



Enchanted with the Orc (The Kingverse Orcs #4)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Can someone whos always on the run finally find a place to call home?

Escaping an ex whos still chasing her and her daughter is harder than Tasia thought. Now that her coven is back together, everything should be perfect, right? Wrong.

Tasia is already wary of males after what shes been through and she cant afford to make any more ties to anyone. When her ex tracks her downs and threatens her once more she has to find a way to leave. But when her daughters claimed a massive orc to be her new father, he keeps getting in the way of that.

Enka never expected to meet his fated mate, but when her daughter sinks her tiny teeth into his ankle, announcing that he now belongs to them, he discovers that hes exactly where he always wanted to be. And when his mate decides to run, hes going to run with her.

Hell protect her no matter the cost. And with the shadows of her past nipping at her heels, hes ready to fight for them. Keeping them safe is the easy part. Getting her to agree that theyre meant to be together? Not so much.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:09 am

Tasia

The sound of my breath was loud in my ears as I ran, knowing I was being followed.

Now I've fucked up.

I should have run far away when I had the chance. I should have hidden in my coven like they'd told me to. Instead, he'd been watching me as I'd taken my daughter to the park for a playdate with one of my sisters. And he'd followed me on my way to the grocery store. I'd noticed him too late.

It was reckless and stupid, and now I was going to pay for it. I continued running through the alleys, the pounding of boots loud in my ears as he gained on me.

He's always been faster. Why the fuck did I think I could outrun him?

I swore I could feel his hot breath on the back of my neck. Years of torment and pain flooded my mind—memories I'd hoped to never have to relive.

The pavement was in front of me. Just a few feet away. If I could make it...

Even as I thought it, I was yanked backward. A short scream left my lips, but it was cut off as I slammed into the ground, my hair still in my husband's fist as the back of my head slammed into the asphalt.

I stared up into the cruel eyes I had hoped to never see again. His lip curled at the corner as he cocked his head at me, giving my hair a yank and smiling wider as I

whimpered underneath him.

This was the part he loved—the part that never grew old for him. When he had me under his full control and he was able to make me feel pain.

“Found you,” he said in a low, dangerous voice that sent shivers down my spine.

Goddess Mother, why didn’t I run further away?

“And Gabbi,” he added with a malevolent grin. “It’s about time she got to know her daddy again, don’t you think?”

The fear inside of me transformed, becoming a burning fury that started in my gut and transformed to a purple glow in my hands. I knew the rules. I knew what hurting a human with magick would mean, but I couldn’t stop myself .

The blast left me before I could stop it, crashing into his chest and throwing him backward. He fell, the slam of his body against the brick wall behind him loud in the cramped alleyway. And that was when I felt it.

The binding.

A swirl of orange runes surrounded me, circling for a moment before it slammed closer, forming a ribbon around my stomach.

And I watched as the purple glow in my fingers stuttered and fizzled until it was gone.

That would mean that the protection wards that the coven had put around Gabbi and I were gone too since we’d been bound together.

Fuck, fuck, FUCK!

Now I would be powerless against him. But it allowed me time to escape now.

That was what was important. It gave me time to get my daughter somewhere safe.

I scrambled to my feet, my head spinning as I ran, but this time I didn't hear anyone following.

I knew he wasn't dead—I hadn't hit him hard enough to kill him.

Just to hurt him enough to get away. My breathing was erratic as I made my way to the park, only slowing when I saw my beautiful daughter giggling as she ran from Hanna—one of my sisters, one of my coven.

Now I wouldn't be any help to them. Without my powers, I was nothing, and I wouldn't be able to protect them.

I didn't know how David had slipped past the protection spell that my coven had cast and managed to find me.

It was something that would need to be countered by another coven.

He was just a human, so he'd had help. This time, I was bringing the danger straight to the people who were trying to protect me.

I put on a shaky smile as I slowed, walking toward them.

I knew I was probably a mess, dirt all over my dress, but my Gabbi-girl didn't even notice, squealing with joy as she saw me coming.

She ran toward me, her tiny arms open wide and I swooped her up, ignoring the ache in my body that echoed my previous fall .

As I buried my face in her curls, inhaling the sweet scent of her, I made up my mind.

I have to leave with her. It's the only way.

I looked up, watching as Hanna's gaze narrowed on me, sweeping from my head to my toes before her brow furrowed. Her beautiful face was transformed from happiness to worry, and I knew I was making the right decision.

I was never putting my family in danger ever again.

I'd become too lax over the years. Now I needed to get out of there before he came for us.

But there was no way my coven would let me, so I would have to sneak out.

I couldn't allow these women to put their lives on the line for me and David wouldn't hesitate to hurt them to get to me.

My heart ached at the thought of leaving them. They were the only family I knew, but this was for their benefit. I'd known when they'd taken me back two years ago that this day might come. But still, a part of me had prayed it wouldn't.

Seeking comfort in my baby's embrace, I mustered my best fake smile and I knew it trembled on my face as I made my way toward Hanna.

"Time to head home?" I asked, tickling Gabbi. She laughed that deep chuckle that was too adult for her little body even as she grabbed my hair and chomped on it.

She was becoming a serious biter and I wasn't quite sure how to get her out of the habit.

Tabitha—the eldest witch of my coven—had suggested that it was just a phase and she should grow out of it soon.

All signs were pointing to the opposite of that, but so far, her sharp little teeth were saved for me and any orc she met.

She had a taste for the mate of the High Priestess of our coven.

She latched onto his leg like a dog with a bone—quite literally.

“Anything I should know before we go home?” Hanna asked, packing Gabbi's bag before I could even try. My heart panged in my chest at that. I'd never had to ask any of the amazing witches in my coven for help. They offered it to me freely.

I stopped myself from crying again, knowing that once I put Gabbi to bed I was going to sob for hours while I mourned their loss. Then I was going to make a plan to leave tomorrow.

It's the only way. Make peace with it.

“No,” I said, shaking my head as I grabbed another bag, hitching it to my shoulder while keeping my girl on my hip. I'd become a master of multi-tasking after she was born. I could carry three shopping bags, her diaper bag, and my daughter with ease. “What're you talking about?”

Narrowed eyes followed me as I walked briskly toward the tower we called home. I sent what I hoped was a breezy smile over my shoulder, but as Hanna's expression got more worried, I figured it wasn't as carefree as I thought.

“I was thinking we can have Gabbi’s party a little earlier,” I told her when she caught up, and her smile grew as she nodded with enthusiasm.

“Yes! Pen was saying...” she started, but I swore that I saw a male in a black cap and coat turn around the corner.

I didn’t hear anything she said as I slipped inside our building, not taking another breath until I was within the protection wards.

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Enka

I pretended to be calm as I walked into the hallway, my heart thudding in my chest. It'd been a week since the last time I'd encountered the female whose scent had drawn me like a moth to a flame.

There was something different about her, but I couldn't put my finger on it. Ever since the first time I'd met her, when I'd caught her scent, everything in my brain began rewiring itself.

I'd talked to Rok and Rudgar about it, trying to suss out whether she could be my mate, but I couldn't be sure. It hadn't hit me the way it had slapped them in the face. This was something else.

Still, as I lifted my head to the air, taking a solid sniff, her scent picked apart from all others, a fine perfume like I'd never smelled before. Turning sharply, I headed in her direction, drawn to her like nothing I'd ever been drawn to in my life.

It's her. I know it.

Was this the slow awakening that Dristan—our chieftain—had told Rudgar about?

Pen's pregnancy had progressed nicely, but she was close enough to giving birth to their youngling that he didn't want to be disturbed, happy to spend their last moments as a single couple alone, so I hadn't been able to ask him directly.

I couldn't blame him. If I was mated, I'd stick so close to her she'd probably find me

to be a nuisance. Making my way down a corridor, I turned into another and went face-to-face with a tiny... person.

Quirking an eyebrow, I stared at it for a long moment as it stared right back. I looked around, trying to see if this was some kind of prank, but the little bitty thing just stood there, rocked back on its heels as it stared up at me.

We have younglings here?

Since we'd arrived to this plane, there had been so much going on and so much learning to do that I hadn't had much time for socializing. Whoever this youngling belonged to must not have had time to introduce it to us either. Confused, I lifted my hand in a wave and it narrowed its tiny eyes at me.

Well shit, I guess I'm in trouble?

"Rud-Rud?" it asked me in a high-pitched little squeaky voice that oddly hit me right in my chest. I lowered myself to my haunches, much closer to being on its level.

"I'm Enka," I told it. "And who're you?"

The narrowed eyes became wide and a grin crossed its face, a loud giggle leaving its lips. Brown, sparkling eyes drew a smile from me. I'd never heard anything sweeter in my life.

"Gabbi," it said, and I realized the youngling was female.

"Hi, Gabbi," I said, adoring the bright grin and sparkling brown eyes. In fact, she looked very much like Tasia. It was almost as if...

My thought trailed off as—with a battle-cry that would rival the toughest of

orcs—she threw herself at my leg, digging her tiny, sharp teeth as deep as she could into my ankle where my pants had ridden up to expose my bare flesh.

It wasn't very deep, since orcs had tough skin, but it was still enough to startle me. I fell backward, onto my ass, and that just made the feral little beastie giggle louder.

She latched her little arms around my leg, keeping her teeth clamped and she moved every time I did. I stared down at her, confused, but she was still giggling up a storm. Looking around again, wondering if the little beastie had an owner, I found the corridor still empty.

Peering down at the youngling, I gave my leg a testing shake, but she held on even tighter, growling now. My eyebrows popped up in surprise, but I found myself grinning down at her.

“Hungry?” I asked, and she giggled louder. “Famished, I see. Well we’re just going to have to find you something to eat, aren’t we?”

She nodded with enthusiasm, still latched to my ankle. I was careful as I made my way to my feet, trying hard not to dislodge her, but it looked like she wouldn’t be going anywhere any time soon.

Snorting out a laugh, I took one of her feet into my hands, marveling at how tiny it was, but she probably thought I was trying to pull her off, so she squealed her annoyance, squeezing her little arms tighter around me.

I cupped both of her feet into the palm of my hand, lifting her until she was upside down.

The squeal immediately switched to one of glee, as I walked, holding her with her little braids falling down to tickle my feet inside my shoe. I’d just turned another

corner when a female almost collided with me.

If I'd been paying attention, I would have realized someone was coming—and most definitely who it was, because it was Tasia, her long hair tied back from her beautiful face, with a red silk scarf wrapped around the top of her head.

Her scent filled my lungs, and a strong cascade of possessiveness filled me.

My mate.

Stumped, I blinked down at her, awed by the fact that I could recognize her now when it had been so difficult before. It was as if something had been blocking the instinct inside of me, and now it no longer was.

She skidded to a stop, avoiding me by only an inch and she gasped, staring up at me with wide eyes. I was trapped in her chocolate gaze—that was so like the youngling's—for a long moment, before she dropped it to look at the giggling toddler still latched to my ankle as I held hers in the air.

“Gabbi,” she fretted, going to her knees to reach for the youngling's face. My head tilted with curiosity as I watched her attempt to open the little one's teeth. “I'm so, so sorry. I can't believe she did this. She probably thought you were Rudgar—”

“That's why she called me Rud-Rud,” I said with a low chuckle, watching in fascination as Tasia tickled Gabbi until she was howling with laughter, releasing me. She scooped her from me, turning her so her little body was cradled against her.

The little one pressed her face to Tasia's neck, and as I looked from the youngling to her, logic coalesced in my brain. With it, denial and crushing disappointment filled me at once .

But I needed to know for certain, so I asked, my voice a low croak of sound, “Your daughter?”

Her bright smile was answer enough, as she pressed her face to the little one’s. “Yes. She’s a handful, though. And I’m so sorry!” she chuckled, her nose scrunching at the end in an adorable expression that made my heart thump in my chest.

Of course she’s already mated. She can’t belong to you.

“No need to apologize,” I told her, dropping my gaze to my feet where the boots that I’d bought with my first paycheck were. “She’s very sweet. Gave me a nickname and everything.”

“She spoke to you?” she exclaimed, rubbing her hand on the little girl’s back. “Oh, that’s wonderful. The only male she talks to is Rudgar, and I was so worried that since she’s only around females she was too shy.”

My eyes whipped up to hers and hers widened as if I’d startled her. “She’s not around males?” I asked, knowing I had no right to question her, but too invested to pretend I was doing anything but hanging on her every word. “What about her father?”

“Oh,” she sighed, her smile becoming tighter, more practiced. “He’s not really in the picture.”

I knew I should stop the beaming grin from spreading across my face, but even as I internally screamed at myself, the ache in my cheeks told me it was firmly in place. “That’s too bad.”

Frowning, she nodded, rubbing her daughter’s back as the little one wriggled in her arms to be put on the floor. While she fussed, Tasia sighed, shaking her head.

“I’ll just take this one back to her room. She was supposed to be taking a nap, but then she just disappeared,” she huffed, turning Gabbi until she was giving her a stern look, but the youngling just smacked a kiss to her cheek.

Her stern expression gave way to another smile and she nuzzled her nose against her daughter’s.

My heart melted at the affection between them and I wished I could be a part of that.

Cautioning myself on getting invested too early without knowing everything I needed to, I waved at the pair as they left before turning and heading straight back to my office.

I need to find out more.

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Enka

I strummed my fingers against the table I was sitting in front of, my eyes glued to the screens in front of me.

“You know this is creepy, right?” Rudgar asked, earning himself two hums of agreement from my brothers who were standing on either side of him behind me, and annoyed grunts from myself and Rok who was sitting next to me.

“It’s my mate,” I explained, my eyes never leaving the female form I was watching as she covered a table with a large, plastic tablecloth covered with butterflies. “There’s no such thing as creepy.”

Rok grunted his agreement next to me, his finger reaching out to gently stroke down the screen over his own mate—Becca—who was helping mine with the decorations. Ever since I’d returned from yesterday’s fateful meeting with my female, I’d been watching her.

Keeping an eye on her and trying to learn more about her. I’d asked Rudgar to perform a background search on her, but he’d already had a file made. The problem was, it was tragically bare. He was almost certain she was using an alias for her last name, and I couldn’t understand why.

“I disagree,” Rudgar said in what I’m sure he meant to be a reasonable voice, but only ended up sounding exasperated.

“I think there’s boundaries when it comes to mates.

Lines that shouldn't be crossed. And staring at them through a camera that shouldn't be there in the first place—" he started complaining, but I waved him off.

"It's for their own security," I told him and I could hear Rudgar and my brothers rolling their eyes behind me.

"So you've said," Krusk sighed. "And yet I'm not seeing what any of this has to do with security."

"The little one runs off," Rok said pointing out Gabbi who was flittering between the females, her face spread with a wide smile. "We're protecting her."

I was so familiar with my brother running his palm across his face that I knew he was doing it without looking at him—just the sound of his muffled groan.

"Just don't get caught, okay?" Rudgar asked, slapping my shoulder before walking away.

I wasn't able to move my gaze away from where Tasia was laughing with Becca.

I had headphones in that were allowing me to hear everything that was being said in the room, but so far it was all light chatter about the party—birthday party—for the little princess.

Listening to that yesterday, I had started planning what I was getting for her—I had a list of at least twelve presents—when I'd realized that I hadn't exactly been invited.

That was when I'd asked Rudgar to run interference.

Through a few clever tactics of manipulation—also known as groveling—aimed his mate's way, I was now the proud holder of a bright purple invitation soaked in glitter

that had fallen all over my apartment floor.

I was almost certain that some of it was permanently lodged in the back of my eyeball, but it was a sacrifice I was willing to make to ensure that I had a proper reason to attend the party.

“I still think this doesn’t make sense,” Krusk told me, leaning in to narrow his gaze on where my mate was staring out of a window, a haunted expression on her face. “Why would she suddenly change the date of Gabbi’s party? Becca said her birthday isn’t for another two weeks.”

“Something happened to her,” Savla said in a low, serious tone, and my gaze sharpened as I took in my female’s profile—hunched and defensive.

“But what?” I asked, wishing I’d been following her for longer, so I could have been there to see whatever had spooked her.

“I don’t know, but it was enough that she decided to change the date of the party. There’s something going on. If there was a regular issue she would have pushed the party back, not brought it forward,” I murmured, frowning. “It seems more serious than that.”

My brothers hummed their agreement, and Krusk slapped Rok across the shoulder. “Do you think your mate’s willing to do some digging?”

“She can try,” Rok said with a shrug, “but that coven is tight-lipped when they want to hide something and you know it.”

“True,” I sighed, leaning back and keeping my eyes locked on my mate and youngling, where the little one had run up to her mother and was demanding to have cake for dinner.

With the party happening, it was a distinct possibility, but I applauded my mate's efforts to stave her off, redirecting her attention to the slices of fruit instead.

"But do you think the rest of the coven knows what's going on? "

"Zara might know," Savla murmured, referring to his best friend, who was mated to Rudgar. "I can ask."

"I'd appreciate that," I told him, hoping for every crumb of information I could get. There was some beeping in the background and soon a ring cut through the silence that had surrounded us.

"Sav?" Zara's voice came from the other end of the phone. "What's up?"

"Hey Zara," I called, "we're all on the call."

"To what do I owe the honor?" she huffed out a laugh.

"How well do you know Tasia?" Savla asked, getting straight to business.

"Very well. She's my sister. We grew up together," she said, confusion filling her voice. "Why? Is something going on?"

"Enka recognized her as his mate," Krusk put in, grinning my way while I glared at him.

"No shit?" she gasped, before squealing into the phone. We all slapped our hands across our sensitive ears at the sound, scowling down at the screen.

"No shit," I agreed, and she squealed again, earning me a glare from the other males, our ears still covered.

“Tell me everything,” she demanded, and Savla rolled his eyes.

“He saw her, he recognized her. What more do you need?” he grouched, and it was my turn to glare at him, more than willing to wax poetic on my mate’s beauty and the first time I’d seen her.

“You’re just the most romantic male ever,” Zara complained, sarcasm heavy in her voice. “You’re going to sweep your female off her feet. Really. ”

Savla scowled, and I quirked an eyebrow his way, wondering if there was something he wasn’t telling me. I was about to ask him when Zara spoke, interrupting me.

“Did you want to know about David?” she asked in a hushed voice and we could hear multiple emotions roiling in her voice—none of them good.

“Who’s David?” I demanded, and I couldn’t stop the possessive growl from my voice.

“That’s her... well, I guess he’s her estranged husband,” she said with a deep sigh.

“He’s not really an ex because she hasn’t dissolved the marriage yet.

He’s a fuckhead. You would not like him.

We didn’t know what happened when she left.

We tried to reach out but she never responded, so we left her alone, thinking we were helping. ”

She pressed her fingers to her eyes. “Turns out he stopped her from talking to us, and then by the time she came back... It was bad, guys. Bad enough that when she came

back, she just... wasn't the same.

She doesn't have the same light in her eyes that she had before.

Thank the Goddess Mother we had a protection spell around the coven grounds, because by the time she came back...

if he'd found her again..." she trailed off, pursing her lips.

Fury like I'd never known swept through me.

A male hurt my mate. Her... husband.

"How do I get rid of him?" I asked her, and she sighed again.

"If I knew, I'd have done it already, to be honest with you. But on this plane, you can't go around killing people. You have to go through the proper channels. The law ." She said the last word like it pained her, and I had to admit that it pained me too.

"But I'd be helping the plane by getting rid of the trash," I explained in my most convincing voice.

"I agree with you," she told me, "but the police won't. And I know you guys are rich and everything, but you're still not above it all. You can bend the law with money, but I wouldn't go around outright breaking it."

I tsked, slumping in my seat. "What the hell's the point of all this coin, then?" I demanded, and she chuckled.

"No dead bodies, Enka, that's all I'm asking," she said, interrupted by a deep male voice joining in.

“No dead bodies. Who’s this?” Rudgar demanded. “Savla?”

No one else in the room said a peep, pointing fingers toward where Savla stood closest to the phone, shaking his head and rolling his eyes. “Yeah, Rud. It’s me.”

“Whatever the mess is, we can fix it up until a point. But no bodies .” With that, he hung up the phone while Zara complained in the background.

“Maybe a body,” Rok said with a shrug. “What Rud doesn’t know isn’t going to hurt him.”

Murmured agreements were heard from all around the table, but Krusk shushed them. “No, he’s our clan leader while Dristan’s busy. What he says goes.”

Annoyed by the new rules that were restricting me, I turned back to face the screen, my gaze going to my female without hesitation. “I just hope she isn’t in any trouble,” I whispered.

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Tasia

I don't know how I'm going to survive this.

I looked around at the females gathering in the main apartment we used for the coven. Gabbi was surrounded by her aunts, and my heart ached with loss.

I don't want to leave them .

I sucked in a breath, forcing a smile on my face as they set up for the party we were holding for my daughter. She was turning four in a couple weeks and I couldn't believe how quickly time had passed.

I'd used the excuse of her birthday being thrown early as a way to say one last farewell to them before we left. I hoped with everything in my heart that we would be able to come back soon, but I didn't know how true that would be.

We needed to run, and we needed to run far . I couldn't rest until I had my daughter safely away from her biological father. And that was all he'd ever be. He'd never done anything to prove he was a real father.

"Oh," Pen laughed as Gabbi ran up to her, pressing her cheek to Pen's heavily pregnant stomach. She peered down at her, running her fingers over my little girl's hair. "Trying to say hello?"

Gabbi turned her face to press a kiss to her stomach, screaming "Hello in there!" and my heart ached with love for her. And loss. So much loss.

I was taking her away from the only family she'd ever known. The one that had raised her. It was such a disservice to her and my family, but I couldn't get them involved. They'd done too much for me to get them into trouble now.

I let her flit between the people she loved, getting praise and presents as she went. She already had so many things—spoiled and adored by everyone in the coven and clan—that I knew it was going to be difficult for her to let everything go.

I'd taken out as much cash as I was able, and had packed our bags with everything I could for her. We were going to have to budget for a little bit—and the transition was going to be hard on her.

When I'd been running the first time and even afterward when I'd moved in with the coven, I was used to living off of the barest. But my Gabbi had only been given the best by her aunts and now her orc-uncles.

She raced over to the door as the tall, handsome orc who Gabbi bit in the hallway entered and my heart thrummed in my chest. I'd met many orcs in the time our coven had moved into the clan-building, but none had stood out the way he had.

I'd seen him around, of course, but yesterday when we'd met in the hallway, something had changed. I wasn't sure what it was, but it wasn't good. Watching him smile down at my daughter had done something to my insides—melting them in a way that didn't happen with any other male.

And I couldn't afford for that to happen.

Not now. I needed to escape and I couldn't have anything else tethering me here.

So when I saw my sweet girl with her teeth latched onto his ankle and him beaming down at her with pride, as if this was the best greeting in the world, I struggled to

harden my heart.

His dark eyes lifted, meeting mine across the room and the jolt in my chest told me that I was in trouble.

Not now. Please not now. Why is this happening now?

As realization filled me, I sent a tight smile his way in greeting and turned away, not even bothering to pry Gabbi off of him.

The wards.

When my powers had been bound and the wards that my coven had placed around Gabbi and I had fallen, it would have allowed another kind of bond to start forming... A witch's true mate.

Oh no. This can't be happening.

I'd seen it with Zara and her orc, but there was no way it was happening with me. I couldn't deal with what he was making me feel on top of the heavy emotions that were plaguing me, since I was leaving.

Everything was too much. I stepped toward the kitchen, trying to help, but Tabitha shooed me out with a well-meaning, "Go play with your beautiful daughter." Unsure what I was supposed to do with myself, I hurried to the snack table, neatening as I went.

I was stopped for conversation one or two times, but it was easy to pass off my near-tears expression as disbelief that my little girl was so grown up already.

I moved to the cake, the letters on the frosting spelling out Gabbi's name along with

purple butterflies that were actually fluttering—her most recent obsession and most definitely a gift from her aunt and our High Priestess, Zara.

The tears clogged in my throat decided that it was time to make an appearance, and I waved a hand in front of my face, trying to stem them.

How am I supposed to get through this night without falling apart?

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Enka

I took my time, picking my way through the small crowd that surrounded the snack table, eyeing the female who was pretending to be laughing in the corner. I'd been observing her, and I knew without a single doubt that there was nothing real in her smile.

Something was very wrong. I could tell from the way she carried herself and the way her gaze shifted from person to person as if trying to memorize them.

She's going to run.

I was certain of it. And my entire body was tight with the knowledge. I wasn't sure why she would. It made no sense. She was safe here with her coven and inside the protection spell that surrounded the tower.

I had no idea what had happened to make her so afraid she would risk that, but whatever it was, there was no way I was going to let her go without me.

I glanced over at my older brother Krusk, and I saw the way his gaze flickered between me and Tasia.

He tilted his head toward her and I rolled my eyes.

Savla, my other brother, was standing in the corner, observing the interactions around him with his usual quiet contentment. He didn't like to be involved too much. But when his gaze met mine, he sent me a little bob of his head.

I'd told them both what I'd felt and they were firmly on my side, backing me any way they could. I was going to have to let them know that I'd be leaving with her—at least until I could convince her that she needed to return.

From the way she was looking at her family, she was going to make her move soon, and I was going to have to make mine. My brothers would support any choice I made—especially when it was attributed to my mate and her sweet youngling.

I was just as attached to that baby as I was to my mate. Every time I saw her, the joy that lit her gaze was mirrored in my chest. Even now, she'd only released her hold on me after Becca had bribed her with a present that she needed to try on.

A little dress for my little princess.

The thought was a possessive one, and I looked back at my mate, the noose tightening its hold around my heart .

Mine.

The bond had strengthened as I'd watched her, becoming more obvious until the knowledge roared through my chest. I could get my brothers to pack a bag for me that I'd have shipped to wherever she was going—because I wasn't letting her out of my sight.

Straightening my shoulders, I prowled closer to her, trying to be inconspicuous in my approach, but her lovely eyes caught my movement and they widened with trepidation as I neared. The same look that I saw on her face whenever there was a male present.

Wariness and vigilance. Something had happened in her past that had hurt her and now she was careful to avoid situations that could lead to it happening again. I

pressed my lips together, struggling to hide the smile that wanted to beam out at her in greeting.

“Wonderful party,” I told her instead, trying to show nonchalance. This was the advice that I’d been given by Rudgar.

Females like Tasia didn’t like being pursued outright.

They needed to be given time to get used to the male who was mated to them.

If her husband was as bad to her as Zara said, she’d be wary.

I had to allow her the time to trust me.

In all likelihood, she wouldn’t even realize who I was to her until I told her the truth.

She gave me that same, measured smile that she had the first time we’d officially met. “Thank you. The coven and clan planned it for us. I helped, but if it wasn’t for them, it wouldn’t have happened,” she told me, her gaze sweeping out to encompass everyone in the room.

The smile that crossed her face this time was more genuine.

“It was more than I could ever ask for,” she murmured, and I was certain that she’d forgotten I was there for a moment.

I didn’t mind. If it meant that I would be able to see that sincere look in her eyes, then I could be invisible for years at a time and just watch her.

I scanned the beautiful planes of her face, admiring her doe-like eyes and the sweet curve of her nose and cheeks. I longed to run my finger along her soft jaw, but I held

myself back, scared that I was going to pull her from the trance she seemed to be in.

“They’re the only family I’ve ever known,” she told me, swallowing hard and I wanted to pull her into my arms. I needed to comfort her, but I also knew that she wouldn’t welcome it.

I wasn’t anyone to her... yet. Soon, I would be.

I had a plan, and I just needed time to execute it.

Still, it took a ridiculous amount of self-control to not intervene when her eyes were filled with sadness the way they were now.

Clenching my fists, I stopped myself from reaching out to touch her cheek.

My instincts were beating at me to hold her, to comfort her, but that would be a misstep. With Tasia, I had to be careful. Every step of my plan forward had to be mapped and charted.

From what Zara had told me, she had been burned and was now shy when it came to males. I understood that. I’d been watching the news of this plane and while it was shocking, for some reason, there were males who hurt the females they were honor-bound to protect.

It hurt my heart that this female carried the shadows she did because someone she’d trusted had betrayed her. But I also knew that I would be able to win her. Fated mates were fated for a reason. I was going to win her. It would just take time.

“I have a present for Gabbi,” I told her, pulling a little box from my pocket and holding it out to her.

The darkness that was haunting her gaze faded as she focused on the box, her brow furrowed. Wide eyes met mine and a jolt of lust sizzled through me, so strong that I almost staggered back on my feet.

Is that how she'll look at me the first time I make her come? A little surprised and a whole lot pleased?

“You didn't have to,” she insisted with a shake of her head, her eyes darting to where Gabbi was spinning in circles with Rudgar on the dancefloor. The big male was hunched almost all the way over as he spun her while she giggled. “She has so many gifts already—” she started, but I shook my head.

“Of course I had to get her something. It's her birthday. She's only had a few so far. Each one should be cherished,” I explained.

Her lips curved and her eyes ducked as she looked down at the box, hesitating for only a moment before she reached out for it. When our fingers touched, the shot of electricity zinged all the way through my body.

This. This is what I've been waiting for my entire life.

My brothers were the only family I had growing up.

We'd lost our parents early on. And every clan we'd approached had tossed us aside.

Chief Rok had been the only one who'd taken a chance on us, and now Dristan.

But there had always been something missing.

A part that was empty inside me. Now I knew what was missing.

Her.

Even as I thought it, a little missile slammed into my legs, latching around the left one, and my hand dropped to the top of downy curls I was already familiar with.

“Happy birthday, Gruk-ir,” I murmured, and she grinned up at me.

“Gabbi,” she said, tilting her head as she bit into the leg of my pants. Even as Tasia made a sound of distress, I waved her off.

“Gruk-ir means tiny sweet in orcish,” I told her, stroking my hand down her hair again and watching as her eyes closed.

This little one had been protected from whatever had happened to them, I could tell. She was open and loving—if a little bitey. She trusted everyone in the coven and it looked as though she’d never been touched by the darkness that had made my mate so guarded.

I was both proud of Tasia for that and disappointed in myself. I wish I could have been there to stop whatever had hurt her. If I’d been there to protect her, she wouldn’t have the shadows. She wouldn’t feel the need to run.

“Gruk-eer,” Gabbi enunciated, taking another bite out of my pants.

I beamed with pride down at her and she gave a little wiggle. “What can I call you?” she asked, taking another chomp.

“Enka,” I told her, and she crinkled her little nose as she sounded it out before shaking her head.

She pointed up at me with her tiny finger and said, “Abu,” in the sweetest tone I’d

ever heard in my life.

Everything inside of me froze as I stared down at the little princess that was latched onto me. “What did you say?” I asked her, struggling to keep the emotions out of my voice.

“I had a dream when I was younger and you and Mommy were in it,” she told me, swinging from side to side, using my leg to keep her tiny body balanced. “And I called you Abu.”

Daddy.

This sweet, precious girl had called me daddy .

“What kind of dream?” I asked her, struggling not to make the simmering love that was boiling in my heart known to Tasia, who was eyeing our interaction with curiosity.

Gabbi shrugged, swinging again. “Mommy was there, you were there and there was a scary male there too.”

The furrow in Tasia’s brow was getting deeper and deeper as Gabbi continued to speak and her gaze swung up to stare at me with suspicion before she lowered herself to her haunches and held her arms out to her daughter.

Gabbi didn’t hesitate, diving into her mother’s arms and nuzzling her face into her neck. Just like I wished I could do.

“I think she’s a little overwhelmed with everything,” she told me, holding the little box up with a tight smile. “Thank you so much for this. I’ll let her open it once she’s had a nap.”

I nodded, allowing her to retreat. I watched as she weaved her way out of the room, making excuses about Gabbi that I was sure wasn't true. The little girl was a lot of things, but she hadn't been overwhelmed.

She's leaving. She's using the party as a distraction.

Every inch of my body wanted to chase after them, but I didn't. I wanted to observe her first, and I'd keep an eye out for any threats to her. Then I'd follow at a distance until they needed me. And I'd be there for them. I knew that with every fiber of my body.

My heart was still aching in my chest at the memory of Gabbi looking up at me with sparkling eyes, a grin on her face as she called me Abu. I was gone for those two. They'd taken me down in one fell swoop.

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Tasia

She's had a premonition.

I swallowed, holding my little girl against my chest while she wiggled in my arms, hurrying toward our apartment. I'd left everyone while they were still enjoying the party and I hoped that by the time they noticed we were gone; we'd be on a bus on our way out of the city.

"I don't wanna take a nap, Mommy," she whined and I nodded, rubbing her back with gentle strokes.

"You're not going for a nap," I told her, pasting what I hoped looked like an adventurous grin on my face. "We're going on a trip."

"A trip?" she asked, a little gasp filling her chest with air. "I love trips!"

The only "trip" she'd ever been on was to move to this new building, so I understood why she would be excited. Unfortunately, that wasn't what we had in store for us. I was hoping to find a way to make it more palatable for her, but I might fail miserably.

"Tell me more about your dream, sweetheart," I asked, setting her down on her bed while I grabbed the bags I'd already packed for her. I tucked Enka's present into one of the pockets of the bags for later.

I wasn't sure what it was, or why I wanted to keep it when I was leaving most of our things behind, but I tended to follow my instincts now. After failing miserably when I

was younger, I'd learned to appreciate my gut feelings when I got them.

"Abu was there, and you were there," she told me, hopping around on the little shoes with heels that Pen had gotten her.

They were most definitely an attempt to get her to slow down when dashing away from me—since my little girl was a runner—and I appreciated that. "And then there was a scary male."

"What did the male look like?" I asked her, bracing myself for whoever she thought was scary. She'd never used that word before and I had a feeling I knew who it was.

"He was tall, but not as tall as Abu," she said, doing a little jig in her shoes. "And he looked really mean."

"What color was his hair?" I asked, steeling myself for the blow that I knew was going to come.

"Yellow," she said, tilting her head to the side. "Like Angele's from the park."

Fuck, fuck, FUCK!

It was David. It had to be. She didn't consciously remember him, I knew she didn't, so the only way she could have had a dream about him was if it was a premonition. She was still growing into her powers and they were going to fluctuate for a while.

A dream like that meant that the people were going to be in her future. Me? Of course. Enka? Doubtful, but we'd see. David? I sucked in a deep breath, shaking my head.

Premonitions could be avoided. There were ways to circumvent them and I was going

to use every single method until we were safe and sound.

“Are you ready for that trip?” I asked her, lowering myself to lift her into my arms. After a few years of carrying her, I now had the upper body strength of a champion lifter, I was certain. That didn’t mean my legs didn’t shake as I straightened up with her.

Maybe if you went to the gym and stopped eating cookies...

I cut my thoughts off, balancing my daughter on my hip as I exited the apartment, leaving it open behind us. I’d left a note on my coffee table for one of the witches in my coven to find. It explained a little of what was happening and I’d asked them not to try to find me.

Knowing those glorious females, it would be a waste of ink. They’d scry for me as soon as they could, but I’d also told them that finding me could put me in even more danger—which was true. If David had found me here, then he could be following them too.

The last thing I wanted was for them to head into a situation where he thought they were hiding me. When I disappeared, I hoped he would leave them alone.

Going down the stairs instead of the elevator, I listened to Gabbi tell me all about her last playdate—which I’d been present for—in detail. Looking around, I made sure that I wasn’t being followed, peering into the shadows of the night around the building before I started walking .

I took a left and then a right, having memorized the map to the bus that I knew would leave in five minutes. Every sound was louder at night, startling me into spinning around to face a non-existent threat three times before I spotted the bus moving along the road.

I swallowed hard, running a palm down my daughter's back as I hurried to the bus stop. "I love the bus," she told me, and I pressed a kiss to her soft hair, thanking the Goddess Mother that she'd given me this sweet, beautiful gift from a marriage that had been the most horrific time of my life.

"I love the bus too, sweetheart," I told her, tapping my bus pass, smiling at the driver and then hurrying to a seat near the back. When I was seated, I glanced through the windows, fear ratcheting through my body since I couldn't see clearly through them.

I almost missed the man standing at the corner with his hands in his pockets, but my throat closed as I recognized the silhouette. I'd know him anywhere.

Fuck.

I exited the bus, holding Gabbi tight as I hurried to the next bus stop. My head swiveled in all directions as I tried to keep a look-out for David. I couldn't see anyone around us, but that didn't mean he wasn't there.

I knew the way he worked. The fact that he'd let himself be seen wasn't a coincidence. He'd done it to let me know that he was there. He wanted me to see him .

Psychological warfare was one of his MOs. He used to love to have me walking on glass, tiptoeing around his moods until I was a mess of anxiety.

He was doing the same thing now, I was sure of it. But I wasn't the same woman I used to be. I may have lost my powers, but I had my daughter with me, and I wasn't going to let him hurt us.

When I heard the footsteps approaching us I swung around, my daughter clutched close as I eyed the threat. The dark silhouette was so big it was intimidating, but I

knew from the fact that it was huge that it wasn't David.

Sagging with relief, I turned back to check the streets for the oncoming bus, and I didn't think anything of it as the person stood next to me.

"Where're you headed?" a familiar voice asked, and I startled so hard I felt Gabbi stir in my arms. And she was a deep sleeper, so I had to be shaking in my boots.

"Enka?" I gasped, staring up at the deep, dark, glittering eyes of the male who was smiling down at me.

"Hey," he said, lifting a hand in a wave that was so silly, it made the anxiety that I was drowning in ease up enough for me to breathe. In the next moment, though, dread filled me.

If Enka was here, then someone had sent him. Which meant that someone knew I was gone and probably wanted me to come back. I couldn't do that, but I didn't know how to explain why.

"I—I was just heading out to get Gabbi a present," I lied, keeping my voice steady from all the years I'd had practice in keeping the truth from David. The stutter was new. I was usually cool and calm under pressure unless it affected my daughter, but not now.

Looking up into this male's eyes, I realized I didn't want to lie to him. I wanted to tell him the truth. To lay everything bare before him and that was dangerous. I didn't even know him.

"Hmm," he said, nodding, looking around. "But the thing is, you're not really heading into the city, are you?"

Swallowing hard, I turned to peek at the street again, trying to gauge when the next bus would get here. It should be a couple minutes out, which meant that I would be saved from having to face this interrogation if I could keep my wits about me.

“It’s a special cake that she likes,” I told him, not looking at him and fighting the idiot inside of myself who wanted him to hold me in his strong arms. “I’ll bring some back for everyone, so you can head home.”

Let your mate protect you.

But I shoved that thought aside. I was probably wrong, anyway. My instincts about mates were always wrong. I’d thought the same thing about David, but that had been the biggest mistake of my life. Just because this instinct was so much stronger didn’t mean that it was right this time either.

“Hmm,” he repeated, and I watched as his gaze took in the bags on my back and shoulder.

I squeezed my eyes shut, hoping he wouldn’t say anything, but I should have known I wouldn’t be so lucky.

“Why don’t I drive you there, then?” he suggested, and I shook my head.

“I’m fine. I like the bus. And it soothes Gabbi,” I fibbed.

You’re getting worse and worse with every word out of your mouth. Shut. Up.

“It’s kind of late to be travelling on your own though,” he said, and while it was a logical statement, I was sure that someone—probably Rudgar and Zara—had sent him.

And if they did, then he didn't want to take me anywhere except back to the building.

I couldn't do that. I would not put anyone else at risk.

"We're fine," I said in a dismissive tone. "You can leave."

He heaved a sigh, nodding, and I had to stop myself from sagging with relief again just as the bus pulled up in front of me. I hurried inside as soon as the doors opened, the prospect of freedom filling me with energy.

That energy switched to panic as Enka followed behind me, eyeing the bus with open curiosity. He watched as I tapped my card against the reader, moving to sit behind the driver—since this bus was fuller than the previous one.

The bus driver—a bored looking Ijiraq blinked at him, his huge antlers brushing the top of the bus as he waited for Enka to pay. His eerie yellow eyes moved from him to the card reader and then he huffed out a heavy, impatient breath.

"I don't have one of those cards," Enka explained.

"Cash payment is four dollars," he said in a weary voice. "And I don't have any change."

Enka nodded, grabbing his wallet and I watched as he pulled out a twenty-dollar bill, handing it over. The Ijiraq looked from him to the money clutched in his skeletal hand and shrugged, tucking it into the front pocket of his shirt.

"Enjoy the ride," he said, and Enka clambered in, taking a seat opposite me. Even as fear that we were being followed rushed through me, I couldn't help but be amused by this big orc squished into a seat on the bus.

It was clear that he was trying to make himself look smaller. He glanced around, taking in all of the different beings on the bus who—after watching his interaction with the driver—had gone back to minding their own business.

When he turned back to me, I stiffened, hoping he wasn't going to ask me anything. It only took him a few seconds.

“Where's this bakery located?” he asked and I rolled my eyes, leaning forward to speak to him. He did the same, mirroring my position, but being so much bigger than I was, and taking up so much more space, it was almost funny. Almost .

“You know I'm not going to a bakery,” I told him, my eyes narrowed on his and he nodded, his hands pressed together in front of him.

“Yes,” he told me, the simple word not saying anything more.

“Who sent you after me?” I asked, furious that my plan was being thwarted.

“No one,” he answered with a shrug, sending an apologetic look toward a pretty little Kitsune he'd jostled since she was standing next to him. She giggled, giving him a shy, inviting smile and I felt my chest burn with jealousy.

He didn't seem to notice though, as he simply turned back to me, effectively dismissing her. Her flirtatious smile turned sour, tails swishing as she moved away in an elegant, miffed huff. I bit my lip, hiding a smile and telling myself that it couldn't be relief that I was feeling.

That would be stupid, Tasia. And remember when we decided not to do stupid things?

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Tasia

I tried to ignore Enka for the rest of the bus ride, but when I stood to leave, he followed, exiting with me as I stepped onto the street and started walking. He was a huge, protective presence behind me and it was the first time I'd felt safe that day.

I peeked back at him as he strolled, his hands in the pants pockets of the charcoal suit he was wearing. His lips quirked in a smile as he saw me looking at him and I spun back to face forward, having memorized the look of his drool-worthy shoulders and chest.

There was no way that I could fall for whatever act he was putting on. "I know it was either Zara or Rudgar who put you up to this," I told him, glaring over my shoulder. "Or maybe both of them."

He shrugged those big shoulders, his biceps outlined in his suit, and I wished I could just take a bite of them. Maybe my daughter had gotten her biting habit from me .

"I told you," he drawled, strolling with casual ease while I was hurrying along the street. "This has nothing to do with anyone. I'm on my own."

"And you just decided to follow a stranger," I sighed, rolling my eyes, focusing on where I was going once more.

"You're not a stranger to me," he told me in a serious voice. "You're part of my clan. You and Gabbi. I noticed that you've been acting differently. More guarded, more watchful. I figured something was wrong. So when I saw you leave, I knew that I had

to follow.”

I licked my lips, struggling not to turn around and look at him. I couldn’t let him know how much his words affected me. How much I wanted to hear them.

For so long, I’d felt invisible. At first with David, then with the coven, then as a woman. I didn’t need to hear exactly what I wanted to hear from a male like him. The sexiest, most gorgeous male that I’d seen in a long time.

This had to be something else, I just knew it. I couldn’t let myself get twisted into whatever the hell he was pretending. The only thing that could come from that was that I’d get hurt. He’d play whatever game he was playing and I would be the loser. Like always.

No, I was going to be smart this time. For myself, for my coven and definitely for my daughter. I’d never let her see the real weakness that I had inside me. I only wanted her to know me as strong.

Trying to walk faster, I stopped at the crosswalk, pressing the button multiple times. I was almost certain that it didn’t have any effect on the speed of the lights changing, but just in case .

“Where’re you heading?” Enka asked from behind me, and I peered up at him—so much taller than I was—as he looked around into the darkness surrounding us.

He was vigilant, his head swiveling and ears twitching to take in everything in a way that told me he wouldn’t miss much.

I turned back to face the lights, not letting myself be swayed by that.

It didn’t matter if he was looking out for us now.

It was because he'd been asked to and I wouldn't be forgetting that.

"There's a hotel nearby," he told me, and I shook my head.

"I told you—" I started, and he tutted, following me as the crosswalk lights turned on and I hurried across the street.

"No need to lie. I'm just letting you know that there's a hotel nearby that I think we could stay in tonight. Formulate a plan," he explained.

"A plan?" I gasped, stopping in my tracks and turning to face him head-on. The abrupt stop made him almost crash into me, but he didn't, teetering on his feet, but never touching me. "You don't have anything to do with this. I told you—"

"I know what you're saying," he said with a twist of his lips, "but you have me at your disposal. Let me help you. I won't tell anyone where you are.

Although I think it would be best if you let them know you're safe.

They will scry for you," he explained, his brow furrowing until I wanted to reach up to smooth it out on his face.

"And they will find you. Wouldn't it make more sense if you called them and explained to them what's happening instead of sending them on a gurak chase? "

Confused, it took me a moment to place the words. "You mean a wild goose chase? "

He shrugged, waving it off. "Whatever they're called here. The feathered beasts."

I swallowed, knowing that he was being logical, but it still took me a moment of staring up at his open, honest face before I said, "I wasn't planning on being found."

“I know,” he agreed, “but—”

“I knew they were going to scry,” I clarified, not happy with the idea that he probably thought I was some kind of idiot if he figured I hadn’t considered that. “That’s why we were heading to a safe zone.”

“A safe zone?” he asked, tilting his head and I remembered that this male hadn’t been in this world very long. There was so much that he had to learn.

“When someone wants to go somewhere that they won’t be found, they go to bespelled safe zones. There’s some hotels, but more shelters,” I explained, shrugging. “I was going to move us around between safe zones until I could figure out something else.”

His frown deepened and his intense stare turned into a glare. It was an odd feeling seeing censure in the eyes of this male whose opinion shouldn’t matter, but I was beginning to think did—for some reason.

“And you were just going to go on a merry chase, not considering your own safety?” he growled, and I swallowed, shaking my head.

“Of course I was considering my own safety,” I gasped, outraged. “That’s why I was sticking to safe zones!”

“With no protection,” he corrected, and I sputtered into silence. “Because it’s very clear that you’re running from something, or more to the point, some one.”

I gaped at him just as Gabbi stirred in my arms, blinking around at us. We’d gone still, and she was probably feeling the light nip in the nighttime air. She didn’t like the cold. Neither did I.

“We’ll get somewhere warm soon, Gabbi girl,” I cooed at her, snuggling her closer, but she was taken from me—with an ease that I was jarred by.

My daughter was out of my arms and pressed against Enka’s huge chest before I could argue.

He tucked her under his jacket, but he didn’t even need to bother.

As soon as Gabbi’s body touched the heat of his, she melted against him, snuggling close and going right back to sleep. I knew I was in trouble as soon as I felt the twist of sweetness in my heart at how tenderly such a huge orc was holding my daughter. As if she was something very precious to him.

He took the bags that I was holding too, tilting his head in the direction I had been walking.

“You’re coming with me,” he told me, not bothering to wait for my response, turning and walking away with Gabbi. I hurried after him, noticing that he was keeping his stride slow so I could catch up.

“I’m telling you—” I started and he turned dark, narrowed eyes my way, cutting me off.

“And I’m telling you that there’s no way that I’m going to let you prance around in danger. I’ll protect you,” he finished, putting his hand out to stop me from continuing to walk when we’d arrived at another crosswalk.

I took the time to stare up at him, confusion and hope swirling in my chest. The hope was the one I tried to quash. I didn’t have the energy or bandwidth to think about another male and if I did, I wouldn’t go for a bossy one.

That's where you went wrong with David.

Although that wasn't true. He was a little pushy in the beginning but overall he acted like a prince, making sure my every need was met and I was pampered like I'd never been before. Then the mask had fallen.

I eyed Enka, wondering if he wore a mask, too. I'd been observing the orcs who'd taken us in. So far they seemed caring and kind, but you never knew what kind of person someone actually was until the chips were down.

Dristan, Rok and Rudgar had come through for their females, but that didn't mean that there weren't any bad eggs in the batch. And I was a master bad-egg-picker.

Enka put his hand on my lower back, the sizzle of electricity shocking me into the forward propulsion of his hand as the light changed and we were allowed to cross.

"I can take her," I told him, worried that he was trying to use my daughter as a hostage of some kind. He stopped on the other side of the crosswalk, moving his body lower so I could take Gabbi, protecting us from the wind as he did.

I blinked up at him, observing the concern on his face as he looked down at my little girl. I shook myself out of my stupor when he raised his eyes to mine.

"Take my jacket, too," he told me, holding both of my heavy bags in one hand and maneuvering it off of himself so he could cover my shoulders.

Then he started walking again, ensuring that he was between me and the street and protecting us from the cross-wind at the same time.

Oh, he's good.

This was probably how he got all the females to fall at his feet. I felt my lip lift in a sneer as I thought about how easy it must be for him to seduce his way through throngs of fawning females. Males like that were the worst kind.

I spotted the sign for the hotel as soon as we turned the corner and I slowed to a stop as he headed toward the double door entrance with the gargoyle doorman. I blinked at the sign and then Enka, shaking my head.

“There’s no way I can afford this,” I whispered to him and he smiled at me, shaking his head .

“Don’t worry about it. Rudgar’s best friend runs the security for this hotel. He’ll give us backup too. You and Gabbi will be safe here,” he assured me.

It was the final words that cinched my fate.

Gabbi.

She would be totally safe in a place like this. One of the fanciest hotels in Grebath and it was a safe zone.

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Enka

I have her.

I saw it in her face. The gorgeous witch was finally beginning to see sense. I couldn't understand what could possibly have scared her enough to run from her coven and the clan.

The building that we'd made our home had a protection spell around it and it was monitored by Rudgar's company—that I worked for—around the clock. There was no way someone could bypass that.

Knowing all of that, I figured that since she didn't trust me, it would take time to ease the answers out of her. I put my hand on her lower back, my palm spanning so much of it that I wished I could pull her against me and claim her in public.

I stopped myself from making a spectacle—barely—and moved toward the front desk instead. The green-eyed nymph blinked her long eyelashes at me, the twinkle in her eyes telling me things I didn't need to know.

I quirked an eyebrow, narrowing my gaze at her and she cleared her throat, appearing chastened.

“How may I help you?” she asked with a melodic voice.

“I'd like to speak to Darak, please,” I told her, and I watched as her eyes widened before she nodded, grabbing the phone and lifting it to her ear.

“Who’s Darak?” Tasia whispered next to me.

“Rudgar’s friend. He’ll cover our tracks,” I explained, wanting her to feel as safe as possible.

I watched her stiff shoulders relax a bit, some of the stress she’d been holding easing. “He can hide us?”

I searched her gaze before I nodded. “This would be the best place,” I told her, before shrugging. “Other than home. There was much more backup there. But this is second best.”

She looked away, staring at her shoes instead. “I couldn’t stay there,” she sighed, her tone telling me that there was so much more to the story, but I wouldn’t be hearing a single bit of it. Resigned to that fact, I turned to look in the direction I knew Darak’s office was located.

The male was already on his way, his gaze moving between Tasia and I. I didn’t like the way he was looking at her, and I curled my upper lip to let him know my distaste. A quirked eyebrow was all that it earned me.

His expression—as usual—never changed. He moved over to us with a grace and presence that always confused me. He acted like a chief, yet he worked for Rudgar. When Rudgar had founded Everlock Securities, Darak was his right-hand male.

Before I’d met my mate, I had briefly considered working on Darak’s team with the hope that I would be able to travel more and meet my mate faster. As it turned out, the little minx had been under my nose the entire time I’d been on this plane.

“Enka,” he said in his deep, rough voice with a nod in my direction. I always assumed that when a male didn’t speak much—like my brother Savla—then the

raspier their voice would get. I'd yet to be proven wrong.

I slammed my fist to my left breast-bone in the age-old greeting of orc-warrior to orc-warrior.

While it wasn't often used on this plane, I found it difficult to break the habit.

The male returned the gesture and I noticed that Tasia winced both times at the loud sound, but it hadn't even jostled Gabbi, who was still fast asleep on her shoulder, a moist spot forming where she was no doubt drooling on her shirt.

"A youngling?" he asked, his brow furrowing as he tilted his head at where the little one was tucked against her.

I nodded, gesturing toward my mate. "This is Tasia. We need a place to keep them safe," I explained, giving him as much of an explanation as I could without giving too much away. I didn't want my mate to be uncomfortable.

"Of course," Darak said, without hesitation, and it earned another notch of respect from me.

Keeping females and younglings safe was of paramount importance, and any male who had the same values as I'd grown up with would be treated like a loyal brother.

"Follow me," he told us, turning on his heel and walking off without another word.

I continued on, seeing Tasia look around with awe in her gaze at the decor that surrounded us. The first time I'd visited this hotel to meet Darak, I'd also been thunderstruck by its beauty.

A huge crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling of the lobby, the light glinting off of

each delicate piece of glass in prisms that lit up the space. Our shoes echoed off of the marble tile under our feet, sinking into silence as we crossed a plush rug.

Two well-dressed guests in deep-backed leather seats eyed us as we passed, but the majority were too busy chatting and enjoying the live music from the grand piano discreetly placed in the corner.

The low murmur of voices did nothing to disturb the little one in her mother's arms and I was glad that she was such a deep sleeper.

I'd prefer for her to wake up when we were safely ensconced in our temporary home.

The burnished steel doors of the elevator caught our reflection as we approached and pride swelled in my chest as I saw us. My mate was by my side, holding our youngling close. She wasn't pressed against me the way I wanted her to be yet, but I held the hope that one day that would change.

The doors slid open as soon as Darak pressed the button to take us up to the higher floors. There was a smiling semi-translucent male, in a dark uniform that I could barely discern the color of, standing inside, his form wavering as he lifted a hand in greeting.

A ghost.

This was the first time I was seeing one on this plane, and I had to admit that I was startled.

The ghosts of our plane—Hellplane, as Zara had dubbed it—were sad creatures that haunted battlefields and burial zones.

This male was smiling, his semi-translucent teeth gleaming in the light of the

elevator.

“What floor, sir?” he asked Darak, his voice lilting with an accent that I didn’t recognize.

“Forty-seventh,” he told him, his expression still stern.

The ghost pressed the button and as we rose, he hummed a little ditty that was going to be stuck in my head for the rest of the week, I was sure.

The elevator was spacious, but I edged myself closer to the corner that Tasia was standing in, declaring to Darak and the ghost—who wasn’t paying any attention to us—that she was mine .

I pressed my arm against hers and she glanced up at me from under her lashes, narrowing her eyes. I blinked with innocence down at her, glancing at where a huge drool spot was forming around Gabbi’s little mouth, her lips parted in her sleep and her cheeks puffed with her breath.

A smile formed on my lips before I could stop myself. My mate was an amazing mother.

The sharp inhalation of breath took me by surprise and I met her gaze for a moment before the elevator slowed and came to a stop.

The open, soft look in her eyes wasn’t expected, but I almost lowered my head to her for a kiss before Darak cleared his throat, startling us from the moment that had been coalescing between us.

I felt my face heat and I gestured for Tasia to go ahead of me while the ghost rocked back and forth on his heels as he watched us. We were out of the elevator and

heading toward the only visible door on this level when the elevator chimed behind us, letting us know it was leaving.

“Will anyone have access other than us?” I asked Darak and he shook his head, holding out his hand with two blank, black cards in his hand.

“No. This floor is secure. The suites on this level are each served by individual elevators. Access will be closed and we’ll be watching the emergency stairwell,” he said, his tone business like.

“You’ll be able to use the rooftop pool, but not the restaurant.

It’s too open. Use room service for everything that you need.

The concierge can get anything , so don’t worry about it. ”

His emphasis on the word told me everything that I needed to know. We would not be stepping out of this hotel until whatever was chasing my mate went away or was subdued. This was our new home.

I nodded, watching as he tapped on the door handle with the black cards before he handed one to each of us. I took mine, tucking it into my pocket as he gestured for Tasia to go ahead. I waited behind and he turned to face me, his brow furrowed.

“What’re we looking out for?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I admitted, releasing a huge pent up sigh of relief now that my female and youngling were safe inside the room. “But she’s scared, so whatever it is, I’ll have to get her to tell me so I can fix it for her.”

“ We can fix it,” he said, baring his teeth. “Whoever it is, they’re threatening an

innocent female and child. They'll go through me, too."

Gratitude filled me. My clan used to be tiny—with just my brothers—but now it was growing in spades with males who I respected and was growing to love. Darak was one of them.

"Thanks, brother," I told him, slamming my fist against my chest.

He returned the gesture before slapping me on my back, glancing at the door where my female had entered. "Whatever you need, call me. The fact that she's running tells me that whoever it is, they're close."

I nodded, agreeing with him, a shot of fear piercing my heart at the thought of my female and youngling being hurt in any way.

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Tasia

I spun in a circle, staring around at the huge suite that I'd stepped into. This place was amazing . I'd seen commercials with things like this, but I'd never thought I'd ever be staying in one of those places.

It wasn't as nice or as large as the apartment we had left behind, but it came really close. And for a temporary accommodation, that was saying something.

The carpet was plush under my feet and I knew it would be so soft if I took my shoes off.

There was a living area spread out in front of us with a dining table behind it.

A massive television took up a portion of the wall on the right of us and a set of double doors to the left had to lead to the bedroom and bathroom.

There was a smaller door closer to the front door and when I moved over, pulling it open I saw that it revealed a half-bath.

The bright, jeweled tones that had been used for the decorations gave off a modern aesthetic but the furniture looked plush and comfortable. And durable , which would be important for Gabbi.

This is amazing.

I spun in a slow circle before everything came to a screeching halt. There was one

door, leading to one bedroom.

I hurried over to it, prying the door open and releasing a panicked laugh. Gabbi mumbled against my left breast and I stroked my hand over her back to comfort her.

Fuck, fuck, FUCK !

How was I going to survive staying with Enka in a place with only one bed? Who I was now more certain than ever was my bond mate. The moment we had shared in the elevator had been more intense and intimate than sex had been with David.

I might have been in denial before, but I couldn't be now.

Still, I wasn't going to do anything about it.

Rash decisions had put me in the place I was now and while I was grateful that my daughter and I were safe and out of danger for the moment, staying in a hotel that was far more luxurious than the borrowed sofa we might have been able to talk our way into once we made it out of the city, I wasn't going to jump into bed with another male.

Not until I was out from under the thumb of the last male I'd trusted.

Even then, I didn't know that I could give my heart and soul to Enka.

I couldn't trust my heart anymore. It had led me down the wrong path before.

I was almost hyperventilating by the time the door snicked closed in the distance.

Enka.

I stepped out of the bedroom, eyeing him as he looked around nonchalantly, putting my bags down on the desk in the corner. He dwarfed the space, and now it felt way too tiny. Too claustrophobic.

“I’ll sleep on the sofa,” he said, without missing a beat, and the racing of my heart slowed along with my erratic breathing.

“What?” I asked, my brow furrowing, not expecting the words from him. He hiked his thumb toward the sofa.

“It’s wide enough that I can fit on it. You and Gruk-ir can take the bedroom. I’ll ask Darak to bring some of my things here. You’ll be safe. I’ll protect you,” he explained.

Just like that, every ounce of panic slid out of my body.

He didn’t expect me to sleep with him. He’s trying to keep us safe.

While a small part of my brain—the part that was trained to not believe males after David—screamed at me to not believe him, the rest of me was finally relaxing. A wave of ease swept over me and I nodded, not able to voice the sweet relief that filled me.

“Thank you,” I told him with complete sincerity.

Maybe he is just as nice as Dristan, Rok and Rudgar. Maybe I can trust him.

While a tiny part of me was trying to see the best in him, another poisonous part was telling me that he was waiting for me to drop my guard before he pounced. Both sides of me agreed that—at least for now—we could let the adrenaline leave our system.

“Did you want to tuck her in?” he asked, lifting his chin toward where Gabbi was

making bubbles with her drool on my chest.

“Oh, yes,” I agreed, sending another grateful smile his way.

“I’ll be right back,” I told him, grabbing the bags off of the desk and heading toward the bedroom.

He watched me from where he stood in front of the sofa, and his gaze felt like caress against my skin—even though very little of it was visible.

The bed was king-sized, so I laid my daughter down on top of the duvet and tugged her blanket and stuffed tiger out of the bag along with her tiny toiletry bag.

My girl was a sound sleeper, but I was able to rouse her for a few minutes of teeth brushing while she blinked up at me with those beautiful sleepy eyes.

She was asleep again before I was able to change her clothes, so I took my time, easing her out of them and then redressing her in her pajamas.

I lay her on the bed again, covering her with her blanket and then putting the toy under her arm.

She squeezed it around the neck and buried her face against the softness.

I ran my palm across her hair, leaning down to press my nose against her, taking a deep breath and allowing her sweet scent to soothe me. Relief that my girl was safe settled inside me, and I stepped away from her, keeping her in my gaze until the very last moment before I closed the door.

I felt Enka standing close to me like a heat signature. Swallowing hard, I turned to look up at him, a small smile tugging at my lips.

“Does she need anything?” he asked, his brow furrowed with a concern that hit me in my chest.

David was her father and he’d never once cared about what she needed. She’d been his way to trap me further in the relationship, and I hadn’t realized it until it was too late. Way too late.

“She’s fine,” I said, taking a small step back, reminded that I had terrible taste in males. “She’ll be out for the night,” I explained, moving toward the sofa.

“Will she be hungry if she wakes up at night?” he asked, moving to pace next to the phone. “We should order something.” He paused, turning to face me. “Are you hungry?”

I smiled, struggling to stop my heart from squeezing with tenderness in my chest, but it was impossible. His face was ravaged with horror at the thought of one of us going hungry. “We just ate so much food at the party. Trust me, we’re set. She has snacks in her bag, don’t worry.”

“Is she allergic to anything?” he asked as he took a seat next to me.

Taking up too much room and surrounding me with his delicious scent.

“I should know that in case—” he started, but I shook my head, reaching out to touch his hand.

I couldn’t stand the worry etched into every inch of his expression.

“She doesn’t have any allergies, thank the Goddess. She puts everything into her mouth and hasn’t had a reaction yet,” I explained. “She’s healthy and full.”

Those words soothed him and he relaxed in small increments, giving me a small, apologetic smile.

“I’ve never been around a youngling before,” he told me, scrubbing his huge palm over the nape of his neck.

“I didn’t know what to expect, so I was reading a book on it and it mentioned that humans can have allergies. ”

He’s reading a book on how to take care of my baby.

I blinked away the tears that were pooling in my eyes, turning to look anywhere but at him. This couldn’t be real. This male who I’d known for less than a month was acting more like a father than the male whose DNA was in my daughter.

“That’s really sweet,” I cleared my throat to say, wanting to make sure that he understood I was grateful for all the work he was doing to try to understand how to take care of my girl. “Thank you for thinking of that.”

He shook his head, his eyes wide. “And it was saying that your body and needs would change as well. That you’d need to make sure—” he trailed off as my eyebrows almost met my hairline .

“ My needs?” I asked with a shake of my head. “No, I don’t need anything. Mothers—” I started, but he shook his head.

“Mothers are just as important as their babies,” he explained, and it was clear that he was repeating the words verbatim from somewhere.

“They need care and rest because they’re going through the emotional and physical turmoil that comes with a youngling.

” He finished, staring at me with expectation.

“Did you want some time to yourself? I can watch Gruk-ir. If she wakes up, I found some games in the book that I can play with her.”

“Time... to... myself?” I asked, not sure if I fully understood what he was asking. I hadn’t had time to myself in... My thoughts trailed off as I struggled to remember the last time I hadn’t been focused on Gabbi in one way or another. “No, I’m fine.”

He shook his head, his strong brow furrowed again.

“That’s what most mothers say, but it isn’t true.

You’re an individual as well as a mother, and you need to remember that.

You won’t be able to take care of her the way you need to unless you take care of yourself first.” he said, and I bit my lip, knowing that this male was reciting the words of a book, but also, those words were hitting close to home.

I haven’t taken any time to take care of myself.

But I also hadn’t had the opportunity. After Gabbi was born, I’d been too busy struggling to survive and keep our heads afloat. After our coven was attacked and we were finally safe, I’d been sinking into the idea that we could finally be at peace. But David had appeared.

We can’t catch a break.

“I know that’s the case with most mothers, but that’s not how it is with me.

I’m fine and—” I cut myself off at the disbelieving purse of his thick, luscious lips.

“I am fine,” I huffed, rolling my eyes and trying to ignore how devastatingly handsome he was.

“And I’m sorry, I don’t know you well enough to leave my daughter with you. ”

I expected him to be offended, but he just nodded his head in agreement.

“You’re right. You can’t trust anyone with her until you can confirm that they won’t hurt her,” he told me.

“You never know. I read about different discipline styles and there are so many options and so much different research on what’s right and wrong.

Unless you’re aligned with the person, it isn’t safe to leave her with them. ”

He turned to me, holding his hand out in my direction. “You can ask me anything you need to know.”

How the hell did this turn into a babysitting interview?

Enka

There was no way in hell that my mate was going to trust me with her precious youngling, and I understood that. It didn't mean that it didn't sting a little, but our Gruk-ir's safety came above all else.

"I don't need anyone to take care of her," she said in slow words, as if I wasn't understanding what she was trying to say—but I did. I totally understood that she was willing to deny herself the downtime that she needed, if it meant that Gruk-ir was safe, comfortable and cared for.

"I know that you don't need it," I lied. I didn't know anything of the sort. She deserved help and I was going to give it to her. It didn't hurt that I wanted us to get to know each other better for other reasons as well. "But wouldn't it be best if I was able to help in case?"

I saw her cursing the logic in her head and I had to hide my smile by scrubbing my palm across my mouth. I was winning the argument and she didn't like it. Not even a little bit.

"In case is the least likely scenario," she huffed, but she unfolded her arms from across her glorious breasts. "But you're right. It's in her best interest to make sure that someone else can take care of her if something happens to me."

The thought sent a shock of pain into my chest and I leaned closer to her, taking her small hand in mine. Her gorgeous brown eyes went wide and she stared up at me, her lips parted in shock.

Gods, I want to kiss those lips.

“Nothing is ever going to happen to you,” I promised her, my voice rough with earnest fire. “No one is going to touch you or our Gruk-ir. I’ll kill them first.”

A breath left her in a rush and I had to stop myself from leaning down to kiss her. I couldn’t think about anyone hurting my mate and youngling. It was sending me over an edge of rage unlike anything I’d ever faced before.

“But you don’t know anything about me,” I said, aching to reach out and tuck her hair behind her ear.

“And I’d like for us to get to know each other better.

Maybe if you trust me, you’ll be able to take a break once in a while.

I promise I’ll take such good care of her.

She’s such a sweet girl, and I know it’s because you’ve raised her. ”

She stared at me as if I had lost my mind and pursed her lips together tight. “It’s not that I don’t trust you. It’s that I don’t trust anyone with her other than my family,” she explained her voice tremulous.

I nodded, giving her a smile. I already knew that about her.

When she gave her loyalty, she gave it full-heartedly.

I saw it in the way that she interacted with her coven and my clan.

I hadn’t known my mother as long as my brothers had, but I knew that she would

love Tasia the way that I did.

After she died, I'd longed for a mate just like her, and it seemed as if the Gods were answering my prayers.

My heart ached at the thought of my mother meeting Tasia and our Gruk-ir. She would have loved her so much. And she would have treated the tiny girl as her own. When my mother loved, she loved with her entire heart, the way that Tasia did.

And my father would have joined me and my brothers in facing off against the asshole who had hurt my mate and her daughter. Even now, I knew that the clan would face off against this male for her and for me.

"You can ask me anything that you need," I prompted, knowing that she needed more from me than I was currently giving.

I wanted to be there for her, but it'd be hard for her to trust me.

And I knew that after everything she'd been through with whoever had hurt her in the past, that it would be difficult for her to put her faith in me. I was asking her to do it anyway.

I wanted to open my arms and hold her close, keeping her safe and sound from the entire world.

But I knew we weren't there yet, and I wasn't sure that we would ever be.

Still, I was going to try. I was going to put everything that she needed above anything that I wanted.

No matter how much I wanted to touch her, I wouldn't be doing it.

This was her priority. So it was going to be mine, too. Her daughter. Our daughter.

Our baby's going to be safe and I'm the one who's going to see to it.

I watched as she ran her gaze over my face and I hoped that she found whatever she needed to find there.

It was difficult to stay still because I knew that with every moment she was judging whether she would stay or go.

I hated that I might have to stop her, but I knew more about what she needed than she did in this moment.

"I don't know what to ask you," she said and looked away from me.

"There's probably so many questions that I should be asking but I don't know where to start.

" She bit her lip, sighing. "I'm still not sure if I can ever leave her alone with you.

I don't trust that easily. I don't know that anyone should trust that easily. Especially when they're a mother."

While I understood that, it didn't stop the sharp hurt that lashed through me.

"Deep down I know that you probably won't hurt us," she added, easing most of the pain right away, "But I don't know that I can trust myself anymore to make those decisions."

"Trust yourself?" I asked "Why wouldn't you be able to trust yourself?"

“I’ve made terrible decisions in the past and they’ve affected me, my family and Gabbi,” she admitted, chewing on her lower lip. I wished I could tug that lip free, but I had to stop myself. She didn’t need me trying to touch her now when she was opening up to me.

“I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I put her in any more danger because of the choices that I’m making.” She looked away as if her choices were something she was deeply ashamed of.

“Did you want to talk about them?” I asked. “I’ll never judge you on anything you tell me. And I can promise that I can keep a secret

“Even from your brothers?” she asked with a small smile playing on her lips. “You guys seem pretty close.”

“We are,” I told her. “We’re as close as any blood brothers can probably be.

It’s a little different from clan brothers.

Closer.” I struggled to explain the dynamics.

“We don’t owe loyalty to blood brothers, but when we make them part of our clan, it’s something stronger.

I chose those two as well as being directly related to them.

We were all each other had for the longest while.

The only family and the only support. Then we met Rok and as soon as we came to this plane, we met our new clan. ”

I scrubbed at the back of my neck, wondering if I needed to go further in depth. I knew she probably wouldn't trust me until I told her all the details of my life. But a lot of it consisted of things that I was ashamed of, and I wasn't sure if she was ready to hear any of it.

It wasn't easy to admit to my mate that in the past my clan and I had been so close to starving that we'd had to steal in order to eat. It was something that I would be humiliated to admit to this perfect, beautiful female. Especially since she was my mate.

How would that prove that I would be able to provide for her and our youngling? Would she ever trust me after that to be there for them if she knew?

The one thing I was sure of was that I wasn't gonna lie to her. If she asked me whether I'd ever had to steal in the past and if I'd done anything that was against our honor code, I would have to admit it to her. I was just hoping she wouldn't ask.

One day when we were fully mated and completely enveloped in each other's lives, then I could tell her all my sins. I could bare my soul to her at that point. But for now, it felt like she was ready to run at the slightest provocation. I couldn't take that risk.

"I wouldn't even know where to start with an interview for a babysitter," she said with a smile. "Should I be asking you for your references?"

"I don't have any," I admitted with a laugh. "I've never sat on a baby before in my life and that sounds a little bit dangerous actually. Why are people sitting on babies? If I wanted Gruk-ir to stop running I would hold her instead of sitting on her."

It was her turn to laugh. "There's definitely no sitting on the babies involved.

They just call it that when you care for a child when their parents are away.

” Her smile was slow and beautiful as she continued.

“I might not be against sitting on Gabbi, though. She’s a handful.

More than a handful. But I guess you’ve seen some of it already. ”

“She’s enthusiastic,” I argued. “And I love being her favorite.”

“I don’t know about favorite,” she giggled, and I adored hearing the sound. It lit me up inside in a way that I’d never known anything could do before. Her joy was contagious and I could feel it growing in my chest. “She also seems to have a bit of a crush on Rudgar,” she confided and I scowled.

“Rudgar’s taken, so she can have me,” I told her with a wink.

She lowered her gaze and looked anywhere but at me as she asked, “And you’re not taken?”

That hopeful part deep inside me cheered at the question. “No,” I cleared my throat to say, keeping my eyes firmly fixed on the side of her face where she was avoiding looking at me. “I’m not taken at all. I’m very available for taking,” I hurried to say.

It was her turn to clear her throat as she struggled to avoid the conversation. But I needed her to know where my stance was when it came to us. I was hers and she was mine. And there was nothing else that mattered.

“I see,” she said, trying out the words. “I didn’t know that.”

“That’s the good part about asking all these questions and doing this interview. You can learn everything that you want to learn about me. There’re no questions that are off limits,” I told her, my voice pitched low and deep.

If only I knew what this gorgeous female was thinking while she had that look on her face that told me nothing. She had so many secrets, and I wanted to know each and every one. But for now, my secrets would have to do.

Instead of waiting for her to ask any more questions, I decided that I would just tell her everything I knew about children and our youngling.

The book had been a treasure trove of information, but I knew that books were different from practice.

And our Gruk-ir was something I was gonna have to learn about on the run.

“Since I joined the clan, I’ve been reading up on younglings,” I told her.

“Especially human ones.” I tried to find the right words without giving her too much of a reason to run away.

If she knew that I was reading up about younglings because of her and Gabbi, then she might be too scared to stay here.

She might seek out someone else to protect her, and deep down I knew that I wouldn’t be able to let them go.

Now that they were mine and they were here with me, I would fight to keep them.

It was something I was going to have to talk to Darak about.

If he needed to subdue me so my mate and youngling could leave—so they could be safe without me—I wanted him to know my weak points so he could do it properly.

“I know all about naps and sleep cycles and I learned about milestone goals for her

age,” I said. “But I haven’t been able to put any of it into practice. I promise, if you need any time to yourself, you can trust me with her. I’ll come and get you if anything goes wrong.”

Her eyes widened at that.

“What do you think can go wrong?” she asked, horror filling her voice.

“In case she cries,” I explained. “I wouldn’t be able to bear it if she cried. I would have to bring her to you.”

Her expression of horror slowly transformed into a small secret smile, and she looked away once again.

It was as though my mate could never look at me, and I wanted that more than anything.

I wanted us to be able to tell each other every secret that we had.

Our time would come and I knew it deep down.

I just had to have the patience to wait.

for this perfect female to open up to me.

Tasia

Deep, sweet tenderness was filling my heart at the thought of this male running away from the tears of my daughter. I knew that most males were uncomfortable with tears, but just the thought of this big, strong male afraid of a little girl crying was enough to make me double over with laughter .

There was no way in hell that I was going to leave my daughter with him. There was no male that I would ever trust that way ever again, not after what had happened in my past.

But there was something inside of me that made me want to trust him.

Something inside of me that was aching for more from him.

I didn't know what that part was, and I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

The thought of him being my true mate was throwing me completely off my usual need to run away and escape from males.

"I think we're good for tonight. Don't worry about it," I told him, rubbing my hands along my cold arms.

His eyes narrowed at the goosebumps along my skin and he stood abruptly. I watched with confusion as he walked into the other room. I was on the verge of standing and going after him, hoping that he wouldn't wake up Gabbi, but he came right back with a blanket in his arms.

He walked over to me and I watched in shock as he covered my arms and shoulders with it. My brow furrowed and I wondered what his game was for a long moment before he moved away, not even accidentally touching me. I swallowed hard, struggling to figure out why he would have done that.

“Thank you,” I murmured in a low voice, and he shrugged as if it was the most normal thing. Which I knew, without a doubt, it was not. Males were selfish creatures. And even though Dristan, Rudgar and Rok so far had not proved to be, for my coven’s sake I hoped they were the exception to the rule.

“Are you okay here?” he asked, and I was confused for a long moment before I nodded slowly in response. “I want to run down and get my car. I left my bag in there,” he told me. My eyes widened and I nodded vigorously.

“Of course. Definitely go get your car before someone steals it,” I gasped .

He smirked, shaking his head. “I doubt anyone would be that bold if they knew what security measures are in that car,” he told me with a grin. “Rudgar takes our security seriously,” he added with a wink.

That wink was so swoon worthy that I had to look away again. My inability to meet his gaze might throw him off, but it was better than him realizing that I was lusting after him.

“Will you be okay here for a little while? I’ll have Darak send someone up to wait outside. If you need me, you just have to go and get him and let him know. He’ll give me a call and I’ll be here as soon as I can. In the meanwhile, Darak will be nearby as well,” he told me, his voice earnest.

“I’ll be ok,” I said, hoping that he didn’t think I was some kind of helpless damsel, even though I’d only proven to be that so far. In most circumstances, I was able to

take care of myself. But when it came to David for some reason, nothing could make me feel safe.

Except now. Except with him for some reason. I felt safer than I'd felt in years when I was with him.

But I wasn't stupid enough to be reckless with my safety or my daughter's.

I wouldn't be leaving without him. And I definitely wouldn't be leaving Gabbi while she was asleep and helpless.

David knew my weaknesses, and he would use her against me.

He had used her against me in the past, and he would be more than willing to do so again.

In the worst ways, I learned what kind of male I'd been with, what kind of male I'd trusted with my heart and my body, and what kind of male had fathered my beautiful daughter. It had taken years for me to realize what a monster he truly was.

But now that I knew, there was no going back. I wasn't the fool who'd met him in the first place. Who'd been seduced by his kind words and sweet lies.

I forced a smile as Enka stepped outside the door, keeping his gaze on me until the last moment.

I exhaled sharply, wishing that I could feel relieved.

Instead, I felt less safe now that he wasn't here.

I shook my head, telling myself that I had only known him for a short while and there

was no way I could become dependent on him so soon.

I pushed myself to my feet, determined to take a long bath and then to go to sleep, cuddling my daughter close.

I wasn't going to lose myself in another male, no matter what happened.

Enka may be the sweetest male that I knew, but there was always a dark side.

And he just hadn't revealed it to me yet.

Tasia

As I walked forward in the line for popcorn, I peeked back at the male who was at the ticket counter. David had left me with enough money to buy snacks, and I still couldn't believe that this perfect male was taking me out for a movie.

We met while I was at the grocery store and it was such a cliché way to meet. Still, I couldn't help but be charmed by him. He was everything that I was looking for in a male, and I couldn't believe that he was interested in me. He was tall, handsome and charming. The perfect trio.

I'd expected him to be attracted to one of the beautiful women walking in the aisles. Instead, he'd spotted me and immediately walked up to me with a gregarious grin. He'd asked me my name. I hadn't been able to stop myself from responding.

And now we were on our third date. I still couldn't quite believe it.

Everyone in the coven was happy for me, but I hadn't introduced them to him yet.

I didn't want to rush anything and introducing him to them felt like it would be too soon.

Although he'd hinted at wanting more. I wasn't sure I was ready yet.

It was heady getting this much attention from a male. It didn't help that I was always surrounded by females. Beautiful females. Females who usually took the spotlight while I stood in the background.

But not this time. This time, he'd asked me out and he told me I was the most beautiful female he knew. I blushed, I feeling the heat rising in my cheeks, even as I was called next in the line.

I move forward to the male Naga, who was looking at me with a smile. "What would you like to have?" he asked.

I beamed at him, ordering our popcorn and drinks, peeking backwards to look at where David was in the line. He was almost to the front and he sent a wink my way.

"On a date?" the Naga asked, eyeing the way that I was looking at David.

"Yes," I said in a shy tone, not sure how to answer questions like this. I'd never been in the situation before. "It's our third date," I explained. "And I think he might be the one."

The Naga was filling the cup, but he looked over at me with a smile, his fangs visible. "The one?" he said. "That's a big proclamation for just a third date. "

I giggled, looking away, not sure how to respond. "When you know, you know," I told him and the Naga laughed.

"That's true," he chuckled. "I knew by the second date that I was going to marry my wife," he added, with a grin.

Hope filled my chest at his words. I wasn't being silly. Love at first sight was a real thing. And even though something was nagging at me on the inside, telling me that it wasn't truly love, it was just that he was paying attention to me and no one ever had, that didn't stop me from dreaming.

"I hope it works out," the Naga added with a wink, his tongue flicking out as he

grinned at me.

“Me too,” I confided, returning the wink and turning to leave. I walked toward where David was standing in the middle of the walkway, his gaze flicking from me and then to the Naga.

“Hi,” I breathed, smiling up at his handsome face. There was something different in his expression, something that I’d never seen before. It looked almost like anger, but that couldn’t be right. “I got you a—”

“Do you know him?” David asked, tipping his head toward the Naga.

I turned to glance behind me at where the male was now smiling at a new customer. “No, but he was really friendly,” I told him, turning back with a shy smile. “He was wishing me luck on our date.”

“I bet he was,” he muttered, taking the drinks and popcorn that I was holding.

Sighing at how chivalrous he was, I walked with him toward the screens. I tucked my arm into the crook of his elbow, giddy with the thought that maybe one day I could do it with his ring on my finger.

“I’m excited about this movie,” I told him, going on one of my usual rambles with him.

He never minded, but today, he didn’t respond to me, keeping his gaze straight ahead.

My brow furrowed, but I continued. “Tabitha—that’s one of the witches in my coven—she said that it was way more interesting than she expected it to be.”

There was still no response from him as he settled into his seat and I did the same in

mine.

“And the actress that acted in this one was in my favorite movie from last year,” I continued, not sure why a strange shiver was running up my spine. “I wish we’d seen it together,” I added, leaning my head against his shoulder.

He didn’t pull away, but he also didn’t put his arm around me the way that he usually would. Confused, I stayed where I was, but rejection filled my chest. Hot and humiliating.

But should I be feeling that way? This was our third date. While I’d worn sexy underwear in preparation for the possibility of things moving along in our physical relationship, maybe he was trying to indicate that he didn’t expect that from me.

Grinning at the idea of him being so romantic and thoughtful, I snuggled closer to him as the screen lit up with the trailers. I continued talking to him, indicating the movies that I wanted to see in the future. Hint, hint, David. With you .

He didn’t respond to me at all, and the bubble of hurt and confusion filling my chest grew bigger.

What had I done to upset him?

He hadn’t been in a bad mood when we’d first started the date. He’d been cheerful and flirty as usual. Was it... Had he not liked me talking to the Naga male?

He’d been different ever since that moment. While a chimera roared in the opening credits of the movie, I leaned over, whispering to him.

“Are you mad because I talked to the Naga? He’s married and I was talking about you—”

He shushed me, giving my hand on his chest a hard squeeze. I was startled by the rough treatment, but didn't argue. The movie was starting.

Confusion swirled in my gut, churning it so much that I couldn't enjoy the popcorn that I usually loved or even pay attention to the movie that I'd been looking forward to seeing for months. Swallowing back the hard lump in my throat, I blinked back the tears that were threatening to spill.

I hadn't done anything wrong, but it felt like I was being punished for it. And I wasn't sure how to explain to him that it was nothing. I would never cheat on David. I was already halfway in love with him for the Goddess' sake. I could never hurt him like that.

But maybe he's been hurt in the past and he thinks you'll do to him what another female did before.

The thought made my heart melt with sympathy. It was possible. Most of my coven had been hurt by past relationships and it would be foolish to think that just because David was cheerful, sweet, and everything a female could want in a male, that no one had hurt him before.

I snuggled closer to him, turning to whisper in his ear. "There's no one else for me but you."

His stiff posture didn't relax, but his hand curled around mine and the flood of relief that filled me had me nuzzling against his shoulder and settling in for the rest of the movie.

I had no idea what was going on since I'd missed the first half, but I didn't care.

I was here with him and that was all that mattered to me.

It wasn't until we were leaving, tossing my full drink and popcorn into the trash that I realized it wasn't over. He still wasn't speaking to me, and the iron in his spine as he held himself slightly away was a brutal fist in my stomach.

"David—" I started, but he gave a slight shake of his head that had me snapping my mouth closed.

I'm sure he was going to explain everything to me, but he wanted privacy. I could understand that. Maybe there was something else that was wrong. Had I done something? I was sure that I had. That was the only reason he could be this angry .

"I don't like you talking to other males," he told me as we neared the car. His voice was low and furious, and I frowned.

"But I wasn't flirting or anything, David. We were talking about you—"

He spun so suddenly, that I gasped. He was much taller than I was, and the way he was looming over me was threatening in a way that I'd never felt before.

I was going to take a step back, but his hands came up, gripping my arms and digging in.

I was certain he wasn't meaning to, but the fury in his eyes told me something else.

"He wanted you. I could see it. Why can't you?" he growled, and I gaped at him.

This isn't the David I know.

I was too startled to respond, but he must have seen the sudden fear that gripped me in my eyes because he released me, rubbing his palms across his face.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled against his fingers, before shoving them through his hair with frustration.

“But you have to know that males don’t just want to talk.

They want more. And you’re too innocent to see it, Tasia, but I can.

I know what they’re like. He wasn’t just chatting with you. He wanted you.”

“Oh,” I gasped, reaching out to take his arm in a weak hold. “No, he’s married. He—”

“Marriage doesn’t matter to males like him, Tas,” he sighed, rolling his eyes.

He’s... jealous.

Never in my entire life would I have ever guessed that a male would be jealous of other males near me.

I wasn’t the typical type that they would get possessive over.

I was overweight, short and most definitely not very pretty.

While my coven often lied to me about it, I saw the kind of females that caught the eyes of males and I did not fit that bill.

The fact that David was being this way about me filled me with the hope that maybe he saw me that way. That I was beautiful to him .

Biting my lip, I lowered my gaze as I shook my head. “I told you before. You’re the only one for me.”

“You say that now,” he huffed, shaking his head. “But one day there’s going to be a male who’ll take you from me.”

“Never,” I insisted, reaching out to hold his arms again. “I’m telling you, you’re the only one for me.”

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And he was. He had to be. He wasn't my true mate. I'd already begged one of the members of my coven to check for me, but that was unlikely anyway. Most witches never met their true mate. It was something that we hoped for, but knew that the likelihood was low.

He narrowed his gaze on my face, searching for a long moment, and I had no idea what he was looking for. After a while, his body relaxed, and he nodded. "Promise?" he asked, reaching out to tuck my frizzy hair behind my ear.

"Promise," I told him, just so I could see that smile curve his lips.

He was happy again. My thudding heart slowed and I was levitating in glee when he took my hand and led me to the car.

He opened the passenger door for me and I moved to get seated, but I wasn't fast enough, because the door slammed on my foot and a shout of pain left my lips.

He yanked the door open at once, gaping down at my foot as I reached down to cup it.

"I'm so sorry," he murmured, kneeling to take my foot into his hand and run his fingers lightly down the side where it had taken the brunt of the hit.

I wanted to yank away from him, but he held my heel firmly in his hand.

"I didn't mean to," he told me, his brow furrowed as he looked up at me. He looked contrite, but there was something in his eyes that hadn't been there on our last two

dates. Something that sent a shiver down my spine.

“It’s okay,” I gasped, shaking my head and giving him a tremulous smile, trying to get rid of the feeling that he’d meant to do that. He’d been looking at me the entire time. He’d have known that I wasn’t inside yet, but... why would he? It made no sense.

“I’m fine,” I told him as he kept up with the apologies. “Don’t worry about it.”

Telling myself that I was being ridiculous, I reached out to put my hand on his shoulder, letting him know that I was fine. I gave him a brighter smile, and he leaned his head down to kiss the back of my hand.

With one final swipe of his thumb over the side of my foot, he made sure that I was tucked safely inside, asking twice before he closed the door again. When he moved to the driver’s side of the car, I watched him settle inside, his hand coming over to take mine.

“Did I ruin our date?” he asked me with his brows furrowed.

He looked so contrite, that I couldn’t stop myself from forgiving him, shoving aside the misgivings churning in my gut.

This was my first relationship. I was being suspicious for no reason.

It was an accident and now that I knew where he was coming from, I just had to be careful with my interactions with other males.

I was going to be his cherished girlfriend and I wanted that more than anything.

“Of course not,” I told him, giving his fingers a slight squeeze. “Every date that I go

on with you is perfect.”

His grin was quick and sweet—just like it always was. He leaned forward, pressing his lips to mine and after a moment of hesitation, I kissed him back, delighting in the fact that this male wanted me.

“Then do you want to go back to my place?” he asked, his eyes twinkling with mischief. I swallowed hard, not sure I wanted to end the night like this. Going to his place had to mean sex. I was almost certain it was what he expected of me, and I’d been bracing myself for it all night.

It would be my first and I was too damn old to still have a hymen, damn it. But after the date we’d just had, it felt... different. Not ruined, perhaps, but not something I wanted. Swallowing hard, since I wasn’t a huge fan of conflict, I sent him a small smile .

“I was thinking we could go back to the coven and—” I started, but his eyebrow quirked as he slid his free hand over to put on my knee, his thumb caressing me there.

“But there won’t be much privacy with your coven there, would there?” he asked, his thumb moving higher.

Swallowing hard, I nodded, an awkward laugh filling the air between us. “Definitely less privacy.”

“Then my place,” he said with finality, leaning forward to press a kiss to my lips.

I went along with the kiss, struggling to find the joy I’d started the night with. The anticipation. But it wasn’t coming.

Later, when I lay on my side next to him, tucked against his long, naked body, I

wincing at the twinge between my legs.

He hadn't been careful, not by a long shot, but I knew from reading magazines that most women had terrible first times.

It didn't mean that the rest of my sex life would be destined for failure.

I turned, peeking over my shoulder at David.

He was the male that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with.

I needed to pull my head out of the clouds and realize that reality was different from the movies I watched.

This was real life and real life meant that the big moments I built up in my head didn't have to turn out the way I thought they would.

Looking into his face, I found my reality swirling, switching to his features again, but this time, they were twisted in fury.

As fear lodged in my chest, I opened my mouth to scream, but no sound came out.

A big hand was holding my arm, and I fought against it, knowing it was David, knowing that he had caught me.

I yanked myself away, confusion swirling in my head as I realized that I was in another room.

Not David's bedroom. A strange room on a huge bed, and the hand wasn't David's.

I pulled away still, scrambling up the bed away from whoever was touching me.

I felt Gabbi next to me and I scooped her into my arms.

As usual, my sweet girl slept through everything that was happening. I eyed Enka, his hands up from where he was kneeling next to the bed, his face ravaged with worry.

“Are you okay?” he asked in a low voice, glancing at Gabbi before looking at me again. “I think you were having a nightmare.”

My eyes squeezed shut as my memories of the night flooded back.

David .

The fucker had found me and as usual, my subconscious was torturing me with our past.

“I’m fine,” I told him with a fake smile, tucking Gabbi close again and easing away from where he was still kneeling at the side of the bed. “I’m sorry if I disturbed you.”

He hesitated for a long moment before he nodded, standing and backing away. “If you need anything—” he started, but I shook my head, cutting off his words.

“I don’t,” I told him, swallowing against the horror of remembering the male who had made my life miserable for too many years.

“I’m fine. Thanks for checking on me, but sometimes I just have these weird dreams.” I waved my hand as if it didn’t matter, lying to him.

I was vulnerable and I didn’t need another male ever taking advantage of that again.

“Okay,” he said in a low voice, backing out of the room. “I’m sorry.”

Regret slashed into my chest. I hadn't meant to make him feel bad for trying to help, but maybe that would be better. I didn't need to worry about another male. I had too much going on with the one who was currently after me and my daughter.

"Thanks again," I whispered, not wanting to be ungrateful. When the door closed, I heaved a sigh of relief and lay Gabbi down on the side. I stood, making my way to the door and turned the lock, the small click telling me that it was locked now.

I knew he probably heard it and there was instant regret in my chest, but I wasn't taking the same chances I had when I was younger. I wasn't trusting another male the way I had before. There was no way I would ever be that stupid again.

Enka

I sat on the pull-out bed outside my mate's bedroom, and the click of the lock sent a pang of pain through my soul. I shouldn't have rushed in there without knocking. My instincts had pushed me to protect my mate, but damn it, I'd made her feel unsafe instead.

Scrubbing the palm of my hand against my face, I glanced toward the door where she was sleeping next to our daughter. She'd remembered something. The scent of her fear while she slept had been acrid in my nose while her whimpers were loud and painful in my ears.

I hadn't been able to stop myself from going to her. From reaching out and waking her. I needed the pain she was experiencing to stop. But I shouldn't have. I was being too forward, and my mate needed me to take things slow.

I could do that for her. It would hurt like an open wound, but something was telling me that when it came to Tasia, I was going to have to take my time. I had to be careful, or she would run. Again.

Now that I knew that it was her plan, I could let the panic that had swept through me when I realized she was gone take over my body. I clenched my hands into the sheets, looking at the locked door while my chest heaved with my breaths.

She wasn't safe. Someone was following her and my beautiful, courageous mate had decided that her best bet would be to run. My lips curled in a snarl at the thought of that asshole who had to be following her.

I'd been too focused on Tasia and our Gruk-ir to be able to track him by his scent—the scents on this plane was unending and unless I identified a single human, my tracking skills took time to be refined here.

I clenched my fingers again until my claws dug into the mattress and I heard material shred under them and my fingers cracked under the pressure. I was never going to let him get to her. That nightmare had been about him. Our Gruk-ir's father. I was sure of it.

He haunted her even now, and I was going to have to get rid of him. My gaze flickered to the door again, wondering how she would react to me finding and killing the father of her daughter. If she was afraid of him, she mightn't mind.

Still, I took a deep breath, releasing my claws from the sheets so I could grab my phone, clumsily typing out a text to my brothers, Krusk and Savla.

Enka: What happens if you kill a human on this plane?

Savla: ?

Krusk: I'm wondering if this is a clean-up question or a preemptive question.

Rolling my eyes, I typed again.

Enka: Preemptive.

Krusk: Phew. In that case, I think there's jail time involved. Should I ask Rudgar?

Enka: Not yet. But I have to take care of Tasia's ex-husband.

Savla: There are animals that can eat humans here. They can get rid of bodies.

My eyebrows swung up, but I really liked that idea.

Enka: How far away are these animals? Can we buy some?

Savla: I asked Rudgar about buying a farm and he said he'd take me to see some. Bring the body.

Krusk: NO BODIES! We have to figure out a solution that doesn't involve killing.

I paused, taking a deep breath before heaving it out in one rush of air and typing again.

Enka: He hurt her.

Krusk: Bring the body.

I smiled at the sudden about-face of my eldest brother. While he was the most reasonable of the three of us, he was loyal to a fault and he would stand up for anyone who wasn't able to stand up for themselves.

Especially my mate. He knew who she was to me.

He'd known almost as soon as I did. Because of his gregarious, outgoing nature, some might underestimate him, but he had our best interest at heart and he'd been taking care of us since we'd been too little to remember.

He was more of a father to me than my real father ever had a chance to be.

Enka: I have to track him. I'm sure he'll be following her, but I'm still not familiar enough with this world.

Krusk: I'll talk to Dristan. He'll be able to tell us how to avoid being caught.

I shook my head, knowing that my brother was already in on the plan to kill the male. Narrowing my eyes into the distance, I remembered how my female had looked—terrified—in the bus and in her bed only moments before.

I was going to be the one to crush his throat under my fist.

I bared my fangs in a growl, the sound eerie in the darkness of the room around me.

“Rawr,” sounded from the darkness behind the door and I tilted my head in that direction, curiosity filling me and I made my way over to it, squatting in front of it. “Rawr,” came the noise again, and I smiled.

“Rawr,” I echoed and a little giggle sounded, little feet pattering back to the bed.

Tenderness filled me at the thought of our daughter repeating a sound that I made. It warned me that I would have to be very careful with what I was saying even when I thought she couldn't hear me .

Those tiny ears were delicate and impressionable. Moving back to the pull-out bed, I settled in, staring up at the ceiling, picturing my mate's face in my head. As sleep took me, I hoped I would dream of her.

Tasia

A little hand batted at my face, and I smiled against the tiny, sticky palm, pressing a kiss there before I opened my eyes, turning so I was facing my daughter's pillow. She blinked at me, a little grin on her face.

“Breakfast,” she said without pausing, pointing toward the locked door .

“Good morning to you too, sweetheart,” I told her, leaning over to smack a kiss to her nose. Gabbi giggled, slapping those sticky palms against my face. “Now let's go get you something to eat.”

I'd packed some things for us to eat, like Gabbi's favorite oatmeal and her mac and cheese. I just needed to get some hot water going. I pressed a kiss to her nose again and climbed out of the bed.

She scrambled behind me, my little shadow, and I ran my fingers through her silky curls as I walked toward the door. Swallowing hard, I unlocked it, peering outside, expecting to see Enka still asleep.

Instead, I was faced with an empty suite. Relief and disappointment warred with each other inside me. I should be happy that he wasn't in my space when I was barely awake and vulnerable.

Biting my lip, I made my way over to the kitchenette, peeking into the cupboards and finding what I needed to get started on Gabbi's oatmeal. Nibbling on my lower lip, I wondered if I would be able to have some fresh vegetables and fruit delivered for us.

Gabbi got cranky without her blueberries and I didn't know how long we would be there, but we couldn't survive off of mac and cheese forever. And we definitely couldn't afford food from the hotel for every meal.

The beep of the door opening startled me, but Gabbi ran straight for it. Before I could grab at her, I spotted Enka's handsome face entering, his lips curling in a smile as he saw the little girl running toward him. His grin was filled with affection as he juggled bags and a drink carrier.

"Gruk-ir," he said, not even blinking as she buried her teeth into his leg, clinging to him like a little monkey. "You're awake," he added, his gaze swinging up to meet mine, the happiness still on his face, hitting me like a wrecking ball to the chest.

"Yep," I chirped in a voice that was so high pitched that even Gabbi sent a questioning side-eyed look my way from her position on his leg.

Clearing my throat, I moved to pry my daughter off his leg, but he handed me the drink carrier instead, shuffling his way toward the kitchenette.

"I picked up some things that you might need. You didn't bring much with you and...

" he trailed off for a long moment before shrugging.

"I don't mean to overstep, but I thought...

" He trailed off again, and his brow furrowed as I could see him overthinking everything he'd done.

"Thank you," I told him in a low voice, letting him hear how grateful I was. "I was just trying to figure out how I could get some things to add to Gabbi's meals."

His grin grew again and my stupid heart gave a hard thump in my chest at his hopeful look.

Goddess Mother, please. I can't fall for another male only to have him break my heart.

He began emptying bags, my daughter contentedly chewing on the tough skin of his leg as he did. There was way too much food, but I had to blink back my tears. No one but my family had ever done anything this kind for me.

"Thank you," I repeated, and he waved it away as if it meant nothing.

"I didn't know what the princess likes to eat," he said, running his huge palm across my daughter's hair absently while she made a little noise of happiness. The little flip in my stomach with his tenderness told me that I was in over my head with this male.

No, ovaries, we cannot get pregnant with his babies right now! Focus!

I'd always wanted a huge family, but those dreams had died because of David. Now, they were peeking out from the barrier I'd created for them, and I was having a hard time shoving them away.

smack, smack, smack Not now!

Not ever, if I was being honest. I'd resigned myself to Gabbi being my only baby, ignoring the longing in my heart whenever I saw a mother holding a newborn or siblings playing together in the park.

I'd been homeschooling Gabbi and I intended to continue in the future—especially now that David had found us—but I knew some of the little quirks that she picked up were because she didn't get to be with other children.

I squeezed my eyes shut against the immediate flow of recriminations in my head about being a bad mother. I'd been working on it, but with everything that had happened recently, I couldn't stop the new onslaught.

"Hey," a low voice murmured, and my eyes popped open as I stared up into the sweet, searching gaze of the male at the counter. His brow was furrowed and he looked so concerned that it was everything I could do to stop myself from stepping into his strong arms.

You barely know him and you already want him to protect you. Pathetic whore.

The small, hissed voice was one I was familiar with. One that had the same tone and voice as David. It festered in my head and I'd never been able to get it out.

"Are you okay?" he asked, and at the tone of his voice, Gabbi unlatched her little teeth from his leg to peer in my direction, her own tiny brow furrowed with worry. She released him, heading toward me with her arms outstretched.

I lifted her with ease, pressing my face to her hair, and girding myself with strength.

She's all I need.

"Yep," I said again, rubbing my palm along her back, soothing us both with the movement. "Better than ever," I lied.

His inscrutable gaze stayed on me for a beat longer before he looked down, continuing to empty things from the bag without comment.

He pulled a tub of blueberries from the bag and with a little gasp, Gabbi wiggled until I put her down and I was abandoned by my daughter who ran headlong toward him again.

“Mine,” she said with a bold tone, holding her little hand out toward him, staring up at his towering form without an ounce of fear or trepidation.

“Let me wash them first,” he told her with a wink, turning to the little sink and pulling another bottle from the bag. I frowned as I watched him pull a few bowls from the bag, adding some of whatever was in the bottle, some water and then empty the entire tub of berries into it.

“No!” I gasped, rushing forward. “You can’t add soap!”

He blinked at me before shaking his head.

“It’s a special solution for fruits and vegetables,” he told me, holding the bottle out toward me.

“It helps get pesticides off of them so Gabbi won’t eat them.

The book says that it’s essential to their well-being,” he added with a firm nod and I looked from the bottle to him before I burst out laughing.

The offended furrow between Enka’s eyes made me stop, but it was difficult. “I see you’re taking the book very seriously,” I said, wiping a tear from my eye.

“Of course I am,” he said with a shrug. “I don’t want anything to hurt her.” The sincere words stopped my laughter immediately and that terrible ache in my chest was back. Regrets for every single one of my actions in the past.

I wish I’d waited for him.

Glancing down at the top of my daughter’s head, I corrected that thought right away. Everything I’d gone through had been worth it because of her.

I nodded, letting him finish what he was doing while Gabbi stared up at him with her hands held out with expectation. “Abu, now ,” she cried, and Enka’s smile was back on his face right away.

“Give me a second, Gruk-ir,” he told her with a wink and I watched Gabbi’s little face go from mutinous to grinning in one second flat.

What the hell? Since when does my daughter have patience?

She hummed to herself, her little arms wrapping around one of his mammoth calves as she waited. Frowning, I watched as he filled the little plastic bowl he’d bought, shuffling with her as she held on to him, careful not to jostle her.

He had her seated on the sofa with her blueberries before I knew what was happening.

After that, he plated up eggs, bacon and pancakes, gesturing for me to head toward the sofa.

A blue dog was grouching about his bath on the television and my eyebrows went up as I realized that he’d already queued Gabbi’s favorite show.

I settled into a seat next to her and Gabbi moved closer to me before patting the empty leather seat to her left without pulling her gaze from the television. I smothered a laugh as Enka lowered his massive bulk onto the sofa with us.

Thankfully the furniture in the suite was orc-sized. The seat swallowed my daughter and I, but Enka fit right in.

“Coffee?” Enka asked, handing over a cup along with sugar packets and little containers of creamer. I smiled, thanking him as I took them.

Settling into the seat, I marveled at the comfort I felt sitting there with my daughter and this male who should be a stranger. I didn't feel the need to fill the air between us with chatter the way I did most people I met.

I didn't feel anything except... safe. It was the oddest sensation in the world.

Something deep down inside of me recognized that when it came to this male, I was protected .

I busied myself with eating, giving Gabbi little bites of pancakes between her blueberries, and when she was full—with only about ten blueberries left in the tub, she handed them to Enka instead of me.

It was the first time she'd ever done that.

My mouth was hanging open as Enka took them without question or complaint, popping them into his mouth.

They were both glued to the television and Enka laughed—a deep, rough chuckle that sent a shiver through me—at the same time that my daughter threw her head back on the sweetest giggle.

I'm not the only one who feels safe.

She recognized something in him as well.

I was terrified to find out what it was, but I leaned back into the plush sofa, letting it hug me as I put my arm around my daughter to hold her close.

It felt so domesticated and normal that I had to pinch myself for a quick second to make sure I wasn't still sleeping.

Glancing over at the big green male next to me—who was still deeply invested in whether the little blue dog would get into the bathtub—I reminded myself that I couldn't have a future with him.

No matter what someone was like at the start of getting to know them, they changed.

And I'd fallen for a skilled actor before. No way was I going to do it again.

Enka

“We can’t get a lizard,” I told our little Gruk-ir as I sat at the table, coloring pages spread across it while she peppered me with questions.

I was hunched over one—an animated sketch of a unicorn that I was assigned by our daughter to colour bright pink—and I was fielding as many requests as I could.

“Why?” she asked, not sounding perturbed at all. I was certain she wasn’t taking my answer as a no. She thought she could wrap me around her finger, but I was not going to be that kind of father.

“Because it’s a lot of responsibility,” I explained, shading the pink darker across the unicorn’s horn. “And right now, we’re not in a place where we’d have the time or energy to give it what it needs.”

I was tense, waiting to hear her response while Tasia pretended not to listen from where she was making lunch. I saw her trying to smother a smile, and damn it, I wanted to see it spread across her perfect face so badly I didn’t know how to stop myself from staring at her.

Keeping my gaze trained on the unicorn instead, I waited, bracing myself for our daughter’s response.

“I have energy,” she said with a nod, as if that was the end of the argument. I parted my lips to respond, but Tasia made her way over, plates in hand as she put them at the end of the table.

“No pets,” she told our Gruk-ir with a firm voice that said it was her final answer. I watched her little face scrunch with annoyance and my heart jolted in my chest.

“Well—” I started and stern brown eyes swung my way as my beautiful mate gave me her full, peeved attention. I cut myself off with a small squeak, ducking my head to continue coloring.

“Mommy—” Gabbi started, her voice holding a high-pitched whine that I’d never heard before and I drew in a sharp breath as her lower lip trembled.

My gaze moved to Tasia at once, determined to argue on behalf of our daughter—if she would let me speak. She ducked next to our Gruk-ir instead, tucking her little braid behind her ear.

“Remember what I said about pets, sweetheart?” she asked in a low, sweet voice .

“Not until we have a forever home,” Gabbi huffed, rolling her eyes with annoyance.

“Exactly,” Tasia whispered, “And we’re not there yet. As soon as we are—”

“But when ?” Gabbi interrupted her, that lower lip trembling again and I was almost blue in the face from holding my breath. I knew without a doubt that if I released it, I would say something stupid like of course we can get a lizard and it would ruin what my mate was aiming for.

“Hopefully soon,” she told her in a low, tired voice, and I exhaled now, the breath leaving me when I was kicked in the chest by her expression.

She’s fed up of not having a real home.

I had every single intention of giving her that. There was no way that I was going to

sit back while she scrambled to find safety on her own. I would take care of her. I just had to convince her that I was a safe bet.

Swallowing back the impassioned argument I had planned in the back of my head—that included an elaborate proposal and then finding a random lizard outside to gift to our Gruk-ir—I continued coloring the unicorn.

When a plate was placed in front of me, I looked up with a surprised smile. I met Tasia's gaze and she returned it.

"Thank you for breakfast," she whispered in a sweet, intimate voice—that immediately made me picture us tangled in the sheets of the big bed in the other room. "I hope you like mac and cheese. It's Gabbi's favorite."

Our little girl nodded, her own coloring abandoned as she began shoveling a tiny plastic forkful of the bright orange food into her mouth, shoving aside the tiny green piece of broccoli that her mother had clearly tried to sneak into it.

"The best," Gabbi stated, her mouth full as she spoke.

"Manners," my mate told her with a stern frown, but Gabbi just smacked her lips with a happy little wiggle as she continued to eat, ignoring her.

I carefully set aside the coloring sheets and crayons I'd been using before taking a testing bite of the neon-looking food, and frowned at the burst of flavors on my tongue.

It was a texture that I wasn't expecting.

Stickier than it looked. I chewed thoughtfully before shoveling another mouthful into my face.

“This is really good,” I murmured, scarfing down the rest of the food on my plate before glancing up. Both my mate and our Gruk-ir were staring at me, giving me slow blinks.

Gruk-ir decided that it was the perfect moment to drop her tiny fork and use her hands to shovel her food into her mouth—still avoiding the little piece of broccoli on the side.

“Gabbi,” Tasia gasped, reaching out to stop her hand from where it was going to her mouth with another fistful of her food. “Don’t do that,” she admonished.

I watched our Gruk-ir’s brow furrow and held my breath, waiting for the fallout. She threw her little fist in my direction, orange bits splattering my previously pristine shirt.

“Abu ate it like this!” she cried, her frustration clear in her voice.

“I can eat it like this, too!” The demand for understanding was obvious, but her mother had already grabbed her hand, gently prying her little fingers open and putting her plate under it so the noodles fell onto it instead of the floor.

“Gabbi, he ate with a fork,” Tasia said, holding her by her hand and walking her toward the bathroom. “You can’t eat with your hands. I’ve told you so many times...”

As my mate’s voice got quieter as she walked through the bedroom toward their goal, I felt heat rush to my cheeks as I marveled at what had just happened.

I’d eaten too quickly and our Gruk-ir—our daughter—had mimicked me. Panic filled my chest as I realized that the sweet, perfect little girl could copy any of my bad habits and take them on as her own.

Abu ate it like this!

The words swirled around in my brain and the panic slowly transformed into adoration.

Abu. Daddy.

I still couldn't believe she was calling me that.

In all my years on the other plane, I'd been so certain that I'd never hear it—especially in reference to myself.

Just a year ago, if anyone had approached me and said that I was going to be sitting at a table with my mate and our daughter like a real family, I'd have assumed they were insane.

Now? Satisfaction filled my chest and when my mate and our daughter returned to the room, I couldn't stop myself from marveling at the rightness of us sharing this meal together.

"I'll eat slower, I promise," I murmured to Tasia, worried that she wouldn't want me to be around our Gruk-ir if I was a bad influence.

"Don't worry about it," she said with a little wink that almost stilled the heart in my chest. "She tries to get away with anything you let her."

After that, she took my plate. "No, I—" I started, but she waved me off as Gabbi sat at her seat, eating again with her fork as if nothing had happened at all. Tasia returned with another plate filled with the orange gooey food for me.

I was too distracted by the sway of her curvy hips at first to realize what was

happening but when she put it in front of me, I blinked at her.

“Are you sure?” I asked, and she nodded, her lips curling in a rueful smile.

“It’s the least I can do after you got us here and bought a bunch of food,” she told me, shaking her head. “I’m sorry we’ve been a burden.”

“You’re never a burden,” I insisted and she looked away, licking her lips before sending another small smile my way .

She tucked into her own meal while Gabbi hummed a little song to herself—that sounded very much like the theme song from the television show with the little blue dog—so I forked up another bite of the golden goodness, pacing myself so I didn’t scarf it down the same way a second time.

The ache that seemed to always be in my chest eased as we ate, the comfortable silence—that I’d only ever experienced with my brothers—only interrupted by Gabbi’s loud smacks that she giggled at with glee.

This is how it’s supposed to be. This is how I’ll keep it.

My lip curled at the thought of the only person that was capable of taking this away from me. My claws curled into my palms and my lip twitched with a sneer.

If that fucking male comes near them, I’ll tear him apart with my bare hands.

Tasia

The dip of someone on the bed was what brought me to awareness first. Kneeling on the bed.

I reached out to him—instinctively knowing it was a male—but he didn't touch my fingers.

Instead, he yanked my hips closer. I gasped in shock, but my heels remained on his shoulders, exactly where he'd placed them.

For some reason, I liked it—the tiny bit of roughness. Just the smallest hint of violence behind the movement. The breaking of steadfast control over his strength.

Enka.

He parted me with his thumb, my pussy glistening and slick for him.

“You're so wet,” he murmured, his voice a low groan.

“Am I?” I gasped, never being one to get wet quickly. It was something I'd always thought was a problem with me. Maybe it was about who I was with, instead.

His deep growl sent a shiver through my entire body. My fingers clenched in the blankets around us. He was acting like he loved this—enthusiastically enjoying it—and he hadn't even started.

My breath hitched, my thighs tightening around his ears. He rubbed his face all over my cunt, basking in my scent, and I tilted my pelvis to rub against his mouth.

“I want to do this every day for the rest of our lives,” he purred, and I wanted that too. More than I’d ever wanted anything.

I was so close. His thick tongue swiped through my pussy before delving deep. And that was when he gave my clit a hard suck. My back arched and I shuddered against him, my stomach contracting under his huge palm, where he was pinning me to the bed.

I released a plaintive breath. He looked up at me with those dark eyes, a playful smirk on his lips, running a tusk along my inner thigh and it was everything I could do to not grip them and drag him up my body.

“Not yet,” he purred, looking down at my soaking, swollen pussy. I was so close. Next came a thick finger. I moaned, gripping the sheets around me, and he added another.

My eyes squeezed shut as my body twisted, unused to so much pleasure. It was a game-changer. Nothing had ever been like this.

Goddess Mother, am I going to survive this ?

I canted my hips against him, not even sure what I was asking him for. He crooked his fingers, and my vision blurred. Thighs trembling, I saw stars as he took a long, luscious suck on my clit. It was like lighting a match.

I contracted around his fingers before I knew what was happening.

I released a shocked, breathless gasp, my back arching with pure pleasure, my eyes

open but unable to see anything, my lips parted on a scream that never came.

It was like being hit by a freight train.

So much sensation, my body was overwhelmed.

In the next moment, I was awake, my breath coming in pants and my nightshirt sticky with sweat. I looked around in the darkness of the room, expecting to see someone—expecting to see him—but I was all alone except for my daughter on the other side of the bed, sleeping soundly.

Shame coated the back of my throat. What the hell was that ?

I covered my face with my hands, scrubbing hard, trying to ground myself and hoping—praying—that the dream wasn't the premonition I thought it was.

I was under siege and I didn't know how to fix it. As it turned out, the suite—while large in theory—was actually the tiniest space that had ever existed. There was nowhere I could look or move that wasn't filled by Enka's scent and presence.

It didn't help that he seemed to want to be around as much as possible. He checked in with Darak, but he'd been with us all day. All day .

I wasn't used to being surrounded by that much masculine energy. I eyed the muscles bulging in his white shirt—the one that he'd refused to change from after Gabbi had splattered him with cheese, seeming proud to be wearing the stains instead.

Something was happening in the region of my chest when it came to him. A curious melting that I was seriously hoping wasn't affection, but I had a terrible feeling it was. It didn't help that the easiest way to my heart was through my daughter and she adored him.

He was her favorite playmate now, comfortable to climb all over him while they built a tower of blocks that she used his shoulders to stand on while she pretended she was a terrifying beast that toppled it over.

Watching them together, seeing how gentle he was and the care he took with her was awakening something inside of me. Something I had considered long dead. And for my sanity, I needed it to stay dead.

I looked away from where they were playing, struggling to find anything else to take my attention, but my gaze was drawn right back to them like a magnet. Gabbi was cackling at the destruction that they'd wrought with the fallen blocks.

His amused gaze met mine, as if he was sharing the moment with me and the blow to my already battered emotions was almost too much. Gabbi was ready to scramble down from his shoulders, but he shook his head.

"Not there, Gruk-ir. Let me put you on the sofa so you won't step on them. Your feet are too soft and they'll hurt you," he insisted, and the overprotective statement shouldn't make me swoon, but it did.

It's just not fair that he's this perfect!

I didn't need to be feeling the way that I was feeling. I wished there was some way to escape but it was the safest place that I could be with my daughter.

I eyed his huge form for another moment before squeezing my eyes shut. He would be the perfect father. It was so different from what I already knew about men that it was throwing me for a loop. The only person I could compare him to was David.

I hadn't realized it until later on in our relationship but he was just as bad at being a father as he was at being a husband. My mind drifted back to the time when he found

out that I was pregnant.

It'd been a month after our wedding, which was a tiny affair only attended by my coven—who came to support me but were honest that they didn't like David much. They stayed in their seats and there was no ceremony for them in the way there would be for other witches who married.

That should have been my first sign. The other witches had tried to warn me. The leader of our coven had looked at me with such sad eyes that I had—for a minute—rethought my marriage.

But instead of following through, I'd ignored all the warning signs and forged ahead thinking that I was doing the right thing for myself. I fought against all of my witch training which told me that the coven made decisions together.

Now I stared down at the tiny sign on the pregnancy test and instead of the immense joy I should have been feeling there was nothing but trepidation. There had been little signs that were growing more and more foreboding.

The first time he hit me had been a week after the wedding. I'd slept in and instead of being awoken with a soft kiss, he'd shaken me awake and slapped me across the face.

“You didn't make breakfast! That's a wife's duty,” he said. “What the hell was the point of marrying you if you can't even do something as simple as having breakfast ready for your husband?”

I'd sat there in shock, not knowing what to do. I'd all but abandoned my coven for this male. Confused and not knowing what to do, I'd stared up at him with my lips parted in horror. That was when the apology started.

He seems so genuinely contrite, telling me that he was stressed at work and he was so

very sorry. I'd believed him and not leaving that first time was the biggest mistake of my life.

It was little things that triggered him after that. A look from a stranger in my direction. Something I hadn't done the way he wanted.

The little things were adding up and I was beginning to see my mistake when that little positive test told me everything that I needed to know. There was a knock on the bathroom door and I knew I couldn't stay in there any longer.

With shaking hands, I took the test out with me and held it out to him. He'd been the one who asked me to take it.

"What's it say?" he asked, with expectation.

In a trembling voice, I said, "I-I'm pregnant."

With a whoop of elation, David had me in his arms and spun me around. Confused, I held onto his shoulders and wondered for the millionth time if I was wrong about him. He was so happy about this.

I always wanted children. Maybe this would be the thing that would fix us. At the same time there was something stirring in my gut that was burning and churning.

He'd taken me to our favorite restaurant to celebrate. We had the most amazing dinner since before we were married. He was being romantic and pulled out all the stops celebrating in a way that I hadn't realized he could.

He was the male that I'd fallen in love with again. Maybe I'd been right. The glowing feeling grew inside of me as hope began spilling out. This wasn't a mistake. I'd been wrong to think that he couldn't change.

I pressed my head to his shoulder in the car as he clasped my hand in his, running his thumb against my wedding ring. “I’m so happy,” he said. “Are you?”

“I am,” I whispered, pressing my lips to his jaw. This was all that I ever wanted. This type of relationship. And with the baby, I was about to have it. The real thing. He finally seemed happy. Settled .

We were both silent as he continued to drive. I stayed where I was, pressed up against him. I was looking out the window when his hand on my hand tightened.

“What are you thinking?” he asked.

“Just that this might be the best thing that ever happened to us,” I told him honestly. When he tensed, I should’ve realized I said something wrong.

“So us getting together is not the best thing that ever happened to us?” he asked, keeping his tone low and angry.

I scrambled to reply. To try to figure out what he wanted me to say. Walking on eggshells was common with David.

“O-of course you’re the best thing to happen to me,” I tried to find a way to fix it. The last thing I needed was for him to get angry right now. “I just meant that this baby will be a great addition to the family.”

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“Or did you mean that you’re gonna love the baby more than you love me?” he demanded.

“Not fair. That’s just not true.” I didn’t know what he wanted from me. The honest truth was that I never did. What he needed seemed to change every day. And I was never smart enough to keep up with whatever he needed.

The whiplash of the bliss of a moment ago and then the terror that was shooting through me now was so common that I should be used to it, but every time, I was thrown for a loop like a fool.

Me tiptoeing around his volatile emotions was the essence of our relationship. I knew I was reeling because of the shock of finding out about the pregnancy, so I couldn’t figure out what he needed fast enough. And that was going to be a problem.

“It seems as though you’re gonna love that baby more than you love me.” He said the words with venom, yanking his hand away from mine. “If that’s how it’s going to be, tell me now. ”

I knew I was in trouble when I realized he was accelerating the car. He always drove erratically when he was angry. But this seemed a little different.

“I will always love you more than anyone in this world,” I lied to him.

Lying had become more and more useful in a relationship.

I had to lie that I was happy, I had to lie about being in love with him still.

Because I really truly did not know if I was.

If what I was feeling for him was love, or if it was something toxic and altogether wrong.

“You’re just throwing bullshit at me now,” he scoffed. He grabbed my hand again, yanking me across the center console until I was almost on his lap.

“What are you doing?” I asked, my voice trembling.

“If you’re going to love this kid more than you love me, then you are going to get it,” he gritted out between his teeth. “We’ll all go together. Like a family. Like it was meant to be,” he added.

He yanked at the wheel until we were speeding on the edge of the road. Gasping with fear, I clutched at him, hoping that he was just joking.

“You can’t do that David.” I struggle to find anything to tell him that would calm him down. He was so hard to calm down when he was like this. “Think about the baby.”

“It’s the baby that I’m thinking about,” he laughed, sounding a little hysterical. “You’re going to decide that you love it more than me, I just know it.”

Fear for myself and for the tiny baby in my stomach rushed through me. In that moment his eyes looked insane. He looked crazy enough to do it.

“Never. I’ll never love anyone more than I love you,” I pleaded, sounding absolutely desperate.

“Lies. Promise me. Promise me that you’ll never love anything more than me. Your life is in my hands, Baby. It’s up to me whether we live or die.” He looked over at me

and I saw everything in his eyes that I had feared I would see. He was insane, and I was just along for the ride.

Terror ran through me straight to my soul. This male was the biggest mistake of my life. But what could I do? I'd already come so far and I was pregnant with his baby.

If I tried to leave he would hurt me and he would hurt the baby. I was sure there was a way that I could deal with him. I just needed to figure it out.

That's what marriage was. For better or for worse I needed to find a way to work it out with my husband. Gritting my teeth and knowing the truth, I reached out to cup his jaw, pressing my lips to the other side.

"It's us, David," I told him with a sob.

"It'll always be you and I. This baby is just a stepping stone for us to get closer, I promise.

" I added, knowing that I'd never known a greater love than what I felt for that life growing inside of me, but understanding that the only way that life would survive would be if I figured a way through this relationship.

Maybe I could grow to love him. After he showed his true colors I hadn't even tried to give it a real chance. Maybe I could help him.

Whatever it was, whatever I needed to do, for now I had to save my baby. And this was the only way to do it.

He was looking at me, his eyes off of the road while we were still too close to the edge. "Are you telling the truth?" he demanded.

“Yes,” I said, trying to sound as sincere as I could.

“And you’ll never leave me?” His hand tightened on my wrist and I could feel his fingers imprinting themselves in my skin.

I swallowed hard, fighting back the sobs that wanted to leave me and were wracking through my body, making me shake against him. “Never.”

The lie spilled from me because if he did anything to put my baby at risk again, I would find a way to leave.

He searched my face some more before he seemed to relax, the wrinkles between his eyebrows settling. His fingers relaxed against my wrist and a happy hum left him.

His eyes returned to the road and he chuckled. “Look how close you are to the edge,” he laughed and I felt a bubble of fury burning inside of me unlike anything I’d ever felt before.

He could have killed all of us and in that moment he was laughing about it as if it was all a big joke. I couldn’t leave, but by the Mother Goddess I wanted to.

As we drove home, he acted as though nothing happened. As if it was just another happy day in our lives having found out that I was pregnant.

Settling into bed next to him, his arm pulling me against his side, it was as if I was being smothered and couldn’t breathe.

What have I gotten myself into?

Tasia

I was yanked back to the present by my daughter running up to me to show me the collection of blocks in her hand. I smiled down at her, running my hand across the top of her downy head.

“Me,” she said, pointing to the small purple block, “you,” she announced pointing to the bigger yellow block, “and Abu,” she finished, her chubby little finger prodding the biggest green block. Then she pressed them all together and lifted them toward me. “We’re a family.”

Shock, horror and terror flooded me at the same time, making adrenaline dump into my system.

Oh no. No, no, no.

I forced myself to smile, shaking my head. “No, sweetheart. Abu isn’t part of our family, okay? He’s a friend.”

The mutinous expression immediately took over her face. The one I knew too well that there was no way around. “Abu,” she insisted, smashing the blocks together harder. “Family.”

“He has his own family,” I tried explaining to her. “And we have our own. Right now he’s helping us, but that doesn’t mean that we’ll be together forever, okay?”

Instead of the screaming that I expected, her lower lip trembled and pain clutched at

my chest.

“Together forever,” she wailed, sniffing hard, running toward Enka, who was frozen where he was standing a few feet away. She grabbed him around his leg, holding on for dear life as her tiny body was wracked with sobs. “Please, Abu!”

I sent an apologetic look his way, but he was staring at me, his eyes dark with pain. “I’ll be a part of your family as long as you want me to, Tasia.”

Shock slammed into me. “A part of our family?” I asked, the words barely leaving my lips, they were so softly spoken.

“If you want me,” he said, clearing his throat.

He reached down to pick up a still wailing Gabbi, who I couldn’t hear him speak over.

His huge palm covered the span of her back with ease, giving it a gentle rub as her face tucked into his neck with perfect trust. “I’ll be whatever you need me to be,” he whispered, and I took a stumbling step backward.

No, no, no. Please don’t tell me ...

“W-why would you do that?” I demanded, my voice still lost in my throat.

“I think you know why,” he said in that same, soft, conciliatory voice that I didn’t know how to respond to.

“I don’t need anything or anyone,” I told him, reaching out for Gabbi. He released her, squeezing his eyes shut as I watched pain flash through them.

Gabbi didn't let go, though. She held on, and no matter what I did, tickling her or whispering to her, she refused.

"I want to stay with Abu," she sobbed, and I couldn't take the sound of her sadness. "We stay with Abu!"

I pressed my lips together, squeezing my eyes shut, never having been in this position with my daughter. No matter who she was with, when it was time to come back to me, she did it with joy. Yet here we were and I was torn, feeling betrayed and hurt, even though I knew I shouldn't.

It wasn't fair to her and I knew it. A child needed more than one person that she could count on. For the longest while I'd hoped I could let her go enough for it to be my coven, but now it seemed that she was demanding that I let her go to someone she chose.

"Okay, Gabbi-girl," I said, swiping my fingers under my eyes to hide my tears. "We'll stay with Abu."

Suspicious, tear-stained eyes turned my way, peering out from Enka's throat.

He had released her, but kept his hands near her in case she fell, and that was like the nail in the coffin.

He'd treated my girl right and it wasn't fair that I was pushing him away because of my own selfish reasons. Gabbi deserved him too.

"Promise?" she asked, swiping her sticky little hand across her snot-covered nose and then wiping it across Enka's cheek. He didn't even flinch.

I smiled, knowing that he really did consider her his daughter. With that in mind, I

tucked my daughter's hair behind her ear .

She smacked her moist hand against Enka's cheek, making me wince. I wanted to snatch her away, so she wouldn't make a mess of his face. But it didn't look like he needed the help. It looked like he was enjoying every moment of it.

The knowledge made me more settled with my decision to stay here with him. At the very least, my little girl would be happy staying here.

Taking a deep breath and finally deciding to trust my instincts, I reached out for Gabbi and she let me take her, giggling in my arms. "Abu's going to take me to play," she told me with finality.

"And I suppose you think I have no say about that, young lady?" I asked, giving her my best stern look.

Her guilty grin told me everything I needed to know.

"She's going to be a spoiled little monster isn't she?" I muttered to myself.

"No way," Enka said in a low voice, smiling down at my daughter. "She's perfect."

I rolled my eyes, amusement filling me as well as affection. "If you keep treating her like that, she is definitely going to be spoiled."

I watched as he took her to the living room, tossing her into the air and catching her. He was so tall and so big that I would've been worried if it was anyone else. But Enka was so careful and had proven himself to be gentle.

I couldn't say that a shiver of trepidation hadn't gone down my spine when I first met him and saw how big he was. But now I couldn't even muster up the worry.

A smile crossed my face as I watched them, and for the first time since I met David I felt safe and content. I looked up at the big orc, wondering how much of it was because of him and knowing deep inside that the answer was all of it.

Enka

Two weeks had passed of living with my girls and it was the best two weeks of my life. I spent the time getting to know them, although it was much easier to get to know Gabbi than it was Tasia.

With my mate, it was like pulling teeth to get information from her. It was slow going, but every piece was like a victory for me.

It didn't help that I was completely eager for every bit of herself that she gave me. She showed me what she wanted to show me, and hid so much for me.

Peeling away her layers required patience and time and I had both in spades. My Gruk-ir on the other hand, was settling into our life here as if she'd been born into it.

She enjoyed every single gift that I showered on her, and even though I knew that Tasia didn't approve, I wanted to give her everything. And I was ruthless. I would let Gruk-ir see the gifts first, before her mother did.

That way I could pretend that it was already one of the gifts that I had previously given her. If Tasia noticed, she hadn't said anything yet. I was pretty sure she was putting up with me for now.

But I wanted so much more than that. Being this close to her for two weeks was slowly killing me. Being so close to her, and not being able to touch her was absolute torture.

I was surrounded by her scent, the sight of her, the sound of her and on occasion—very lucky occasions—she would touch me.

This typically happened when our Gruk-ir was around.

Then she would initiate touch to take her from me for something they needed to do, or it would be an accident.

I never pushed for it. I wanted all of her touches to be voluntary.

For this little while, it was as if we were a real family. And I was gonna treasure every moment of it.

As it turned out, it was my Gruk-ir's birthday.

I knew that the birthday party had been early, but I hadn't been aware of exactly when her birthday was until Tasia had asked me to put Gruk-ir's papers into the safe.

Her birth certificate had been one of the papers that had been put away, and I had spotted the date of her birth

I wanted her birthday to be special. I didn't know exactly how I was going to do it, especially since her coven wasn't here. But I'd tried anyway.

I had some ideas, and Darak helped me put some things together. I didn't want to override what Tasia had scheduled—not that she'd mentioned anything to me—but I didn't know how to approach it without letting her know that I peeked at the documents.

I'd also taken a look at the name of the father on their certificate. David Wright. The fucking name haunted me.

He was the monster who had traumatized my mate. I just knew it.

I started looking into him, and based on his history, I knew he was trouble. He hadn't been arrested for anything, but there'd been complaints against him.

None of the complaints had been substantiated, and it worried me that the victims had never followed up. It made me wonder if they'd gone missing.

I had already asked Darak to start looking into it for me. While I was focusing on wooing my mate, and getting to know my daughter, I was entrusting him with the background search of the asshole who had hurt her.

It was more than I was used to doing. With something this close to me, I usually handled it myself or with my brothers. But Darak was proving to be trustworthy. He was quiet and intense in a way that reminded me of Dristan, but more withdrawn than grumpy.

Yet he'd been quietly helping me with everything I needed.

The male was a good one, and I appreciated everything he'd done for me and my tiny family.

He hadn't given me an update yet, and that worried me, but I knew we'd be safe as long as we didn't leave the hotel. That was all that mattered for now.

I strummed my fingers against my thigh, watching Tasia out of the corner of my eye as she stretched to reach the top shelf in the mini-kitchen pantry that we'd set up.

She was grabbing oatmeal for our daughter, but my eyes were latched onto where her back arched and her ass stuck out at just the right angle .

It was everything I could do to not growl low in my chest. My female was perfect. And I had to lasso my self-control so that I didn't touch her.

I was jarred from my lustful thoughts as a little missile launched itself onto my head.

Startled, but aware that these sneak-attacks were a regular occurrence, I kept very still, hooking my hands over my blunted tusks.

I'd been filing them regularly, but I didn't trust them around our Gruk-ir's tender skin at all.

"Did I get you, Abu?" our daughter crowed, giggling from her perch on my shoulders. "You were too busy staring at Mommy," she added.

I felt heat rush to my face, but laughed it off as if nothing was wrong with that. I saw Tasia turn to send a quirked eyebrow my way, but I pretended not to see.

"You got me," I told Gabbi, ensuring she was securely perched and wouldn't fall. "And you're getting better and better," I added, making her wiggle with pride.

"Mommy, I scared Abu!" she squealed and it still struck me with awe every time I realized how comfortable our daughter was with me. She laid her head on top of mine, giving a huge yawn, just as I heard a ping on my phone.

"Breakfast time," Tasia called, moving behind me and lifting Gruk-ir from her perch so she could cuddle her close.

"It's my birthday," Gabbi announced at the top of her lungs and then smothered another yawn. It took a little while for our daughter to wake herself up fully.

"It is?" I asked, pretending to be surprised, and she nodded with enthusiasm while

Tasia sent an awkward smile my way.

“We’re not making a big deal about it since she’s already had her party,” she told me, settling Gabbi into her chair and setting her up with oatmeal, toast and yogurt.

She went straight for the yogurt, dunking her fist into it and then sucking on it. I watched as Tasia rolled her eyes but didn’t admonish her—probably because it was her birthday.

I cleared my throat and Tasia turned to face me, her gorgeous hair falling behind her. She’d wrapped a scarf around her head to keep her hair back, but I wanted to set it loose and bury my face in it.

Her scent was delicious and I had to give my head a sharp little shake to remember what I’d been about to say. “I have a little party planned for today. Downstairs in the playroom,” I explained in a wary tone, semi-terrified that she would beat me with the little spoon she had in her hand.

Instead, her gorgeous brown eyes widened. “You planned... a party?” she asked, her lips parting and it was everything I could do to stop myself from ducking my head to kiss her.

“Yeah, for Gruk-ir,” I whispered, trying to not be heard. I didn’t need to bother, though, since our daughter was splashing her hand into yoghurt again, screaming a song at the top of her lungs.

“For her birthday?” she tilted her head to the side, her eyes flicking between mine as if she was searching for something.

I nodded, my arm going backward to scratch at the back of my neck, guilt heating it. “I saw her birthday on her birth certificate when I put it away,” I admitted, and a

small, shy smile spread across her face.

“You just happened to see it?” she asked, mischief in her voice, and I froze for a moment, not sure how to react to it. Teasing wasn’t my mate’s default setting.

“I looked,” I admitted, ducking my head in shame.

A laugh left her, shocking me. I wanted to fall to my knees in front of her and beg for more of that laugh, but I didn’t need to. Instead, she reached out, taking my hand in hers—her bronze skin perfect against my green.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “I was worried she’d be upset about how boring her birthday was, but I wasn’t sure what we could do. ”

“If you ever need anything,” I whispered in a rushed statement, my voice low and hoarse, “I’m here.” It was an eager statement—maybe too much so—but she just smiled at me instead of rebuffing me.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she murmured, looking behind her to where Gruk-ir was making a ruckus with her breakfast. But she didn’t release my hand. I was frozen in place, wishing that we could stay like this forever.

The moment was broken when she called, “Guess what Abu did, Gabbi-girl?” to our daughter.

Our little one spun in her chair, sending a spray of yoghurt to the floor. “What?” she gasped, with an eager expression, clutching the back of her chair and standing on it, starting to jump up and down. “Abu, what?” Her voice was almost a screech and I flinched, my sensitive ears twitching.

“I’ve planned something for your birthday, Gruk-ir,” I said, grinning at her. “A party

for you.”

“For me ?” Her scream could probably be heard from the next building over. Even Tasia flinched at the volume, turning back to me to blink and rub her ear, shaking her head.

We’re sharing this moment.

She was including me, and it was everything I’d ever wanted.

All the Gods in heaven, I prayed , please keep it this way. I want to share moments with her. Share her life.

“Now, Abu, now!” The volume only seemed to be rising as she jumped enthusiastically on her chair. With so much enthusiasm the chair began rocking. I released my mate’s hand—grudgingly—and moved toward her, lifting her into my arms so she didn’t hurt herself.

“Let’s go!” she screamed, and I turned back to face my mate. The look in her eyes took me by surprise. It was tender and heated . I gave myself a quick pinch, trying to make sure I wasn’t sleeping and my Gruk-ir joined in, pinching with enthusiasm.

I grinned at Tasia, and she shook her head, walking toward us, reaching up to wipe the yogurt off my skin. It was like a heat wave passed through me.

“I’ll just get her cleaned up and we’ll go,” she said in a low voice that was so different from how she usually spoke to me. “Thank you.”

I nodded and Gruk-ir launched herself at Tasia. “Hurry, Mommy! We have to get to my party!”

I watched them go to their bedroom before pressing my palm to my chest, trying to keep my heart inside of me from where it was pounding in my chest.

Dear Gods, I didn't know if I could survive her looking at me like that, but I wanted it more than anything.

Tasia

There's no point in pretending anymore.

The thought had blasted into my chest when I heard that the male had planned a birthday party for my daughter.

In two weeks, I'd been waiting and biding my time for him to show me his true colors.

It was possible to keep it hidden for a few days at a time, but how could a male act the way he did for a prolonged period?

One day we'll get on his nerves and he'll snap.

As it turned out, I was wrong. We'd tested his patience in ways that would have driven David straight up a wall, but instead of that, Enka had responded with patient smiles.

He's not the same as David.

The realization had hit me when he'd fidgeted—clearly nervous—before telling me he'd made plans for his Gruk-ir . I couldn't act like I thought he was anything like David anymore.

This male was different. I still wasn't going to be throwing myself all in, but my instincts had finally been right. He wasn't going to hurt us.

A thought niggled at the back of my mind, reminding me that there was something else that my instincts had been telling me.

True mate.

Shaking myself hard, I tugged on shoes for my daughter. There was no way I was going to think about that until I knew more about him. It was one thing to trust a male, it was completely another to consider him my true mate.

I lifted Gabbi into my arms while she was vibrating with pure excitement. I stroked my palm over her hair, making sure it was still neat, before turning to face Enka, my heart thudding in my chest at the soft smile on his face as he looked at us.

Down girl , I told my heart. We're not doing this again.

I was okay with being attracted to him. At least he was a decent male. It was entirely another thing to be catching feelings. And I wasn't .

Swallowing hard, I walked toward him. "Lead the way," I proclaimed with a grin, keeping my little wiggling bundle close.

He opened the door, gesturing for us to leave first, and I passed by him, trying not to breathe in his glorious, masculine scent that I'd been struggling to become immune to for the past two weeks. It hadn't worked .

He locked the door behind us before leading the way to the elevator, tapping the button and waiting, rocking on his heels as he wrinkled his nose at Gabbi. She giggled, holding her arms out to him as if it was the easiest thing in the world, and it was.

He took her into his arms, pressing a quick kiss to her little nose that had me melting

again.

Stay strong, Tasia.

I looked away, but I could still hear them.

“Is my Gruk-ir excited?” he asked, as the elevator opened. He pressed his huge palm to the doors, ensuring they were opened as he let me step in and followed suit. He told the operator that we were going to the first floor as Gabbi nodded with enthusiasm.

“I love parties,” she announced, arms wrapped around his neck as she kicked her little feet against his chest and stomach. He didn’t even flinch, entirely focused on what she was saying—as if she was the most important thing in that moment.

The pang got even more painful and I pinched my wrist to ground myself.

It would be too easy to see how he was with my daughter—how he was with me, too—and fall.

I wasn’t ready for that, and I’d hoped that she wasn’t either, but she looked so happy with him.

More settled than I’d ever seen her before.

My daughter chattered on, cupping Enka’s face in her palms to make sure that he was fully focused on her.

Something that she didn’t need to bother to do, because when she was talking to him, he never paid attention to anything else.

He did the same for me. Fully focused and involved in a way I'd never imagined someone could be when it came to us.

I looked at our reflection in the silver of the elevator and saw how perfect we looked together.

The big, strong orc held my tiny daughter in his arms while I stood by his side.

My brain filled in the gaps that should be there.

If we were more, he'd have one arm wrapped around my waist while he held her with the other, and maybe there would be a bit of a swell to my stomach...

I trailed off at the thought, snapping myself back to reality, because it sounded phenomenal and I couldn't afford for that to be in my head. I pinched myself again, and saw Enka's head snap to the movement, his brow frowning before he met my eyes, censure there for me to see.

"Did you just hurt yourself?" he demanded, worry tingeing his voice. I gave him a tremulous smile, shaking my head.

"Sorry, it's an old habit," I explained, and Gabbi shook her finger at me in admonishment.

"Bad Mommy," she said, and it was everything I could do to look contrite and nod. "Abu doesn't like it," she tsked, hugging Enka around his neck, both giving me worried frowns.

I had to smother a laugh, nodding again. "Sorry," I told them both again just as the doors to the elevator slid open.

We stepped out, and Enka took my hand, lifting it for his inspection.

Gabbi leaned down to look too, although I was certain she had no idea what she was looking for.

Shock filled me when he lifted my hand to press a gentle, soft kiss to my wrist. I looked up into his dark eyes that were brimming with something I couldn't name—and maybe didn't want to name—when Gabbi dropped a kiss to my wrist too.

I was still staring up at Enka, not sure what to say, but Gabbi squealed with joy.

“Uncle Darak!” she crowed, wiggling madly until Enka lowered her to the ground. She rushed at the big male who was making his way closer. She launched herself at him and he caught her up in his arms.

I marveled at how gentle these huge males were with her, ensuring that she never hurt herself.

“Hello, little one,” he told her, as solemn as ever. I don't think I'd ever seen this male smile in the two weeks we'd known him .

“It's my birthday,” she announced, and I swore I saw the corner of his lips twitch.

“Yes, I heard,” he said, looking over at Enka, amusement brimming in his gaze. “The playroom's ready for you,” he told us, turning to face double doors that had a giant pink sign in front of them.

Gabbi's Birthday Party

A grin crossed my face as he opened the door. The loud sound of laughter filled the room and I was startled by the blast of sound.

Children of all ages were inside, all over the room.

There was a huge mix of tube mazes, slides, ball pits, video games, as well as tables for eating.

There were pink and purple balloons all over, being tossed between children and over heads.

I looked around in shock, but my daughter had no such problem.

She squealed with joy as Darak's voice boomed across the room. "The birthday girl's here!"

The announcement was met with cheers, and most of the children ran in our direction. Darak lowered Gabbi and she ran straight toward the children, meeting them halfway. Tiny little humans, goblins, orclings and a mix of tiny beings.

"How did you do this?" I breathed, my fingers pressed to my lips and making me wonder if they heard me.

I shouldn't have worried. Enka was watching my daughter, but his focus encompassed me as well.

"We sent an invitation to the rest of the hotel. For any parents with children who wanted their children to attend a supervised birthday party," he told me, looking as though he was ready to snatch Gabbi up from the rambunctious group of children.

Especially when she was grabbed into a hug by a little centaur boy who pressed a kiss to her cheek. I grabbed him by his wrist as he lunged toward them, and I shouldn't have been able to stop him. He was too big, too immovable, but he stilled right away, looking back at me with incredulous eyes.

“He kissed her ,” he snarled, and I’d never seen him annoyed before. It should have frightened me, but instead, I laughed.

“She’s fine ,” I told him, delight clear in my voice. “It was a kiss on the cheek. She’ll survive.”

“He shouldn’t do that,” he told me, as the little centaur led Gabbi off with her hand in his, toward the ball pit.

“He’s being friendly,” I explained, trying to be soothing.

“ Too friendly,” he grouched, narrowing his eyes on the tiny male.

“Come on,” I chuckled, tugging him in the direction of the tables, just noticing the adults scattered inside the room. They were all wearing uniforms, and were ensuring that none of the children were hurt as they played.

I looked over at Darak, noticing that he was leaning against the closed doors of the playroom. Gratitude filled my chest as I realized we were protected here as well.

“Thank you for this,” I told Enka in a low voice as he took a seat next to me at the table, covered from end to end with food and snacks. “You don’t know how grateful I am. I’m always worried she isn’t getting enough interaction with other children her age.”

He nodded, his brow furrowed before he said, “We can set up weekly play dates.” He still hadn’t looked away from where Gabbi had climbed onto the little centaur’s back as he cantered around the room.

They were both laughing raucously, and I smothered a laugh at Enka’s deep scowl. “With everyone except him .”

I smothered my laugh, nodding as if I was taking him seriously—when I definitely wasn't. "I'd really like that," I murmured, realizing that I still had his wrist in my hand. I looked down at it, sliding my palm until I was touching his hand instead .

That distracted him, and his head turned sharply, looking down at where our hands were joined. He looked up at me, something that was close to hope brimming in his gaze. And I couldn't do anything but give him a tentative smile.

Tasia

“ You’ve been an amazing friend,” I whispered, and that smile that I was becoming obsessed with curled his lips as he wrapped his big fingers around mine.

“I’d love to be your friend,” he murmured, and everything inside of me softened at that.

Good. He isn’t asking for more. I can deal with friends.

“You can trust me, Tasia,” he told me, and that emotion that I was avoiding swirled in my chest again as I nodded.

I looked away, not sure what to say, but keeping my fingers twined with his.

“Can I ask you something?” he murmured in his deep voice, and a shiver ran down my spine at the deep tone.

“Of course,” I said, trying to send a careless smile in his direction, but I wasn’t fooling anyone.

“Are you running from her father?” The words were a whisper, but I heard every one and it was like I’d been dunked in freezing water.

I tried to pull my fingers free, but he didn’t let me, keeping his warm palm around mine, running a dulled claw against the back of my hand in a gentle caress that made me melt.

“I’m sorry if I’m being pushy,” he added. “I just wanted to make sure I was protecting you both properly.”

I looked up at him, and didn’t see the judgement I’d expected. I couldn’t read what I saw there, but it was soft and accepting. I looked over at where Gabbi was giggling madly while rolling around in the ball pit with a dozen little children, the centaur at her side.

“Yes,” I admitted, the word forced out of my throat, but I found words leaving after that. “He... hurt me.”

His expression grew thunderous but where I would usually find that as a red flag in a male, his expression made me feel... comforted. He was angry on my behalf.

“How did he hurt you?” he asked, and while his brow was low with anger, his words were gentle.

I took a deep breath, digging deep for a story that wouldn’t traumatize him. But also, I wanted him to know what he’d been like. How I’d had to live when I was with David .

“When I was seven months pregnant,” I told him in a low flow of words that I’d never said before, “my neighbor, Mrs. Davidia invited me over for an herbal tea that she said helped with her pregnancy.”

I clutched at his fingers with mine, needing some of his strength to keep going.

“I was just getting the mail. That was when she saw me.” I swallowed hard.

“It was still early and I knew David—” I paused on the name, not having said it out loud for so long it felt like a curse that would call him upon us.

I glanced around, but of course, he didn't appear out of nowhere the way I expected him to. I focused on Enka's hand instead. Big, steady and warm. "I knew he would still be asleep. So I went over and we had breakfast." The memories were pouring into me and it was as if I was back there again.

"When I got back, he was so angry," I whispered, my voice low and hoarse, tears clogging my throat, but I refused to let them fall. "He slapped me across my face and called me a whore," I gasped, struggling to keep myself together.

"He said I was hiding someone from him," I played with the lines on his fingers, struggling to stay present. To stay here instead of there. "That I was carrying his child and I was still sleeping with men on the side, eating with them instead of him."

I lifted my gaze to Enka's not able to see him beyond the tears in my gaze. "I wish I'd left then. I wish I'd told Mrs. D. She would have helped me leave. I think she wanted me to. That was why she invited me over all the time. She knew he was hurting me," I admitted for the first time ever.

His fingers tightened on mine for a moment and I felt a shudder run through his big body, but I still wasn't able to see his expression. Still, he didn't say anything, just stroking my fingers with his own and keeping me with him.

"I don't know why I told you that," I choked out a laugh, blinking past my tears. "That wasn't what you asked. But yes, we're running from him. He's... not a nice male."

He lifted my hand to his lips, pressing a gentle kiss to my knuckles and the tears were threatening again when he said, "That's his fault. Not yours. You didn't ask for any of that, Tasia. None of it was your fault."

"I stayed," I gasped, squeezing my eyes shut, shame smothering me until I couldn't

breathe. “I stayed when I should have left.”

I was in his arms before I knew what was happening, snuggled against a solid chest, my face pressed to the steady beat of his heart. I shook against him, but with a few harsh breaths, I was able to control myself.

“You did your best,” he whispered against my hair, his lips pressed to the top of my head. “You did what you had to do. But it wasn’t your fault.”

The words were like a balm to an open wound. It was still festering, but not as bad as before. I’d never explained what happened to me to anyone—not even my coven. I was sure they’d come to their own conclusions, but I hadn’t said a word.

Talking to him was a relief that I’d never thought I would be able to get.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, shaking my head and pulling away from him.

He released me, but he kept our fingers twined.

“I didn’t mean to say all of that. This is a happy day and—” I was cut off by his fingers on my chin, tilting my head up.

Heat suffused the space he was touching. He was just so... warm. And it made me feel so safe. So different from when I’d been touched before.

“Don’t ever apologize for talking to me about something that matters to you, Tasia,” he murmured, his brow furrowed as he met my gaze. “I’m here for you however you need me.”

I gave him a tremulous smile, looking away as heat flooded my face.

However I need him?

Illicit images filled my brain before I could stop them.

No! Get it together! You're just friends !

I nodded, looking away from him and tugging my chin from his fingers to hide what I was feeling. I shouldn't have tried, though, because in the next moment, his face was pressed to the side of my neck, his nose and blunted tusks nudging my skin.

I gasped, releasing his hand to brace myself against his hard chest and shoulders. "E-Enka?" I stuttered, heat flooding low in my stomach as his scent and heat surrounded me. A low growl left his throat, making me tremble against him.

Oh dear Goddess Mother, I'm so wet I can slide across this seat.

"Whatever you need from me, Tasia," he groaned, nudging my throat with his nose again. "However many times you need it. I can give it to you."

My entire body ignited, and I was just saying "fuck it" to the part of my brain that was telling me it was a terrible idea when a loud screech sounded on the other side of the room.

I pulled away, my head turning in the direction of the sound.

Enka's did the same, but his giant hand moved to my lower back, keeping me close to him.

A little harpy was laughing so hard, her wings fluttering and her head thrown back, that she had screeched. My daughter, ever the entertainer, was in the middle of the group, regaling them with a story as they jumped in the bouncy house in the far

corner.

“I’m glad she’s having a good time,” I told him, struggling to breathe, ignoring the push of my fingers into his chest, feeling his muscles, and praying that he would ignore it too.

“Me too,” he murmured, smiling that sweet smile before he turned back to face me. “But as I was saying, Tasia,” he started and I cringed inside.

He didn’t spontaneously forget that I was trying to jump him?

“I’m here for whatever you need,” he whispered, tucking my hair behind my ear. The tickle of his fingers on my skin sent a zing of heat straight to my nipples—which had nothing to do with where he was touching. “Anytime you need it.”

“Thank you,” I told him, ducking my head and avoiding his probing stare. “That’s really sweet of you, but you’ve done enough for us.”

“You know what I mean,” he said in that low voice that did things to my insides and definitely moistened my already sopping panties. “You know what I’m saying to you.”

Dammit Tasia, be brave.

Taking a deep breath, I looked up at him, and his lip curled in a seductive grin in response.

Fuck. Me.

“I know what you mean,” I gasped, unable to catch my breath. “I know exactly what you mean.”

“Good,” he murmured, leaning down. I held my breath, hoping and dreading the press of his lips, but he only put them against my forehead. “I want you to feel safe and comfortable around me. To know that I’ll be whatever you need me to be.”

My fingers were still clinging to his shirt, caressing his muscles in a way that was entirely inappropriate when surrounded by a group of children. I forced my hands away, tucking them under my ass so they would behave and then I nodded. “Yep.”

His smile was feral now, and he leaned in to run one of his tusks against the skin of my neck. My moan was dragged out of me. I didn’t want to feel pleasure, but I lit up like a wick when he touched me.

It was dizzying. I’d never experienced anything like it. Being with this orc was unlike anything I had ever felt before. The tingle under my skin and the heat that was rising inside me was something I’d never encountered.

The laughing squeal from the area of the bouncy castle had me turning to look at my daughter. She was surrounded by a group of new friends and she looked so happy I grinned.

“I have to thank Darak,” I said, turning to look at Enka. “This is perfect for her birthday. I never thought I’d be able to give her anything like this. Especially after we ran.” I ducked my head, embarrassed.

“I thought we’d be on the run for a while. I was so scared that she would ask me about her birthday. Thank you for this as well,” I said looking up at him, sure that my gratitude would be going in my eyes.

“There’s never any need to thank me for anything,” Enka said, his brow furrowed.

“Anything I do, I want to do.” He looked as though he wanted to say more, but his

eyes slid away.

His gaze snagged on my daughter. “I’d do anything I can for her,” he admitted, sending me an embarrassed smile. “She’s the daughter I always wanted.”

I bit my lip, struggling to keep my thoughts to myself, but his head tilted as he kept looking at me.

“You don’t know me yet,” he said in a low voice. “But you can tell me anything and I’ll never react like he would.”

The words were like a blow to the chest. I hadn’t realized that was what I was doing until he pointed it out. Going for honesty, I sent him an apologetic smile as the words spilled from my lips.

“But she’s not your daughter,” I bit my lip, knowing he wasn’t David, but also knowing that he was a huge male with muscles the likes of which I’d never seen before in my life.

He nodded, shrugging. “One day maybe.” His voice was earnest and it caught at my heart like nothing ever had.

“What are you saying, Enka?” I asked him and his expression grew serious just as a little rocket launched itself at his legs.

“Abu, come play ,” Gabbi insisted, tugging on his pants, her voice at a pitch that I’d never experienced before.

Dear Goddess Mother, is this what happens when she’s with other children?

When he smiled down at her, his lips curling in that way that made my heart a

squishy mess, I was startled to realize how handsome he was.

Damn him and his good looks.

“Of course, Gruk-ir,” he said, lifting her into his arms. She screeched with joy so loud I cringed, and I watched his sensitive ears twitch, but his smile never left his face. “It’s your day.”

He carried her to where the other children were gathered and she sat in his arms, imperious as a queen, pointing to where he needed to go and bossing everyone around. He allowed it, leading the entire group to where she wanted to play.

I melted as he laughed with the children, my ovaries quivering in a way that was alarming.

You do not want babies with this male, Tasia. Snap out of it. You don’t want any more children.

The last was a blatant lie, but I was becoming used to lying to myself. Especially when it came to males.

Enka

I ' m exhausted.

I'd trained to be a warrior. I'd survived in the leanest, most difficult situations. But this playroom with this many younglings was killing me.

I lifted what felt like the seven hundred and fifth child into the air, swinging them in an arc over my head while they laughed raucously. I looked down at the line that was still going strong in front of me.

Fuck me.

“Alright,” Tasia said, coming over and folding her arms under her ample chest—accentuating a pair of breasts that held me in a thrall. “It’s time for cake! Let’s leave Enka alone and all get a spot at the table.”

The collective groan was loud in the room, but I sagged with relief, sending a grateful smile in her direction. She winked at me—something I’d never thought I would ever see in my lifetime—before leading the younglings toward the tables near the door.

They were laden with food and the younglings hit them like a pack of wild locusts, giggling, screaming as they did.

I was making my way over when a little hand took mine.

I looked down to see Gabbi walking alongside me, completely nonchalant about the

fact that her tiny hand only wrapped around one of my fingers.

“Blow out the candles with me, Abu,” she demanded, and I nodded, struggling to clear my throat so I could speak through the rush of emotions that filled me.

“Of course,” I told her, charmed and humbled that she was making me such a big part of her day.

At the head of the table was a huge cake of her favorite cartoon—that we watched together. Her scream when she spotted the cake was drowned out by the noise of all the other younglings.

She dropped my finger, lifting her arms for me to lift her instead. I did, ensuring she was secure and comfortable before turning back to the table. Tasia stood next to the cake, a smile lighting up her gorgeous face.

“Happy birthday, Gabbi-girl,” she whispered, for our ears alone, leaning in to press a kiss to our daughter’s cheek.

I lowered her so she had access and Gabbi threw her arm around her mother’s neck and then mine, yanking us close so that we were all pressed together.

I found myself face to face with Tasia, our breaths mingling and our gazes locked .

“Hey,” I whispered, my brain misfiring. I couldn’t think of a single thing that I wanted more than to stay here—right in this position—surrounded by my two females for the rest of my life.

“Kiss her, Abu,” Gabbi insisted, shoving us even harder together.

Since when did she get so strong?

“I don’t think your mommy wants that,” I chuckled, knowing she was probably uncomfortable.

“She does!” Gabbi said with a frown, shoving her face and planting a loud kiss on her mother’s lips. “See? Mommy loves being kissed.”

It took us a moment but it wasn’t long before both Tasia and I fell into laughter. Gabbi frowned at us, pushing at our necks even harder and I searched Tasia’s gaze, waiting for consent. When she nodded, I leaned in, pressing my lips gently against hers.

It didn’t last longer than a few seconds, but when I pulled away from the innocent kiss, I was breathless. Clearing my throat, I settled Gabbi back against my chest, ignoring the smug grin she had across her face.

Our daughter’s matchmaking.

“Are you ready for those candles?” Tasia asked, unable to look at me. She was nibbling on her lower lip and it was everything I could do to not crow to the ceiling. The scent of her arousal was strong in my nose.

She wants me.

“Yes!” our daughter chirped in my arms, vibrating with excitement as Tasia lit the candles. The distracted younglings around the table all turned to face us, cheering with excitement.

“Blow them out, Gabbi!” the little centaur cried and I scowled as Tasia smothered a laugh.

I angled her lower and she leaned forward without hesitation, trusting me completely

to keep her balanced.

I did, but Tasia had to pull Gabbi's braids back before they splattered into the cake.

She sent me an amused look and I wasn't sure when I would get used to it—the shared intimacy that was growing between us, joining us together—but I hoped I never did.

“Make a wish,” she gasped, before Gabbi blew on the candles and she shook her little head.

“Nope! I got my wish already. I got a daddy.” And with that pronouncement, that shocked both Tasia and I into silence, our jaws falling open, she blew on her candles and then shoved her hand into the cake, turning to face Tasia. “Taste, Mommy!”

She took advantage of her parted lips and shoved her cake covered fingers between them. “Yummy?” Gabbi grinned, turning to shove her fingers into my mouth next.

I widened my mouth at once, worried she'd graze her precious, soft skin against my fangs. I pulled her hand out, smacking my lips and leaning forward to press a kiss to her cheek.

“Thank you. But we'll eat on plates, okay?” I murmured, struggling not to look at Tasia. I wouldn't recover if I saw horror in her expression at the thought of me as Gabbi's father.

“I want a big slice, Abu,” Gabbi insisted, pointing at the cake.

I nodded, but just as I was going to start cutting it, Tasia jumped into action, cutting and plating with efficient ease.

She wasn't facing me and I lowered Gabbi to the floor so she could eat with her new friends, sitting next to the centaur and making me scowl again.

"Here's yours," Tasia's voice was little more than a whisper and when her eyes met mine, soft pools of an emotion I couldn't read, I prayed to every God I could think of.

Don't let her hate me.

"I... I didn't ask her to say that," I explained and she shook her head.

"Trust me, no one can put words in my daughter's mouth," she said with a rueful smile. "I'm sorry she put you in that position."

It was my turn to frown now .

"What position?"

The tug of a little hand on her clothes had her turning her attention away from me and back to the younglings surrounding her for cake. I didn't get my answer, but she wasn't going to get away without one.

A little chirp sound left my phone and I tugged it out of my pocket, seeing Rudgar's name on the screen. I turned around, making my way toward the door of the room. I lifted the phone to my ear, bracing myself for news.

"Hey Enka," he called, and his cheerful voice made me a little less apprehensive. Still, when it came to the safety of my mate and youngling, I didn't want to let down my guard.

"Is everything okay?" I asked, not waiting for pleasantries.

“Oh, yeah. The females just wanted to wish Gabbi a happy birthday,” he told me, and I beamed, turning back to where half of her face was smothered in frosting.

“She’s having her cake right now,” I told him.

“There’s so much noise there. Are those other younglings?” he asked, and I could hear the frown in his voice.

“The other younglings from the hotel that Darak could find for her party,” I explained, and Rudgar’s laugh was deep.

“I knew the bastard had a soft spot somewhere. Turns out it’s for younglings. Good to know,” he chuckled.

“No bullying Darak,” I growled the warning. “He’s helped too much for me to help pick on him.”

“I’m offended,” Rudgar scoffed, sounding the exact opposite. “I wouldn’t do anything to one of my most beloved friends.”

The threat in those words was clear and I shook my head, hoping poor Darak would survive however Rudgar planned to mess with him.

“Did they want to talk to her now?” I asked, “Because she’s with her little friends. I’ll ask Darak to plan a few more of these, but I want her to get as much socialization as possible. It’s important.”

The silence on the other end should have warned me. Instead, I wasn’t prepared.

“When are you planning to deal with the real issue then? So you can both come back home and host some of those younglings in a safe space here instead?” he asked, and

I heard the sound of cooking. I was almost certain he was in his kitchen with his mate.

“As soon as possible,” I growled, my lips curling and baring my fangs involuntarily.

“Good. Ask Darak to get the younglings’ information so we can have something here, get that shit done and bring those females back. Let me know what you need, and if you need my backup.”

“My brothers and I have it handled,” I told him, knowing it was true. “But I’ll let you know.”

“I’ll let Zara know that you’ll call when you’re finished,” he told me and with a quick farewell, we hung up. I turned to look at my family, where Tasia was doling out even more cake to our daughter and her friends, and felt my gut tighten.

They were being threatened and I was going to protect them. Darak had his best workers keeping an eye on the surrounding buildings. If that good for nothing male had followed them, we’d know soon.

He’d reported that there had been a few sightings of a male who might fit a description of the human trash my mate was still—to my utmost chagrin—married to, but he’d only darted around nearby wearing hats and hoodies, so they hadn’t been able to confirm.

The only one who would be able to recognize him that way was Tasia but I refused to get her involved unless it was absolutely necessary. She turned to look at me, her eyebrows high in question. That was when I realized I’d been scowling in their direction.

Fuck. I can’t let her know that there’s anything wrong .

I sent a quick, reassuring smile, but my mate was too smart to be fooled by that. She ran a hand over our daughter's head and made her way close.

"Hey," she murmured, moving close enough that her scent surrounded me, comforting me and turning me inside out at the same time. "Is everything alright?"

"It was Rudgar," I told her, honestly. "The coven wants to wish our Gruk-ir a happy birthday, but I didn't want to disturb her while she was with her new friends."

Her expression softened at once. "That's so sweet. Thank you for thinking of that," she told me, pressing her hand to my forearm. I should be used to the electricity that arced between us, but I wasn't.

I licked my lips, looking down at where she was touching me before my eyes flicked up to hers. Her pupils were dilated and I could see everything I was feeling reflected back at me.

You want this as much as I do.

She cleared her throat, pulling her hand away and rubbing it against her thigh. I wasn't offended. She was trying to ward off her feelings, but it wouldn't work. I'd make sure of it.

"I'll call them back when we're done," I told her and she nodded, swallowing hard before turning away from me. My gaze followed the sensual sway of her hips and I held in a barely checked groan.

You can run, my mate, but I'll always catch you.

Tasia

I ' m such a coward.

The thought ran through my head as I made my way back to my daughter. It was the closest to the truth that I could get.

Especially when he acted like he was already a part of our tiny family.

After today, after watching him with my daughter, it was getting harder and harder to lie to myself about my feelings for him.

And the way she'd said that he was her daddy...

It took everything in me not to take her and run again.

I couldn't have her loving this male. He would hurt us, just like David had.

Just like every other male I'd let into my life.

I wasn't sure if he meant to, but he was wearing me down with his charms. He was the sweetest male I'd ever met and I wanted to jump his bones at every turn. I didn't feel attraction like normal females. Not anymore. Not after David.

I wasn't sure if it was related to trauma or if it was a part of my sexuality that was only just showing itself. I could find a male to be attractive externally, but it didn't affect me. There were good-looking beings everywhere. But I hadn't felt heat like

this since... ever.

Even with David, I was certain that my initial attraction to him was more related to what he represented than who he was.

I swallowed hard, keeping focused on my daughter as I made my way over to the food tables, determined to neaten up and pack goody bags so I could distract myself from my train of thought.

When Enka made his way over, wordlessly helping me, but keeping a keen eye on Gabbi as well, I huffed out a breath.

Damn him for being hot and perfect. As if I wasn't already confused.

Enka slid a look my way after I huffed, a mysterious smile playing on his lips and I wanted to bite him. To scratch him. To force him down to my height with his tusks so I could finally taste him. Heat flooded my cheeks at the thought, but I was too worked up to care.

"I know you said you want to be my friend," I said in a low voice, moving closer to him so none of the children could hear. "But I need you to be honest with me. What's your game? Why are you being this way with me? With Gabbi?"

He frowned for a long moment before shaking his head. "Being what way?" he asked, leaning in even closer so we were only inches apart .

I didn't pull away the way I usually would. Instead, I stayed close and let his scent surround me, weakening my resolve. "I know what you're doing," I insisted, eyes narrowed. "I just don't know why ."

"What am I doing?" he asked, his gaze softening into something mild, amused and

understanding.

I paused for a long moment, wondering how insane I was going to sound, before deciding I didn't care.

I was fed up holding back the real me. And whether or not she was a distrustful lunatic, he was going to get her.

"You're trying to trick me," I blurted, tipping my chin up in challenge. "You're being all nice now so that you'll get me to agree to do whatever it is you want. And then you'll..." I swallowed hard, and wasn't prepared for the punch of his words.

"And then I'll change and become just like him."

I didn't expect the tears that pooled in my eyes, but I nodded. With a deep sigh, I was in his arms, his big palm cradling my head against his hard chest.

"I know you're hurt," he murmured into my hair, taking a deep breath, his huge body shuddering under my palms that were pressed to his chest—ready to push away—and I'd found myself clinging to him instead.

"But I don't want anything from you other than to let me be here with you.

Supporting you." His dark, intense eyes roamed over my face before they flicked to mine.

"And our Gruk-ir." There was a long pause and his fingers clenched in my hair. It felt involuntary. "Please."

My stupid heart was opening for him—blooming in a way that I couldn't begin to understand.

It was my turn to study him. And I did. For a long, long time.

The hope brimming off of him scalded me with its sincerity.

Still, I didn't respond right away. I mulled over the idea of letting him in. Of actually giving him my full trust.

"I don't want a relationship," I explained, testing.

He nodded, tucking an unruly curl behind my ear. "That's fine," he whispered. "However you want me. Whatever you need. That's what I'll give you."

The screeching sound of another huge barrier being opened inside of me made its way through my head. If I wasn't careful, he would make it all the way through. And then what? Then he would decide that he didn't want anything to do with me, my tiny broken family and the drama of my husband.

"I'm married," I told him, taking a deep breath. "Legally."

He nodded, his expression soft and open, listening and not judging.

"I'm really not interested in anything other than friends. I... can't."

"Then we'll be friends," he breathed, as if it was the easiest decision in the world. As if it wasn't a life-changing decision that would flip over my entire worldview of males.

"Okay," I gasped, burying my face against his chest, holding on for dear life, and letting a tear slide down my cheek. In his arms, I was protected and safe.

It feels so good. I wish I could stay here forever.

The little missile slamming into our legs would have mowed me down if I wasn't securely pressed against him.

Instead, my little clinging monkey of a daughter made her way up our legs, aided by Enka's giant palm.

She snuggled herself between us and I pressed a kiss to her soft hair the same time Enka did.

Our eyes met and we were so close together I could see the little lines of his irises.

Goddess Mother, he could hurt me so bad.

"Abu and Mommy were hugging," Gabbi said with a smug note to her tone and I knew that the sweet little gremlin was plotting something. "Good."

"Good, huh?" I asked, pulling away to tickle her and she screamed with laughter, scrambling up Enka like he was a tree and clinging to his neck. He held her with a big hand under her and she fit so well into it, it was almost as if he'd been made to keep her safe.

Ignoring my fanciful thoughts, I told Gabbi, "Your Abu and I decided that we'll be friends."

She frowned, her little brow scrunching and her nose crinkling. "Friends can't have babies," she said with firm knowledge as if she was an expert.

"Babies?" I squawked, my eyes wide. "What're you talking about?"

"I want a little sister," she said, releasing Enka's neck and folding her arms over her chest—very reminiscent of when I was scolding her. "And you can't be friends for

that. You have to be a mommy and daddy.”

I would have been less shocked if she’d suddenly announced that she was leaving for college. “We’re not having a baby,” I gasped, turning around to make sure none of the other children were listening. And they weren’t. They were running around in a mad post-cake haze of sugar-induced fervor.

“I want a sister,” she demanded again, and I looked at Enka, at my wit’s end. But I didn’t get the reaction I expected from him. Instead, he was nodding, thoughtfully, as if considering it.

“Why not a brother?” he asked, and I threw my hands up in the air, stalking off to clean the rest of the table in an angry flurry of movements.

“Mommy’s mad,” Gabbi said in a loud whisper to Enka. “We should go play in case she wants to yell at us.”

I rolled my eyes while they snuck off.

Enka

I ' m in a slow-burning hell.

Tasia was plastered against my side as she waved at the screen I was holding.

Our Gruk-ir was on her lap, trying to plaster her face on the screen, but her mother had pinned her against her chest while she wiggled for freedom.

It was the only reason she was so close to me.

I was both cursing my bad luck and thanking every God that could hear me.

She wanted us to be friends , and here I was enjoying every inch of her body that was soft and sweet against me.

The muscles in my body were stiff from holding myself back from what I wanted to do.

I wanted to bury my face in her throat, to cradle her and our daughter in my arms. To revel in our closeness.

But I couldn't do that. Not when I was so close to her trusting me. Instead, I pasted a smile on my face and watched as Gabbi told an amused Rudgar all about her day while he made his way toward Zara's apartment.

"I'm glad you had a good birthday," he told her with a wink. "And I have a present

for you when you get home.”

She was vibrating against Tasia now, and she grabbed at the phone, causing Tasia to hold her even tighter, pressing harder against me, her ass bumping against my thigh. It was everything I could do to angle my hips away and not roll my eyes back in my head.

Rudgar gave me a knowing look as our Gruk-ir screeched, “Present?” just as the male opened the door to Zara’s apartment. The loud cheer from the other side made my mate and daughter grin. If only based on that reaction, I would forever be grateful that they had them to rely on.

“It’s our girl’s birthday!” Zara called, her hands in the air in celebration while the others clapped. My Gruk-ir wiggled with joy while Tasia wiped a tear from her cheek.

“How was your day, little one?” Tabitha asked. She’d been leading the coven when Zara’s mother—the original High Priestess—had died. Now that Zara had taken over, she was a treasured advisor and one of the strongest witches in the coven.

“So much fun!” Gabbi babbled, telling the enthralled group all about her party and the friends she had made.

I scowled as she started talking about her best friend Jael , the little centaur male who she appeared to be smitten with.

“And we ate cake and then Mommy and Abu kissed ,” she finished and her audience turned their awestruck gazes our way instead.

My lips parted to explain, but I snapped them shut, not sure what to say without giving away my intentions. I waited for Tasia to say something—anything—but she

just sat there, her eyes wide and her mouth hanging open.

“Kissed?” Zara asked, tilting her head at Tasia, sending a wink her way. “Well what do you know, I guess our Tasia is spending her little away time more productively than I thought.”

Tasia was shaking her head violently while Zara spoke, but no one allowed her to talk, breaking out in boisterous laughter instead.

“I’m getting a little sister!” Our Gruk-ir announced then, and it was everything I could do to not laugh along with them. I bit my lip, watching as Tasia sputtered, turning horrified eyes on our daughter.

“I am not pregnant!” she insisted, and the cackles from the phone didn’t stop. “I’m not !”

“But she needs a sibling, Tasia,” Floria called, wiping tears from her eyes while still leaning against Hanna’s side to hold herself up. “And you have quite a fine specimen there.”

I puffed my chest, grinning down at Tasia, but she shook her head wildly, whispering, “Don’t encourage them!” so I deflated a little.

“There won’t be any sisters,” she said to Gabbi, who turned a mutinous look her way, her entire face scrunching in that way that sent a punch to my gut. And while I knew that it wasn’t time for the discussion, I didn’t want to do anything but give her whatever she wanted.

“Never say never,” Zara laughed, wiggling her eyebrows with vigor, and Tasia sent a withering expression in her direction.

“And what if it ends up being a brother?” Floria asked and it was our Gruk-ir’s turn to look horrified.

The laughter started again until Tasia spoke up, quieting the rowdy group. “Alright, alright. No more of that.” She pulled Gabbi back toward her chest, keeping her close. “Thanks so much for calling,” she told them, “even though all you did was make trouble.”

“It’s what we’re best at,” Zara quipped, but her smile softened as she searched my mate’s expression. “We want you both back soon. You’ll be safe here.”

“I miss you,” Gabbi called, fighting Tasia’s hold to press a sweet kiss to the camera. The females all got a little teary eyed, including my mate. “I want to come home.”

“Soon, sweet girl,” Tasia insisted, pressing a kiss to her hair.

“And until then,” Zara told her with a little wink, “We sent some presents with Darak. They should be waiting outside in the hall. From the coven to our littlest witch.”

The sound that left Gabbi was more war-cry than joy, but she scrambled off of Tasia and onto the floor, running with all her might to the front door.

I left Tasia’s side, my body protesting the move, following our daughter to make sure she didn’t get herself into trouble.

When I spotted her, she was swinging off of the door handle, but it wasn’t budging.

It was an extra precaution that I’d taken, ensuring that she didn’t get out and run amok in the hallway. I couldn’t bear to think of other possible scenarios of anything happening to her where I couldn’t reach her.

She released her hold on the handle and then pointed at it like the little princess she was. “Abu, open.”

“Please?” I asked, kneeling down so we were closer in height—while still towering over her.

“Please,” she agreed with a firm nod and I grinned, opening the door. In poured dozens of wrapped gifts and her war cry sounded again. I flinched before corralling all of her energy and enthusiasm into the living area near Tasia with her presents.

It was a struggle to get her—the vibrating ball of energy that she was—into the space while also holding all of her presents, but I survived it.

I could barely hear the words being shared between the females, but when I sat next to her again, ensuring that I was pressed against her the way I had enjoyed, they quieted.

“And you, Enka?” Zara asked, amusement filling her gaze. “How’ve you been?”

“Good,” I told her with a contented smile that was probably telegraphing that I was way better than good .

“I’ll bet,” she drawled with a smirk before focusing on Tasia again. “He’ll take care of you. Trust him.”

She stiffened against me before giving a small, almost imperceptible nod. I knew it was difficult for even that, so I was flattered. Even the smallest show of trust from her was better than nothing.

Progress.

“You know we’re just a call away,” Tabitha said, her voice low but filled with intensity. “If you need anything. We’re your family.”

“And we forgive you for leaving us without a word,” Floria said with pursed lips and crossed arms. “Because you’re trying to protect our little girl. But never again .”

Tasia swallowed, and I wanted to hold her so bad that my hand shook with the urge. “I promise,” she whispered, swiping away a tear from her cheek and I had to look away. I couldn’t sit there while she cried and not comfort her.

“Mommy?” Our Gruk-ir asked, abandoning her presents and scrambling up her lap for a hug. Tasia smiled down at her while our precious girl frowned, swiping at her wet cheeks with her tiny hands. “Why are you crying? Abu, hug Mommy.”

I looked at Tasia’s face and she gave me a small smile. I took it as all the approval I needed before gathering them both into my arms, holding them tight against me. I ignored the feel of another tear sliding against my skin .

“Take care of them,” Zara called. “I love you all.”

The words were repeated by the group and Gabbi pressed one last smacking kiss to the phone before we hung up. She pulled away to look at Tasia who had finally stopped crying.

“No more crying,” she told her with a stern voice and my mate’s watery laugh had me holding her tighter. Gabbi waited for her mother’s nod before she ran back to her presents.

“You can let me go now,” Tasia murmured, but she was leaning against me, her eyes closed as she turned her face into my chest.

I didn't say anything, my heart breaking for my mate as she sniffled, clenching my shirt. Unable to stop myself from doing anything else, I gathered her into my arms, tighter against me, hugging her close.

"It's okay," I whispered against her temple, nuzzling against her, taking a deep hit of her scent to calm myself so I didn't immediately run out of the building to kill her husband.

I had a mate and daughter to think about. I couldn't be taken away from them for doing anything reckless. Instead, I let her soothe me, her small, soft body curved against mine.

Over my mate's head, I saw our Gruk-ir looking at me with a grin that could only be described as evil. I quirked my eyebrow and she went back to what she was doing, ripping wrapping paper off of a paint set.

Tasia

I smoothed my finger over my daughter's hair, making sure everything was in place while she vibrated with glee.

She'd put on her best dress, which was saying something, since Enka had bought so much clothing for her, that he'd had to get a rolling rack for her that took up a big portion of the bedroom.

"And you're going to be careful?" I asked her, ducking down so she was looking at me directly.

She nodded, her expression sobering. "I'll only play with my friends and I'll run to Darak if I see any adults I don't know," she repeated the rules that I'd given to her. "No going outside."

"I'm sorry we can't go with you," I told her, and she shrugged, much less worried than I was.

"Jael's going to be there," she explained, as if that should soothe every worry that I had, and I smothered a laugh as I heard the low growl from behind me.

"Jael's nice, Abu," Gabbi whined, frowning at him over my shoulder.

I felt him before I saw him. His heat came up behind me, his big palm pressed against my back as he kneeled in front of Gabbi. "No kisses," he told her in a stern voice that had me biting my lip to stop from laughing. "You only get kisses from Mommy and

Abu, okay?”

“And the coven,” she said, nodding agreeably.

“And the coven,” he agreed. “But not Jael.”

“I like kissing Jael,” she announced with a shrug before turning to saunter over to the door, leaving Enka kneeling there in shock, his jaw hanging open while I couldn’t stop myself from laughing.

“I’m sorry,” I gasped, when he turned a betrayed look in my direction. “But you should see your face.” I dissolved into more laughter at his scowl as he poked my side making me fall over. He caught me, grabbing me quickly and holding me up, but it didn’t stop me from laughing.

Once I was steady, I used his shoulder for balance before standing. The heat in my face was from his hands on me, but I struggled to ignore it and pretend it was from laughter instead.

It had been almost a week after Gabbi’s birthday party and we’d formed a truce of sorts. We were... friends. And I was struggling to stick to that boundary .

We’d created a little routine around Gabbi, but even when we put her to bed—which she insisted needed to be a two being job—we stayed up together, chatting about her or watching TV.

On our first night alone on the sofa, I’d asked him if he wanted me to go to the bedroom so he could sleep, but he’d explained that since he’d come to this plane, the silence made it difficult for him to fall asleep.

It didn’t help that Gabbi’s bedtime was much earlier than when we both usually felt

tired.

We'd started a series on one of the streaming services.

A cute comedy that had us laughing together before the end of the night.

And that was how I'd learned that I didn't mind spending time with him.

In fact, I liked spending time with him.

It was throwing me for a loop, but I was embracing the weirdness of having a male in our space. And oddly enough, it was... nice. He took care of us so well that it was making me feel safe.

When the parents of Gabbi's new little friends had suggested that they have a daily play date—most likely to wear them out and so the parents could have some down time during their vacation—Enka ensured that it would only be children with Darak and the female who was in charge of the on-site child care services supervising.

It was one less thing for us to worry about, and I was so happy that my little girl was finally able to spend time with other children her age.

Plus, it seemed she and Jael were becoming fast friends.

I hoped they'd be able to stay in touch once we returned home—after the danger with David had passed. Whenever the hell that was going to be.

“Tell her not to kiss that male,” Enka whispered, pulling me from my thoughts and gesturing wildly toward where Gabbi was painstakingly putting on her shoes.

“I think she should be able to kiss whoever she wants,” I giggled, and he glowered at

me as he made his way over to where she was tying her laces .

I could tell he wanted to help. I saw it in the way his brow crinkled as he looked down at her tiny hands, his own huge ones twitching, but he didn't.

He was patient and gentle and I tucked my folded fingers under my chin as I watched him get her little purse—another purchase that he'd made at her request.

Darak was waiting outside and I heard a low murmured conversation between the two males before the door closed and my daughter was gone.

Anxiety clawed inside of me, but I pushed it aside.

No parents were allowed in the area and Darak was watching her.

I exhaled the breath I was holding when Enka turned, striding inside, his handsome face looking smug.

“Did you tell him to stop them from kissing?” I asked, my hands on my hips, trying to look angry, but I knew I was failing when he grinned at me.

“Yep,” he said, popping the p the way Gabbi did when she was supremely proud of herself.

“She only kisses his cheek,” I said, rolling my eyes as we made our way over to the sofa.

“That's bad enough,” he huffed, his brow crinkling again. “I don't like him.”

“Because Gabbi likes him,” I snickered, shaking my head as I took my place at what I was considering my end of the sofa, opposite him. I turned myself and he did the

same, facing each other with our feet sharing the center cushion.

This was what usually ended up happening when we were watching our show together, and even though we had finished it, and hadn't started a new one yet, it appeared to be our new thing.

Our feet tangled together. His were warm and toasty while mine were a freezing abomination that Gabbi complained about when she tried to paint my nails.

But he never reacted, never complained that I was chilling him to the bone. Instead, he snuggled them against his ankles, warming them up .

"It's not that she likes him," he growled with vehemence, even though that was exactly what it was. "It's just that..." he trailed off and looked away.

I ran my toes upward, along his calf, and he met my gaze again. "You can tell me," I whispered, intimacy surrounding us.

Oh dear Goddess Mother, we're alone in here. How had I only just realized that? This is the first time we're truly alone together.

I ducked my gaze, but kept my toes against him. It wasn't his fault I was freaking out. In fact, we'd been alone quite a few times when Gabbi was sleeping and he hadn't been anything except a perfect gentlemale. There was no reason for me to think he'd do otherwise now.

"It's my own problem," he sighed, scrubbing his huge palm across his face. "I don't want to lose her to another male already and I don't know his intentions ." The last was said with a deep scowl and it was my turn to laugh again, my head thrown back.

How he could be so sweet, kind and considerate while also being absolutely

ridiculous was beyond me.

“You’re not going to lose her to another male,” I told him, leaning forward and reaching out my hand toward him.

He hesitated for only a second, searching my expression with hope brimming in his eyes and sending a sharp panging ache into my chest before taking my fingers into him, his hold firm and warm.

“She’s only making friends,” I continued, clearing my throat.

“She can have as many female friends as she wants,” he explained, as if he was being totally reasonable.

“But why does it have to be a male?” he groaned, running his thumb over the back of my hand, staring down at it in wonder.

“And especially that male .” His lip curled, but adjusted itself while he twined our fingers together.

“ That male,” I laughed, pretending that I didn’t notice the heat of his touch or the fact that my hand was so comfortable in his it was as if it was made to be there. “Is a child.”

“And do you think I wouldn’t have known who you were to me if I’d met you at his age?” he scoffed, still marveling at our hands.

Until he realized what he’d said. He froze, his eyes sweeping up to mine, wide and round. “I mean...” he trailed off, and I smiled, suddenly shy, ducking my head and pretending that I didn’t know exactly what he meant. I’d been doing a lot of that.

“Well I think we should leave them alone and let her make a friend,” I told him, twining our fingers together even more.

He licked his lips, and I noticed his fangs were still blunted. He’d kept them that way after Gabbi had begged him to play “bite monster” with her. In the game, they would have to bite each other and leave the biggest mark they could.

The Goddess Mother only knew where she’d come up with the game, but he’d been terrified to hurt her with his teeth, and she’d pounced on him, prying his lips apart and poking his teeth to prove that he could bite if he tried.

That night, he’d gone into the bathroom with a metal file and then come back out with blunted teeth.

Only then had he allowed the “bite monster” game to continue.

Since the file now stayed on a shelf that Gabbi couldn’t reach in the bathroom, I was certain he was using it daily. It was so far removed from what David would have done, that I didn’t know how to feel. Then again, if David had had even a fraction of Enka’s strength, I wouldn’t still be alive.

I swallowed hard, running my fingers over his now, in a small grateful gesture for all the sweet things he did that were unconscious for him. He knew how to take care of my daughter and I without being told.

Friends touch. I can touch him and it’s okay, right?

I nibbled on my lower lip before glancing up at him from under my lashes. His reaction was exactly what I needed in that moment. His lips were parted as he stared down at where I was tracing patterns over his skin. His pupils were blown, the black taking over most of his eyes.

“Okay,” he whispered, his voice deep and growly. “I will.”

I’d almost forgotten what we were talking about.

Jael and Gabbi. Right.

“You’ll let her be friends with him?” I asked, my own voice husky in a way it had never been. My awareness of him—of us being alone—was pinging in the back of my mind.

“Okay,” he repeated, and I had to hide my smile.

He’d been arguing about this for a week, but suddenly, he’d changed his mind. Suddenly, with a simple, tiny touch, he was amenable to being reasonable. I smothered a laugh against my fingers as I pretended to yawn.

“Tired?” he asked, his brow furrowed, and I shook my head. “Are you sure? You’ll finally be able to get an undisturbed nap in.”

Maybe I want to be disturbed... by you.

I ignored his blatant attempt at changing the subject after his little faux pas.

The last thing I wanted was to lose out on our first real interaction with each other when we were alone.

“No, I’m good right here,” I told him, and I couldn’t stop the small flirty tilt of my head, my loose hair falling over my forehead and over my shoulder, hiding a part of my face.

I pretended I was stretching, my toes reaching out and nudging against his calf and I

saw his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed. I tried to push aside the deep, sweet, feminine knowledge inside of me that was crowing with satisfaction over his reaction to the simplest touches, but I was failing.

Life had been so much simpler and easier when I'd sworn off males and had never met Enka, but I couldn't say that I regretted a single moment with him. Nibbling on my lower lip, I watched him focus there, licking his own lips as if he couldn't stop himself.

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Tasia

“ S o what am I to you?” I asked him in a low voice, tucking my toes against his warm, hard calves.

I saw the argument he was having with himself in his gaze.

Long moments passed where he stared down at where I was touching him, not moving.

I mentally pumped a fist in the air when he released a deep sigh of surrender and met my gaze again .

“My mate,” he murmured, “but I think you already knew that.”

I shrugged, tucking my other foot against him. “Kind of.”

His smile was sheepish. “I didn’t do a very good job hiding it.”

“Neither did I, I suppose,” I looked away and then back at him, in time to see his frown.

“What were you hiding?” he asked, his head canted in that adorable way that he had. One of the many adorable things that he did.

Ugh. Stop noticing everything about him. You can’t afford to fall harder.

I quirked an eyebrow at him, leaning my head against the top of the sofa. I watched with amusement as he did the same so that we were mirroring each other's positions. "You're mine, too," I admitted with a deep sigh, not seeing the use of pretending anymore. Not after he'd admitted his truth.

Enka's entire body went stiff. He was frozen, his lips parted and his eyes huge in his face as he stared at me. I wanted to prod his mouth closed, but I didn't think I could touch his face without wanting to do more.

"Witches have mates?" he asked, searching my expression with hope shining in his eyes.

Confused, I raised my eyebrows. "Obviously. Didn't you know that after Zara and Rudgar?"

He shook his head and I had to cover my mouth to smother another laugh. This was too serious to joke over, but his dumbstruck expression was hilarious.

"Well, we do. Have mates. I don't think it's the same as orc mates," I added with a shrug. "It's more magickal. Mystical. It's a bond that grows over time until you're completely tied to the other being."

"Tied," he murmured in a low, awed voice.

"Yes," I whispered, ducking my head and feeling vulnerable. "And it's something I thought I had with David." I felt him stiffen against me at the name, but I didn't stop. "In fact, I'd hoped never to meet my mate after him."

I peeked up at him, expecting fury to light his face, but as usual, when it came to this male, I was happy to be wrong. Instead, understanding filled his expression and he reached out a huge hand to mine.

I pondered what I should do for a long moment before giving in to what my instincts were screaming at me. I took his hand, feeling whole and settled while touching him. Still, I needed to set the facts straight.

“And I don’t think I want a mate, still,” I whispered, expecting any kind of reaction at all, but I didn’t get one.

This amazing, patient male sat there and looked at me, waiting for what else I had to say.

“I really enjoy spending time with you and Gabbi loves you,” I explained. “I was hoping we could stay friends.”

I studied him, searching for any flaws or cracks in his facade, but I didn’t see anything. Just a slow, sweet smile.

“Alright.”

Narrowing my eyes, I waited for another moment, but he just stayed where he was, waiting for me.

“Alright?” I asked, suspicious. “That’s it?”

You tell me I’m your mate, I tell you you’re mine and then it’s okay that we stay just friends .

” I clarified. “Because I can’t be anything else .

This isn’t a friends with benefits situation and I won’t have Gabbi getting any false hope. We’re platonic friends only.”

He nodded, running his thumb along the back of my hand. “Platonic friends with the mate I never thought I’d find?” His grin was triumphant. “I think I hit the jackpot.”

I blinked at him, before huffing out a little laugh. “No, I’m pretty sure I did.”

We smiled at each other like complete idiots for what could have been minutes or even hours. When I finally came back to myself, I turned away from him with a blush. “Well if that’s okay with you.”

“Friends,” he confirmed with a nod, his thumb still circling my skin. “ And if you’re okay with it, I was hoping we could work toward becoming best friends .”

I chuckled, tucking my hair behind my ear with my free hand. “Well there’s a position open, then, that you can definitely apply for.”

“If I applied, would you pick me?” he asked, and deep down, I knew he was talking about something else. I couldn’t tell from the way he was looking at me, but I knew it inside.

“I would,” I murmured, ducking my head and looking away from him. I wasn’t going to lie to him. Especially not now. My scariest and biggest truth was out in the open and laying bare in front of us both. Nothing I could say would even hold a candle to it.

“Since we’re alone,” he said in a low deep voice that had my pussy clenching and unthinkable things running through my mind, “I think we should talk about what happened with... you know.”

Every single happy, sexy thought drained from my brain in a flash. It was impossible to think about those things and David at the same time. I kept my gaze averted, even as I told myself that I’d known these questions would come. And I owed this male all

of the answers.

“I was young,” I started, taking a deep, shuddering breath before I continued. I glanced down as he stilled the motion of his thumb on the back of my hand.

“How young?” he asked, struggling to hide the fury in his voice, but I heard it. For some odd reason, it made me smile.

“Not that young, don’t worry,” I whispered, awed by his ability to be angry on my behalf when I had been so, so stupid. “I was old enough to know better.”

“How old?” he asked, tipping my chin back so I was looking into his eyes.

I swallowed hard, still angry with myself all these years later. “Nineteen. ”

He scoffed, shaking his head and rolling his eyes. “You were barely old enough to be considered an adult,” he told me. Those big, gentle fingers released my chin as he cupped my cheek instead. I leaned into the movement, closing my eyes against the protective rage in his own.

“I still should have known better. I should have seen what he was doing. How he was separating me from my friends. From the only family I’d ever had,” I gasped the words past my tightening throat, praying that I wouldn’t begin sobbing yet.

This was only the beginning. I hadn’t even told him the hard truths yet.

Instead of arguing, he stroked his thumbs over my cheek and the top of my hand at the same time. I kept my eyes closed, unable to meet his soft gaze as I continued.

“He wooed me the usual ways. Dates, acting like he loved me. Things like that.” I released a long breath before I continued.

“And then the abuse started.” It was still so hard to talk to him about it, even after I’d admitted it to him before.

The never-ending pool of shame was still there—and I doubted it would ever go away.

“And then I found out I was pregnant with Gabbi,” I whispered.

The speed of the memories was nauseating, but one stood out to me. The moment when I realized that Gabbi was more than just something keeping us together.

I felt a tear slip down my cheek at the memory. For the longest time, I’d regretted getting pregnant. For months, a small trickle of resentment had forced its way to the front of my mind while my baby had grown inside me.

But one night had made me see the truth. Had made me realize how much I wanted her. How much I loved her already.

“One night,” I said, barely hearing my own voice. “He’d come home from work and for some reason, he thought I’d had someone over.”

I shook my head, still unable to fathom why he’d had his breakdown that night. Why he’d decided that it was time for the real monster to come out. The memory played like a movie in my head as I relayed it.

“He was always the jealous type, but that night was different. It was as if... he’d gone over the edge.” The look in his eyes as he’d faced me, spewing poisonous words at me was unforgettable. I’d never seen him look like that, and the fear that had overtaken me had chilled me to my bones.

“I was two weeks away from my due date,” I scoffed, rolling my eyes. “And

somehow he got it into his head that I'd had the energy to sneak around with someone behind his back."

You're nothing but a whore. Is that baby even mine?

"Then he started hitting me," I whispered, pressing my thumbnail into the flesh of my thigh so I could center myself with the pain.

"It's not like he'd ever stopped. My pregnancy wasn't anything special to him.

I'm still shocked I didn't lose her." I pressed my hand to my lower stomach, remembering how many times I'd done that, not quite sure whether I wanted her to still be there or not.

A hot flush of shame overtook me as I wondered what I would have done without my sweet girl. The most precious thing in the world to me. I took a steadying breath, not ready to admit that to anyone.

"When he aimed for my stomach, I ran from him. But we were upstairs and he was so fast," I whispered. "When I got to the stairs, he shoved me. I lost my balance and I was about to fall when he grabbed me by the hair."

The painful ache in my scalp had been nothing compared to the terror that had flooded me.

The knowledge that I would prefer to die than to lose my baby.

In that moment, I knew I loved her. I loved the little heartbeat that I heard on the ultrasounds.

I adored every little move she made inside of me.

And it would have all ended if he'd let my hair go.

“That’s what stopped me from falling. His hold on my hair.” My voice cracked as I relayed the story. “And he held me there,” I gasped, tears flowing more freely. “Letting me know that the power to kill Gabbi and I was in his hands.”

I was in Enka’s arms in a moment. He pressed me to his chest, snuggling me close.

“I’m so sorry,” he murmured into my hair, and I felt the wetness against my scalp that told me that he was crying with me.

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I didn't respond to him, just holding him close, comforting myself while I comforted him. I hadn't been held like this— allowed myself to be safe and vulnerable in someone's arms—since well before I'd met David.

“That's when I started my plan,” I told him, tucking my face against his throat, surrounding myself with his heat and scent.

Filling myself up with safety in the face of a memory that made me feel everything else.

“He pulled me up by my hair and took me to the bedroom. He locked me in and I didn't know how to escape but I knew I had to.

I had to get away or he'd kill me and my baby.

I had to go home, but he knew where I would go, and I wasn't powerful enough to do the protection spell on my own. ”

“A protection spell?” he asked, stroking my hair with gentle fingers.

I nodded, sniffing against his skin. I should be mortified that I was getting my tears and snot all over this male, but I couldn't find it in myself to feel that way. Not with Enka.

“It's a specific one. One that makes us untraceable,” I murmured, wrapping my arms around his neck, twining my fingers into his thick, dark hair. I didn't even know what I was doing. I just needed to be closer to him. “So that he'd never be able to find us.”

“Were you able to do that?” he asked, and I gave a slow nod.

“But not then. It was...after Gabbi was born. Before that, it was hard to sneak out of the house. And he had so many cameras everywhere. It was like a prison,” I said, moving even closer until I found myself on his lap.

He was stiff for a long moment, before he stroked a hand down my back and he relaxed under me. I released a relieved breath, melting against him. I continued talking, pretending that this was completely normal for friends . That I wasn’t clinging to him like a long lost lover.

Friends hug, I lied to myself.

“But then it got worse,” I explained and he released a shuddering breath.

“Worse?” he breathed, and he shuddered under me. “Dear Gods, he was a complete monster already.”

I couldn’t stop the little laugh that left me. I nuzzled against him, and ignored the way he twisted his hips away from me.

We’re friends. Just friends.

“Yeah, well, once Gabbi was born, he was much worse. He kept telling me that I was paying too much attention to her.” I couldn’t keep the disbelief from my voice. “Even though she was a newborn. He said I should be paying more attention to him because he’d given her to me .”

The scoff that left him was loud and obnoxious and it made me fall in love with him a little. I stopped that train of thought right away, shoving it to the back of my mind, deciding that I was going to lay my entire story out for him.

“I took her to the pediatrician without him one day when she had a fever,” I sighed, my fingers clenching in his shirt again at the memory.

“She was so tiny and so hot . I didn’t have any support.

No one I could call. He’d broken my old phone so I didn’t have any way to contact my coven.

They were all already in hiding so there was no way to reach them except for their personal numbers and like a complete idiot, I’d never memorized any of them.

And he monitored everything I did, so I couldn’t go out looking for them. ”

I had to stop, my anger bubbling up until I was talking so fast I was unintelligible. I needed to slow down. I had to explain everything to him so he knew what we were dealing with .

“He’s obsessed with me, I think. I don’t know what it is about me, but if I could change it, I would.”

That was when he pulled me away, glaring down at me.

“There is nothing about you that needs to be changed. His issues are his ,” he growled, and I marveled at how this big orc with fury in his eyes didn’t make a single ounce of fear bubble inside of me.

I nodded, cupping his cheek, and he softened right away.

“Sorry,” he whispered and I shook my head.

“No, I like it,” I told him. “You getting worked up at what a dick he was,” I added,

with a small smirk. “It’s fun to watch.”

His watery laugh was disbelieving and he nuzzled his nose against mine. “Well, get used to it. I hate him.”

“Me too,” I giggled, so close to him that if I leaned forward an inch I could kiss him.

And fuck , did I want to kiss him. I looked away, burying my face against his chest again, away from temptation.

“But I can’t figure out why. I’m not special in any way.

So the lengths that he went to watch me was insane.

All the cameras, and I assume everything had tracking devises, because he always found me. ”

He tugged me closer, as if he needed to feel me as much as I needed to feel him. Which was impossible.

“That day, I took her to the doctor and when I got home, he was back from work and he was waiting. The Goddess Mother had to have blessed us because the doctor gave her some sample medicine she had while we were there,” I explained, shaking my head.

“So she was already doing a little better. She was sleeping, but when I got home, he didn’t believe me.

He thought I’d gone to meet someone or I’d tried to leave or something. ”

I released a heavy breath. “I wish that was it. Because he took her from me that

night.”

“What?” he asked, his fingers tightening on my back, squeezing me tighter than he probably meant to.

“He took her?” His voice was dark and furious, shaking with the kind of emotion that only someone who loved a child could ever understand.

He wanted to protect her while her biological father had done the opposite.

“Yeah,” I admitted, sniffing into his shirt again. “I’d thought I was scared before. Every time he hurt me, I thought I’d been as scared as I possibly could be, but I was wrong. I didn’t know what fear was until he locked her in a bedroom on her own while she was sick.”

“Alone?” he growled, and every inch of his body was tense.

“Alone and sick,” I gasped, sobbing now.

“She was so little, and I could hear her screaming on the other side. I begged him, but he wouldn’t let me go to her.

He said—” I had to cut myself off as I sobbed harder.

“He said that it would teach me that she wasn’t as important as he was.

That if I thought I could leave him for anyone else, he was going to take her and never let me see her. ”

Enka

Rage was a living thing inside me.

I was flooded by the need to find that pathetic male and string him up by his balls. He'd left Gruk-ir on her own when she was sick and too little to fend for herself. I couldn't imagine what kind of monster could do that to her and then rub it into Tasia's face .

Especially when she would have been crazed with worry. Even now, my extremities tingled with a panicked need to comfort her. I took a deep breath, holding her shaking form against me as she sobbed and I vowed to avenge every tear that she wept.

My useless murmurs and the stroke of my hand on her back couldn't take away her pain and I knew it. I'd have to fix that, but until I had the male in front of me, all I could do was focus on my female and what she needed. And that was the priority anyway.

I'd get him eventually. This moment etched his eventual demise into my brain, but not until my mate felt safe enough for me to go hunting.

"I couldn't get to her," she whispered, reliving the trauma in her head.

"And I begged him. I was on my knees. I did... whatever he told me to." She ducked her face into my chest again and I ground my fangs together so hard I wondered if I was going to crack them.

“But he still didn’t unlock the door. He went to sleep, but I stayed at the door, listening to her cry. ”

I pressed kisses to the top of her head, listening to the recrimination in her voice. She was angry at herself, and I wished she could see that there was nothing she could do. That he was a monster who had hurt them both and it wasn’t her fault.

“I tried to pick the lock, but I didn’t know how and I didn’t have any way to look it up,” she sniffled. “He password protected the computer and only let me use it when he was standing behind me.”

I frowned, my brow dropping low as I realized just how much control he’d held over my female. Both the big and little ways he’d trapped her in his abusive cycle.

What a fucking asshole.

“But the next day when he let me have her,” she whispered, swiping her fingers under her eyes, “I pretended like I was grateful to him and only took care of her long enough to make sure she was safe, clean and fed before I...” She went still, her breathing shallow and harried. “Distracted hi m.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, knowing what she was saying. She’d done things that she wished she hadn’t to keep him focused on her and not her baby. She was the best female I knew. The most amazing mother. I couldn’t imagine the sacrifices she’d made for Gabbi.

And it had all worked out. That little female was the happiest youngling I knew. Not that I knew that many younglings, but she was well-adjusted, loved and brave. Everything that Tasia had fought for.

“When he was sleeping, I packed a bag for us and ran. I stole money from his wallet

and took a bus out of there,” she murmured, her lips moving against my skin again, and I begged my cock not to react the way it had before.

She needs you to be a friend for her right now. Focus.

“I knew the address for my coven,” she whispered, nuzzling my skin for comfort and I gritted my fangs. “So that’s where I went. They were so happy to see me, even after I’d abandoned them for him.” Her tiny sniffle told me everything I needed to know about her reunion.

They’d been there for her and wouldn’t have asked too many questions. They’d have taken her back into the fold and welcomed their newest, youngest member as well. I knew them well enough to know that much.

They’d done the same with Krusk, Savla and I. They didn’t need to know our history. Just that we’d treat them and others well. The judgement had been low and we’d been allowed to hold onto whatever secrets we had.

“Our High Priestess at the time—Zara’s mom—helped cast a protection spell on us. So he couldn’t find us even if he used magick to try.” She was smiling now, her voice thick with tears and I continued stroking my fingers down her soft back.

When she pulled away, she smiled as tears continued to leak down her face.

“I never got a chance to tell her how much I appreciated that. Appreciated her. She hid how sick she was from us. And near the end, we were too busy trying to find a way to save her...” she trailed off, squeezing her eyes shut as tears poured again.

“I probably look like a lunatic,” she wailed, throwing herself into my arms, and I savored the feel of her against me again. “I just keep crying and telling you sad things.”

“You’re telling me your story,” I murmured against her hair, keeping my eyes closed so I could cherish her scent. “And I’m so grateful you trust me with it.”

She peeked up at me with red eyes and a moist face. “Really?” she whispered, her gorgeous, splotchy face so filled with hope that I just nodded, pressing a gentle kiss to her lips.

She pulled away, her eyes widening with shock and I froze, unable to believe that I’d just done that. My mate had cut herself open, baring herself to me. Her most vulnerable parts, and instead of making her feel safe, I’d mauled her the first opportunity I got.

“I’m sorry—” I started, but she cut me off by pressing her lips to mine. I went still, not sure what to do, but she didn’t need to be told. She deepened the kiss and I could feel my eyes rolling back in my head.

This is the best moment of my entire life.

I returned the kiss, cupping her soft, wet cheek, scraping my blunted claw against her jaw.

I’m going to savor this moment for the rest of my days.

My female was kissing me. She’d made herself vulnerable to me, seeking comfort in my arms, and then kissed me. This was everything that I could ever hope for. I wasn’t going to wish for more. This might just be a moment of temporary insanity after all, but I was taking what I could get.

The low beep at the door followed by the scrape of the handle being turned was the only warning we had. We pulled away from each other, blinking blearily into each other’s shocked faces, when Gabbi ran inside with Darak behind her, holding a large

bag in his hands.

He eyed us with a raised eyebrow but didn't say anything. Gabbi on the other hand, ran straight for us and launched herself into Tasia's lap. I was holding both my females in my arms and it was everything perfect in this world. Even if I'd been interrupted during the best kiss of my life.

Tasia

I kissed him.

Internally, I was screaming and all the alarms were going off inside my brain. Externally, I smiled at my daughter and then Darak who followed behind her with a bag that was laden with what had to be goodies and toys.

At the same time, my ovaries were screaming at me that I needed to put Gabbi down for a nap and tackle the male that I was sitting on. The male who made my body burn like it never had before. The male who soothed me, comforted me and protected me.

Swallowing hard, I struggled to keep my focus on Gabbi's words as she told me about her playdate. But it was so much harder than it usually was.

"And Jael gave me gifts," she added, making me narrow my gaze. "Because it's his birthday this week but he won't be here."

The last was said with a little pout. And I quirked an eyebrow.

"He gave you gifts for his birthday?"

"Yep," she said with a firm nod. "And he gave me his phone number so I could call him," she added, blinking up at me with pleading eyes. "I can call him and go see him, right, Mommy?"

How can I say no to that?

“Okay,” I told her, tugging at one of her braids. We were going to have to tighten them soon, especially if she kept attending these play events with the other children. “But you should give these presents back and then get him one for his birthday first.”

“He said I could have them,” she told me, mutinously, tipping her chin up. “Ask Darak,” she said pointing an imperious finger at where the male was standing with his eyebrows raised.

He gave a slow nod. “His parents brought them for her,” he said in his low, deep voice. “And gave me their number for you to call. They’re excited that he has a new friend.”

I frowned, wondering in what world that gregarious little male wouldn’t have a million friends.

“I’ll give them a call,” I told my daughter, putting her down and standing.

Enka did the same, standing with me and walking in the direction of his phone.

“Thank you so much, Darak. I can’t imagine these play dates are fun for you.

” The male shrugged and I grinned at him

Enka handed his phone to me and I murmured my thanks, moving toward the bedroom while Darak sat on the floor with Gabbi to lay out her new presents.

I smiled at the picture they made. One giant, serious male whose glower should scare anyone off and a tiny little girl wearing bright pink and giggling as she clapped her hands in glee. These orcs were quite a surprise.

I didn’t expect Enka to enter the bedroom with me, but he stood there, his arms

crossed with expectation as he looked from the phone to me. “Did you... want to talk?” I asked, hoping—praying—that he didn’t.

He shook his head, pointing at the phone. “No, we’re going to call that little centaur’s parents, right?” I smothered my smile at the annoyance in his voice when he said that little centaur. He didn’t like the idea of Gabbi staying in contact with him and that was certain.

It wasn’t until the amusement faded that I realized what he was doing. He was here . He wanted to make the call to her parents with me . It was something I wouldn’t have to do alone. He wanted to be a part of her life. A strong male figure... a father to her.

I had to look away from him before I began sobbing again. I’d done enough of that for the day, I was certain. I didn’t know that my tear ducts could handle much more.

“Okay,” I whispered, tucking my hair behind my ear. “Thank you.”

“For what?” he asked, confused, and that hit me like a sledgehammer to the chest. He didn’t even know why I would be grateful, because it was second nature for this male to take care of us.

Don’t fall for him, don’t fall for him, don’t fall for him.

I kept chanting the words as I dialed, hoping my heart would listen.

“Hello?” a sweet voice answered from the other line.

“Hi, this is Tasia, Gabbi’s mom?” I said into the phone, rubbing my hand against my heart that gave a hard pang as Enka leaned in, his eyebrows furrowed.

“And Enka, her father,” he said without a hitch. Without hesitation.

Do not swoon. Don't you do it.

"We're calling because we got your number from Darak," I continued.

"Yes, of course," the female responded. "Thanks so much for reaching out. I'm Leran.

Jael's so excited to finally have a good friend like Gabbi.

I'm really hoping they can stay in touch when we move back into our home.

We were staying here because of some renovations, and I'm so glad we did.

"She sighed with what had to be parental relief and I smiled, knowing exactly how she felt.

"He's usually so shy. He doesn't talk to anyone, but with your Gabbi, it's like he's finally opening up.

"I heard the tears in her voice, and had to wave at my own face.

That's exactly how I'd felt when Gabbi had announced that she had a friend.

She didn't get to interact with children much, and it had been so amazing that she'd bonded so quickly.

"I'm so happy to hear that. He's Gabbi's first real friend too," I told her and Enka scowled. I wagged my finger at him in admonishment for not being more accepting of Jael and he glowered.

"I'm sorry if we sent too many gifts," Leran said, a sheepish tone in her voice. "But

when he said that last week's party was for his new best friend's birthday, so close to his, I just added some presents for her along with the ones I was getting for him."

"Oh," I gave a nervous laugh that had Enka stiffening. I sent a warning glare his way before continuing. "Thanks so much, but it's just too many—"

The heavy sigh on the other end made me pause. "Oh, my husband said it was," she sighed. "But I was just so... excited. I'm so sorry if it made you or Gabbi uncomfortable."

"Not Gabbi," I laughed. "Trust me, she loves the presents. I just think it might be a little much. "

"I'm sure it is," Leran agreed. "I can return them if they make you very uncomfortable, but I bought them with her in mind. Jael talked about her so much I feel as though I know her already. I'm sorry if I overstepped."

The sweet female on the other end hadn't meant any harm and I looked up to Enka, but he was searching my face as if waiting for my reaction on the matter.

The least overbearing male on the planet.

I smiled, and his relieved expression told me that he hadn't wanted to take the toys from her either. "In that case, thanks so much, Leran. But you have to tell us what Jael likes so we can get him some presents, too."

The happy cry from the other end told me that she was over the moon. "Will you be willing to come to his party?" she asked, a pleading note to her voice. "We're going to be having it this weekend and it just wouldn't be the same without Gabbi."

I looked up at Enka, and he stepped closer, his big hand cupping mine under the

phone. “The thing is,” he said in a low, firm voice. “We have a bit of a security situation going on, and we can’t leave the hotel.”

“Oh,” Leran gasped, and I cringed, wondering if she was going to cancel the invitation. We might be more trouble than she was willing to handle. “Of course, we can host it at the hotel,” she rushed to say. “And I’m so sorry to hear that. My husband’s a lawyer if you need any kind of help.”

I stared down at the phone, surprise and gratitude filling me. After David, I’d begun expecting the worst from anyone outside of my family, but I was beginning to see that my expectations might be skewed.

“Thank you, but we don’t need one quite yet,” Enka said, reaching out to take hold of my hand, spreading comfort with the simple touch. “If we do, you’ll be the first one we’ll call.”

“Good,” Leran said. “And I’d love to meet you, too. If you don’t mind attending a children’s party. ”

“Of course. We want to meet you,” I told Leran, adoring the use of the word we . I was part of a we and it was amazing.

“I’ll text you the details,” she said.

After we’d hung up, I turned to look up at Enka, pressing my hands to his chest as I tiptoed to press a small kiss to his lips that somehow still sent me up in flames.

“Thank you,” I whispered against his lips and with a low moan, he clasped the back of my head and pressed his lips harder against mine.

The kiss careened out of control in a few seconds. His lips moved against mine and I

found myself falling into it. I parted my lips and he didn't hesitate, sweeping his tongue inside. The taste of him, the smell of him and feel of him made my pussy throb.

I was tugging him backward before I even knew what I was doing. When my thighs hit the back of the bed, my eyes flew open and I froze. His eyes opened as well, his lips still pressed to mine for a long moment before he pulled away to search my expression.

He frowned, shaking his head. "I don't want to pressure you," he whispered. "You can tell me to stop any time."

I licked my lips, and his dilated gaze darted there before they went back to mine. He was so worried, so bothered by the fact that he could have pushed too far, that I didn't stop the moan from leaving my throat before I grabbed him by the tusks and pulled him back to me.

The enthusiasm of the move made me fall backward, and my hold on his tusks pulled him with me. He braced himself as he fell, not pressing against me the way I wanted him to. I kissed him again, and he groaned, the low sound sending a flurry of butterflies in my stomach.

"Gruk-ir," he gasped, turning his face from mine, and I pulled away to look at him.

"What?" I asked, my brain filled with lust-filled thoughts of what he would look like naked. Glorious, I was certain.

"Gruk-ir is outside. She's expecting us back," he whispered, pressing drugging, sensual kisses along my shoulder. My eyes were rolling back in my head, but I struggled to stay present.

“Right, we should stop,” I murmured, but I ran my feet over his heavy, thick calves, pinning him against me. “We should definitely stop.”

His low chuckle made me look at him. “I want to keep going,” he whispered. “But she’ll come looking for us soon. How about...” he trailed off, studying me the way that he always did, gauging my reaction. “How about we continue this later tonight? When she’s asleep?”

I nibbled on my lower lip, contemplating the idea.

I couldn’t lie and say I didn’t want to continue.

Not after mauling him multiple times. And he would never hurt me.

He’d had so many chances. So many opportunities, and instead, all he’d done was protect my daughter and I.

I took a deep, calming breath before giving him a slow nod.

“Okay,” I murmured, licking my lips.

Hope flared in his eyes and then they darted to my lips, lust burning there with such intensity, the heat almost scalded me. “Later,” he whispered as if he was promising it to himself, before he stood, holding out that huge palm for mine.

I took it without hesitation.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:09 am

Enka

“ I ’m going to see him,” our Gruk-ir announced with a dramatic huff as she grabbed two toys and marched to the door. I looked from her tiny form marching away to Tasia, and I quirked an eyebrow.

She shook her head at me and pointed toward me, mouthing, Don’t fall for it .

I gestured wildly toward where our daughter had dropped her toys and was climbing onto them to reach the handle for the door. She shook her head, still adamant, her arms folded under her luscious breasts and a stern look on her face.

Gods, this female is too sexy.

I had to mentally slap myself from thinking of everything we’d done on her bed earlier. The image of her lying there under me would haunt me until I could do it again.

Tonight. She said we could try again tonight.

I had no idea what she would let me do to her, but the fantasies crossing my mind were filthier than usual.

I had to admit that when it came to her, my mind could get creative.

And now that she’d agreed to more? It was an artist, putting her in poses and situations that would make even the most experienced being blush.

Reining myself in was difficult, but I stepped behind the sofa to hide the way that my cock was now tenting my pants.

Embarrassment rushed through me, but I pretended that everything was normal when Darak looked between us, his gaze narrowed.

He was standing with his arms folded near the door, not assisting our daughter in her bid to escape.

When she floundered for another long moment with the handle, she turned, her face scrunched with exertion as she pointed toward it. “Abu, open it.” The demand was clear in her sweet voice and I caught myself as I automatically moved toward her. I froze as Tasia glared at me, looking away in shame.

Damn it, I’m not good at this parenting thing.

“No, Gruk-ir,” I told her instead. “You can’t go today. We can visit him tomorrow.”

“Today,” she demanded, and I could see that she was working herself up to a full-out tantrum. I’d never seen one before, I’d only ever read about them. And I definitely hadn’t expected one from my tiny Gruk-ir .

Just as she opened her little, pouted mouth to scream, Tasia said in a stern voice, “If you scream, you will go directly to time out and you will not be going to Jael’s birthday party this weekend.”

Gruk-ir’s lower lip immediately began trembling and my knees shook with the need to go to her. When tears overflowed her cheeks, I watched as Tasia moved toward her before looking back at me and tilting her head toward me.

I followed her lead, going to our daughter. She kneeled next to her and I did the same.

“I know you want to see him and be friends with him, my sweet girl,” Tasia whispered, wrapping our little one up in her arms. “But his family is busy right now. They’re moving back to his house. We promise you that you’ll be able to see him this weekend for his party, okay?”

Gruk-ir’s eyes came up to meet mine, as if seeking reassurance, and I nodded. “We promise,” I whispered, putting my big hand over her mother’s on her back.

She sniffled hard, wracking sobs leaving her chest and I gathered them both to me, wishing I could take her hurt away. “H-he’s my b-best friend,” she wailed. “It’s n-not fair! I already c-can’t see the c-coven.” She was barely coherent, but I was able to make out her high-pitched words.

“I know, Gabbi-girl,” Tasia whispered, pressing kisses to the top of her head. “It’s not fair. But I promise I’ll make it better as soon as possible. Then you’ll be able to see your friend any time you want. He lives in Grebath. Did you know that?”

Gabbi’s sobs slowed at her words, and she pulled away, swiping her forearm over her nose before calmly wiping it on my arm. I’d never been more honored in my life. “R-really?” she asked, her sweet little voice back to normal.

Tasia nodded, swiping her fingers under our daughter’s eyes with gentle wipes. “We’ll find out his address and once we’re back home, we’re going to make weekly playdates, okay? This will only be for a little while longer.”

Gabbi searched her face, suspicion bright in her eyes, but what she saw there cleared it right up. With a cheer, she threw herself at her mother and then at me, squeezing us tight before running toward Darak and looking up at him.

She held her arms out to him, and he blinked at her for a long moment.

Our Gruk-ir didn't move, staying very still until he finally released a sigh of defeat and lowered himself to crouch next to her.

She tackled him with a hug then, not pushing him back even an inch.

His hard eyes softened for only a moment before he released her.

"Thank you for taking me to play," she told him, before moving to the door, grabbing her two toys and heading toward her play corner. And just like that, her pique was over and done with.

Meanwhile, I was trying to deal with the whiplash. I turned to peer at Tasia who looked exhausted as well.

"Parenting is hard," she said with a grin, running her hand up and down my arm. I wanted to melt there, but since Darak was looking between us, I didn't.

"Thanks for taking care of her," I told him and Tasia nodded with enthusiasm, agreeing wholeheartedly.

"She's such a handful and I know you have so many other things to do—" she started, but he shook his head, cutting her off.

"It's fine. She's a good youngling. I'm more than willing to help," he told us, looking between us. "You have your hands full here, so I'll head out. Let me know if you need me."

He said the last words to me and I nodded, knowing that he was giving me the courtesy of communicating with me instead of Tasia since she was still unclaimed, but he'd probably already noticed the many ways I'd surreptitiously marked her with my scent—by touching her as much as I could get away with and running my tusk

along her skin when we hugged.

“Thanks, Darak,” Tasia and I said at once and he raised his hand in acknowledgement before turning and exiting.

I turned to look at where Gruk-ir was playing on the floor and then I looked at Tasia, still befuddled. “Will she be okay?” I asked in a low voice so only she could hear.

“Oh yeah. She has meltdowns at least twice a day. She was distracted because we came to a new place, but I was just waiting for one to happen,” she explained, moving closer and biting her lip as she smiled up at me. “Welcome to parenthood.”

I huffed out a small laugh, taking my time and reaching out for her hand. She met me halfway, her fingers twining with mine—so much smaller than mine, but fitting so perfectly. “I think I’m going to love it,” I whispered. “I have a lot to learn, but you’ll be patient with me?”

She ducked her head, a shy smile spreading across her face, and she nodded. “Yeah. I can be patient. And so can Gabbi. She’s... needed a father. And I know it’s a lot to ask—”

“It’s not,” I murmured, reaching out to run my thumb over her chin until she tilted her hair back to look up at me.

“It’s nothing. From the moment she first called me Abu, she’s been a daughter to me.

I just don’t want to cross any boundaries with you that you don’t want me to. Tell me you’ll let me know.”

Her smile turned into a mischievous grin. “Are you bossing me around right now? After talking about boundaries?”

My eyebrows went up as I shrugged. “I’m a little more bossy with you than you’re probably used to,” I sighed, scrubbing my free palm over the back of my neck. “Sorry.”

She bit her lower lip, drawing my gaze there.

“I like it,” she whispered, moving closer, her luscious breasts pressing against my chest. But before I could lean down to kiss her the way I wanted to, she turned from me, already meeting the little rocket that was our daughter, lifting her into her arms.

“Are you guys kissing?” Gruk-ir asked, looking between us, her face expressionless.

Tasia gave me a worried look, that cute furrow between her eyebrows and I felt panic rising inside of me.

What the hell were we supposed to say to our daughter?

“I was thinking about it,” Tasia explained. “But I wasn’t sure that was okay. Can I kiss Abu?”

That word out of her mouth started an ache in my chest—one that was so sweet, I didn’t know if I could call it pain—and an inconvenient rush of blood to my cock. I prayed to every God that I could that Gruk-ir didn’t look down.

“Yes,” our daughter said with a firm nod. “Because friends can kiss.”

It was my turn for my brow to furrow. “Wait, what the hell does that mean? Have you kissed that little centaur?” I demanded and she giggled hard, launching herself from her mother’s arms into mine.

I caught her, holding her up and giving her a stern look, but it was as if she knew

mine was meaningless.

“Yes,” she announced. “When he told me it was his birthday. I kissed him.” She nodded, and then smacked a kiss on my cheek. “Like that.”

Relief swept through me, and the breath that I’d been holding left my body in a slow hiss. “Okay, that’s fine. I still don’t like it,” I told her with what I hoped was the expression of a firm disciplinarian—although based on the way she was laughing, I doubted it. “But cheeks are fine. No lips .”

“Lips means more than friends, right?” she asked in a sweet voice.

I nodded, wondering where she was going with that. “You haven’t kissed anyone on the lips have you?” I asked, worry tearing through me. She was too little. Too innocent. And I couldn’t handle the thought .

“Mommy,” she said with a nod. The relief almost took me to my knees again.

“Good,” I nodded. “It’s okay to kiss Mommy, but no one else , okay?” I questioned her, hoping she would agree.

“Okay,” she answered with a flippant shrug that did nothing to cure me of the stress that I was certain was going to plague me for the rest of my days.

“Not until you get married,” I told her.

“I’m going to marry Jael,” she said with another shrug.

I looked at Tasia with what I was certain was pure horror on my face and saw her doubled over with laughter. Betrayal was quick and true.

“You’re not marrying that little centaur,” I told her, ready to start the lecture I had planned on why all males couldn’t be trusted except me and her uncles.

“Is kissing on the lips okay if you’re going to get married?” she asked me, her curiosity souring some of my plan.

“Yes, but you can’t get married until you’re older,” I told her, starting up again, taking a deep breath.

“Then you and Mommy can kiss on the lips, since you’re going to get married,” she told me with a firm nod and it deflated me, the breath leaving me in a hiss that ended in a wheeze.

A punch to the gut would have been less shocking.

I looked over at Tasia who wasn’t laughing anymore.

Her jaw was dropped and her eyes were huge in her face as it was now her turn to stare—with obvious horror—at our daughter.

Enka

I covered my mouth so my grin wouldn't show as Tasia tried to change the subject so quickly that it was the most obvious thing I'd ever seen. It was very cute and I loved seeing her a little flustered. It made me want to kiss her until she calmed down.

After all, our daughter knows we're going to get married.

I was almost certain my hand couldn't cover the shit-eating grin I was wearing now. It had to have covered my entire face. I received one hard glare from Tasia letting me know that I was right, before she hustled over to the kitchen to start dinner.

I walked over with her at once, well used to the routine we'd started since we'd moved into the suite.

I set the table with Gabbi's help and then settled her in front of the television with her favorite show while I moved over to put on the giant apron I'd bought.

It matched Tasia's, and we stood side by side while I hesitated to ask her what she needed.

I shouldn't have bothered though. She turned to peek at her daughter before turning on me with a glare and a hissed,

"I can't believe you were smiling like that where she could see." She gestured wildly toward our daughter and I beamed down at her with a shrug.

“What did you want me to say?” I asked, feigning innocence. “She has a wild imagination.”

That I plan to make real as soon as I can.

“I want you to say no ,” she scoffed, rolling her eyes and I took a moment to study her gorgeous profile, realization hitting me hard.

She was the furthest thing from scared. In this moment, she felt safe enough to pick a fight with me. With me . A male who was three times her size. Pride sizzled strong and hot inside me, swelling my chest until I threatened to pop the seams of the apron.

I knew I had to be looking extremely smug, because when she turned to me, she narrowed her gaze, peeked another look at her daughter and then stepped on my foot. I didn’t feel it, but the fact that she was safe enough to do it—

Don’t swoon. Adult males do not swoon.

I pulled my hair into a top knot and then washed my hands, taking the knife from her where she was massacring the salad and began to chop it with calm strokes. I expected a kick to the shins, but she huffed, turning back to take the steak from the containers I’d had them brought in with.

“Are you mad at me?” I asked in a low voice, leaning down to take a whiff of her hair.

It was a long moment of us working in silence before she sighed, turning to me with pursed lips. “I should be.”

“But are you?” I needed to know, my mood turning sour. I didn’t want her to be upset

.

“No,” she sighed, and I put the knife down, turning to ensure that our daughter wasn’t looking before I tilted her chin up with my thumb, ducking so we were eye to eye.

“I don’t want to make you uncomfortable, I promise. I just... I like you,” I whispered, and it was the biggest understatement of my life. “We don’t have to do anything,” I told her, even though my cock would probably strangle me in my sleep.

She searched my face before relaxing, reaching up to cup my cheek, stroking her thumb over it. I closed my eyes, savoring the feel of her gentle touch.

“I want to,” she whispered, and then leaned forward to press a quick, chaste kiss to my lips.

“See?” Our daughter screeched from her seat. “Married!”

Explaining to Gabbi that we weren’t getting married so she couldn’t pick out a dress to be in the ceremony felt harder than it should be. I would, in fact, adore having our daughter in our wedding ceremony.

But since my mate wasn’t ready for that discussion yet, I tabled it, knowing that there was no way I wouldn’t bring it back up. I was just biding my time. It had been all well and good when she’d relegated me to the role of a friend . Even a best friend.

I understood the boundaries there. My hope had been dormant in my chest. But after she’d decided that we could be more . Even if just physically at first, the hope was now a burning flame, growing with each moment.

Dinner was fraught with demands for tulle and tiaras from our daughter—who had been watching some wedding show with one of her aunts and knew what an A-line was and why Tasia would look fabulous in it.

It was like watching tennis.

“Pink peonies,” Gabbi demanded, stuffing her plastic spork into her mouth, grimacing in retaliation that it had contained a piece of broccoli. She didn’t spit it out, though, and I considered it progress.

“We’re not getting married, sweetheart,” Tasia sighed, pressing a finger to the space between her eyes as if she was getting a headache.

“And earth tones are in ,” Gabbi announced. My eyebrows swept up.

“What are earth tones, Gruk-ir?” I asked, interrupting for the first time in a while. She shrugged and went back to chewing before speaking.

“Randy’s never wrong, Mommy,” she said with an aggrieved sigh.

I looked over at Tasia with an amused grin and she couldn’t help but smile back. Before long, we were laughing and Gabbi was looking between us with a grin.

Once dinner was done and Gabbi had had her dessert—one cookie that somehow became two after multiple rounds of begging—it was time to get her ready for bed. I marveled at the ease with which I’d fit into their lives .

While Tasia gave our daughter a bath, I cleared up the toys that were askew after Gabbi “cleaned up”, and pulled the bed out of the sofa, anticipation growing inside of me.

There was going to be something different in our routine now.

Tasia and I were going to take a big step in our relationship.

A huge step that I hoped she was ready for.

I was. I was more than ready to touch her. But that same eagerness could be my downfall if I wasn't careful. I didn't want to overwhelm her with my need for her. I ran my palms down my pants considering how I was going to ease her worries and concerns when a soft palm touched my arm.

I looked down to find my Tasia there, staring up at me with concern. "Are you okay?" she asked, her brow furrowed, and I nodded, moving toward the sofa like we always did. We took up our usual positions but instead of turning on the television, we studied each other from opposite sides.

"Are you sure?" I asked her, in a low whisper so Gabbi couldn't hear us in case she was still awake. Not that I needed to worry. Everything in these suites were soundproof. But I couldn't help my stomach from churning with worry.

Instead of sending her down the same spiral I had gone, my words made her smile. She nodded, running her toes along my foot.

That's not supposed to be an erotic touch.

And yet, everything from her was erotic.

The air between us was charged with anticipation.

Her quick movements shocked me, and I wasn't prepared for her to suddenly be next to me, but when she was, I smiled at her, reaching up with slow, steady movements so she could shove me away anytime she wanted to.

I ran my fingers over her cheek, a sigh leaving me.

“You’re the most beautiful thing that I’ve ever seen,” I whispered, and ran my dulled claws down her cheek, along her jaw and then to her neck.

She tilted it backward for me, giving me more access, so I ran my thumb down her soft throat until I was touching the skin of her chest.

I swallowed hard, glancing up at her and freezing my fingers. But her eyes were closed and her lips were parted on swift puffs of air. As if she couldn’t quite catch her breath.

Gods, this is everything I dreamed of and more.

I ran my claw down to the soft skin above her t-shirt and stopped as soon as I hit the material.

Still, her luscious breasts were full enough that my claw dipped between her cleavage for one blissful moment.

I swallowed at the same time as she did, and she opened her eyes to look up at me with an expression that I’d never thought I’d see from her.

Lust. Pure lust was shining from her gaze.

I couldn’t stop myself then. My body surged, tackling her to the sofa-bed, taking her down under me. Her softness pressed against me and my eyes all but rolled back in my head.

Fuck, she’s perfect.

I pulled away long enough to look down at her—gauging her reaction—but I shouldn’t have worried. She wiggled under me until her legs were wrapped around

me, and her face was lifted to mine, seeking. Her lips ran across my jaw and I may have blacked out.

I was lost to the moment. I was lost to her.

I took her lips in a heated kiss, deepening it until our breaths were shared.

Her breasts were pressed against my chest, so I clenched my fists on either side of her head, holding myself a little away from her in case the feel of her made me lose all of my control.

“Enka,” she gasped against my lips—a soft whimper of sound.

The little bit of control I had snapped. Not that there was much of it left. I cupped her jaw, squeezing a little until she parted her lips, letting me in. Then it was wet sounds of sucking and the heat of our tongues as I fucked her mouth with mine .

Gods, I’ve been waiting for this. Praying for this.

And I loved every second of it. She was soft heat and sweetness under me. Everything I’d ever wished for. Her hands skimmed up my back, tentative and soft. I groaned against her lips, sucking harder on her tongue until her fingers were digging into my flesh, pulling me closer.

Yes. Want me like I want you. Need me like I need you.

I tried whispering the words into her mind, willing her to feel what I was feeling, but I shouldn’t have worried. My female rolled under me, her pussy a scalding heat against my thigh.

“I need you,” she pulled away long enough to gasp before she kissed me again.

Alarm bells were ringing in my head as she tugged at my t-shirt, struggling to yank it off of me, but I pushed them aside.

I reached back, gripping my t-shirt behind me and then pulling it over my head.

When I was revealed to her, she stopped kissing me, pulling back to stare down with an expression I couldn't quite interpret.

It wasn't until she leaned down to lick my chest, swiping that tiny hot tongue across my skin, that I recognized what it was.

Greed.

My little mate was greedy for my body. I'd never been so flattered in my life. Did she like my body then? I hadn't thought much about it. I was so big compared to the perfection of her smaller, softer body.

But was she as attracted to me as I was to her? I doubted it, yet looking at her as she ran her fingers down my chest, running them over my stomach, a small moan leaving as her pupils dilated, I wondered.

My mate wants me.

I kissed her again, her hips rocking hard against the jeans that I was wearing. She had hers on as well and the denim was a thick double-layer between us.

"Take them off," she murmured against my lips, hooking her hands into my belt loops and tugging down.

My laugh was soft and husky as I took those hands into mine, pinning them beside her head. Her eyes went wide with shock and I paused, but the gleam of interest there

told me everything I needed to know.

“No touching,” I murmured against her lips, stealing kisses between the words. “ I want to touch you .”

“Then hurry,” she gasped, arching her back until her breasts were pushed upward, crushed against my bare chest.

She isn't playing fair.

“I want to take my time with you,” I told her, running my tusks along her skin, marking her with my scent. Instead of pulling away, she pressed into it, arching harder against me for my mark.

Fuck, this female is everything.

Tasia

I circled my arms around his waist, feeling so very close to him, rubbing myself against his tusks, smothering myself in his delicious scent. I knew what he was doing. He was marking me, but I didn't care. I was tired of being cautious. Tired of needing to make the safe choice all the fucking time.

Especially when I was with him. I didn't need to be. I could be recklessly wanton and know that I was perfectly safe. I was burning up inside, my pussy soaked for him. That wasn't something that happened... ever. Not since David. Not with David.

"This feels amazing," I tell him, gasping the words against his lips, and they curled with what had to be smugness. I didn't chastise him because he deserved it. He could definitely be smug.

He grunted his response, but it was a yes. His erection pressed against my stomach. So hard. So immense.

"Take me," I said simply, not holding anything back from him. I didn't have the willpower. Not anymore. I'd been doing it for weeks, and I was finally going to have what I'd wanted this entire time.

He murmured an incoherent response and then suddenly his muscular thigh was pressed between mine. An unexpected pressure right between my legs, exactly where I needed him.

I gasped, my head falling back onto the sofa, cushioned under me while pleasure

saturated my body—new and terrifying.

“Is this what you want?” he murmured—and fuck yes. It is. Not everything that I wanted, but it was a fantastic place to start.

I tried to arch closer, to chase his lips with mine, but he’s too far away and my body wouldn’t let me wiggle away from his touch. And he was not helping at all. It didn’t matter, though. His hands were exactly where they should be.

One on my hip and one on my lower back, tilting me to the perfect position for the thickness of his thigh to hit just right.

“Enka,” I moaned.

He made a soft, murmuring noise, but he didn’t stop. I reached up, my nails scraping against his scalp, the shorter hair at his nape—soft and thick—as my hips moved, desperate for more friction. My underwear was soaked .

I had a brief, delirious moment to wonder if he could feel the slick mess of me through the denim of our jeans.

“It’s okay,” he murmured, staring down at me with unblinking dark eyes, and apparently that was all the permission my body needed.

There was nothing particularly romantic about the moment. Nothing too skilled or delicate about the way he grinded me under his body, but it felt like the most significant experience I’d ever had in my life.

So very significant that I couldn’t go through it alone. I lean forward, craving more of him. Anything to bind us together. But it’s as if he’s the sun and I’m a planet, forever pulled to him, but unable to reach.

He's staring down at me, his lips parts, breathing ragged and quick. Our gazes are locked and I'm hot all over, but I can't look away.

"Enka," I started, my voice a blubbing sob and I wanted to say more. The underside of his cock pushed roughly against my hip, jutting in what had to be a lewd aberration in his jeans, and I wanted to touch it. Needed to, if I was being honest.

But before I could, pleasure erupted inside me and I came, dazed by the aftershocks of my own body. Everything that was happening to it—that I'd never experienced and couldn't hope to understand, or replicate on my own ever again. The uncontrollable, quaking tremors that seized me.

Having an orgasm in front of someone was always a vulnerable, soul-baring experience.

I hadn't done it much, but in that moment, I felt gutted, my soft center open for him to peruse.

But he watched me lose control, his chocolate irises swallowed by his pupils, and it somehow made the experience even more erotic.

"Fuck," he hissed from above, lips pressed hot against my temple. For a long, silent moment, his grip was a vise-tight, splitting, bruising cage, and I feel trapped. Then I remembered where I was. Who I was with. "Fuck. "

I panted through the heat. Grounded myself as I climbed back down from heights I'd never thought I would ever experience.

Okay. So, maybe, once upon a time I thought I knew what an orgasm felt like, and I was only just discovering that I was so wrong it should be illegal. That was fine. I could work on a new definition. We could work on that new definition together.

A minute later, Enka lowered himself next to me on the sofa-bed. I couldn't read his expression, and for a moment, I was worried that he might try to leave me there, alone. Like we'd broken a rule and he'd run. But he cuddled next to me. Gathered me in his arms.

His eyes were filled with something that was too much like shock. I hoped that the smile on my face—that was pretty much hurting because it was so huge—tipped him off that I was pretty great, actually. He grinned back at me and that's when he leaned down to kiss me.

His mouth.

I can't imagine that anything had ever been sweeter, more necessary, than his mouth was in that moment. I moaned, sucking on his tongue as his huge palm slid up my back, under my t-shirt.

We've been matching our styles and outfits almost every day.

The realization hit me like a slam to my sternum. We'd been dressing like a little family ever since we came to this hotel. And he'd been choosing the outfits.

The giggle I released made him pause, and he quirked an eyebrow as he grinned down at me.

"Something funny?" he asked, dipping his hand down to give my ass a firm squeeze.

The giggle transformed into another moan, and I shook my head. "You've been matching our outfits," I accused, and he didn't even have the decency to look ashamed.

"Yep," he agreed, nodding. "And I'll keep doing it. You're both mine, and I want

everyone to know.”

I wasn't allowed to continue my line of questioning since he moved his huge hand up my back, spanning so much skin I gasped, tugging my shirt with him. He had it up, and over my head before I knew what was going on.

My bra was next. It was huge and clunky. An old nursing bra that was so comfortable I couldn't give it up. It was now about half of a cup size too big and didn't do anything for lift.

I would have regretted not putting on something new—something that he'd bought—but I couldn't.

Not with the way he was looking at me as though I was the sweetest dessert on earth and he'd been without food for years.

And when the straps fell to the side and he tugged it down, baring me, it was like game over.

The hunger was a fire in his gaze, and it scalded me. He lowered his mouth to mine and I gasped at the sweet invasion.

He kisses like he's starved for me.

Like he'd been waiting the entire time for this moment. Holding back. Like the possibility of the two of us doing exactly what we were doing had occurred to him before, but it was something he'd set aside, storing it in a deep, dark place where it had grown into something huge and terrifying.

He was distracted now, as if he didn't know whether to kiss me or pull away to look at me. As if he didn't know where to look. He was staring at my breasts like they

were something spectacular—which they weren't. His lips parted and his breaths were quick and shallow.

He didn't speak. Instead he looked up and down at me, his eyes glazed.

It was long moments before he said, "I want to keep you with me like this for a week." His hand came up to cup my breast, not exactly gentle—as if he was on the very edge of losing control.

Just on the side of too forceful, and instead of being afraid, I felt myself clench around nothing. "For a year. Longer."

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:09 am

Tasia

Enka gave a gentle push with his huge palm against my shoulder blades to make me arch toward him, and then closed his mouth against my breast—all teeth and tongue and wonderful, delicious suction.

I whimpered against the back of my hand, because I'd never known—had never thought that I'd be so sensitive.

My nipples were tight and raw and almost sore, and if he didn't do something, I'd—

“You're the only flavor I crave, my mate,” he whispered in a guttural voice, and my pussy clenched with aching emptiness.

His palm pressed against my spine, and I arched a little more—offering myself up to him. Whatever he needed, however he needed me.

He could fit my entire breast in his mouth. All of it—and they'd gotten larger after I'd had Gabbi. His fangs grazed the skin, dull but still there and it was unimaginably erotic. He could eat me alive if he wanted to, but instead, he was taking the time to pleasure me as much as he could.

He groaned in the back of his throat, and it was clear that he'd love to swallow me whole. Frazzled, I wondered if I should touch him, too—I was the one who'd wanted this, and it made sense that I should ensure that being with me wasn't a chore for him.

Should I touch his cock?

He could tell me how he liked it. I could learn. I didn't have much experience with orcs, but I was certain that biologically, they would like the same things—

“Is this okay?” I must have lingered too long inside my head, because he was looking up at me with a frown, his thumb swiping back and forth on my hip, his thumb claw dragging along the button for my jeans, not opening it. “You're tense.” His voice was strained.

He was cupping his cock almost absentmindedly, stroking and gripping every once in a while—when his eyes fell on the hard points of my nipples, on where my stomach shivered, where the stretch marks from my daughter had always made me self-conscious but now, his heated stare was driving those thoughts away. “We don't have to—”

“I want to. I said I did.”

His throat bobbed. “It doesn't matter what you said before. Or what you think I expect. You can always change your mind.”

“I won't.” The way he was looking at me, I was sure he'd protest again.

But he just rested his forehead on my sternum, his breath warm against the skin he'd just licked, and let his fingertips pop the top button of my jeans.

The sound of the zipper was loud in the silence of the night.

I lifted my hips as he dragged them down.

When we were settled again, he regained his position, nuzzling the skin of my neck, bracketing it with his tusks.

His thick fingers traced the elastic of my panties, dipping under the thin, plain cotton.

He pulled away to stare down at me for a long moment, and neither of us said anything.

That was when his gaze dipped. He licked his plump lips as he eyed what had to be a huge wet spot on my panties.

In that moment, seeing the way he wanted me, my shyness was shoved to the side and a wanton part of me spread my legs for him.

His lips parted, his breath coming faster. As if he was panting.

He hooked his finger in the elastic and pushed the cotton to the side.

I peeked down, craning my neck to see over my stomach.

I was glistening, swollen and plump to my own eyes, way too far ahead, considering that we'd barely done anything.

Too eager. A shiver of embarrassment went up my spine. "I'm sorry."

There were two kinds of heat, the one curling tight at the bottom of my stomach, and the one rising to my cheeks. I could barely tell them apart. "I'm . . ."

"Perfect." He wasn't actually talking to me.

More to himself it seemed. Focused on the way his fingertip sank so easily between my folds, parting them and gliding back and forth until I threw back my head and closed my eyes because the pleasure was twisting, moving, thrumming through me and I couldn't —

“You are so beautiful.” The words were a rough whisper, ripped from inside him. Like he wasn’t sure they were the right ones, but he was going to say them anyway. “Can I?”

It took her several heartbeats to realize that he was referring to his huge middle finger, to the way it was circling around my entrance and pushing slowly into it. A light pressure right at the rim. Soaking it already.

I moaned. “Anything,” I breathed. “You can do anything to me.”

He licked my nipple, a silent thank-you, and pushed inside. Or... he tried. I hissed and so did he, with a quiet, hoarse “Fuck.”

He had such big fingers—big everything. That was probably why they couldn’t fit.

The first knuckle was almost too much. A tense, pinching ache and the sensation of wet, slightly uncomfortable fullness.

I shifted on my heels, trying to adjust myself around the intrusion so I could make room, and then I shifted some more, until he had to grip my hip with his other hand to keep me still.

I clung to his shoulders, his skin sweat-slicked and sweltering hot under my palms.

His thumb grazed me, and I whimpered. “It’s okay, my mate,” he whispered, pressing a sweet kiss to my nipple. “Relax.”

I can’t . Though, if I had to be honest, the way his finger was curving inside me—it was already getting better. It didn’t hurt so much now, and I was even wetter. If he touched me there , on that spot that I hadn’t known existed... my head lolled back. I clutched his muscles with my nails.

“There? Is that a good spot?”

I wanted to say no, tell him that it was too much, but before I could part my lips to do that, he did it again, until I couldn't stay silent anymore, all whimpers and groans and increasingly obscene, wet noises. Until he tried to get a little deeper inside, and I couldn't help wincing.

“What is it?” His voice was his regular voice, but a million times raspier. “Does it hurt?”

“No— Oh .”

He looked up, all flushed pale skin against dark waves. “Why are you so tense, Tasia? Am I doing something wrong?”

“I—not.” I wasn't sure what compelled me to continue. Anyone would know that it was a terrible idea, but there wasn't any room left for lies now that we were so close together. I swallowed hard, confessing, “Only ever with David.”

Enka went still. Completely motionless. His muscles flexed, coiled strength under my palms, and then they just stayed like that, tense and still as he stared down at me. “Tasia.”

I was left breathless as his large palm cupped the side of my face and brought it down for a warm, laughing, slow kiss.

Maybe I was a little inexperienced when it came to sex.

But I really hadn't thought about it for ages before Enka, and even then, this wasn't what I'd been expecting—him above me, spreading my legs wide open with his big palms on my inner thighs and then kneeling between them. Sliding down, going

low...

“Wait,” I gasped. “What are you—”

The way he parted me with his tongue, it was as though I was the meal he’d been waiting for his entire life.

He was slow but sure and steady, and didn’t stop when my thigh stiffened against his palm, or when I tried to squirm away.

He just grunted, the sound low and rich; then ran his nose down the skin under my stomach, inhaling deeply as if he was apologizing but then he buried his face into my pussy once more.

“Enka—stop,” I begged, and for a moment he just nuzzled his face against my folds like he had no intention of doing any such thing. Then he lifted his head, eyes foggy, as if coming to the realization that he should be listening to me.

“Mmm?” His lips vibrated against me.

“Maybe... Should you stop?”

He went still, his hand tightening around my thighs. “Did you change your mind?” he demanded, and I was certain he meant it to be a gentle question, but urgency was pushing him hard.

“No. But shouldn’t we be doing something we both enjoy?”

He frowned, his face a mask of confusion. “You’re not liking this? Am I doing it wrong?”

“No! Well, I don’t actually know , because I’ve never...” The line between his eyebrows deepened. “But we should just... have sex. That way we can both have a good time instead of just me.”

The next thing I felt was the flat of his tongue against my clit, pressing just enough to make me clench and exhale in a rush.

The pointed tip was circling around it, which was such a tiny movement, and yet it sent my hand straight to my mouth.

It made me bite the fleshy part of my palm to stop myself from screaming and waking up Gabbi.

“Enka!” My voice sounded like someone else’s. I kept it low, but it was broken “But I thought...”

“You said I should do something I enjoy.” His breath was hot against me. “ This is something I love .”

“You can’t possibly want to—”

He squeezed my leg. “I can’t think of a moment since I’ve met you that I didn’t want to.”

It was so intimate. But I couldn’t protest when he looked so spellbound, staring at me, at my face, my breasts, my pussy—my entire body, as if I was the most beautiful thing in the world. As if I was something he coveted with his whole heart.

His hand was so big, open over my abdomen and holding me down, inching higher and closer to my breasts, but never close enough. Sprawled back on the giant sofa-bed, I was a little embarrassed of how squishy my stomach was. Of the way it rolled

over and the cellulite in my legs.

The fact that I hadn't shaved, so there was body hair everywhere . In all the places that I hadn't thought he'd be seeing tonight. Definitely not burying his face in. Enka, though, didn't seem to mind.

“Wouldn't you rather— ”

A nip with those fangs. “No.”

“I didn't even say—”

He glanced up. “There isn't anything I'd rather do.”

“But—”

He sucked on one of my lips with a wet, loud noise, and I gasped. Then his tongue was inside me—thick and long—and I moaned, half in surprise, half in ecstasy.

Oh, yes .

“Fuck,” someone said. It wasn't me—I was pretty sure of that, but couldn't be certain—so it must have been him. “Fuck.”

Tasia

It was incredible. Completely out of the stratosphere. His tongue, moving in and out, lapping and circling, and his nose against my skin, and the hungry sounds he made from deep in his chest whenever I clenched around him, and I was going to... I was going to...

I wasn't sure I was going to come. Until tonight, I'd never come with another person before. Only alone. "I don't know if I can," I murmured apologetically, hating how needy my voice sounded.

"Fuck, yes," he groaned. His tongue swiped the entirety of my pussy.

A long, broad stroke. "Please." I didn't think I'd ever heard him quite as enthusiastic about anything.

It kicked the whole thing a few notches higher for me, and it got worse when I noticed what his arm was up to.

The one that wasn't cupping the cheek of my ass and holding me open.

He hadn't taken himself out of his pants yet, I thought—not that I could see anyway—and that was so unfair, since I was splayed wide open for him.

But from the way his arm was shifting, how his hand was moving up and down slowly, that was just unbearable.

I arched further, my spine shaping a perfect curve as the back of my head hit the pillow.

“Tasia,” he whispered. He leaned back a few inches and kissed the inside of my trembling thigh. He took a breath with his nose, as if to hold my scent within himself. “Don’t come yet.”

His lips brushed against my pussy as his tongue dipped in again, and I squeezed my eyes shut. There was a burning, liquid heat blossoming in my tummy, spilling all over me. My nails clawed at the sheets, grasping for something to hold onto. This was impossible .

“Enka.”

“No. Two more minutes,” he growled. He sucked hard on my clit— Goddess, yes. There .

“I’m—I can’t.”

“Just one, then.”

“I can’t —”

“Yes, Tasia.”

As it turned out, it was his voice that ruined everything. That possessive, quiet tone, the tiny hint of an order in the low, silky rasp of his words, and the pleasure broke over me like a wave, taking me under. My brain broke. That was the only way to explain it .

I wasn’t myself for seconds that melted into minutes, and when I had an inkling of a

sense of reality again, he was still licking me, except more slowly. Not doing anything but savoring me. “I want to eat you like this until you pass out,” he groaned. His lips were soft and gentle against my skin.

“No,” I gasped, shaking my head and fisting the pillow. “Please.”

“Why?”

“I don’t think I’ll live.” I couldn’t think straight, not quite yet. My mind was stuttering. Confused.

I almost screamed when he pushed one finger inside. This time it slid in with ease, smooth and without any fight from my body. And my walls clamped on it as if to welcome him and hold him inside.

“Gods.” He licked my clit again, and I was too sensitive for that. “You are—” he started as he hooked his finger inside me, pressing against the roof of my pussy, and the pleasure built in me, pushing at the edges of me until I didn’t know what was happening. “—so small and tight and warm.”

The heat started flooding within me once more, knocking the air out of my lungs, leaving me open-mouthed. Colors started bursting behind my eyelids. He groaned something that wasn’t coherent, and slid in another finger on the tail end of my orgasm. The taut stretch of it—it was ruining me.

My body blossomed into something that didn’t belong to me anymore. Something made of bright, high peaks and lush deep valleys. It left me heavy and boneless, and I wasn’t sure how much time passed by before I could bear to raise my hands to grip his tusks and gently tug him away to get him to stop.

He shot me a slightly irritated glance but complied, and I tugged him up—because he

had a look on his face that told me he could start again at any moment, and because it would be nice to have him laying next to me.

He might have had the same thought because he lifted himself above me, leaning himself on his forearms. His heavy, thick chest pushed against my breasts, one giant thigh lodged firmly between my legs.

I looked down at myself, noticing the pink socks that were still on my feet. Embarrassment flooded inside me, and I wondered if he thought I was weird—

“Can I fuck you?” he asked, before kissing me, not seeming to be bothered with where his mouth had been just a few seconds before.

I wondered if I should be put off by that, but since my body was still twitching with pleasure, contracting with aftershocks at the memory of what he’d just done, I couldn’t make myself care, and it was nice that he was kissing me. He was an amazing kisser.

“Mmm.” My palms came up to cup his face, and I started to trace his cheekbones with my thumbs. They were so hot. “What?” My thoughts were fuzzy, but I couldn’t have heard him right. Not after I’d done nothing that could have made him want me. I’d just laid there while he’d touched me .

“Can I fuck you?” He sucked the base of my throat and I was certain he’d be leaving a mark. “Please?”

He breathed it against the shell of my ear, and—I’d never wanted to say yes so fast. I nodded my permission and reached for his cock, but he beat me to it, tugging down his pants, closing his large fist around it.

He was huge . Larger than I’d thought he’d be, than I’d thought anyone could be.

I could still feel his heart pounding rapidly against my chest as he aligned himself to me and nudged the head against my opening and—

I was lax now—and pliant. But still not loose enough.

“ Ah .” The first stretch wasn’t quite painful , but it was nearly too much.

Not the easy glide I thought it’d be. Then again, he was so big all over.

And yet, the sensation, the push of him against every part of me—it held a promise of something that was going to blow my mind. “You’re so big. ”

He groaned into my neck. His entire body was vibrating with tension. “You can take me,” he whispered against my skin, a low purring sound starting in his chest. I didn’t understand what was happening, but it relaxed me, melting me into the sofa-bed.

“I can,” I told him, voice reedy, and my breath caught halfway through the second word. I’d given birth, after all. Except that he wasn’t in, not really. Not even halfway. And there was just no more room.

I looked up at him. His eyes were squeezed shut, dark half-moons against his skin, and his jaw was tense. “What if it’s too much?” I gasped.

He lowered his lips to my ear. “Then...” He tried to thrust, and maybe it was too much, but the friction was perfect. “Then I’ll fuck you like this.” I squeezed my eyes shut when he hit a place that made me whimper. “Gods, Tasia.”

My entire body was pulsating. “Is there something I should be doing?” I asked, arching against him.

The purring intensified and he kissed my collarbone. Our breathing was erratic by

now, loud in the silence of the room. “Shh,” he whispered. “Or I’ll come too quickly. You feel amazing .”

I canted my hips, and he was rubbing against that spot again. It made my thighs tremble, and I tried to open them wider—to invite him inside. It was in that moment that I realized one critical factor I hadn’t considered. “You’re not wearing a condom,” I gasped.

His hips slowed, and then stuttered to a stop. “Fuck, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I murmured, running my lips over his jaw and he shuddered against me. I nodded, gasping as I rocked against him, wishing he was still fucking me. “Come inside me.” His fingers clenched in the skin of my hips at my words and he shook his forehead against mine.

“Be sure,” he groaned. “I won’t be able to stop myself. I can pull out now.”

“No, don’t pull out,” I whispered. We were too dazed to kiss with any kind of coordination but his lips were hot and soft when they brushed against mine. “Yes.”

“Inside you?”

“If you—” I started.

His hand came up behind my knee and angled it just so, spreading my legs in a way I simply hadn’t thought of. Firmly holding me open.

“If you want to,” I finished, struggling to keep my voice low.

“Fuck, Tasia,” he whispered, pressing a kiss to my lips. “You’re so perfect, you’re driving me insane.”

My insides opened to him without warning. They welcomed and pulled at him until he bottomed out, until he was so deep inside of me, stretching me to a point that should be breaking, but just made me feel filled, sealed and perfect.

We both exhaled. I lifted a hand, closed it shakily around his sweaty nape, burying it in his hair.

The hair that I'd started combing when I did Gabbi's.

He sat there on a little stool next to her, grinning at her while I played with the strands.

The memory flashed into my mind, and it made my lips curl.

"Hey," I whispered, smiling up at him.

He smiled back, just a little. "Hey."

His eyes were dark and lost. He moved inside me, just a hint of a thrust, and it made my entire body clench around him, until I could feel his cock twitch and pulsate inside me, like a drum.

My head fell to the sofa-bed below, and then someone was groaning.

Saying something guttural and out of control.

Then Enka pulled out, pushed back in, and we were finally one.

In the span of a few seconds his thrusts went from tentative, almost testing, to fast and intense.

His hand slid to the small of my back, lifting me into him he thrust, rubbing inside me, against me and forcing pleasure to shake up my spine.

I'd never felt anything like it. I was dizzy with it .

"Gods, you're perfect," he gasped, sucking on the skin of my neck again before he slowed, asking against my ear in a voice that was raspy and broken. "Is this alright? Am I hurting you?" He didn't fully manage to stop.

I couldn't answer. Not past the sharp hitch of my breath, the way my fingers dug desperately into the flesh and muscle of his back, clinging to him like I was lost at sea. Pressure built again inside me, swelling large and overwhelming—all-encompassing.

" Gods , Tasia," he rasped. "If you're not enjoying any part of this, you have to tell me now.

" He was eager, his movements becoming erratic, losing control and powering into me harder and harder.

His cock slipped out for a moment, and his growl of annoyance shook my entire body.

It took him only a moment to notch the wide head back to my entrance before he thrust hard back into me, snapping my teeth shut with the force.

As I stared up at him, the only thing I could think was, I'm never asking him to stop.

Pleasure fizzled in my veins—sang in my blood—and he was the one who was giving it to me.

I adored how he was out of focus, but then so was I, too flooded by how good he felt, how all-consuming the sensation of him so deep inside me was.

He was sliding in and out of me so smoothly, and I couldn't stop from losing myself to everything.

To the wonder of exactly how right this felt.

“I—”

“Tasia, tell me if you want me to stop—” His hips slowed for a moment, before he released a guttural grunt.

I'd canted my hips and clenched around him—dragging the sound out of him.

I was gripping his cock as hard as I could with my cunt, massaging him in ways that made his massive, corded forearms shudder on either side of my head.

“I love it,” I purred, reaching up to fist my fingers in his thick hair. To catch his eyes and make sure that he was paying close attention when I said, “I fucking love it, Enka.”

Those were the words that snapped the last of his control. I watched it burst like an overstretched elastic band. He made a guttural noise in the back of his throat and shuddered above me, pumping his hips hard and dropping his face into the side of my neck, his teeth biting hard.

I gasped at the sharp pain, feeling his orgasm soar.

The scalding pleasure cascading over him as he shook on top of me.

After a long, burning moment, he released his bite, licking it with gentle laps, his thrusts slowing, becoming lazy.

His hips curled, and I ran my hands down his back, savoring his sweat-slicked skin over bunching muscles.

He murmured words then. First in Orcish and then in English. How beautiful I was. How perfect. How much he'd wanted me from the first moment he'd seen me. How he was going to keep me and never, ever let me go.

Tasia

I smiled a real, genuine, smile. I buried it against his skin, but I knew that for the first time, I was in a place where I couldn't feel, see or touch any of the bad memories or thoughts.

This was a light, blissful safe space. The only thing that jarred me was when he shifted and I felt the first tiny gush of his cum slipping out of me .

Instead of freaking out the way I probably should, I released a tiny giggle. I smothered the sound with my hand, but he raised his head in a lazy movement, looking down at me with curious eyes that were filled with the same joy I was feeling.

The snort came next as another gush slipped out when his cock shifted inside me. That was all he needed to start laughing with me, pressing his forehead to mine as we shook with humour, keeping the sounds low and soft so that we wouldn't wake our daughter in the other room.

"I need to clean up," I whispered, nuzzling my nose against him. I needed to, but I didn't want to. I wanted to keep his cum inside me forever. I wanted him to mark me with it. With his scent. So that I belonged to him.

Damn it, Tasia, you're falling.

I didn't even fight the voice that was telling me it was too fast. I shoved her out instead. This wasn't the time or place. I knew that I was falling, and for some reason,

I didn't mind it. Not when it was Enka. He just might be the only male who was worth it.

"No," he whispered, leaning in to my neck to take a deep breath. "You smell like me."

I hid a smile, curling myself around him, not enjoying the stickiness of our sweat, but loving the heat and comfort his touch brought.

He ran a palm down my back, spanning the entire thing with his fingers, which I'd never thought would be possible.

I always assumed I was too big. Too much.

But here I was, with this male who made me feel like I was enough . Perfect.

Burying my face against him, hiding the tears that suddenly popped into my eyes, I ran my own fingers down his perfect, green skin. "What are you thinking?" I asked, running my lips over him next.

I could hear the smile in his voice as he murmured, "When I was back on Hellplane, I'd always imagined my mate.

What you'd be like. What you'd smell like and look like.

But I never..." he released a ragged breath, squeezing me close to him—almost too tight—but I loved the tightness, the easy way I felt at home with him.

Safe in the knowledge that no matter what, he'd never hurt me.

"I always imagined a lot, Tasia," he whispered, swallowing hard. "But you . You've

exceeded my every expectation and dream. You've given me all the things I wanted and the things I couldn't even imagine."

I leaned back to look at him, searching his eyes as he stared down at me with what looked close to worship in his expression. I didn't need to wonder whether it was all words. It was there, in his face. The truth.

"I didn't think you existed," I gasped, running my lips across his jaw in gratitude. "I thought I would be alone. That my expectations were too high. But you... You came to me. You found me."

"I'll always find you," he said against my hair, and I could hear the tremble in his voice. "No matter what, I'll find you. You and Gruk-ir are mine. I'll never let you go."

I'd heard those words before.

I'll never let you go.

And I let myself marvel for a moment at the extremely different context of the words. One from a male who'd only ever sought to hurt me. The other from a male who would always protect me. I huffed out a small laugh against his skin.

"Thank you," I said against his skin. "You don't know how much that means to me."

It was another long moment of him running his palm down the skin of my back and over my hip before I asked, "Can I ask you something... personal?"

His low chuckle vibrated his chest under my ear. "Always. You're the most personal thing in my life. You can ask me anything."

I raised my face to smile at him, adjusting my position until I was splayed over him, my face cushioned on my folded hands on his chest. “Can you tell me about Hellplane? About what it was like there?”

His eyes widened with surprise, and I kicked myself. He shouldn’t be surprised that I wanted to know more about him. I promised myself to be less selfish and obtuse in the future. For now, I’d take this one piece of information.

“Hellpane,” he scoffed, leaning his head back and staring up at the ceiling, as if considering what to say—or where to start. “That’s the most accurate name I’ve ever heard for it. It was... hell.” He sighed, looking back down at me and running his fingers through my curls.

“I don’t remember much from when I was younger,” he started, shaking his head.

“I was younger than Krusk and Savla, and I can only imagine that after our clan died, they struggled. Because when I was old enough to help, surviving was hard ,” he sighed.

“A struggle every day to get enough to eat. To fight for water rights.” He tugged on one of my curls, staring at it as if entranced.

The words were coming out of him faster now, as if he was there in his mind.

“So if that was what it was like after we’d established a routine; I can’t imagine what it was like before.

My brothers took care of me. They didn’t have to.

They could have left me behind. I was a burden to them.

” His brow furrowed and I dug my fingers into his chest, holding him close, not able to imagine a world in which he didn’t exist. It was as if all the breath had been sucked from my body.

He didn’t even notice, his eyes unfocused and his brow pinched. “Surviving was the only thought in our minds for so long. So many winters that we’d wonder if we would die and sometimes we hoped we would.” He shook his head, hugging me close, dragging me up against him, burying his face in my hair.

I ran my fingers over him in gentle strokes as he sucked in a deep breath. “I’m so fucking glad we made it. ”

My throat was tight with tears, but I stayed silent and let him continue on his own, without my input, providing as much comfort to him as I could.

“Rok was the first one to show us any kindness. I think it was because he lost his family too. He was older and stronger when it happened, but he was... nice. It was a big change from the orcs we’d faced in the past. We’d learned everything we had through trial and error.

Most of it wasn’t efficient or the best way to approach a situation.

” He huffed out a small laugh, nuzzling me and sucking in a deep breath, savoring my scent and using it to comfort himself.

“He showed us what we were doing wrong and how to fix our hunting and water-seeking. He was... is ... a male that I owe my life to. And then we came here and Dristan and Rudgar showed us how to survive on this plane.” His fingers were gentle in my hair, but his laugh was rough.

“We have a clan now when I never imagined we ever would. I always thought...” He

swallowed hard, and I had to wiggle against him to look up at him where there was an odd darkness in his gaze.

“What?” I whispered, cupping his face and stroking my fingers against his high cheekbones.

He searched my gaze, his eyes caressing every inch of my face before he released a pent up breath.

“I always thought I’d die there, struggling and suffering every day.

If I’d been there when I found you, I wouldn’t have had anything to give you.

” He lowered his gaze, shame filling his expression and it was too much.

I moved up his body, plastering myself to him as I pressed my forehead to his, forcing him to look at me. “Being with you is enough,” I told him, staring into his eyes until he saw the truth there. “ You are what I want, Enka. Just you.”

It took him a moment before his disbelieving look cleared and he squeezed his eyes shut, a single tear leaking out. I pressed my lips there, tasting the saltiness.

“You’re mine,” I whispered against his skin. “All mine, and I love every single part of you.”

He released a breath in a huff, squeezing me and burying his face against the side of my neck, hiding from me but when his shoulders shook, I understood, letting my own tears leak out of my eyes.

We were both enough, and that was what mattered.

Enka

I was certain that Tasia expected things to be different. In fact, for a moment, I expected things to be different when we woke up the next morning.

Not that I'd had much sleep.

I'd laid awake the night before, reliving every sweltering moment of having my mate for the first time. Of the little noises she made, of the way her soft, delicious body shook under mine when she moved. And how she moved .

Never in my life had I ever experienced anything so erotic and perfect. Her sounds and the expression she made when she came would be seared into my memory for the rest of my life. I wanted to see and hear her like that every day until I passed on to the other side.

I licked my lips as I took a deep breath, watching how she moved around the kitchen, a slight shift to the way she walked telling me that she was sore. Sore and feeling me still.

My self-satisfied grin must have been showing on my face from where I was supposed to be helping Gruk-ir play a game on the tiny tablet she held, but my fingers were too big and I kept losing it for her.

Still, our sweet girl laughed instead of getting angry, holding onto my finger to jab at the tablet over and over, cackling at the unwanted outcome.

She might be a bit of a chaos demon.

“Breakfast time, sweetheart,” Tasia said to our daughter, running a gentle hand down her hair and connecting with mine where it was resting on her back.

She glanced up at me and then looked away, but I spotted the shyness in her expression and marveled at it. Shy . After she’d made me come until my balls had shriveled up inside me. I grinned at her, twining our fingers together behind Gruk-ir, but our girl wasn’t one to miss much.

She peered behind her, seeing our hands, and then looked up at me with a small grin that said, I told you so. She had, indeed.

“Mommy, you have something right here,” she told Tasia, pointing to the right of her neck and I stiffened, giving my mate my most innocent smile.

Tasia’s brow furrowed, and her fingers went to the spot our daughter indicated.

She canted her head to the side, wincing as she felt the twinge of pain from the healing bite.

She gave me an indecipherable look, and headed back toward the kitchen.

I pursed my lip before looking at Gruk-ir, but she just smiled up at me, heedless of any censure from me.

“Does this mean I get a little sister?” she asked, tapping dexterously on her tablet, playing the game at a speed that made my eyebrows sweep up. When the words registered, I almost choked on my own spit.

“If you’re trying to help Abu win your mommy,” I whispered conspiratorially, and

she leaned forward with a serious nod, “then don’t talk about sisters yet. Let her get used to it just being the three of us for a while.”

“But I want a sister,” she argued, her lower lip sticking out, and I was recognizing the signs of my Gruk-ir getting ready to protest.

I dropped a soft kiss on the top of her head. “And you’re going to get one. But if you talk about it before your mommy’s ready, she’s not going to want it to happen for some time. She’ll get scared.”

“Why?” she asked, moving toward me and climbing up on my lap so she could cuddle against my chest while she played her game.

“She’s scared,” I whispered against her soft, sweet-smelling hair. “And we have to be careful with her, okay?”

“Like when I have to be careful of the hard cups?” she asked, still tapping away on the screen.

“Exactly. We never want Mommy to be hurt, right?”

“Never,” Gruk-ir agreed, nodding with finality.

“Then we’re going to have to be patient. Things like weddings and babies will have to wait, alright?” I asked, and I should have realized my mistake when she went as stiff as a board against me.

The way her little head turned on her neck—as if she was haunted by a demon—should have been my second warning. But I was too foolish to understand, until I saw the gleeful gleam in her gaze.

“Wedding!” she shouted, sucking in a deep breath before releasing an eardrum-rupturing screech of excitement. I fumbled to keep her still, pressing her little face into my chest to smother the sound, but it was terrifying in its pitch.

“Shhh, or Mommy will get worried,” I insisted, and our daughter wiggled with joy.

“Wedding!” she cried, her words still muffled against my shirt, and I was wondering if she was always this excited about weddings or if it was just every time ours was mentioned.

“I know, Gruk-ir,” I murmured, rocking her while she did a happy dance. “I know you’re excited, and it’s all going to happen, but remember I said you have to be patient?”

The wiggling stopped and she pulled back to frown at me. “Mommy’s being too slow. We should plan it and then surprise her!” The feral glee in her eyes told me that I would have no say in anything for the wedding and I would end up wearing sparkles of some kind.

“No,” I laughed, cupping her little face in one of my hands. “I haven’t even asked her,” I whispered. “And when I do, I want to make sure she’s going to say yes. For that, I need some time to get her to fall in love with me.”

“That’s easy,” Gruk-ir said with a shrug. “She already loves you.”

“She does, huh?” I chuckled, tickling her under her neck and making her squeal with laughter.

“Yeah,” she cried, rolling around to hide from where I aimed for her sides. “She doesn’t really love people. She loves me, our coven, and now you.” The words were said with such matter-of-fact assurance, that I almost believed them.

“Well, we’ll see about that,” I sighed, settling her back down to play her game. “But until then, no more talking about our plans, okay?”

She heaved out a sigh as if the weight of the world was on her tiny shoulders, and I had to hide a smile. “Fine,” she agreed, rolling her eyes and leaning against me. “But did you get a ring?” she asked, focused on the screen again.

“I did,” I told her, and when she looked up, her eyes gleaming, I shook my head. “And you can’t see it until Mommy shows it to you, okay?”

Her pout was even bigger, but I ignored it. I didn’t want her to get attached to a ring until Tasia did. I wanted my mate to have a choice. If she didn’t like the one I’d chosen, I would take her to the store that I’d visited with Darak and let her select another.

It hadn’t taken me long. I’d been sure as soon as I’d seen the beautiful, unique ring on display. It was one-of-a-kind, just like my Tasia. It held a special place in my heart and even if she didn’t like it, I’d still like for her to have it.

“I want a ring too,” Gruk-ir said from her position cuddled against me. “A pretty one.”

A grin spread across my face and I didn’t tell her about the tiny little exact replica that I’d had commissioned for her that was tucked in the wedding box under Tasia’s. “We’ll see,” I told her instead, and she huffed as she continued playing her game.

“We’ll pick one for you too, Abu,” she told me with firm confidence and my heart clenched hard in my chest at the thought of my mate and our daughter searching for a ring for me . Something that would let the world know that I belonged to them. That I had a family who accepted me.

It was a struggle not to let the tears that were threatening brim in my eyes, but in the end I won, taking a deep, rattling breath before releasing it and trying to help Gruk-ir with her game again.

Tasia

I stood frozen just inside the doorway next to the kitchen, staring straight ahead, but seeing nothing. Enka had a ring that he was going to propose with ? I didn't know if I'd ever been more surprised by anything in my entire life.

I'd known that we were enjoying each other physically , and yes, I was also catching all the feelings, but I hadn't thought that we were serious enough for something like rings . Still, hearing my two favorite people discuss rings and weddings and proposals had my heart fluttering.

I clutched at my chest, feeling the strong pounding of my heart. Enka wanted more . He wanted us to be a family. And I wanted that more than anything.

But could I? I would be pulling him into the mess that I'd made for myself. A mess that I'd needed his help to clean up because I'd been too naive. Too stupid to do it myself.

Swallowing hard, I pressed my forehead against the wall, letting the cool smoothness center me. There were ways that I could deal with this.

First, I'd need to handle the David situation.

I'd gotten myself into it and I would find a way to get myself out.

I'd been an idiot, avoiding the police, when I'd had so much evidence.

Squaring my shoulders, I peeked around the edge of the door toward the room where Enka and my little girl were together.

The two most important people in my world. I was going to find a way to protect them. I just had to ensure that they didn't get into any trouble when I did.

Licking my dry lips, I pasted a smile on my face before going out toward them.

"One more," Gabbi insisted, holding up another book toward me with an imperious tone that I was going to have to get stern with and not laugh at... eventually. Not tonight. Tonight was about cuddles, snuggles and kisses from my sweet girl.

"Alright," I murmured against her hair, and she nestled herself between Enka and I on the bed. Gabbi had insisted that Enka was a necessary addition to our nightly routine. The shock and then delight in his expression when she'd told him had made what was left of my heart fling itself at him.

I love him.

I knew it, Gabbi probably knew it and he would have to have missed all the signs if he didn't know it already.

"This is the best one, Abu," Gabbi told Enka with a serious tone. The same tone she'd used to announce the same thing for the previous two books we'd read together.

It wasn't long before her little head was drooping and she was drooling all over Enka's shirt. The softness in his gaze as he pressed a gentle kiss to her head was enough to have me leaning over to press a brief kiss to his lips.

His eyes widened as he switched his gaze from our sleeping daughter to me in confusion.

I smiled at him, tilting my head toward the door of the bedroom.

He licked his lips, and I watched his throat work as he swallowed.

He eased out of the bed, ensuring that Gabbi was lifted and placed on her side of the bed.

He tucked her in with gentle care before straightening and eyeing me. That was when he turned and quietly hustled his fine ass outside. I smothered a laugh as I pressed a kiss to our daughter's head and moved toward the door, too.

The door closed behind us.

“Did you need something?” he asked me, cupping my cheeks and searching my face .

My heart was in my throat as I stared up at him. I didn't know what to say to him. Everything that was bubbling inside me that needed to get out might be too much, too soon.

Instead, I pressed my lips to his. He pulled away, searching my face for another long moment before he buried his face in my throat with a sharp, long inhalation. “Your scent,” he murmured against my neck, and my aching heart started galloping. “It's my beacon home.”

It was like a gut-punch. Every time he said something like that, it only made my belief stronger that he felt the same way that I did.

Still, I couldn't claim him until I'd gotten rid of the problem that I'd created for myself—for my family.

I just needed to show him... one more time. Then I'd do what I had to do.

The sofa wasn't close to the door, but it didn't seem to matter to him.

He was so big, more than twice my size, and millions of times stronger than I was.

I sucked in a quick breath, beyond turned on when he lifted me without any difficulty, as if I was a doll or a pet.

He tossed me to the sofa and I bounced for a second, dizzy with lust.

I was disoriented and out of breath. Lost for him.

I love him so much.

I didn't have time to focus on the thought.

He didn't give me a moment to find my way.

His fingers hooked into the elastic of my shorts and pulled them down my legs, at the same time as my underwear.

I didn't give any resistance at all, because a moment later he was there, on his knees next to the sofa, staring down at what he uncovered.

My bare pussy.

He didn't wait, didn't look at me or say a word.

And maybe he was desperate for me the way I was for him, because he touched me without hesitating.

His thumb gave a firm but gentle pressure against my folds, teasing them apart,

baring how I was dripping for him.

Starting just beneath my clit, he swiped down in a stroke that made my legs twitch.

He did it again, dipping his finger inside my opening as he did.

I gasped, but it didn't distract him from his goal.

He stared at the place where just the barest hint of his finger is inside me, and for a moment, I wonder if this is affecting him.

If he's as in control as he looks, but when he speaks, I can hear it in his voice.

A low hum. A hard edge that has never been there before.

"I dreamt of you," he murmured, licking his lips as he kept looking.

"Of doing exactly what I'm going to do. And for the longest while," he added, dipping his finger in deeper until my back arched, shoving my breasts hard against the cotton of my shirt.

"I thought I'd never have you. That I'd have to be your friend and that would be it."

He ran his nose across the crease of my inner thigh and I whimpered, wanting his tongue on me more than anything I'd ever wanted in my life and dreading it at the same time.

It's already too good.

"But then you let me have you," he groaned, his dark lashes sweeping open to show the pitch black of his eyes. They were completely dilated—and he was right at the

edge of his control. “And now I’m never going to stop.”

I swallowed hard, wondering if I was going to combust into flames. His thumb moved up again, and this time he allowed it to graze my clit. I arched my back again, biting a moan into my lower lip.

“I’m going to fuck you every way I’ve imagined. Every way I’ve pictured since I met you. Since I tried to picture you when I was a teenager fucking his fist for the first time.”

I feel myself clench around nothing. His dirty talk was filthy , and I loved every second of it. My heart was racing and I was immediately on the verge of—something, I wasn’t even sure.

But then he moved his thumb and I heard myself whine, but I couldn’t recognize the voice. I’d never heard it from myself. I sounded desperate and needy. A little out of control. A lot out of control if I was being honest with myself.

But his thumb was gone and the realization that I could come so hard if he’d just left it there, touching me, was almost too much to bear.

I didn’t need much. I just needed it anywhere.

With anything. But he didn’t and I had to admit to myself that it’s not that far away from the truth that I just might cry.

“Tasia.”

“Yes?” I didn’t honestly think I’d be able to respond in a normal-sounding voice, but there we were.

“You’ll tell me if I go too far, right?” he asked, belying his previous announcement that he was going to take me any way he wanted me. I smiled, giving him a nod, but he just looked up at me until I parted my lips and gasped,

“Yes.”

But I never will.

It was all too good for that. Everything he did to me was too good.

“You’re even wetter than before,” he murmured, dipping his thumb inside once more and my head fell back onto the sofa.

I didn’t know how to respond. I wasn’t even sure he wanted a response. I rolled my hips, praying that he would bless me with his finger once more. My pussy gave a greedy little flutter as he gave the opening a solid rub but didn’t go inside.

I groaned with frustration—inside my head—not wanting him to decide to take away what little he was giving me.

“Do you like being mine?” he asked, dipping his nose down the side of my pussy again and I sob out a yes that’s basically a babble of nonsense.

It’s so stupid that I like the word. Love the word, and I shouldn’t want it as much as I do, but I do .

And I’m ashamed of the moan that leaves my mouth, but he presses a hand to it, his huge palm covering the entire bottom half of my face, curved over my jaw.

My eyes widened, but instead of reacting the way I thought I would, I almost came, my eyes rolling back in my head at the control he had over me—but would never

abuse.

“Shhh, my mate,” he whispered. “Gruk-ir’s in the other room. You’re going to have to be quiet. Can you be?”

I was confused for a moment. I couldn’t grasp what he was saying. The way he was speaking to me. The grip he had on my face. The mix of control and gentleness. He’d never hurt me and I knew it.

“Can you?” he asked again, his twinkling eyes staring at me, glittering in the darkness.

I nodded against his palm, while the other one stroked fingers down my belly.

His pleased grin worked me up that much higher.

“If you can’t,” he murmured, moving down again until he ran his stubbled cheek against the soft skin of my stomach, “then just bite.” He pulled his hand away a bit, the span still remarkable, caging my cheeks and right by my lips.

I wanted to tell him that it was fine, that I could do what he asked and he didn’t need to worry, but it immediately turned out to be a lie.

The first time he made me come with his mouth, it turned out to be in five seconds flat. It was just his tongue, flat and unyielding against my clit and when I shuddered under him, Enka groaned like the pleasure was his.

I really thought I could be quiet, but instead, I keened against his palm like my world was coming to an end.

“You’re so fucking sweet,” he told me in a low, rumbling voice that vibrated against

me. He ran his tusk over my skin there, spreading his scent on me before burying his face back in my cunt and a handful of moments later, I was coming again. “Already? Gods, you’re so fucking perfect,” he groaned.

He continued to suck and lick against my clit, eating me out like I was made of everything he needed to survive.

Without warning, the pleasure changed to something else.

Something bigger and scarier. I can feel tears gathering at the corners of my eyes.

Leaking down the way my pussy was dripping onto his fingers as they pressed into me.

“Enka!” My voice broke into a sob. I arched my back again, my head tilted back, convulsing under him.

It was too much. Too intense. Too everything.

Tasia

Sex with Enka was making me lose my mind. Killing every thought in my head except for him. My brain, that was usually moving at a rapid speed, flicking through thoughts, lists and anxieties, was still for the first time in forever. As if he knew exactly how to make them obey him.

I squirmed away from his mouth, but somehow, he knew that wasn't what I needed. "Shh," he murmured, running his tongue along the crease of my thigh, making me pant for breath. "It's okay. You're doing so good." I pushed my heels into the bulging muscles of his upper back, keeping him close to me.

He took his time, one huge palm cupping my ass while the other splayed over my stomach, pinning me down for him. He avoided the over-touched, sensitive parts of my pussy, and still managed to throw me over the edge into another mind-boggling orgasm.

"More?" he asked, after I floated down, and from his expression I can tell that he wants it .

It was as if the past ten minutes had not just been an epic assortment of mores, as if my cunt wasn't twitching every time his breath puffed against the flesh.

I was burning up. Heavy. Made of tremors and sparks.

I watched him watch my clenching pussy, splayed wide so he could see everything.

“I...” I didn’t know what to say, but the sound of my voice startled me.

It was raw, as if my throat had been scraped from the inside.

His palm that had been covering my mouth was marked with my teeth, and he couldn’t have looked more satisfied if he tried.

“I...” I want to say yes, but I don’t know if I can come again.

I trailed off, and his grin spread across his face. “You were made for me,” he told me, his hand leaving my face and coming down to spread my legs even wider. He pinned my right knee to the sofa and lowered his head again. Except it wasn’t what I expected.

I feel his fangs grazing my inner thigh and when he bit it my entire body jerked. It hurt a little, more than I thought a bite from blunted fangs would, but I’m confused, disconnected from my usual reactions to pain. It’s impossible to tell the difference between pleasure and pain now.

There was a faint thought in my head, wondering if I was ever going to get used to his strength.

The part of my brain that isn’t melted into a puddle understands that his physique is different from mine because we’re a separate species—even though biologically, we’re compatible.

The other part of my brain—the melted one—preened at the ease with which he flipped me around until I was all the way on the sofa, stomach down, my cheek pressed to the pillow that he used every night to sleep there.

It smelled exactly like him. So much so that I couldn’t stop myself from grabbing two

fistfuls of it and burying my face to suck in more of his mouthwatering scent.

Mine.

“I really want to fuck you,” he murmured from behind me. I was still shaking under him. I wasn’t wearing anything except the sleep top that had ridden all the way up to under my breasts a long time ago.

Enka was on his knees, trapping my thighs in the spread of his. He must be looking at my ass, and if it was anyone else, I’d be stressing myself out about it, wondering if he was disappointed with my body. Is he turned off by my cellulite? Is it too jiggly? Should I try to cover it?

Except I don’t feel that way when it comes to Enka. He had let me know enough times that he was attracted to me. That I was the one who was holding back and he was ready to take me any way I let him have me. My worries were non-existent when it came to him and I smiled into the pillow.

“Can I?” He rasped the question, his hands coming up between my shoulder blades and he pushed down. My head could barely move, but I struggled to nod anyway.

“Thank you,” he leaned forward. Kissed my shoulder, pushing my hair aside to press a kiss to my nape, patient and slow. “I want to come inside you. To mark you as mine.”

His voice pierced through the dense fog clouding my brain. I remembered that the last time we did this, he’d come inside me, but he hadn’t asked. He kept pressing tender kisses to my skin, not rushing me and allowing me to make the decision .

It was an easy one.

“Yes,” I gasped and that was all the permission he needed. I groaned into the pillow.
“Please.”

He licked the trails of my tears that I hadn’t even realized were still leaking.

The stubble on his jaw brushed deliciously against my ear, and he released a noise that sounded like a regretful, strained laugh.

“You’re so beautiful.” He pressed another kiss to my cheek.

“I don’t know how I’m going to survive not being able to do this every second of every day. ”

I released a frustrated second groan, but he was unbuttoning his jeans, pushing the layers of fabric down his legs, his weight pressing down on me as he lowered himself against my back, pressing my legs wider with his big palm and—

Fuck!

He grunted and I gasped. The first glide of his cock inside me was choppy, too rough and very raw where I was still a bit achy from being fucked by him the night before. But then his thrust slides deeper.

“ Gods, Tasia, you feel—” He isn’t able to finish his sentence as his hips find a steady rhythm and it’s as if we’ve been doing this our entire lives.

The hot length of him inside me, fucking me into the sofa with powerful thrusts is more than I’m able to comprehend. I’d come too many times that night to even think about another orgasm, but the pleasure of him inside me was enough to make my eyes roll back in my head.

This is what it's supposed to be like.

His fingers twine with mine as he braces himself, his hips punching in and making me wheeze out a breath of pleasure instead of a scream. I didn't know how much longer I could keep going without...

"You're a dream, aren't you?" he gasped, running his tusks over my skin, burying his face in my hair and taking a deep breath before releasing it in a puff of hot, damp air against the skin of my neck. "I'm going to wake up and find myself back in Hellplane, alone. You can't possibly be real."

I started saying words, but I didn't know what. They were inappropriate and wild, I was sure, and he had to murmur soothing words against the skin of my neck.

"You're supposed to be quiet, my mate," he murmured, his fangs digging into the mark he'd already left there, cupping my mouth once more until I was biting into his hand again. I could feel his feral grin as his lips curved.

I shouldn't moan too loudly, I know it. I know why we had to be quiet.

I should be choking back the sounds that I was making.

But I couldn't, and somehow that was fine.

Everything was fine when we were like this.

He'd deal with any fallout. I knew it deep inside.

The part of me that had never free-fallen before. Never trusted enough to do that.

"I need you in my bed," he groaned in my ear, heavy, urgent and raspy.

“We’re going to figure everything out so I can take you and Gabbi back to my home.

You’ll be there with me,” he gasped. “Every day.” One particularly hard thrust pushes me into his pillow until I almost smother myself, but then I feel his fingers tightening in my flesh, his hips moving erratically and without purpose.

“Every day I’m going to fuck you in our bed, Tasia. You’re mine .”

I nodded and rolled my spine, struggling to get closer to him but failing. I didn’t have control over what we were doing, and I heard myself whine, reedy and high-pitched.

I give a silent hitch when the head of his cock hit a perfect spot. I gasped, a hairbreadth from coming again, shockingly. If only he would do it again. Just one time. Even if he just stayed there...

“Say it, Tasia,” he grounded out, evading the spot with skill. Torturous skill, pulling back right before I slipped over the edge again.

I was so close. So close I could feel it already. “I’m... yours.”

“ Yes .” He resumed thrusting, and I was so wet that the sounds were filthy. The slapping of his body against mine faster, and the noises I made—his palm moved back against my mouth, a tight grip that I hoped I’d never lose. His movements stopped.

He bit a deep, guttural groan in the tender flesh of my neck, marking me for the third time, and when I felt the thick ropes of his come inside me, I started convulsing against him. For long moments, I was just sensation and pleasure, only aware of Enka, our bodies and nothing else.

When I could breathe and think again, Enka had shifted us so that he was spooning

me, held to his chest with both arms—at once worshipping and keeping me there.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

His voice was so shaken, I had a brief thought that I should be asking him that.

I turned a little and lifted my hand, letting it run through the shorter hair at the side of his head.

It was a little softer there. A little straighter, but just as thick and lustrous.

He leaned into it like he was touch-starved, struggling to catch his breath.

This male who could probably lift cars if he wanted to. “Yeah. You?”

He didn’t respond in kind. He only gave me a brilliant smile, which meant everything and nothing at once.

I returned the smile, just as brilliant as his.

We’re doing this.

And it was so much better than I thought it would be. It felt so much better than I ever imagined.

“Gods, you’re so...” he panted, trailing off and never finishing the sentence. He pressed sweet, open-mouthed kisses that felt almost involuntary to my temple, neck and collarbone.

He caressed me like I was breakable—crystal in his hands. He followed the line of my arm, my belly and my hips. His touch was a little hungry, a tad desperate, a

smidge disbelieving and quite a bit satisfied.

“I’ll clean you up soon, I promise,” he murmured against my skin. “Just let me... touch you, okay?”

I nodded with a happy, sated smile, running my fingers down his skin, touching him as well. After a moment, a thought penetrated my brain, stealing my style and making me hesitate before I touched him again.

Enka

Small sparks of pleasure were still skittering across my nerves as I lay with my mate, grateful that she was still plastered against me, her scent mingled with mine strong in my nose. It was heady—addictive.

I pushed her hair away from her face and she looked up at me with sleepy eyes, blinking at me, but instead of the sweet satisfaction I'd seen in her eyes before, there was something else there. Worry.

“Hey,” I murmured, leaning down to press a kiss to her lips, gentle with her now after I'd been so rough. “What's wrong?”

Her lips parted a few times, but nothing came out. Whatever it was, she didn't want to talk about it. That meant that it involved her fuckhead husband.

“Did you know...” she started, squeezing her eyes shut, as if she wasn't able to look at me. “That I'm still married?”

I tensed against her, my gut roaring with the need to find that unworthy male and rip him to shreds. To kill him so that she didn't have a single thing linking her to him.

The look in her eyes told me that that wasn't the reaction she needed though. She was searching my face as if gauging how I was dealing with the news and I couldn't show her anger. She'd think it was aimed at her when that was the furthest thing from the truth.

He'd targeted her. My sweet, perfect mate had been a victim of David, and he'd continued to abuse her until she'd left. I was so proud of her. So fucking proud that she'd found a way out of the cycle.

Instead of answering with words—which I was certain wouldn't be helpful in this situation—I nodded, twining my fingers with hers. There was a little spark of hope in her eyes now, and a small, tremulous smile appeared on her lips.

“I want to get a divorce,” she said, taking a deep breath and releasing it.

I didn't allow the punch of joy that I was feeling show. This wasn't about me or my possessiveness. This was about her and I was going to support whatever she wanted to do.

“I... have pictures of everything,” she murmured, ducking her eyes as if she wasn't able to look at me while talking about it.

I didn't force her, letting her seek comfort in my touch instead.

“So I want to go to the police and file for a restraining order. I thought...” She shook her head as she trailed off, before clearing her throat and trying again.

“I thought that if I did that, he'd find Gabbi and I, but now, I just want to get him out of my life.”

She looked at me now, her smile clear and sure. “And I want to start a new one with you. I think it's time to start over,” she murmured and I couldn't stop my grin this time.

I pulled her hard against me, hugging her close and her arms wrapped around my neck, squeezing me tight.

“I’m so happy to hear that,” I told her. “I can help you with anything you need, and I’ll protect you and Gabbi.”

“I know,” she murmured, tears in her voice. “That’s why I feel safe to do it now. Even if he finds me, I know you won’t let anything happen to our daughter.”

“Or you, my mate. He’s never going to touch you again,” I assured her, burying my fingers in her hair and pressing my lips to hers, kissing her with all the love I felt for her.

She was perfect. So strong, so beautiful and still so kind. I didn’t know who’d blessed me by granting her to me as a mate, but I’d forever be grateful to them.

She kissed me then, as if I was the most precious thing to her. Cupping my cheeks and caressing my lips with hers. Her tongue took a slow, savoring foray of my mouth and I stayed still, basking in her affection.

She pulled away, searching my face and I swallowed hard, wondering what she was going to say. Hoping, praying.

“I love you,” she murmured and the punch to my gut of her words had me exhaling a slow, wheezing breath.

I grabbed her, making her yelp, squeezing her against me and murmuring grateful prayers against her hair in Orcish. A lifetime of being alone had led me to her. I’d do it all over again in a heartbeat .

“I love you so much,” I told her, pressing kisses to her hair, neck and shoulder, paying special attention to my mating mark on her neck. “So fucking much.”

She was beaming when she pulled away to kiss me.

“Gabbi’s going to say I told you so,” she giggled, snuggling against my chest and resting her head in the crook of my neck—fitting me as if she was always meant to be there.

“She did tell us,” I defended her, “so she’d have every right to.”

“You’re going to spoil her until she’s rotten,” Tasia tsked, running her fingers through the hair on my chest.

The buzz of my phone was quiet from my jeans and I sighed, making tiny adjustments under her so I could reach it without jostling her. I tugged it free and pulled it closer to us, showing her the screen as well.

“Rudgar,” I grunted, opening it, my eyes scanning the words before we both froze. She’d clearly been reading as well.

Hanna’s missing. The coven’s tried scrying for her, but they can’t find her. Call asap.

We were up and off the sofa, dragging on our clothes as quickly as we could. We were both seated next to each other on the sofa in minutes, and Tasia’s hand was trembling as she took the phone from me.

The sound of ringing was loud in the quiet room and I watched my mate’s lower lip start to tremble. I ran my palm down her back, wishing and hoping that nothing was wrong with Hanna. I didn’t know her that well, but she was one of my mate’s beloved sisters and our daughter’s aunt.

“Hey,” Rudgar’s voice was a rough growl as it came over the phone’s speaker. “I have the rest of the coven here—”

“Tasia,” Zara interrupted, before he could finish. “Is she safe?”

“I’m here,” my mate said into the phone, her voice trembling. “I’m safe. Gabbi’s safe.”

The rush of breath from across the phone told me that the others were sighing with relief.

“We don’t know exactly what happened,” Tabitha continued, the voice of reason in a moment when everything seemed to be falling apart. “But she went to the park like she usually did, and she... she didn’t come back.”

“I should have gone with her,” Floria wailed, a little further away from the phone. “She asked if I wanted to go with her and I should have .”

“It’s no one’s fault,” Rudgar said, but I saw the guilt in my mate’s eyes, the same way the rest of the coven was probably feeling.

“You don’t know what happened,” I said in a low voice to Tasia, but she was shaking her head.

“It has to be him,” she gasped. “It has to be David. He couldn’t get Gabbi and I because we were here, but if he was watching us, he knows who my sisters are.”

Tears were flooding her eyes and I had her in my arms in the next moment. “We’ll find her,” I told her, pressing a kiss to her hair. “I’ll get her back for you.”

“No,” she insisted, shaking her head before speaking into the phone. “I’m the one he wants.”

“And it’s reckless for you to go after them without support then,” Rudgar insisted, and I was so grateful for his words that if he were in the room with us I would have spun him around in a hug.

“We need to think this through. We have to narrow down the locations he could be. I’ll start tracking her through the cameras.

We just wanted to make sure you were okay first.”

“Yes, that’s a great idea,” I told him. “I’ll get Gabbi and take her to Darak. Then we can head back home—”

He reached out, putting the phone on the table and then gripping my arms while he searched my face. I knew immediately what he was going to say and I shook my head with vehemence.

“No, Enka. No ,” I insisted. “He’s after me, so I’m not going to let everyone put themselves in danger while I sit here protected.”

“You need to take care of our Gruk-ir,” he explained, pressing a lingering kiss to my forehead. “I promise I’ll handle this for you. I’ll take care of our family.”

Tasia

The words were like a shock to my system. Our family. We weren't so far into our relationship that I fully understood him, but this male was loyal without fault. He'd lay his life down for the ones he loved and that's what terrified me.

"No, no ," Zara was saying on the phone. "We have to go together. The coven is stronger when we're all there."

"We can handle this," Rudgar was explaining to her.

"We can help!" Tabitha insisted, and then everyone was speaking over each other, the entire coven fighting to be part of the rescue mission.

I gave a tremulous smile, reaching out to take the phone in my shaking hand. "What do you think would be best, Rud?" I asked, my voice low and worried.

Everyone went silent then, and I just knew that they were all looking at the male.

"I've already spoken to Dristan," he explained.

"And I think our clan should hunt him down, find Hanna and deal with the issue. I want to bring the coven there to stay with you," he added, and another loud protest sounded from all around him.

"So that we don't have to worry about your safety. We'll take care of her, we promise."

“She’s our sister,” Zara whispered, and I knew that it would be difficult for him to say no to her. The same way Enka had looked tortured when I’d told him I needed to go as well.

“I know that,” he agreed, “but we’ll bring her back to you, I swear it.”

There was another long silence where I studied Enka’s handsome, solemn face as we waited for a response.

“Okay,” Zara agreed, “but it has to be now.”

I murmured my agreement, as did Enka.

“You have ten minutes to get ready while I get the rest of the clan,” he said, and there was a scramble over the phone, which told us that the coven had scurried to get ready. “I’ll be there soon,” he said directly into the phone, before a beep told us that he’d hung up.

I swallowed hard, turning to look at Enka, whose expression was growing more and more angry by the second. I reached out for him, my hands shaking as I did, and I was enveloped in his arms before I even knew it was what I needed .

“I’ll get her, my mate,” I whispered against her hair. “I’m going to bring her back to you and she’ll be safe.”

I didn’t allow the sobs to start, nodding briskly and swiping my fingers under my eyes before wriggling away from him. “I want to go with you,” I told him, trying to sound firm. “If I’m not there, he might hurt her.”

He was there in a moment, cupping my face and lifting my chin so my eyes could meet his.

He swept his thumbs under my jaw, soothing me in a way I didn't even know I could be.

“Protect our daughter, my mate. Stay with her and make sure she's safe.

I promise I'll bring back your sister. Can you trust me? ”

I stared up into the eyes of my mate, knowing that I could, but wishing that I could help. Still, he was right. I wouldn't feel complete knowing that this could all be some kind of trick and our daughter would be the real victim.

“I trust you,” I told him, meaning it with every part of my soul.

He pressed a gentle kiss to my forehead and then to my lips.

I paced in front of the door, nibbling on my lower lip with my arms crossed, waiting. Enka was leaning against the wall nearby, his gaze following me as I moved. I had the phone that I'd had before I left home in my hand, waiting for it to ring.

I'd left it off the entire time so that it couldn't be used to track me, but now the group chat was pinging and I needed to know when my coven would arrive. I glanced at it every few seconds, but I hadn't seen anything new in minutes.

“Maybe we should—” I started, just as there was a knock on the door. I lunged for it at the same time that Enka lunged for me, spinning me and holding me against his body while I struggled to escape.

He looked into the peephole before he put me down, pressing a kiss to the top of my head. He opened the door and a rush of females poured inside, hugging me in a tight circle of arms. Familiar scents bombarded me and I let myself soak in the love that surrounded me.

“I missed you guys so much,” I tried to say, but it came out a garbled mess of sobs.

A similar mass of words that had no clear meaning, just unintelligible, high-pitched screeches of sound.

The bedroom door opened, a little head peeking out, rubbing her eyes, and a scream that would probably shatter glass left Gabbi.

She raced across the room, suddenly completely awake even though it was the early hours of the morning.

More hugs and kisses were spread to her and the coven migrated into the living room.

I looked over at where Enka was, males entering the room to greet him, shaking his hand.

Dristan, Rudgar, Rok and Darak. His brothers entered last, but they both pulled him into tight hugs, slapping his back with blows that would have taken me to my knees—and possibly killed me.

I watched as they formed a circle, much like ours, but instead of reunification and passing around a little girl, they shared low words and serious frowns.

For some reason, Savla—usually the calmest of the bunch—looked jittery and shaken.

Enka’s gaze met mine and he sent me a reassuring smile before Dristan said something in a low rush that I couldn’t understand from so far away and he turned back to him.

Tabitha’s hand on mine drew my attention to her and her expression told me she was

feeling just as much pain as I was. I leaned forward, hugging her close.

“This is my fault,” I told her in a low whisper and she scoffed, shaking her head.

“It’s just as much all of our fault then,” she told me, taking my arms in her hands. “We knew that David was after you. We knew you were running from him, and we should have been more careful, don’t you agree?”

I shook my head, and she shushed me, squeezing me into her arms again. “You’re safe and Hanna will be safe. Those males won’t let anything happen to her and we’re going to perform a protection spell from here,” she added, tightening her arms. “Are you ready?”

I swallowed hard, avoiding her gaze. “I... lost my powers.”

I watched her eyebrows sweep upward as she studied me. “You’re bound,” she sighed, squeezing my hands in hers. “And you didn’t tell us.”

Gasps sounded around us as the words penetrated the coven.

“You should have stayed at home,” Zara told me, sweeping over to hold my hands as well. “We could have protected you.”

“I’m the one who brought the danger,” I sniffled, tears leaking from my eyes as I looked around at the circle of women who had taken me in when I hadn’t had anyone else in the world. Gabbi ran back from where she’d wandered over to greet the males, her little brow furrowed with worry.

I swiped my tears away again, giving her a tremulous smile. “Hey sweetheart, why don’t you head back to bed?”

She shook her head, adamant. “I want to stay here.”

“How about I read you a story?” Floria asked, sweeping her up into her arms.

“Three,” Gabbi said, holding out three tiny fingers in demand.

“Two,” Floria negotiated as they walked.

“Four,” Gabbi huffed, and Floria’s laugh was the last sound I heard before she closed the bedroom door.

I turned to look at where Zara was still studying me with worry.

“He found us and he followed us to the park. Hanna was there with Gabbi but I went to grab groceries and he came after me. I didn’t know what to do, so I ran.

By the time he caught me, I’d gathered enough power to blast him. But he’s—”

“Human,” Zara sighed, rubbing her palm over her face before shaking her head.

“That’s fine. We’ll call the Magickal Bureau. Did you receive a summons?”

I shook my head. “Not yet, but I’ve been staying here. I’m not sure if they would have sent it home instead—”

“I changed our official coven address,” Zara said with a shrug, “but I haven’t seen anything for you. Let’s reach out to them soon. We need to get you empowered again.”

I nodded, agreeing wholeheartedly. How could I protect my family if I didn’t have any magick to do it with?

“In the meanwhile,” she told me with a stern look, “you’re going to trust that mate of yours to get Hanna back. Those orcs know what they’re doing.”

I felt heat rush to my cheeks and I ducked my head, but Tabitha tsked. “As if we wouldn’t know,” she huffed. “With the way you both can’t seem to stop looking at each other.”

Even though she said it—or perhaps because she said it, my gaze swept to Enka where he was already looking at me. He sent a small wink my way, and it melted my heart. This male was going to do whatever he could to help us .

“We’re ready to leave,” Dristan called, and Savla already had his hand on the door, opening it and gesturing for everyone to exit. “We’ll be back with Hanna, don’t worry.”

“Thank you,” we all said as one, and I sent up a silent prayer that all of the males would be safe. David might be human, but he still had tricks up his sleeve. I wasn’t sure what he would do, but I could trust that it wouldn’t be fair.

“Be safe!” I called to them, and they waved as they filed out. Enka blew me a small kiss, sending a jolt of love shooting straight to my heart—along with a sharp fear that I’d never see him again.

Please Goddess Mother, protect him. Protect them all.

Enka

The plan that Dristan had set in motion was simple but straightforward.

One that I was certain we'd be able to execute quickly and efficiently.

I was so grateful to the mates of these males for sending them to assist us.

Dristan had grumbled fiercely about how Pen—so pregnant that she was about to pop—had shoved him out the door and told him that he wasn't allowed back without Hanna.

We were going to locate David by letting Rudgar's team hack into the street cameras near where Hanna had last been seen. When they found her, they'd find him. Once we had a close enough range, we'd canvas the area until we found him.

"No one's going rogue," Dristan said to the group of us that were squished together in his car. Rudgar and Darak's cars were behind, carrying everyone else.

As it turned out, transporting our clan was going to require more vehicles.

I eyed the way Dristan drove with quiet confidence and was glad that he'd been the one who had taught me to drive the smaller automatic vehicle that I used.

Now, though, I needed something bigger so I could help with this part of the clan's needs.

“No one,” we all agreed, except Savla who sat next to me, his gaze on the darkness outside the window. I nudged my shoulder against his, but he didn’t respond, still lost in his thoughts.

I left him alone, knowing that when he was like that, he needed to sort out whatever was going on in his head. I wasn’t sure if it was because a female had been abducted—it was eerily similar to what had happened to Zara, his best friend.

Perhaps this had brought back terrible memories. Either way, I returned my attention to Dristan, knowing that we only had a short time to prepare.

“Is this a good idea?” Krusk hissed to Rok, who shushed him just as quickly.

We were currently squatting behind a dumpster with Rudgar, Dristan and Darak posted behind the dumpster opposite us. I was trying my best to ignore the stench from the alley and garbage, but it was hard.

The building we were facing looked older and the area around it was on the sketchier side of the city. The lights were all off, unlike the buildings surrounding it, so it was probably abandoned,

“He’s in there,” Rok said, scowling as he tilted his head toward the solid metal door behind us. “And Rudgar’s team just have to make sure that no one’s nearby using the magick box.” He gave a firm nod and I rolled my eyes.

Rok still didn’t have a full grasp on technology, even though he’d been here longer than the rest of us. I wasn’t able to understand the background processes of the things that happened on this plane, but I could at least tell the difference between that and magick.

“Shouldn’t be long then,” Krusk said, and I grunted my agreement.

Rudgar's team was amazing when it came to tracking, and they could find anything that you needed in a few taps. I was still struggling to learn the basics.

The low whistle from the other dumpster had us all standing and making our way to the door. Dristan, Rudgar and Darak had their hands near their belts and I was certain that they were getting ready to draw their guns.

I had mine—and had learned to use it along with my brothers—but I would have preferred having an axe. Rok hadn't even given them a chance, the sound of metal swinging clear in the air as he drew his.

"How come Rok gets to keep his axe and we have to use these?" Krusk muttered in annoyance and everyone shushed him even though I agreed.

Dristan nodded his head, pulling his own gun free and facing the door while Darak moved up to it, pulling a slim case from his jacket pocket, opening it and pulling long implements from it before ducking and starting to work on the lock.

Rudgar had also drawn his weapon, facing the alley behind us instead.

With a few scrapes of metal meeting metal, there was a clicking sound and Darak lifted his hand to turn the handle.

My brothers and I had our guns drawn immediately.

The door swung open with ease and both Dristan and Rudgar ducked out of the way, gesturing for us to do the same.

We pressed our bodies against the concrete walls. My ears twitched as I focused on listening to anything that was happening inside the building. There was a low murmur of voices, but it wasn't anywhere near this door.

We all looked to Dristan and when he gave a small nod, we moved in a group into the empty room.

Rudgar pressed a hand to Dristan's chest and there was a small moment of what had to be a silent but heated argument with their eyes.

It ended when Dristan rolled his eyes and Rudgar moved to lead the group instead.

With sure, silent steps Rudgar made his way forward. I knew that he had the layout of the building from one of his team members. We made our way toward the stairs, quietly climbing to the third floor.

Stepping into the open corridor was nerve wracking. I tightened my hold on the grip of the gun, careful not to squeeze the trigger at all. I kept expecting someone to jump out from a corner.

Instead, the entire place appeared to be empty except for the two voices that we'd heard downstairs. My ears twitched as I heard the same voices still speaking. The conversation was getting more heated now and I could make out some of the words.

“—ridiculous. All over some fucking woman? You need to get your shit together. No whore's worth this.”

I felt heat rising in my face, my fury bubbling. Savla, the one who was usually the calmest of the group released a low growl. Everyone turned shocked eyes in his direction, but he wasn't looking at us, his gaze narrowed on the door down the corridor where the voices were coming from.

As one, we made our way closer to the door just as a feminine gasp of pain sounded behind it. We all froze, snarls sounding as involuntary responses.

Fucking cowards.

“Where the fuck is she?” he asked, and we continued making our way forward, at a faster pace.

We leaned against the walls on either side of the door while Rudgar moved in front of it. I shifted my bulk in front of it instead, easing him out of the way, with Savla right behind me.

I didn't wait before I kicked in the door. A loud feminine screech sounded across the room, and I wasn't shocked to see that it had come from one of the men instead of the female on the floor. I ducked back behind the wall, shoving Savla with me when two guns lifted in our direction.

The loud crack of a gunshot sounded and I heard the reverberation of it hitting the wall behind me. My lips parted in a snarl as two more gunshots sounded, the bullets slamming into the wall opposite us through the door.

Savla was shaking with fury next to me and I still couldn't understand what was happening. Pushing the worry aside, I eased my way back to the doorway. Hushed, hurried words made their way in the ensuing silence.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck . You didn't say she had bodyguards!”

“Shut the fuck up!”

“I'm getting out of here!”

A scuffle ensued and I heard my chance. I darted my head back inside, and saw that one male had thrown himself on the back of another who was halfway to the door on the other side of the room. They were distracted, and that was all I needed to aim my

gun at them.

Savla pulled my hand away, his eyes wide with worry, hurrying over to the female on the floor. That was when they noticed us. And they weren't aiming for me.

Savla.

He reached the female just as the two of them raised their guns.

I lunged in front of him even as the gunshots rang inside the room.

From their direction as well as behind me.

The impact in my chest had me staggering on my feet, spinning me around like I'd been punched, followed by the burning sting of something in my forearm.

My brother's wide, horrified eyes turned my way, finally distracted from where he'd run for the tiny female crumpled on the floor.

I was still in front of them, protecting them, when I heard the bodies falling to the floor behind me.

I sent up a small prayer that David hadn't died while I ignored the pain.

He's mine to kill.

"Go," I hissed, shoving at him before I turned back toward the males, my own gun lifting in case they got up. The leaking sensation on my arm had me frowning at it for a moment before I realized it was blood.

Fuck. I'll look at it later.

Savla lifted the shocked female into his arms with ease, hurrying out of the room, and I stared at the two forms writhing on the ground. They weren't going anywhere, so I loosened the buttons of my now-torn shirt, peering down at the vest that Dristan had insisted we all wear before we arrived.

There was a damaged section where pain was radiating from my chest, letting me know that whatever the hell it was made of—and now I had to wonder if it was magickally reinforced—had saved me from the bullet.

The wet dripping from where the second bullet had hit my arm called my attention next as the rest of the males swarmed into the room, guns aimed at the men on the floor.

I should maybe do something to stop the bleeding, but I was too interested in what was happening in front of me.

The slimy face of the asshole I knew to be David lifted, fear visible on his face. The fucking coward had expected my mate to be here instead. He hadn't thought she'd have backup of any kind.

The growl that left my throat was loud in the room and both males whimpered at the sound. The acrid scent of urine filled the space between us and I rolled my eyes, scoffing.

Darak had David on his face, his hands tied behind his back in seconds. Rudgar did the same with the other idiot. I didn't need to know his name. The fact that he'd played any part in intimidating an innocent woman told me everything I needed to know about him.

I stalked toward David, but Rudgar got in the way. I barely checked the impulse to bare my fangs at him.

“Not here,” he said in a low voice. “It’ll be harder to clean up any messes.”

My eyes flashed to meet his, and I saw the same dark fury there that I felt inside me. With a solemn nod I stepped back, watching as David’s expression cycled between terror, fury and despair.

“I didn’t do anything!” he yelled, trying to pull his arms out of the restraints to no avail. “I was trying to save her! This asshole’s the one who took her!”

The other male snapped out of his blubbing state long enough to throw an incredulous look at David. “What the fuck , asshole? This was all your plan!”

“I have no idea what he’s talking about. Just... just take me to Tasia. I can tell her what he did,” David said, trying to gather his wits again.

I was beginning to realize that this obsession of his hadn’t been kicked out of him yet. But it would be. I had plans for that.

I squatted in front of him, leaning down until we were eye to eye. He pulled back, away from me, until he was almost lying on the floor, his expression one of sheer terror again.

“W-whatever she’s paying you,” he hissed in a low whisper, “I can double it.”

My smile was slow and a tad bit evil. “My mate doesn’t have to pay me a cent to deal with trash like you,” I told him, baring my fangs. “I deal with all her problems for free.”

I fisted his shirt with one arm, standing and lifting his limp body with me until he was dangling a couple feet off the floor, our eyes now even as I kept the same smile on my face. He looked down, swallowing hard and flailing.

“And you’re a problem,” I told him in a low voice. “So we’re going to take you on a little trip.”

He opened his mouth to start screaming, but Darak came up behind us, reaching forward to slap tape over the male’s mouth. It made him scream harder, his eyes bulging with terror. The last thing he saw was my grin as Darak covered his face with a black hood.

I turned to look at the other human whose head was also covered while he lay on the floor in the fetal position. I rolled my eyes, shaking my head. The punch to David’s stomach made him double over and Darak snorted out a laugh before dragging his wheezing form away.

Rudgar rolled his eyes at me and I shrugged before grabbing the second male, holding him away from myself so the urine didn’t drip on me. I scowled as I turned to take him downstairs.

Pathetic.

Enka

I didn't go back home right away like most of the clan did with Hanna in tow.

Instead, Rudgar, Dristan and I made our way into a building I'd never seen before.

We'd dropped the male that we didn't know off on the side of the road, uncaring that his eyes were covered and he might get hit by a truck or eaten by an animal.

Not our problem.

Dristan had David by the arm, dragging him along on the ground, uncaring for the yelps and sobbing he was doing inside the black hood.

Rudgar moved to the huge metal doors, pressing his palm to the reader on the side.

A loud beep sounded and the door swung open.

Both Dristan and I peered into the cavernous interior that lit up when we entered.

It was an empty, unpainted space with no furniture except for a group of chairs and tables along the perimeter.

"I could have used this place when I was dealing with the assholes who fucked with Pen," Dristan huffed, walking in with David sliding along behind him, bumping him over the entrance without a care.

“I got this because of that. Our clan can’t seem to stay out of trouble,” Rudgar said with wry amusement. He walked over to the tables and grabbed one of the chairs, moving it to the center of the space. “This is good,” he said, pointing to it.

Dristan walked over, tossing David into the chair without a care until he tipped over with it. He fell backward and his sobs grew louder. We all rolled our eyes but I looked over at Dristan. He was our Chief and I was going to defer to him.

He folded his arms over his chest and looked me in the eye as he tipped his head toward David. My grin was grateful and feral all at once.

Have at him, was the message I was getting, loud and clear.

I moved forward, yanking the asshole up with ease, fixing the chair and sitting him on it before I pulled his hood off. He stared up at me with panic and horror, a whimper leaving him.

I squatted so we were eye to eye, making sure he was getting my message loud and clear as I said, “So you’re the puny human who’s been hunting my mate. Who hit her and forced her to run.” My voice was pitched low and I watched as he began crying in earnest.

It was everything I could do to not roll my eyes again. The theatrics were becoming tiresome.

“And you tried to hurt my daughter,” I tsked. He shook his head vehemently and that was when I decided to let him bury himself a little deeper. “No? Tell me what you did, then.”

I ripped the tape from his mouth—hard—and he cried out but sobered as soon as I glared at him.

“I—I don’t know who your daughter is,” he gasped, looking around in a panic. “But I didn’t touch her. I only tried to take Tasia and Gabbi.”

I grabbed his throat then, giving it a squeeze that let him know I could pop it like a fucking twig. His eyes were huge in his face, but he shut up so fast I figured he got my message.

“Gabbi is my daughter,” I growled, possessiveness and ownership in my tone. “Tasia is my mate. Mine . And you tried to hurt them.” I tried to stay calm, but it was a struggle and my fingers were shaking with the need to squeeze. “Tell me why you deserve to live.”

He was sobbing again. Great heaves and hiccups. “I didn’t know, I swear.”

“That’s not an excuse, is it?” I asked Rudgar over my shoulder. He and Dristan were standing there, arms crossed on their huge chests.

“Nope,” Rudgar agreed. “Sounds like he’s making shit up.”

“I’m not,” he gasped, “I didn’t know she’d met someone. If I had—”

“You wouldn’t have come after her?” I asked, my lip curling in a snarl as my fist tightened. “You wouldn’t have terrified her?”

He was gasping now, and I watched with satisfaction as his face turned blue. His legs and arms scrabbled in their restraints. That was when I heard the knock on the metal of the door.

I released him, reaching up with my blunted claws to dig into the flesh at the side of his right eye, pulling hard to make a gash that ended at his temple.

He was howling and screaming as the metal door behind me opened.

Blood poured down the side of his face, but I ignored it, turning and wiping my hand on the side of my pants before smiling as Zara came inside, leaning up to press a kiss to her mate's jaw.

"Hey Zara," I said jovially, as if there wasn't a wailing male behind me.

"Hey Enka," she said, hugging me tight. "You okay?"

"Better than okay," I told her, my arms wrapping her tight. I watched Rudgar scowl behind me, but she was my friend, and I wasn't saying no to her offered hug when she was doing such a huge favor for me. "Dristan told me he asked you to help me."

"Always," she told me, leaning back to smile at me. "You helped me when you didn't need to and I'll owe you and your brothers for the rest of my life."

That sobered me. "You don't owe us anything," I told her with firm conviction. "None of us expect anything back for that."

"And that," she told me with a mischievous grin, "is why I owe you." She rubbed her hands together with glee. "And I heard that I get to have some fun too. There's an asshole that needs some payback?"

My smile was slow and wicked. "Right over here. I was thinking we should send him to a place where his kind will be welcomed with open arms. No matter how much I want to kill him, it'll just make trouble for Tasia.

Sending him there means he's as good as dead without bringing any unwanted attention to the clan or coven. "

Zara's laugh was more of a cackle now and she nodded as she pulled away, her arms moving as magick swirled around us. Her head was tossed back as she started chanting in a low voice. I turned to look at David and saw that blood was still pouring from the cut I'd given him.

I moved over to him, and he started struggling harder as he screamed. I lifted him from the chair just as a portal began opening in front of us. Zara was glowing along with the magick now, her head thrown back with a gleeful expression on her face that made me hope I never got on her bad side .

"You'll feel right at home where I'm sending you, David," I told the puny male, and his screams quieted long enough to ask,

"Where're you sending me?" his breath coming in pants now.

"To Hellplane," I said, without explanation. Just as the portal opened, I tossed him, his arms and legs still bound, while he shouted and scrabbled, trying to get back. He landed in a forest, looking around in fear.

I gave him a cheerful little wave as the portal got smaller and smaller, disappearing after one final look at his terrified face. Zara was still cackling.

"He's either going to get killed or he'll face some orcs," she laughed before sobering. "Would they take him in?"

"Not with the scar I gave him," I said with a smirk, tapping the side of my face where I'd cut him. "It's meant for traitors."

A guffaw left her and she doubled over. I sent Rudgar an amused look, vindication filling me. He shrugged, moving over to hug his mate around her waist.

“There’s my feral witch,” he purred.

“Feral bitch,” she corrected with a sniff, kissing him. I scowled, looking away and spotting a similarly disgusted expression on Dristan’s face.

“Will the sorcerers help him?” Rudgar asked, looking between Zara and I. Orcs weren’t the only ones on the plane after all.

She shook her head, rolling her eyes. “They barely trust each other. They’d never take him in and they only speak Magick. They’d gut him faster than the orcs would.”

I snorted out a laugh, turning toward the exit, not feeling an ounce of guilt. “Ready to go?” I asked them, and they all nodded, moving to the door with me.

Tasia

I paced in front of the kitchen sink, my gaze on the phone on the counter.

“Mommy, you’re making me dizzy,” Gabbi called from where she was sitting on Hanna’s lap. Hanna’s arms were wrapped around her as Gabbi force-fed her cold oatmeal that she hadn’t eaten .

“I’m sorry,” I told Gabbi and the rest of my coven who were sitting around the table as well. Hanna hadn’t had a moment to herself, surrounded by us and cuddling my daughter, who refused to leave her side. “I was just hoping to hear from Enka.”

Hanna nodded, under her eyes smudged with darkness from lack of sleep and stress. “He... He was so kind to come and get me,” she said, clearing her throat as she snuggled Gabbi.

“He’s part of our family now,” Tabitha sniffed, plaiting Hanna’s hair, smoothing the lengths down her back. “He better rescue any of us that need it.”

That started a round of laughter from everyone and I sent her a grateful look. She returned a wink.

“It probably won’t be the last time then,” Hanna chuckled, her eyes closed as she rocked Gabbi side to side. Gabbi shoved another spoonful of her oatmeal into Hanna’s mouth and she swallowed out of habit more than anything else.

I was glad Gabbi was getting her to eat. We hadn’t been able to get her to take a

single bite of the breakfast we'd made. I wasn't making it any better, nervously pacing and eyeing the phone and door like they were lifelines.

"That other male too," Hanna said, frowning. "What was his name?"

"Which one?" I asked, moving around the table and clearing plates.

"The one who brought me here," she said, and I saw her bite her lip before she looked away. A sign of embarrassment that I wasn't used to from her.

"Savla," I told her, watching her carefully, but she didn't react, only nodding and sending a careful smile my way.

"I'll have to thank him," she said, and I reached out to take her hand in mine.

"Are you sure you're okay?" I asked, studying her .

"I am," she assured me, but her smile didn't quite reach her eyes. I knew a little bit about her past, but she didn't speak about it often, so I didn't pry any further.

"I'm so sorry, sweetheart," I told her, sure that I was going to crumble to pieces in worry and guilt.

"Stop saying that," she huffed, showing some of her old self again with a quick roll of her eyes. "You had no idea that your psycho ex was going to do what he did. Forgive yourself because I haven't blamed you for a single moment of it."

Gabbi chose that moment to shove another spoonful of oatmeal into Hanna's mouth and we both laughed, but mine was teary.

The sound of the door opening pulled my attention away from the moment, my heart

soaring with hope. And it was rewarded when a tall, familiar form entered the hotel suite. I ran to him, stopping just in front of him, not sure what I should do.

Was he hurt? Was he regretting that he'd ever tried to help me? Had David hurt him?

I studied him from head to toe, gasping as I saw the blood on his arm, my hands going to it right away before I stopped myself, hoping I hadn't hurt him.

"Are you okay?" I gasped, but I was in his arms, squeezed tight before I knew what was happening.

That was when the tears started flowing and I was sobbing in his arms, squeezing him tight. I felt a little tornado slam into us and I knew Gabbi was joining in the reunion.

"I'm okay, my mate," he purred, rubbing his face against my hair and inhaling deeply. "I'm perfect now."

"You're bleeding," I sobbed harder.

"Abu's bleeding?" Gabbi squeaked, her arms up to be lifted. With a quick dip and scoop, Enka had her in his arms and she held onto both of us in a tight hug. "Why, Abu? Did you fight?"

She pulled away to give him a stern look. "Mommy said you're not supposed to fight."

He gave her a nod, before saying, "And if someone picks a fight with you, what do you do?"

"Get Abu," she said with a firm nod and he pressed a proud kiss to her forehead.

“Exactly,” he told her.

“Can we go home now that Aunty Hanna’s back?” she asked, snuggling against his throat before scrunching her nose. “Abu you’re stinky.”

The boom of his laughter resonated through me, joy filling me that my family was hale and whole.

“Yeah, we’re going home,” he told her, pressing another kiss to the top of her head and then mine, pulling away and putting her down before heading to the bedroom, sending a wave in the direction of my coven who were staring with avid interest at our interaction.

I felt heat sweep up my cheeks as Gabbi skipped her way back to them.

“Well, well,” Tabitha said, grinning at me. “Isn’t this something?”

I refused to respond, holding up a finger as I rushed after my mate. He was already taking his shirt off in the bathroom and his eyes widened when he saw me. He turned toward me, reaching out and searching my face.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” he asked, his voice low and soothing, a purr automatically leaving his chest as he tried to calm me down.

I shook my head as my body relaxed, reaching for his arm. “You’re hurt,” I told him, cradling his hand to me.

His grin was huge and please. “Worried about me?” he asked, leaning forward for a sweet kiss. “I’m fine. The bullet went in and out.”

“You were shot ?” I screeched, startling him, and he shrugged.

“Just twice. It wasn’t anything— ”

I covered his mouth with my palm, narrowing my gaze on him. “You were shot twice ,” I demanded, “and you didn’t tell me ?”

His eyebrows went up and his eyes widened, but he didn’t remove my palm, only nodding in response.

I took a deep breath, trying to regulate the rush of worry and fury at David that was running through me. After a few seconds, I released the breath, struggling to get under control.

“Okay,” I said in a calm voice. “So from now on, when you get hurt,” I sounded out, trying to be reasonable, “I’d appreciate it if you tell me, alright?”

He gave a slow nod as I pulled my hand from his mouth.

“Good. So we’re going to treat the wounds—”

“Only one of them touched skin, and it’s already healed—” he tried to interrupt, but the glare I sent his way silenced him.

“As I was saying,” I sounded out with narrowed eyes, “we’re going to treat it and then you’re going to promise me that you’re never going to do anything to get hurt ever again .”

His gaze softened, but he shook his head.

“I want to give you everything you want, my mate, but I can’t promise you that I won’t get hurt,” he said in a low voice and I was about to argue when he continued.

“If it ever comes to it, I’ll protect you and our daughter.

If that means getting hurt, I don’t care.

If it means giving my life for yours, I—”

I couldn’t take it. I stopped him with a trembling hand over his lips again. Tears ran freely down my face and I pressed it into his chest, cherishing the feel of him there.

“I can’t think about losing you,” I gasped, shaking my head. “Don’t ever say that again.”

His lips curved in a smile against my fingers. “I won’t say it but I need you to understand. I’d do anything for you and Gabbi, so I can’t promise that to you. ”

I nodded, nuzzling my nose against him.

“I love you,” I told him, pressing my cheek to where his heart was thumping.

“I love you too, my mate,” he murmured, running his big palm down my back.

It was a long moment before I released a rough laugh.

“You really do need a bath,” I joked, and he pulled me tighter against him.

“Good. Then you’ll take one with me.”

I released a loud peal of laughter as he pulled me into the shower, sending our clothes flying as we went.

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Tasia

“ I can’t wait until you see all the toys we got for you for when you get home,” Zara told Gabbi, who was clinging to her neck and swinging from side to side as Zara tried to stuff her new toys into the suitcases Enka had bought for her.

Even with the new ones, they were overflowing. I sent a mild glare my mate’s way, but he was humming happily as he folded my clothes, lifting them to his nose every once in a while to take a deep sniff.

Goddess Mother, I love this orc.

“More toys?” Gabbi squealed, wiggling wildly, almost throwing Zara off-kilter. She giggled, spinning my daughter before tossing her onto the bed.

“You’re going to spoil her more than you already do ,” I told the other females in the room, sending censuring looks their way, but they ignored me and Zara continued spinning with Gabbi.

The carefree way my daughter laughed sent a pang of relief into my chest. I never had to worry about losing that ever again. I sent another look my mate’s way, but this time one of gratitude. He winked at me, leaning over for a kiss.

“Gag,” Floria said, but her tone was mild and there was a smile on her face. “You’ll make us sick with the mushy stuff.”

“Sorry, but was it Enka and I or Zara and Rudgar who did the dirty on the shared

sofa?” I asked, tapping my chin.

Zara’s face whipped in my direction and everyone else turned to gape at her.

“You didn’t ,” Tabitha gasped, from where she was checking all the cupboards for anything we missed.

Zara sputtered for a long moment before bowing her head in shame. Floria marched over and smacked her over the head, making her yelp.

“I eat breakfast on that sofa!” she gasped, and Zara turned her bent head to send me a small glare. I bit my lip, struggling not to laugh, nodding my head in agreement instead.

Gabbi giggled, hopping up to smack Zara across the head as well. Our High Priestess just rolled her eyes, dropping my daughter back to the bed to blow on her stomach instead, making her scream with laughter.

A few more laughing arguments later, our bags were packed and we were making our way out the door, everyone rolling a suitcase. I peeked back into the room, my heart clenching at the sweet memories it contained.

Gabbi had passed out and was draped over my shoulder, dribbling spectacularly, as usual. We’d come into this place like this. With Gabbi asleep and with a bag. But it wasn’t the same. There wasn’t an ounce of fear inside me anymore.

With David in Hellplane and with Enka by my side, nothing could touch me anymore. There wasn’t anything that I had to worry about that my orc couldn’t handle.

I was already working with Kor—the lawyer Dristan had recommended—to get my

divorce finalized. With David gone and not answering the summons it could take some time, but it would happen and then I could marry my mate.

Tasia had already scheduled a hearing with the Magickal Bureau to get my powers back. It was easy to prove that I was defending myself with the evidence I'd gathered over the years of David's abuse.

I was as free as a bird and could decide to do and go anywhere I wanted. It had been so long since I had that choice that tears clogged my throat.

When a big palm spanned my waist and the male who owned it ducking to press a kiss to our daughter's head, I leaned back against his chest. Gratitude and hope filled me as I cuddled against him. I had a real family now. My mate, my daughter, my coven and a new clan.

I took a deep breath, savoring the scent of him---the scent of safety and love.

"Let's go home," he whispered against my hair, and I squeezed my eyes shut, a tear leaking out of my eye before I nodded, turning to press a soft kiss to his lips before taking a deep breath and releasing it, finally looking forward to the future.

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Emma

“Holy hotness,” Lin, the harpy next to me, shrieked, her talons digging into my arm as she gripped it with her hand.

“Ow,” I complained, prying myself free, but she wasn’t paying any attention to me. I turned to look at where her eagle-eyes were focused and my eyebrows slowly rose in admiration. “Okay, yeah. Holy hotness.”

“Right?” she gasped, slapping me hard. I almost buckled under her enthusiastic response, but I held strong, if only to stare in awe at the group that was entering through the front door.

Four huge, gorgeous orcs in suits were making their way inside the building, two beautiful human-looking women in the lead, holding hands. The palm of one of the orcs was on the lower back of one of the females, so I didn’t bother focusing on him.

But the others. I bit my lip, shuffling the mail on the cart in front of me for a moment before my eyes were drawn back to the males.

They were making their way to the bank of elevators and my eyes snagged on the one at the back, his huge hands in the pockets of his pants as he surveyed the area around him.

That male is everything that is fine in this world.

He had to be at least seven feet, with shoulders that would test every doorway he

entered, tusks that shone in the light with a golden ring around the left and a body under that suit that should be illegal. Who looked like that?

“The one in the grey can put a baby in me any day of the week,” Lin crooned near my ear making me bat her away as I giggled.

I hadn’t even noticed the one in the gray suit. I gave him a cursory sweep of my gaze, dismissing him from my spank bank, anticipation filling me as I swung my eyes back to the male who’d taken up my attention.

Eye candy of the highest order.

I had one more hour of work before I had to be at my next job, so I needed to get my ass in gear, but damn , this was a break that I needed.

A few minutes to just stare at some prime orc-flesh.

I exhaled a long breath, pretending that my current situation wasn’t so dire, and that I could be desirable enough—or at the very least available—for that male to claim and pillage.

Life had been a shit-show recently. For the last three months, I’d been girl-bossing too close to the sun.

I was burned out, exhausted and I needed a nap—or an orgasm.

I couldn’t allow myself to take any rest-days until I’d fulfilled my budget requirements for the month, though, so I still had another solid two weeks of back-to-back work.

A twelve hour nap , I promised myself dreamily.

That was exactly what I needed. Images of my pillow floated in front of my eyes for a moment and it was so realistic that I almost reached out to stroke the softness.

I'd spent thirty dollars on an ergonomic style that allowed my constantly stiff neck to relax.

I'd cringed over the cost. I wasn't one to spend on anything other than the complete basic necessities and knock-off brands were my best friend. They were the only way that I was able to keep myself fed, dressed and somewhat normal looking.

Store-brand is just another word for lifesaver.

I ran my eyes down the male's suit, recognizing bespoke luxury when I saw it.

I might be the poorest of the poor, but I could still admire something well made and clearly expensive.

And it fit him like it was tailored just for his perfect proportions.

I would give twenty whole dollars-that-I-didn't-have to find out what he smelled like.

I released a sigh, knowing that seeing was the closest I was going to ever get to touching . Not only was someone like him forever out of my reach, but even if I could reach, I didn't have time for reaching.

Any downtime was going to be spent visiting my grandma—who was living in the best home I could provide for her. It wasn't the kind of luxury home I hoped I could one day be able to afford, but for now, I was going to make sure she had the best care I could give her.

Four jobs and an online store that currently had zero sales—mainly because I couldn't invest any time, energy and money into my dream project until I dug us out

of the hole we were buried in—meant that my time had to be rationed more than the cheap spaghetti that I made for most dinners.

Another sigh slipped out of me—longing and regret filling the space between the male and I.

Maybe in another lifetime, hot stranger.

My teeth were still buried in my lower lip as his brow furrowed and his eyes swung my way. I looked away at once, returning to shuffling through the mail on the cart with no real goal except to look busy. Next to me, Lin joined in even though her job had nothing to do with mail.

“He’s looking over here,” she squeaked, hysteria entering her voice.

“Calm down,” I murmured. “Just pretend you’re busy and he’ll leave us alone.”

I was certain of it. Males like him were too busy being gorgeous to even notice females like me. Not that there was anything wrong with me per se.

I was pretty in my own way, but I was certain that I wasn’t anywhere near his league. Still, eye-candy was in short supply these days, so I took one last peek at him before I started pushing the cart again.

What was meant to be one last appreciative glance made me stop in my tracks. The male was looking at me . Not just looking, but staring. His lips were parted and his eyes were wide, so I turned to peer over my shoulders before meeting his gaze again. There wasn’t anyone behind me.

There was a trembling sort of tension in his body that I could see from where I was—which was saying something, since I was all the way on the other side of the huge room. He turned his entire body so he was facing me instead of following in the

directions of the other orcs.

What the hell?