that colored her cheeks.

The beast howled its approval as Malrik lowered his head to claim her mouth. The kiss was hungry, demanding, a physical manifestation of the need that had driven him to the edge of madness. Her lips parted beneath his, welcoming him, and the sweet taste of her nearly undid him.

Her hands moved to his shoulders, then down his chest, pushing aside the tatters remains of his clothing. Every sensation was heightened, every touch magnified.

“You’re hurt,” she murmured against his mouth when her fingers brushed one of his wounds.

“Doesn’t matter,” he managed to growl.

She smiled against his lips, then gently pushed him back. “Let me see you.”

The beast bristled at the command, but something else—something that had been buried beneath fur and fang and claw—responded to the care in her voice. He allowed her to push the remnants of his clothing away, exposing the full extent of his injuries.

“What happened?” she asked, her fingers ghosting over a particularly deep scratch that ran from his shoulder to his sternum.

“Trees,” he grunted. “Rocks. Didn’t care.”

She frowned at him. “You did this to yourself?”

He couldn’t explain how he’d thrown himself against the unyielding forest, how he’d welcomed the physical pain as a distraction from the turmoil within. How could he tell her that he’d been fighting a war against himself, against the beast that both was and wasn’t him?

But as she continued to touch him, to trace the lines of his body with gentle fingers, something shifted inside him. The beast, which had been raging and clawing for control, began to settle. Not retreating, but merging with something else—something that remembered what it was to be Vultor, to be male, to be Malrik.

The change started slowly. First, the fur along his arms began to recede, revealing slate-gray skin beneath. His claws retracted fully, his fingers lengthening into the strong, dexterous hands of his Vultor form. He felt his face shifting, the muzzle shortening, his features becoming more defined.

Not wholly Vultor—the beast was still too close to the surface for that—but more so than he had been since his initial transformation.

She watched the change, her eyes widening as his face transformed before her. When it was done, she reached up to touch his cheek, her fingers tracing the line of his jaw, now angular rather than lupine.

“Malrik,” she whispered, and the sound of his name on her lips sent a shudder through him.

He looked down at her, seeing her clearly for the first time with eyes that were more Vultor than beast. She was so beautiful—not in the cold, distant way of the Vultor females who had once been paraded before him, but in a way that reached inside him and touched something he'd thought long dead.

The sight of her—vulnerable, trusting, her body bared to him—made him hesitate. The beast urged him to take, to claim, to mark. But the part of him that was awakening, that remembered honor and duty and the weight of choices, made him pause.

“Are you sure?” he asked, his voice rough but the words distinct. “This is what you want?”

Her smile was like sunrise after an endless night.

“Yes,” she said simply. “It is.”

He shook his head, even as his body trembled with the effort of restraint. “I cannot hold this form,” he warned her. “The beast... it will return.”

She only shrugged, her hands continuing their exploration of his transformed body. “It doesn't matter to me,” she told him. “Beast or Vultor—you're still Malrik. You're still mine.”

The words broke something open inside him—a dam that had held back emotions he'd refused to acknowledge, even before the curse. Relief, gratitude, and something deeper, something he wasn't ready to name, flooded through him.

With a groan that was half beast, half Vultor, he lowered himself to her, careful to distribute his weight on his forearms. She was so small beneath him, so fragile compared to his bulk. Yet there was nothing fragile about the way she wrapped her

arms around him, drawing him closer.

Their lips met again, but this kiss was different—no less passionate, but tempered with something more. Tenderness. Care. The acknowledgment that this was more than the satisfaction of a primal need.

Her hands moved over him, learning the contours of his body as it shifted between forms. Sometimes her fingers encountered fur, sometimes skin, but she never faltered, never showed disgust or fear.

He explored her with equal fascination. The softness of her skin amazed him, as did the small sounds she made when he found particularly sensitive spots. He traced the curve of her waist, the swell of her breast, marveling at how perfectly she fit against him despite their differences.

When his hand moved between her thighs, finding her wet and ready for him, the beast surged forward again, demanding satisfaction. But he held it in check, determined to give her pleasure before taking his own.

He watched her face as he touched her, memorizing every expression, every gasp and sigh. The way her eyes fluttered closed. The way her lips parted on a moan. He kept his touch light at first, teasing her until her hips lifted from the furs, urging him on. Then he slid one finger inside her, feeling her inner walls clench around him.

“Yes,” she whispered, her voice barely audible.

He added a second finger, curling them slightly as he withdrew, seeking the spot that would make her gasp. When he found it, he stroked it again and again, his thumb circling her clit.

Her breathing grew ragged, her skin flushing pink. He could feel her tightening



around his fingers, her body drawing closer to release.

“Mine,” he growled again, his voice almost unrecognizable as he fought to hold the beast in check.

“Please,” she whispered, her voice breaking on the word. “Malrik, please.”

The sound of his name, spoken with such need, nearly undid him. He positioned himself between her thighs, the head of his cock pressing against her entrance.

“Look at me,” he commanded, his voice deeper than usual as the beast stirred restlessly.

Her eyes opened, meeting his without hesitation. In their depths, he saw not just desire but acceptance. Trust. She knew what he was—beast and Vultor both—and still she welcomed him.

With a single, powerful thrust, he claimed her.

The sensation was overwhelming—tight heat enveloping him, her body yielding to his invasion even as it clung to him, drawing him deeper. He stilled, giving her time to adjust, fighting the beast’s urge to rut mindlessly.

Her nails dug into his shoulders, not to push him away but to pull him closer. “Don’t stop,” she gasped.

Permission granted, he began to move. Slowly at first, then with increasing urgency as her body responded to his. Each thrust drove him deeper, not just into her body but into a connection that transcended the physical.

The beast howled its approval, but for once, it didn’t fight for control. Instead, it

seemed content to share in the pleasure, to bask in the rightness of their joining.

He felt himself shifting again, fur sprouting along his spine, claws extending from his fingertips. But she didn't recoil. Instead, she wrapped her legs around his waist, urging him on, accepting all of him.

Her hands moved restlessly over his back, tracing the boundary where fur gave way to skin. When she arched up to press her lips to his throat, he felt the vibration of his own growl against her mouth.

"Mine," he growled again, the word clearer than before despite the fangs that had extended in his mouth.

"Yours," she agreed breathlessly. "And you're mine."

The claim, so boldly stated, sent a shock of pleasure through him. Yes, he was hers. Had been from the moment he'd caught her scent. Would be until his last breath.

He increased his pace, driven by the need to make her his in every way possible. Her body tightened around him, her breathing becoming more erratic. She was close. He could smell it in the change of her scent, see it in the flush that spread across her skin.

"Let go," he urged, his voice a mixture of beast's growl and Vultor's command. "Let go for me, Bella."

The sound of her name seemed to push her over the edge. She cried out, her body convulsing around him as pleasure claimed her. The sight of her—head thrown back, eyes closed in ecstasy, his name on her lips—was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

His own release followed swiftly, tearing through him with an intensity that bordered

on pain. He roared as he emptied himself inside her, marking her as his in the most primal way possible, but mindful of her untried body, he forced himself to pull free before his knot expanded.

For a moment, he hovered over her, arms trembling with the effort of holding himself up. Then, carefully, he rolled to the side, bringing her with him so that she lay sprawled across his chest.

They lay in silence, their breathing gradually slowing. He stroked her hair, marveling at its softness between his fingers—fingers that were once again more claw than hand. The transformation was reversing, the beast reclaiming territory. But for the first time, he didn't fight it. The beast was part of him now, and Bella had accepted both.

“Bella,” he whispered, her name like a prayer on his lips.

She raised her head, her eyes meeting his. In them, he saw not just the afterglow of physical pleasure but something deeper, something that made his chest tighten with an emotion he hadn't felt in so long he barely recognized it.

Hope.

“I'm here,” she murmured, pressing a kiss to his chest, directly over his heart. “I'm not going anywhere.”

The beast purred its satisfaction, but it was Malrik who tightened his arms around her, holding her close as if she might disappear. For the first time since the curse had taken hold, he felt something like peace.

“Mine,” he whispered one last time, the word no longer a claim of possession but a promise of protection. Of devotion.

As sleep claimed him, one final thought drifted through his mind: For the first time in longer than he could remember, he was not alone.

### CHAPTER 20

B ella woke to the familiar weight of Malrik's arm draped across her waist. Sunlight streamed through the windows, painting the stone walls with golden light. She shifted slightly, careful not to disturb him, and glanced down at the arm holding her close. Thick grey fur covered it once more, the sharp claws now fully extended in sleep.

It didn't bother her. Not even a little.

She traced her fingers lightly over the fur, feeling the powerful muscles beneath. The contrast between his strength and the gentleness with which he held her made her heart swell.

I love him in any form , she thought, then froze as the realization hit her fully. Love. She loved him. This creature who was both beast and man, who had terrified her at first meeting and now made her feel safer than she'd ever felt before.

She loved his fierce protectiveness, his unexpected gentleness, the way he looked at her as though she were the most precious thing in his world. She even loved his gruff, demanding ways—how he'd growl orders at her one moment, then present her with flowers the next.

But as quickly as the happiness came, worry crept in to replace it.

What about her father? She'd expected him to return once he'd recovered, but there had been no sign of him. What if he was still sick? The wagon should have taken him straight to Agatha's, but what if something had gone wrong? And even if he was fine,

what would he do without her? They'd been a team since her mother died, just the two of them against the world.

She bit her lip, troubled by the conflict between her new love and her family responsibilities. She couldn't take Malrik back to the village, even if he agreed to go. The villagers might be tentatively open to the idea of trading with the Vultor, but most of them still regarded them with suspicion at best, outright fear at worst. They would be even less tolerant of Malrik's beast form.

Behind her, Malrik stirred. His arm tightened briefly around her waist before relaxing again. She felt him nuzzle into her hair, breathing deeply.

"Morning," he rumbled, his voice rough with sleep but clearer than it had been in their early days together.

She rolled over to face him, forcing a smile. "Good morning."

His eyes, glowing softly in the morning light, narrowed as he studied her face. The fur around his muzzle had receded slightly, revealing more of his Vultor features. It was a strange blend of both forms, but she found it oddly appealing.

"What's wrong?" he asked, reaching up to brush a strand of hair from her face with surprising delicacy for such large claws.

She sighed, knowing there was no point in hiding her concerns. He could read her too well now.

"I'm still worried about my father," she admitted. "I was sure he'd come back once he recovered, but he hasn't. What if he's really sick? Or what if the wagon malfunctioned and never made it to Agatha's? Do you think we can send that message today?"

His face darkened immediately. A low growl rumbled in his chest, and his arm tightened around her possessively. The beast was clearly displeased at the thought of her concern for another, even her father.

But then, to her surprise, he sighed heavily. The growl faded, and his arm loosened its grip.

“You should... check on him instead,” he said reluctantly, each word sounding like it was physically painful to speak.

She blinked, surprised by his concession. “Really?”

He nodded once, sharply, his eyes averted. “He is your father.”

The simple statement held so much meaning. He was acknowledging her bond with her father, putting her needs above his instinctive desire to keep her isolated with him. It was perhaps the most selfless thing he’d done since she’d met him.

A sudden idea struck her. “What if we check on him? Together?”

His head snapped back toward her, his eyes widening. “We?”

“Yes,” she said, warming to the idea. “We could go to Agatha’s together. You know her, right? She seemed to know about you when I spoke with her before.”

He frowned, looking uncertain. “Agatha is... old memories. Not all good.”

“But she helped me find you,” she pointed out. “And I sent my father to her because I thought she would help him.” She reached up to touch his face, running her fingers along the edge where fur met skin. “I don’t want to leave you, Malrik. Not even for a day. But I need to know my father is all right.”

He leaned into her touch, his eyes half-closing. “Dangerous,” he muttered. “For me. For you, with me.”

“I’m not afraid,” she said firmly. “And I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

A rumbling sound that might have been a laugh escaped him. “You protect beast?”

“Yes,” she said without hesitation. “Just like you protect me.”

He studied her face for a long moment, as if searching for any sign of deception. Finding none, he sighed again.

“We go,” he finally agreed. “But careful. Quick. No village.”

Relief and gratitude washed over her. “Thank you,” she whispered, pressing a kiss to his muzzle. “We’ll be careful, I promise. Just to Agatha’s and back.”

He nodded, then pulled her closer, burying his face in her neck and breathing deeply, as if trying to memorize her scent. She wrapped her arms around him, feeling the way his body shifted slightly beneath her touch—fur receding in some places, muscles changing shape.

“Should leave soon,” he murmured against her skin. “Before I change my mind.”

She smiled against his shoulder. “Let me get dressed and pack a few things.”

He reluctantly released her, and she slid from the bed, wincing at little as previously untried muscles protested. She did her best to hide it from him, afraid he would insist on putting off their trip. As she dressed, she glanced back to see him watching her with those intense yellow eyes, a mix of emotions playing across his features.



“You’re worried,” she observed, pulling her hair back and securing it with a strip of cloth.

“Humans fear beast,” he said simply. “Vultor... remember Malrik. Neither good.”

She crossed back to the bed and took his face between her hands, forcing him to look at her. “I don’t care what anyone else thinks. You’re mine, and I’m yours. That’s all that matters.”

Something fierce and possessive flashed in his eyes at her words. “Mine,” he agreed, his voice dropping to a growl.

“And I’m not ashamed of you,” she continued firmly. “Not of any part of you. Beast or Vultor or whatever’s in between. I?—”

She hesitated, almost afraid to say it out loud and he went very still. Before she could gather the courage, his arms were around her, pulling her against his chest with such force that it knocked the breath from her lungs.

“Bella,” he whispered, his voice thick with emotion. “My Bella.”

She wasn’t sure if it was a declaration of love, but she felt it all the same—in the tremor that ran through his powerful body, in the careful way his claws avoided scratching her, in the way he pressed his face to her hair and breathed her name like a prayer.

When he finally released her, there was a new determination in his eyes. “We go,” he said firmly. “Find father. Then return home.”

Home . The word sent a wave of warmth through her. This crumbling keep with its broken tech and overgrown gardens had become home to her, in a way the village

never had. Because he was here.

“I’ll pack some food,” she said, her practical nature reasserting itself. “And we should bring water. Do you know the way to Agatha’s from here?”

He nodded. “Through woods. Avoid main paths.”

“Good plan,” she agreed, heading toward the door. “I’ll meet you in the kitchen in a few minutes.”

She packed dried meat and fruit from the POTTS, filled water containers, and added the small medical kit she’d assembled from supplies found in the keep. Better to be prepared for anything.

When she returned to the kitchen, Malrik was waiting. He’d dressed in what remained of his clothes from the night before—the pants torn but wearable, the vest abandoned as unsalvageable. He’d found a cloak, which he’d draped over his shoulders, the hood pulled up to shadow his face.

“Ready?” she asked, shouldering her pack.

He nodded once, then moved to take the pack from her. “I carry.”

She relinquished it without argument, knowing it would make him feel better to help. “Lead the way.”

As they stepped outside into the bright morning light, she felt a strange mix of excitement and apprehension. This journey would be their first real test as a couple—facing the outside world together.

She glanced up at Malrik, noting the tension in his shoulders, the wary way he

scanned their surroundings. Reaching out, she slipped her hand into his, feeling his claws carefully retract as his fingers closed around hers.

“Together,” she said softly.

He looked down at her, his yellow eyes glowing beneath the hood of his cloak. “Together,” he agreed.

And with that, they set off into the forest, leaving the safety of the keep behind.

He had suggested that they take the forest path rather than the road, preferring the concealment it offered, and she hadn’t objected. The path was narrow and winding, clearly not meant for regular travel. Malrik moved with silent grace despite his size, while she had to watch her footing on the uneven ground. He kept her close, occasionally lifting her over fallen logs or guiding her around thorny patches.

“How far is it to Agatha’s?” she asked after they’d been walking for about an hour.

“Half day,” he replied, his head constantly swiveling as he monitored their surroundings. “If no trouble.”

She squeezed his hand reassuringly. “We’ll be fine. And it’ll be worth it to know my father is okay.”

He glanced down at her, his expression softening slightly. “He is... good father?”

“The best,” she said without hesitation. “After my mother died, he raised me on his own. Taught me everything he knew about mechanics, never once told me I couldn’t do something because I was a girl.” She smiled at the memories. “He used to say that my mother would have been so proud of my clever hands.”

Malrik was quiet for a moment, absorbing this. “You miss him,” he finally said. It wasn’t a question.

“I do,” she admitted. “But that doesn’t mean I want to leave you. I just need to know he’s all right.”

He nodded, seeming to understand. “And after?”

“After we make sure he’s okay?” She thought for a moment. “I’d like to go back to the keep with you. It’s become home. But maybe we could visit my father sometimes? And perhaps he could visit us, once he’s fully recovered?”

He didn’t answer immediately, and she could almost see the conflict playing out behind his eyes—the beast’s territorial instincts warring with his growing Vultor rationality.

“Perhaps,” he finally said, which she took as a significant concession.

They continued in companionable silence as she admired the beauty of the forest. Despite growing up near these mountains, she’d rarely ventured this deep into the woods. Everything seemed more vibrant here—the greens deeper, the flowers brighter, the air fresher.

Suddenly, Malrik froze. His head snapped up, nostrils flaring as he scented the air. A low growl built in his chest.

“What is it?” she whispered, instantly alert.

“Others,” he growled. “Coming this way.”

### CHAPTER 21

M alrik tested the air, seeking out more information about who approached. Vultor . Not just one, but several. A patrol.

He froze, pulling Bella behind him with one arm while the other hand went to his blade. His beast form was weapon enough, but his Vultor side remembered the comfort of steel and he'd selected a blade from his armory before they left. The familiar motion had triggered another memory—training yards, warriors bowing before him, his arrogant dismissal of their skills. He growled low in his throat, pushing the memory away as his beast surged forward, fur rippling across his skin, claws extending fully.

“What is it?” she whispered, her hand on his arm.

“Vultor. I'll protect you,” he promised.

“I know.” She reached for his hand, fearlessly twining her fingers with his. “And I'll protect you too.”

The absurdity of it—this small human female protecting him—should have angered his beast. Instead, warmth spread through his chest. She had already protected him in ways she couldn't understand, bringing him back from the edge of oblivion one touch, one smile at a time.

Although his beast urged him to confront the strange males, he scanned their surroundings, looking for cover. If they could hide, wait for the patrol to pass... No.

The wind would carry their scent—his scent—to the warriors. They would investigate.

“We should go to meet them,” she said softly. “If they’re Agatha’s friends, they might help us.”

His beast snarled at the suggestion, territorial instincts flaring, but his Vultor side recognized the logic. Better to face them on his terms than be hunted down.

“Stay behind me,” he ordered, moving forward with measured steps.

They hadn’t gone far when the patrol appeared—three warriors moving with the silent grace of predators. They spotted Malrik immediately, freezing in place with expressions of shock and wariness.

The leader, an older male with a hard face, stepped forward, hand on his weapon. “Identify yourself,” he commanded in the Vultor tongue.

He struggled to respond in the same language, the words feeling foreign on his tongue after so long. “Malrik,” he finally managed.

The name sent a visible ripple through the patrol. The leader’s eyes widened, then narrowed in suspicion.

“Malrik died seasons ago,” he said. “We heard you’d been seen, but the beast that wears his form is not welcome in these lands.”

He growled, his beast responding to the threat in the warrior’s tone. His transformation advanced further—fur spreading across his chest and arms, his face elongating slightly.

“He is Malrik,” Bella said, stepping out from behind him despite his attempt to keep her sheltered. “And I am his mate.”

The declaration silenced the patrol. They stared at her with undisguised astonishment, then back at Malrik with new assessment in their eyes.

“Another human mate?” one of the younger warriors muttered.

The leader studied them both, his gaze lingering on the places where Malrik’s transformation seemed to halt—not fully beast, not fully Vultor. “Impossible,” he said, but with less certainty.

“I’ve seen many impossible things,” Bella replied, her voice steady. “Including a beast who remembers being Vultor.”

The other young warrior stepped forward, his stance less threatening. “Is this true? You remember?”

He nodded stiffly. “Pieces. More... with her.”

The patrol exchanged glances, a silent communication passing between them. The leader finally sheathed his weapon, though his posture remained alert.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“To see Agatha,” Bella answered. “I think my father is staying with her because he’s been ill. We need to check on him.”

At the mention of Agatha, the patrol relaxed further. One of them even smiled faintly.

“We can escort you,” the leader offered, his gaze fixed on Bella rather than Malrik.

“These woods can be dangerous for humans.”

The offer, innocent as it might be, sent a surge of possessive rage through Malrik. His transformation accelerated, his beast rising to the surface with a roar that echoed through the forest. He stepped between Bella and the patrol, fur bristling, teeth bared.

“Mine,” he snarled, the word barely intelligible through his elongated jaw.

The patrol tensed, hands returning to weapons, and his anger increased at the threatening gestures.

“Malrik.” Bella’s voice cut through his rage as she placed a gentle hand on his arm. “They’re just trying to help.”

Her touch anchored him, slowing his transformation. He breathed deeply, struggling to rein in his beast.

“We don’t need an escort,” she told the patrol firmly. “But thank you for the offer.”

The leader studied them both, his expression unreadable. “Alpha Seren should know of this,” he said finally. “Malrik’s return—and his... condition—is a matter for the council.”

Malrik tensed again at the mention of Seren. Fragments of memory surfaced—a younger Vultor male, serious and stern, one of the few who had earned his respect before the curse.

“Will you meet with him?” the warrior added.

This time the question was directed at both of them, an acknowledgment of their bond that Malrik did not miss. His beast wanted to refuse, to take Bella and retreat to



the safety of his keep, but his emerging Vultur side recognized the importance of this moment.

“After Agatha,” he managed, the words coming with effort.

The leader nodded. “We will send word to Seren. He can meet you at the healer’s dwelling.”

Bella squeezed his arm in silent support. “Thank you,” she told the patrol. “We appreciate your understanding.”

The warriors backed away, still watching him warily. “The old path will take you directly to Agatha’s,” one of them said. “It’s faster than following the stream.”

With that, they melted back into the forest, though he knew they would not go far. They would observe, report back. His return would be known to the entire pack before nightfall.

As they resumed their journey, he found himself caught in a storm of conflicting emotions. Fear of rejection warred with a newfound desire to find a place amongst his kind. Shame over what he had become battled with pride that Bella had claimed him as her mate before others.

“Are you all right?” she asked after they had walked in silence for some time.

“Yes,” he said, surprising himself with the truth of it. “I am... beginning.”

“Beginning what?”

He looked down at her, at the small female who had somehow found the male beneath the monster, who had chosen to stay even knowing what he was.

“Beginning to remember,” he said. “Who I was. Who I could be.”

She smiled, reaching up to touch his face. “I like who you are right now.”

The simple statement washed over him like a balm, soothing both beast and Vultor. He leaned into her touch, savoring the connection.

“Are you worried about meeting Seren?” she added.

He considered the question, searching for words to express the chaos within him. “Uncertain,” he finally said. “Seren... powerful. Respected.”

She nodded thoughtfully.

“He’s the one who’s been negotiating a trade alliance with the mayor, although I heard something happened at the bonding ceremony. Do you think he’s dangerous?”

“Perhaps.” He frowned, trying to piece together memories of the stern warrior. “Fair, though. Honorable.”

“Then he’ll listen to us,” she said with a confidence he couldn’t share. “Two of my friends have Vultor mates and he supported their relationships. I’m sure he’ll support us as well.”

He wished he could believe it would be so simple. He’d never heard of a cursed male returning to his pack, let alone one bonded to a human female. It would challenge everything they believed about their kind.

Yet as they continued toward Agatha’s dwelling, a strange sense of possibility began to take root alongside his fear. For the first time since his transformation, he allowed himself to imagine a future beyond his isolated existence—a future where he might

walk among his kind again, Bella at his side.

The thought was both terrifying and exhilarating and despite his doubts, he found himself smiling as they continued through the forest.

### CHAPTER 22

B ella's heart pounded as they approached Agatha's cottage. The half-timbered building was perched at the edge of Vultor territory, surrounded by a lush garden overflowing with flowers and herbs. It looked exactly the way she remembered it, but everything else felt different. She was different.

She glanced at Malrik, who'd shifted more toward his Vultor form as they neared the edge of forest though his eyes still glowed faintly and his movements retained his usual predatory grace. He paused for a moment, nostrils flaring as he scanned their surroundings.

"It's safe," she assured him, squeezing his hand. "Agatha's place is private. No one will see us here."

He gave a terse nod but the tension in his body didn't ease. "I smell him. Your father. He's inside."

She couldn't suppress the wave of relief that washed through her. "Is he... can you tell if he's well?"

His nostril flared and he tilted his head, considering. "Alive. Weak. Not dying."

Not the most reassuring assessment, but better than the alternatives. Her steps slowed as she approached the door, suddenly nervous. What would her father think of her now? Of her choices? Of Malrik?

Before she could knock, the door swung open. Agatha stood there, silver hair pulled back in a practical bun. Her eyes traveled from Bella to Malrik, and then a broad smile crossed her face.

“Well,” she said after a moment. “You certainly don’t waste time, do you, girl?”

She blinked. “I... what?”

Agatha ignored the question and waved them in. “Come, come. Standing on my doorstep for all to see. In you go.”

Malrik ducked to enter the low doorway, his massive body making the cottage seem suddenly tiny. He stood awkwardly in the center of the main room, clearly uncomfortable with the confined space.

“Father?” she called, moving toward the back bedroom.

“Bella?” Her father’s voice, weaker than she remembered but undeniably his, sent another wave of relief through her. “Bella, is that you?”

She rushed into the bedroom to find her father propped up on pillows, his face pale but his eyes clear. He looked thinner, frailer, but his smile when he saw her was as bright as ever.

“You’re safe,” he breathed, reaching for her with trembling hands.

She crossed to him in three quick strides, wrapping her arms around him and burying her face in his shoulder. The familiar scent of machine oil mixed with Agatha’s herbs. He felt smaller in her embrace, but his arms tightened around her with reassuring strength.

“I was so worried,” he murmured against her hair.

“I’m fine, Papa,” she assured him, pulling back to look at him properly. “Better than fine, actually. I?—”

A shadow fell across the doorway, interrupting her words, and her father looked up, his face draining of what little color it had.

“Gods above,” he whispered, staring at Malrik. “You brought the beast with you. Why?”

Malrik remained in the doorway. She could tell he was doing his best to appear non-threatening, but he was too big and powerful to be anything else.

“Papa, this is Malrik,” she said as she went to join him. She put her hand on his arm and smiled up at him, and the tension in his shoulders eased slightly before she turned back to her father. “He’s the one who found you in the storm. He... he kept you safe.”

“Safe? He locked me in a tower!”

“To keep you out of the storm,” she said patiently. “He could have hurt you, but he didn’t. He took care of you until I arrived.”

Her father’s eyes darted between them, fear and confusion giving way to dawning understanding as he studied the two of them, his gaze going from their faces to her hand on Malrik’s arm.

“Bella,” he said slowly. “What’s going on here?”

She took a deep breath. “It’s complicated.”

“Uncomplicate it,” he demanded, his voice firmer now.

“I stayed to fix things at the keep, like I promised. But while I was there...” She glanced up at Malrik, who was watching her with those intense yellow eyes. “We formed a connection. A bond.”

“A bond. With a Vultor. With the beast who imprisoned me.”

“He was cursed, Papa. He’s been alone for years, trapped in his beast form. But when I came, something changed. He started to remember who he was.”

Her father shook his head, disbelief etched on his features. “Bella, do you hear yourself? This sounds like something from one of those ridiculous romances you and Tessa used to read.”

“I know how it sounds,” she admitted. “But it’s real. He’s real.” She turned to Malrik. “Can you show him? Show him who you really are?”

Malrik hesitated, then nodded. He closed his eyes, and she watched as the transformation took hold—fur receding, features shifting, becoming more defined, more Vultor. When he opened his eyes again, he almost looked like any other Vultor warrior, although hints of the beast remained.

Her father stared at him, speechless.

“I apologize,” Malrik said, his voice deep but clear, “for frightening you. For confining you. My beast... it doesn’t always understand human ways.”

“Your beast,” her father echoed. “You speak of it as separate from yourself.”

“It is and it isn’t. The curse fragments the mind. The beast takes control. But Bella...”

He looked down at her with such tenderness that her heart ached. “She helped me remember. She brought me back.”

Her father studied them both, his engineer’s mind visibly working through the problem. “And this bond you mentioned?”

She knew she was blushing, but she met his gaze steadily. “We’re... together.”

“Together,” he repeated. “As in...?”

“As in I love him, Papa.”

The words hung in the air between them. She hadn’t planned to say it, but as soon as the words left her lips, satisfaction filled her.

Malrik’s sharp intake of breath made her look up. His eyes were wide, filled with wonder and something that looked suspiciously like hope.

“You love me?” he asked, so softly she almost didn’t hear it.

“Yes,” she said simply. “I do.”

For a moment, the room was utterly silent. Then her father sighed heavily.

“Well,” he said, “I suppose that complicates things.”

“Mr. Fletcher,” Malrik said, turning back to her father. “I know this is... unexpected. But I give you my word as a Vultor warrior that I will protect your daughter with my life.”

“Noble words,” her father said dryly. “But forgive me if I find them hard to trust,



coming from the one who held me prisoner.”

“Papa—” she began, but Malrik raised a hand.

“He’s right to doubt,” Malrik said. “I’ve given him no reason to trust me. Only my actions can prove my intentions.” He looked directly at her father. “I love your daughter. She has brought light back into my existence. I would die before allowing harm to come to her.”

Her father held Malrik’s gaze for a long moment, then looked back at her. “And you’re sure about this? About him?”

She nodded. “More sure than I’ve ever been about anything.”

Her father closed his eyes briefly, then gave a resigned nod. “Then I suppose I’ll have to accept it.” He fixed Malrik with a stern look. “But if you ever hurt her?—”

“If I ever hurt her,” Malrik said solemnly, “I would welcome your vengeance.”

A dry chuckle from the doorway drew their attention. Agatha stood there, watching the exchange with evident amusement.

“Well, that’s all very dramatic,” she said. “Now perhaps you’d like to hear what I know about Vultor curses?”

“You know about the curse?”

Agatha snorted. “Child, I’ve lived alongside the Vultor for fifty years. I’ve forgotten more about them than most humans will ever know.” She moved into the room, shooing Bella toward a chair. “Sit. Both of you. This may take a while.”

She obeyed, but Malrik remained standing, his tall frame making the small bedroom feel even more cramped.

“The curse of the unmated,” Agatha began, “is as old as the Vultor themselves. As a Vultor male grows older, his beast grows stronger. Unless he finds a mate, it can consume him entirely. For some males that can take many years. For some it never happens. For others, especially those who are not open to the possibility of a mate, it can occur more rapidly.”

“That’s what happened to me,” Malrik said quietly. “I was... arrogant. I rejected many potential mates, believing none were worthy.”

“And then you were alone,” Agatha continued, “trapped in your beast form, unable to find your way back to yourself. Until Bella.”

“Until Bella,” he agreed, his eyes finding hers across the room. “But the beast is still strong. Still fighting for control.”

“A Vultor is not meant to live alone,” Agatha said tartly. “Being part of a pack will help your efforts to control your beast.”

“I was cast out of the pack.”

“As I recall, you never considered yourself part of it to begin with.”

She saw him wince, even as he nodded.

“I did not believe I needed a pack either.”

“And so Seren enforced the old ways,” Agatha said. “Cast you out until you learned humility.”

“We’re supposed to meet with him today,” she said. “He’s coming here.”

Agatha nodded approvingly. “Good. You must face him, acknowledge what you’ve learned.”

“And if he doesn’t accept it?” Malrik asked, his voice low.

“He will,” Agatha said confidently. “Seren is stern but fair. And I think you’ll find him much more... relaxed than usual,” she added, her eyes twinkling.

Malrik still looked uneasy and she went to join him at the door, smiling up at him. “And I’ll be there with you.”

“Bella, no,” her father protested. “It could be dangerous.”

“It won’t be,” she insisted. “Not if what Agatha says is true. And besides,” she added, looking up at Malrik, “we’re in this together now.”

Malrik’s expression softened as he looked down at her. “Together,” he agreed.

Her father watched them, a mixture of concern and resignation on his face. “I suppose there’s no talking you out of this?”

“None at all,” she said cheerfully.

“You’re just like your mother. Stubborn as a rock drill and twice as determined.” Her father looked at Malrik then nodded slowly. “She’d have liked you, I think. Once she got past the whole beast thing.”

“I would have been honored to meet her,” Malrik said quietly.

Her father nodded, then turned back to her. “Just... be careful. And come back to me. Both of you,” he added, including Malrik in his gaze.

“We will,” she promised. She moved to kiss her father’s forehead. “Rest now. We’ll talk more later.”

As they left the bedroom, Agatha pulled her aside. “The love you feel for him,” she said quietly, “it’s the key. Remember that when you face Seren.”

“I will,” she said. “Thank you, Agatha. For everything.”

The old woman waved dismissively. “Just doing what needs doing. Now go on, you two. You’ve got preparations to make.”

“What kind of preparations?”

Agatha’s eyes sparkled gleefully. “I’m sure you’ll figure it out.”

She shooed them both out of the cottage before she could ask any more questions, and she gave Malrik a puzzled look.

“Do you know what she was talking about?”

He shook his head absently, then cleared his throat.

“What you said in there... about loving me...”

“I meant it,” she said firmly. “Every word.”

“Even knowing what I am? What I’ve been?”

“I love all of you, Malrik. The beast, the Vultor, everything in between. Just as you are.”

For a moment, he seemed unable to speak. Then he pulled her close, burying his face in her hair. “I don’t deserve you,” he murmured.

“Good thing it’s not about deserving,” she replied, wrapping her arms around him. “It’s about choosing. And I choose you.”

### CHAPTER 23

She loves me. She chooses me.

The knowledge that Bella loved him filled both sides of Malrik with joy—joy and something more. Need. He drew her closer, his thumb stroking the delicate curve of her neck.

“Bella,” he whispered.

Her name came out half groan, half prayer. His lips brushed her cheek, then moved lower. Her sweet scent intoxicated him, adding to the desire flooding his body. His teeth grazed the tender skin of her throat and she gasped softly, her hands clutching his arms. A rumbling purr of satisfaction rose from his chest as his mouth continued downward, nibbling at her collarbone.

She tilted her head back to allow him better access, then suddenly pushed him away.

He growled, not understanding why his mate was rejecting him, but then she grabbed his hand and tugged him urgently away from the cottage.

“Not here,” she whispered, gesturing at the open, sunlit garden. “Not with my father and Agatha just inside.”

She tugged on his hand again and he realized she was trying to pull him towards the woods. He immediately took over, and she laughed as he half-pulled, half-carried her into the shadows of the trees, his cock already hard and straining at the annoying

trousers.

They didn't make it far into the woods before he couldn't wait any longer. With a low growl, he pressed her back against a wide tree. She looked up at him, eyes glazed with the same desire that pounded through his veins. Her fingers clutched at his shoulders.

"Need." He stroked her neck again, his mouth watering, and she shuddered. "Claim."

His ability to form words had vanished, his beast too close to the surface. She didn't seem to mind.

"Yesss," she hissed, and her eyes held a challenge. "Take me. Claim me."

Her scent changed, growing deeper, richer, and his cock throbbed in response. He tugged at her coveralls, pushing them down impatiently, needing to feel her skin against him. Her nimble fingers flew to his waist and his pants dropped away. His cock sprang free and her fingers closed around it.

"Impatient little mate."

"You have me pressed against a tree," she pointed out. "What else do you expect me to touch?"

He laughed and the sound seemed to echo in the woods, but there was no one to hear it other than the two of them.

"I want to feel you," he growled.

"Less talk, more action," she said, but he heard her breath catch when he shoved her coveralls down and his hands finally touched her bare skin.

His mouth followed, tracing the soft curve of her stomach, the fullness of her breasts. He took a nipple into his mouth, suckling eagerly, and she moaned and clutched his head. His hand slipped between her legs and her thighs parted, giving him access.

Wet heat met his questing fingers and he growled, thrusting a finger inside that slick channel and seeking the place that gave her the most pleasure. He knew when he found it because she moaned and her hand tightened on his cock, stroking him until he was afraid he would explode in her hand. He took her other nipple in his mouth and she shuddered helplessly.

He couldn't wait any longer. He grasped her hips, lifting her higher into the air before pulling her down over his cock in a long, slow slide. Her tight little channel fluttered wildly around him as she tried to adjust to his size, and then she cried out, her fingers digging into his shoulders. Her legs wrapped around his waist and he was lost to the pleasure, thrusting helplessly as the beast roared its triumph.

With each stroke their bond intensified, strengthening until he was certain it could never be broken. He felt his climax approaching, the pressure building to impossible heights, but he fought against it, determined that she would come first. His teeth ached with the need to bite, to claim her, but instead he forced his lips to her breast, nipping lightly at the tender flesh.

She exploded, convulsing around him, and he roared his pleasure. As his cock jerked inside her, his seed flooding her welcoming body, he found her neck. He bit down, claiming her, and her body shuddered helplessly as another orgasm swept over her. Her body clamped down on him as his knot expanded, and his own release seemed to go on forever. When they were both spent, he lowered them carefully to the ground, still locked together.

She sprawled across his body, her head pillowed on his chest, while he wrapped his arms around her and held her close. The sun filtered through the leaves, warming



them while they rested in the peace of the forest. He'd never felt so satisfied, so content.

"My mate," he growled softly, stroking the mating mark. His claim, clearly visible on her pale skin.

Her eyes widened and he felt her quiver through their still joined bodies.

"Oh! That feels so strange. But so good..." She reached down between their bodies to where his knot stretched her open and let out an amazed chuckle. "You knotted me."

"It is the way of the beast," he said, and then a pang of regret swept over him. "Does it displease you?"

"Displeases me? Of course not." She twisted, trying to get a better look and he groaned as the movement made her body clamp down around him. "Oh my."

"You should not move," he growled. "Not unless you want to remain here longer."

"I'm in no hurry. Are you?" She gave him a teasing smile.

His hand closed over her ass. "I could remain like this forever."

"As delightful as that sounds, we do need to return to the cottage in time to meet Seren."

He murmured his agreement, but then he bent her back over his arm and licked the mating mark. She shivered again.

"That feels so good," she whispered.

“Only when your mate touches you. Only me.”

“Only you.”

She tilted her head, offering him her neck again and he licked the bite, then teased the sensitive flesh with the tip of his tongue. Her breathing increased, her hands stroking his skin, and his knot expanded again, drawing another one of those soft helpless sounds from her lips.

He reached between their bodies and found her clit, swollen and sensitive, and stroked gently as he continued to lick and tease the mark. Her body quivered, her hands tightening on his shoulders. She was close, he realized, and he stroked harder, faster, until she came in a rush, her body milking his cock and triggering a second orgasm in him. More of his seed spilled inside her as he groaned and buried his face in her neck, completely overcome by the intensity of their union.

Their bodies were still locked together, but she managed to raise herself up and look down at him.

“Is it going to be like this every time?” she asked.

“Perhaps.” The thought pleased him.

“But how do you do anything?”

“I’m sure the knot subsides eventually.” He shrugged. “Or we learn to do more things while we are joined together.”

The idea intrigued him and his knot swelled again, making her gasp and arch her back. His hands came up to cradle her breasts as she rode him and when his teeth found the mark again, they climaxed together.

When it was finally over, she collapsed against his chest and he wrapped his arms around her, holding her close as he felt his cock finally slip free. Their combined fluids trickled down her leg as she snuggled into his arms.

“That was incredible,” she said, yawning.

“It was. But we must return.”

“I know. But I’m so comfortable.” She looked up, and he saw the worry in her eyes.

“Do you think Seren will really accept our bond?”

“I will make sure of it,” he said firmly. “But first, I should make sure you are clean.”

His hand dipped between her legs, and she gasped.

“Malrik, if you start that again...”

“I know.” He tried to sound regretful, but his heart sang with her pleasure. “But I cannot leave my mate in this condition.”

He dipped his pants in the nearby stream, then washed her gently, ignoring the demands of his cock. But when he finished and rose to his feet, he couldn’t resist teasing her, stalking towards her as she backed up, laughing, against the tree.

“Enough, my beast,” she said firmly, putting her hand on his chest.

Her nipples were taut and rosy from his attentions and he longed to lick them again, to feel her shiver with desire against him, but the words died in his throat as a familiar scent came to him. Seren.

He grabbed her coveralls, helping her into them as she laughed at his urgency.

“The Vultor are coming,” he warned and her eyes widened in panic as she tugged frantically at her clothing while he dragged the wet pants up over his still hard cock.

### CHAPTER 24

Malrik and Bella hurried back to the cottage, then took up a position just outside the garden gate. His beast prowled restlessly, unhappy with the possibility of a confrontation, but Bella remained close, her hand occasionally brushing his, each touch an anchor that kept his beast from taking control.

He sensed them before he saw them. The subtle shift in the air, the scent of other Vultor. His beast stirred, hackles rising at the territorial intrusion, but his rational mind kept control. This meeting had to happen.

“They’re here,” he murmured.

She squeezed his hand. “You can do this.”

He nodded, his eyes fixed on the tree line.

Seren was the first to appear. The alpha stepped into the clearing with the confident stride of one accustomed to command. His silver-streaked hair was pulled back, his expression as calm and controlled as always, but there was something different about him. He seemed... at peace in a way that Malrik suddenly recognized. His suspicions were confirmed as the other male approached and he caught the difference in his scent.

“You have taken a mate,” he burst out, unable to hide his shock. Seren was long past the age when most Vultor found a mate although, unlike Malrik, the curse of the unmated had never affected him.

Seren calmly inclined his head but couldn't hide the smile that curved his lips.

"I have." The alpha looked from Malrik to Bella, his eyes dropping to the mating mark. "It appears I am not the only one."

"This is Bella." He placed a protective hand on her lower back. "My mate."

"Indeed. We all believed you lost to the beast," Seren said thoughtfully.

"I was. For many years."

"And yet here you stand."

"Bella helped free me from my beast. To an extent," he added truthfully.

"I don't know that I freed him," she said quickly. "He did that himself. I just helped him see that his beast didn't have to rule him."

Seren nodded. "Interesting. And unexpected. No one has ever bonded with a cursed Vultor."

His jaw tightened. "Bella is exceptional. And the bond between us is real."

"I believe you," the alpha said calmly. "Although others may not." He turned to Bella. "What are your intentions toward Malrik?"

"I love him," she stated without hesitation and his beast purred with satisfaction. "And I'm going to help him break this curse, once and for all."

The other Vultor's eyebrows rose, but a small smile played at the corners of his mouth. "Do you mean you wish to rid him of his beast?"

“Of course not,” she said immediately, even as his beast growled. “It is a part of him and I love all of him.”

“In that case I would argue that the curse has already been lifted.”

He stiffened, and Bella gave him a shocked look before turning back to Seren.

“What do you mean?”

“All Vultor must balance both sides of their nature,” Seren explained. “The curse affects those who cannot control that balance—and once they are lost to their beast they do not return. At least they never have before. But the bond you share has broken the curse’s hold on him. That does not, however, mean that the beast will disappear.” He turned to Malrik. “You will always struggle to control both sides of your nature. It is the way of our people.”

“But if I can control my beast, then I’m no longer a danger. And I will not be an outcast.”

“That is correct.” Seren’s gaze sharpened. “But can you control it, Malrik? It will always be harder for you because your beast ruled for so long. There are those who will need to be convinced that your Vultor side is in control.”

Seren raised his hand and the three Vultor who had accompanied him stepped out of the woods. Malrik recognized one of them immediately—Korrin, the male whose female had been threatened by a human male. He didn’t know the other two—an elderly female who regarded him skeptically and a stern-faced warrior who matched him in size. His beast growled, already anticipating a threat. Bella must have sensed his reaction because she put a soothing hand on his arm.

“I believe you know Korrin,” Seren said calmly. “He wishes to speak on your behalf.

Lena and Varro are council members. What do you seek from this Council?"

"I seek understanding," he said simply. "A chance to reclaim my place among our people, not as a noble, but as a Vultor who has learned humility through suffering."

The Council members exchanged glances, their expressions unreadable.

Seren's voice was carefully neutral. "We have questions about your condition and your intentions."

His beast bristled, but he had anticipated such questions.

"Go ahead."

Lena, the old female, spoke first, looking skeptically at Bella's hand on his arm.

"You think to control him, child?"

"Never," his mate said immediately. "But if my touch provides comfort, I would not deny him that."

"Humph." Lena still looked skeptical, but she turned to him next. "How is it possible that you maintain your Vultor form? The curse of the unmated?"

"Should have consumed me entirely," he finished for her. "I know. For many years, it did."

"Then what changed?" Varro asked.

He glanced at Bella, drawing strength from her encouraging nod. "I encountered Bella. Her presence... awakened something in me. The part of me I thought was lost



forever.”

“Impossible,” the female muttered. “The curse cannot be broken by a human.”

“And yet it is happening,” Korrin interjected, speaking for the first time. “When I first encountered him, his beast still ruled him, but now he stands before us, speaking, reasoning.”

“The beast could still resurface,” Seren warned.

Unease shivered down his spine but he kept his face calm. “As you said, the beast is still part of me. It is always beneath the surface.”

“Then you remain a danger,” the female said. “To yourself, to your human, to all who encounter you.”

“Why?” Korrin asked, before he could respond. “Even when his beast ruled, he never harmed any member of our pack. Why is he any more dangerous than any other male?”

“If he is not in control of his beast, he could become a danger at any time,” Varro said coldly.

“Have you always been in control of your beast? Have you encountered any male who could make that claim?” Korrin demanded, and after a brief hesitation the two members of the council shook their heads. “Then why is Malrik any different? I do not believe he is a danger to us. Do you want to lose a warrior and an ally simply because you refuse to believe it is possible for a cursed male to change?”

“Korrin is right,” Seren said calmly. “We have not seen this type of change in the past, but that does not mean it is impossible.”

“The bond between a Vultor and his mate is powerful,” the old female acknowledged grudgingly. “But what about his beast?”

He tensed, but Bella spoke up before he could.

“That doesn’t matter,” she said firmly. “Our bond encompasses every part of him. It will be enough.”

“It is unprecedented,” Lena muttered. “The curse has never been broken before.”

“Perhaps because no cursed Vultor has ever taken a mate before,” Korrin suggested. He stepped forward, positioning himself closer to Malrik in a subtle show of support. “We should also consider that Malrik has shown remarkable control despite his condition. The first time we met, I was the one who lost control; I was the one who attacked him. He defended himself, but he did not retaliate. When my mate was in danger, it was Malrik who alerted me, even though he was still mostly beast at the time.”

“Is this true?” the big warrior demanded.

Korrin nodded firmly. “I would not have reached her in time otherwise. He could have attacked her—or me—but he didn’t. Even as the beast, something of his honor remained.”

He gave Korrin a grateful look.

“This speaks well of you,” Varro acknowledged. “But it does not fully address our concerns about your stability.”

“I understand,” he said. “I do not ask for blind trust. Only for the opportunity to prove myself.”

Seren considered this, his expression thoughtful. “The old texts speak of trials for those seeking redemption. It is not a direct parallel, but perhaps?—”

A commotion from the direction of the village interrupted him. Malrik tensed, his beast stirring at the sound of raised voices and crashing undergrowth.

“Something’s coming,” he growled, moving protectively in front of Bella.

The other four Vultor immediately formed a defensive line, and Korrin moved to Seren’s side, ready to protect his alpha.

Moments later, a group of humans burst into the clearing—men from the village, armed with hunting rifles and makeshift weapons.

### CHAPTER 25

Bella's heart pounded as the armed villagers poured into the clearing. They were led by the miller, George Hendry—a burly man with a heavy black beard who had taken over as mayor after Mrs. Jacobson left the town in disgrace. She'd never seen him look so righteous, his face flushed with indignation as he led the small mob toward them. The rifles in their hands glinted in the sunlight, cold and threatening.

"We've come for the Fletcher girl," the mayor announced. "Release her at once, beasts!"

Malrik's body tensed against hers, a low growl building in his chest. His arm moved protectively in front of her, blocking her from stepping forward. She felt the vibration of his growing rage, the way his muscles bunched beneath her fingers.

"I told you she was in danger," one of the villagers called out—Tomas, the butcher's son. The same man who'd once tried to court her, only to be offended when she'd shown more interest in his delivery wagon than in him.

"I'm not in danger," she called, trying to step around Malrik's arm but he wouldn't allow her to pass.

"Stay back," he snarled, his voice roughening.

"See how it controls her?" Tomas shouted. "It's bewitched her!"

"Nobody controls me," she snapped, but her voice was lost in the growing tension.

“This is our land. You come armed into Vultor territory and dare to make demands?” Seren asked coldly.

“We come for one of our own,” Mayor Hendry replied. “The girl doesn’t belong with your kind.”

A younger man pushed forward, his rifle raised. Bella recognized him as Jared, whose sister had been killed years ago in an accident blamed on the Vultor. “My sister was killed by one of you beasts ten years ago,” he spat. “I won’t let another girl die!”

“No one is dying today,” she insisted, but her words were drowned by angry shouts from both sides.

Under her hand, Malrik’s arm began to change. The transformation was happening faster than she’d ever seen before—muscles expanding, skin giving way to thick fur. His pants ripped at the seams.

Bella could feel him slipping away, the rational part of him receding as the beast took control. His breathing grew heavier, more ragged.

“Malrik,” she whispered urgently. “Malrik, stay with me.”

The villagers gasped as he grew larger, his transformation accelerating. Someone shouted “Monster!” and another voice called to shoot him.

“No!” she screamed, her voice finally cutting through the chaos.

Malrik dropped to a crouch, a terrifying growl tearing from his throat as he gave the armed humans a predatory glare. All of the Vultor tensed, preparing to intervene, though whether to protect the humans or join Malrik wasn’t clear.

Korrin's voice rang out. "It was Malrik who saved Tessa's life. The beast you fear protected a human when he had no reason to."

The revelation caused a brief hesitation among the villagers, but their weapons remained raised. She could see the fear in their eyes—the same fear that had driven humans and Vultor apart for generations.

Jared stepped forward, his rifle aimed directly at Malrik.

"Stay back, Bella," he called. "We're here to save you."

Malrik's control shattered completely. His massive body tensed, muscles coiling to spring.

In that suspended moment before violence erupted, she made her choice.

She slipped around Malrik before he could stop her and placed herself directly between him and the rifles. Her hand found his arm—now completely transformed, massive and covered in dark silver fur.

"Stop," she commanded, her voice steady despite her racing heart. "All of you, stop this right now."

The beast snarled, trying to move her aside, but she held firm, turning to face him directly. His yellow eyes blazed with rage and fear—fear for her, she realized. The same protective instinct that had driven him to challenge the armed villagers now warred with his need to keep her safe.

"Malrik," she said softly, holding his gaze. "I'm not afraid of you. I never have been."

The beast growled, but he didn't try to push her aside.

"Look at her," the mayor called. "She's trying to calm it like some wild animal!"

"He's not an animal," she shot back without turning around. "And I'm not your prisoner to rescue."

She kept her eyes on Malrik, speaking only to him now. "I know you're in there. I've seen you fight this. I've watched you come back to yourself, over and over."

His breathing slowed slightly, the yellow eyes focusing more intently on her face.

"Get away from that thing, Bella," Jared called, his voice shaking. "It'll tear you apart!"

"He could have done that a hundred times," she replied calmly, still not looking away from Malrik. "He's had me in his keep for over a week. If he wanted to hurt me, he would have."

She placed her other hand on his chest, feeling the thundering heartbeat beneath the fur and muscle. "Remember the library? Remember how you listened while I read to you? Remember the garden you cleared for me?"

Something flickered in his eyes—recognition, memory.

"That's right," she encouraged. "You're more than this rage. You always have been."

Behind her, she heard movement—someone approaching. Malrik's growl deepened, his muscles tensing again.

"Bella," her father said softly.

She felt a flood of relief but didn't turn. "Stay back, Papa. I've got this."

"I know you do," he said, his voice closer now. "But I'm standing with you."

She felt him come to a stop beside her, his familiar presence steady and calm. His hand came to rest on her shoulder.

"My daughter knows her own mind," he announced to everyone present. "Always has. If she says she's not in danger, then she isn't."

Malrik's eyes flicked to her father, confusion visible in their depths. The beast recognized him—the male who shared Bella's scent, the one he'd once imprisoned.

"It's all right," Bella murmured, her thumb moving in small circles against Malrik's fur. "He understands now. He's not here to take me away."

A rustle of fabric announced another presence. Agatha stepped forward, standing on Bella's other side.

"Look at what you've all done," the old woman scolded the villagers. "Charging in here with weapons drawn, making demands. Is this how we build peace?"

Mayor Hendry lowered his rifle slightly. "Agatha, you can't possibly approve of... of this."

"Of what? A Vultor finding his mate? Do I need to remind you that my own granddaughter is mated to a Vultor? It's happened before. It will happen again." She fixed him with a stern look. "Put those weapons down before someone gets hurt."

The mayor hesitated, looking from Agatha to Bella to Malrik's imposing form.



“But Finnar is not like that,” he protested weakly.

“He can be,” Agatha said calmly. “And I assure you he would be if you dared to point a gun at Scarlett. In fact, I suspect you would be dead by now.”

“Bella,” Jared called, his voice pleading. “You can’t want to stay with this... creature.”

She finally turned to face the villagers, keeping one hand firmly on Malrik’s arm. “This ‘creature’ has a name. He was once a Vultor noble. He protected your Tessa when she was in danger. He’s shown me nothing but kindness.”

“Kindness?” Tomas scoffed. “He kidnapped you!”

“He made a bargain with me,” she corrected. “I stayed willingly to repair his keep. And then I stayed because I wanted to.”

She felt Malrik shift behind her, his breathing changing. She glanced back to see his features flickering, the beast form struggling against something else—his Vultor side fighting to emerge.

“Look,” she said, gesturing toward him. “He’s changing. The curse is breaking.”

The transformation wasn’t complete—his form remained massive, still covered in fur, but his features were shifting, becoming more Vultor than beast. His eyes cleared, intelligence replacing blind rage.

“Impossible,” Lena whispered. “The curse of the unmated cannot be broken once it’s taken hold.”

“Apparently it can,” Agatha replied with a small smile. “With the right mate.”

Malrik's voice emerged, rough but unmistakably his. "Bella." Just her name, filled with wonder and gratitude.

She smiled up at him. "There you are."

He straightened, still towering over everyone present but no longer crouched to attack. His eyes swept over the armed villagers, then back to her.

"Never left," he rumbled, glancing meaningfully at the villagers. "Just... protected."

Understanding dawned on her. "You were in control? The whole time?"

He shook his head. "Not... complete. Beast strong. But heard you." His massive hand gently touched her cheek. "Always hear you."

He looked over at the group of villagers and frowned.

"They came for you," he said, the words a question.

"They thought they needed to rescue me," she explained. "They were wrong."

The mayor lowered his rifle completely, confusion evident on his face. "Bella, you can't mean to stay with... with him."

"That's exactly what I mean to do," she said firmly.

Seren stepped forward, studying Malrik with intense curiosity. "I've never seen someone so lost to his beast brought back like that."

"Perhaps you've never seen true mates before," Agatha suggested, her eyes twinkling.

Malrik's hand—still clawed but more controlled—came to rest on her shoulder. The touch was gentle, reverent.

“Is this truly what you want, child?” Mayor Hendry asked, his bluster fading into genuine concern.

She nodded. “I’ve never been more certain of anything.”

Jared shook his head, his rifle now pointed at the ground. “I don’t understand.”

“You don’t need to understand,” Agatha told him firmly. “You just need to respect her choice and go home.”

The young man looked as though he might argue, but then his shoulders slumped. One by one, the villagers lowered their weapons completely.

“The negotiations,” the mayor said after an awkward silence. “The trade agreement. We still want that.”

Seren inclined his head slightly. “Then perhaps we should discuss it without weapons next time.”

The tension in the air gradually dissipated as the two groups regarded each other warily. The immediate threat of violence had passed, but years of mistrust couldn’t be erased in a moment.

She turned back to Malrik, reaching up to touch his face. The fur was receding further, revealing more of his Vultur features.

“Are you all right?” she asked softly.

He nodded, his yellow eyes bright with emotion. “You stood between me and danger.”

“Of course I did.”

“You could have been hurt.”

She smiled. “I knew you wouldn’t hurt me. And I wasn’t going to let them hurt you either.”

His arms encircled her, drawing her against his chest in a careful embrace. “My brave mate,” he murmured, the words vibrating through her.

Over Malrik’s shoulder, she saw the Council members watching them. Lena still looked disapproving, but Varro actually had a small smile on his face.

“It appears we have much to discuss,” Seren said, addressing both Malrik and the Council. “And perhaps much to reconsider about what we thought we knew.”

Malrik nodded, keeping one arm around her as he turned to face the Alpha. “I am ready to answer for my past.”

“And I’ll be right beside you,” she added, her hand finding his.

The villagers began to retreat, urged along by Agatha’s stern gaze. Her father came to join them, his expression a mixture of worry and pride.

“You’re sure about this?” he asked quietly.

She nodded. “I love him, Papa. In any form.”

Her father sighed, then managed a small smile. “Then I suppose I’d better get used to having a Vultor son-in-law.”

Malrik looked down at her, his expression softening into something that made her heart skip. The beast was still there—she could see it in the wildness of his eyes, the power in his stance—but now it was balanced with the intelligence and nobility of the Vultor.

“What happens now?” she asked, looking between Malrik and Seren.

“Now we make peace,” Seren said, and she realized he wasn’t just talking about the villagers.

### EPILOGUE

S ix months later...

Bella tightened the last bolt on the power coupling and sat back on her heels, wiping her brow with the back of her hand. The mechanical heart of the keep hummed with new life, a symphony of perfectly calibrated parts working in harmony. She'd spent the better part of the morning repairing the auxiliary power system, ensuring it would engage seamlessly if the main grid faltered.

"There." She gave the metal housing a satisfied pat. "That should hold through the next three storms at least."

She tucked her tools into the pockets of her coveralls and headed back through the keep. Six months of hard work had transformed the once-crumbling fortress into something magnificent—a waystation for travelers using the new mountain pass that connected the human villages and the Vultor territories.

The trade agreement that Seren and the village council had finally signed had changed everything. Merchants and travelers now passed regularly through the mountains. The keep provided a safe stopping point, offering shelter, food, and minor repairs for those traveling the route.

She made her way through the corridors, nodding to a human merchant who was studying one of the ancient tapestries Malrik had restored. The man bowed slightly, still clearly nervous about being in a structure associated with the Vultor, but the presence of other humans helped ease such tensions.

She headed toward what had once been the stable block, now converted into a workshop and living quarters for her father. He had moved in three months ago, after it became clear that she would never return permanently to the village. Malrik had suggested the arrangement, and her father had accepted with surprising enthusiasm.

The workshop door stood open, and she paused in the doorway, watching her father bent over his workbench. Tools hung from the walls in neat rows, and half-finished inventions covered every available surface. The scent of metal and oil reminded her of their old shop, bringing a smile to her face.

His health had improved dramatically since moving to the keep. The mountain air seemed to agree with him, and having regular work for his hands kept his spirits high.

“Papa?” she called softly.

He looked up, his face breaking into a wide smile. “Bella! Come look at this contraption I’ve been working on.”

She crossed to the workbench, examining the device with professional interest. It appeared to be a small, handheld scanner of some sort.

“It’s for the traders,” he explained, his eyes bright with enthusiasm. “Detects metal fatigue in axles and wheel components. Should prevent breakdowns on the mountain roads.”

“Clever,” she said, genuinely impressed. “The merchants will pay good money for that.”

“That’s what Malrik said.” He set the device down carefully. “He stopped by earlier to bring me these.” He gestured to a stack of small metal components arranged neatly at the edge of his workbench.

She smiled, touched by Malrik's thoughtfulness. He made a point of checking on her father daily, bringing materials or simply sitting with him while he worked. The two men had developed an unlikely friendship, bonded by their shared love of creating things—and their shared love for her.

“How are you settling in, Papa? Truly?” she asked, perching on a nearby stool.

He considered the question, his weathered hands absently arranging his tools. “I never thought I'd live in a place like this,” he admitted. “A Vultor keep, of all things.” He chuckled, shaking his head. “But I'm content, Bella. I have my work, comfortable quarters, and most importantly—” he reached out to squeeze her hand, “—I have you nearby.”

“You don't miss the village?”

“What's to miss? The gossips? The small-minded council?” He shrugged. “I have more interesting conversations here in a day than I had there in a month. Did you know that Seren's chief engineer stopped by yesterday? We talked about power conversion systems for hours.”

She laughed. “I'm glad you're happy here.”

“And you? Are you happy with your beast-prince?”

“He's hardly a prince anymore,” she said, though they both knew it wasn't true. Malrik might have abdicated his formal position, but the Vultor still treated him with the deference due his bloodline.

“You didn't answer my question,” he pointed out gently.

“Yes,” she said simply. “I'm happier than I ever thought possible.”



Her father nodded, satisfied. “Good. That’s all a father wants.” He turned back to his work, a signal that the emotional moment had passed. “Now, off with you. I need to calibrate this sensor array before sundown.”

She kissed his cheek and left him to his tinkering, heading outside into the late afternoon sunshine. The keep’s garden spread before her, once overgrown and wild, now partially tamed into orderly beds interspersed with wilder areas. It had become one of her favorite places at the keep, especially since Malrik spent so much time there.

She found him kneeling beside a bed of silver-blue flowers, his broad back to her as he carefully pruned dead blooms. Even from behind, she could tell he wasn’t in full beast form—his silhouette was more Vultor than animal today, though still not like the other Vultor who occasionally visited.

Unlike them, Malrik never fully transformed back to the traditional Vultor appearance. His form remained a blend—more beast than most Vultor would tolerate, more rational than the beast alone had been. The curse had been broken, but it had left its mark on him permanently.

Bella didn’t mind. She loved him in any form.

She approached quietly, admiring the play of muscles beneath his skin as he worked. His form today was somewhere between beast and Vultor—his skin a deep slate grey, with patches of dark silver fur across his shoulders and down his spine. His hands ended in claws, but they moved with delicate precision among the fragile blooms.

As if sensing her presence, he turned, his yellow eyes finding her instantly. They still glowed when his emotions ran high, but now they usually shone with contentment rather than rage or hunger.

“Finished with the power coupling?” he asked, his voice a low rumble.

“All fixed,” she confirmed, moving to join him. “The next storm can rage all it wants—we’ll keep our lights.”

He made a sound of approval, setting aside his gardening tools as she approached. When she reached him, he pulled her down to sit beside him on the stone bench, his arm settling comfortably around her waist.

“Your father’s device is promising,” he said. “I’ve arranged for the next Vultor trading party to test it.”

“He told me. He’s thrilled.” She leaned against his side, enjoying the warmth of his skin against hers. “You’ve been good to him.”

Malrik shrugged, a gesture he’d picked up from her. “He is your blood. And he has valuable skills.”

“Mmm, very practical,” she teased, knowing there was more to it than that. For all his lingering beast instincts, Malrik had developed a genuine fondness for her father.

He growled softly, but there was no heat in it. “Would you prefer I be impractical?”

“Sometimes.” She traced a finger along the line where fur met skin on his arm. “You look more Vultor than beast today.”

“Does that disappoint you?” There was a hint of real concern in his voice.

She shifted to face him, cupping his cheek in her palm. “Nothing about you disappoints me. But sometimes...” She bit her lip, suddenly shy.

His eyes flashed. “Sometimes?”

“Sometimes I miss the beast,” she admitted. “The wild part of you.”

A slow, dangerous smile spread across his face, revealing the sharp points of his fangs. “He’s never far from the surface.”

“I know.” She leaned closer, her lips brushing his ear. “And I know exactly how to bring him out, too.”

Before he could respond, she sprang to her feet and darted away, throwing a challenging look over her shoulder as she headed for the tree line at the edge of the garden.

His growl followed her, low and primal, sending a delicious shiver down her spine. She ran faster, laughing as she plunged into the cool shadows of the forest. Behind her, she heard the distinctive sound of transformation—fabric tearing, a guttural snarl, the heavy thud of paws on earth.

The beast was loose.

She ran with purpose, following a familiar path through the trees. She wasn’t truly trying to escape—they both knew that—but the chase itself was part of the game. She ducked under low branches and vaulted over fallen logs, her heart pounding with exhilaration rather than fear.

She could hear him gaining on her, his massive body moving with surprising stealth through the underbrush. Only the occasional snap of a twig or rustle of leaves betrayed his position. He was toying with her, letting her maintain the illusion of escape while steadily closing the distance between them.

She burst into a small clearing, a secluded spot carpeted with soft moss and dappled with late afternoon sunlight. She had barely taken three steps into the open space when a massive form crashed through the trees behind her.

She whirled around, breathless and laughing, to face her pursuer. He stood at the edge

of the clearing, fully transformed into his beast form. Eight feet of rippling muscle and dark silver fur, eyes glowing with primal hunger, claws extended and fangs bared in what might have once seemed a terrifying snarl.

To her, it was a smile.

“Caught you,” he rumbled, his voice deeper and rougher in this form.

“So you have,” she agreed, making no move to run further. “What will you do with me now, beast?”

He stalked toward her, each step deliberate, his gaze never leaving hers. When he reached her, one massive paw-like hand came up to cradle her face with his usual gentleness.

“Mine,” he growled, the word both possession and promise.

“Yours,” she agreed, reaching up to tangle her fingers in the thick fur of his chest.

His kiss was hungry, demanding, the beast’s passion untempered by Vultor restraint.

She clung to him, returning his fervor measure for measure, her hands sliding up his chest to wrap around his neck. He scooped her up as if she weighed nothing, lifting her so they were eye to eye.

“I want you,” she murmured against his lips. “I need you.”

He made a rumbling noise of agreement, his claws shredding her clothing with careless strength. The cool forest air caressed her bare skin, quickly replaced by the heat of his body pressing against hers.

He carried her to a soft patch of moss beneath a towering tree, laying her down with a

tenderness at odds with his fearsome appearance. He settled beside her, his massive frame dwarfing hers, but she felt no fear. This was her beast, her mate.

He explored her with all his senses, burying his nose against her neck to breathe in her scent, then flicking out his tongue, longer and rougher now, to taste her skin, teasing her mating mark and sending shivers of pleasure down her spine. He trailed that rough, wet heat over her collarbone, down between her breasts to the curve of her stomach.

She tangled her fingers in the thick mane of fur around his head, urging him lower. He growled softly, his breath hot against her thigh as he pressed his mouth to her core. The first lap of his tongue tore a cry from her throat, the sensation intense and overwhelming. He continued his ministrations, each stroke sending bolts of pleasure through her body.

“Malrik...” She gasped his name, arching into his touch. “Please, I need you inside me.”

He growled and flipped her over onto her hands and knees, claws dragging lightly down her sides. The feel of his massive chest covering her back, the heat of his breath against her neck, made her moan in anticipation.

She could feel his cock, hard and ready, pressing against her thigh as he positioned himself behind her. With one powerful thrust, he buried himself deep within her, filling and stretching her to her limits. She cried out at the sudden intensity, pain and pleasure mingling in a heady rush.

He held still for a moment, giving her time to adjust to his size. Then he began to move, his hips rolling in a primal rhythm, each stroke hitting a spot deep inside that had her seeing stars. His massive body surrounded hers, protective and possessive all at once.

He leaned closer, his fangs grazing her mating mark as he drove into her again and again. The growls rumbling from his chest vibrated through her, heightening the sensations coursing through her body.

She could feel the pressure building within her, a wave of ecstasy cresting higher with each of his powerful thrusts. She pushed back against him, urging him on.

“Mine,” he growled against her skin. “My mate. My Bella.”

“Yours,” she gasped. “Always.”

With a roar, he slammed into her one final time, throwing them both over the edge into a blinding climax.

The sun had dipped low in the sky when Bella woke, still curled against Malrik’s side in the forest clearing. He was back in his Vultor form, though patches of fur lingered on his shoulders and arms.

She stretched, feeling pleasantly sore and languid, the aftereffects of their lovemaking still humming in her body.

He watched her, his yellow eyes hooded and content. “Mm, you look thoroughly pleased, my Bella.”

“I am,” she said, smiling lazily. “Though I fear we’ll have to find our way back to the keep without clothes. You’ve ruined mine.”

He chuckled, a low, rumbling sound that she felt in her bones. “Perhaps I’ll just carry you back and scandalize everyone.”

“Mmm, the great and powerful Malrik, parading through the halls with his mate in his arms, naked as the day she was born.”

“My mate,” he echoed, his voice growing softer. “I still cannot believe you chose me. That you could love this broken, cursed thing.”

“You’re not broken or cursed,” she said, propping herself up on one elbow to look down at him. “You’re beautiful and strong. A little wild, yes,” she added with a smile, “but that’s part of your appeal.”

He huffed a laugh. “Careful, mate. You’ll give me a bigger ego than I already have.”

“Good. You deserve it.” She traced the line of his jaw, marveling at the contrast between his soft fur and hard muscle. “I love all of you, Malrik. Every side, every form.”

His eyes darkened, and for a moment she thought he might transform back to the beast and ravage her again. Instead, he pulled her down for a long, lingering kiss.

“As I love you,” he said when they finally broke apart. “With all my being.”

She sighed contentedly. “We should probably head back before my father sends out a search party.”

“Agreed.” He stood in one fluid motion, then scooped her up into his arms, cradling her against his chest.

“Malrik!” she protested. “You said you wouldn’t parade me naked through the halls.”

He grinned down at her. “I lied.”

She tried to look indignant, but his mischievous grin was infectious. “Just try not to traumatize anyone,” she said with a theatrical sigh.

He carried her to the edge of the forest, where the keep’s outer walls rose high

overhead. The sun was sinking below the horizon, painting the sky in brilliant hues of pink and orange. He paused to watch it with her, his eyes reflecting the fiery glow.

“I never tire of seeing this through your eyes,” he murmured. “Before, it was just the sun setting. But now it’s...” He trailed off, at a loss for words.

“It’s beautiful,” she finished for him. “Like a promise of a new day to come.”

He nodded, holding her a little closer. “I used to dread the dawn. It meant another day alone in the darkness. But now... Now I welcome it. Because I wake with you by my side.”

She leaned her head against his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart. “I never thought I could be this happy,” she whispered. “That I could find a place where I truly belong. With someone who accepts me just as I am.”

“As I love you,” he echoed, kissing the top of her head.

She could feel him smiling against her hair, his joy matching her own. This keep, this wild land, this half-beast prince—this was her home now. Her happily ever after.