



Monster's Redemption (Monsters in the Mountains #9)

Author: *Leann Ryans*

Category: Fantasy

Description: The male thought he'd succeeded, sinking his teeth into the omega despite her screams,

but I was a bigger monster than he, and I wouldn't leave her to suffer.

Even if she was only a human.

What should have been the best day of my life turned into a nightmare when the alpha I'd chosen was murdered and I was claimed by the man who'd done it.

Neither of us was aware of the monster until it was too late, then all I knew was searing pain, my new mate taken from me as fast as he'd stolen my future.

The monster refuses to let me die too, caring for me until I heal, but I don't think I can ever accept another human alpha.

A monster though...

This is the ninth book in the Monsters in the Mountains series but it can be read as a standalone. It starts out dark but the romance is sweet. Please check authors website for content concerns.

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Blythe

A sob escaped as I pushed my way through the thick brush along the river's edge. My burning flesh made the water too cold to stand, stealing my breath each time I attempted to cross, but the sounds of pursuit were growing louder behind me.

How could this have happened? I was supposed to be with Ricarie!

My heart clenched at the thought of my intended. We'd planned to be mated since we were young, our families happy with the match. I'd envisioned a life with him as my alpha, and it had all been stolen away in a moment.

"Blythe, you can't get away. I can smell you, ripe and ready to be claimed. Be a good little omega and come to your alpha."

My stomach churned, bile creeping up the back of my throat as another sob stole the air I needed to keep going.

A handful of days. A single handful of days, and my life would have been perfect. My heat would have been over, Ricarie and I would have bonded, and Dicean wouldn't have had any reason to do what he'd done.

Instead, my intended laid where he'd fallen, his blood spilling from his neck in an impossible flood. He'd barely drawn a breath to warn his cousin away as Dicean approached us on our way to the bonding cabin, then I'd seen a flash. He was on the ground before I realized what had happened.

The way Dicean grinned at me, bloody knife fisted at his side, would haunt my dreams for eternity.

“The longer you ignore me and keep running, the rougher this will be for you.”

His voice sounded as if he was right behind me, and I stumbled over a branch in my scramble to move faster. I barely felt the sting of thorns scratching my flesh and catching in my hair.

“You were always meant to be mine, Blythe. Ricarie wasn’t half the alpha I am. You’ll learn that.”

My cheeks were the only part of me not burning, the cool spring breeze chilling my tears as they tracked down my face. My flesh was on fire from the hormones rushing through my bloodstream, and my muscles burned from the strain of trying to keep away from my intended’s murderer. I’d been lost in a haze as Ricarie had led me through the forest to the cabin we were to use during my heat, but the shock of seeing him die had cleared my head enough to focus on one thought.

Stay away from Dicean.

I couldn’t let him claim me. My life would be misery.

Even if he hadn’t killed Ricarie, the other alpha was not the kind I’d want myself tied to. I hadn’t liked him since I’d seen him kick a chicken because it happened to be in the path he was walking, and there were whispers he’d done worse to other animals as well as people. Not enough to be banned from the village, especially since he hadn’t been caught, but enough that all the women and children were wary of him.

I pulled my wandering focus back to what was in front of me. A tree had toppled over into the water, it’s roots still clinging to the shore as if they could drag the giant back

upright, but it had clearly been down for long enough that other brambles had grown up around it, creating an impenetrable wall. I didn't have the time to climb it even if I'd been wearing something more appropriate for the task than a dress, so there was no option but to swerve deeper into the forest.

The shadows beneath the canopy sent a shiver down my spine, the movement of branches and leaves swaying in the breeze ratcheting my heartrate even higher. I'd been a weaver, spending my days indoors by the window, not out traipsing through the trees. Even in my distracted state I was worried about what lurked behind the trunks and under the bushes, but if I stopped, Dicean would catch me.

A growl came from behind me, driving me forward despite the fears. What he would do to me would be far worse than anything an animal would. A wild animal wouldn't bind me to it forever.

Could you bond with someone who didn't have a soul? Dicean was surely too evil to have one.

My mind drifted for a moment, the world growing fuzzy as the pressure in my womb increased. The pain made me want to double over, but each time my steps slowed, the voice of the alpha following me would spur me on.

"Enough of this, Blythe, I'm tired of chasing you! Instead of letting you nest, I'm going to rut you in the dirt where I catch you."

I barely choked off a whimper. Despite the fuzziness trying to steal my focus I could tell he was closer than before. I wasn't woods-wise and didn't have the first clue of how to hide my trail, and I knew it was only a matter of time before his strength simply outlasted mine, but I still wouldn't stop. Every step I took could be the last one I made before being enslaved by the brute intent on claiming me despite the fact that I'd picked another.

Nothing would make me give in and let it happen without a fight.

The sun grew closer to the mountain peak, the shadows beneath the trees growing deeper. If I had been smarter I'd have run towards the village when Dicean killed Ricarie, but I'd been too shocked to do more than put space between myself and the alpha I didn't want. Instead of running towards a chance of help, I'd run higher up the slope of the mountain that cradled my village at its base, and farther from anyone who might have intervened. With night falling, my freedom grew closer to its end.

A patch of brightness ahead drew me forward, my thoughts reduced to nothing more than to keep moving. The urge to run was stronger even than the desire to nest and hide, but a growing crunch behind me told me it was useless. A clearing wasn't going to save me any better than the trees towering overhead.

"You should have picked me, and then you would have been fucked on a bed. Instead, we're going to get a little dirty."

I couldn't stop the scream that ripped from my throat, my eyes darting over my shoulder as I stumbled into a weary run. My energy was flagging, my body hurting with how hard I'd pushed it while dealing with the cramps and fever of my heat, but I couldn't give up.

Dicean's chuckle followed me, the crunching that had been following me growing into crashing. I saw a bush shake before his bulky form appeared from behind it, the dimming light still bright enough to show his triumphant grin.

"There you are."

My heart fluttered in my chest, my lungs heaving as I tried to push myself faster, but my body didn't have much left to give. A cramp seized me as I tried to jump over a log, making me miss my step and sending me tumbling forward, my palms stinging

from rocks beneath the leaf litter covering the ground. I tried to scramble up, to keep going, but fingers tangled in my hair and yanked me back before I could get my feet under me again.

“Good omegas don’t run from their alphas. They submit and present like a bitch is supposed to.”

The rough shove on the back of my head sent me face first into the ground, the coppery tang of blood mixing in my mouth with the bitter flavor of old leaves and dirt.

“P—Please, Dicean.”

He rumbled a growl as he kicked my legs apart, a yank on the skirt of my dress keeping me from crawling forward once I’d pushed up onto my hands.

“That’s right. Beg for me.”

I shook my head, tears blinding me to anything more than dark shapes and bright patches of light.

“No. No, please stop!”

I didn’t realize he was on his knees behind me until I felt them forcing mine wider as he took his position. The cool breeze stroked my legs as my dress was flipped up over my back, exposing me. I’d been excited to go to the bonding cabin with Ricarie and hadn’t bothered to wear underthings when he came to collect me from my parent’s home, so there was nothing to stop Dicean from dipping his fingers into my core, making me sob harder. The effect of my heat had my hips tipping to allow better access despite the way my heart ached and my mind screamed no.

His grip disappeared before tangling in my hair again, pulling my head back until my neck and back groaned with the strain.

“Omegas don’t get to say no. I’m your alpha now, and you’ll do as I want.”

He pressed himself against my opening, another cry escaping my lips as I tried to crawl forward despite his tight hold on my hair. My body warred with itself, the instinctive part ready to accept the alpha’s brutality, while the little part of my consciousness left that was me fought to resist as long as possible. It wasn’t even the physical invasion I feared as much as it was the idea of being bonded to him.

The fingers in my hair tightened as his other hand took hold of my hip. Bracing myself, I held my breath and hoped I’d get lucky enough to stop breathing forever.

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Fin'hir

The cry that had caught my attention rang out again, the agony in it tugging at my heart. I increased my pace but still tried to remain silent since I didn't know what I was running towards. The area was unfamiliar to me, and while I was certain the call wasn't from one of my kind, I still couldn't stop myself from responding to it.

Using my claws to cut some low-hanging vines so they didn't tangle in my horns, I looked around, searching for the source of the sounds. The initial scream had been piercing and clear, startling the birds near me into flight, but sounds echoed beneath the tree canopy, so it was hard to pinpoint where it came from.

As I moved farther down the slope I began to pick up more noises, my ears swiveling to catch them better. I thought I heard a voice, but the sound didn't last long enough for me to be sure.

Slowing my steps, I looked around and sucked in a deep breath, hoping for more clues. What I found was a hit to my chest, the sweet musk of an omega in heat flooding my lungs and sending a rush of blood to my shaft.

Why was there an unbonded omega out here?

My nose led me forward and I made out the plaintive sounds of a female crying. Mixed with it were grunts and low growls that had my hackles rising. Closer to the source, I caught the scent of an alpha beneath the thick smell of slick, and my own chest vibrated with the need to release a growl.

This was my territory.

I tried to squash the automatic reaction, but my instincts were too stirred up. I'd only been in the area for a short time since I'd wandered after leaving my clan, and I hadn't been aware of any others around, monster or human. The scents confirmed it wasn't one of my kind ahead, so I had to assume it was humans, which meant every step I took was more dangerous.

Still, my feet kept moving.

The sound of fleshy impacts grew along with the cries, and I finally caught sight of where they were coming from. My lips curled back at the so-called alpha rutting the omega, even as my cock jumped in interest. The largest alphas of their species were smaller than us, and the one mounting the female wasn't a prime example by any stretch.

My instincts were trying to push me forward, to remove the pitiful alpha from the omega and take her for myself, but I dug my back claws into the earth. While my old clan had proven humans were compatible with my kind, it didn't mean we should be taking them as mates.

It was wrong.

They were weak, and any younglings from the union would be weak as well.

I started to turn away, to leave the pair to complete their union, but my eyes caught on the omega's face. While it wasn't unusual for a female to make sounds that seemed like distress, especially during their first time being mounted, something about the look on her face stopped me.

The alpha rutting into her pulled her upright by the grip he had in her hair, her pained

cry making my fists tighten. What at first glance might seem like a lover's hold was clearly too rough when I looked closer, and the tears spilling down her cheeks seemed more than what could be considered normal.

The male wrenched her head to the side, exposing her neck as he kept thrusting. The female was clothed, what was happening hidden beneath her covering, but her curves still made my ridges shift along my shaft. As much as I hated to admit it, I was drawn to her, but I was caught in indecision.

“Please! Don’t! I didn’t choose you.”

Her words were a flood of ice washing down my spine, leaving my fur standing on end as the lust I’d felt was buried beneath rage. Humans called my kind monsters, claiming we were evil, but we knew omegas were to be cherished. They might not always be given a choice in who claimed them, but if any were as distressed about it as the one before me, they wouldn’t be ignored or treated so harshly.

I was in motion before I’d even made the conscious choice to intervene. My kind avoided humans because the threat they posed as a group was real even if they were individually weak, but I couldn’t stand by and ignore what was happening to the omega.

The scent of blood hit me before I closed the distance between us, the female’s scream wrenching at my heart. I stumbled, knowing he’d made his claim and she was now bonded to him, but the agony in her voice drove me on. I could only hope if I ended him soon after his bite, the bond wouldn’t take and kill her too.

The alpha released his teeth and shoved her forward, the little omega’s body slumping as if she was no longer conscious. The red tears welling on her neck enraged me further, and every hair was standing on end as I wrapped my hand around his puny, human neck.

“The omega said no!”

My roar echoed beneath the leaves, startling birds into flight all across the slopes. The alpha’s eyes widened, his mouth going slack as I jerked his attention from the female he’d abused to the danger he was in. His knot was locked in her, her body shifting as I lifted him, and I had to restrain myself so I didn’t cause her any damage.

Fear was an amazing motivator, and despite biology creating knots to stay locked in an omega long enough to ensure the best chance of impregnation, it only took a single breath for his to shrink and his pathetic cock to slip from the unconscious female.

The scent of his seed spoiled the sweetness of her slick, the blood in the air making me clench my hand tighter. The tips of my claws entered his neck, slipping through his sweaty flesh without resistance.

Alertness grew in his eyes in equal parts with his terror, and he began to struggle, his hands coming up to tug uselessly at my fingers. I tossed him away when he started thrashing so much he threatened to kick the omega, his back slamming into a nearby tree.

Taking a step towards him, I was distracted by the female stirring. Her eyes were still clenched shut, but her hand lifted to her neck, a sob slipping from between her lips as she curled into a ball.

“Don’t worry omega, I will fix it.”

My attention swung back to the alpha trying to push himself up from the ground, his coverings tangled around his lower legs with his shriveled cock flopping, exposed, at the apex, and my lips pulled back in a cruel grin as I let go of my restraint.

“You’re going to die, but first, you will suffer to pay for what you’ve done.”

I dropped to my knees, lashing out with both hands to keep him on the ground. My claws sank into his shoulder, making him scream as I pinned him in place and grabbed his genitals with my other hand.

I snarled at the feel of her slick coating him.

He hadn't earned the right to it.

"You will no longer need these."

I let my claws slip through tender flesh, his skin parting as he let out another scream that made my ears flatten to my skull at the pitch. His own thrashing split open his sac, blood vessels and testes popping through the holes.

I would have taken more time to torture him, but a soft whimper behind me reminded me that if the bond had taken, she would feel the pain too.

It was nothing but the twitch of a finger to remove the rest of his genitals, his cries fading to silence as I removed my other claws from his shoulder and clamped them around his throat again. He didn't deserve the quick end, but I wouldn't risk causing the omega more pain.

Once the light faded from his eyes, I wiped my claws on his coverings, my lip curling at the stench of him. He'd soiled himself on top of his already unsavory scent, and I knew the combination would linger in my nostrils, but there was nothing I could do about it. The only use left for him was as food for the forest.

Another whimper behind me pulled my focus to the female I'd killed him for, and I stood to my full height as she finally opened her eyes.

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Blythe

Everything hurt.

Fire still lingered in my veins, but the sensation was fading the longer I laid on the ground. The dirt beneath my fingers seemed to be leeching the heat from my flesh, and I welcomed it, embracing the cold creeping in.

My cramps had stopped, but my belly ached as if I'd drank too much and hadn't relieved myself. The bloating was a mild discomfort compared to the stinging of my entrance and channel, but my mind shied away from that, not wanting to think about the cause.

My knees and palms felt like pincushions, tiny abrasions flaring to life as I moved to push myself upright, but they were nothing to the pounding in my head. It felt like someone had taken a branch to it, beating it like a dirty rug.

The worst of the pain was in my neck, though, radiating through my chest to join with the throbbing of my heart.

I couldn't help the whimper that slipped out as I blinked my eyes open, trying to find my bearings. I wasn't sure if I'd remained lucid or if I'd lost time, and while the fog in my mind was clearing, my thoughts were still muddled enough that it took a few heartbeats to realize what was standing in front of me.

Jaw dropping, I could do nothing more than stare up at the towering beast, horns curling from the sides of his head, and for a moment, I welcomed the thought of him

taking my life. Death would be less painful than the turbulent emotions warring within me as images of what had happened since I'd awoken that morning came back to me in pieces, and the scent of blood in the air confirming why my chest and neck hurt so much.

Dicean had claimed me, the bond forming between us despite my unwillingness. It wasn't as strong as a two-way bond would have been if I had bitten him in return, but it was still enough to tie us together. His satisfaction and enjoyment in my pain had poured into me, confirming my life would be misery tied to him, and then fear flooded over everything.

I understood what it was that had scared him so badly.

Swallowing hard, I sucked in a deep breath, preparing for it to be my last as the monster moved closer. I'd never been one to believe the tales of monsters living high in the mountains and had never listened to them, but if he'd killed Dicean, there was no reason to believe my fate would be any different.

Clenching my eyes shut, I whispered a prayer to the gods even as part of my mind was distracted by the scent of honeysuckles. They didn't bloom until summer, so I had to be imagining the smell, but my lips lifted at the corners thinking the gods must have sent the memory to remind me of a time I'd been happy.

"Omega, are you okay?"

Goosebumps rose along my arms at the rumble voice, a shiver skating down my spine as I let my breath out in a rush. The pain lingered, throbbing and distracting, so I clearly wasn't dead yet, therefore it was no god inquiring as to my welfare. After another breath, I reluctantly peeled my lids open again.

"Omega?"

The monster had crouched down in front of me, but his massive form still dwarfed mine. It was as if I sat before a furry boulder, and a giggle tried to burst free before a spike of pain popped the hysteria threatening spill out.

“I... No.”

My chin trembled, tears pooling along my lashes. His question forced my attention inward again, and it didn’t matter what the male looked like, because he was the least of my concerns.

The trembling spread, extending into my chest and then out through my limbs. Tears scalded my cheeks, and I lifted my hand to my neck where the pain was the worst.

“He... He...”

I couldn’t form words.

Couldn’t face the multitude of things Dicean had done in the course of one evening that took everything from me.

Couldn’t think about what he’d have done to me for the rest of my life if the monster before me hadn’t come to my rescue.

My eyes had dropped to the ground, but I lifted them to meet a golden gaze. There was intelligence shining back at me, and some emotion I almost wanted to name regret.

My heart clenched, spikes of bleakness radiating through my chest until my focus shifted past him to the body of the alpha who’d taken my future from me. His clothing was still rucked out of place, pale thighs almost glowing in the light coming through the leaves overhead, exposing the bloody mess left where the thing he’d

violated me with should have been.

Savage glee filled the hole in my chest left behind by the torn bond. The red painting Dicean's throat and dripping down his chest was almost regretful, and I wished I'd been more aware when the monster had gelded the cruel alpha.

"He is gone and will hurt you no more."

I nodded at the monster's words, almost unable to peel my eyes from the gory sight, but with Dicean's death and the possibility that the monster might not be taking my life as well, I had to face this new reality. One where my intended was dead, and somehow I'd survived the death of the alpha who'd claimed me instead.

What do I do now?

As unwanted as the bond had been, I still felt the ragged edges of it lodged in my chest. It matched the jagged tears in my flesh left behind by Dicean's teeth, and was just as painful. A claiming bite didn't usually hurt, but he had been neither thoughtful nor kind when he'd made it, and I'd had no pleasure to ease the physical pain.

I tried to force myself to think.

To come up with some reason to move from where I sat in the dirt and old leaves.

To envision something of what would become of me.

The tears that came then were fat and slow. Full of sorrow, because what kind of life could I have now?

The alpha I loved had been killed.

I had a broken bond and a mark that would haunt me forever.

If I returned home people would want to know what had happened, and yet I wasn't sure any of them would believe me if I told them of being rescued by a monster. They might blame him if they believed me at all.

"Kill me, too."

I stared at the ground as I let the words out, but I didn't miss the way the monster flinched as if I'd hit him.

"Omega, no! You don't mean that."

His tone was soft, but I heard the outrage in it. He'd saved me from Dicean, but he wouldn't save me from a future I had no reason to live for.

"Please. It hurts."

I pressed my palm to my chest where the ache I didn't want to acknowledge gnawed at me.

"He killed the alpha I chose, and now, I'm ruined."

My voice broke on the last word, my breath rushing out on a sob. The thought of going home, of facing all the people who knew us...

I couldn't.

Everyone knew I'd chosen Ricarie, but I also knew there were some who wouldn't see anything wrong with what Dicean had done. They'd blame it on instincts instead of holding him accountable for his actions. That was the way it was with alphas.

And how would I explain Dicean's death without it being blamed on the monster? People would think I was crazy. They would say it was the broken bond, and they'd never look at me the same. The monster would be hunted and possibly hurt because of me.

But I'd still be forced to choose another alpha. No omega was allowed to remain unbonded once their cycles began. I'd have to go to another alpha who would consider me used. I'd feel his contempt and disgust.

I clenched my eyes shut, shuddering at the thought. My scalp prickled and my hip throbbed as if Dicean had ahold of me again, the burning between my thighs intensifying.

There was a gentle brush against my cheek before a soft sound reached my ears. Ricarie had purred for me whenever I was distraught, but this was deeper, somehow invading my mind and pulling me from the dark spiral I'd gotten stuck in.

"You are not ruined, omega. There can still be meaning and happiness in your life. There is no reason to end it now because of one bad person."

I wanted to scoff, to pull away, but something about the warm fingers cupping my cheek and the vibration of the purr had me unwilling to lose them.

"Then take me with you. I can't go back home."

It was a foolish decision, but as I opened my eyes and looked up at his golden ones, it felt right. Dicean's betrayal stirred mistrust towards every alpha in my village, because if he'd been willing to kill his own cousin to steal me, what might others do to an omega without an alpha to protect her? I couldn't hide that I'd been claimed, and there were those I suspected would try to take liberties since I was already spoiled.

“P-Please.”

His purr had stuttered to a stop at my request, and while his face was different than what I was familiar with, I could still see different emotions flitting within his eyes. There was shock and worry, but there was also anger, and a deep, burning intensity that froze my lungs.

It wasn't until then, as I drew in a ragged breath, that I realized what I'd done.

Beneath the gentle smells of the forest, beneath the scent of seed and slick and blood, there was that rich perfume of honeysuckles...

Laced with alpha musk and pheromones.

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Fin'hir

Digging my claws into my palms, I struggled to compose myself.

The omega, the human , didn't know what she asked.

I had to swallow a snarl, rushing to stand and put space between us. The lingering pheromones from her heat were messing with my head, although they faded more with each brush of the breeze. A claiming bite didn't usually end a heat, we'd been designed to mate multiple times to ensure the seed would take, but coupled with the trauma she'd faced and the broken bond, it seemed her body had decided to allow her to heal instead of putting her through more.

Unable to hold still, I paced between the body of her attacker and a nearby tree. I was tempted to lash out at the useless lump of flesh, to relieve some of the tension coiled inside of me, but I feared scaring the female more.

But why did I care?

"You're better off with your own kind."

I had to force the words out, the taste of them bitter on my tongue, but so was the desire I desperately wanted to quench. I'd left my home, my clan, because I didn't agree with us taking humans as mates.

And yet I'd been thinking of doing it myself.

No. I'd only been protecting her.

I scoffed, unable to lie to myself. If she'd still been in heat and my concern hadn't outweighed the lust, my cock and teeth would both be locked in her.

"I won't be. I-I can't trust them. I won't be protected."

My chest rumbled with the growl I was holding back as my steps quickened. I'd never understand humans or how they treated each other. Each one of my kind was my brother, even if they were from other clans, and omegas were always to be protected.

I didn't want to believe her, but I heard her conviction. If she was certain enough to think she was better off with me, how could I argue?

I stopped pacing and looked down at her. She'd straightened her clothing, but her cheeks were still stained with tears, and the scent of what had happened here lingered. The need to provide and protect pulled at me, and I knew I couldn't deny her.

No matter how hard it was going to be to live with an omega I couldn't touch.

Chest deflating, I squatted again so I wouldn't be looming over her.

"I can offer you a place to stay while you heal, but I still think it best you return to your own kind. I can take you to a different village when you're ready. For now, let's get cleaned up."

Her shoulders rose, some of the lines on her face smoothing away. She still looked like she wanted to argue, but she kept her mouth shut as she nodded.

Standing, I stepped closer and held out my hand to help her up. She stared at it for a

moment, her gaze tracing the claws that extended from the tips of each finger, before carefully placing her delicate hand in mine. It was as small as a youngling's, her claws too short to be useful, and when I stroked my thumb along the back of it, her skin was soft and smooth where mine was calloused and rough with fur.

I was reluctant to release her once she'd risen to her feet, but I doubted she welcomed my touch. The feel of her stirred things in me I didn't want to examine, so I dropped her hand and gestured north.

"There's a stream this way."

We remained silent as we made our way through the trees, the sky darkening rapidly. With the sun already behind the mountains, it didn't take long for darkness to fall, and I now had another mouth to feed.

When we reached the stream I waded in, washing the other alpha's blood from me. The water was still cold from the spring melt, but I was used to the temperature. As well as having softer, furless skin, apparently humans were more sensitive too, because the female let out a hiss when she tried to follow me.

Turning, I watched as she looked for a place to kneel where her coverings wouldn't get muddy, but she was close enough to reach the water. If the water was cold to her she likely needed the coverings to stay warm, and night in the mountains in spring could get frigid enough for even me to feel it. If they got wet she'd be miserable and might even grow ill.

"Just remove them. You can wash faster without all that in the way."

White ringed her dark irises as her gaze jerked up to mine. Her throat worked, her mouth moving, although no sound emerged.

Sighing, I climbed from the stream.

“I will go hunt while you bathe. I won’t go far, but you should stay here until I return.”

I flicked my ears, drawing in a deep breath to check the area.

“There’s nothing nearby that can hurt you.”

Her expression was torn but the relief in it outweighed everything else.

“Thank you.”

I barely resisted shaking my head. The other human omegas who’d come to the clan with Mel’ar and Mel’cam had been the same, insisting they weren’t seen by others without coverings, even in the heat of summer. I’d heard the clan chief had ordered everyone to wear loin cloths around them as well, but it was all utterly ridiculous.

Moving through the trees, I tried to release the tension I still carried. With the scent of seed and slick on her my instincts were on edge, still pushing me to mount and claim the omega, despite what my mind said. I knew she was traumatized and her cycle already over, plus she was human, but my body didn’t understand why I couldn’t dominate the little female. It said omega was omega, and I needed to erase the other male’s scent and claim with my own.

Growling under my breath, I turned my focus to finding food. With my earlier hunt interrupted and a female to protect, I couldn’t go after big game, so I was heading for a rabbit warren I’d found when I first came to the area. It was too small to sustain us without depleting the population, but taking two bucks wouldn’t hurt, and it would allow me to return to her faster. She’d likely need to burn her food the way humans did to eat it, so we had to get back to the cave I’d been using for shelter so I could

build a fire before true night fell.

The female was bent over beside the stream when I returned, digging in the bank with a stick. She didn't seem to realize I was there until I stopped beside her, the way she jerked setting her off balance. Her arms spun but she'd have ended up in the stream if I hadn't reached out with my free hand to catch her.

"Easy, omega. I cannot care for you if you become ill due to the cold."

Wincing, she dipped her head. Once I was sure she wasn't going to fall into the water I released her, the faint scent of blood wafting to my nose, but I didn't realize I'd cut her until she turned her arm to look at the red spots blooming on the inside.

Regret hit me so hard I gasped, surprise following on its heels. I hadn't meant to hurt her, but the intensity of the feeling seemed excessive. Still, my stomach churned with it.

"I'm sorry."

"Oh, no, it's okay. Thank you for catching me. I should have been paying more attention."

While I agreed with her, the emotions roiling inside wouldn't let me say so.

"My name is Blythe."

It took me a moment to realize I had never asked her what she was called, nor had I offered my name.

"I'm Fin'hir."

Her lips moved as if she was repeating my name, but it was quiet enough I couldn't hear if she did.

"Are you finished bathing? I know human's eyesight is weak in the dark, so we should return to my cave."

"Cave?"

Her forehead creased as if she was upset by the realization that I wasn't taking her to some false, wooden-cave like she had lived in at her village, but she swallowed whatever else she was going to say about it.

"Oh, okay. I was just trying to dig up some taro. I already collected a bit of water lettuce though, so we can go."

She pointed to a pile of greens I hadn't noticed. I must not have hidden my disdain since she was giving me an odd look when I turned back to her.

"Do you eat vegetation? I wasn't sure if I collected enough for you as well."

Letting out a huff, I stepped back.

"Meat is mostly enough. I eat plants when I must. I have a rabbit to complete your meal, so gather your plants and follow me."

Her lips flattened but she gave me another nod before stooping to collect her food. We were silent once again as we walked, her shorter legs having difficulty keeping up with mine. It was hard to hide my sigh when I had to slow for the second time so she didn't fall too far behind, and then I had to hold her elbow to get her over the shale outside the cave.

The place I'd claimed was nothing like my home. As part of the clan and one of the mature alphas, I'd had a nice warren of connected caves, with a stream in the corner of one, and a natural chimney in the deepest. While the stone kept out the heat of summer, it was easy to warm since it was enclosed and protected from the wind.

Here, the best cave I had found was a single pocket within a crevasse, the wind whipping through the cracked stone when it blew from the right angle. It had done well enough for me, but I had to wonder if Blythe would be comfortable.

Kneeling by the fire, I stirred the coals and added another log. Blythe stood where I'd released her until the flames rose enough to illuminate the cave.

"This is where I sleep. You may take two of the furs to make your nest. I will collect more wood for you to burn your rabbit."

"Burn?"

Her brow arched and she let out a little laugh.

"I take it you don't cook your meat before eating it?"

My lip curled and a tremor shook the omega. I didn't know if it was the thought of eating raw meat or the sight of my teeth.

"No. I'll be back."

I left the rabbit near the fire where she could see it before slipping past her into the night. Washing in the stream had helped lessen some of her scent, but I could still catch notes of slick when I was near her, and my groin tightened. Even if it hadn't been for me, it called to my base nature.

Living with the omega was going to be torture.

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Blythe

In, and out. In, and out.

My chest rose and fell with my internal chant as I worked to keep from breaking down. My muscles trembled with weakness, my throat was parched despite the great gulps I'd drank from the stream, and my neck throbbed in time with the aching pulse anchored behind my ribs.

I'm alive. He's gone. I'll survive.

The walking had made the burning between my thighs grow, and even though I'd washed our fluids from my thighs, my dress still stank of Dicean. With nothing else to change into and night falling, washing it hadn't been an option, but the stench was getting to me.

Ashes .

We used ashes to scrub with, and while it would likely stain the fabric, how it looked didn't matter as much as my peace of mind.

Not knowing how long it would be before Fin'hir returned, I stripped the dress and my shift over my head and knelt by the fire. Even right in front of it I shivered from the cold of the cave, but nothing was going to stop me from eliminating the smell of the alpha rotting where we'd left his body. If the ash wouldn't cover it, I might just toss the bundle into the flames and risk death from exposure.

Taking handfuls from the edge of the ring and ignoring the little pricks of heat from tiny embers, I rubbed it into the seat of my shift, where our fluids had leaked from me and soaked the fabric. I barely felt the tears that ran down my cheeks as I worked, scrubbing until the pale fabric was grey from waist to knee.

My dress was both worse and better. The scent of his seed and my slick was less, but his stench was all over the dress where he'd grabbed and held me. It wasn't strong, but it still burned my nose and drove me to coat the whole thing in a layer of ash.

Noise behind me snapped me out of the mindless kneading, and I rose to shake out my shift before tugging it over my head. It was barely better than being nude and left me chilled, and while I doubted Fin'hir cared if I was attired at all, it made me feel better to cover myself.

A dark shape moved within the shadows of the opening, his massive form appearing with a pile of logs beneath each arm. Part of me was ashamed that he was having to go to extra effort for me when he'd made it clear he didn't want the responsibility of providing for me, but the other part was thankful he hadn't sent me on my way or left me to fend for myself.

When I'd realized he was an alpha a bolt of fear had lanced through me, my body tightening in preparation for another assault, but other than his very obvious erection and the one flash of something I may have misinterpreted in his eyes, he hadn't shown any interest in me. We clearly weren't the same species, and I couldn't fault him for a natural response to my pheromones even if he didn't find me pleasing.

But why did I care? I should be glad he turned away.

Blaming hormones and a horrible day, I turned my thoughts to more immediate concerns. I left the ashes on my dress to absorb as much as possible, bundling it against the wall opposite where I spotted the pile of furs he'd claimed was his bed. It

felt strange to take his bedding, but he'd instructed me to, and I was growing cold enough to realize it was necessary, whether I wanted to or not.

The sweet scent of honeysuckles surrounded me as I wrapped one fur around my shoulders and took another to cover the stone, so it didn't leech away what little heat I had. There was a spicy undertone to the smell, something I couldn't name, but it eased some of the fear still lingering in my mind.

I would survive.

I couldn't say why I was so determined to after having asked Fin'hir to end my life. Perhaps it was his assurance that my life could still have meaning and happiness. While I might not be able to believe him yet, especially about the second part, there was still a tiny piece that clung to the hope that he was right.

"I am unfamiliar with humans. Is there anything else you require for the night?"

The big monster seemed to grow more formal the longer we were together, and I could only think it was because he was having regrets. I didn't want to be a burden to him, but I was aware I had nothing to survive with other than the clothes I'd been wearing.

"If you have a knife I can use to prepare the rabbit, I can take care of it. Thank you for getting the wood. And... everything else."

The last sentence came out quieter as I dropped my eyes to the fire. I didn't want to see how he felt about the events of the day. His life had surely changed as much as mine, at least for the moment.

My neck throbbed and I winced, but I stopped my hand before it reached the bite wound. I'd cleaned the blood away in the stream, but without an alpha's saliva to heal

it, it was still bleeding and painful.

“I do not have a knife. What needs done to the rabbit?”

Biting my bottom lip, I blinked back tears. What was one more thing he had to do for me?

“Humans only eat the meat of the animal. It needs to be skinned, and the offal and head removed.”

“Wasteful.”

The word was muttered so low I wasn't sure he'd intended it to be heard, but I was distracted from any response when he picked up the body and removed the head.

With his teeth.

Perhaps too much had happened for me to be any more shocked, because despite thinking I should be repulsed when he swallowed, I found myself shrugging. He was right, throwing the head away was a waste, and if he was willing to eat it, then why not?

I settled across the fire from him, watching him use his claws to make short work of dressing the rabbit. The offal disappeared the way the rabbit's head had, my stomach turning a bit at the slurp, but I had to admit it was the easiest way to deal with the mess.

Either he knew how to cook or had seen humans do it before, because he thrust a thin branch through the meat before passing it to me. I held it over the flames as I watched him scrape the backside of the hide with his claws before stretching it out on the stone floor of the cave.

“So, you live here alone?”

Golden eyes flashed at me before turning away.

“Yes.”

His tone was rough, my instincts rising to warn me away, but it was better to focus on the monster than what had happened.

“Are there others of your kind nearby?”

“No.”

He rose and turned his back to me, moving to his bed. I couldn't make out what he was doing when he leaned over, and I also couldn't seem to stop my questions when it would have been smarter to leave him alone.

“Does your kind usually live alone? What do you call yourselves? Are there many of you?”

He stood again, those golden orbs glowing in the firelight. A chill stole through my chest, my neck and core both burning where my flesh was injured as he closed the space between us.

“No, we do not always live alone. There are not as many of us as there are humans, which is why we choose to remain hidden. You call us Monsters, although it seems humans have earned that title more than us.”

My jaw clamped shut, my eyes stinging. Even though he was the only one of his kind I'd encountered, I had to agree with him.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

I stared at my hands, sucking in a deep breath filled with the scent of him. Despite myself, it was calming, and I held the fresh wave of tears at bay.

“Eat, omega, and then get some rest. You can ask your questions tomorrow.”

Sighing, I nodded, pulling the rabbit from the flames to check the meat. I hadn’t meant to, but I’d ended up burning it the way he’d said I would, but I couldn’t find it in me to care.

I startled when something dropped next to me, my eyes darting to the fur before going to where I’d left the second one I’d claimed against the wall by my dress.

“You need it more than I do,” came his soft voice before he turned away and returned to his bed.

Chest and throat tight, it took a long time to force the rabbit down and crawl to my pitiful nest.

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Fin'hir

I t was impossible to sleep.

The lack of bedding didn't matter, I'd be just as comfortable out beneath the trees with nothing.

It was the little omega across the cave from me.

The human .

Despite the pheromones from her cycle dissipating, I was still drawn to her. Still had to fight myself so I didn't react and show my interest. The poor thing had been hurt in the worst way imaginable for a female, and yet my body still wanted hers.

It was wrong. She wasn't my kind. She couldn't give me strong younglings.

Could she?

I barely caught the growl that vibrated up my throat, stopping it before the noise could grow and disturb her. It had taken her a while to finish her meal and climb into the furs to sleep, but eventually her breathing had evened out, slumber stealing her away.

My claws dug into my palms as I clenched my fists and rolled to my side again. I couldn't force my eyes to close as long as I faced her, so perhaps lying the other way would finally convince my mind to rest.

It only made me stretch my other senses. My ears angled back despite my order to relax, picking up every quiet exhale from the tiny female. My nose twitched, trying to pick her scent up beneath the smell of the fire and the ashes she'd rubbed into her coverings, my instincts enjoying the way she smelled more like me wrapped in my bedding.

Guilt and something else had stirred in my belly when I'd realized she'd ruined her coverings with ash so she didn't have to smell what had been done to her. I'd been tempted to toss her dress in the flames and make something from the furs for her to wear, but I didn't have anything to sew with. A bone needle was easy enough to fashion, but I'd need guts or sinew to use as thread since I didn't have the knowledge or patience to turn hair into something useable.

Forcing myself to breathe slow and deep, I waited for sleep to take me, trying to keep my mind blank, but my thoughts kept circling around the omega. Her dynamic was so rare amongst my kind it was unheard of to find more than a couple of breeding age within any clan. It was one of the reasons there were less of my kind than there were humans, which was why we kept ourselves hidden. Initially I hadn't understood why my clan leader would have taken one as a mate after his brother returned with one and proved it was possible, but opportunity sometimes dictated our actions more than desires.

Rolling onto my back once more, I stared up at the ceiling of the cave. It had been formed by water running through the shale, the edges all rounded and smooth, and it made me want to claw something since it reminded me of the female's soft skin.

I refused to turn my head and look at her, even when I heard her breathing hitch. Pressing my horns into the stone beneath me, I kept my gaze locked on the firelight playing over the rock above me.

She whimpered, stirring in her sleep. My lips drew back in a silent snarl I couldn't

resist, but my neck remained locked.

Not my problem.

I already had enough of my own.

I remained stiff until I'd taken three breaths without another sound from her. I thought she'd fallen into a deeper sleep until she jerked upright, letting out a cry that had me jumping to my feet.

“What is it?”

The cave echoed with my snarl, the sound reverberating until it sounded like the whole clan stood at my back. Wide dark eyes blinked at me, her chest heaving beneath the thin white covering she'd worn since we made it to the cave. Licking her lips, she glanced around before her cheeks darkened and she dropped her gaze to the ground.

“Sorry, it was just a dream.”

The fur standing up along my shoulders and spine flattened, my growl fading away. It took a few more moments for my breathing and heartrate to slow as I watched her bite her bottom lip before scooting back down beneath the furs.

“I won't wake you again,” she whispered.

Huffing out a breath, I shook my head and moved to the stack of firewood. I knew she couldn't help it, and I didn't blame her for having a bad dream. It was ridiculous of her to apologize and make promises over something she couldn't control.

“Just get some rest.”

I fed the fire, watching the flames take and grow instead of watching the female. If it had just been me, I'd have let it burn down to coals, but I'd seen her shiver, and I didn't think she'd be able to handle the chill until morning.

It took a while before her breathing evened out again, and when I stole a glance at her, her face was relaxed in sleep. It didn't last long though, my ears picking up little whimpers and whines as she twitched beneath the furs.

I didn't even realize I was purring until the crease that had formed between her brows smoothed out, her chest rising slower as tension left her. I almost stopped, but when the sound faded the crease returned.

I shuffled around the fire, moving closer to her under the guise of tending the fire. I couldn't help that it was instinctive to care for her, even if she wasn't my kind.

She was still an omega. Something to be protected.

Grabbing a handful of cooled ashes, I settled in to polish my horns, purring in a steady flow. It worked for a while, Blythe sleeping quietly, until the night deepened and the chill in the air seeped through even my natural defenses. I built the fire higher, trying to chase away the cold, but she still grew restless once again.

I couldn't help looking at her as she rolled onto her side, the firelight exposing the wound on her neck. I'd noticed human teeth were blunt, not meant for cutting or tearing with efficiency, so I was surprised the other alpha's had left such a ragged mark. It still oozed blood, the flesh around it darkened to almost purple before fading out to red and pink as it spread away from the wound before turning into her dusky tone.

It wasn't my mark. It hadn't been my teeth that sank into her flesh.

But still, I was drawn to tend it.

Releasing a breath, I debated what the best action would be. The wound could become infected if it wasn't cared for, but I wasn't sure Blythe would willingly let me tend it the way an alpha normally would.

My mouth watered at the thought, her scent growing sharper in my nostrils. It had been hard to determine her natural smell with the mix that had been on her, but the tart sweetness reminded me of the little red stone fruit that grew on trees in the summer.

I'd crawled closer to her before I realized what I was doing, but I couldn't resist the pull. The crease had returned between her brows, a frown curving the edges of her lips downward despite my purr, and the way she held her shoulder near her ear showed the bite was causing her pain.

Forcing more air through my throat, I increased my purr, hoping to keep her asleep. If she woke to me looming over her she'd be frightened, and I had no desire to scare the poor thing.

I dropped my snout closer to her neck, drawing in more of her scent. It was mixed with mine from the furs she clutched around her, and I couldn't help the way my ridges bunched along my shaft, wanting to make her smell like me both inside and out.

Letting my jaw part the tiniest amount, I extended my tongue, but paused when she shivered as my breath ghosted over her throat. The crease in her brow had softened, but she still frowned, and her neck was still tense.

I stuck my tongue out farther, finally meeting her flesh. Her skin was chilled outside the red ring, but hot and swollen around the punctures. The flavor of her was similar

to her scent, sweet but slightly salty, with a metallic tang from the blood that smeared the wound.

I made three swipes over the bite before she let out a sigh, her shoulder relaxing and her frown clearing away. Changing the angle of my head, I flattened my tongue and pressed it to the hollow at the base of her throat, licking over her collar bone before covering the bite again.

My mouth watered. My shaft thickened, the ridges writhing along my length.

A soft moan had me freezing, my cock twitching where it hung beneath me. My heart raced, and suddenly, I realized what I was doing.

Jerking away, my claws scuffed on the stone, the soft sound seeming loud in my ears. My eyes were locked on Blythe's face, but she hadn't awoken, her lashes remaining in a fan on her cheeks.

What are you doing?

Shaking my head, I backed farther, until I sat atop the fur of my bed.

She's a human! And she's NOT yours!

I shook my head again, willing her taste from my mouth, but it stubbornly lingered. My instincts were urging me to return to her, to taste more of her, and my shaft throbbed its encouragement, but I had to resist.

How could I be so drawn to a human after leaving my clan because they'd brought them in? Were instincts truly that strong?

Or was there something about this human, this omega, that had my alpha side

convinced she was mine?

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Blythe

I woke shivering and aching. Even with the furs piled atop me, the chill inside the cave made me feel as if I sat outside in a snowstorm. My muscles were stiff, my hips throbbing in time with the pain in my chest, and the burning between my legs reminded me it hadn't all been a bad dream.

Ricarie had been killed. I'd been taken and claimed by his cousin.

And then a monster had killed him, leaving me with the frayed edges of a broken bond eating away at my insides.

At least my neck felt better as I pushed myself upright, and a gentle exploration with my fingertips didn't uncover any fresh blood. Only thin scabs marked the area, the tissue around it still warm but not as hot and tight as it had been the night before.

A quick glance around the cave revealed I was alone. A small fire still burned, and I spotted Fin'hir's bedding against the opposite wall, so I didn't think he'd abandoned me, but doubt lurked at the edges of my thoughts. He had no reason to help me, and I questioned whether I'd made the right decision about not going home.

Wrapping myself in two of the furs, I dragged the other closer to the fire before sitting atop it and tucking it around my legs. The trees around the village were already green with spring growth, but it seemed the seasons changed later higher up the mountain.

I heaved a sigh as I poked at the logs with a small branch. I didn't want to think about

the village and the people who would be left wondering what had happened when we didn't return, but there wasn't much to distract me that wasn't just as depressing. I was woefully unprepared to live in the wilderness the way Fin'hir clearly did, and I wasn't sure how I was going to keep from being a burden to him. Already he'd had to find extra food and gather more wood, on top of giving up most of his bedding.

And I didn't want to admit what having the scent of him wrapped around me did to my instincts. It seemed ludicrous for my body to have that kind of response after what had happened less than a full day ago, and yet my nature made it so. Violence and lust were woven together in the way we were made, and I couldn't help my reaction to a dominant alpha. Especially one who'd showed the care he had, although he tried to hide it.

Once I thawed a little I decided to check on my dress. The ash had done its job, absorbing the scents from the fabric, but while the stains weren't as obvious on the darker color as it was on my shift, I would normally have retired it to the rag bin. I didn't have that option any longer, so I tugged it over my head and barely had the laces tightened before a gentle scratch on the stone alerted me to Fin'hir's presence.

I'd watched the big monster move through the forest without a sound, so I knew he only made the noise for my sake. More proof he was more considerate than he showed.

"Good morning. I hope I didn't disturb you anymore last night."

My cheeks warmed as I remembered his reaction when I'd jerked awake after a nightmare. I didn't want to think about what had been happening in my mind, but I certainly felt safer with Fin'hir.

His intense stare lasted a little longer than was comfortable, the heat in my cheeks spreading down my neck before he responded.

“It’s not your fault. Do you need to eat again?”

I’d been stuffed when I’d laid down for the night after forcing myself to eat the whole rabbit so it wouldn’t go to waste, but my stomach grumbled at the mention of food. One of Fin’hir’s ears flicked towards me in a way that said he’d definitely heard it.

“I can try to catch a fish in the stream if you can eat it. Unless you want more plants instead?”

I had to bite my lips to keep from smiling at the way he said plants as if they disgusted him. His teeth showed he was primarily carnivorous even if he hadn’t stated as much, so I imagined vegetables and greenery weren’t very tasty to him.

“Another rabbit would be fine if you don’t want to get wet.”

I couldn’t imagine stepping into the stream as cold as I felt, and guilt swirled in my stomach over him having to do that because of me.

“The rabbit warren is too small to take too many from them, and the cold doesn’t bother me.”

His chastising tone had me ducking my head and clutching my hands in front of me. I’d dropped the furs to get my dress on and hadn’t picked them up since he had walked in. Goosebumps lined my flesh, and a shiver rolled through me, but I was too unsure of myself to grab it with the way he stared.

“Obviously,” I muttered.

It should have been too quiet for him to hear, but he let out a huff before walking over to the fire and depositing the wood he carried beside it.

“I’ll hunt for larger game once you’re taken care of. I might have to go farther to find something, but I should be back before nightfall. Nothing in the area will disturb you before then, but it would be best to stay on this side of the stream.”

Chewing my bottom lip, I nodded before finally giving in and moving to the fire. Wrapping the furs around my shoulders once again, I huddled in front of it, trying not to feel miserable for myself. I had no plans to wander the forest alone.

“Is there anything I can do for you? I don’t want to be a burden.”

Looking up, I was caught in his golden gaze. The heat in them stole my breath, leaving me panting with my lips parted, but utterly confused when he lurched to his feet and turned away from me.

“You’re an omega. Taking care of you is not a burden, it’s a duty. I’ll be back shortly.”

Mind whirling, I gaped after him as he left once again, leaving me sitting alone in front of the flames. The way Fin’hir looked at me and the way he acted were so at odds I didn’t know whether being called a duty was good or bad, but I couldn’t mistake the way his body reacted as mine did to the opposite dynamic.

It should terrify me.

With what Dicean had done, having another alpha physically interested in me should send me running the other way.

For that alpha to be a monster almost twice my size with a strange-looking member between his legs, I should be screaming as I did everything to avoid him.

And yet, I still felt safe in his presence.

I was drawn to him, despite being a different species and not knowing him. If he'd been willing to take the way Dicean had, he'd already had the opportunity. He'd killed Dicean fast enough that if he'd mounted me himself and sank his teeth into me, there likely would have been enough hormones still in my system for him to claim me as his.

But he hadn't.

My heartrate calmed and I pulled in a deep breath, forcing myself to relax further. It might seem ridiculous, but I trusted the monstrous alpha.

And despite his sometimes rough tone, I believed that he didn't see me as a burden.

It didn't mean I was going to sit around and let him do everything, but it gave me breathing room to figure out how I could contribute, and to decide what I wanted to do when he tried to send me to another village. He didn't trigger the fear that ate at my heart whenever I thought of my people, but I knew I couldn't remain as I was forever. Eventually I would go into heat again, or the broken bond in my chest would grow worse, and I'd have no choice but to find a mate.

But those were thoughts for another time.

Staring into the flames, I let my mind and body rest as I waited for my caregiver to return. One way or another, I'd figure out how to keep going.

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Fin'hir

Why was I torturing myself?

I stared across the cave at the sleeping omega, once again bundled in her furs. Her little whimpers and frowns tore at my chest, trying to pull me closer to soothe her, but I remained firmly atop my bedding. If I moved I knew I'd go to her again, tend the wound on her neck, and end up even deeper in this ridiculous pull between us.

I should send her home. She'd be better off with her own kind.

And yet I wasn't sure that was true. Clearly at least some human alphas had little regard for omegas and thought they could take them against their will. Would my poor omega end up in the same situation again?

She's not mine.

My growl echoed back at me before I could snuff it out, Blythe's form going rigid before she curled into a ball with a whine. Cursing myself, I drew on the softer feelings she created and let out a purr, watching as her body slowly relaxed.

Relief swamped through me before my lips curled back. The tangle in my chest was going to rip me in half or drive me mad. The entire time I'd been out hunting I'd worried about her, caught myself turning back to check on her multiple times before forcing myself to keep going, and then once I was in her presence, all I wanted to do was run.

She'd be fine. Her village isn't that far, and if she didn't have me to take care of her, maybe she'd go home like she should.

Her words drifted through my head.

"I can't trust them. I won't be protected."

I barely clenched my teeth around another snarl.

Clan was everything, an extended family where everyone contributed to the good of the whole, and omegas were the heart. They were the mothers, the caregivers, the reason to stay together. They were to be sheltered and protected. They shouldn't want for anything.

And when the time came, they were claimed by the strongest alpha who would provide for them and keep them safe. It was usually a mutual claim, the omega knowing it was in their best interest, but in rare cases if they were unhappy with the match, they had been known to choose another. The right to claim them was fought over, but in the end, it was their choice if they claimed the alpha in return.

But that wasn't how the humans did it. I'd heard the tales of Mel'cam and Mel'ar's mates. Some villages claimed to let the omega choose, but that seemed to be a sham if their stories were true. Blythe said the male I killed had murdered the alpha she'd picked, and if that was allowed to happen, how did any omega really get a choice?

Blythe moved in her bedding, pulling my focus back to her. The bite on her neck looked redder in the firelight than it had when I'd returned earlier, and my mouth watered at the thought of tasting her again. Usually an alpha licked the bite for days after placing his mark, cleaning it and helping it heal faster without the pain such a wound would usually cause, but since I'd killed the male, it wasn't getting that attention.

I was the cause of her pain.

I was crawling towards her before I realized I was moving. No matter how I fought it, the instincts drove me on.

She needed me.

Dropping my nose to her hair, I drew in the scent of her. Even without the slick and heat pheromones, it still stirred my ridges. I'd been almost constantly hard, to the point that my shaft and balls ached from the strain of it, and being this close only made it worse.

Her neck wasn't in the same position as it had been the night before where I had easy access to the bite. I had to nudge her head to the side with my snout to have enough room to clean it. I was already salivating at the thought, and the first touch of my tongue to her flesh almost had me moaning in her ear.

Fuck .

She'd cleaned it at the stream earlier so the flavor of blood was gone, but I was still addicted to the taste of her. I kept licking long past when I'd done what was necessary, only pulling away when her breathing grew heavier and she rolled onto her back.

She was so tiny. Her legs were barely the thickness of my arms, and just my chest covered her from head to belly. I'd seen for myself that Mel'cam and Mel'ar had claimed humans, even scented pregnancy on one of their omegas before I left, but it was still hard to believe Blythe's little body could take mine.

And what would grow in her womb?

The thought had me pulling back before I did what my body urged and covered her. The uncertainty of what would come of a union of our kinds was what had finally driven me from my home, my mind unwilling to accept the possibility that everything would be okay.

Surely Fate hadn't meant for our kinds to cross in this way.

I moved to withdraw further but watched as she shivered even beneath the furs I'd given her. She'd kept her second layer of covering on since it had been a colder day than the previous, but it still seemed like she wasn't warm enough. She'd collected more wood for the fire while I'd hunted, but I couldn't make it any bigger without risking her safety since she already slept as close to it as she could.

If it had been one of my clansmen I wouldn't have hesitated.

Her being human wasn't even what kept me frozen in place.

It was the fear that once I had her in my arms, I wouldn't want to let her go. That she'd wake to me holding her close for warmth and be frightened, and then decide to do what she should have, and go back to her people.

I didn't want her to go. I wanted to endure the torture to see if this pull was more than a one-sided fluke.

My knee moved backwards, my mind set on returning to my bed, but a wet sniffle and her chin trembling had me going the direction I shouldn't. I barely breathed as I climbed over her, settling my bulk between her and the wall of the cave.

I'd wake before her and move.

She'd never know.

My purr came unbidden as I carefully placed my arm over her smaller form, wrapping her as much as I was able while trying not to touch her. Sandwiched between me and the fire, the tension slowly drained from her body and her breathing slowed, deep sleep taking over where she'd been restless before.

I was just doing the right thing. What I'd do for anyone in need.

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Blythe

Days melted into each other until I wasn't sure how long it had been since the start of my first heat. The evenings were still chilly, but not the bone aching cold it had been the first few days of my new life. The burning between my thighs eased, the bruises faded, and the mark on my neck healed.

Fin'hir thought I didn't know what he'd done, but it wasn't hard to figure out.

A mating mark tended by an alpha was usually healed by the time the omega's heat ended. There was something in their saliva that repaired the tissue and prevented infection. Any other time, a wound like that would take a moon or more to seal and stop looking angry, and while mine lasted a few more days than was average for an omega's heat, there was no way it would have been faded to a silvery scar if he hadn't tended it.

I also knew how he kept me warm at night. I'd woken from nightmares to find his massive body pressed to my back, a thick arm pinning me in place. With the dark dreams I'd been having it should have terrified me to wake up to an alpha so close while I was vulnerable, but one breath of his honeysuckle and spice scent and I'd drift back off to nothingness.

And in the morning, he'd be gone.

I didn't mention it. He clearly didn't want me to know since he waited until I fell asleep to come lie with me, maintaining his little bed across the cave and the charade that he slept there.

I appreciated it more than I could show. I'd tried to thank him for it once, but his intense stare and the way his shoulders tensed and his fur rose had the words crumbling in my mouth. He wanted to be the big, bad monster, so I let his soft center be his secret.

Despite everything else healing, the ache in my chest remained. The nagging, ragged edges of the bond I'd never wanted reminding me of the moment I wanted to forget.

Fin'hir and I fell into a routine over time.

I would wake to an empty cave, stir up the fire and get dressed, and then Fin'hir would arrive with something for breakfast. Sometimes it was only the greens and berries he watched me collecting when he took me out into the forest, but usually there was some form of meat. He needed a lot of food to maintain himself, and he truly seemed to detest anything that grew from the earth. He helped show me there was little in the forest to fear if I paid attention to my surroundings, and I was determined to convince him that at least some greenery could be good.

"Is there any way to get more supplies? Could we trade with someone?"

I fingered the feathers of the bird he was cleaning. They would have been a good trade item back in my village, but I didn't know if his kind found them valuable. I still didn't want to return home, and I wasn't certain I wanted him to take me to a different village either. A woman, especially an omega, showing up alone would raise suspicions.

Plus, it would put me back at the mercy of other alphas like Dicean.

"What do you need?"

He was trying to hide it, but I still caught the curiosity in his tone. I'd made do with

nothing more than what I could make with what I found in the forest, but there were a few things I wanted to make life easier if it were possible to get them.

“A pot would help a lot. I could keep water in it here in the cave and use it for cooking. You wouldn’t have to hunt for me so much if I could make a stew.”

His head tilted, his horns catching the firelight and making him seem demonic. I had never been one to hold with the tales of witches and demons, but I also hadn’t believed in monsters, and one was staring into my eyes.

“An extra dress would be great too. And salt! A needle and thread... or even wool for me to make it from. That’s what I did back in my village.”

I knew he was curious about my home and life before he’d found me, but it was a subject he never brought up, and I appreciated it. The memories were tainted since most of them featured Ricarie or Dicean. I didn’t want to think about those times and the dreams I’d had before my life was changed.

“There might be a way.”

He said the words slowly, as if he was reluctant to consider the idea. I knew just as little about his past as he did mine, and I didn’t want him to do something he was uncomfortable with.

“It’s not that important. I’ve done just fine with what we have, so don’t worry about it.”

Fin’hir huffed as he turned his attention back to the bird.

“I may not know much about humans, but I’ve been around females enough to know better than to believe that. You wouldn’t have brought it up if it wasn’t important.”

My jaw dropped for a moment before I tried to deny his words.

“No, really. Yes, the stuff would be nice to have, but I can get by without it. If it’s trouble, then it’s not worth it.”

He huffed again before shoving a branch through the bird and putting it on the stand I’d made over the fire.

“We’ll go in the morning. I’ve been thinking about it anyway, and tomorrow will be as good as ever. The snows have melted enough to make the trip easy.”

Unsure what to say, I bit my lip and nodded. If he said it was possible and not too much trouble, I wasn’t going to argue with him.

“Should I save these feathers?”

I twirled one between my fingers, admiring the subtle pattern on it. The bird wasn’t uncommon, but I’d seen lovely things made from their feathers.

“For what?”

His brow was scrunched, the end of his nose wrinkled as if my question was strange. With how he was so efficient about not wasting any part of an animal, I didn’t know how he couldn’t think of a use for feathers.

“To trade with? Maybe someone would want them for a cloak, or the down for a pillow?”

He looked as if I’d suddenly started speaking a different language

“They can just go get the feathers from the bird themselves. And have a meal too.”

“Yes, but...” I paused then let out a sigh. It wasn’t worth arguing over. If he didn’t think we needed them, then I’d trust him as I did with everything else.

“Never mind. I’ll take them out.”

I would have been tempted to keep them myself, but I had no way to store them. I wasn’t going to be making a fancy cloak anytime soon, and I’d look foolish if I wove them into my hair the way I’d seen other girls do. Squirrels and other birds would make better use of them in their nests.

Thinking about the animals keeping their babies warm with the feathers had my hand dropping to my belly. I may have lost track of time, but I’d been with Fin’hir long enough to have my courses and know Dicean hadn’t bred me, and my emotions were a confused jumble over it. I didn’t want a baby by him, but sometimes, in the lonely moments when Fin’hir was out hunting and I was all alone, the thought of having a baby to care for made me ache. I still wasn’t sure I’d ever want another alpha, but I had always wanted children.

I sighed as I scattered the feathers in the waning light beneath the trees. I never wandered far from our cave without Fin’hir accompanying me, but I’d explored the area around the cave opening enough to know the best places to leave them for the animals to find.

Task complete, I lingered, listening to the breeze rustling the leaves overhead. It was quiet enough I could hear the scamper of small animals and the twittering of birds in the canopy as they prepared for nightfall. It was a difference to the village that never seemed to have a quiet moment, and it was one I’d come to appreciate.

Claws scuffed stone behind me, and I couldn’t stop the smile that lifted my lips. Fin’hir was always watching out for me, doing his best to make sure I felt safe.

“Come, little human, before the bird burns. You know what will happen if you leave me to tend it.”

The one time he’d tried to cook my meat before I’d awoken, he managed to char one side while leaving the other raw. He’d learned the meat had to be turned to cook it evenly, but it had become something of a joke between us.

My chest throbbed, the pain stealing my smile. There were times I could ignore the broken bond inside me, but it seemed like every time I managed to find a moment of happiness, it reminded me it was there.

Would I ever feel whole again?

Fin’hir’s eyes were filled with concern he would never admit to when he spotted me clutching my chest, and I forced my hands down to my sides. He’d done his best for me, saving me from a miserable life tied to a cruel alpha, and then taking me in when I refused to return home, so I didn’t want him to feel guilty for not getting to me sooner to save me from this pain as well.

Everything else from that day had faded with time, I could only hope the pain would too.

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Fin'hir

The thought of returning home was terrifying, but I wasn't sure where else to go. The one time I'd forced myself to mention perhaps it was time for Blythe to return to her own people she'd insisted she wasn't ready, and I couldn't bring myself to do it again.

I didn't want to lose her.

It had taken over a moon for me to accept that the desire I felt for her wasn't due to her cycle or simply that she was an omega.

Or perhaps it had begun due to her being an omega and was my body's natural response to that, but after spending more time with her, it was now simply her .

I enjoyed her company.

It was strange. I'd always been more of a loner, someone who was part of the clan without being at the heart of it. I'd tended to go out on long hunting trips, sometimes spending three seasons at a time away from the clan. Even when I was home I rarely joined in when the others gathered, only watching from afar.

But now, I couldn't imagine returning to that lonely life. The thought of only having myself to see to, of going to sleep without Blythe in my arms, whether she knew I was there or not, made my heart shrivel.

I wanted her.

I wanted her.

It was getting harder and harder to keep my desire hidden. I'd made myself a loin cloth from the first rabbit I'd caught for Blythe, telling myself it was to make her more comfortable, but I needed it more than she did. I'd caught her looking at my shaft, her expression devoid of the fear it should have shown, and I hadn't been able to stand it. Just the thought that she might be as interested in me as I was in her kept me hard for days, even after I tried to relieve myself.

There were times in the night I would wake with her in my arms, her tiny form tucked against my chest, with my shaft wedged against her bottom. My ridges would be writhing, trying to get to her center despite the furs that were always between us, and once, we'd somehow moved enough that my shaft had been caught between her thighs.

I'd had to remove myself and rush outside, my snarl as I took myself in hand and spent my seed on the forest floor scaring the night animals silent until morning.

It truly was torture living with her.

And now, after leaving my clan for accepting humans, I was going to return with one.

But she isn't mine.

I wasn't sure if I was more worried about them accepting me back, or her finding another alpha amongst them that she preferred. I was senior to most of the unmated males, meaning I would typically get the first chance at an omega after the ones senior to me, but I knew I would never take Blythe if she didn't choose me in return. It was said that love would grow after a bond was made, but after seeing her taken against her will, I'd never be able to put someone through that pain.

Her pain was one of the reasons I wanted to return to my clan, though. I hadn't been fast enough to save her from being claimed by the alpha I'd killed, so it was doubly my fault she suffered the effects of a broken bond. The pain seemed to have lessened since the first days, or perhaps she was simply getting better at hiding it, but if there was a way to take it away completely, I had to find it, and the only ones I could think to ask were back home.

I sucked in a lungful of the mountain air, the scent of flowers mingling with Blythe's tart sweetness. The smell of her followed me everywhere, embedded in my fur as if we were a true couple, and I had to admit I liked it, but I yearned for more.

"Does it ever get warm here?"

My lips twitched into a smile before I controlled them, raising a brow over my shoulder at the little omega huffing up the trail behind me. I'd chosen the easiest route for her short legs and clawless feet, but that meant leaving us exposed to the air blowing over the mountaintops.

"It is warm."

The look she gave me had my control snapping and I laughed despite myself. I was surprised humans could survive winter at all with how cold she always seemed to be, even if the winters at the base of the mountains were nothing compared to what the peaks saw.

"The winds will die soon, little human, and your exertion will warm you, but if you're going to live up here, you'll have to get used to the chill. It does get warm in summer, but that time is short, and not quite here."

Her village likely already had what she'd consider warm days with the mountains to protect it from the cold, and days spent in the sun, but we were too high up the slopes

to be anything other than not quite cold. It was a pleasant day for me, the wind ruffling my fur kept me from getting warm despite how far we'd already trekked, but Blythe's exposed skin was more sensitive.

"Do you need one of the furs?"

I was already swinging the pack I'd fashioned off my back when she shook her head as she huffed to a stop beside me. All it held was our bedding since there was nothing else I couldn't find on the way, and we hadn't had anything that couldn't be replaced. It was a point of shame that I couldn't provide what my omega needed, but that was one of the reasons for returning to my clan.

She isn't mine.

No matter how many times I reminded myself, my instincts and alpha side ignored me. When she slept against my body and relied on me to provide for her, it was impossible not to think of her as mine.

I just couldn't touch her the way I wanted to.

"No, you're right, I'll be too hot for one of them once we're out of this wind."

Listening to her heavy breathing, I examined her from the corner of my eye. I'd already assumed the trip to my clan would take longer than if I was alone, but I worried I was pushing her too hard at our current pace. She hadn't complained, but I knew she wouldn't. She'd hide her discomfort and exhaustion until it was too late, just like she did her pain.

"Let's take a break."

It was only mid-morning, but her flushed face and heaving breaths made my instincts

prickle.

“Here?”

Her tone pointed out how terrible the spot was. I’d led her higher to avoid a ridge she wouldn’t have been able to climb, which left us above the tree line. The wind and sun were nothing to me, and while she wasn’t as pale as some humans, her dusky skin would still redden if she was under the sun for too long.

Trying to hide my embarrassment, I pulled the pack back into place on my back.

“Once we reach the trees.”

She looked like she was about to argue until she spotted how far we were from the next clump of evergreens. Pulling in a breath, she held it before huffing and letting her chin dip.

Walking slightly ahead and to her side, I used myself as a wind block as we made our way across the rocky ground towards the greenery. The footing was fine, but I berated myself for not seeing the other issues with the path I’d taken. I had to do better.

“Tell me about where we’re going.”

My heart stuttered, my mind trying to come up with a reason to avoid the question, but she was going to find out eventually.

“We’re going to my home.”

Her head cocked, curiosity shining from her eyes.

“I thought the cave was your home?”

My nose wrinkled before I could stop it, and I had to smooth the grimace away.

“I lived there, but not long. I’ve been travelling for a while. I meant, we’re going to my clan.”

There was no reason to bait her into more questions by calling it my previous clan. If all went well, I wouldn’t have to make that distinction any longer. Mel’cam had seemed fair and understanding as a clan leader before I left, and I hoped my apology would be enough to allow my return.

What if it wasn’t?

I shoved the thought away, refusing to consider it. I had an omega to care for, and if nothing else, they’d help me for her sake.

Or they’ll take her from me.

A growl slipped out under my breath, but Blythe didn’t seem to notice as she perked up. I could practically see the questions tumbling through her head, trying to get out.

“Your clan? I’ll get to meet more of your kind?”

She’d been careful never to call me a monster, although sometimes it was hard for her to maneuver around the word. My kind didn’t care what humans called us, but I found it amusing to watch her squirm over it.

“Yes, you will see more of us. I’m not sure how many you’ll actually meet though.”

We weren’t as social as humans seemed to be, and while there had been more

gatherings after Mel'cam and Mel'ar claimed their omegas, I had no idea what had changed in the many seasons since I'd left. Plus, I'd be coming back shamed and without status in the clan, so we could be shunned.

Or I would be shunned. Blythe would draw attention from every unmated alpha she passed. Her scent wasn't quite as tempting as it would have been if she'd never been claimed since there was a tinge to it after what had happened, but it was still clear that she didn't have a mate.

I managed to swallow the snarl that thought brought and tried to focus on Blythe's questions instead of my own thoughts.

"Does everyone live in caves? Do they share, like a massive cavern or something?"

"Yes, we all live in caves since they're available. Each family has their own set, usually separate from other families, although some are connected deep within the mountain. We tend to be territorial, so never go into someone else's home."

Her eyes rounded and I purposely left off saying unless she was invited. When people of the clan needed to talk, it was done in the shared space by the lake. Only family or close friends were invited into another's home, except when an alpha was trying to lure an omega into being his mate. There was no way I would allow Blythe to go into any cave but my own.

If I still had one.

I hated how everything hung on Mel'cam and whether he accepted me back or not, and what sort of punishment I might receive. It wasn't unusual for alphas to leave their clans and travel to another, and they were usually allowed to join with little fuss, but leaving and coming back was a different matter. While I hadn't announced why I was leaving the clan, or even that I was leaving for good, my reason why had

probably been clear. Since Mel'cam's mate was human, he would likely be more sensitive about the issue, but I hoped returning with Blythe would convince him to give me a chance to prove I'd changed.

I caught the shift in Blythe's demeanor from the corner of my eye, turning all my focus to her as her shoulders slumped and her steps slowed.

"Are you sure it's okay to bring me there? I don't want you to upset them by bringing a human there. Will they be angry?"

The tension that had coiled in my body eased, and I let my smile show without fighting it.

"You have nothing to worry about. My clan leader is mated to a human."

The emotions that played across her face almost made me laugh, but I waited for her to process the news. I'd seen the way she looked at me, and while I'd known it was possible for our kinds to be together, that was something she likely hadn't been aware of.

My shaft twitched beneath my loincloth despite the way I tried not to think of what could be going through her mind. She'd grown comfortable enough in my presence that I didn't think she'd have an issue accepting the joining the way I had, and her natural curiosity would point her towards exactly what I wanted her to imagine.

"He is?"

"Mmhmm. His brother too. They were expecting younglings when I left."

I could have claimed the information was necessary, so she wasn't surprised when we arrived and she saw them, but telling her was purely selfish.

I wanted her to know it was possible.

That we could be together.

That she could choose me.

I kept my gaze focused ahead, forcing myself not to stare at her. She'd gotten good at reading me, and I didn't want to give away my feelings. I knew she still felt guilty about not being able to survive on her own and thought she was a burden, and I didn't want my interest to push her towards offering herself simply because she wanted to repay me.

If I was going to have Blythe, I wanted all of her. I wanted her to choose me because she wanted me too. Not because of some imaginary debt.

"Wow, that's... I'm surprised."

I huffed a laugh as we finally stepped beneath the cover of the trees, and I looked around for a place where she could rest.

"So was I."

More than she could imagine.

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Blythe

My mind was whirling, too many thoughts competing to be able to focus on any of them. I couldn't even formulate another question despite how many I wanted to ask, so I remained silent as I sat on a fallen tree and caught my breath while Fin'hir looked for a stream.

Humans and monsters could mate.

And breed!

I wasn't sure what to do with myself. There had already been attraction growing for the big monster, but the thought that what my body was urging me to do might not even be possible had kept it in hand.

Now...

Now there was nothing to hold me back.

Except the nightmares.

I still had flashbacks of what had happened. Despite how different Fin'hir was, there were still times when I reacted in a way I otherwise wouldn't have, although his differences made it easier to remember he wasn't Dicean. He wasn't going to hurt me.

At least on purpose.

Despite myself, I'd seen his cock. Even after he'd taken to wearing a loincloth of rabbit fur, it was hard to miss. I wouldn't be too far off calling it the size of my lower arm, and something that big drew attention when it was waving about, even if there was something over it. The only thing the pelt hid was the details.

It was... different.

Even that part of him wasn't like a human's. I'd saved myself for my bonding with Ricarie, but that didn't mean we hadn't fooled around. I'd seen and even touched a cock before that day, even though one had never been inside me. I knew Fin'hir would have a knot at the base like all alphas, but there were other differences.

The rings. Ridges? I wasn't quite sure what they were, but he didn't have a smooth shaft from base to crown the way a human did. It looked as if he had bracelets spaced along the length of him, but beneath the skin.

And I swore I remembered seeing them move.

My core clenched just as a twig snapped behind me, making me jump to my feet.

"Sorry. I found a stream."

Cheeks burning, I was just as eager to get a drink as I was to leave the area I'd perfumed with my indecent thoughts. I should have been thinking about other things, but all I could focus on was the fact that it was possible to mate with one of his kind.

Not one of them.

Him.

Before my first heat and what had happened, if given the choice between a human

and a monster, I'd have said it was ridiculous to even think of choosing the monster, much less wanting to mate anyone after having my choices taken from me. After the incident I had been scared I'd never be able to move on and find another mate despite knowing it was necessary, but the time I'd spent with Fin'hir had shown me there were still good alphas out there.

Even some who didn't look like the real monster in my memories.

It had been a hasty decision to stay with Fin'hir instead of returning home, made out of the desire to hide, both from reality and my shame. Being with him hadn't felt real since everything was so different to what I was used to, and I didn't have to face anyone who knew me. It made it easier to pretend nothing had happened.

Eventually, I'd gone from ignoring it, to accepting it. The lingering pain wouldn't allow me to forget, and while I still held regret over Ricarie's death and the loss of my innocence, I couldn't dwell in the past. I had to move forward, and to be able to do that, I had to accept what had happened. I couldn't count on my body to stop cycling simply because the wrong alpha had claimed me and then died, which meant I'd go into heat again in the fall, and unless I wanted another alpha to come along and take my choice away again, I had to choose one before then.

I still hadn't thought it would be possible, but now the answer was easy.

Fin'hir.

I trusted him.

He'd proven he was a gentle soul even if he was gruff at times. He took care of me, usually seeing to my needs even before I was aware of them. He'd sacrificed for me, giving up food that he could have eaten, as well as his bedding.

And I loved waking with his scent and warmth surrounding me.

It was an easy choice.

Maybe this was Fate.

I'd been as skeptical of the fickle goddess as I had been of monsters, but if one was real, I couldn't discount the other. The stories said she could be devious, creating the most convoluted path to get you where she wanted you, and it was supposedly impossible to change it once she set you on it.

It was comforting, in a way, to think there was a reason behind what had happened. That it wasn't just one selfish alpha's decision that had caused Ricarie's death and my pain, but that the events were necessary to bring me where I was meant to be.

To bring me to Fin'hir.

There was something there, beneath what he'd told me about his clan. I could feel it. Something he didn't want to talk about. He'd never been chatty, but he'd opened up more the longer I'd been with him, showed more emotion, except when he'd spoken of his clan. There was a tightness around his eyes and tension in his tone that said there was pain there. Even when he smiled, there was wariness in his eyes.

But I trusted him. He wouldn't take me there if it wasn't safe.

But would he protect me from one of his own the way he'd protected me from Dicean?

I chewed on my lower lip as I stared at his back, following him between the trees. If it wasn't for the pack he carried I would almost think we were back where we'd spent the last two moons since everything around us was the same, but the bundle of furs

was a reminder that I wasn't going to wake in the middle of the night to the feel of him against me in our little cave, warming me from the back while the fire heated my front.

Things were changing.

I doubted Fin'hir would ever be one to talk about feelings. I knew there was at least some interest on his part, but I also knew he'd never push me. If I left things to him, I'd be in heat again before he'd ever loosen his control, and while I wanted to believe he'd protect me no matter who the threat came from, the thought of facing other alphas without both of us knowing where we stood made my stomach churn. He needed to know I wanted him as my alpha.

And he'd never believe me if I simply told him. I was going to have to show him I was interested, that I wanted him, and then he might accept when I asked him to claim me.

I spent the rest of the day trying to think of a way to go about it. It worked well to distract me from the strain as we kept hiking through the mountains, but as the sun started to sink, I was too exhausted to even put two sentences in a row, much less plan a seduction.

Stumbling to a stop at the entrance to a cave, I blinked around at what little I could see. Fin'hir had gone inside to check for anything dangerous but told me to wait, and while I'd have loved to do something useful like collect firewood, I was barely capable of keeping upright.

"It's safe."

I jerked so hard at the unexpected words I started to tip sideways until long fingers curled around my arms. I hadn't seen him returning with how dark it was inside the

cave, and I was so tired I hadn't noticed the sounds he made as he approached.

"Are you okay?"

It took a moment to realize he'd pulled me against his chest, or perhaps I'd leaned into him, but his palm on my cheek forced my focus back. Despite the long claws on each finger, he hadn't scratched me since the first day, and I added that to the list of things that proved he was softer than he acted.

"Yeah, I think I just fell asleep on my feet for a minute."

His brows bunched, little wrinkles forming along the top of his snout. After more than two moons together I was so used to his appearance I didn't even blink at the horns or the way his eyes seemed to glow when there was only a little light.

"I pushed you too hard."

Shaking my head, I lifted my hand to press against his chest. He was still holding me close, as if he'd forgotten he was supposed to let go, and at least part of my brain was still capable of doing things to make sure he knew I didn't mind the contact.

"It's fine, I'm just not used to so much physical activity."

I didn't want to tell him the muscles of my legs were trembling like a flame burning up the last bit of oil, or that there was a dull throb at the base of my skull from dehydration. Despite the coolness of the air and how much I drank each time we found a stream, I'd sweat out a lot of moisture.

Wiggling my fingers through the fur on his chest, I worked until I felt bare flesh beneath my fingertips. His skin was hot to the touch, and I wasn't sure if it was because he always seemed warm to me, or because my fingers were cold. Either way,

I didn't miss the way he sucked in a breath before holding it.

"I could do with getting in better shape. A good night's sleep is all I need."

His rumble vibrated through my fingertips, making them tingle, and I considered touching more of him, but was disappointed when he pulled away.

"Rest here while I gather firewood and something to eat. You need protein as much as rest."

Grumbling as he turned to walk away, I decided not to argue. Each blink was getting longer, and I wasn't good at hunting even in the best light. With darkness creeping up quickly, trying to find firewood would become a dangerous task that would likely leave me calling out for help when I got lost. Staying where I was created the least work for him.

I sighed as I found a spot free of loose rocks and let myself sink down. If walking left me this tired by the end of the day, I had no idea how I was going to reassure Fin'hir I wanted him before we reached his clan. I could only hope an opportunity presented itself.

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Blythe

I was getting frustrated.

Every day was a repeat of the first, where we walked all day until I was ready to drop by the time we stopped for the night. I could barely stay awake long enough to eat, sometimes having to be awakened for even that, much less have the energy to get anywhere with my plans of persuasion. I wasn't even waking at night the way I had before, falling asleep as soon as I was horizontal and not waking again until Fin'hir woke me to eat again before leaving. It was so bad he'd actually gotten good at cooking whatever he caught for me since I couldn't focus enough to do it myself.

I was going to have to do something drastic. He'd said his clan wasn't too far away, but we'd already been travelling for a handful of days. While I was beginning to feel like we'd never stop walking, I didn't want to waste anymore time and risk getting there before I knew how he felt.

Because if I was wrong, I didn't know what I was going to do.

I'd decided I wasn't going back to my village, I'd rather let them think I was dead or kidnapped, and I wasn't going to go to another village either because I wasn't sure I'd ever not see Dicean in a human alpha. If Fin'hir rejected me my heart would be torn apart again, and I didn't think I had the strength to lose another alpha I'd grown attached to.

"We can rest here for a while, then maybe if I carry you we could reach the clan tonight."

My lung froze and my head snapped up, eyes focusing on his dark shape ahead of me. I hadn't realized he'd stopped walking since I'd been picking my way across a stream too wide to jump, but I had figured he'd call a break soon since it was already past midday. Still, I wasn't prepared for him to say I was already out of time.

"No."

His gaze swung to me, one brow lifted.

"What?"

"I, uhm... I don't want to get there exhausted after a long day walking. First impressions are important. Could we maybe stop early, so I can bathe and get some extra sleep, then we can finish the trek tomorrow? It's rude to arrive at dinnertime unannounced anyway, and I'd like to see your home in the daylight when we arrive."

I was scrambling to find something to convince him. I wasn't sure it had worked until his head tipped and he looked at the position of the sun.

"There aren't any caves between here and there. We'd have to sleep in the open."

It wouldn't be the first time on our trip that there hadn't been a convenient cave nearby to sleep in, but with him, I wasn't worried about anything getting us during the night. The weather was finally getting warm enough that even the nights were only a little chilly, so as long as it wasn't going to rain, it would be worth it.

"That's fine. The fresh air is nice."

Pasting on a smile, I held my breath, but I shouldn't have worried. Fin'hir had never denied me, and it didn't look like he was going to start.

Which was a relief with the idea that suddenly popped into my head. I might die of embarrassment if I was wrong about his attraction to me.

“Okay. We can finish the trip tomorrow. If you want to bathe, there is a river a little farther ahead. We can camp once we cross it, so you have plenty of time to rest.”

My shoulders sank as I sighed, but my relief was short-lived. Buying myself time was only part of the problem, I still had to make sure he knew how I felt.

And hope he felt the same.

The walk to the river felt like it passed in a blink. I heard the water before I saw it, and when it came into view, it was breathtaking. My little village was positioned beside a small lake that was fed by multiple streams from the mountains that dried up during summer, and this river was almost wider than parts of that lake.

“How am I supposed to cross that?”

The water had enough ripples across the surface to make me think the current was faster than the gentle burble it made seemed, and I was willing to bet the middle was deep enough I’d be up to my chest in water. The day had been on the warmer side, but I still didn’t relish the thought of having wet clothing at nightfall.

Being chilled to the bone would distract me from what I wanted.

“I’ll carry you.”

He’d offered to carry me during our trip, and while I felt bad to be slowing him down, I’d insisted on walking. I didn’t want him to waste his energy lugging me around when I had two working feet. He was already carrying all our bedding and did all the hunting, the least I could do was walk, although it was to the point where my

shoes sorely needed replaced.

But for this...

A shiver ran down my spine as I looked at the water. This wasn't the sun-warmed lake I washed wool in and had swam in as a kid. This was runoff, still cold enough to make my teeth chatter if I was to dunk myself in it.

And being snuggled against his chest as he carried me might be a nice opening to the evening.

Nodding, I looked up and met his golden eyes. There was concern clouding them, as if he'd expected me to argue, and I couldn't help smiling.

"Okay. If it won't put you at risk of falling."

One brow barely arched as the lines between his eyes smoothed away. His lip twitched like he wanted to smile back but wouldn't let himself.

"Hardly."

Alphas were going to be alphas, no matter the species.

He slipped off the pack, handing it to me. The bundle of furs was more bulky than heavy, but getting it situated distracted me enough that I didn't see him lean down to swoop me into his arms.

The yell I let out started nearby birds into flight, their cries mocking me as I shoved the pack out of the way to glare at Fin'hir.

"A warning would have been nice."

One shoulder lifted, rocking me as he moved towards the edge of the river.

“I thought you were ready.”

He may have been able to keep his amusement off his face, but he couldn't keep it from his voice.

“Well, I think you wanted to make me scream.”

I hadn't thought about the words before I said them, but the way he focused on me and the heat in his eyes sent another shiver through me for a completely different reason. I had to fight not to squeeze my thighs together, but the way his nostrils flared told me he could smell the way I responded.

Disappointment flooded through me when he turned his attention back to the river without saying anything, but I tried not to let it get me down. He was moving deeper into the water and needed to focus, and I wasn't sure what he could have said anyway. He'd never openly admitted to any attraction even if his body showed it, and I doubted he would be like some of the males in my village who made inappropriate remarks whenever given the opportunity.

Trying not to think about it, I turned my head to gauge where we were in the river, then wished I hadn't. Fin'hir was so massive it hadn't crossed my mind that the river might be too deep for him, but the water was a lot closer than I'd expected it to be. I could have reached down and put my hand in it.

“Are we going to make it?”

My fear must have shown because Fin'hir immediately started to purr, the gentle vibration soaking straight into me from his chest.

“I won’t let anything happen to you. It’s higher than when I first crossed it, but we’re almost past the deepest point.”

I watched as the water crept closer, but his purr kept my anxiety from rising with it. I still worried my rump and feet were going to get wet since they hung lower than the rest of me, but as Fin’hir forged on, he lifted me higher. His chin was almost in my lap, his horns bumping the shoulder and knee closest to him.

My fingers tightened in his fur when he seemed to wobble. The water had to be up to his belly, and I’d heard of people getting swept away by currents in streams and creeks much smaller than this.

“Almost there, little human. We’re fine.”

I wanted to believe him, I trusted him, but my heart still beat a rapid rhythm behind my ribs until we reached the opposite bank. I didn’t even complain when he didn’t set me down at the edge, instead carrying me until we were amongst the trees with only the sound of the river reminding me it was still there.

“Why don’t you wait here, and I’ll check for a place to camp. Then I can hunt while you bathe.”

It was our routine for him to take me to the stream where we’d been and then leave to hunt so I had privacy, and the gentle reminder was enough to shake me out of the funk I’d fallen into so I could release his fur and let him put me down.

“Okay.”

While I was still leery of the river, I was caked in layers of sweat and dirt from walking for days, and I wanted to wash it off.

A small part of me also needed to go back and see the river again to be sure it was as big as it had seemed only moments before. I was going to feel foolish if it was really only a large stream.

While Fin'hir went to search the area around us, I began looking for any edible plants. The monster rarely ate anything I found even though I always offered, and I was still determined to find something he enjoyed. I had a feeling if I could cook some of them better than just warming them in the coals of the fire he would like them more, and I was looking forward to hopefully having access to a knife and pot.

It took him longer than usual, but the sun was high, and I stayed busy hunting mushrooms and strawberries. There were ramps along the river that we'd passed, and I planned to grab them when I went down to wash. I didn't know what would be available near his home, but knowing other humans lived there meant there were likely edibles nearby.

I was just beginning to grow worried when I heard rustling moving towards me. Fin'hir was usually silent unless he purposely made noise for me, so for a moment I thought it might be a wild animal, but it didn't take long for his massive form to appear with a deer leg slung over his shoulder.

No matter how many times I compared us, it was still hard to believe how much bigger he was. It was the back leg of the deer, enough to feed an entire family, yet it's thickest part looked smaller than the arm holding it in place on his shoulder.

And despite the assurance that there were other monsters mated to humans like me, it still made me concerned about the size of other parts of him.

Well, parts of me weren't concerned. My lower lips were wet with slick I hoped he couldn't scent over the meat slung so close to his face.

“Looks like hunting went well.”

“The herds are doing good this year. This doe was past her prime and hadn’t bred, so she won’t be missed. I found us a campsite too. Come.”

The way he spoke of the animals he hunted always intrigued me. We’d had many conversations about proper husbandry, and it was surprising how much he cared for the forest as a whole. It was something I thought humans needed to learn.

My core clenched, reminding me of the direction my thoughts had gone. He didn’t mean the last command the way my body wanted him to.

He had left the pack with me when he went off to hunt and I’d hung it off the front of my shoulders, creating a little space for me to stuff my food as long as I was careful to hold the bottom against me, so it didn’t slip out. Between focusing on that and my footing, I couldn’t look around as I followed him, but the sounds of the river faded.

I worried he was moving us farther away and I’d have to trek back for my bath and the ramps, until I looked up and realized he’d actually brought us to the water’s edge, but in an area where the river was shallow enough that the gentle lapping against the shore was almost silent. Lush grass spread from the bank to the edges of a weeping willow, its branches hanging down to create a dense curtain to hide its trunk.

“This is beautiful.”

I looked up at Fin’hir, but he ducked his head and looked away.

“It’ll make a good place to camp, but we’ll have to make the fire out here.”

He was always careful of our fires, making sure they were in a place that didn’t risk the trees and that they were completely out before we moved on. It was another thing

that showed how much he cared, even when he tried to appear tough.

I found myself smiling, and when he finally turned back to look at me, he raised a brow. Shrugging, a little laugh escaped before I turned my attention to finding a place to set my berries and mushrooms. My heart fluttered like a bird in my chest, and it was hard to ignore the thought that this was how I used to feel with Ricarie.

My love for my intended had grown as we did, developing from our friendship as children. It had been an old, comfortable thing that I had never questioned. We had explored each other in stages, slowly building towards the intimacy I'd looked forward to when my heart had grown close.

But with Fin'hir, it came on faster. There were things we didn't know about each other, things still to be explored, and the excitement and uncertainty made everything seem more intense.

And maybe I didn't love him yet, but the possibility was there. He had a gentle soul, even if his appearance was scary. The thought of being bound to him for life didn't make me want to wither away like it had with Dicean.

He was my hope.

Hope for a future that wasn't full of pain and nightmares.

I just had to see if he was willing to take me as I was and give us a chance.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 4:09 am

Fin'hir

Blythe was acting strange, but I figured it was due to anxiety over meeting more of my kind. Her life had changed a lot in a short period of time, and this was another thing she might not feel prepared for, but I thought she'd adjust well.

I tried to hide my own nerves so I didn't make her feel any worse, but as the sun sank below the treetops, the buzzing beneath my skin grew. The thoughts of being rejected were almost as bad as the thoughts that Blythe would find another alpha amongst my clan and choose him over me when her next heat came.

Busying myself gathering firewood I knew wouldn't get used before the night was over, I kept one ear focused on the little omega beneath the willow tree. She'd taken the pack to lay out our bedding after she'd finished eating, and I hadn't been able to sit beside the fire as if nothing was wrong.

"Fin'hir?"

The odd waver in her voice had me jerking upright, all my attention focused on her shadow amidst the willow's branches. There was enough light for me to see she was standing close to the trunk, but not enough for me to make out any details behind the curtain of leaves.

"Blythe? Are you all right?"

I was already moving towards her, dropping my armful of wood far enough from the fire I wouldn't have to worry they'd roll in. I'd scooped the willow branches out of

the way before she got the chance to respond, the trace of fear in her scent making my fur rise along my spine.

“Yes. I, just, wanted to see if this was okay?”

It took me a moment to realize what she was referring to. She’d clutched her hands together in front of her, vaguely gesturing to the furs on the ground.

The single pile of furs, instead of the usual two.

I’d slept beside her every night since the first, keeping her warm with the heat of my body. Each morning, I woke before dawn to crawl away and pretend it had never happened, but clearly she’d known.

My fur slicked down against my flesh, my ears flattening out to the sides in embarrassment.

“The ground is a little damp here, so close to the river, so it made more sense to just make one bed.”

My heart was racing behind my ribs, but I couldn’t trust myself to read the situation correctly. The thought that she was offering to share a bed with me, or knew we already had, had to be wrong. She simply had more need of the furs than I did, and wanted to be sure it was okay to take the one I pretended to use.

“That’s fine. I don’t need any of them.”

I wanted to turn and duck back out from beneath the tree, but my back claws had become roots, holding me in place as Blythe stepped forward, her eyes searching my face. Her little pink tongue slipped out to wet her lips, making my ridges bunch along my shaft in a way that made it harder to ignore the fact that it was stiff.

“It’s for us to share.”

My cock twitched and I had to close my eyes. I tried to pull in a deep breath to clear my head, but it only served to make things worse since it was full of her tantalizing scent.

Laced with the sweet traces of slick.

My chest vibrated without permission, the low rumble not quite a growl. I curled my claws into my palms, welcoming the sting to help keep me from reaching out for her.

“I’ll be fine.”

I had to force the words out, keeping my eyes closed and hoping her vision wasn’t good enough to see my struggle. The sound of shuffling steps came to me before her small hands touched my chest, making me suck in another breath.

“I want us to share, Fin’hir.”

My rumble deepened, growing louder within the confines of the willow’s branches. I peeled my eyes open to look down at her, the low light catching in her dark eyes.

“Don’t tempt me, little human. It’s been hard enough.”

That tongue slipped out again, her bottom lip gleaming before it disappeared between her teeth. My growl sharpened, the desire to be the one biting the pillowy flesh almost driving me to lean down and take it.

“I know we’re going to be with your clan tomorrow, and I want to make things clear before we arrive. I know I’m going to need an alpha, and you’ve shown me there are still good ones out there. If it’s possible for us to be together, then I choose you.”

My lungs froze, the world narrowing to the female in front of me. It no longer mattered that she was human, or that our young would be some blend of the two of us. All I wanted was to hear those words again, but with more conviction in her voice.

“If you want me .”

Her scent soured with fear again, her whisper telling me what caused it. Wrapping an arm around her, I cupped one cheek in my palm.

“I’ve wanted you since I first scented you in the forest. I tried to get to you before it was too late, and I’ll forever be sorry my hesitation caused you so much pain.”

The hope on her face made my chest swell, but I couldn’t go forward without her knowing everything. There couldn’t be anything that might make her change her mind.

“I left my home because my leaders took humans as mates. I was scared it would weaken us and bring disaster to the clan, but that was because I didn’t know anything of humans besides what I’d seen and heard. Your kind are cruel to each other, and have no respect for nature. They do not put their omegas first, instead they prey on the weaker dynamic. I believed a cross between us would be too much like what I’d come to believe all humans were like, but you’ve shown me I was wrong. My fear was short-sighted and unfounded.

“If you give yourself to me now, Blythe, I won’t be able to let you go. I will guard you as a dragon does its hoard, letting none near. I will protect you from any who would harm you, and I will keep you for myself. The moment your heat returns, I will take you, claim you, and make you mine forever. There will be no other chances to change your mind.”

Her eyes had widened as I spoke, her scent growing sweeter. Her chest rose and fell with each rapid breath as if she'd been running, but she leaned into me harder, her fingers curling in my fur.

“I want that, Fin’hir. I want you .”

Warmth spread through my chest, my growl evening out into a rich purr that had her eyes fluttering. My cock was throbbing so hard I could barely think with the way she was pressed against it, and as much as I wanted to take over and dominate her the way my instincts demanded, I knew what came next was still going to need delicacy.

“This is your last chance. Are you sure?”

I wanted her more than my next breath, but I couldn't stand the thought of hurting her. She might think she was ready, but I knew I'd need patience for her to finish healing.

“I'm sure.”

I couldn't stop myself from squeezing her closer, my hips rocking as I let my nose drop to the space beneath her ear. She'd washed her dress in the stream when she'd bathed which left her in only the thinner covering she wore beneath it, but even that and my loin cloth felt like too much between us.

“Show me,” I murmured against her neck, letting my tongue slip out to tease her flesh before pulling away.

She blinked at me in confusion as I backed away, but I wasn't going to leave her wondering for long. Untying my loin cloth and tossing it aside, I sat in the middle of the furs, leaning back to brace myself on one arm. My cock jutted up, the ridges writhing up and down my length in eager anticipation as her attention dropped to it.

“Come take what you want.”

A wrinkle formed between her brows as she pulled her bottom lip between her teeth to chew on it again, but she moved towards me. It was only a few steps before she was standing near my feet, eyes darting from my cock to my face and back again.

“I don’t know what to do.”

Taking my shaft in my free hand, I squeezed and pulled toward the tip, forcing a bead of my seed to form and spill over. I watched her nostrils flare as she scented it, the alpha part of me preening beneath her gaze.

“Let your instincts guide you and do what feels good. You’re in charge.”

The wrinkle between her brows cleared as they rose, her eyes sparkling as if she was going to cry. For a moment I feared I’d said the wrong thing, that it was too soon, but she was tugging her covering over her head before I had the chance to react to the change.

The sight of her bare curves froze me in place. The thin covering she usually wore to sleep had hinted at what was beneath, but nothing could have prepared me for the desire the sight of her silky, smooth skin inspired.

Her breasts hung heavy, the dark tips tight as if she was chilled. The swell of her belly and hips made me think of how she would grow with our young, and the dark thatch of curls where her thighs met had my mouth watering.

“I didn’t know you had more fur.”

Her laugh pulled my focus back to her face as she moved closer, stepping along each side of my extended legs. I wanted to reach out and pull her to me quicker, but I’d

said she was in control, so I placed my other hand on the ground behind me to reduce the temptation.

I groaned as she sank to her knees, straddling my thighs, but still too far from my cock. It had ached for her for moons, and with her so close, I was on the verge of shaming myself before she even touched me.

“Can I...”

She reached for it but hesitated, her eyes meeting mine in the darkness. The last rays of the sun were disappearing, leaving us with only the flames of the fire beyond the willow’s branches, but I had no trouble seeing the hunger on her face. It burned as fierce as mine, and another growl slipped free as my shaft jerked.

“Yessss.”

It was almost a hiss, words needing too much thought to form. My blood was rushing elsewhere, my entire body straining towards the contact I’d craved since I’d found her.

Her pace seemed glacial as her hand crept closer. Even my ridges froze, waiting for her touch, my cock leaping out of her reach with the first brush of her fingers along my length.

My growl was a low rumble I couldn’t contain as Blythe’s lips parted on a gasp. She’d flinched when my shaft twitched, but when nothing more happened, she finally took hold of me.

I groaned, the noise filling the space around us as my eyes closed to savor the sensation, but I pulled them open again to watch Blythe. Her touch was soft and hesitant at first, her expression one of wonder, but she grew bolder as she explored

me.

“It’s so soft.”

My brows crashed down, my growl turning into a grumble that pulled her eyes to mine. Lips quirking, she let out a huff.

“The skin. It’s soft and smooth, but firm beneath.”

I still wasn’t sure I liked her description, but I forgot about it as she squeezed and pulled toward my tip the way I had when I’d been enticing her closer. A pearly bead of fluid formed at the tip of my slit, sitting there before running down the vein along the base of my shaft. Her gaze followed it’s path, her nostrils flaring again as she released me and pulled her hand closer to her face.

“Your scent has a little spice to it, but this smells more intense.”

She closed her eyes, the distance between her hand and mouth disappearing as I watched. Her little pink tongue slipped out, flicking where my seed had spread on her skin, and I almost burst at the soft noise that escaped her.

“Definitely spicy, but I still taste the honeysuckle.”

She looked towards my face, but I knew it had gotten too dark for her to see well. The angle to the corners of her lips had my stomach tightening as she reached for me again, and I had no more time than that to prepare before her mouth encased the crown.

My lungs seized and my heart burst.

Time ended.

The world ceased to exist.

There was nothing but me and the little human omega kneeling over my legs, suckling on the tip of my shaft.

A spurt of fluid rushed up my length, flooding her mouth and giving her a true taste of me. The way she hummed and squeezed her hand around me had my knot pulsing, her hot tongue battling my control as I tried to hold back so I didn't drown her in my seed before I got to feel her take all of me.

“Enough.”

The command came out rough, my fingers tangling in her hair to pull her mouth away before she won. I tried to be gentle, but if she licked me one more time I was going to blow, and there was still more I wanted her to take.

Her smile said she knew what she was doing but she didn't fight me. She slid forward along my thighs, coming to sit with her curls nestled against the base of my shaft.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 4:09 am

Blythe

“Y ou said I was in charge.”

His growl swelled between us before he choked it off. I knew his instincts would be pushing him to take control, but he was doing an admirable job of holding back.

Part of me wanted to see him lose that control, but another appreciated he was letting me do this my way, at my pace. I trusted him as much as I wanted him, but there were times memories still snuck up and stole my peace.

“Yes, but I can only take so much teasing, omega.”

The rough quality of his voice sent a shiver down my spine, my nipples tightening further. It was instinctive to rock my hips, my clit grinding against the slight bulge where his knot would expand.

Could I really fit that inside me?

Even the reassurance that other humans had managed wasn't enough to soothe all the fear. It didn't seem possible something that size could be shoved inside me without pain.

I tried not to think about my only experience with it. All I remembered was the pain and horror flooding through me at the thought of what was coming, not the act itself, although I'd had lingering soreness afterwards. That was to be expected after the first time, and I wasn't naïve enough to think I wasn't going to be sore again.

But I wanted it. I wanted to feel him stretching me open, and I wanted to enjoy our joining the way I'd heard others took pleasure in it.

I rocked forward again, my slick coating the hot flesh trapped against me. The pressure against my clit had my toes curling and my core clenching, demanding more.

Fin'hir groaned as if he was dying, his lips pulled back in a snarl. I wouldn't have been surprised to find holes in the furs with the way he seemed to be clenching them behind him.

I worked myself further forward, gasping as one of his ridges bumped across my clit. I froze, but the ridge kept moving, rubbing back over the bundle of nerves and making me jerk. It was an odd sensation, to feel it moving where my lower lips were spread over the bottom of his shaft, but it made fresh slick seep from my core to wet us.

“Coat my ridges in your arousal. They're trying to work their way inside you. To pull you down on me so I can knot and breed you.”

Sucking in a shuddering breath, I rocked against it, little pings darting deeper into my belly. My channel was clenching, wanting the same thing, but half his shaft still stuck out in front of me.

It was intimidating, but there was only one way to get over the fear of the unknown.

Lifting myself up on my knees, I reached between us to grip his shaft. All the ridges were moving, feeling almost like I held a bundle of snakes in my grasp who were all trying to get away.

I had to press my other hand to Fin'hir's belly to lift myself higher, toes digging into

the furs, to notch his tip at my entrance. Without giving myself a chance to overthink it, I relaxed and let my weight drop my knees back to the ground.

We both groaned.

The width of his crown stretched my opening, making me gasp for breath as one of his hands came around to grab my thigh. I could barely see more than shadows in the darkness, but I felt his gaze on me, and I lifted my head to search for his golden eyes.

“Slowly. Give your body time to adjust.”

My heart melted.

His body was almost vibrating with tension, little snarls punctuating the low growl that flowed from him. I knew he was straining to hold back, to let me remain in control, and yet he was still the most concerned with my comfort.

My sweet monster.

Warmth spread from where we were joined, and my body urged me to move. I knew he was right, that I needed to go slow, but I was desperate for more of him.

I couldn't lift any higher, so there was only one direction to go. Releasing the tightness in my thighs, I sank down until the rim of his crown popped through my opening, making me moan at the sensation. I already felt stretched by his width and I hadn't taken the widest part of him yet, not even including when his knot swelled.

Lifting myself, I waited until I felt the crown stretching my entrance again before letting myself drop. Fin'hir's hand tightened, the tips of his claws sending pricks of pain to dance with the pleasure from the way he filled me.

His first ridge bumped up against my lower lips, demanding entrance, and instead of lifting again, I wiggled my hips and pressed down. The growl surrounding me intensified, my own hiss lost beneath it as the ridge pushed inside and began to massage my inner walls.

It was... everything.

It was the slight burn of the stretch. The slick feel of his flesh gliding into mine. The pressure against my sparking nerves. The deep need to have more.

And the knowledge he was everything I needed.

My motions became mindless, instinct driving me on. I raised and lowered myself on his shaft, his ridges working their way inside one by one, until my entrance kissed the beginning of his knot. I felt stuffed full, my thighs spread wide to accommodate his hips, my breaths short from the pressure inside, but I needed to know I could do this.

That I could take an alpha, knot and all, and enjoy it.

That Dicean hadn't stolen that from me too.

My thighs trembled, my head spinning from the sensations. My core pulsed, something drawing tighter with each stroke of his ridges along my inner walls.

I startled when his fingers brushed my cheek, pushing my hair back from my face. I hadn't realized I'd closed my eyes, but even with them open I couldn't see anything more than the hulking shadow of him between me and the dying fire.

"Relax, Blythe. You've done so good."

Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes.

My view of my future had been so narrow at the beginning of spring, when I thought I knew what life had in store for me. I'd lost a lot, but I'd also gained an alpha who proved over and over that he cared for me. He wasn't the one I'd thought I'd be with, but I found myself thinking perhaps he was better.

Perhaps this life I was carving for myself was better than the one I'd been willing to settle for.

"I want you."

Even with most of him inside me, I still craved more. I wanted that connection, that tie, that would keep us together forever, but until my heat came and he could claim me, the closest I could get was having his knot locked inside me, and I was determined to feel it.

His hand dropped, his claws brushing along the side of my breast. He pinched my nipple between the curve of two of them, making me gasp and clench on his shaft, before he dragged them down my belly.

I should have been scared of those claws on me. I'd seen what he'd done with them and knew they were dangerously sharp. He'd scratched me on accident before, and it wouldn't take much for those tips to sink into my flesh.

But I trusted him more than that.

I watched as his fingers moved down my body to where we joined. His skin was flushed red where his knot had started to swell, the bulge of it pressed to my folds as I tried to force it inside.

The first brush of his finger over my clit made me gasp. My core clenched again, a fresh wave of slick seeping out to coat his knot.

Pressing harder, he rubbed back and forth over the little bundle of nerves before circling it. It was impossible to keep my hips from rocking with him, chasing the friction.

Moans spilled from my throat as everything inside me drew tighter. My muscles were so tense it felt like my spine was going to snap, but I couldn't escape the need for more.

My hips stuttered, my lungs freezing and my heart squeezing. Fin'hir's hand on my hip tightened, and at the first flutter of my core he used it to pull me down.

His knot slipped past my opening as my orgasm crashed through me, a scream ripping from my throat. He snarled as he kept rubbing my clit, the bulge at the base of his shaft expanding inside me until I was stuck, every nerve compressed and stimulated past its limit. Light burst behind my eyelids, my limbs flushing cold before going hot, muscles twitching as wave after wave of release flooded my body.

It was pure, tortured bliss. It was everything I'd imagined and so much more. I never could have comprehended the way it felt before it happened.

I shivered as the sensations slowly melted away, leaving me panting against Fin'hir's chest. He'd wrapped both arms around me and I could feel his cock flexing inside me as his own release came to an end, my belly bloated with the seed trapped by his knot. If I hadn't been so wrung out it might have been stimulating, but as it was, it made me grimace in discomfort.

"Hold on to me."

It took a moment to process his quiet command, and another to get my arms to respond when I tried to raise them. Wrapping them around his neck, I used what meager strength I had left to hold on as he shifted and pulled one of the furs from

beneath him.

“Here, lay down on me.”

He leaned back, taking me with him. His shaft shifted inside me, making me whine as he let out a groan and I felt his cock flex again. A thrill ran through me at the thought that I did that to him, that I’d pleased him, but I was too tired to do more than smile into his hair.

I released the back of his neck as he settled the cover over my back, letting my fingers trail across his shoulders. He was so massive I was left with my head resting in the center of his chest, the steady thump of his heart beneath my ear reassuring as my muscles went lax. It didn’t matter if I was unable to move, because I knew my alpha would protect me.

Between the relief from my worries and the pleasure he’d forced from my body, I was asleep in moments.

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Fin'hir

I let my hands roam her as she slept, unable to allow myself to drift off the way she had. I still wanted more, but I also knew Blythe probably wouldn't be able to handle more just yet. She was exhausted, and her body was unused to such activities, and our size difference would have only been more of a strain for her.

My mind drifted, unable to focus on any one thought. I was still in shock over her choosing me, worried about our reception from my clan, lust-drunk on the feel of her, and fearful that I'd do something wrong. She was so small and delicate, bearing wounds not visible to the eye, and I wasn't sure I'd be able to do what was right for her.

But I was going to try.

Possession seeped through me, the urge to turn and go back to our cave almost overwhelming. I didn't want to share her. I wanted to keep all of her thoughts and focus centered on me. I wanted to spend my days providing for her, and my nights teaching her all the things there was to learn about pleasure. I wanted to keep her full of my seed and covered in my scent, locked away from everyone until she went into heat and I could sink my teeth into her along with my knot.

I spent the whole night holding her, her naked body pressed to mine. Even when my knot deflated my shaft remained hard inside her, connecting us.

And for the first time, when the blush of dawn lit the sky, I remained with her.

Her breathing changed first, a deep inhale expanding her lungs. Her heartbeat picked up as she was flooded with my scent, the way she rubbed her nose along my chest, instinctively nuzzling into me, making my cock twitch. Her little gasp and the way her channel fluttered around me let me know she'd felt it, her awareness coming back in a rush.

I wanted nothing more than to roll her beneath me and take advantage of the wetness that seeped from her, but I waited, wary of how she'd react. What seemed like good ideas with the coming of night were sometimes regretted in the daylight. I'd been honest when I told her I wouldn't let her go if we went forward, but I had to see if her choice remained the same.

She gave a gentle rock of her hips, a purr leaving her throat as she lifted her head to meet my eyes.

"Good morning, little human. I've yet to fetch your breakfast since I've been distracted."

I tipped my hips, and her lips twitched into a smile before parting as her core clenched around me.

"Did I—Did I sleep on you all night?"

Her eyelids fluttered as my shaft flexed inside her, the ridges beginning to move. They'd remained docile while she was sleeping, but with renewed stimulation, they were eager to work deeper inside her.

"You did."

I didn't need to tell her that I hadn't been able to bring myself to move. There was nowhere else I'd have rather been, and nothing short of danger would have made me

leave her depths.

She rocked her hips again, the scent of slick growing stronger around us. Her continued acceptance was more than I could have hoped for, and her eagerness to have me again was all I'd have dreamed about if I had been able to sleep.

"I'm sorry."

The breathy whisper was at odds with the way she ground herself against me, a soft moaning leaving her throat as I let my hands creep up her thighs to grip her hips.

"Don't be. You kept my cock warm and wet all night."

Her eyes and mouth popped open, her chest and cheeks flushing darker, and I couldn't help the grin that pulled my lips back and exposed my teeth. She'd started this thing between us, and she needed to know what she was in for. The one release had done nothing to satisfy my craving for her.

She seemed unsure what to say, so I gave another thrust, holding her in place by her hips. Her moan had my balls drawing tight, already ready to fill her with my seed, but I needed to see her come apart for me first. Needed to remind her how good I made her feel and renew my scent on her before she met other alphas.

"Take what you want, Blythe. I can feel your slick soaking me. Use me."

It would have been better to give her a break and her body a chance to recover from the last time, but I couldn't bring myself to deny what we both wanted. I'd never be able to refuse her.

Her fingers curled into the fur on my chest, the little pricks of pain adding to the sensations coursing through me. Her tangy sweet scent surrounded me, her breaths

and thumping heart loud in my ears. Her slight weight on top of me was nothing, and it was a struggle not to take control and tug her down on me over and over until she screamed my name.

“I—I want...”

She trailed off as she met my gaze, her movements slowing. Her bottom lip disappeared into her mouth, her teeth dimpling the flesh as she worked up the courage to speak.

I raised a hand from her waist to cup her cheek, carding my fingers through her hair. Her eyelids fluttered closed as she sucked in a deep breath, her blunt nails pressing into the flesh of my chest.

She opened her eyes again, expression set.

“I want you on top.”

More blood flooded to my shaft, making it even stiffer inside her. I wanted nothing more than to cover her, but I didn’t want her pushing herself too far. I had no desire to trigger any bad memories to taint our moments together.

“Are you sure?”

I tried to keep my tone soft and neutral despite my worry. She didn’t need to carry the burden of my fears on top of her own.

“Yes. Please.”

The words were quiet but firm, and I couldn’t deny her. Wrapping my hand around the back of her head, I used the one on her hip to hold her in place as I lifted and

turned us, depositing her where I'd laid all night. She maintained eye contact the whole time, her heartbeat remaining a steady, fast thump as she wrapped her legs as far around me as she could.

Extending my arms, I tried not to crowd her, giving her space to see the area around us.

"Is this okay?"

Her expression softened and she released her grip on my chest to reach up to stroke the sides of my muzzle.

"Yes. I trust you, Fin'hir."

I groaned at the feel of her small hands on me, touching and petting.

Accepting.

She had no problem with our differences, and it only shamed me more for how I'd reacted to the others. I made a promise to make it up to them.

I was still lodged deep inside her but some of the immediacy of the lust had subsided. My ridges had calmed to gentle waves along her inner walls, and I wanted to take my time so she could enjoy each moment the way I was.

Pulling out until only my tip remained inside, I paused for a heartbeat before sinking back in, moving slow enough for her to feel each ridge and vein pass through her entrance. Her lips parted, her eyes going hazy as her body took mine, and I couldn't help dipping my head down to lick along her collarbone.

Her fingers were still stroking my cheeks, the gentle sensation soothing and helping

me maintain control of my slow pace. Her wet heat made me want to bury myself as deep inside her as I could get, but I kept my hips moving in a steady rhythm that had her breathing growing deeper with little whimpers interspersed when my ridges pressed against her inner spots.

Legs tightening around me, she tried to pull me into her faster, but her strength was nothing to mine. I let myself smile against her neck as I left a nip to remind her who was alpha.

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Blythe

My core pulsed at the feel of his teeth on my flesh. For half a breath I fear I was going to flash back to the last time I felt that, but the feeling was quickly washed away beneath the rush of desire it brought.

My body knew this wasn't Dicean. I wanted Fin'hir to bite me.

I felt like I was being washed away in the sensations he caused, only held in place by his shaft impaling me with horrible slowness. One of his hands braced him above me while the other roamed my breast and hip, but it did nothing to stop my drifting.

I slid my hands higher up his head, my questing fingers digging into the fur at the base of his ears. It was so soft and downy I wanted to cover myself in it, and the purr he let out made me think he liked my petting as much as I enjoyed it.

His broad tongue swiped over the place where he'd nipped me, soothing the sting as another ridge popped through my opening. He filled every bit of me, the ridges massaging the walls of my channel in ways that stole my breath and made me want the experience to stretch on forever.

But I was also desperate for something more. Something just out of reach. His slow penetration was stimulating every sensual nerve I had, but it wasn't quenching the thirst in my soul.

Fin'hir moved to pull his head away and I reacted on instinct, taking hold of his horns to keep his mouth on my neck. A shudder rocked through him, his shaft jerking inside

me, and his purr slipped into a growl.

“Be careful, little human. You don’t want to make me lose control.”

His voice was pitched low, the deep rumble in it making me shiver and tightening my nipples into painful points.

That was exactly what I wanted.

I parted my lips to ask why I had to be careful, shifting my hands on his horns, and froze when another snarl spilled over my neck. His cock seemed to throb inside me, the ridges becoming more frantic as I connected the dots.

Tightening my fingers, I slid my hands along the warm, smooth length of his horns for as far as I could reach. His hips punched forward, slamming the rest of him into me as curses worked their way through his snarls.

“Damn it, omega. You don’t know what you’re doing. You can’t—I can’t—”

The shudder that went through his body as I pulled my hands back towards his head was so hard it shook me beneath him. I heard the furs tearing as his claws dug into them, but I couldn’t find it in me to care as a grin slipped across my face.

“I think I do.”

He tried to shake his head like he was going to force me to let go but I refused to loosen my grip.

I wanted him desperate for me.

I wanted him to show me how it really was with an alpha. It was sweet that he’d

allowed me to control our first time together, and I knew he'd done it because of my trauma, but I wanted to leave that behind and just be an omega with her alpha.

“Let me have it, alpha. I can take it.”

His nose dug into the bend of my neck, his growl vibrating through my whole body, but I wasn't scared. He was fighting himself, and it was denying me what I needed. He thought it was for my sake, but we both had to move on.

Stretching my neck as far as I could, I pulled his horn towards my face and extended my tongue. The moment it touched the hard warmth Fin'hir froze, his growl dying away. I'd have worried he'd somehow died if I hadn't felt his heart beating where he was pressed against my chest, or the way his knot instantly bulged.

“Fuck! Fuckfuckfuck.”

There was no time to prepare as he jerked his hips away from me before pistoning them forward. He fucked into me so hard I scooted up the blanket with each impact until his hand dropped to my hip to hold me in place.

My eyes rolled back in my head, warmth spreading through my core into my chest. Every stroke was pure bliss, my limbs twitching as his ridges hit all the spots inside me I hadn't known existed. My breath was punched out of me each time his shaft slammed home, but air lost importance as my alpha dominated me the exact way I needed.

“You are mine, Blythe. My little human. My omega. My future mate.”

His growing knot pulled at my lower lips, stretching them in a way that stung, but the pain wasn't enough to diminish the pleasure of him fucking me. As enjoyable as it had been to ride him, my place was beneath him, accepting everything he could give

me.

His nose dropped to the ground beside my ear, his groan loud when his knot finally caught behind my pubic bone and refused to slip out again. My eyes were pinched closed, white light blinding me behind my eyelids, as everything in my body strained towards the last thing I needed to tip me over the edge.

“You’re my future, Blythe. My everything.”

My heart clenched, my lungs stuttering. I wanted to laugh and cry at the same time, to tell him he was the same for me, but I was trapped in the tension wound through my body, holding me on the verge of release.

The first pulse of his seed scorched my womb, the way his ridges bunched driving me impossibly higher before he used his grip on my hip to change the angle of our connection. His knot shifted, his tip pressing deeper, and I shattered.

Fin’hir’s voice followed me, but I couldn’t make sense of anything he said as I flew apart. My core clenched around him, pulling his seed deeper with each wave of release. It went on and on until my head spun and I barely knew where I was, Fin’hir’s massive body pinning me to the ground the only constant. He was the only thing that brought me back and kept me from drifting away forever.

My alpha.

My monster.

Blythe

It was another day before we left our haven beneath the willow. Fin'hir snuck off to hunt once while I slept, and ferried me to the river and back for water, but other than that, we did nothing but enjoy each other. I almost wished we had stayed at our first cave, but I doubted we'd have moved forward if we hadn't decided to leave. He would have kept avoiding me, and I'd have kept waiting with my fears.

Fin'hir finally admitted his worries in the middle of the night, that his clan might not accept him back. I knew he had changed, that he accepted me as I was despite not being his kind, and I hoped his clan would see that. He tried to act like it wouldn't bother him to be rejected, but I knew it mattered to him.

The first view I had of his home was breathtaking. He'd forced me to eat before allowing us to leave, worried he'd starved me, so the sun was high in the sky when the lake came into view. He said the cabin next to it was new, as well as the garden not far from it. I was excited to get a closer look, but also nervous over meeting more of his kind and their mates.

We took our time closing the distance to the cabin, and someone must have seen our approach, because four large monsters stood outside the building waiting for us. One of them was the color of coal, except around his muzzle and eyes where he was going grey. Another had mottled shades of brown, while two of them had similar dirt-colored fur. Their horns were all different, although three of them had curled horns like Fin'hir's, and the differences between all of them stirred my curiosity.

Fin'hir asked me to wait while he approached who I assumed was the leader of his

clan. I felt exposed standing beside the lake where the trees had been cleared away to allow sunlight to flood the area, but I did as he asked, faking confidence for him. The group spoke in low voices, and I couldn't catch more than a word or two at the time, and while the fur rose on one of the pair who looked alike, the other eventually clapped Fin'hir on the shoulder.

I held my breath as my alpha made his way back to me, my eyes searching his face for clues. He'd returned to his stoic expression as we'd drawn close to his home, and while the greeting hadn't been joyous, it hadn't seemed like he'd been told to leave either.

I finally couldn't wait any longer and closed the last few steps between us.

"Is everything okay?"

There was motion behind him, but while he flicked one ear backwards, he didn't seem worried, so I kept my focus on him.

"They have accepted my apologies, although it might have been harder without you. I am permitted to rejoin the clan and return to my old caves."

My heart was racing and tears pricked the corners of my eyes as I wrapped my arms around him. He went stiff for a moment before relaxing into the hold and putting his arms around me. It was going to take him a while to accept casual touches since he'd held himself back for so long, but it was another thing I couldn't wait to develop between us. We had a long way to go, but I knew I'd made the right choice in Fin'hir.

He made me happy.

It might not be the blinding joy of youth and dreams, but it was the realistic, comfortable happiness of knowing I was accepted and wanted and cared for. It was

something that would grow and deepen with time, and something I wanted to live for.

“Come, meet my clansmen, and then we can meet their mates and young.”

I sucked in a breath, my brows jumping, and I couldn't help sneaking a look around him. More monsters had arrived, most looking similar to the first four, but there were also human women scattered amidst them, some holding little bundles that were heartbreakingly adorable, even from a distance.

Fin'hir took my hand in his, turning to lead me to my new home, but before I took more than two steps a blur raced towards us and crashed into my legs.

Brown eyes blinked up at me from a face similar to Fin'hir's, but with a less pronounced muzzle. Little ears flicked atop his head as it tipped to the side, tiny horns peeking through the fur beneath. He was wearing a loin cloth like all the monsters present, so it was easy to see his fur was shorter and not as thick, but he still had black claws at the tip of each finger.

“Ma'cane, come here until you're introduced.”

The woman who called him stood beside the monster who'd clapped Fin'hir on the shoulder, her smile one I'd seen on many mothers calling to their unruly children, and it brought out an answering one on my face. Her belly was rounded with a new baby growing inside, and my heart clenched with desire for what she had. Hearing it was possible had been enough, but seeing the truth of it made me impatient to join the ranks of happy omegas staring back at me, and I couldn't wait until my heat came again so Fin'hir could claim me, and if the gods were willing, give me a babe like the cutie blinking up at me.

“Welcome, Blythe. Come join us.”

The woman waved me closer, and I looked up at Fin'hir, happiness flooding my heart. This wasn't the life I'd envisioned for myself, but I finally believed perhaps Fate knew best, and this was where I was meant to be.

Chapter One – Lyric

It was colder than she'd expected as Lyric ran across the open field, the frozen grass crunching under her feet. The trees had blocked some of the wind before, but she was exposed in the field and thinking twice about the wisdom of her decision to run.

Maybe if she had submitted they would have spared her, and she wouldn't have found herself gasping freezing air into straining lungs.

Lyric had never expected to leave the village she had called home. Her father was the Chief, and the alpha he had promised her to as a mate was someone highly placed and well respected. Though he wasn't someone she would have chosen for herself since he was much older, she was content with him knowing that her father could have picked someone far worse. She had to believe he was doing what was best for her. Lyric had looked forward to their mating in the spring, once her first estrous came, since being a mother was all she had ever wanted to be.

The raiders had changed all of that. The pleasant, unexciting life she had envisioned disappeared with the smoke in the air. Watching her father's throat slit in front her, and then finding her intended already dead when she tried to turn to him for help, Lyric had no other choice but to run and hope none of the raiders tracked her.

That was why she had left the cover of the trees to cross the field. There was a river she hoped to use to break her trail, but with how cold she already was, she wasn't sure she could force herself to step into the water. Dying of hypothermia was not the way she wanted to go.

Pushing on as fast as she could run, her tired legs pumped until Lyric came to a sudden halt at the water's edge. The crust of ice along the bank made her hesitate to run into it as she had planned to break her trail.

Forced to think fast, she followed along the edge of the bank and prayed that no one was tracking her, but it didn't take long for her to lose that last bit of hope as she heard rough male voices calling to each other in the distance. They weren't in view yet, but they were close enough that she didn't need to strain to catch their words, though she couldn't understand them.

Gathering the last of her courage, Lyric waded into the water, gasping as the chill stole her breath. Already shivering, she forced herself to slog in deeper so the water would carry her scent away. Knee deep in frigid water, she wasn't able to move as fast as she had on dry land, with the rocky bottom and the numbness seeping into her legs and feet.

Tears running silently down her chapped cheeks, she kept moving upriver until a rock turned beneath her waterlogged boot and pitched Lyric into the deeper water running through the center. Attempting to force air into lungs trapped behind muscles seizing from the cold, she couldn't get her feet beneath her again, and was swiftly pulled back towards her village. The river passed just outside the edge of the village, and her only hope was that no one was watching the water when she passed by.

Giving in to the pull of the current, Lyric began moving with it instead of fighting it. Propelling herself as fast as she could in the frigid water, she tried to make as little noise as possible as she moved past the edge of her home.

She thought she was doing well until something bumped into her shoulder. Looking into the blank eyes of a boy she had known since childhood, Lyric couldn't stop the scream that escaped her throat as she struggled to distance herself from his body.

Shoving against it to propel it away from her, she realized he wasn't the only one

floating limp and unseeing in the river. She thrashed to get away from the corpses lining the water along the village, but pain bloomed in her left shoulder, causing her to swallow a mouthful of river water.

Sputtering, she felt herself being pulled towards the riverbank as she choked on another scream. When she looked behind her, there was a large figure holding the line attached to the arrow sticking out the front of her shoulder. Lyric tried to fight against the pull, but between the cold and the injury preventing the use of her left arm, her body was giving up. There was no strength left to fight as he reeled her in like a fish caught on a line.

One massive hand wrapped around her upper arm, lifting her from the water as she screamed again from the pain of her weight pulling on the injury. When he reached out his other hand, she saw the glint of light along the edge of the long knife he held, and she accepted her fate. She hadn't expected to live through the night anyway.

Going limp in his hand so he could get it done faster and not cause her more pain, Lyric barely had the energy to be surprised when he paused, pulling her closer to sniff her hair. Unable to do anything more than shiver, she didn't resist as he held her against his body and nuzzled her throat, licking over the pulse in her neck.

At the point where she was oblivious to anything but the warmth of his body, she snuggled closer to him as he lifted her limp body into his arms and strode back towards the village, his musky scent wrapping around her and telling her muddled brain that she was safe.