



My Orc Nanny (Eastshore Isle #8)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Just when I think I'm at the end of my rope, the universe sends a gorgeous, talented, and oh-so-caring nanny to rescue me. What's the catch?

Every morning I wake up and remind myself I was the one who decided to kick out my horrible ex, and it's my choice to raise my kids alone. This is less comforting than you might think when I'm knee-deep in deadlines, snotty noses, defiant preteens, and desperately in need of some help. I just never expected that help to come in the form of an absolutely delicious, seven-foot-tall, green monster...an orc who can make a killer pot roast, organize my junk drawer, and seems to understand exactly what each of the kids needs.

So what's the catch? The catch is that with this phenomenally tempting male living under my roof (did I mention what a good kisser he is?), I'm dangerously tempted to turn this relationship into something more than employer-nanny. I want Aswan, but I really don't want to screw up this dynamic. For the first time in a long while, I feel like my family is right where we should be.

But when my past shows up to haunt us, I realized exactly how much I need Aswan. In every way.

This feel-good, low-angst, high-heat cozy romance features the following tropes: Fated Mates, cinnamon roll hero, a determined heroine who is learning she doesn't always have to be strong, hurt/comfort, adorable small-town (of course), lots of humor, lots of heat!

Total Pages (Source): 15

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:17 am

Chapter One

Hannah

I wasn't going to make it.

Dramatic? Yes, but each morning was a struggle to keep my shit together in this chaos. I was in desperate need of help, and I wasn't going to get it.

You always get maudlin when one of your babies is sick. Today is just like any other stressful school morning.

Huzzah.

Joshua sniffled pitifully against my shoulder, his mop of brown curls limp from the fever, Mr. BunBun tucked up against his side. I knew he was rubbing snot all over my shoulder, and I berated myself for wearing my good silk blouse for today's meeting.

"Benny, are you ready?" I yelled from the living room, rushing about, trying to find my other heel. I swear it had been right here. I'd had to drop them both to pick up Joshua, because at almost three, he wasn't nearly as tiny as he used to be. "Benny, we're going to be late."

"I don't care," my oldest hollered back from upstairs. "The school doesn't care either."

“Oh, the school most definitely cares, young man!” I had enough notes from them to prove it. “Let’s go, let’s go!”

Joshua whimpered again, and I ran my hand up and down his back, trying to soothe him. “I know, babybear. We’ll get your brother and sister to school, and we’ll figure something out, okay?”

Although what, I didn’t know. Daycare wouldn’t take him with a fever. Mom’s chemo appointments meant that I couldn’t risk compromising her with toddler germs. And my boss wasn’t going to be happy if I called out again...

“Mom?” Tova wandered in from the kitchen, one of her braids already coming undone. I swear that child gets into more mischief before eight a.m. than most children do in a week. “Where are the brownies?”

“Aha!” I crowed, bending to scoop up my other shoe triumphantly. “What brownies?”

“The ones for my class today. Everyone was supposed to bring in a treat, and I told them you make the best brownies. Did you make them?”

My chest clenched, and I turned incredulous eyes toward my daughter, both heels dangling forgotten. “And you didn’t think you ought to tell me this? Tova, you need them today? ”

She shrank back. “I thought Ms. Rios told you. ”

Oh no. I shut my eyes helplessly. “I...I can’t make you brownies, honey. There’s not enough time. If you’d mentioned it yesterday...”

“I’m sorry, Mommy,” she whimpered, and I opened my eyes in time to drop the

shoes again and catch her as she threw herself at me.

“ Oof ! It’s okay, honeybear.” Now I was soothing two children. “I’ll figure something out.” I always did, after all. “Maybe we could stop by Meli’s Bake Shoppe on the way to...” Figuring out what to do with your brother.

On my shoulder, the toddler hiccupped, and I knew he must be in bad shape if he didn’t even fuss louder. While I was trying to think of what I could grab from the store for Tova, my brain was also whirling, trying to guess what Joshua’s symptoms meant. A cold, a new tooth, something worse?

Oh God . I resisted the urge to close my eyes in defeat. This was easier when Travis was here .

Was it, though?

My ex was a warm body in the house, sure. But what would he be doing in this situation?

He’d be sitting on the couch, high as a kite, eating junk food and spitting crumbs everywhere.

Yeah, but having another adult would mean I could hand Joshua off to him or tell him to drive Tova and Benny to school, at least.

But would he? Maybe five years ago he could’ve managed, but the drugs made him an unsafe driver.

Oh yes, there was that .

I sighed.

My life had certainly become more difficult since my divorce, but at least now, I only had to worry about three immature humans instead of four.

Joshua sneezed, and I sighed, opening my eyes.

Right.

Self-pity was well and good, but I had to get shit done.

I patted Tova again. “It’ll be okay, honeybear. We’ll figure something out.” And if I can’t, Ms. Rios was an understanding sort. “How about you go and get your stuff ready? Do you need a backpack today?”

“Nope! No homework!” My daughter pulled away and did a little spin, showing off the way her favorite pink leopard-print dress twirled. “Just the last-day-of-school party!”

“Okay, well, why don’t you bring it anyhow, in case Ms. Rios has something to send home with you? And get your brother’s stuff too— Benjamin Thomas Wood!”

Tova ran to the bottom of the stairs and called up, “Benny! Mom’s using your middle name, you’d better come!”

How could that kid not want to go to school on the last day of classes? I would’ve thought he’d be thrilled!

Shaking my head, I pulled Joshua away from my shoulder long enough to check on him. “You okay, buddy?”

His bright red cheeks told me he wasn’t. How was I going to take care of him when?—

Right on time, my phone rang. I'd already slipped it into the pocket of my slacks, so I hoisted Joshua back onto my shoulder and fumbled to pull it out .

My boss. Great.

The man wasn't a bad boss, but he didn't seem to understand the concept of school mornings are hectic .

"Good morning, sir." I managed not to sound exasperated. "What's up?"

"Just making sure you're all set for the ten o'clock appointment with Butch Holdings. We can't afford any more delays; not if the building projects the mayor wants are going to move forward on time. You have all the info you need?"

"Yes sir, but..." Joshua sneezed again. "Can I send the information to you? Or maybe Cindy? My youngest is sick, and?—"

"Hannah." His voice was steely. "When I hired you, you assured me you had plenty of childcare options."

"He has a fever, sir." I couldn't just foist him off on someone!

"Be that as it may..." He sighed. "No one else knows this portfolio, Hannah. The bank needs you here for the meeting, and the meeting will happen at ten. So you will be here by ten. Is that understood?"

There was an implied or else , and I couldn't afford to lose my job. I mean, I was good at it, so they couldn't fire me, but my boss could make my life miserable. I closed my eyes, thinking how much shit single moms put up with. "Yes, sir."

He hung up without acknowledging my agreement.

I frowned down at my phone, trying not to feel hopeless .

If only that Help Wanted ad had born fruit. It had been Benjamin's teacher's idea, actually, to hire a nanny, after I complained to her about the upcoming summer months. I had the money, after all...just not the time.

But Eastshore Isle was a small town, and it wasn't like there were an excess of qualified nannies sitting around. I'd been hoping that, starting on Monday, I'd be able to hire a temporary babysitter from the high school population...

That didn't help me today.

"Benny!" I called again. "We're leaving soon! I have to stop by the bake shop! Get your butt down here!"

"Butt!" giggled Tova, dancing toward the kitchen. "Butt, butt, butt!"

My temples were pounding. Maybe I was getting sick.

Telling myself it wasn't fair to snap at her because I was frustrated with her older brother and worried about her younger brother, I slid my phone back into my pocket and turned to the kitchen to find myself something to pack for my lunch.

The knock on the door stopped me.

Who the hell came visiting at eight a.m. on a Friday morning? It was too early for any deliveries.

Scowling, I readjusted Joshua, tucked Mr. BunBun back into the crook of my elbow, and opened the door.

My first thought was to wonder if someone had sent me a stripping telegram.

If they had, they'd sent the perfect male to deliver it .

The orc on my front porch was huge—tall and broad, his hair almost brushing the overhang—and stunningly handsome. His dark hair was impeccably cut and styled, his jaw and cheekbones were chiseled, and he wore a tight black t-shirt that accentuated all the right things.

There was a mole on his cheek, and it highlighted his perfection, rather than detracting from it.

“Good morning.” He smiled, and I saw that between the two tusks which poked from his bottom lip, his white teeth were perfectly straight. “Are you Ms. Woods?”

I stared.

This god of a male knew my name?

I'd known orcs were handsome—Tova's best friend was an orc, and her father Sakkara was the mayor—but this one? My mouth opened, but no words emerged.

“Ma'am?” His smile faded, replaced with concern. “Am I in the right place? I'm looking for Hannah Woods?”

Joshua sneezed again, and it shook me from my shock. “Oh! Yes, I'm Hannah.”

“Good. I'm here about the job.”

Job? I shook my head, distracted by the way my toddler was rubbing his running nose against my silk. “Honey, don't do that to Mommy's shirt.” I turned back to the

stranger. “What job, Mister—look, who are you?”

He’d pulled out his phone and now waggled it at me as if that would help me remember. “I’m Aswan. I’m your new nanny.”

Aswan

The woman’s panic was infecting me. I could taste her desperation, which shouldn’t be possible; all I knew was that she was desperate, frantic, and I couldn’t stand by.

“Ms. Woods? Sakkara said you needed help.”

“Sakkara sent you?” she blurted, even as she turned back into the house, shaking her head. “That’s ridi—no, I posted that job advertisement a month ago, and didn’t get any responses.”

All the more reason for me to apply, right? She had stumbled back into the house’s foyer, leaving the door open, and it wasn’t an invitation...but I decided to take it as one. Cautiously, I stepped inside.

“Benny!” she yelled up the stairs. “If you’re not down here in ninety seconds, I’m leaving you!”

A little voice hollered right back: “ Good !”

“Benjamin Woods! Get your butt down here! We have to stop at the bakery for your sister, which means we had to leave ten minutes ago, and?—”

The baby on her shoulder chose that moment to sneeze again, spewing snot across her blouse and the side of her neck. “Oh, yuck, Joshy!” she groaned.

Unable to stop myself from helping, I stepped forward, arms out. “Here,” I demanded. “You go change, and I’ll wrangle the children?—”

My words cut off when she—Ms. Woods—clutched the toddler to her and reared back, panic in her eyes once more.

“Are you nuts—Look, I don’t know you, mister! You should leave before I call the cops!”

It took effort to drop my hands to my sides, instead of gathering her and the child against my chest to whisper soothing words. Instead, I nodded serenely. “Yes, that would be fine. My younger brother Simbel is on the force, and Chief Ortiz is a fine man who will vouch for me.”

I could tell by the way her eyes narrowed that she hadn’t expected that answer.

“Here’s Benny’s bag, Mom!” came a new voice, and I tipped my head to one side to see a girl child spinning in place, a too-big blue backpack pulling her off-balance with centrifugal force.

“Tova—” began Ms. Woods as the girl spun too close to a cabinet laden with books and bins.

Without thinking, I reached out and snagged the handle at the top of the backpack, causing her to spin to a stop a few inches from disaster. She didn’t realize how close she’d come to collision, of course, and merely blinked up at me.

Then she grinned as she recognized me. “Hi, Aswan. Did you bring Emmy? Can we play today?”

“You know him?” her mother barked, and I glanced over to see her hoisting the red-

faced toddler higher as she chewed on her bottom lip. “Tova, this male?—”

The little girl rolled her eyes. “He’s Emmy’s uncle. Kinda-uncle.” She latched onto my hand, although I wasn’t sure if it was in support or because she was still dizzy. “Aswan, we gotta go to the bakery because I forgot to tell Mom she had to make the brownies for the party today, and Ms. Meli’s brownies are almost as good as Mom’s. But my big brother is being a butthead and we gotta go now .”

“I don’t think he’d appreciate being called that.”

Tova just shrugged. “And my little brother is sick.”

This time, I turned—turned us both —to face her mother. Yes, the little one she held was looking significantly droopy, wasn’t he? I winced in sympathy. “That explains the sneezes.”

“I have an important meeting today,” she whispered, the words almost drug from her, as if she didn’t want to admit the failing. “And Joshua has a fever...”

I grasped the situation immediately and pulled out my phone to call Sakkara.

No daycare would accept the little one with a fever, and she would miss her meeting, and the other two were already late.

“It’s Aswan,” I barked into the phone, even as I punched the speaker button. “Ms. Woods didn’t realize I’d be starting today. Please vouch for me.”

The woman’s hazel eyes were locked on the phone, and Sakkara immediately did as I asked.

“Hannah? It’s Sakkara. Please forgive my oversight, I am so sorry.” I could hear him

pacing. “I told Aswan I would reach out to you and arrange for him to start today, but in my calendar I wrote Monday , and I thought I had another few days to arrange everything. ”

The toddler was beginning to slip down her hip, even as he clutched a ragged stuffed animal, but his mother was glancing frantically between the phone and me. “I—I—Really , Sakkara? You sent him?”

“I knew you needed help. Nikki told me you were looking for a nanny for the summer, which starts next week, and Aswan really is a perfect choice.”

“He’s nannied before?” she asked, eyes narrowing in disbelief as her gaze raked me.

I opened my mouth to defend myself—no, I haven’t nannied before, I didn’t even know you could verb the word—but Sakkara beat me to it.

“He won’t let you down, Hannah, I swear it,” Eastshore’s mayor assured her smoothly. “I hope he can be of help to you today.”

I saw the moment she gave in. Her shoulders slumped, her chin dropped. “Yeah, thanks,” she mumbled, turning away. “Um...have a good day. Benny !” she called, dismissing the phone call.

I hung up. “Ms. Woods.”

When she swung her worried gaze back to mine, I held out my hands again. “Give me the child. Go change and wash up and fetch your son. Tova and I will keep Joshua safe.”

She hesitated, her palm spread across the toddler’s back. Well, who could blame her? I didn’t exactly inspire trustworthy nanny vibes, did I? But maybe the fact I already

knew everyone's names proved that I was trustworthy? She glanced down at Tova, who was happily swinging on my hand, then back up to me .

With a mighty sigh, she held out the boy.

Without hesitation, I scooped him up and tucked him against my shoulder, grabbing the stuffed animal before it could fall from his limp hold. His mother watched in concern, chewing on her lower lip.

The lower lip I couldn't seem to stop noticing. It was plump and far too interesting.

"Be careful," she finally blurted. "He has a cold. If you got sick?—"

"Woman," I said sternly, "I'm an orc. We don't get the sniffles . Go. Care for yourself."

She shuffled backward toward the stairs, as if unwilling to leave me alone with not one, but two of her children. I had enough time to see her grip the banister as if her life depended on it before Tova tugged on my hand.

"Guess what, Aswan? Today is the last day of school, and we're having a party! Ms. Rios is the best teacher, although Benny likes his teacher too. Emmy is in my class, did you know that?"

I felt my lips curling as I patted the small child's rear, the way I remember fathers doing for their kitlings in my village. "I did know that. You're her best friend."

"And she's my best friend. She doesn't talk to me very much, but she talks to me more than she talks to any of our other friends, that's how I know." The convoluted sentence took me a moment to work through. "And you know what else? Her mom is Ms. Rios, our teacher! I mean, she's her stepmom, that's what it's called when your

dad marries a new lady. Like if Mom married a new boy, he'd be my stepdad. I want a stepdad, because you know why? ”

Honestly, I was only half paying attention. I'd been on Eastshore long enough—and had spent enough time with Sakkara, his Mate Nikki, and their daughter Emmy—to know Tova...and to have been talked at by Tova. So I studied the boy, Joshua, and murmured, “No, why?” to his older sister.

“Because then Mom would be happy again. Sometimes, when it's nighttime and she thinks I can't hear her, she cries. I don't like it when she's sad.”

The confession, so nonchalantly given, caused something in my chest to freeze. My shocked gaze swung back to Tova, who'd dropped my hand and was now shrugging out of her brother's backpack.

Ms. Woods... cried at night?

Why did that make my Kteer —that primitive part of me that howled survival instincts deep in my chest—growl? Did this have to do with the way I responded to her panic, with a need to fix things?

A thundering of feet saved me from having to respond to this shocking realization, and I looked up to see the woman holding the hand of a sullen boy about ten years old as they came down the steps. She was wearing a cotton blouse now, the red causing the highlights in her hair to shine.

“Find your shoes,” she snapped to her oldest son as she struggled into her suit coat. “Your sister has your bag. We have to go now .”

“Ms. Woods,” I announced, stepping in front of her as she hopped on one foot to strap her heels. “You take the children to school. I will stop by the bakery and pick up

the brownies and drop them off with Ms. Rios on Tova's behalf."

"Wh—" she began, straightening to gape at me.

I thrust the toddler into her arms. "Is your stroller in the garage? I'll load it into my car, and we can go from the school to the bank." That's where Sakkara said she worked, and where I assumed her meeting was.

Her mouth was working, but no sound emerged, and Tova tugged on my arm. When I turned my attention to her, she beamed.

"Make sure you get the ones with the sprinkles, Aswan. They're the best."

I nodded curtly. "Understood. Will two dozen be sufficient?" When the little girl merely blinked at me, I clarified, "Twenty-four. Never mind, I'll get thirty."

"You'd better get fifty," she said seriously. "They're really good, everyone likes them."

Her mother interrupted, "He'll get what he can find, young lady. Get in the car!" She bounced the fussy toddler as she peered up at me, her gaze torn between fear and hope. "You really don't mind, Aswan?"

My attention was caught by her lower lip again. Part of me had been wondering what it taste like...but when she said my name? All my attention centered on that . And the way it made my Kteer howl with glee.

I forced myself to incline my head. It took two tries to make my voice work. "I am here to help," I managed before I strode out the open door.

I had a stroller to find and brownies to buy.

It was good to have a purpose again.

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Chapter Two

Hannah

Maybe I was hyperventilating a little when I pulled into the bank's parking lot.

Joshua was asleep in his car seat in the back—poor baby, that's how I knew he really was feeling yucky, to already be so tired. I dropped my forehead to the steering wheel, squeezed my eyes shut, and tried to breathe through the pep talk.

Unfortunately, all I could seem to manage was, You can do this, you can do this .

Which sucked, because I wasn't sure I could do this.

My boss had made it clear I needed to lead the meeting with Butch Holdings. Honestly, the portfolio was my personal responsibility; I'd been the one to liase with them since they won the contract to build the condo development down by the docks. The bank needed this meeting to be successful, and more than that, I wanted them to succeed.

I had twenty minutes before they showed up.

But could I just...hand Joshy off to a complete stranger? I know if I called up my mother, she'd badger Dad into driving over to pick up their youngest grandbaby so she could pamper him with homemade chicken noodle soup and cuddles...but I could not afford her to catch whatever he had. I mean, I could already feel my nose clogging and my head aching, likely from all those open-mouth sneezes Joshua

managed this morning.

If my mother caught anything, in the middle of her chemo treatments, it could be disastrous.

Woman, I'm an orc. I don't get the sniffles .

Aswan had been so...certain. So sure of himself. The way he'd made a plan about how to tackle the morning? And then he'd just announced it and implemented it. It had been...well, frankly, it had been a little aggravating, but also really hot.

For so long, I'd been the strong one. The capable one. The one everyone—my three kids, my sick mother, even my dirtbag ex—had looked to.

This morning, for just a moment, it had been a relief to have someone else come up with a plan and make it happen.

Giving a little groan, I lifted my head just a smidge and dropped it again.

You can't rely on him. You can't rely on anyone .

I mean, my parents were pretty awesome. But the last few months, since Mom's diagnosis, had proven that the roles had definitely begun to reverse. I couldn't count on them to always be there for me; in fact, it was now my responsibility to be there for them , to help them whenever they needed.

At least Travis wasn't in my life anymore.

He was safely in prison in Tennessee, a world away from us.

I sighed and resisted the urge to run my fingers through my hair. I had to look

professional and capable and not at all like the completely frazzled mess I was. Why yes, that is a snot stain on my tailored pantsuit and applesauce in my hair. Please trust me with your multi-million-dollar portfolio.

Sure, Hannah. Sure.

Taking a deep breath, I forced myself upright.

“Okay,” I whispered, staring unseeing straight ahead. “Okay, you can do this. You can do this. If he shows up, you can trust him. Tova does, Sakkara does. You can?—”

A gentle tapping at my window interrupted me, and when I whirled sideways and jerked back in surprise, I felt something pop in my neck. That’s why my screech turned to a whimper, and the entire embarrassing experience lasted approximately a quarter-second.

And Aswan saw the whole thing.

Of course it was him, bent at the waist so he could nod politely to me as he peered through the window.

Open the door, you idiot. Go outside and talk to him. You just decided to trust him, didn’t you ?

Didn’t I?

Another deep breath, and I fumbled for the door handle.

To my surprise, it opened under my hand, and it wasn’t until I swung my legs out that I realized he’d held it for me. Huh. Sometimes my dad did that for my mother, but no one had ever done it for me...

“Hi!” I blurted, too loud, too enthusiastically. “The brownies...?”

Another solemn nod of acknowledgement. “Thirty-six brownies are in Nikki’s hands. Only half have sprinkles, but all of them are peanut-free. I didn’t know if there were any allergies in her class.”

Oh. He’d... thought of that? What kind of male thought of that?

There was the slightest twinkle in his dark eyes when his gaze flicked sideways. “I’m lying. I bought thirty-seven, so I could try one.”

“And?” I managed to not sound like I was strangling. Barely.

“Cairo’s Mate makes perfectly sufficient brownies. But mine are better.” Was that a wink? Did he just wink ? Before I could ask, Aswan had turned to point to an SUV that I didn’t recognize, and a stroller I did. “I’ve figured out how to open the stroller. Since it’s clear you were surprised by my presence this morning, I thought it would be helpful for me to watch Joshua right here, in and near the bank. After your meeting?—”

All the breath whooshed out of me in relief. “Oh my gosh, that’s perfect !” In my relief, I reached forward, my hand landing on his forearm. “That’ll be great—the meeting won’t last past noon, and then Mr. Morrison will let me work from home, and I can?—”

It wasn’t until I followed his gaze down that I realized I was holding onto him. Onto his heavily muscled forearm, which was bare thanks to the dark t-shirt he wore.

And those muscles? That warm skin? It felt good . It felt nice beneath my palm. I swallowed, remembering my initial reaction to seeing someone this hot on my doorstep...and I yanked my hand back from his arm as if I had been burned.

Maybe I had.

When he lifted his gaze to mine once more, I saw something else in his dark eyes...a softness I didn't want to contemplate.

"I'm glad you approve, Ms. Woods," he said softly. "I never want to make you uncomfortable."

Too late for that buddy . But I wasn't going to ever let him know about my response to him, because the last thing I needed was to complicate anything.

"Um..." What had we been talking about? Oh yes, the plan. "Yes, I mean...um, yes. Let's do that. The thing you said. We'll be in the big room along Main Street, the one with all the windows, and the tellers won't mind if you wander in and out, I'll put in a good word..."

Okay. Okay, you can do this. I nodded twice, then took a deep breath and nodded again. "Okay, yeah." I turned to the car to get Joshua. "And don't forget to charge me for the thirty-seven brownies too. "

As I bent over the five-point harness, I thought I heard a small snort from behind me, but didn't want to know what it meant.

Joshua whimpered as I lifted him, but he didn't wake. That was a little alarming. I was frowning as I straightened with a small grunt. My little guy wasn't quite so little anymore, was he?

"He really is sick," I murmured.

When Aswan reached for him, I didn't hesitate to pass Joshua over to him, which surprised me when I considered it later. Instead, it felt natural to watch my little guy

being tucked up against that strong shoulder. Forcing myself not to admire Aswan's muscles, I turned back to the car. "I managed to remember his diaper bag, thank goodness."

Aswan hummed. "Is there a sippy cup in there? Juice or water?"

Wincing, I handed the bag to him when he reached with his free hand. "There's a cup in there, but it's not filled. I'll get it?—"

"I can fill it with water inside," he interrupted with a gentle smile. "And I'll see if I can get him to wake up and drink a little too, okay?"

Okay . Yeah. Another deep breath. "Yeah," I whispered. "Okay." Yeah .

Yeah, I could do this.

Swallowing down my fears at the idea of giving up control like this, I followed Aswan to the stroller, where I tried not to be obvious as I hovered and watched him buckle my baby in. He pulled the sippy cup from the bag and tucked the rest in the basket under Joshua's butt.

"Oh!" I blurted. "Mr. BunBun!" I whirled and toddled—stupid heels—back to my car, and returned nearly breathless with the beloved floppy stuffie. "Here," I panted, thrusting it toward Aswan. "Joshua takes him everywhere."

With a solemn nod, the big orc gently tucked the rabbit up against my son's side, and I tried not to melt.

"You must have a lot of experience with kids," I guessed. "That five-point harness is a pain in the butt to figure out." And I had normal sized fingers!

Instead of assuring me of his experience, Aswan nudged the locks off the stroller wheels and turned it—and himself, having to bend over almost comically to push it—toward the bank. “It’s ten minutes until ten, Ms. Woods.”

Oh! Oh, crap, yeah, I was still running behind, wasn’t I? “Come on,” I huffed as I hustled toward the front door. “I’ll introduce you!”

I was surprised by how quickly I settled into the meeting—into focus . Mr. Morrison turned the whole thing over to me, of course, but I’d expected myself to be distracted. After all, my baby was in the hands of a virtual stranger, right?

But...it had felt okay to wave goodbye to Aswan, who dwarfed the tiny stroller and my sleeping son. He’d been screwing the cap back on the sippy cup—so delicate in those large, clawed hands—and I’d been surprised how natural it felt to trust him.

Was it because he’d taken charge when I’d needed it ?

Was I making a mistake in trusting him?

The meeting went well, and it had been a comfort to be able to see Main Street so clearly. Aswan was just walking up and down the sidewalk outside, occasionally stopping to chat with someone he knew. Even from inside, I could see how protective his body language was, and that made me feel like maybe I had made the right choice in trusting him.

By noon, the meeting was wrapping up. Contracts had been picked apart, discussed at length, and rebuilt into something that everyone was happy with. My boss had been right; I really had needed to be here to run this, since I knew the most about it.

“Thanks for coming, gentlemen,” I said with a tight smile as I offered my hand. “Eastshore is going to be better off with this new project.”

One of the reps from Butch Holdings shook my hand with an easy smile. “And we’re hoping to bring some jobs to the island too.”

Now that the meeting was wrapped up, I’ll admit I was a little distracted. I wanted to check on Joshua...and find a tissue for myself. So I nodded. “I know we’re all looking forward to it. If you’ll excuse me,” I offered half-heartedly as I darted for the ladies’ room and blew my nose prodigiously.

Oh no.

Had I caught Joshy’s cold?

Woman, I’m an orc, I don’t get the sniffles .

Washing my hands in the hottest water I could stand, I grinned ruefully at my reflection in the mirror. “I hope you’re right, Aswan, because catching a cold would be a terrible first paycheck.”

A toilet flushed, and I saw my reflection’s eyes widen in surprise to discover there was someone listening to me mumble to myself. I ducked out of the restroom before I could be accused of being crazy.

Crazier .

Mr. Morrison was excessive with his appreciation—I guess he could tell how much of a pain it had been to get me here today. I sat across from him at his desk, and I nodded whenever I thought it appropriate, but I’ll admit I wasn’t paying attention.

The second time I sneezed, he handed me his box of tissues and kindly suggested I work from home the rest of the day.

Dully, I shook my head. “I think I need a sick day, sir.”

I saw his wince, but knew he saw the truth in it. So despite his big sigh as he stood, he nodded toward the door. “Good work today, Hannah. We’ll see you on Monday, bright-eyed and bushy tailed.”

I wanted to ask him if he thought I was a lemur, but instead pressed my lips together and managed to make it out the door before I sneezed again.

Aswan and Joshua were waiting for me on the portico, in the shade. My baby was asleep in the stroller, Mr. BunBun tucked under his chin and his sippy cup mostly empty, thank goodness. The stunning male was watching him .

Whereas most males would pace or stare at their phones or something, Aswan just stood there with his arms crossed and his shoulder propped against the column, his thoughtful gaze on my sleeping toddler.

But then I stepped outside, my leather bag slung over one shoulder, and he glanced up. When he saw it was me, his expression slowly transformed from neutral curiosity to a smile. A real smile, not a polite one.

“How’d it go?” he asked in a low rumble, straightening away from the column.

I could do little more than shrug, and I saw his smile begin to fade. So I forced myself to assure him. “It was great. Everything’s moving ahead. They’re even going to hire some locals, which will be great for Eastshore.”

Aswan’s concerned gaze darted across my face, but he nodded and glanced back down to Joshua and changed the subject.

“I ducked into the market with him and picked up some of that flavored-electrolyte

water. He seemed to like the cherry flavor, but I couldn't get any protein into him."

I bent closer and could see the remains of Joshua's favorite fish-shaped crackers spread out on the tray, so I shrugged. "He'll be okay."

That was when Aswan began lining up small bottles across the top of the stroller, distracted by pulling them from the shopping bag I only now saw hanging from the handle. "I wasn't sure which pain-and-fever reducer you normally used on him, so I just picked up everything the market had. Of course I'd never give him medicine without your approval, but I think it makes sense to get some into him as soon as poss—what?" he asked when he noticed me staring at him.

I shook my head, not sure how to explain how surprised I was that he thought of such a thing. "I—thank you. Yeah, fever reducer is probably a good idea."

He peered closer. "Ms. Woods, are you okay?"

I flicked my fingers dismissively. "I'm fi—" But my assurance was interrupted by a massive sneeze. "Sorry." A second one. "Sorry." A third sneeze. " Sorry ."

Aswan's lips twitched as he dug into his back pocket and emerged with?—

A handkerchief? Who carried a handkerchief these days?

The kind of male who thinks of food allergies and preemptively picked up medicine for your sick baby .

"Thank you," I muttered miserably when he offered it to me.

A good nose-blow was just what I needed. And didn't I sound like my mother when I thought that?

Afterward, I had that awkward Well I can't very well hand the soggy thing back to him, can I? moment. So I stuck the handkerchief into my bag and swore I'd wash and fold it for him.

With a sigh, I reached for the handle to the stroller.

"Ms. Woods, do you mind if I accompany you back to your house? I can help you get Joshua settled, and maybe start some lunch for you? "

"Oh, you don't have to—" I began, but he grinned, almost shyly.

"I can help."

It was such a small offer, but...he'd saved my butt this morning. Severely. I owed him big time, and besides...it looked like Aswan was now our new nanny, didn't it? So I nodded mutely, and he turned us all toward the parking lot.

I used his handkerchief all the way home, and by the time I got there, my head was just a big pounding ball of snot and pressure. He was the one to lift Joshua out of the car seat, and gather up the bags of groceries—that was more than just medicine, wasn't it?

Once inside, I oversaw the medicine choice and dosage, but I let him feed it to the semi-awake toddler, just to make sure he knew what he was doing. It was wild to see those large green fingers—capped with claws!—being so gentle and delicate.

I wondered, not for the first time, what those hands would feel like if he touched me .

Aswan shot me a sudden glance, surprise on his face, and I flushed and looked away guiltily, wondering if he could read my mind somehow.

“Do you want to get more comfortable?” he asked in that low rumble, bouncing Joshua against his shoulder. My toddler looked so tiny compared to Aswan, whereas I sometimes struggled to hold him upright these days. “I bought ingredients to make chicken soup.”

My mind flashed to the matzo ball soup my mother used to make me when I was younger, and my brows rose. “Really?”

“Sure. It’s good for you when you’re sick. Oh, I meant to ask—do you keep kosher? I remember Tova telling Emmy about lighting the menorah.”

My eyebrows were likely hidden in my hairline now. He’d listened ? I mean, I knew Tova could talk to a brick wall, and most adults dealt with that by not really paying attention. But Aswan had paid attention and even known the implications of lighting the menorah.

“Ms. Woods?” he prompted me, and I winced at the formality of it.

“No! I mean, no, we don’t keep kosher. My grandparents were orthodox, and my mom sort of drifted away when she married my father, and I was raised with both traditions.” I was blathering, wasn’t I? “We’re Jew-ish. Jewish-ish . We still celebrate, but we don’t like...go to synagogue or oh my gosh , Hannah, just shut up.”

It wasn’t until I saw his lips twitch that I realized I’d said that last part out loud, and managed not to sink into a puddle of embarrassment only by sheer dint of effort.

“Got it,” he rumbled, bouncing Joshua some more. “Don’t have to worry about kosher. Any food allergies?” When I shook my head, still wide-eyed in surprise that he thought to ask, he asked, “And are you a spicy sort of female?”

I couldn’t help myself; I thought of the books I sometimes found time to read, where

spicy meant something else entirely. I thought of his green skin pressed against mine, I thought of how hard and warm he'd be...and I blushed again .

Aswan's nostrils flared, his brows lowered thoughtfully, and his gaze swept over me. "I meant pepper ."

"Yeah," I croaked, backing out of the room. "Yeah, I like spice."

If I'd been alone, I would have taken a long steamy shower and then changed into my favorite jammies. Since I wasn't, I made do with yoga pants and a comfortable bra under my t-shirt. When I came back into the kitchen, it was to see Aswan chopping celery and speaking to Joshua.

"Most people don't like the strands, buddy. They get stuck in your teeth, huh? But once we cook them, you won't even notice the celery."

My baby was sitting in his high chair, his eyes bleary and two spots of color high on his cheeks, watching the big orc in the kitchen. I can't imagine they were having much of a conversation , but it was kinda endearing to see Aswan trying to include him.

So all I said was, "Smells good," as I scooped Joshua up. "Let's go sit down, huh?"

Without looking up, Aswan said, "Feel free to rest, Ms. Woods. You both need it."

Oh my gosh, a nap sounded amazing, and honestly, I wasn't that hungry. I glanced at the clock on the wall. "Okay, but I have to head to the bus stop at three, so not too long."

Finally, he placed the knife down and lifted his gaze to mine. His eyes were two dark pools, and he slowly inclined his head in a nod of acknowledgement .

I tried not to think of how regal, how composed he was, as I stumbled out of the kitchen to the living room.

Our couch is the World's Most Comfortable Couch, and I sighed as I sank down into it, resting Joshua against my chest. I don't even remember closing my eyes, but I promised myself it wouldn't be for very long.

The next thing I remembered was hearing Tova's and Benny's voices raised in argument.

"You're not in charge of me!" Tova screamed, stomping into the house. "You're a jerk!"

"I'm oldest!" Benny yelled right back. "You have to listen to me!"

"Tova, Benjamin," came Aswan's quiet rumble as I struggled to sit up, rubbing my eyes and wondering what had died on my tongue. "I told you that your mother and little brother were sick. Be respectful."

My daughter's expression turned mulish as Benny's looked guilty for a moment. Then he rolled his eyes, muttered, "Whatever, happy summer vacation," and stomped upstairs.

"He's just hungry," I tried to explain, struggling to surreptitiously twist my bra right way around. "I'll make him a grilled cheese."

"Ms. Woods," Aswan began sternly, coming to scoop Joshua off my chest. "I can make perfectly lovely grilled cheese sandwiches. You rest."

With him so close, I could do little more than flop back down onto the couch and listen to Tova's rendition of the last day of school...the brownies were a hit,

apparently. One more thing I owed Aswan for.

And his chicken soup? Amazing . “Boy, this is spicy,” I later coughed, reaching for the glass of orange juice he’d brought me. “It’s clearing me right up.”

One of his solemn nods. “That’s the idea. I simmer it with the red pepper, and the orzo soaks it all in. Come on, Joshua, let’s get your mama one of the garlic rolls.”

My almost three-year-old, who had perked right up thanks to the medicine, dragged Mr. BunBun into the kitchen, bellowing, “Gahlic woll! Gahlic woll!”

Because oh yeah, it turns out, Aswan also made my children dinner; a simple pasta dish, since the soup was too spicy for them. Oh well, more for me.

I still wasn’t 100%, but thanks to the nap and the spicy soup, I was feeling a little better by the time the kids were sitting down to dinner, and I managed to get my butt off the couch to walk Aswan to the door.

“Thank you for everything today, Aswan.” Although it felt strange—especially after how much I owed him—I offered him my hand, as if we were in a business meeting. “You really saved us today.”

“I was happy to do it,” he said quietly with a small smile, his large hand enveloping mine. I swear a warm tingle shot up my arm at that touch. “I hope I’ve passed muster.”

Passed mus—oh. “I think the kids and I would benefit greatly from having you as our nanny.”

“Thank you, Ms. Woods. ”

I squeezed his hand—because oh yeah, had I failed to mention that I still hadn't released him? "I think, after today, you ought to just call me Hannah, okay? I mean, we're friends, right?"

Something flared in those dark eyes, and for a moment, I swear I saw a flash of green before Aswan dropped my hand. "Yes," he said. "Friends."

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Chapter Three

Aswan

It was difficult, but I managed to stay away from Hannah's house until just before noon on Saturday. A full eighteen hours. What, you think you deserve a reward ?

I should have stayed away longer. What kind of male enters a desperate situation like Hannah's and imagines things that aren't there? Because that's surely what had happened.

She'd been ill—maybe not fevered like her son, but she clearly wasn't feeling great. There was no way she'd been thinking dirty thoughts about me!

Except...there'd been a few times, right on the edge of my senses... Look, orcs have much more acute senses than humans gave us credit for, right? We could hear small movements or even pulses, especially if it's someone we're attuned to. And our sense of smell was legendary, which wasn't so much of a boon when it came to Joshua's diapers.

But yesterday?

I could have sworn I smelled Hannah's arousal.

See? Ridiculous. The poor woman was ill, exhausted, and at her wits' end when it came to her work and kids. Besides, there'd been that parting handshake: friends . I was her nanny, and she was my friend.

And I told myself that's why I was standing on her porch at noon on a Saturday—a day the nanny shouldn't be working—with arm loads of groceries. Because she was sick, and she was my friend.

“Hi, Aswan!” Tova announced as she yanked the door open, a smile—missing two teeth—brightening her face. “I’m going to play at Emmy’s. Mom said it was okay. Did you bring her?”

Since she’d skipped off as she asked this, I took it as an invitation, and stepped into the foyer, carefully nudging the door closed with my heel. “I didn’t. Do you walk to Emmy’s house?” I told myself I was only asking because nannies needed to know these things.

“Our backyards connect, silly!” Tova was shoving things—were those dolls?—into a backpack. “Well, almost. The Stevensons and Mrs. Mallak don’t mind if we cut across their woods to play. I have to cross the creek, but I can just hop across it, easy peasy. Wanna see?”

It sounded like the two little girls were used to going back and forth, so I wouldn’t concern myself. Instead, I arranged my bags on the counter. “Maybe some other time. Is your mom around? ”

“ Mom !” Tova bellowed up the stairs. “I’m going to Emmy’s! Aswan is here!”

I winced, hoping for a more subtle introduction.

Because the Hannah who came shuffling to the top of the stairs, her expression incredulous, was not who I was expecting. Her hair—which yesterday had hung about her cheeks and shoulders in glorious waves—was tied up in a messy bun. She wore silk pajamas and was struggling to carry a squirming Joshua.

And the poor woman had two pieces of tissues shoved up her nostrils.

I knew the moment she remembered, because she whirled around and bent over—I was a horrible male for admiring her ass—to plop Joshua on the ground, snatch the tissues, shove them in her pockets, and pick him back up again before he could make an escape.

“Down, Mama!” he yelled, wriggling furiously.

In an effort to distract her from her embarrassment—she was adorable when she blushed—I tried a chuckle. “My little buddy’s feeling better, huh?”

“Um...” Swallowing, clearly uncertain, Hannah began to pick her way down the steps. “I gave him another dose of fever reducer this morning, although I’m trying to keep him low-key today.”

Wincing in sympathy, I met her halfway up the stairs to take the squirming toddler from her so she could focus on not tripping. “And you’re not feeling any better?”

“A little,” she sighed. “I don’t think it’s a major cold, but they always hit me hard. ”

“Because you don’t take time to care for yourself,” I half-scolded over my shoulder as I carried her son toward the kitchen.

I don’t think I imagined her quiet, “I don’t have time to take care of myself.”

I stood Joshua on the tile. The little boy tipped his head back to stare up at me, so much so that he stumbled backward and plopped down on his butt. His blue eyes were wide, reminding me of his mother’s surprise.

“We’re going to warm up some soup for your mom,” I told him. “I need your help,

okay?”

His solemn little nod was pretty damn cute. I handed him a wooden spoon and placed one of the dirty bowls from the sink in front of him. “Can you show me how to mix soup?”

As Joshua began to happily smack the bowl—and the tile, and himself—with the wooden spoon, I frowned at the sink. “And we’ll have to teach your siblings how to load their cereal bowls into the dishwasher,” I muttered.

“Sorry it’s so messy,” Hannah blurted, and I glanced up, surprised to still see her here.

“It’s not messy.” I made a shooing motion with my free hand. “Go lie down. I mean it. I’ll put away the groceries.”

“Aswan, I don’t work on the weekend. I need a nanny during the week.”

Something deep in my chest tightened, and I think my smile was overly bright to hide that fact. “Yeah, but you do need a friend. Seriously, I’ll work on lunch, and pick up in here, and I’ll keep the kids busy. ”

“I—”

“I’ll bet another nap would do you good.” I was already focused on finding a place for the mozzarella cheese in the fridge. “And if it makes you feel less weird about accepting help from a friend, you could pay me for an extra day.”

“ Fine .” It wasn’t until I heard her acquiescence that I realized how much I was hoping for it. “But save your receipts. Today’s and yesterday’s, and the brownies. I’m adding them into your paycheck.”

I didn't need a paycheck; I needed to feel useful . But since I was getting my way, I merely grunted and used my knee to block Joshua from climbing into the open fridge. "Buddy, if you want a cheese stick, just ask."

"Cheese tick! Now!"

"Now isn't the magic word."

"Abba-dabba! Magic cheese stick!"

By the time I quit chuckling and got him his snack, Hannah had snuck away. Hopefully to nap. I made a mental note to try to keep the noise down.

I'd decided to make pizzas for the kids' lunches, after I'd put the soup on the stove to reheat. I was measuring out the flour when I heard light steps coming down the stairs. I was already turning toward the door when Benny's voice came through.

"What smells so— Oh ."

Yesterday had been a strange interaction with the boy. He was clearly on the cusp of puberty, and I'd learned enough about humans in the last decade—and I'll admit, some late- night reading last night on physiology—to know the poor kid's brain and hormones were being pulled in all directions.

"Hello," I offered neutrally. "I'm reheating your mom's soup. Did you want any?"

Watching me a little warily, he edged around his brother to sniff at the stove. "It smells spicy. What is it?"

I hesitated, then decided to tell him the truth. "I call it my Kickass Chicken Soup. I used to make it for my brother whenever he got sick."

Abydos was sick a lot when we first found safety in Colorado, but he preferred the soup about eight times spicier than this.

Benny had whirled on me, brows raised. “Did you tell my mom that? Is it kickass because it’s good?”

My twin had been the one to name it. Gods below, at times like this, I missed him. I missed the peace we’d found in Bramblewood. I wished he hadn’t gone back to the mainland—to handle his business, he’d claimed—but I knew it was because he couldn’t handle being around this many humans.

But Benny was still staring at me eagerly, waiting for me to say the bad word again.

“It’s kickass because I used to make it strong enough to kick your ass.” I held up my hand, palm out. “And I think that’s the last time we’re going to say that word around your brother, okay?”

The boy flushed guiltily and glanced at Joshua. “Why are you on the floor eating? That’s gross,” he muttered as he struggled to lift up the toddler and carry him to his highchair.

I cocked my head to one side and watched him strap the little one in. It was clear Joshua loved his big brother, from the chortling...but Benny was frowning in concentration. He hadn’t been looking out for Joshua because he was necessarily worried, but out of...obligation?

“I’ll find you some crackers, Joshy,” he muttered, turning away.

But I was already there, holding out the box. “I got it, Benny. Or do you prefer Benjamin?”

He'd done a double take when I started to feed his little brother and now frowned thoughtfully. "My mom calls me Benny. My teacher calls me— called me Benjamin."

"Did you like your teacher?"

"Ms. Young? Yeah, she was cool." He shoved his hands in his pockets and glared down at his bare feet. "When school's back in, I'll be in fifth grade. That's the year before middle school."

Ah. "Big changes, huh?" I said nonchalantly as I went back to measuring dry ingredients. "I'll bet it feels a little weird to think about moving schools."

The boy shrugged, not looking at me. "The upper school is right next door. Besides, I'm ready." He took a deep breath and straightened his shoulders. "I'm the man of the house, after all."

I kept my gaze on the bowl, trying not to let him see the way my chest had tightened at that innocent comment. Obligation . That's what this was. Where was his father? Where was Hannah's Mate?

"You know," I began carefully, spooning in the Greek yogurt that gave my pizza crust its tang, "orcs change our names frequently. We're born with one name, and we get another right around the age you are, when we start to become adults. Our clans give us new names—or we choose them—with each milestone, like Mating or a battle or a particular achievement."

"So your real name isn't Aswan?"

"It is," I corrected, turning out the dough to the floured counter. "I was given the name Aswan by human scientists when I crossed into the human world, and it is what

your government calls me. Maybe one day I'll choose a new name, but for now, Aswan is my real name."

"Not a great name," the boy muttered. "Sounds like ass-one."

When I twisted my head to raise a brow at him, he flushed and looked away. "Let's not use that language," I gently chided. "Although to be fair, my brother used to say the same thing."

"The brother who you made the soup for?" he blurted, moving over to the counter to watch me.

"Yes, that one. I have many brothers. Three of them came to the human world with me, ten years ago. My younger brothers are living here in Eastshore—Simbel works at your schools, and Memnon and his Mate run the garden shop. Go wash your hands, so you can help."

As he followed my instruction, I carried on with the explanation. "My twin brother is Abydos, and he's appointed himself head of our little group. I don't think he needed to, but he felt obligated. It is a heavy responsibility, and I think it has made him..." I frowned thoughtfully at the dough I was shaping. "Hard. Bitter."

The boy's only response was a little snort as he dried his hands, and I wondered if he got my point.

"I only mentioned all this to share that to me, at least, it's normal to choose a new name when we make changes. So that's why I asked you what you wanted me to call you. Benny? Benjamin? Ben?"

"Ben," he blurted, then looked a little embarrassed. "I mean, I like Ben. Maybe next year the teacher can call me Ben."

“Ben,” I agreed, shifting out of the way, welcoming him at the counter. “I’m making pizza. If you don’t want the spicy soup, would you prefer to help me?”

“I love pizza!” Ben’s face lit with a childlike sort of joy as he took the rolling pin I offered. “Pepperoni is the best.”

I was just digging out the pepperoni when Joshua threw his crackers on the floor. “Uh-oh!” he laughed. “Uh-oh! Uh-oh!”

Ben looked up from his work, and his expression fell again into disappointment. “Oh, Joshy,” he sighed, placing the rolling pin down.

“Uh-oh, Doshy!” the toddler laughed, kicking his feet. “Mo’ cackers!”

I watched Ben’s joy fade as he surveyed the mess, and realized he was mentally preparing for the responsibility of cleaning up the mess .

“It’s okay, Ben,” I was quick to offer. “I’ve got this. You keep?—”

“I know where the broom is,” he interrupted with a sigh, heading for the pantry.

And I followed him, to gently take the implement from his hand. He glanced up at me in surprise, and I laid a palm on his shoulder as his little brother laughed at his own cleverness at knocking more crackers onto the floor.

“It’s okay, Ben,” I repeated quietly. “I got this . You go back to working on your pizza.”

But he frowned up at me. “It’s my job to take care of him.”

“No, it’s not.” I tried to be gentle, but firm. “It’s your job to be a kid, Ben. It’s my job

to feed Joshua and clean up his messes.”

His frown deepened. “You’re not our dad. Or a real nanny. Dudes can’t be nannies.”

“Really?” My brows rose. “That’s the first I’ve heard of it. You can explain your insights into gender roles as you make the pizza?—”

“I just mean...” Flustered, Ben slipped away from my hold and flapped his hands. “Real men don’t care about taking care of kids or cooking or cleaning up messes or whatever.”

And he’d still been willing to do all those things, albeit reluctantly? I shook my head. “Real males do whatever their friends and family need them to do, Ben. That is why I’m here. Because your mother is now my friend, and she trusts me to take care of all of you. You are not yet an adult, and thus you don’t need to worry about...” I shook my head again and spat out the words, “what real men do. Who taught you such things?”

I could read from Ben’s body language, and the sour smell of his embarrassment, that he didn’t love the question. So I was surprised, as I swept up the broken crackers, to hear him mutter, “My dad was kinda a jerk.”

I didn’t respond, but the answer gave me plenty to think about as I finished cleaning and brought Joshua a banana. “What eats bananas, Joshua?” I asked him seriously.

The boy was reaching happily. “Monkey!”

“Here you go, little monkey.” I opened the peel just slightly and handed it over, watching in case I needed to peel it more. But the toddler happily attacked the fruit, peeling it himself.

I stepped back to see Ben watching me. He quickly shifted his attention to the dough on the counter. “Is this thin enough?”

I hummed, pretending to study the dough. “It could be thinner here and here.” As Ben bent back over the rolling pin, I cleared my throat.

“Your father isn’t here, Ben, but that doesn’t mean you have to be the man of the house.” I could see his ears reddening. “But that being said, and I know I just gave you a whole speech on allowing me to take over responsibility...”

I trailed off enough to give him time to glance at me. When he did, I grinned.

“Could you tell me where the crayons and paper are? Or something I could give your little brother to do while we make lunch? Because once we start saucing this thing, I don’t want to have to stop to entertain him.”

His grin seemed a little relieved. “How about you finish rolling the crust, and I’ll get the crayons? I can get the mozzarella cheese too.”

“Oh no, mister,” I told his back as he rummaged through what was clearly the junk drawer. “We’re grating our own. When I make pizza, I make it from scratch. Is there any kind of organization here? What is this thing?” I asked as I held up what looked like a medieval torture implement.

“It’s a thingy to take the pits out of olives, I think,” Ben offered with a smirk, reaching around me to pluck two crayons from the mess. “I’ve seen Mom use it exactly once.”

I surveyed the drawer in confusion. “You’re going to help me organize this while the pizza bakes.”

“Oh joy.” But Ben didn’t sound particularly unhappy, and I turned to see him arranging the coloring supplies in front of his brother. He cocked a brow at me. “You make your own pizza often?”

“I used to have my own restaurant. Come over here and grate this cheese—wait, no, wash your hands again first—and I’ll tell you about it.”

The ten-year-old’s grin seemed natural, at ease, as he rolled his eyes good-naturedly. “I’ll do just about anything for pizza.”

And I felt like...I dunno. Like maybe I’d done something right ? Maybe, with me in his life, in his family’s life, Ben could spend the summer...just being a kid? He deserved that .

If I could make his life, and his mother’s life, easier...I would.

That’s what friends were for, after all.

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Chapter Four

Hannah

By Sunday evening, I was feeling much better...and frankly, a little tired of hiding out in my—in Joshua's bedroom. I suppose, as it had been almost a year since I'd kicked out Travis, I really should start sleeping in the master again, but...

I'd napped most of Saturday and had woken to the smell of homemade pizza. I'd managed to pull myself together to join the kids at the kitchen table, and to my surprise, Benny had proudly served the pizza.

When I'd glanced at Aswan in question, he'd smiled slightly. "Ben made it himself."

Ben , huh?

"Aswan helped," my oldest was quick to point out, and the two of them shared a look that told me not only was I right to hire this strange savior of an orc, but right to accept his help on a Saturday too.

I only managed to eat one piece, but: "Holy moly, Benny, this is really good!"

"Peeza! Peeza!" Joshua had chanted as Aswan cut his into small pieces, and even Tova had beamed at her big brother. "You can make pizza any time, Benny!"

My oldest wore a smile I hadn't seen in a long time: pride, pleasure, and a bit of camaraderie. Like the time his soccer team won the regionals.

And I had another bowl of the soup, which made me sweat. Or maybe that was Aswan.

He'd shaken my hand again after he made us popcorn and settled the kids in front of the television for an evening movie. And I'd stood at the door and watched him walk to his car...pining like a nincompoop.

Tonight was a full day later, Sunday evening. I'd put the kids to bed—or at least, Joshua was asleep, Tova was getting there, and Benny was reading beneath his covers with the assumption I didn't know about his flashlight stash. And I'd asked Aswan to stop by now that we could finally talk.

"Hi," I greeted him shyly. "Thanks for sitting down with me so we could discuss the job before you officially take over."

"Of course," he rumbled in that delicious dark voice as he followed me to the dining room. "You're feeling better?"

"Yeah, thanks in part to your soup." I smiled over my shoulder. "I don't know where you learned to cook like that, but it was much appreciated. You haven't caught Joshua's cold?"

He surprised me by following me to my chair and holding it out for me. "I told you, I don't get sniffles."

Oh yes, he had told me that, hadn't he? I was too flustered to answer though, because when was the last time a male had held a chair like that for me? Aswan was a real gentleman, wasn't he?

"I owned a restaurant," he announced as he moved to the opposite side of the dining table.

It sounded so out of the blue that I frowned in confusion, and he merely grinned when he saw that. “In Colorado. We were living in a little town called Bramblewood Bluff when Sakkara tracked us down. I had a little restaurant there but decided to sell it.”

I gaped. “You sold your restaurant?” I couldn’t imagine how hard he’d had to work to build up a business like that, and he’d just abandoned it? “To become a nanny?”

It was his turn to flush—at least I think that’s why his skin darkened and he looked away. “I sold it to follow my brother, Abydos, to Eastshore. I... He needs looking after.”

I studied him, dropping my gaze to the folio of papers between us, then back up to him. Aswan liked taking care of others, that much was obvious but... “You’ve never worked as a nanny, have you?” I asked quietly.

Suddenly his serious dark gaze swung back to mine. He placed his hands on the table in front of him and laced his fingers together. Then, taking a deep breath, he admitted, “No. But Sakkara thought I’d be good for you. For your family. ”

And I had to trust Sakkara. He was the father of Tova’s best friend, the husband—no, Mate to her teacher, and our town’s mayor. If he trusted Aswan...

You trust him too. You left your babies alone with him .

I did.

I guess I already trusted Aswan.

“You’re...” I lifted my gaze and made my decision. “You’re really good with them. You made the right calls with Joshy being sick. And Benny— Ben seems to like you. And Tova already loves you.”

His smile looked a little lopsided, a little relieved. “I like her too. I like them all. I think Ben just needs—” He clamped down on whatever words he’d been about to say and just repeated himself. “I like them all. But since I’ve never worked directly with kids before, I’m happy to take whatever certification—CPR, whatever—and background checks you need.”

That was a relief. “Yeah, I think that would be good, if you’re okay with it.” I opened the folio and began to sort through the files. “That was one of my questions. I was going to ask for copies.” I started sorting through papers, then passed him a pile. “Here, I’ll need you to fill these out so I can get you paid. And these”—I passed him the rest of the papers, tucked into the folder—“are your basic duties, outlined. Why don’t we—” A yawn interrupted me. “Oops, sorry.”

Aswan grinned as he sorted through them. “I think we’re probably beyond that, Hannah.”

The knowing look he shot me told me he remembered the tissues-in-the-nostrils incident, and I groaned and slumped against the back of my chair.

“I was hoping we could pretend you didn’t see me in my jammies and sick as a dog.”

“Hey, you needed my help, and I was glad I could be here.” His words were simple, but their meaning ... I’ve never heard a guy say something like that. “And that’s what friends do for each other, right? Help out?”

Except...now that I was feeling better, I found myself thinking about Aswan in a way other than friendly . In a way other than the nanny I just hired .

And I didn’t think that was smart. “Okay, how about I give you a tour, and a quick rundown of stuff.” I pushed away from the table. “Then tonight you can go over the schedule and whatnot and be ready to start tomorrow.” My boss had made it clear my

sick leave was over. “Summer schedules are more relaxed, but both older kids are taking classes at the rec center.”

Aswan also stood, although his attention was on the schedule I’d printed up. “Gymnastics and taekwondo. Useful skills, and Ben will benefit from the self-discipline.” One claw tapped against the page. “And swimming is vital for Joshua to learn—whichever timeslot you choose, I’ll make it work. What?”

When he lifted his gaze, I was likely gaping at him again.

“I’m sorry.” I shook my head and turned toward the living room. “I’m just not used to...um...having someone besides my parents. Have opinions about the kids and their future, I mean.”

“Your Mate must have had opinions. ”

I stopped suddenly enough that I must have surprised him, because when I turned back to frown up at him, Aswan was right there . And he didn’t back up, merely raised a brow, almost challenging me to answer.

Mate ? Travis had never been a Mate, a partner .

“My ex-husband isn’t part of our lives anymore.” There. That seemed sufficient. Except my mouth opened and more came out. “He left at the end of last summer. We’d been split, but he still lived with us.”

Aswan nodded solemnly. “Ben says he wasn’t the best role model.”

Benny had already spoken about his father? I snorted and turned back to the living room. “That’s an understatement. I have a no-food rule in here, but I’m not strict. Mainly it exists so I can give grief to whichever kid spilled whichever snack, so they

clean it up immediately.” I’ve spent too many nights cleaning up spilled popcorn. “The T.V.’s smarter than me, but Tova and Ben can show you how to use it if you need help. Um...board games, books, Joshy’s toys...” I pointed to various cabinets, then turned toward the kitchen. “I guess you know your way around there pretty well already.”

What followed was the quietest—and speediest—house tour. I tried to focus on what he would need, so the upstairs tour was mainly of the medical supplies in the master bathroom, and I pointed out the kids’ spaces, figuring they’d show him their rooms when they were ready.

Back downstairs, we talked about the yard toys, what to expect, and what the kids had permission to do outside— basically anything, as long as they made good decisions and wore their helmets.

“Tova will likely spend most of the days with Emmy, either here or at Sakkara’s house. I think Nikki was going to take Emmy to school with her next week though, since she had in-service days.”

Without looking up from the notes he was taking, Aswan shook his head. “I can watch them both over here, if that’ll help Nikki. I’ll text Sakkara about it. Does Ben have local friends?”

“There are two boys across the street—nine and eleven. And a few in the cul-de-sac down the way, they all play basketball together. I think he was asking about going to the beach this week with a few of them.”

“And Joshua?” Aswan looked up and grinned. “Any playdates for him?”

With a sigh, I rubbed my forehead. “Honestly, am I a bad parent if I say no? He has friends at the daycare, but mostly he just hangs out with me as I run errands, and?—”

A large warm hand caught mine as the panicked guilt began to build, and my lips snapped closed. When I met his eyes, Aswan's were concerned.

"You're a great mom, Hannah. You've just had a lot to handle. And I'm here to help now, okay? I'll get Joshua out and about, we'll make friends, and I won't let him grow up to become emotionally stunted or whatever. And he'll be potty-trained before college."

It was a silly vow, but I grinned in relief. "Promise? "

He squeezed my hand. "Promise," he whispered. He didn't release me, but I felt him pressing the pad of his thumb into my palm. It felt so good, I almost moaned. Instead, I allowed the muscles in my fingers to go slack, and he continued to rub, even as he glanced down at his notes.

"This week, once you're home, I'm going to try to set up some tours of rentable homes in the area. As long as you're okay with that? I think I'd feel better if I had a place in the neighborhood, to be close by if you need me."

Why did that make me go all warm and gooey inside? Maybe it was his touch.

"Uh...yeah. Wh-where are you living now?"

His grin was rueful as he shrugged, his fingers still making me melt. "The four of us who moved to Eastshore last month got an apartment together, because that's all that was available. Ahkmin moved in with his Mate recently. My brother shares a room with me when he deigns to visit the island, with Tarkhan in the spare."

Three orcs in one tiny apartment? "I can see why you'd want to move out."

Aswan hummed. "I just hope I can find a new place to rent." He glanced around my

home. “Surely there are smaller houses than this?”

“Oh yeah,” I assured him, inching closer, hoping he’d continue the little palm massage. “Most of Eastshore’s houses were built at the same time, in the same design. Living space across the front, two bedrooms and two baths across the back. Some have additions.” I tipped my chin to point toward the stairs. “A second floor is rare, so when this one came on the market when the kids were little, I jumped on it. I wanted them to all have their own space, without having to worry about building an addition.”

He was studying me. “Your ex wasn’t particularly handy?”

“No,” I said flatly, glancing away. “He wasn’t.”

“Well, one of the smaller houses would be more than enough. I just need a bedroom and a kitchen to be happy, really, although a huge bed would be a plus.” I peeked at him to see him wink. “The double beds we’re in now aren’t long enough.”

Oh . Orc males were much bigger—in all directions—than humans. I found myself flushing again as I wondered how much bigger he was in other places.

Maybe he guessed the direction of my thoughts, because Aswan abruptly dropped my hand and stepped back, clearing his throat. “So, I’ll start looking?—”

I don’t know why I said it. I don’t know what I was thinking of. Maybe I was imagining him trying to sleep in a double bed, or thinking of that empty king-sized bed upstairs. Maybe I just didn’t want him to leave yet. Either way, before I could stop myself, I’d blurted it out.

“You can stay here.”

He blinked, and I hurried to explain. “We have an empty room upstairs. It’ll fit you—I mean, it’s nice and roomy. You’d be like...the live-in nanny.”

Aswan was still staring at me, his expression carefully neutral, and I plowed ahead, talking with my hands the way I did when I grew uncomfortable. “Only if you were okay with it, I mean. I’d have to look at the contract again because I guess it would mean your hours could be longer— although obviously we’d arrange your time off logically—but with room and board included?—”

“You mean it?” he finally rasped, his voice sounding almost painful.

I snapped my lips together and met his eyes. His dark eyes were...I swear I saw a desperate sort of hope there.

“Yeah,” I whispered. Then I licked my lips and tried again, louder. “Yes, if it’s suitable for you. We could take it on a monthly basis and reevaluate often. Once school starts, if you want to find a new place or a new job, I’ll understand?—”

I bit off my words again when Aswan thrust out his hand. “Thank you, Hannah. I would be grateful for the chance to be your live-in nanny.”

Moving automatically, I placed my hand in his, his large fingers enveloping mine once more. As if they belonged there. As if I belonged there.

“Good,” I whispered, staring down at our hands, and trying not to think of what those hands would feel like on my skin.

Shit. Maybe I did have a fever.

“I’d be happy to handle the grocery shopping,” he was offering, but I couldn’t focus. “I’ll order a car seat for my SUV, and a booster for Tova. We can go to the mainland

for the better deals on the days they don't have classes at the rec center. I'll make up some menus—including healthy breakfasts—and we can work through them together.”

Vaguely, I had some realization that he was saying my kids' cereal addiction wasn't healthy, but I was too dazed to really care.

Aswan had just...stepped up. Stepped in , and not taken over, not really, but stepped up beside me. He was offering suggestions and thoughts and help . He was offering help when I needed it most.

I wondered if I was getting teary-eyed.

“Hannah?”

“Yep.” I squeezed his hand, then forced myself to drop it before I could melt under his touch any more. “That all sounds amazing. So...tomorrow at nine? I don't have to be at work 'til nine-thirty, so that should give us time...”

“I'll be here at eight forty-five.” His smile looked...eager. Excited.

Excited to spend time with my kids. With me .

I pressed my fingertips to my cheek. Yeah, I think I was feverish. Or totally overwhelmed by this gorgeous male doing everything I'd ever dreamed of my prince charming doing.

Just wait 'til he has to start on the potty training.

True.

Still...I couldn't believe how lucky I'd gotten with Aswan.

And I couldn't afford to do anything to screw it up.

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Chapter Five

Aswan

I told Hannah I'd show up early for work on Monday morning, but that didn't explain why I was parked outside her house at six in the morning. Too early? I spent some time ordering a bunch of stuff I thought I might need—car seats, a XXXL baby carrier, etc.—and then pacing a little.

I was just... excited .

Excited to start my new job? Well, yeah, okay. But more than that: I was excited to spend the day with the Woods family.

I'll admit that on some level, I was thinking of them as mine already.

Little Joshua had stolen my heart with his enthusiasm and drool. Tova was sweet and open-minded and loved with all of her heart. And Ben? On a few levels, Ben reminded me of myself , especially in the years after we crossed into the human world; confused, angry, and lost.

Remembering how he'd helped me with making the pizza on Saturday, and how he'd asked good questions, I pulled out my phone and ordered him *Cooking For Teens: How To Make Easy Food That Doesn't Suck And Will Make Your Parents Respect Your Mad Skillz*.

I mean, no idea what that meant, but putting a Z in anything makes it cooler, right?

Maybe Ben would enjoy cooking with me, and we could tear down some more of those strange gender norm ideas he had.

What else...?

Oh yeah, the stroller.

Turned out, no one made strollers for orcs to push. Even the ones for “tall fathers” would still have me hunched over. Friday’s experience told me unless I wanted to carry Joshua strapped to me at every moment, I was going to need a stroller solution. I found the largest one online, and snapped a screenshot to send to Tarkhan.

Hey, are you awake?

I am now. Where are you?

At work. Look at this stroller. Could you design something to extend the handle? Make it taller so I don’t have to hunch over to push it?

Tarkan was the handiest of us. When we left Bramblewood Bluff, not only did he leave behind a bevy of heartbroken ladies, but also his extensive workshop. When he didn’t answer right away, I knew he was contemplating the problem.

Finally he responded.

Yeah, I think so, even with the tools I have on hand. Can I do the mods at your place? The apartment is pretty small.

I hurried to type out my response.

No problem. I’ll get clearance. We’ll have to wait until it’s delivered, but that gives

you a few days to get the materials together.

Sounds good. Send me the website so I can pull the specs. I'll stroll down to the hardware store today and see what they have in stock. If I have to buy a miter saw, can I stash it in your car?

I found myself chuckling. Leave it to Tarkhan to use this as an excuse to a) buy himself new goodies and b) try to hide it from Abydos. My twin was the only one who didn't seem affected by Tarkhan's charm... and never had been.

Damn, you really need to find your own space with a workshop, huh ?

I'm working on it! Meeting with the realtor next week.

Which would leave Abydos all alone in the apartment when he visited, assuming this position as a live-in nanny turned permanent. He'd be happier alone, anyhow.

It took a moment to realize the frantic scrambling in my chest was my Kteer expressing its approval of the plan and had to shake my head ruefully. This primal part of me was concerned with keeping me alive and happy, and often expressed interest in things that couldn't happen in the modern world.

Like the urge to rip out another male's throat if he complained about the dryness of his well-done steak. Or the need to scoop up a pretty female and carry her back to my home, despite knowing nothing about her or her interest in me. Such things might have been useful in our distant evolutionary past, but even the world I grew up in was more civilized than that...and we cooked over fires, for fuck's sake.

But yeah.

The idea of living permanently with the Woods family not only made my Kteer

happy, but me happy as well.

I wanted that. I wanted to be the one Hannah could rely on. I wanted to be the one the kids could turn to when they needed something. I wanted to make their lives better however I could...

By eight thirty, I was calmer and more certain of my ability to tackle this position, but my heart was still pounding as I knocked on the door .

And as soon as Hannah opened it? As soon as I saw the way she smiled in welcome, even while attempting to clasp a necklace around her throat?

Well, let's just say that everything was going to be alright. I exhaled, my shoulders relaxing.

“Good morning. How can I help?”

Chewing on her lip, she tipped to one side, struggling with the necklace. Was that an attempt to get her hair—thick and luscious and shiny, what product did she use to make it look so touchable?—out of the way? Or was this a dance I was unfamiliar with?

“I think we're— darn! Sorry, this keeps slipping. I think we're good.” She cut her eyes toward the kitchen as she tipped even farther to one side. “Nikki has already picked up Tova to take her to the school to keep Emmy occupied. Joshy is working on his cereal and bananas—I'm sorry to say that he'll make a mess, but I can clean it when I get home?—”

“I am perfectly capable of cleaning the floor, Hannah,” I interrupted gently. “I'm here to be useful.” Since she was staring at me, I took a step closer. “May I help you? You appear to be stuck on something.”

Clucking her tongue, she turned around, and I was met with a strange sight: the back of her neck. Strange in the way it affected me. I told myself it was the way she managed to hold her hair out of the way and fiddle with the necklace clasp that held my attention...not how delicious her skin looked, with the little hairs at the base of her neck calling out for me to test their softness .

“I don’t know if you’ll be able to manage,” she said over her shoulder, offering me the two ends of the necklace. “I can go get a different one...”

And miss this opportunity?

When I took the ends of the necklace from her, a spike of warmth flashed up my arm. I stepped closer, bending over her head and neck, inhaling her sweet scent as I used the tips of my claws to pull back the clasp and slide the other end inside...

In the silence, the click of the metal was unnaturally loud, as was my heartbeat.

I bent closer, struggling to keep from burying my nose in her hair and licking her neck. “All done,” I rasped, digging my claws into my palms to try to control this need .

It’s just your Kteer . It’s just a response to Hannah needing help .

Right.

Except...

When she shot forward and turned back to me, her smile was too brittle, too fake. How could I tell that already? She looked uncomfortable, not with me...but with herself.

And there was that sweet scent of her arousal again.

I had much to think on.

And I was still thinking on it, two hours later, as I explained to Joshua how to use the broom. He struggled with the size, of course, and frankly made more of a mess than if I had just swept the damn cereal...but I thought it important for him to learn. He was almost three, after all, and maybe if he knew he'd be the one to clean the floor, he'd throw less of his food down there.

"Excellent, Joshua. Now tip it into the trash can like... this ." I guided his small hands in holding the dustpan. "Good job."

"Uh-oh Doshy!" He grinned toothily up at me, and my heart clenched. Gods below, he was adorable, wasn't he?

" Good job , Joshy," I repeated, then braced my hands on my knees to push myself out of the crouch. But the boy surprised me by, without warning, dropping the dustpan and broom into the garbage and throwing himself at me.

I had no choice but to catch him, which put me off-balance, and I rolled backwards onto my ass, then my back.

The toddler, clutched to my chest, thought this was the most amazing thing in the world, and chortled uproariously.

Well, really, was there anything I could do except tickle his soft little sides and feel his joy as he kicked and squealed?

That's why I was lying flat on my back, spread eagle on the kitchen tile, when Ben—looking sleep-tousled and grumpy—stepped into the kitchen, scratching his

hair. “You two are loud,” he grouched. “Why is the broom in the trashcan?”

I grinned up at him. “We had a bit of an accident.”

“Uh-oh, Doshy! Doshy boom and cwean!”

“I see you used the broom,” Ben grumbled, bending to pull the dustpan from the garbage. “Good work. What’s for breakfast? ”

Trying to decide if the boy was angry or just always like this in the morning, I clutched his brother to my shoulder and rolled to my feet. “Well, considering we’re only two hours from lunch, I would say: Whatever you can catch and kill.”

Ben swung on me, eyes wide. “ What ?”

I shrugged, and since Joshua was draped over my shoulder, that sent him into peals of laughter. “I just mean, you slept in past breakfast, so if I had made something, you missed it. Why not get a snack, then you can join us for lunch. We could do pizza again.”

“No, I mean...” He shook his head in disbelief. “ Whatever you can catch and kill ? I’m not eating a squirrel!”

I pretended to eye him speculatively. “Do you honestly think you could catch and kill a squirrel?”

“Skerl!” hooted Joshua happily. “Skerls eat nuts!”

“That’s right,” I told him, patting his bottom distractedly. “Squirrels eat nuts. I suppose your brother could use nuts to bait a trap to?”

“ I’m not catching and killing a squirrel !” blurted Ben frantically. Then he took a deep breath and cocked his head to one side, considering me. “Do you know how to catch and kill squirrels? Is that what orcs eat for breakfast?”

Ah.

Um, I might have done Orc-Human Cultural Understanding a disservice here.

Shifting Joshua up around the back of my neck, so he could pull on my hair, I considered how to respond. “ Well...not anymore. I eat normal food just like you—I told you I owned a restaurant?”

“Skerl yummy!” hollered the toddler, pounding on my head until I winced.

“Totally normal foods. Burgers, fries, pizzas, steaks, seafood. But...” I met Ben’s eyes and shrugged, sending Joshua laughing again. “When I was younger, before I came to your world, I did used to have to catch and kill animals if I wanted to eat meat.”

Ben’s eyes had gone even wider, and it looked like sleep was a long way from his mind. “Seriously? You like...skinned them and everything?”

“Not squirrels, but...yeah.”

“ Cool .” Before I could register my surprise at such a response, Ben hurried to ask, “Can you teach me?”

I blinked. “You want to know how to catch and kill squirrels? I doubt that’s what your mother had in mind for summer enrichment ...”

“Come on , dude!” Ben climbed into the bar stool at the counter, looking far more

animated than earlier. “Just tell me about it. Setting traps, how to use a knife. I promise I won’t kill any squirrels.”

“Skerls yummy !” hollered his little brother, and I had to grin ruefully.

Well, I had wanted to bond with the children, hadn’t I?

As Joshua played, Ben and I talked about my life in the orc’s mountains, and how it differed from Colorado, where we’d moved to. Using online videos, I told him about the different animals, and how we caught and butchered them. I was surprised how interested he was, but I supposed it was different than what his friends got up to.

We made sandwiches for lunch, then he taught me—or tried to teach me—how to play some racing video game on the television while Joshua napped. Afterward, we strapped the toddler to my chest and walked to the market, where I let Ben pick out dinner ingredients.

Burgers, thankfully, although Joshua hadn’t let go of the idea of squirrels tasting yummy.

I wasn’t sure if this counted as a successful first day on the job or not. So when we got home, I said to the two boys, “Hey, let’s go pick up your rooms. You can give me a tour.”

After all, I still didn’t know where I was supposed to be sleeping.

Ben was surprisingly enthusiastic about showing off his room to a virtual stranger. Once I saw all his posters from the national parks, I had a little more insight into his earlier questions, and I made a mental note to teach him more about woodlore or campfire cooking. Maybe we could even do a campout in the backyard?

He seemed excited about the suggestion, and I was able to get him to make his bed without complaint. He showed me his sister's room—which was clearly decorated in the All The Pink In The Entire World And Then Also A Bit More Pink theme—but we didn't go inside. Joshua's room was last and surprisingly, the least messy.

There was his little bed, obviously converted from the crib, and a long dresser with a changing pad on top. And under the window...a single bed .

I frowned, looking around.

Was this what Hannah meant when she said she had an extra room? Was this the guest room? There were more toddler toys, and a small bookshelf full of kids' books, but also an end table with a lamp and...

And a paperback with a half-naked male on the cover.

Frowning now, I bent over the bed and inhaled.

This wasn't a guest bed.

Despite the neat covers and pillows, this was where Hannah slept.

And not just occasionally; she'd slept here last night. I would recognize her scent anywhere.

I glanced over at the toddler bed. She slept in Joshua's room? Why? Was she that worried about him? Or did she just not sleep in the larger master bedroom?

And where did she expect me to sleep?

I kept my questions to myself until after dinner—it was delicious, of course, and I

spent it listening to Ben and Tova wax enthusiastic about their respective days, which felt good—and bathtime. As the big kids bathed upstairs, I offered to wash Joshua in the kitchen sink, and the look Hannah gave me made me feel like a hero.

She allowed me to participate in the bedtime routine, even if it was just as an observer. I noted the negotiation tactics she took with Joshua, and her firmness with Tova, and how she sat with her daughter and let the girl talk, even though I could tell Hannah wasn't really listening .

The bedtime routines of three very different children took a long while, and I was impressed that, despite her obvious exhaustion, Hannah made time for each of them.

How could I help? I watched and pondered and took mental notes.

Because I wanted to participate. Not just to make her life easier, but because I wanted to participate . I wanted to be the one Tova prattled on at. I wanted to be the one Joshua snuggled with as I read *Billy Bear Goes Swimming* for the fourth time. I wanted to see Ben's shy excitement and do what I could to encourage that.

And I wanted to make Hannah smile at me like a hero again.

"Whew," she breathed as she closed Ben's door behind her. Seeing me in the hallway, my arms crossed, leaning against the wall, she smiled. "We haven't scared you off yet?"

"Far from it." I straightened and began to move toward her. To my surprise, she met me halfway. "I had fun today, Hannah, and I'm looking forward to tomorrow. I'm glad..." Unbidden, my arms unfolded, one hand raising, the back of my claw going to her temple. "I'm glad you let me help," I murmured, pushing a strand of hair off her brow as my excuse to touch her.

She'd stilled, and again, I caught a whiff of that sweetness.

There was no denying it; Hannah was aroused. Not completely, but there was something that spiked her interest.

And while my Kteer howled in glee at that, I forced my hand back by my side and reminded myself of the truth: Until Hannah expressed interest, I couldn't take her body's responses as permission or approval.

"I..." Her voice caught, and she looked away. "I'm glad. To have you here, I mean. And that you're enjoying your time with us."

More than enjoying . I wanted to tell her, but I didn't. I didn't want to scare her. I didn't want to do anything to jeopardize my position here in her life, with her family.

"Well!" she suddenly announced, too brightly, her stretch too big to be real. "I'm off to bed. Let me show you where you'll be sleeping."

I followed her...to the master bedroom.

"The sheets are fresh, but of course you're welcome to do anything you need to make the bed more comfortable. That dresser is empty"—she pointed to one of the two large pieces of furniture— "So you can fill it with whatever. Most of my stuff is out of that one, but I still store some clothes in the closet. I promise not to come in without permission, although it'll likely take me a few days to completely clear out the bathroom?—"

"Hannah," I interrupted, capturing her gesturing hand in mine. "This is your room. I'm not sleeping here."

"Don't be silly." She pulled away, already backing toward the door. "I haven't slept

in here in a long time. It's available for you, Aswan, seriously. Don't worry about it."

With that, she turned and fled, leaving me to wonder why she slept in the smallest room in the house, and why this room was available for me to use.

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Chapter Six

Hannah

How'd I get so lucky?

In the three weeks since I'd hired Aswan, my family had thrived .

Joshua was still his sweet self, only now he was making strides in maturity. I don't know if it was because he was my third and I was just used to doing everything for him, or if the last years have been so overwhelming that I didn't know how to find time to teach him to do things himself, or what...

But in three short weeks, my baby was doing so much better at cleaning up after himself, simply because Aswan was so dang patient with him.

"Uh-uh, buddy, come back here and help me pick up these blocks before you get out the cars. "

"No! Caws now, 'Swan!"

"Cars right after you help me clean up the blocks," Aswan would say sternly and then—this is the wild part—he'd actually stick to his guns . Instead of giving in and realizing it was going to be less of a pain to quit arguing and just clean up everything himself, he would sit there with his arms folded, refusing to allow the cars to come out until Joshy helped clean up the blocks.

Remarkable .

You want to know what else was remarkable? He was starting the potty training .

Holy crap, let me repeat that: Aswan had started potty training my toddler.

The first time I came home and learned that Joshy had gone all afternoon—after his nap—in big-boy underwear, I’d almost broken down into tears. I remembered how young Ben had been when I’d potty trained him, how eager he’d been to learn. Had I been doing Joshy a disservice all this time?

“Hannah?” Aswan had asked softly, concern in his tone. I’d brushed off the question and hurried to my room—to the room I shared with my youngest—to change.

Because if he did one more thing to prove himself kind and insightful and sweet, I would break down and cry in front of him. Or all over him .

It was bad enough when he helped Tova and Emmy plan a tea party. The little girls had created a truly outrageous menu, and he’d gone along with it as well as possible, although he’d demanded their help .

And on one Sunday afternoon, Nikki arrived, her homemade invitation in hand, and she and I sat down with our daughters while Aswan—wearing a top hat the girls had made for him and carrying a silverish tray—served us tea and cakes and cucumber sandwiches.

Nikki and I had kept our faces straight, even while the girls had giggled.

But after Aswan had bowed his way out of the room—losing his hat and his “butler” status in the process—she’d leaned over to me and whispered, “ Dios mio , woman, how have you managed to keep your hands off him?”

I'd smiled weakly, and taken a hurried sip of tea to cover the fact that I didn't know .

I wanted to touch Aswan. I wanted to do more than touch Aswan. I wanted to lick him, to kiss him, to feel his body pressed against mine. That first morning, when I'd been so desperate for help, and he'd appeared as if by magic? That first morning, I'd been attracted to him. He was the most gorgeous male I'd ever seen, from that birthmark to his smile to his muscles.

But now that I knew him...

There was more to Aswan than just his hotness. If anything, I liked his strength, his quiet kindness, his acceptance and his patience even more than just his appearance .

So while I knew it had been a really long time since I'd had any action in bed, I also knew that wasn't why I was jonesing so hard for my nanny.

This wasn't just basic biology; this was Aswan .

And although I did my best not to let Nikki know I agreed with her that afternoon, I was having trouble keeping my hands off him. I lost count of how many times I'd broken off awkwardly in the middle of an interesting conversation or a casual touch, not wanting to seem like I was hitting on him.

Because as much as I liked being around him—hearing his opinions, listening to his stories of growing up in the wilderness, imagining the way his strength would play out in bed—I liked the way he interacted with my kids even more.

All three of them were blooming under Aswan's care, and I frequently thanked God for sending him to us just when we needed him.

And if that meant that I frequently woke up moaning from erotic dreams brought on

by my stupid, unfulfilled libido, it was worth it. Because I could not afford to screw up this dynamic.

Aswan was my nanny, and a darned good nanny. If I didn't want to risk losing him as a nanny, I couldn't dream of anything more.

Well, I mean, apparently I could dream of more.

It was getting a little embarrassing.

One, because I shared a room with my kid, who was thankfully a sound sleeper.

And two , because I then had to look Aswan in the eye when he made me breakfast each morning, remembering what those lips and tusks and hands had done to me in my dreams last night .

But on the other hand: fresh waffles. Sliced melon. Bacon and egg muffins. Chocolate chip protein pancakes. And he'd apparently declared Mondays as Fancy Oatmeal mornings, and my kids weren't the only ones amazed that he could make oats taste like chocolate chip cookie dough.

I was eating better than I ever had, and my house was spotless, and my children were little angels.

Surely that was worth a little pent-up sexual frustration?

Okay, a lot .

“ Uno !” Benny called, triumphantly slapping a card down onto the pile on the coffee table, dragging my attention back to the game.

“Quick, Tova” growled Aswan. “Change the color to red.”

She seemed frantic. “I can’t. I can’t! I have this blue seven, though?”

“Crud,” the orc muttered, putting down a blue reverse card. “Does this help?”

Tova glanced at her smirking brother and sighed as she reached for the draw pile. “You have a blue, don’t you?”

In triumph, Benny tossed down his last card—a blue two. “I win!”

Aswan glared at his cards in mock-irritation. “I need to learn how to cheat at this game,” he announced, and Tova fell into him, giggling.

“Okay, time for bed, missy,” I announced, standing up and holding out my hand to Tova. “You’re already up past your bedtime. ”

Instead of whining, the girl glanced at Aswan, who nodded solemnly, and she slipped her hand into mine.

“Night, Benny. ‘Night, Aswan.”

Her brother grunted, his focus on sorting the cards into a neat pile, but Aswan smiled, his tusks gleaming. “Goodnight, d’pin . Pleasant dreams.”

Tova practically skipped up the stairs, half-dragging me. I brushed my teeth at the same time as her—we now shared a bathroom, after all. It was only later, when I was tucking her in, that I asked what was on my mind.

“Do you and Aswan have a secret code? He called you d’pin .”

Her smile was sleepy. “It means sweetie in his language. Or—” A yawn interrupted her. “Something like that.”

Forcing a smile, I bent over to kiss her forehead. “Then goodnight, d’pin . I’ll see you in the morning.”

I was in a thoughtful frame of mind as I came back downstairs to see Benny and Aswan standing in the middle of the living room. Well, not so much standing as?—

“Benny!” I cried instinctively, hurtling toward the couch.

I was too late. My son’s punch landed squarely on Aswan’s stomach, his expression curiously intent rather than angry. “Wha—” I began, but Aswan’s command stopped me.

“Good, again.”

Benny punched again, then again, and finally the male let out a grunt, his expression softening into a smile. “I told you. Your shoulder controls the potential energy far more than your wrist. ”

“Are you teaching him to fight ?” I blurted.

Both males turned to me, Benny looking guilty, and Aswan looking shocked. “We were discussing how to use a hammer. Ben and his friends are improving the bridge over the creek and he needed to understand transfer of force.”

“Physics?” I mumbled, shocked. My knees gave out, and I sank down into the World’s Most Comfortable Couch. “This was a phsyics lesson?”

“In retrospect, I can see the confusion,” Aswan offered. “I’m sorry.” He turned to

Benny. “I shouldn’t have used a punch as an example. I really hope you’ve been learning from taekwondo how not to fight.”

My son huffed a put-upon sigh. “You sound like Master Sunny. Yeah, I’m not going to go out and pick fights, the whole point is not having to fight.”

“Right.” When Aswan smiled, my stomach—already knotted from that burst of fear—flipped over. “Sounds like you’ve been paying attention.”

Ben was a boy on the cusp of puberty, struggling with his own identity. I’d been meaning—for like six months now—to sit down with him and discuss the changes happening to his body and mind. The days never seemed long enough, and now...

Well, now...it was common for him to say something dismissive or mean, then stomp off. Or at least roll his eyes so far back he was staring at the back of his own head.

And frankly, I assumed that’s how he would react to Aswan’s compliment. But instead, my son flushed slightly, his hands shoved in his pockets, and stared down at Aswan’s stomach as he shrugged. “It’s a good class.”

I held my breath, trying to decide if I should speak up, but I didn’t need to. Aswan laid his hand on Benny’s shoulder, bent slightly so he could catch the boy’s eye, and said gently, “I’m proud of you, Ben.”

My son launched himself forward, wrapping his arms around Aswan’s middle for just the briefest of moments. He mumbled something against the male’s chest, then pushed away and ran for the stairs.

“Love you, Mom!” he called in a strangely choked voice, and I couldn’t even respond.

My fingertips were on my lips, as if I could hold in the sounds—the sobs—I wanted to make. Needed to make.

I'm proud of you .

Aswan had said that to Benny, and it had been just what he'd needed to hear. Just what we'd all needed to hear.

Fighting tears, I swung my gaze back toward Aswan...to find him studying me. Unable to remain still, I shot to my feet, half wondering if I should go after Benny.

But the worry in his tone stopped me. “Hannah? I'm sorry if I?—”

“No,” I choked. “No.” It was a choke, my throat thick with unshed tears. “It was...thank you.”

He took a step toward me, hesitated, then took another one. “Hannah, if I've offended?—”

It was as if his words released a floodgate, and I wailed, “How could you?” When he reared back, fear in his eyes, I buried my face in my hands and sobbed, “You couldn't possibly offend—Oh, Aswan, he needed...”

“Hannah, what is it?” I could hear— feel him so close to me. “Tell me what I've done, how I can make it better. I'm sorry!”

Instead of answering, I threw myself forward, the same way Ben had, and felt Aswan's strong arms wrap around me. My sobs were ridiculous, uncontrollable, and nothing at all like what I'd dreamed of doing when I finally landed in his arms.

And yet...

It felt good. It felt good to let it all out, to release the stress of these last weeks—these last years . And through it all, Aswan held me, murmuring words and apologies, sometimes not even in English, as he stroked my back.

“I’m sorry,” I managed to finally hiccup. “Oh my gosh, I’m so sorry, Aswan.”

He was bent forward, curled over my head, his mouth pressed against my hair. “No, I’m sorry, Hannah. I shouldn’t have overstepped?—”

“ No !” I pushed away far enough to tip my head back and meet his eyes. “That’s what I’m trying— Aswan ! Seeing the way you gave Benny approval—he needed—darn!” Still hiccupping, I dropped my head forward to press against his chest.

His hand, almost as wide as my back, stilled, and I could sense his confusion. This might be easier without looking at him .

“My ex wasn’t a...good father. You’ve probably figured that out. Benny...” I swallowed. “Ben has been conflicted for the last few years. I can tell he doesn’t know how to act.”

“He’s trying to be the man of the house,” came Aswan’s rumble. “He doesn’t know what that means, but it’s also causing him a lot of guilt when he does act like a kid. Goes out to play or has a meltdown or something.”

With a little groan, I knocked my head against Aswan’s chest, my own guilt threatening to swallow me whole. “If you can see it, it must be bad.”

“I’ve been spending a lot of time with him. Trying to teach him about what he’s interested in and guide him toward the right path.”

Oh God in Heaven . I squeezed my eyes shut. As if I couldn't love this male any more, he goes and says something like?—

I gasped as I realized what I'd just thought.

Love ?

I was in love with my nanny ?

Well yeah. I mean, how could I not be?

“Hannah?”

“Thank you,” I choked, pushing myself away. “Thank you for being the male influence Benny— Ben needs.” Had my son's name change been a result of Aswan's gentle teaching? I looked away, ashamed. “I should have been?—”

“Enough?” he growled, grabbing my hand, refusing to let me leave the conversation. “Hannah, you work long hours at a demanding job. It's no wonder you can't be everything for everyone . Look at me. ”

Trying to wipe off the evidence of my tears, I did as he commanded, and was caught by his dark gaze.

No, not completely dark. In the center of his eyes, there was a spark of green.

“Hannah, you are enough .” He squeezed my hand, gently tugging me toward him. “Just you. You're enough. But I'm here to help you too.”

“Thank you,” I sniffed, and as one of his arms tucked me against his chest, I whispered it again. “Thank you.”

“You’re a good mother, and it’s not your fault that your Mate isn’t around.”

“I mean, it kinda is,” I offered weakly. “Although I don’t like to think of him as my Mate.”

Aswan had stiffened slightly at my confession, and now slowly relaxed. “Good. I don’t like to think of him that way either. Why is his failure your fault?”

“Oh, he failed all on his own.” I took a long, shuddering breath, and figured it was time to share my embarrassing past. It was easier if I stared at the dark television, though, instead of at Aswan.

“I met Travis in college and got pregnant in my senior year. He was a year behind me, and when I graduated, he sort of just...stopped attending. At the time, I told myself it was because he needed to get a job and support me and Benny. Our parents pressured us into marrying, saying it would be for the best.”

“Was it?” Aswan rumbled, his hand on my lower back.

“I thought so at the time. But by the time Tova was born, I realized I was the one busting my butt to support him. He couldn’t seem to hold down a job, so I moved us here to be closer to my family. I thought maybe Dad’s connections could get Travis work.”

With a hum, Aswan shifted so both his arms were around me, his hands were cradling my back, and his chin was resting on my head. “Did it work?”

“No. But by then, my parents were helping with childcare and juggling responsibilities, and it didn’t matter so much that Travis was useless. As the kids grew, I was able to take on more responsibility at work, and I was good at it.” That fierce sense of pride hadn’t left me. “I realized I thought of Travis as just one more

responsibility... And then the cops showed up.”

He stiffened around me and growled, “Because of him?”

I didn’t nod, because of how tightly he was holding me, and dang but I liked it. I liked how protected he could make me feel.

“Travis had been using drugs for a while, but by then he’d started dealing them too. He was arrested, and I was mortified. It wasn’t until after he’d been in jail a few months that I started to feel guilty about being more embarrassed than empathetic.”

“Pathetic ,” Aswan rumbled, repeating the last few syllables of the word I’d said. “You had no reason to be embarrassed or feel bad for him because he was pathetic. What kind of male puts his Mate and kitlings in danger like that, for his own selfishness? He’d abandoned you long before.”

Slowly, I straightened, the words echoing in my head. He’d abandoned you long before . “You’re right,” I breathed. “He had . I can’t even tell you that I hated him by then; I was indifferent. It was difficult for the kids to understand what was happening, of course, but I guess we felt relief to have him gone.”

Aswan was quiet for a long moment, and I could hear him doing the calculations. “Joshua?”

I sighed. “When Travis was released, he seemed like a changed man. He came back to Eastshore and got a job and swore he was going to hold it down. He was kind to Tova and seemed to really be trying with Benny. Poor Benny got his hopes up so far...and I guess I did too.”

He made a little noise of understanding, and I squeezed my eyes shut, glad I didn’t have to explain the details; about how Travis had sworn up and down he was going to

be here for all of us, and how he was going to be loving and attentive.

He'd never been particularly good in bed, and right after I got pregnant for a third time, I realized the truth... "He might not have been dealing the drugs anymore, but he was still using them. I had Joshy, and our life got even more complicated."

"I'm sorry."

"Me too," I snorted. "I told Travis I was done when Joshua was eleven months old. He convinced me—whining and begging—that he didn't have anyplace left to go. Since he wouldn't move out, I did. We still lived in the same house, but...separate lives."

"You moved in with Joshua," Aswan murmured. "Two years ago?"

"It took a year for me to finalize the divorce, and get full custody, before I could finally have him removed. It's been almost a year since we've heard from him, thank God. The last I knew, he was in prison in another state."

"But Hannah." He shifted me so he could stare down at me. "He's been gone a year. Why haven't you moved back into your space? Taken it back?"

Shrugging, I stared at his chin, because it was somehow easier. "It didn't feel like my space," I whispered. "And besides, if I had, then there wouldn't have been room for you."

When he exhaled, I felt his breath across my lips.

"Hannah..." he whispered, and I tipped my head back to finally meet his eyes.

The green spark had grown into a glow.

His hand rose to cup my head, his fingers reaching around to massage the base of my skull as the pad of his thumb brushed the tear streaks on my cheek.

“I am sorry you’ve lived such pain, dkaar. I am impressed with everything you’ve overcome. And although I don’t have any right to be, I am proud of your strength and resilience. ”

It was...

I whimpered, swaying in his arms.

It was what I needed to hear.

I’m proud of you .

It was something my mom had said to me right after the divorce, although I knew she didn’t understand why I hadn’t left Travis and moved in with her and Dad. But this was my life, and my house, which I’d paid for. I wasn’t going to disrupt the kids because their father was a shitty human, and Mom hadn’t understood that.

But to hear those words now? Now, after years of struggling to come to terms with my life and my kids’ emotions? After seeing what could be possible with an emotionally available male in the house who not only cared , but did everything he could to make our lives better?

It was just what I needed.

With another little whimper I surged upward, aiming for his mouth.

I didn’t miss.

Aswan froze for a heartbeat, his lips stiffening under mine, before he gave a low growl and tightened his hold on me. I melted against him as he took command of the kiss.

How could someone so large hold me so gently? And how could his lips fit so perfectly on mine? I thought his tusks would get in the way, but my mouth fit between them, and his tongue?—

Oh my gosh , his tongue was ridged!

How had I not realized that? In the three weeks I'd been around him, I hadn't known his tongue was ridged. And thick and long and...I gave another whimper as he licked my upper lip, and my mouth opened to play with his.

My fingers curled around the cotton of his t-shirt, desperate to get closer. I could feel his heart pounding under my palms, and lower...lower, where my stomach pressed against his hips, I could feel something thick and hard and incredibly delicious feeling .

I wriggled slightly, cradling that hard length, and he growled again, the kiss deepening.

Unable to help myself, I closed my mouth around his tongue, my teeth scraping the top and bottom, as I wanted to feel the texture of those ridges. Aswan's entire body gave a jerk, and as he abruptly straightened, my stomach flopped over.

I'd hurt him! Oh no, I'd hurt him, right in the middle of—"I'm sorry!" I blurted, blinking up at him, tugging on his shirt desperately. "I'm sorry, Aswan, I didn't mean..."

I trailed off when I saw the way he was looking at me.

His eyes were glowing.

He looked shocked, and his eyes were glowing green.

And that hardness pressed against me? His thick cock? I could feel it throbbing.

When he finally spoke, his voice was all raspy. “What you just did, Hannah, is enough to drive an orc male crazed. I’m trying very hard right now to control my urges.”

Urges ? “What kind of urges?” I squeaked, wide-eyed.

His chin dipped until he was piercing me with that glowing gaze. “The Mating Heat. I want to throw you over my shoulder and drag you to my cave and claim you. But your kitlings are upstairs, and I am your employee, and this would not be appropriate. So for their sake, I suggest you leave right now.”

“Me?” I managed.

“Yes, because there’s no way my Kteer is going to let me walk away from you right now. ”

Oh my.

That was...remarkably flattering. Especially considering I’d just snotted all over his shirt and confessed my deep dark secrets and everything.

You were the one who kissed him. He’s just taking what you offered. Any male would, right? It would be meaningless sex .

But I mean...I could get behind some meaningless sex right now. And tomorrow.

And all week. Because dangit I was a roiling ball of horniness right now.

And your kids are upstairs .

Aswan was right.

He was being far more mature and thoughtful right now, putting the kids' welfare before our own needs.

See? This was what I meant. He's an amazing nanny, and you can't afford to screw that up.

Yeah.

Yeah.

So, with a deep breath, and very purposefully not making eye contact with Aswan, I slid from his arms and all but ran up the stairs.

To lock myself in a small bedroom with a tiny bed and try to ignore the way he made me feel in my dreams.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:17 am

Chapter Seven

Aswan

By the end of June, I wasn't certain if the gods of the ancestors were punishing me or rewarding me.

I couldn't go longer than a few minutes without remembering the feeling of Hannah in my arms, or the taste of her on my tongue. I was in a constant battle with my Kteer, struggling to keep from claiming her in the most primitive way, while also wanting her more than my next breath.

Yeah, I was screwed alright, and the only thing that kept me centered and focused was her children. The kitlings. How long had it been since I'd called children that? Giza, the oldest of us, had recently welcomed a daughter, and was crowing about the next generation of kitlings in this new world.

Other people's children had only been kids to me. But Ben, Tova, and Joshy? They were more than just Hannah's kids. They were mine. Mine to protect, mine to nurture, mine to care for. They were my kitlings, despite belonging to Hannah.

Every day I learned something new about one of them, or myself. As much as Ben loved nature and the outdoors, he was a budding engineer, and his designs were innovative and interesting—and sometimes downright impossible. Tova was a phenomenal story-crafter. Sure, she chattered nonstop, but her imagination was remarkable. I'd already started her and Emmy on writing "books," and one of our favorite things to do was to read them out loud to Joshua, who chortled and clapped

to everyone's delight.

And Joshua? He was my little guy in every sense. From the moment I got him out of his crib in the morning, to slinging him under my arm while I worked—much to his delight—to walking him in our new and improved stroller to the market...he had smiles just for me. At first, I was afraid Hannah would be offended by this bond, but on the contrary; I often caught her watching the two of us with a soft sort of pleasure in her eyes.

The little boy was completely potty-trained during the day now, barring some accidents. The trick, I'd discovered, was to let him walk around in just a shirt outside and allow him to piss on the bushes. He thought this was great fun, and often bellowed, "Doshy pee-pee!" as he ran for his mother's azaleas.

The timing of the potty-training was convenient because his birthday was this coming weekend. Hannah was planning a gathering of family and friends in the backyard, and I'd thrown myself into the choosing, purchasing, and constructing of an outdoor playset just for him .

"That's awfully expensive," she'd said when I'd suggested it, chewing on her bottom lip. "I don't know if I can?—"

"It's my gift to him." How was I supposed to think about what I was saying when all my attention was on that plump lower lip? "Please, Hannah?"

The first time she'd learned how much money I—and the rest of my brothers—had in our investments, she'd been flabbergasted. When we'd come through the veil to her world, the scientists had spent a full year studying us before letting us loose. The government's hush money had been wisely invested, and thanks to Abydos's company, all of us were quite comfortable.

“I don’t understand why you’re working at all,” she’d blurted, throwing her hands up in frustration. “You could be sitting on a tropical beach somewhere.”

I’d caught her hands then, smiling softly, despite how badly my Kteer urged me to claim her. “Because I need to be useful. Because you and the kitlings needed me. Because the only tropical beach I want to hang out on is right here in Eastshore, and I told Sakkara I’d meet him and Emmy with Tova, Ben, and Joshy this afternoon at beach access number fourteen.”

Her grin had been a little lopsided, a little uncertain...but finally she’d exhaled. “You have more money than I do, Aswan, and you’re my nanny. It’s intimidating.”

I shouldn’t have said anything. Instead, I squeezed her hands. “Then let me spend some of it on my favorite people.”

Something changed in her eyes then, something soft and contemplative and a little hot. I thought I smelled her need again, but she nodded and pulled her hands from mine. “Don’t think this gets you out of cooking for the party, though. We’re going shopping on Saturday and have to discuss the menu before then.”

Oh yes, because this weekend? The weekend of Joshua’s party?

The kids would be staying with her parents.

Her mother was in between rounds of chemo, and feeling strong enough to chase after Joshua, with the help of her husband and Ben and Tova, so she’d made the offer to keep them Friday and Saturday nights, before bringing them back for the party Sunday afternoon.

She’d suggested this would allow Hannah the chance to cook and clean and prep for the party, but I’ll confess I was a little fixated on the Being alone in the house with

her for forty-eight hours thing.

“Hey, man, focus.”

Tarkhan’s exasperation jerked me from my reverie, and I saw him nodding to something behind me. I turned around, but saw nothing, and when I turned back, his expression had turned to laughter.

“The ratchet, Aswan. Pass me the ratchet, or this thing is going to fall on my foot. Then lift your end , for fu—I mean, for goodness’s sake.”

Smirking at his attempts to curb his cursing as he struggled to hold up one end of the jungle gym, I scooped up two non-identical wrenches. “Which one of these is a ratchet? ”

“The one on the left.” He shifted his stance to keep the heavy playset upright, his voice sounding strangled.

My grin grew. “My left or your left?”

“ Aswan .”

With a chuckle, I dropped the crescent wrench and came to stand over his shoulder and screw in the carriage bolt to take the weight off his shoulder.

“Oh, thank the gods,” he sighed, ducking out from under it. “You know, when you said you wanted my help in putting this together, I didn’t think you meant I’d be doing it all.”

“Really?” I hummed innocently. “I can’t imagine why. You’re definitely the right male for the job. You want a beer?”

I saw him calculating as he eyed the half-constructed playset, then clearly deciding there was time, sighed again. “Absolutely.”

“You keep an eye on them,” I instructed, nodding to where Ben and Tova were working together to screw the rock-shaped handholds to the climbing wall. “But don’t say anything unless they ask for help.”

With a tired little salute, Tarkhan settled on the porch steps while I hurried inside to listen for sounds of Joshy waking from his nap. Not hearing any, I grabbed two bottles from the garage fridge and headed back outside.

“Here.”

Tarkhan grunted his thanks, his attention on the kitlings. “He’s good with his sister. Patient. ”

“Yeah,” I agree proudly, popping off the cap. “For a long time, he thought he had to be the mature, responsible one, and I think that really weighed on him.”

“Too much responsibility,” my friend muttered. “I feel that.”

I glanced at him and hid my wince. Yeah. Yeah, he did understand. “Well, it’s been cool to watch Ben realize he can be a kid again, you know? Now I see that”—I tipped my bottle at the pair of them working together in the shade of one of the oaks—“and I know that’s the real him. He is patient and kind. I mean, little sisters can be annoying, but he does well with her.”

Tarkhan didn’t say anything, and eventually I glanced over...only to see a sort of stricken look on his face as he stared at Tova.

And I remembered why he was here in the human world in the first place.

“Oh shit, Tark,” I whispered. “I’m sorry.”

He swallowed and glanced away. “It’s okay. Long time ago, you know? I don’t think about it.”

That was a lie, but I wasn’t going to call him out on it.

Not now.

Not ever.

While I struggled to find a way to drag this normally cheerful friend of mine back into the conversation, he cleared his throat. “So...the party’s on Sunday?”

Thankful, I latched onto the offer. “Yeah. I’m thinking slow-cooked ribs, a few salads, lots of burgers and brats for the kids. Hannah says you and the others are welcome to come. Sakkara will be here, of course.”

He grunted and sipped his beer. “Maybe,” he finally said. Then he shot me a look and took another sip. Then another look.

“What?” I finally asked.

“So...Hannah, huh? She’s...”

I felt myself bristling. “She’s what? Wonderful? Beautiful?”

When his lips curled, I saw the trap. Crap .

“Yeah, wonderful and beautiful, that’s what I was going to say,” Tarkhan smirked.

“I’m glad you see it.”

“Of course I see it.” My eyes narrowed. “Do you see it?” This friend of ours was used to human women throwing themselves at him, and if he thought he was going to charm Hannah...

What? What are you going to do? It's not like you have a claim to her .

Didn't I?

That kiss...

His chuckle told me everything I needed to know. “I'm not interested in your Mate, Aswan, relax. I'm just...happy for you.”

With that, he pushed himself to his feet with a grunt and meandered toward the half-completed playset, sipping his beer idly while he examined the next steps.

And me?

I sat there, my beer forgotten, stunned .

Mate .

Hannah was my Mate.

Holy fucking shit, Hannah is my Mate ?

My Kteer was howling in glee, and I swallowed, pressing my fingers against my chest until I felt my claws trying to pierce the skin.

Hannah was my Mate.

I knew it. I knew it .

My Kteer knew it, my heart knew it. Tarkhan had seen it—how?

Your eyes, you idiot. Your eyes are glowing.

Fuck, I'd wondered about that.

How had I not realized it?

Hannah was my Mate...and I was hers.

Now claim keep Mate forever taste lick claim Mate CLAIM.

But.

But.

But she was my employer. I was her nanny. I couldn't afford to claim her, the way my Kteer was begging, because I couldn't afford anything to change between us.

Hannah had shared about her past, her experience with her ex-husband. She couldn't afford to allow another male into her life, into her heart, and risk her children. And I would do nothing to risk the kitlings' happiness.

Nothing .

I took a deep, shuddering breath and bent my head, my elbows resting on my knees. I would never risk the happiness of Ben, Tova, Joshua...or Hannah.

Don't forget the scent of her arousal.

My lips twitched. I didn't think I'd ever be able to forget that scent, or what it meant. Despite her trauma, despite her tears, she'd been as aroused by that kiss as I was. She'd wanted me, as much as I'd needed her.

No, maybe not.

Maybe to her, I was just a big male with nice muscles who could safely fulfill her fantasies. She'd been attracted to me from the beginning—I'd recognized that even during those first days. It had been a long time since she'd been with a male, right?

Maybe, when she looked at me—when she kissed me—she didn't see a Mate, potential or real.

Maybe she didn't see a forever.

Maybe she didn't want a forever, she just wanted a night.

Or forty-eight hours alone .

With another deep breath, I lifted my head and stared, unseeing, at the half-constructed playset in the middle of the yard.

This weekend, we'd be alone. Sure, we had plenty of work to do to prepare for the party, but the kitlings wouldn't be around. I wanted her, and she wanted me...and maybe this was our chance.

I'd let her lead. If she showed any indication that she was interested in pleasure, I would show her pleasure like she hadn't imagined. I would prove that, even if we only had a short time together, even if she wasn't looking for forever , I would take care of her.

Because there was no need for her to know what my Kteer was demanding. I could show her pleasure without claiming her. I could bring her ecstasy without her being my Mate—hells, Tarkhan did it frequently!

Yeah, that was it.

This weekend, if that's what my Mate wanted, I would show her pleasure, and not think of tomorrow or next month or forever . I wouldn't claim her. I wouldn't pressure her.

And I would do my best to convince my Kteer that no matter how certain I felt it, deep in my chest, Hannah Woods wasn't mine .

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:17 am

Chapter Eight

Hannah

I love my children. I really do. After all, everything I'd done for the last... uh, forever had been for them, right? I would've left Travis's deadbeat butt years ago if I hadn't been worried about them thriving without a father.

Yeah, I loved them...but dang it felt good to leave them sometimes.

Before Joshy had been born, Benny and Tova used to spend more time at my parents' house; they'd been the primary babysitters, after all. But having a third kid, especially in the middle of divorce proceedings, had made things...difficult. Then Mom's diagnosis, and Dad having to become her primary caregiver and everything.

So these special weekends at Nana and Papa's had been few and far between, but they were special .

Not just for the kids, but for me too. Usually I only took advantage of them for work trips or whatever, but this weekend? This weekend, I was really looking forward to having the house to myself.

Almost to myself.

I might have broken the speed limit getting back to my house. It was four-thirty on Friday afternoon, and my parents would be back by noon on Sunday. Two glorious days alone...with Aswan.

And frankly, I knew just how I wanted to spend them.

Here's a hint; not cooking and cleaning for the party, although I suppose that was inevitable.

No, I'd been thinking about that kiss—that embarrassing, wonderful, riveting kiss almost nonstop. The way he'd almost lost control—the way I almost made him lose control! The way he wanted me, despite my messy meltdown. The way he'd held me and said and done all the right things. And his tongue! Oh my gosh, his tongue .

So I'd come up with a plan.

A mature, responsible plan.

And it was time to implement it.

I all but ran from the driveway to the front door, and when I slammed it behind me, I was surprised—and nervous, and relieved—to see Aswan standing right there in the foyer, waiting for me.

As if he'd known I was coming.

“Hi,” I blurted awkwardly .

His eyes were glowing green again, as his gaze swept me from head to toe and back up again. As if he was memorizing me. Marking me.

I swallowed and stepped toward him. “I... We're alone now.”

“For two days,” he rumbled, as if he was already thinking the same as I was.

“And since the kids aren’t here...” Oh gosh, how was I going to get this said? I took a deep breath. “You’re not the nanny.”

Aswan blinked. “I’m not.”

It wasn’t a question. I took another step closer.

“For the next two days, we’re just... roommates .” Dang, that sounded silly. Still, I pushed ahead. “And roommates don’t have to think about being professional or worry about what the kids might think if they saw us together.”

Aswan’s chin ducked, and I saw his nostrils flare. “ Together ,” he growled.

I had to say it. “I want you, Aswan,” I whispered. “I don’t need a commitment, but if you’re okay with it, I really need to...” Oh crap, was I going to have to spell it out? With him staring at me so intently like that? “I need you .”

If you’d asked me how he was going to respond to that, I might have said, Verbally agreeing with me or maybe Asking for another kiss .

I would not have said He lifts me by my waist, throws me over his shoulder, and all but runs up the stairs .

But that’s what happened, the suddenness of it surprising a shriek of laughter out of me.

It wasn’t until I landed on the king-sized bed in the master bedroom that I realized where I was, and I had a moment of disorientation. It had been so long since I’d seen this ceiling from this angle...but then Aswan was there, bracing his hands on either side of my head, looming over me...

I had eyes only for him.

And when his lips found my neck? My eyes closed entirely, so I could focus on him .
On the sensations shooting through my body.

“I’ve been hoping you would come to me, dkaar ,” he was murmuring against my skin, his lips and tusks sending shivers up and down my body. “I’ve been thinking about that kiss since last week.”

“Mmm, me too.” I stretched my arms around his neck, loving the way he was touching me, his large hands running down my sides, over my hips, and back up again. “I’ve been so...”

Horny . I didn’t want to say it, though, because it sounded so...crass.

To my surprise, though, Aswan lifted his head, a gentle smirk on his lips. “I know.”

I blinked. “What?”

“Orc senses are far stronger than humans’, especially our sense of smell. Normally, it doesn’t bother me, but...” His smirk softened to a sort of admiration as his gaze swept me. “I haven’t been able to ignore it, dkaar . Especially since I discovered how sweet you taste. ”

“How sweet...?” I murmured, my own senses dazed by his closeness.

“So sweet.” His head lowered again, his lips claiming mine.

I should have felt overwhelmed. Scared, even, with him so much larger, pinning me to the bed. This bed, the bed with the memories of Travis...

Except now this was Aswan's bed, and Aswan had been the one I'd been dreaming about for the last weeks. The one I was in love with.

The one I trusted.

He would never hurt me. He would never do anything I was uncomfortable with. He would never make me sorry I trusted him.

I love you .

I wanted to yell it, but I knew we only had now. Tonight. This weekend. On Sunday, things would return to normal, and that was okay. I needed to enjoy this now.

“ Dkaar ,” Aswan murmured against my jaw, his tusk lightly scraping as he nibbled his way toward my neck. “I want to touch you all over.”

“Yes!” I gasped, arching into his touch. “ Please .”

If you'd asked me if this huge orc knew how to undress a woman, I would have said only in the most primitive manner . Like, ripping of clothing with tusks and claws, and you know what? I'd be okay with that.

But Aswan took his time. He undressed me gently, slowly. As if ...

As if I was a present, a gift, and he was savoring the opportunity to unwrap me.

It made me feel desirable and self-conscious all at once.

Except...

After a while, I stopped feeling self-conscious, and focused only on his touch,

because holy moly , Aswan's touch! The pads of his fingers were rougher than I expected, and I knew it was possible for him to retract his claws—I'd seen how careful he was with the kids, after all—but it was remarkable to feel them against my skin.

And then...

And then .

And then his tongue got involved.

“Aswan!” I gasped, arching against the bed. He was stretched out at my side, and chuckled as his tongue circled my nipple again. God, I was so ready, so aroused. I thought I might come just from that playful nibble. I really didn't think my nipples were that sensitive anymore, but when he bit down on them?

I moaned, my fingers clutching the bedspread, not sure what to do with themselves.

His hand gently pushed apart my thighs, and for a moment I hesitated—it had been so long since anyone touched me there—but then his breath hit my wet skin, and I relaxed into his touch.

“Perfect, dkaar ,” he murmured. His fingertip found my cleft and he stroked. “So wet, so perfect. ”

I don't know if it was the praise, or the fact I was so primed. But when his fingertip found my clitoris—just the faintest touch, really—I spasmed, jerking toward him with a gasp as my orgasm burst over me.

He didn't move his hand as I came, clutching at him, eyes squeezed shut...half in bliss, half in disappointment. I'd been looking forward to this—this session with

Aswan for so long, and I'd come so quickly... dangit .

No, that was worthy of a dammit. You don't have to watch your language here, and you just came without his fingers even in you. Dammit, you'd been looking forward to this!

When my core had stopped pulsing, I exhaled and flopped back to stare up at the ceiling. "Dammit," I sighed, still tingly from the release, but vaguely disappointed.

That's when a grinning Aswan loomed over me again. "You feel fucking magical , Hannah," he murmured, lowering his mouth to my shoulder.

Unable to help myself, I started when his tusks scraped my skin, which seemed to still pulse with his nearness. "Are you—I mean, that was great. I...thank you."

He didn't even look up.

Chuckling, he kissed down my clavicle. "Oh, we're just getting started."

I... what ? I groped for him, and my palms encountered his bare chest. Just feeling his muscles under my palm made me shudder, and I realized my body was still tuned to him. "I already came, Aswan," I admitted, dragging my hand down his side, and surprised to encounter the waist of his pants. He was still half-dressed? "It's your turn to?— "

His fingers wrapped around my wrist, tight as steel, and moved my hand away from the erection I could feel pressed against my thigh. "Oh no, dkaar , tonight isn't about me." His dark gaze, with the green glow in the center, held mine seriously. "Tonight I'm bringing you pleasure."

My eyes widened, and my mouth opened to argue, but he caught my lips with his,

stifling my protests. Besides, he'd sounded so... certain about his plans for the evening.

Tonight I'm bringing you pleasure .

I mean...how could I object to that?

Not once, in our time together, had Travis said such a thing to me. Not once had he suggested my pleasure was more important than his. I think, after all that time together, he'd just...stopped caring. Had he ever cared?

And why in the ever-loving poop are you thinking about Travis when you should be focused on what Aswan's left hand is doing ?

Deciding to take my subconscious's recommendation, I moaned in pleasure and pushed my breast against his palm.

Aswan's lips left mine, trailing kisses down my body like he was on a pilgrimage, and I was his sacred ground. He lingered at the valley between my breasts, his tongue tracing patterns that had me writhing. I could feel the ridges on his tongue, subtle yet unmistakable, a promise of what was to come.

When he moved lower, I squirmed, both from the tickling sensation of his tusks grazing my skin and the anticipation of where he was headed. When he reached my belly, he paused, then shot me a knowing glance. "You are a feast, Hannah," he murmured, his voice a low rumble that I felt more than heard.

Then he was moving again, his hands gently pushing my thighs apart. I felt exposed, vulnerable, but the way he looked at me—like I was a treasure—made me feel safe. He settled between my legs, his broad shoulders keeping me open to him. I could barely breathe; I could guess what was going to happen, and I could barely believe it.

The first touch of his tongue was electric. The ridges were rough, jarring in the most delightful way, causing me to jerk against his hold. He licked, slow and deliberate, from my entrance to my clit, and I bucked against him again, gasping in response.

“I knew you’d be delicious,” Aswan growled, his fingers dimpling my thighs. “Gods below, you’re the most perfect thing I’ve ever tasted.”

Stunned at such a compliment, I reached for him, but my fingers could only curl around his dark hair. “Aswan?—”

I’m not sure what I would have said, because he interrupted me with another long, slow lick, and I thought I might come undone right then. But he didn't let me. He built me up, his tongue dragging along my cleft, the ridges creating a tantalizing friction that had me panting and moaning.

And just when I thought I would go mad from the torture, he slid a thick finger inside me. I gasped, my body clenching around him.

“That’s it, dkaar ,” he hummed against me as he curled his fingers upward. “Open for me. ”

I could only whimper—half in confusion, half in bliss, because oh my God, what was happening ?

His fingertips hit something, a spot , deep inside me. Something I’d never felt or experienced on my own...and I nearly shot off the bed, yanking myself upright by his hair as I gasped.

It should have hurt him. Instead, Aswan chuckled—I swear to you, I felt him chuckle!—and nuzzled at my curls, his tongue lapping at me again. My entire body was coiled like a spring ready to snap.

“Aswan,” I rasped, not sure what I was going to say, and when he tipped his head to one side, the scraping of his tusk caused me to shudder. I couldn’t believe how close I was to coming again, so quickly. He’d done that to me— for me. His fingertips slowly stroked that spot deep within me, and I nearly sobbed at the sensation.

“So beautiful, Hannah.” A swipe of his tongue. “You’re the most delicious thing I’ve ever put in my mouth.” Another swipe. “I could spend the rest of my life between your legs, feasting on you.” A third. “I love the way you taste.”

I love.

I love.

I love .

My fingers tightened in his hair, and I stared sightlessly across the room. I love . How bad would it be to blurt out the same words? I love you, Aswan . But he hadn’t said that. He’d said that he loved the taste of my pussy, which...I mean, that was a pretty close second, wasn’t it ?

We only had this weekend.

Until the kids returned, and we went back to being Mom and Nanny .

This wasn’t an I love you moment. This was a focus on your body, Hannah, because you’ll never again get to experience something so incredible moment.

So I did. I exhaled, forced myself to relax, and loosened my hold on him. Just in time, too, because Aswan curled his fingers inside of me, and closed his lips around my clitoris, the tip of his tongue finding that sensitive bud.

When he hummed, I exploded.

“Asw—” I began, before clamping my hand over my mouth, trying to muffle my shriek of ecstasy as my climax burst over me. Thank goodness he was holding my thighs down, because I bucked against him, as if trying to reach even closer, deeper, longer, harder.

This was what I’d been hoping for. This was the release I needed, and it went on forever. He continued to gently stroke me, and my orgasm stretched, my inner muscles clamping around him, as if trying to draw his fingers against my womb.

Aswan was everything I could have possibly prayed for.

With this realization, tears came to my eyes. My body was still thrumming from that orgasm, and now I was ready to cry? Just because I’d caught feelings for this remarkable male, and he was only available for a weekend fling?

Oh my gosh, you have got to get your shit together. Just enjoy it while you can !

As if Aswan had heard, his lips released my clit, and his tongue swiped along my cleft, from where his fingers disappeared in me, upward. But my lips were too sensitive, and I was—frankly—overwhelmed by what had just happened. I jerked against him, my fingers curling into his hair again as I blurted, “ Wait !”

I suppose it was incredulity that I was stopping him from going to town on me again, stopping him from giving me that incredible pleasure...whatever it was, by the time I succeeded in pulling his face from my crotch, I was laughing. Although maybe I was laughing to keep from crying, who knew?

No, when he lifted his face, his mouth and chin covered in my liquid desire, and grinned wickedly up at me, the laughter was real. I tugged again. “Aswan! I need...”

“Anything, dkaar . I’ll give it to you.”

Another incredulous burst of laughter. “A breather! I need...” Oh gosh... “Just give me a minute or ten.”

He hummed in agreement, then crawled from between my legs to stretch out beside me. Embarrassed now, I rolled against his chest, burying my face in his shoulder as his large hand stroked my back.

“I’ll give you whatever you need, Hannah.” His voice was low, serious. “Never feel like you can’t ask.”

“I just need...” I exhaled, feeling warm and safe in his hold, although how much of that was just the aftereffects of that orgasm? “Aswan, I’ve never...Oh my gosh ,” I groaned, pressing my face against his skin. “That’s never happened before.”

His hand stilled, and I felt his muscles tighten. “What? ”

“I’ve never come twice,” I mumbled. Then, deciding he deserved the truth, I exhaled. “I’ve never come with anyone before.” Although he hadn’t come, had he? “I mean, I’ve never had a guy make me?—”

He pulled away sharply, enough to stare down at me. “Hannah, you’re saying that your ex-husband never brought you to orgasm?”

Did he have to sound so incredulous? Mutely, I shook my head, knowing I was blushing furiously. His expression shuttered, but I saw something flare in his eyes, along with that green glow.

Trying to laugh it off, I ran my hand down his naked chest. “And I mean, you’re not even naked!” I could feel his erection pressing against his trousers and my hip, so I

knew he wasn't unaffected. "You're still wearing your pants."

This time, he didn't catch my wrist, but he merely said, "I don't need to be naked to pleasure you, dkaar."

I really needed to figure out what that meant. I tried to grin, but was pretty sure it came out crookedly. "I'd like to touch you. It would make me happy to touch you, feel you." I wanted to wrap my fingers around his cock, to feel it inside me...

Maybe he sensed my thoughts, because his nostrils flared, and the tip of that long tongue flicked out against one of his tusks. I wasn't sure if it was a response, a habit, or if he was licking his lips...but I wanted to be the one to lick that tusk.

"Okay," he rasped, reaching for his waistband and rolling onto his back. "If it will bring you pleasure..."

As he pulled down his trousers, I rolled over him, bending over his mouth to kiss him. But I quickly gave into temptation and ran my tongue across his tusk, licking him the way he had...and the response was immediate.

With a growl, he wrapped both arms around me and yanked me against him. I could feel his chest vibrating, even as he kicked off his boxers, and decided that meant he liked it.

So I did it again, and this time, Aswan fell back against the bed with a groan, one hand reaching for his cock. I sat back, determined to explore.

He was magnificent—all muscles and taut green skin that seemed to shimmer in the low light. His chest and abdomen were tight with muscles, although I knew from the cuddling I'd just done that he wasn't too hard either, and his legs were strong and thick. My fingers skimmed over the ridges and dips of his body, trying to memorize

them.

Whenever I glanced up at his face, he was staring at me, his breaths coming deep and measured, as if I was far more interesting than whatever my touch was doing to him. Or as if he was fighting for control.

Because as I touched him...he was touching himself.

His cock was a thing of beauty, thick and a darker green than the rest of him, standing proudly against his abdomen. He had one hand wrapped around it, stroking slowly, his attention on me.

I reached out tentatively, wrapping my hand around his. He was hot and hard, silky smooth, and I could feel his pulse throbbing against my palm. And to my surprise, his cock was ridged, just like his tongue. I shuddered, imagining the way it would feel, sliding into my pussy.

If I hadn't already been aroused—yet again! What was he doing to me?—that image would have been enough.

“Gods below,” he rasped, his strokes growing in speed. “The way you’re looking at me makes me...” The words ended in a groan as I gently nudged his hand out of the way.

He released his grip, letting me take over, and a low rumble echoed from his chest as I began to stroke him. What had he said to me? Oh yes.

“You like this?” I murmured. “You like the way I touch you?”

“More than anything,” he choked, his hips bucking slightly into my touch. “Just like that, love. Oh gods below, yes. You’re going to kill me...so fucking good.”

Emboldened by his praise, I leaned down, my hair cascading over his thighs as I pressed a soft kiss to the tip of his cock. He jerked in my hand, a hiss escaping his lips.

“Hannah,” he warned, his voice little more than a growl. “You don't have to?”

“I want to,” I interrupted, looking up at him. “I want to taste you, Aswan.”

Something like desperation—or maybe fear—flickered across his features. “Tonight was about your pleasure, dkaar .”

“Sucking your cock will bring me pleasure, Aswan,” I announced primly, positioning myself over him .

His eyes flashed, the green glow brightening, and he nodded, the long green column of his throat working as he swallowed. “Then—taste,” he rasped. “Take your pleasure from my body.”

I smiled, leaning down again and this time, I took him into my mouth. He was too thick for me to get very far past my lips, but judging from his groan, I was doing just fine. I used my tongue to circle the thick green head, then used both hands to spread my saliva along his ridges.

He tasted of...cinnamon?

I hummed—partly in pleasure, partly in delight at his new and exciting taste, and the vibration made him buck his hips again.

“Fuck, Hannah,” he groaned, his hand coming to rest on my head, tangling in my hair. “Your mouth...”

I felt powerful. Powerful and desirable, as I pushed myself up on my knees to bend even further over him. I found myself waving my butt in the air, trying to squeeze my thighs together to capture the pressure and pleasure already teasing my core.

Who would've thought sucking cock could make me this horny? It had always been a chore in the past, but I hadn't lied; tasting Aswan had brought me pleasure. When his big hand palmed my rear end, squeezing me, I wondered if he could sense how aroused I was.

I dragged my tongue up his ridges, then popped his head from between my lips. Feeling naughty, I tried to continue the dirty talk. "I can't wait to feel this inside me."

Look, I never said I was particularly good at the dirty talk, did I? But it must have worked a bit because Aswan groaned again, his hips flexing.

"When it happens," he rasped, "do you know what will happen?"

I mean, if the last hour was any indication... "I can guess," I murmured, tipping my head to one side, my hair hanging down over one shoulder, to smirk at him.

When his fingers gripped my thigh, his claws dimpled my skin, as if he was fighting to hold control. "An orc's cock is made for pleasure. When he enters his Mate, she orgasms."

I froze, intrigued. "Immediately? Like...an instant-O?"

"It's an evolutionary adaptation to ready her body for him."

I had questions. I wanted to know more. But I sure as heck wasn't going to sit here and ask for a biology lecture with this body laid out for my exploration. So, grinning wickedly, I shifted over him, so my weight was on my knees. "I'm ready."

But his fingers tightened. “Hannah,” he choked. “ No .”

The word startled me, and I lost my balance. With one hand planted on the other side of his hip, I raised a brow at him. “No?”

I watched him swallow, even as his gaze turned hesitant, uncertain. “I...” He took a deep breath—his chest expanding in all sorts of interesting ways—and pushed himself up on his elbows so he could more easily meet my eyes. “I don’t think you’re ready for that, dkaar . When an orc claims his Mate, it’s forever. Mating is...” He swallowed and shook his head as he repeated, “ Forever . Right now, we have two days, so for now... ”

He's not ready for forever. He's not ready for I love yous .

I’d known it, but hearing him say he wasn’t going to fuck me—wasn’t going to claim me, as he said.

I was still telling myself to stop being disappointed when his hand dragged down my leg and latched onto my ankle. Startled, I tried to straighten. “What are you?”

Aswan swung my leg over his chest until I was straddling him, my legs spread impossibly wide over his torso. The movement also shifted my weight forward until I was supporting myself on my palms, braced on either side of his hips...and staring down at his cock.

I knew what to expect from this position, but I couldn’t help the way I flushed in embarrassment to have my pussy spread out in front of his face like that. Oh my gosh, my butt . My...my other hole was staring right at him, and he could probably see everything , like how wet I was and how?—

His tongue dragged up my cleft and my knees gave out, dropping me to spread across

his chest—my chin bumping against his cock on the way down—with a startled little eep .

“Aswan—” I gasped in confusion, but he merely chuckled and clamped his hands on either thigh and lifted me. Like I weighed nothing! He lifted me right back up and his tongue found me again.

His hands went to my butt cheeks, and he spread them further, his thumbs finding my folds and sliding along them. He spread those as well, which allowed him to lick me from the front—starting at my clitoris—all the way to the back .

Holy moly .

Whimpering, I realized my face was pressed against the base of his cock, as I struggled to breathe through what he was doing back there. I groped for him, trying to continue my stroking, but overwhelmed by the sensations. I didn’t realize it was possible to lick me from this angle, in this orientation?—

Then his ridged tongue slid inside me, and I forgot everything I’d been worrying about, really.

An orc’s cock is made for pleasure. When he enters his Mate, she orgasms.

Oh, yes please .

I pushed myself up, sliding back to press against his face, as I moved his cock into position. As he tongue-fucked me, I stroked him, doing my best to keep his cock in my mouth while also trying to rock back and forth on his face.

Dear God, when did I become so naughty ?

Right around the time you started dreaming of tasting Aswan's cock, you slut .

I mean, if it made me a slut, I was going to embrace that shit.

I hummed around his cock, and I felt him growl deep in his chest. I kid you not; I could feel the vibrations through my thighs and up to my pussy, where he slid his tongue from me in order to push his thumbs inside. It was an incredible sensation, to be stretched like that.

"I love the taste of you, Hannah," he murmured, brushing kisses along my inner thighs. "I've been dreaming of it forever. I love the way you respond to me. "

Moaning again, I tried to simultaneously take more of his cock and push back against him.

His tusks scraped along my cleft. "So fucking delicious."

"You're—" I gasped, then licked him and tried again. "You're pretty delicious too." Cinnamon , huh? I wasn't going to think of apple pie the same way ever again. "I want to make you come, Aswan."

"Oh, dkaar , you don't know how close I am."

Feeling bold, I stroked his cock again, and a second time. "Then let go," I whispered. "Come with me..." And I dunno what made me say it, but I tried to mimic his accent. " D-car. "

He stiffened, then surged upward, pushing me forward as his face pressed against my pussy. I took as much of his cock into my mouth as I could, and I stroked him frantically, as his long, ridged tongue slid forward, flicking against my clitoris.

I felt him growl again, and I hummed in response, and more than anything, the realization I —me, a divorcee mother of three—could make him lose control? That sent me over the edge. When his tongue flicked against my clit again, I squeezed around his fingers, around his face , and let myself go.

And with a groan, so did Aswan.

His cum did taste of cinnamon, and it hit the top of my mouth and the back of my throat faster than I could swallow it. I tried, but far too much of it spilled from my mouth, dribbling down my chin and throat and boobs and across his cock and stomach .

I'll admit it; I gagged. I mean, not because it was disgusting—which is how my body had responded to the first blow job I'd given back in college—but because there was just so much cum.

I expected Aswan to be disappointed I couldn't take it all, but with my own pleasure throbbing through my core at that moment, I wasn't sure if I cared. I ended up with my cheek pressed against his upper thigh, covered in his cum, gasping for breath as my thighs and butt shook from the power of that orgasm.

As it faded, I became more aware of him, and the way he continued to kiss my inner thighs, murmuring words in a language I didn't understand. At long last, I sucked in a breath and made an attempt to lift my head.

That was the sign he was waiting for, apparently.

With a sound that sounded suspiciously like a moan—happy or sad? I couldn't tell—Aswan lifted my hips as he sat up. Somehow, he twisted me around until I was sitting in his lap, and his arms were wrapped around me.

He rocked me slightly, as if trying to give me comfort, and he rasped, “Love, that was...” His voice cracked.

Since I was tucked up against his chest, my veins still coursing with pleasure and every inch of my skin too-sensitive, I whispered, “I’m sorry I couldn’t swallow it all?—”

My words broke off when he wrenched me away from him, holding me by the upper arms and staring, stricken, down at me. His mouth opened and closed a few times as if trying to find words, and I noticed the glow in his eyes had diminished almost entirely .

Why?

“Sorry ?” he finally choked, and I realized his expression was incredulity. “Hannah, how could you possibly —” He bit off the words, then shook his head and shoved my head under his chin again. “Love, you smell of me. You took me into your mouth, and you’re covered in my spend, and I can taste you in my fucking soul ...and you think you should be sorry?”

Before I could blink my way out of my shock to think of a way to answer that, Aswan shoved himself to his feet, taking me with him. I shouldn’t be surprised by the show of strength when he lifted me so easily, but I still gasped and clutched at him.

“Where—what—?” I tried.

“I’m taking you to the shower,” he growled, stomping toward the big bathroom. “I’m going to wash every inch of you, then I’m going to sit you on the edge of the counter, and I’m going to lick you until you come again. I’ve been dreaming of it every shower I’ve taken for weeks.”

I clutched at him, unable to do more than murmur, “ Wah? ” as he turned on the water.

“Then, dkaar ...” He scowled down at me. “I’m going to cover you with my scent again.” He shook his head. “ Sorry ,” he spat, clearly offended by my earlier apology. “As if that wasn’t the most magnificent thing I’ve ever experienced. It’s my job to ensure your pleasure .”

When he placed me in the shower, I wobbled slightly, but he was there to hold me. And as I relaxed into the hot water, I found myself smiling .

Most magnificent thing I’ve ever experienced .

Yep.

Yep, that about wrapped it up.

When I pulled Aswan down for a kiss, he was smiling too.

Chapter Nine

Aswan

I was never going to be the same, was I?

My Kteer was nowhere near satisfied; it had taken all my willpower not to claim Hannah Friday night. But I would never be able to erase the taste of her from my tongue, my lips, my heart.

After our shower, I wrapped her in my robe and carried her downstairs, where I sat her in my lap at the kitchen counter and fed her leftovers from last night's venison roast. She'd squirmed and giggled and flirted until I could take it no more, and I cleaned off the counter, spread her out on top of it, and ate her .

The sight of her spread across the counter, moaning and touching herself? More than I could stand.

After bringing her to climax in the kitchen, I carried her into the living room, where I laid on the couch and settled her on my face. I loved the way she held my hair as she rode me, my tongue deep inside her, feeling as if I'd died and joined the gods.

At some point, we ended up back upstairs, spread over the large bed.

Somewhere, deep down, I suspected that I was trying to erase Hannah's memories of her ex. After all, my Kteer had never crowed as loud as it had when she announced the bastard had never brought her pleasure in bed. But me? I brought her to orgasm

again and again.

And while I could be happy for the rest of my life knowing that, she'd been determined to bring me pleasure too. She didn't push me for sex again, as much as I wanted it, which told me everything I needed to know.

This was a one-time thing. Just for now. Just this weekend.

And that was okay.

Friday night we fell asleep wrapped around each other, and I woke her Saturday with another climax. Although I could've easily spent all day wringing orgasm after orgasm from her, she'd laughed and told me how hungry she was, so I whipped up some eggs benedict.

We spent the day not in bed, but shopping together. We took the ferry to the mainland and held hands in the grocery store. It shouldn't have felt so normal, so right. The menu for Sunday's party delighted her, and I loved incorporating her suggestions and family traditions into the plan.

Saturday night we went to The Golden Pearl, Eastshore's fanciest restaurant, and we talked about all sorts of things. In the weeks I'd been working for—and living with—Hannah, she'd learned about so much of my past, but that night, I told her about my family, and what it had been like to leave our world, and how difficult it had been to acclimate to the human's world, with its technology and huge population.

I told her about Abydos, and how I worried for him—despite the insane profit he'd made—because of the anger he carried around with him. I told her about how I'd missed my younger brothers, and how good it was to be near Simbel and Memnon again, and how Tarkhan's good humor had kept us close all these years.

She'd asked insightful and empathetic questions, and it made me proud to know my Mate understood and cared so much.

No, she's not your Mate.

Not until she was ready to be.

Maybe I was thinking of this when I carried her up the stairs that night, determined to shower her with love and affection, using my body to show her what she meant to me. How things could be.

I lost count of her climaxes, and still my Kteer wasn't satisfied. After she fell sleep, I continued to hold her, to curse the way I was torturing myself, and—unable to help myself—I woke her with more orgasms through the night.

And then.

And then.

It was Sunday morning, and our interlude was over.

It was Sunday morning, the day we were celebrating Joshua's birthday, and I had to leave her bed. Leave her . It took all my willpower to release her—sleeping spread out and exhausted—and shower, then head downstairs to begin to prep the food.

When she joined me, her cheeks pink with an adorable flush, trying to act as if everything was normal, I fed her pancakes and did my best to focus on the onions I was mincing for the potato salad.

The fact the damned things made my eyes water was an added bonus.

The two-day holiday had past, and everything was back to the way it should be. I was her nanny.

Surprisingly, even with my Kteer 's displeasure at the lack of claiming, the morning passed quickly. By noon, I had the food prepped, the tables set up outside on the porch, and the tablecloths tacked down.

“Sakkara just texted to let me know he’s bringing the ice for the coolers, thank God,” Hannah announced as she hurried past, two stacks of blue plastic cups balanced in one hand and a bunch of “birthday boy” napkins in the other. I heard the back door slam, and assumed she was arranging everything just so.

“The sprinkler is set up along the back fence,” she announced breathlessly as she rushed back in, “in case any of the kiddos want to play in the water. The balloons are tied off, and?—”

I caught her hands in mine as she rushed past. “Hannah, everything is perfect.”

She froze, her breath catching, as she tipped her head back to stare up at me. At the base of her throat, her pulse ticked, and I swore I could hear her—not with my ears, but with my own heart.

She wasn’t mine, not yet...but she was.

Her tongue darted out across her lower lip, and I remembered the way she’d licked me last night, and only just managed to contain my groan.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she whispered.

Deep in my chest, my Kteer urged me to scoop her up, to claim her. “Like what?” I growled.

“Like you want to taste me again.”

Oh, gods below. “I do,” I murmured, lowering my mouth.

If the doorbell hadn’t rung then, I would have forgotten my promise that things would go back to normal between us.

She was the one to dart away, stumbling toward the front door, and I curled my hands into fists, forcing my breathing to steady. Focus, you idiot . I could do this. I had to do this. Hannah had just made it clear this is what she wanted.

Her parents were at the front door, loaded down with presents and supplies, the kids tumbling over themselves as they rushed inside.

“Swan! Pick me up!” yelled Joshua, dragging Mr. BunBun as he threw himself at me. I forced my Kteer to forget about Hannah—if only that were possible—and scooped the kitling up to my shoulder.

“Hey, buddy, did you have a good time?” I asked him, just as Ben dropped his backpack in the middle of the foyer and gave me a wave. As Joshua bounced happily, telling me about the movie he watched that morning, I held his brother’s gaze and jerked my head toward the bag. “How about you take that upstairs? Your mom worked hard to get this place spotless for the party.”

Ben huffed slightly but bent to scoop up the bag and pound up the stairs after his sister, while I went to help his grandparents.

“Let me help,” I announced, lifting the bags from the older woman’s arms. “These are refrigerated?”

“Oh—oh, yes, thank you!” The woman looked flustered. “Are you sure you can carry

all that?”

I straightened, one brow twitching, even as the man at her side began to chuckle. “He’s carrying all that and Joshy. I’m calling him the next time I need furniture moved.”

Smiling, I inclined my head. “I’d be happy to help any time you need it. I’m Aswan.”

“Charlie Woods,” he announced. “I’d shake your hand, but yours are full. You’re the reason Benny isn’t pretending to be a grouchy teen any longer.”

“Oh, no, Hannah is a wonderful mother—” I began but was interrupted.

“Put me down!” yelled Joshua as he threw himself forward. “I hug Papa!”

Luckily, the older man caught him with a laugh, and I had a free hand to gather up more of the party supplies. My ears ringing with their praise, I retreated to the kitchen, unable to help my smile .

The party was a success, and I discovered I enjoyed standing behind the grill, my eyes tracking Hannah. She was in her element, laughing and greeting people, making them at ease. Tova and Ben had invited their friends and their friends’ families, and the backyard was filled with dozens of people, the kids all playing together.

Every few minutes, Hannah’s eyes would meet mine, and her smile would grow just slightly before she was distracted by someone else...and that was enough.

It had to be enough.

As the party continued, I found myself standing with Sakkara and Tarkhan, who had decided to come after all. The three of us were doing a good job of not talking much

about anything, until the moment that Hannah, thinking no one was paying attention to her, sent a wink in my direction.

Sakkara snorted at the same time Tarkhan murmured, “Oh for fuck’s sake, Aswan, you have to figure shit out between you.”

“What?” I frowned at him. “Things are fine.”

“The hells they are,” he muttered into his beer. “She’s looking sated and happy and has your scent all over her...and you’re so on edge you need mountain climbing gear.”

“He’s right,” Sakkara agreed. “If you don’t claim her soon, you’re not going to be able to live with her.”

“I’ve—” I began, but then snapped my mouth shut with a growl, not wanting to share anything more about what should be private between me and Hannah .

And thank the gods I did, because at that moment, her mother came bustling over, holding her plate in both hands. “Aswan! Hannah tells me you’re the one who made the potato salad? It’s delicious!”

Dismissing my friends from my mind, I gave her a smile and a little bow. “The secret is Italian dressing.”

“Oh, I’m desperate for the recipe, if you don’t mind. There have been days when I just can’t manage to cook, and it would be delightful to have something so delicious in the fridge to look forward to!”

The woman, who looked so much like Hannah, except for the bright pink headscarf she wore to hide her missing hair, beamed up at me, and I found myself beaming

right back.

“I’d be happy to give you the recipe, ma’am. And I’ll pack up the leftovers to send home with you today.” In fact, I vowed to make her a weekly batch of it—or any meals she wanted—if it would make her treatments easier.

“Oh, call me Allison,” she insisted, beaming at my friends. “I’m Hannah’s mother. You’re our new mayor, Mr. Sakkara.”

“Just Sakkara,” he said smoothly, with a smile. “And this is Tarkhan, one of our new residents.”

“Allison, my dear, you don’t need to settle for just Aswan’s potato salad.” Tark bent over her free hand with a charming smile, then winked at her. “Have you tasted his lobster ravioli? I’m sure he’d make anything for you.”

As the older woman blushed, flustered, I found myself also shifting awkwardly. “Tark’s right, ma’am— Allison . I’ll make you any meal you’d like and deliver it on the days you’re not up for cooking.”

Her mouth dropped open in surprise, but before she could answer, Hannah came bouncing up, full of energy. “What are we talking about? Are the burgers ready?”

“Not yet,” I murmured, pretending interest in the meat, when I really wanted to gather her to my side and drop a kiss to her lips. “Almost.”

I thought I heard Sakkara snort softly under his breath as Hannah linked her arm through her mother’s. “Aswan’s food is amazing, Mom. He used to own a restaurant, you know.”

“I didn’t!” Allison beamed at me. “And now he’s helping to raise my grandbabies. I

was very impressed by how much Ben has matured, you know. I've missed being able to spend as much time with them as usual. Hopefully when these treatments are done..."

I saw Hannah tighten her hold on her mom and press their shoulders together. "Soon," she promised. "We'll all go on a fun vacation in August, okay? Maybe to the mountains."

I would love to see the East Coast mountains and compare them to my home. Maybe something showed on my face because her mother glanced at me. "Can we bring Aswan along to cook? I'm going to need more of this potato salad!"

Hannah started in surprise, glancing between us, and I saw the worry in her gaze. Worry, because she didn't want anyone to realize what had passed between us when we were alone ?

I forced a nonchalant shrug. "I can send some along," I told her—just her—so she didn't have to worry about inviting me.

But from the way her shoulders slumped and the flash of disappointment in her eyes, that hadn't been the right thing to say.

Suddenly Sakkara cleared his throat. "Excuse me. Nikki is finally here with Emmy, and I promised I'd help carry Tova's present from the car."

I nodded to him as he slipped away, and it wasn't until I turned back to our little group that I saw Allison's surprise.

"How did—" She shook her head in disbelief. "I didn't hear anything, and he wasn't looking at his phone. How did he know his wife was here? Is it an orc thing?"

I exchanged a glance with Tarkhan, who raised a brow in challenge and gestured for me to explain.

Fine. I could do this.

Taking a deep breath, I considered my words.

“To humans, marriage is...a partnership. A promise?” I gave a little shrug, even as Hannah’s mother nodded. “It is a choice, is my point. To orcs, there is more. Mating is... more. ”

I winced, knowing I was explaining it poorly, and knowing Hannah was watching me intently. My hand went to my chest, my heart and my Kteer pounding beneath my palm, and struggled to find the words.

“When we meet our Mates, the person who is going to be our...our forever , we just know them. That’s how it was explained to us as kitlings— there is a knowing . Not just from us, but from our Mates as well. They— she will recognize us if the Mating is to be successful.”

I couldn’t look at Hannah, for fear that she would see the longing in my eyes. Instead, I focused on her mother, who looked so interested. “Once the Mating bond has been completed, and the couple has committed to one another, then their connection becomes even stronger. They can...sense one another.”

Allison’s brows had risen. “How fascinating. So Sakkara just felt his wife—excuse me, his Mate ? Is the Mating bond ever wrong? What happens if one person doesn’t want to be Mated?”

Since she was looking at Tarkhan when she asked this question, he shrugged helplessly. “Then the other accepts her decision and lives in misery. It’s not

completely unheard of for a female to reject a male, and while that male will never find another Mate, he will respect her decision.” His expression turned almost pitying. “You have to understand that in the world we came from, there were so few females that many of us only knew one Mated male, and that was our fathers. We had no hopes of finding Mates.”

As Hannah frowned, studying me, her mother glanced from one of us to the other. “Since coming to our world, have either of you found your Mates?”

Tarkhan immediately shook his head, his smirk back. “Not for lack of trying, ma’am.”

Allison gave a little chuckle at his charm, then turned to me. I was hoping she’d be distracted, so I bent over the meat, pretending it needed flipping .

“How about you, Aswan?” she prodded, and I winced. “Have you found your Mate?”

Taking a deep breath, I lifted my gaze...and found Hannah unerringly. She was chewing on her bottom lip, and I could barely stand it.

“Yes,” I rasped, glancing away. “But she...I have to respect her decision.”

“Oh, how sad,” Allison breathed, and just as she took a deep breath to ask the logical next question, rescue came from the most unlikely source.

“Swan!” Joshua bellowed demandingly, stomping toward me on his strong little three-year-old legs, dragging Mr. BunBun behind him. “Now! Go up now!”

Grateful for the reprieve, I handed the spatula to Tarkan and turned toward the kitling. “What’s up, Joshy?”

“I wanna go up da ladder! You said!”

Forcing a chuckle, I scooped him up and tossed him over my shoulder, the way he liked. “Thank you for following directions and waiting for me to be available to spot you as you go up the ladder.”

“Yes! Doshy go now! Now! ”

I patted his rear and headed down the steps. “You’ve done a good job being patient, buddy, thank you.”

Behind me, as I walked away, I heard Allison say, “Goodness, Joshua’s language has really improved. Is that thanks to Aswan as well? You certainly got lucky, hiring him as the nanny.”

And faintly, I heard Hannah murmur, “I think he’s a wonder.”

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:17 am

Chapter Ten

Hannah

There is a knowing.

That's what Aswan had said. He'd been explaining orc Mating traditions to my mother, but...but he'd been talking to me. There is a knowing .

And then, when Mom had asked him if he'd found his Mate? He'd looked right at me and said yes .

And in that moment...there was a knowing.

Lord knows how I managed to make it through the rest of the party, feeling like I'd been gut-punched.

But I did. I was polite. I was friendly. I smiled, and I was excited for my baby as he climbed to the top of his new playset—with Aswan standing right behind him, ready to catch him if he fell—and zoomed around the yard on his new ride-on toy Sakkara's family bought him. And when he ate too much cake and had a temper tantrum because he'd opened all his presents, I held him and comforted him while sending apologetic grimaces to the guests, as if this was the most normal day in the world.

As if I hadn't just had my entire being shaken.

I loved Aswan. And... Well, he hadn't said I love you —he hadn't needed to. He'd

talked about his Mate, and he'd looked at me, and I'd known .

I needed to confirm. I needed to ask him if what we shared this weekend was real .

So of course the rest of the day dragged on, lasting several bajillion hours. I wanted to be present for the fun, I really did. But I couldn't stop thinking about Aswan and the tortured look in his eyes when he'd said he'd found his Mate.

And he was respecting her decision to stay away.

I was the one who told him I couldn't do anything to jeopardize the kids' well-being. I was the one who told him what we'd shared this weekend was only for this weekend. Was this my fault?

Eventually the party finished. Eventually my over-stimulated three-year-old crashed hard—luckily, he waited until after I bathed him and brushed all the icing from his teeth. Eventually the last of the streamers were cleaned up, and Benny helped Aswan load the dishwasher, and Tova and I set the porch to rights again.

I kissed them both, read to Tova, and sent them off to bed, all the while thinking about something else. I should be exhausted. I should be ready for a hot bath and a glass of wine .

But I was ready for something else— someone else.

After I tucked in Tova, I hurried to the small hall bath I shared with the kids and rushed through my evening tasks. I wanted to look my best for what would happen, but also...Aswan had seen me at my worst. He'd helped me through my worst, and he still wanted me. Still thought I was worthy of being a Mate.

Taking a deep breath, I met my eyes in the mirror and cinched the belt of my

bathrobe. Under it I wore nothing...and I assumed that would be enough of a hint.

You can do this

While I'd been putting the kids to sleep and preparing myself, Aswan had disappeared. The lights were off downstairs, and the kitchen was neat as a pin—as it had been since he'd come into our lives. He took care of us, took care of me ...and I wondered if it had become more than just a job to him.

Maybe I ought to go to sleep, ought to forget this...

There is a knowing .

No. I knew I was right, and I needed to prove it.

Taking a deep breath, I knocked on his door. The room that had once been mine, the room where I'd slept the last two nights, wrapped in his arms.

Sooner than I expected, the door was yanked open, and I forgot what I'd come to say. Because in the few hours since I'd left his bed, I'd forgotten how beautiful Aswan was. He'd clearly just come from the shower—his hair was wet, tousled, and drops of water still speckled his shoulders. A pair of sweatpants, hastily pulled on, hung low on his hips... And I wanted to tug them further.

After what we shared this weekend, I shouldn't have been surprised that Aswan could guess—or perhaps know —my body's reaction to his state of undress. I saw his nostrils flare, his lids lower slightly. His lips parted, and that beautiful tongue of his darted out to brush along his tusk.

“ Dkaar ?” his tone was husky. Needy.

“What does that mean?” I blurted. It hadn’t been what I wanted to ask, but at that moment, I was desperately close to throwing myself at him and needed a distraction. “You called me that before.”

He continued to watch me. “Beloved,” he finally admitted, his expression unchanged. “Dkaar means beloved.”

Unable to help myself, my smile bloomed. “Beloved,” I whispered, and stepped into his room. The door closed behind me, but I don’t know which of us did it. “There is a knowing.”

Aswan reared back, as if I’d struck him. “What?” he rasped, his green eyes now wide.

“You said that earlier today. You said that when an orc finds his Mate, there is a knowing. You said his Mate will recognize the connection as well, and either accept or reject him. You said you just know.”

He was backing away from me now, his body language wary. “I did. I mean, yes, I said that.”

I followed him. “You also told my mother that you’d found your Mate. But you hinted she’d rejected you.”

Finally, he halted, the backs of his knees hitting the footboard of the bed, and he looked down and away. As if he couldn’t meet my eyes? “I did,” he ground out.

Feeling strangely bold, I stepped up in front of him. “There is a knowing, Aswan.” I reached for his hand and lifted it, placing his palm on my chest. I felt him shudder, saw his eyes close. “I feel it too. Am I your Mate?”

Three heartbeats. Four. Six. Ten. We stood in silence, and the longer we stood there,

the time measured in my pulse pounding against his palm, the more the dread pooled in my stomach.

Had I been wrong?

I watched his face for some hint, but his brows had drawn in, his jaw tight, his eyes moving beneath their lids, as if he was looking for an escape.

Was I wrong ?

“Aswan?” I whispered desperately, hoping I wasn’t about to humiliate myself.

“Yes,” he finally rasped hoarsely. Those beautiful eyes with the incredible green glow, opened and met mine. “May the gods of the ancestors forgive me, Hannah, but yes .”

I felt his fingers tighten against my chest, and I pressed harder against his hand, keeping him there. “Why do your gods need to forgive you? You don’t want me to be your Mate?”

“I want you more than I want my next breath, Hannah.” The words sounded as if they’d been ripped from him. “I want to gather you and the kitlings in my arms and in my heart and keep you safe forever. But I cannot ask you to risk putting them—or yourself—through trauma again.”

I felt my heart, my chest, begin to cautiously expand, along with my smile. “And you think loving you will risk hurting us?”

“I would never hurt you,” he whispered. “But I know I cannot ask you to trust me—a male, when I say that.”

Well, he was in for a surprise then, wasn't he?

Straightening, I took a deep breath. "I love you, Aswan. I trust you. I trust you to treat me and my children well. I have never stopped believing in love, and in you I have found everything I've ever wanted in a partner."

Partner .

Yes. That's what he was. My smile grew, even as his expression turned slack in disbelief. "You're already my partner, Aswan, when it comes to this house, this family. How could I not trust you?"

Eyes wide, he whispered, "You love me?"

My smile softened. "Of course I do. I love the way you care for me and the children so effortlessly, as if it isn't an obligation?—"

"Of course it isn't," he interjected, lips tugging into a frown in offense. "You might pay me..."

"But you're more than our nanny," I explained gently. "Although we're going to have to have a conversation about your salary and contract if we're sleeping together—" I realized I was getting all Human Resource-y, and shook my head, getting back on track. "I mean, Aswan, that in these last weeks, I've come to rely on you and your caring. Your strength. How you always know exactly what to say to each one of us to make our days better. How could I not love you? I'm just afraid that this is one-sided, because I could never possibly give you what you've given me."

"Dkaar ," he murmured, moving his hand from my chest to wrap me in his arms. "You've given me everything ."

“Like what?” I mumbled against his chest, because I’d wrapped my arms around his waist and was pressing against him, terrified of losing him and jubilant at what he was admitting.

“You are my Mate.” He whispered the words, then repeated them louder. “ You are my Mate . I will love you for the rest of my life, Hannah, and the kitlings as well. I understand if you don’t want to confuse them, but I hope you will at least allow me to continue to be part of their lives as their nanny.”

He loved me! Aswan loved me !

The jubilation overran the fear, and I squeezed him hard.

Still, I tried to keep my voice steady when I said, “If I’m your Mate, then you are mine. You told me you didn’t want to claim me until I was certain.” I realized I was holding my breath, because I could feel his hard length through the sweatpants he wore. “Certain about what, exactly?”

His breath stirred my hair. “About being mine. My Mate. Hannah, I don’t want to push you.”

As if he could. “I love you. This is more than just need or sex , right? I mean, the claiming thing. I want you . ”

There was a sound like a growl, deep in his chest. “Claiming is...” His hips flexed, and I nearly whimpered in need when I felt how hard and thick he was. I was so ready for him. “Hannah, Mating is forever. I don’t ever want...” He paused, then took a deep shuddering breath. “I don’t want to make you or the kitlings uncomfortable.”

I pulled away enough to reach up to cup his jaw in my palms. “Then let’s take it slowly,” I whispered.

“Whatever you want, dkaar .”

“We commit to one another, here, tonight.” With a slow smile, I pushed myself up on my toes, rubbing myself along his hardness. “We can introduce the concept to the kids later, slowly.”

Something like joy flashed across Aswan’s expression. “You mean it? You’re comfortable with me?—”

“I want you, Mate,” I whispered, just before I pulled his mouth down to meet mine.

And the sound he made? It was a combination of a growl and a crow of victory, and I felt him smile against my lips as he took control of the kiss.

I felt my feet leave the floor as his tongue slid between my lips, and no , that wasn’t a metaphor. Aswan was strong enough to lift me until I was level with him, and I thought that was the most beautiful thing.

My arms slid around his neck, and when he lifted me higher—his mouth marking me with hot kisses along my jaw and throat—my robe parted.

Aswan’s mouth left my skin, and I immediately lifted my head, wondering what had gone wrong. But I found him staring down at me in wonder, and I realized my breasts were pressed against his naked chest. Grinning impishly, I wriggled my legs free of the robe and wrapped them around his waist.

“Hannah...”

My fingers tugged at the hair at the base of his neck as I gyrated against him, certain he could feel how ready—how wet I was.

“Love, you showed me this weekend just how talented your tongue and fingers are. I want the rest of you.”

His gaze snapped back to mine as his hands went to my lower back, supporting me. “You’re certain?”

I wriggled lower, until I could feel his hardness pressing— pulsing —against my ass. “Aswan, you told me exactly what was going to happen when you put your cock in me. I want that.”

His lips twitched, although his gaze remained serious. “I also told you it was my responsibility to make you ready for me.”

No, he’d said the Insta-O his cock was going to give me would make me ready for him. My grin turned naughty, and I squeezed him with my thighs again. “Does this feel like I’m not ready?” I pulled myself closer to whisper near his ear, “I’ve been thinking about this since I took all my clothes off tonight. No, since this morning when you—” I stopped myself with a laugh. “I’ve been dreaming of your cock inside me for weeks , Aswan. Do you know how guilty I’ve felt?”

With a hum, he bent forward to press his mouth against the place where my shoulder met my neck. “I’ve been jerking off, thinking of you.” His lips blazed a hot trail across my skin as I moaned and dropped my head back. “I lay in your bed and touch myself. I stand in your shower and I stroke my cock, wishing it was you I was stroking.”

Oh God .

Even when he was pleasuring himself, he’d been thinking of pleasuring me ? How very Aswan.

I lowered first one arm, then the other, knowing he could hold me, as I shrugged out of the robe completely. It dropped on the floor as he lifted me high enough for his long, ridged tongue to swipe across one of my nipples.

Shuddering, I grabbed him again.

“I’m ready for you,” I gasped, my hips gyrating against the hard plane of his stomach. “Please, Aswan.”

One of his hands left my ass, and it took me a moment to understand he was pulling down the waistband of his sweatpants. Yes .

I felt the moment his cock burst free, because it smacked my ass cheek, and I sucked in a pleased breath. I remembered the feel of it—in my mouth, sliding along my most delicate parts...

“ Dkaar ...” Aswan’s voice sounded strained, as if he was struggling, as one hand closed around his cock and the other lifted my ass. “Once I claim you...”

My hands slid to his jaw, and I cupped his face so I could hold him—hold myself?—steady. As if I could hold us both here, in this moment.

“I’m ready for you, Aswan. I love you, and I accept you as my Mate. ”

That fierce victory flashed across his face once more, at the same moment I had a flicker of doubt for our future. Would the children understand? Would they accept him as a stepfather?

But then I wasn’t thinking at all because Aswan had repositioned me and was lowering me onto his cock. In shock, my grip on his waist weakened, which allowed me to slide farther down the ridged length. Dear God, the ridges! Each one slid into

me, and I had to resist the urge to clamp down on it—on him —and hold myself in place.

He was thick, but I'd given birth three times, and I could handle?—

“Breathe, dkaar ,” he murmured soothingly, running one hand up and down my back. That’s when I realized he was supporting me with only one arm. “We can stop if you want.”

I sucked in a breath. Like hell we were going to stop. Not when I was so close...

With a little whimper, I sank farther down, at the same moment he flexed his hips upward, and suddenly I was fully seated atop his cock.

Just as he'd promised, his cock triggered my climax. It took me by surprise, and I gasped, arching back and away from him.

Thank God he had better control than I did, because as I writhed and bucked on his cock, my legs barely clamped onto him, both my hands pressed against my mouth to keep myself from screaming in ecstasy, Aswan held me there, perpendicular to himself, and allowed my pleasure to claim me .

It wasn't until the orgasm began to subside that I realized he was speaking, murmuring to me in soft words. “—seen anything so beautiful as my Mate coming on my cock like that. Torvor's Hammer, dkaar , do you know how beautiful you are, taking your pleasure like that? Gods, yes.”

“Aswan,” I gasped, groping for his shoulders, trusting him to hold me upright at the same time I desperately needed to move against him. “Oh God, Aswan, that was...”

Humming, he drew me to him, his cock still deeply imbedded. The movement caused

him to flex inside me, and I gasped again, then moaned at the sensation of those ridges scraping along my sensitized core. “Oh, God,” I groaned again, trying to flex atop him, “Yes, please.”

It took a moment to realize he wasn’t moving, and I was...well, I was more or less trying to hump him while he stood upright , and if you can imagine this position, it meant I wasn’t going to be able to get what I wanted at all. I leaned back slightly to frown at him, as my legs fell away from his waist, and he caught my ass.

“Aswan, move .”

When he grinned, his tusks seemed more prominent, and his eyes glowed in the light from the bedside lamp. “Consent is important?—”

“Do you want to fuck me?”

He blinked at my bluntness, and I had to fight to keep my stern expression on my face, when really I just wanted to focus on the white-hot sparks shooting through my veins in the aftermath of that climax.

“I...Right now, Hannah, I can’t think of anything I want more. ”

“Good. Consent is...” He flexed again, and I moaned. “Aswan, now please. I need you to... now , claim me now.”

With a low growl, he turned and fell toward the bed, catching both of us as my back hit the mattress. His palms spread out on either side of my shoulders, his feet were braced against the floor, and he began to move .

“ Yeeeeesssss, ” I moaned, my hands closing around his forearms, my legs opening for him. “Oh God, yes, Aswan. That feels so— oooh God it feels so good. Right. Yes.

There.”

He slowly worked his hips, his cock sliding in and out of me. I felt each and every ridge, the sensation making me breathless with need. I had no idea I could become so aroused again so quickly. For that matter...

“I didn’t realize my Mate was such a talker in bed,” murmured Aswan above me. “I like that you tell me what you like.”

I refused to feel embarrassed. “I like it all,” I assured him, dropping my head back, exposing my throat as I ran my hands up his corded forearms to grip his shoulders. “Your cock is... so good, mmmm there .”

“I love the way you take your pleasure, dkaar .” His hips flexed again, his cock thrust in and out, slowly at first, then faster. “Malla the Beginner made you to fit me perfectly. Only you could take my cock this well.”

His praise made my chest swell. I arched against him, which meant his next thrust hit that secret spot behind my clitoris, the one he found on Friday which drove me mad. I gasped again and rocked my own hips, trying to recapture that sensation .

Soon we were both breathing heavily, our gazes locked as our bodies slammed into one another. This was a different sort of experience than the gentle way he’d used his tongue and hands on me only this morning. But oh my gosh I loved it. I loved how strong he was, I loved the way he used that strength to love me.

“Hannah, I need...” he groaned.

“Yes,” I gasped. I wanted this. I wanted him . I wanted him to claim me, to seal this Mating bond. I wanted him to find the same pleasure I did.

But suddenly, he straightened, his cock sliding from me.

I gasped again, pushing myself up on my elbows even as he dropped to his knees beside the bed and reached for my hips. When he yanked me toward him, I slid along the mattress with a little surprised yelp, until my thighs bracketed his hips again.

His gaze pierced mine for just a moment. “I love you, Mate.”

I opened my mouth to repeat the vow, but the pad of his thumb pressed against my clitoris then, and my scream of pleasure cut off my words. His palm slammed over my mouth to muffle my cries of ecstasy from my children, and I let myself go.

I arched against him, and he slid his cock inside me as my second climax burst over me.

This time, with my heels planted, I was able to move . As he plunged into me, I rocked against him, timing my thrusts with his, drawing out the pleasure, the ecstasy, until the edges of my vision went black, and I realized I was no longer breathing .

He stiffened, and I felt the last spasms of my orgasm clenching around him, my inner muscles milking him.

“ Dkaar ,” he whispered, moments before his eyes fluttered closed, he grabbed my hips and slammed into me.

His seed was hot and thick, and I felt it fill me, which shouldn’t be possible. It never was before, with my ex.

But my ex had never cared for my pleasure, had only taken his own. Aswan... I watched as his expression slackened with wonder, and his eyes slowly opened. He blinked at me, the green in his gaze slowly fading to black. And I smiled.

“Dkaar ,” I agreed, reaching for him, trying to draw him down to me.

This would be the moment I should feel nervous, wonder if all those vows we’d made were just in the heat of the moment. But I didn’t—I wouldn’t . This wasn’t Travis; this wasn’t one of the guys I’d dated before or after him. This was Aswan , and I trusted him not just with my life, but with my heart.

Could I trust him with my children’s hearts?

“I love you,” he whispered against my hair, gathering me to him. “I...thank you.”

When I squirmed, I felt his cum leaking from where we were still joined. “Well, I enjoyed it too,” I tried to joke.

But he pulled back, his expression solemn. “No, Hannah. Thank you for accepting me. For allowing me to be your Mate. I...” He swallowed and shook his head slightly, but didn’t look away. “You and the kitlings are my world, and I will do everything in my power to make your world the best possible.”

Oh.

Oh wow .

That was...

That was better than a wedding vow, as far as I was concerned.

I reached up to cup his face. “I accept you, Aswan, and look forward to the future with you. With...” Us. I wanted to say it, but I didn’t. Couldn’t.

I wasn’t sure I was ready for Benjamin, Tova, and Joshua to know about this yet.

Travis leaving had ripped Benny up, even though we hadn't been truly married for a long time before then. What would me accepting Aswan in my life do to my son?

Luckily, Aswan understood. Of course he did.

With a rueful smile, he slid from me and twisted, gathering me in his arms as he stood. I pressed against him. "What are?—"

"Bathing my Mate," he murmured, stalking toward the large bathroom he alone used these days. "It wasn't well done of me to find my pleasure so quickly, and now I need to make it up to you."

"Quickly?" I squeaked, even as he bent to turn on the water and I had to clutch him. "I came twice."

He dropped a kiss on my lips. "You should have come five or six times before I allowed myself to find pleasure."

Five or six times ? My eyes widened. "I've never... "

"I know." His gaze turned solemn as he set me upright. "And while I'm sorry the males of your past didn't know what a treasure you were, Hannah, and didn't know how to treat you right, I'm selfish enough to admit a little pride at knowing I'm the first to make you scream my name."

Ah, there was the blush. He saw it and chuckled, then bent his head to capture my lips in a sensual kiss as the water filled the tub.

It was amazing how primed my body was, how attuned it was to this male. Or maybe it was just Aswan. When he pulled away, I was already breathing heavily, and his proud smirk said that he knew it.

“Soon,” he promised. “First you must relax, then I’ll make you come, Mate.”

Oh, heck yeah. I could get used to this being Mated thing.

But what would my kids think?

Pushing the thought aside, I lifted my arms to his neck. “Five or six times,” I murmured, and drew him back down.

Chapter Eleven

Aswan

The old legends were true: Claiming my Mate had completed me. The week after Hannah and I had consummated our Mate bond, Tova and I were walking Joshua down Main Street when we passed Giza juggling the keys to his tattoo parlor and his new daughter Raina. I jumped in to help, and the older male took one look at me and burst into proud chuckles.

“Congratulations, t’mak !” he announced, slapping me on my shoulder before accepting my help in unlocking his shop. “Sakkara told me you were settling into Eastshore, but I hadn’t realized how well.”

I knew I was blushing, but my Kteer crowed with pride, and so I smiled as well.

“Aww, she’s adorable,” Tova was telling Giza. “Is that what Emmy looked like as a baby? Does she look like you or her mom? What’s her name? Can we go inside?”

Since this last one was directed to me, I sent Giza a raised brow in question, and he ushered us all into his shop. The front half was a sort of display area for orcish artwork—mainly made by Karnak here on the island, but there were pieces from as far away as Bramblewood Bluff—while the back half was where he did his tattoo work.

To my surprise, he spent a half hour—the time we were waiting for Ben to finish his class at the rec center—answering all of Tova’s questions about baby Raina and his

Mating bond with Harper, Raina's mother and Eastshore's resident lawyer...while I tried my best to keep Joshy from tasting priceless art.

Yeah, I was settling into Eastshore alright, and it was all thanks to my Mate.

For so long, Bramblewood had been my home, and I thought that was the best I could hope for: a new purpose among other non-humans, and a restaurant of my own. But here on Eastshore? I'd found a real community...and a family of my own.

My Mate was here, and she'd accepted me as hers. What more could I want?

Kitlings who look at you the way Raina looks at her father .

Shaking my head, I bent to scoop Joshy up and placed him atop my shoulders. The boy knew I was his nanny, knew he could trust me to take care of him, protect him. That was like being his father, wasn't it?

It would be good enough. It had to be good enough, because Hannah had made no more mention of sharing our relationship with her children, and we still hadn't had the promised conversation about our employer/employee status.

She no longer slept in Joshua's room, but I didn't think the children had noticed her moving her things back into the master bedroom. Each night, she slept wrapped in my arms, and I reveled in the feel of her body—her soul —next to mine...and that was good enough. I had a Mate, and she loved me as I loved her. I should be satisfied.

My Kteer should be satisfied.

But it wasn't.

Despite things being settled between Hannah and myself, my Kteer was unsettled.

And I knew it had everything to do with the kitlings.

Eastshore Isle's Independence Day celebration came and went with a red, white, and blue parade and a sandcastle building competition—Cairo and his Mate won this year with a rendition of a giant cupcake. We joined Hannah's parents to watch the parade, and when I lifted Joshua—clutching Mr. BunBun, of course—and Tova so they could see better, Allison made a big deal out of how well I blocked the sun for her.

She seemed delighted by everything I did, and her gentle enthusiasm made me smile as well. I was sending over meals to her home now at least twice a week—her husband Charlie sometimes picked them up, or Ben and I drove them over—and they'd begun to ask for my help when it came to tasks that were just too tiring for them.

Honestly, I was happy to help, and I knew it was important for Ben and Tova to have an opportunity to help them as well .

So, during the second week of July, when Allison called me directly to ask for help picking up her new purchase from the antique store in town, of course I agreed. It was an afternoon when all three kids were home with me—Emmy had a dentist appointment off-island, and Ben had been staring at the T.V. too long—so I strapped Joshy to my chest, and we all walked to Second Time's A Charm .

Allison was waiting for us on the walkway out front.

“Oh, there are my favorite grandbabies!” she cried, holding out her arms.

Tova ran for a hug immediately, her enthusiasm almost knocking Allison over, but Ben merely rolled his eyes and smiled. “We're you're only grandbabies, Nana.” Still, he stretched up on his toes to kiss her fragile cheek.

I eyed her color and the pink baseball cap she wore over her missing hair. “You’re looking good today. Those fish oil supplements are helping?”

“And knowing that the end is in sight,” she agreed with a bright smile. “The steak you made on Tuesday didn’t hurt either.”

“Nana!” Joshua bellowed, kicking his legs and waving his lovey. “BunBun wants a tiss!”

When the older woman leaned closer to kiss first the toddler, then Mr. BunBun, I inhaled, and realized I could recognize Allison’s scent the same way I knew Joshy’s, or Ben’s, or Tova’s. Just like Hannah, this woman had become part of my family, and I would do everything in my power to make her life a good one.

“Thanks so much for your help today, Aswan, kids. I can’t wait to show you the credenza I found,” Allison was saying as she held the door to the antique shop for us. Second Time’s A Charm smelled of well-dusted treasures. “Of course, Mavis wasn’t going to be any help in loading it into my car?—“

“I’m eighty-two!” came a call from the rear of the store. “I don’t load cars!”

“So that’s where you come in,” Allison finished smoothly, gesturing toward one of the aisles. “I really appreciate this.”

I was only half paying attention, instead trying to keep Joshua from kicking me as I unstrapped him from the carrier. “Here you go, buddy,” I announced gratefully as I placed him in the aisle. “Stay with us, okay?”

“Wook, BunBun!” he yelled, holding the lovey above his head. “Forts!”

“They’re not forts,” Ben said with a good-natured scoff. “They’re old people

furniture.”

“Forts!” his younger brother yelled, then took off running toward the stale-smelling couches.

With a sigh, Ben shot me a look. I glanced between him and his grandmother, wondering how much trouble a toddler could get into in an antique store. Probably a lot .

“You help Nana,” Ben said. “I’ll watch Joshy.”

I nodded gratefully. “Don’t let him get near anything glass or breakable. Tova, where are you?”

It was a little maddening to have to try to keep track of three kids and Allison amid the delicate antiques, and I was ready to get out of there as soon as she finished paying for her credenza. Which—in case anyone else has been in this world for a decade and had no idea what a credenza is— isn’t actually a kind of houseplant, which is what it sounds like, but a sort of cabinet.

Not terribly exciting, but also large enough to understand why Allison was worried about it.

In the end, I solved the problem by sending Tova to hold her grandmother’s hand, and picked up the entire thing with a grunt, then maneuvered it out the front door.

Allison hurried ahead to open the trunk of her SUV. “If you can manage to get it in here, Aswan, I’ll give you all a ride home. Oh, thank you so much!”

“Ben,” I grunted, even as I managed to manipulate the wooden cabinet into the trunk. “Can you— oof —get your brother strapped in?”

Tova was climbing over the seats, chattering about the forts they'd imagined inside the store, and Joshua was giggling along. Until, just as I managed to close the trunk, he suddenly wailed, "BunBun! BunBun gone !"

Allison paled, and I resisted the urge to mutter a curse. Instead, I met Ben's eyes and jerked my head toward the store. "We'll find him," I assured her. "Tova, you stay here with Nana and your brother, okay?"

Ben joined me at the door, and it wasn't until he said, "I'm really sorry," that I realized how downcast he was.

"Whoa, what?" I pulled him aside, right outside the antique shop, and bent down to meet his eyes. "What are you talking about?"

His hands were in his pockets. "Joshy was my responsibility. I'm sorry I lost Mr. BunBun. "

I frowned as I placed my hand on his shoulder. " I'm sorry for asking you to watch your brother—that wasn't your job, and if I'd been better prepared, it wouldn't have happened. Watching Mr. BunBun was Joshy's responsibility, but..." I shrugged. "What do you expect from a three-year-old?"

I saw Ben's lips twitch as he peeked up at me through his lashes. "You're not mad?"

"No, of course not." I pulled him to me for a quick hug, then turned to lead him through the door. "Besides, it's easily fixed, right? Let's split up inside and go up and down the aisles. You check in all the places where Joshy hid, okay?"

With a quick, determined nod, the ten-year-old turned down the left-most aisle, and I headed toward the linens section, where I remembered Joshua playing.

It was less than two minutes before I found the missing lovey, lying forlornly under a table piled high with pillows. “Found him!” I called out, but when I emerged with Mr. BunBun clutched in my hand, I realized I hadn’t heard Ben’s response. “Ben? I found him.”

Nothing.

Frowning, I cocked my head and turned in a slow circle, realizing I hadn’t heard anything from him since we split up. Had he returned to the car?

Not sure why my Kteer was urging me to hurry, I half-jogged back outside and wrenched open the door to the SUV, even though my senses were telling me Ben wasn’t inside. “Have you seen Ben?” I barked, tossing Mr. BunBun over the seat to a relieved Joshua. “He didn’t come out? ”

Allison was already reaching for her seatbelt. “No, he’s not out here. I’ll help?—”

“I’ll find him.” I was already turning back to the antique shop. “Stay with the kids,” I commanded, heart pounding.

He’s fine. He’s hiding. He’s playing .

Except...my Kteer was telling me it wasn’t fine. What had happened?

“Ben?” I yelled again, striding through the store. “Mavis, have you seen the boy I was here with?”

“What?” came the cracked voice again. “Who’s speaking?”

Gods below, she wouldn’t be any help. “Ben? Where are you?” I used my height to peer over the piles of furniture in the jumbled store, each heartbeat sending me closer

to panic. “Ben!” I reached the back of the store and kept going, striding into the storage room. “Where are you, buddy?”

And then.

And then I heard it.

A scuffle, a muffled cry. A car door slamming.

The back door was still swinging closed, and I don’t know how I knew it, but I knew Ben was in trouble. I went from a standstill to a full run in a moment, and reached the back alley in time to see a bright blue sedan peel away.

Ben was in the backseat, eyes wide and scared and mouth opened as he peered back at me.

No no find hunt save hunt hurt safe no now .

My Kteer’s instructions were instinctual, primitive, and I couldn’t not obey.

With a roar, I whirled and pounded back through the store, still in enough control of my primal instincts to know what I had to do.

“Who’s that?” came Mavis’s call, and I ignored her to wrench open the front door. Allison was standing beside the SUV, and when she saw me, she paled. My rage must have shown on my face.

“Someone took Ben,” I snapped out, not bothering to modulate my volume. “A bright blue sedan, Tennessee plates. Call the cops and Hannah!” I yelled, already jogging backwards down the street.

“Wait!” Allison called frantically, hand out. “Where are you going?”

“There’s only one place he’s going!” I bellowed, turning around.

And I know where it is .

My feet pounded against the asphalt as I hurtled down the center of the road, not bothering to swerve for oncoming traffic. The cars would get out of my way, or I’d go through them, because nothing was going to stop me from getting to the ferry dock.

My breath burned in my lungs, my arms pumped, and I refused to believe I would miss the ferry. My Kteer urged me to focus on the hunt chase kill , but I struggled to guess the time. We arrived at the store a little before eleven, and the ferry left Eastshore docks on the half hour .

It was the only way off Eastshore, and if that’s where the bastard had taken Benny, I had to beat him there. I couldn’t catch him, but I could head him off.

Because if he got on the ferry before I could reach him, who knew how much time he’d have to hurt my charge. My kitling. My son .

Howling with rage, I pushed myself harder.

Chapter Twelve

Hannah

Oh God.

Oh God.

Oh God .

Unable to breathe, I raced toward the parking lot, my mother's frantic phone call still ringing in my ears.

"Benny was taken from the shop! Aswan is chasing after the car; the police are on their way!"

I hadn't even excused myself from the meeting; I'd just started running. Now I threw myself into the driver's seat and slammed into reverse, yelling at my phone, "Call Aswan!"

As I hurtled through Eastshore, the phone rang and rang.

Please be okay. Please be okay .

If Aswan was chasing the kidnapper, then he wouldn't pick up. Please be okay . I wasn't sure if I was praying for Benny or Aswan or both.

Breathe. Breathe.

Oh God, I needed to focus. I couldn't careen through town, helplessly scanning all directions for my stolen son. Focus .

I sucked in a deep breath and forced my foot off the gas. Another deep breath. A third.

I needed a focus. A direction . A strike of inspiration.

It never came, but I felt myself turning left on Seahorse without any reason. Another deep breath, and...

And...

I turned on Cuttlefish Lane, heading toward the docks.

I don't know why. I don't know how.

But I knew Aswan was there. He was somewhere ahead of me, and he'd be able to tell me where Benny was.

What had he said about Sakkara's Mate bond with Nikki? They could sense one another once the Mating bond had been finalized. Is that what was happening here? Without thinking, I turned into the ferry parking lot and swerved around the employee cars. Aswan was somewhere ahead.

A long, low whistle burst through the sea-salt air and startled a little scream out of me. The ferry! Ahead, I could see the dock workers ushering the last of the line of cars on board. It would be leaving soon, and if the kidnapper was on it...

My car skidded to a stop at the curb, and I threw myself from it without bothering to turn off the engine. “Wait!” I screamed, running toward the ramp, waving my arms.

But a figure stepped into the ramp, one I’d recognize anywhere.

Aswan, his shoulders strong under that dark t-shirt, his expression thunderous as he glared over my shoulder.

Time seemed to slow as I turned to see a bright blue sedan hurtling down the drive lane toward the ferry ramp. It was going to crush Aswan, going to plow right through him.

And in the backseat, his palms pressed to the window, was my precious son.

“Benny !” I screamed, reaching for him, as if I could grab him from this distance.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Aswan step forward, plant his heel, bend his knees, and extend his hands...right before the sedan barreled into him.

I don’t know if the driver braked at the last minute, or if the stopping power had truly come entirely from Aswan’s strength. All I knew was that there was a screech of twisted metal, my Mate slid backwards a few meters...and when I was able to suck in a breath to scream again, the car had been stopped, its hood dented by two orc-sized handprints.

As if his amazing show of strength wasn’t humbling, Aswan was already stalking toward the car’s door. He ripped it open and reached in, grabbing the driver by his throat and yanking him out of the vehicle.

Travis .

Something snapped in me then .

“You bastard!” I screamed, running toward the man who had already tried to break me once. “How dare you! How fucking dare you hurt Benny like that!”

My ex-husband was clutching his throat and kicking his feet helplessly. Aswan’s eyes glowed green, rage painting his expression, although he was clearly not squeezing. Skidding to a stop in front of them, I punched Travis in the arm, all I could reach.

“You have no right?—”

“He’s my son, bitch,” came the strangled reply, although Aswan’s hold meant that Travis couldn’t look at me. “Belongs to me.”

The disgust was so sudden I almost vomited. “ Belongs to?” I managed. “He’s a child . And you gave up the right to be his father the very first time you put yourself—and your dangerous habits—before him or any of us!”

Aswan huffed a growl and yanked the blond man closer. “Legally, asshole, you have no right to be in the same county as Ben.”

I saw Travis kicking fruitlessly, even as he spat, “Who the hell are you?”

Aswan’s tusks gleamed as he yanked Travis closer and opened his mouth to roar, “I’m the motherfucking nanny !”

There was a sudden, sharp scent of urine as Travis pissed himself in fear.

“Mom?”

The quiet whimper had me whirling, stumbling toward the car. Benny was climbing

out, his hands shaking, a bruise on his forehead. Oh my God, he must have hit it in the crash.

“Benny, oh Benny.” When I grabbed him, my fingers flew over his face, his scalp, his shoulders, looking for more injuries. “Are you hurt? Did he touch you? Oh my God, Benny.” My body was shaking to match my voice as I crushed him against me. “Did he hurt you?” I repeated.

His voice was muffled against my shoulder when he replied, “No, Aswan stopped him in time. He said once we were on the ferry, he was going to...” His words cut off with a sob, and I tightened my hold, finding myself crying right along with him.

Oh, my poor Benny. “It’s okay, baby,” I rasped, rocking us both back and forth. “We got you. He can’t hurt you anymore.”

Dimly, part of me recognized the police sirens and recognized what they meant. I knew there was relief in my expression when I met Aswan’s eyes over Benny’s head.

My Mate shook my ex-husband again. “Only a worm would think to take a child to hurt him.”

“He’s my kid,” rasped Travis, still clawing at his throat. “I can do what I want with him.”

“How dare you!” I snapped, my anger overriding my fear as I turned my son and I to face him. “You’ve hurt so many people, and we’re lucky to have you out of our lives. You’re useless, Travis, and when the courts told you so, you thought you could just take my son?” I spat out the words as the first police car skidded to a stop nearby. “I’m having you charged with kidnapping. ”

As the police officers approached, guns drawn, Aswan carefully lowered Travis,

although anyone could still read the angry violence in his stance. My ex's expression turned wheedling—just like when he used to need money—and he turned to Benny.

“Come on, son,” he whined. “You wouldn’t let this bitch do that to your dad, would you? I’m your daddy, aren’t I? You want to be with me, don’t you?”

I felt Benny stiffen in my arms, and my heart broke. Travis was manipulative and always seemed to know exactly what to say...it was why I’d taken him back so many times. But the kids... They didn’t realize that about him, did they?

To Benny, Travis was his father . Realizing that his father had tried to hurt him... oh God . I had to fight against the urge to vomit, to keep my son hidden. But he was clearly trying to push away from me.

The police were barking orders, but I was focused on my son. Slowly, I released him, allowing him to turn to face the bastard who’d fathered him...and then tried to hurt him.

Travis grinned, that stupid charming grin, and was reaching for the boy. Benny stepped out of my arms, and for a horrifying moment my heart clenched, thinking he was going to be swayed by Travis’s manipulations.

And from the way my ex smirked, he believed the same thing.

But I should have had more faith in my son.

After all, he was half Travis, but he was half me too. And I was the one who’d raised him, who’d taught him. Me and ...

Aswan .

Benny stepped toward the two males, but when Travis groped for him, my son skittered out of his reach and slammed hard into Aswan. My Mate gathered Benny in his arms and turned them both away from Travis as the police moved in.

“You fucker!” screamed Travis as a knife appeared in his hand, and he launched himself toward Aswan. “He belongs to me!”

Those sickening words were the last I heard before two policemen swarmed him, slamming him to the ground, and I found myself in the protective circle of my Mate’s arms.

Safe .

I was safe, Benny was safe. Aswan’s arms closed around us, shielding us from the obscenities Travis hurled. I knew we were safe now, and I thanked God for sending us someone as strong and good and kind as Aswan.

But Benny’s arms were around Aswan’s middle, his face crushed against his stomach, and I could feel his small body shaking with tears. My son was still processing his fear.

I stroked his head and met my Mate’s sad gaze.

We were safe, yes, but Benny hadn’t accepted that yet.

He—all the children—needed to know Aswan was part of our family now...and we weren’t going to be separated. Not now. Not ever.

Chapter Thirteen

Aswan

I tipped the pizza delivery guy exorbitantly as I heard Hannah wrapping up the phone call with her lawyer.

“Yeah. Yeah. Okay...” She exhaled. “Okay, that makes sense. Perfect. ...Thanks for working so late on a Friday.” A rueful smile twitched at her lips. “That would be nice. Thanks, Shonda. Have a good weekend.”

When she hung up, she stared down at the phone long enough for me to set out the boxes and cross the kitchen to engulf her hand in mine. “Good news?”

She took a deep breath and lifted her chin, her expression tight, but her nod firm. “Yeah. Shonda was on my side through the divorce and custody hearings, which she reminded me were pretty easy. The courts already know Travis is a scumbag.”

When she glanced over her shoulder, I checked as well. All three kids were zoned out in front of the T.V., and I had to hope they were far enough away they couldn’t hear us. So I squeezed her hand.

“And now?”

Another deep breath, and she pressed forward, into my arms. “She says that he skipped parole in Nashville, stole a car, and drove for two days straight to get here.”

“That makes sense. Chief Ortiz says he was obviously under the influence of cocaine.” High as fuck was what the man said, but I knew what he meant. Simbel and Memnon—both my younger brothers were cops—showed up at the station to help run interference for my family. While Memnon had scowled and stomped around—so much like Abydos it was scary sometimes—Simbel had done his best to translate what was happening so we could understand it. “Does this mean he’s wanted back in Tennessee?”

She nodded, then turned her head so her words wouldn’t be muffled against my chest. “Shonda says since he used deadly force—the knife—in an attempted kidnapping of a noncustodial child, he’ll likely be headed back to prison for a long time. We won’t have to worry about him.”

I felt my muscles untense as I exhaled along with her. “And if he does get out of jail in the next decade,” I reminded her, running my hand up and down her spine soothingly, “I’ll be right here.”

Hannah tipped her head back to smile up at me, but it was a sad smile. “Mate.”

Mate .

“I love you,” I whispered. “I love all of you, more than anything in this world.”

And one day, I hoped the kitlings understood that. I would always be here, always keep them safe...even if it was just as their nanny.

We’d spent hours that afternoon at the police station, and I had no idea how Hannah had managed to be so strong, listening to Ben give his story again and again, especially with Travis yelling obscenities from the town’s single jail cell.

Eventually, unable to stand the pacing any longer, I sat beside him on one of the

ridiculously small human-sized folding chairs to lend him my strength. To my surprise, he stood up and pressed against me. It was second nature to gather him up and sit him on my lap, the way I might his sister or brother, and he curled up and closed his eyes.

When I looked up and met Simbel's gaze, he gave me an approving smile.

Knowing it had only been a few months since he'd found his own Mate and son, it made me feel like...like I was doing something right. At least at that moment.

After the ordeal at the station, we'd been sent home, and Hannah's parents—Allison nearly frantic—had met us with the two younger kitlings, who'd needed reassurance as much as Ben. For that matter, so had Allison.

While the kids swarmed Hannah, I'd pulled her parents aside and updated them on everything we knew, and the plans. Charlie, her father, had been stoic as he asked questions, but Allison cried through it all until I couldn't stand her pain—and, on some level, I knew, guilt—and opened my arms to her as well.

“We should have never pressured her to marry him,” she sobbed against my chest.

I met her husband's eyes, and Charlie exhaled as he patted her back. “He's a bad husband and a bad father...but if she hadn't married him, we wouldn't have Tova and Joshy.”

That was true. I nodded to let him know I appreciated the reminder. “And they're worth a little heartbreak, right?”

Eventually, Allison had cried her tears—I tried to keep her distress hidden from Tova and Joshua, because I knew it would bother them—and I sent her and Charlie home with last night's leftover ham and potatoes, which had been the plan for tonight's

dinner.

But tonight, in our house, wasn't a night for ham and potatoes. It was a night for...
"Who wants pizza?" I called to the kitlings.

"Piz-za!" yelled Joshua, rolling from the sofa, as Tova hummed, "And ice cream?"

Little scamp knew tonight was a no-rules kinda night, apparently.

The five of us sprawled around the living room to eat the junk food—yes, I made popcorn after the pizza, claiming it was a vegetable...but the chocolate candy I mixed in likely negated any miniscule health benefits—and watched old cartoon movies.

When the evil stepmother locked Cinderella in her room, no matter how much she begged, I noticed Ben's breathing growing shallow, and I snatched up the remote, jabbing at it with my claws. "Let's watch something else?" and everyone agreed.

We stayed up too late, and all the sugar meant the kids should've had meltdowns, but they didn't have a chance. One by one, they fell asleep right there on the couch, and one by one, I carried them into their rooms and Hannah tucked them in.

By midnight, we were standing in the center of our room, our arms locked around each other again. My chin rested on her head, and I could feel her heart beating against my chest.

"Today..." she whispered, "I was so scared."

"Me too," I admitted.

"But you went after him. You risked your life to save my son."

I pulled away far enough to meet her eyes. “I love him. No matter what happens, dkaar , he’s mine in the same way you are. Of course I went after him.”

“Thank you.”

“Thank you for trusting me with him.”

Another rueful smile tugged at her lips as she nodded and pressed her cheek to my chest again. “When Mom called to tell me what you told her, I ran out of my meeting. I jumped in my car, and I just started driving. I didn’t know it was Travis who’d taken Benny, I didn’t know anything . I just knew...” She took a deep breath and held it. “I knew you were going after him. So I focused on you.”

When she didn’t say anything else, I dropped my chin to her head again and hummed in encouragement .

“I felt you,” she whispered so low I had to strain to hear it. “I just... knew where you were, Aswan.”

Slowly, my lips curled. “There is a knowing.”

“That’s the Mate bond? I knew where you were, and I knew how to get there. I had this feeling that if I could get to you, I would get to Benny, but...I knew where you were, and I drove right to the ferry dock.”

My Kteer purred in satisfaction. “That’s the Mate bond, Hannah. And it will only get stronger.”

She nodded, bumping my chin, then glanced up at me. “Would you mind if...tonight, could we just...”

Maybe it was the Mate bond, but I knew what she was asking. “I’ll hold you, dkaar ,” I whispered, “for as long as you need.”

But when I woke in the middle of the night, Hannah was no longer wrapped in my arms. I pulled on a pair of sweatpants and padded down the hall to the open door of Ben’s room.

She was lying in the twin bed beside her son, her arms wrapped around his small frame, her face buried in his hair. And I couldn’t blame her.

If I had the right to hold him like that, the right to claim him, I would. I would roar to the world that he was mine , my son, and I would protect him from all the dangers and fears that threatened him.

But I couldn’t.

Not until Hannah was ready .

Sighing, I backed out of the room and gently shut the door. Unable to help myself, I poked my head into Tova’s room. She was sleeping innocently, face down in that spread-out ungainly way of hers that was her way of tackling everything one hundred and ten percent.

Smiling, I knelt beside the bed so I could lean over and kiss her cheek.

“I love you, d’pin ,” I whispered, pressing my forehead to her temple. “So very much. And one day, you’ll know that.”

When I went to check on Joshua, he was whimpering in his sleep. I scooped him up and paced in the small room with him until he calmed, and my eyes grew heavy. After tucking him back in with Mr. BunBun at his side, I sat on the twin bed—the

bed where my Mate had slept for so long—with my elbows on my knees, watching him.

So sweet, so innocent. So full of life and love and energy. And I was helping to raise him. I was...I was creating a human, who would one day be a grown man. Even if I was only ever his nanny, I would one day stand before the gods of the ancestors and know I had done something good, something right with my life.

I had helped raise Joshua and Tova and Ben to be good people, and wasn't that all I could ask for in a life well spent? A Mate and knowing I'd helped make the world a better place?

Yes.

Even if that's all I ever had, it would be enough.

Hannah

It felt as if I'd been crying all night, but today?

It was Saturday. The sun was shining, the air was warm already, and it was a perfect day to do something special as a family. Something to wipe away the horror of yesterday and the struggles we'd have to face in the future.

Struggles we'd face together.

I propped my shoulder against the door of Joshy's bedroom and watched Aswan sleep. I guess he'd been as restless as I'd been last night and found his way in here. Watching over my children even in sleep.

No.

Not my children.

When I accepted Aswan as my Mate, when I trusted him with Joshy, Tova, and Benny, we'd become a family. He cared for my parents as if they were his own. He took pride in our home. We were a family now, and deep in one another's hearts.

They were our children now.

And they needed to know that.

I was rattling around the kitchen— Coffee. Need coffee. Lots of sugar and ridiculous special-occasion creamer flavor. Eggnog? That'll do— when a yawning Aswan joined me. "Breakfast?" he mumbled.

"Benny wants chocolate chip pancakes," I confessed, having asked our son this morning. "And a day at the beach. "

"Then he'll get chocolate chip pancakes," Aswan agreed, bending to pull out the griddle. "And a beach day."

As a family . That's what Benny had said, but...what did he mean?

Joshy stomped into the kitchen, dragging Mr. BunBun. Luckily, he hadn't seemed to understand what was going on yesterday, so it was simple enough to pretend everything was normal as I strapped him into his high chair and cut up the first pancake for him. A glass of cold milk, a sliced banana, and he was delighted.

"Keep it off the floor, young man," rumbled Aswan from where he stood at the griddle, waving a spatula in mock sternness, "or you'll help me clean it up."

"Otay, 'Swan!" Joshy was grinning as he deliberately dropped a piece of pancake on

the floor. “I like oozing da boom!”

Well...I guess if he wanted the consequences... “Better make him another one, just to be safe,” I murmured to Aswan as I passed him.

Tova, as well, seemed to have shaken off yesterday’s scare when she came skipping into the dining room. “Good morning! Are we going to the beach? Benny said we were. Can I bring Emmy? She has a new boogie board that’s really cool, and I want to try it. Did you know she doesn’t get sunburned like me? I don’t think that’s fair.”

I couldn’t help grinning as I passed her a plate piled high with pancakes. “I think today is going to be family only,” I said gently. “Although the boogie board sounds cool. Maybe your brother will teach you how to body surf instead. ”

“Okay. Do I have to wear suncream?” she asked as she began to stare at her pancakes.

I’d never bothered to correct her adorable mispronunciation. “You do. Emmy’s skin is different from yours, and yours needs protection.”

Aswan placed a jug of orange juice on the table. “Orcs don’t sunburn easily , but we do sunburn. I’ll bet Emmy’s dad makes her wear something to protect her skin if she’s out too long.”

“Nuh-uh, that’s not what she said. She said suncream makes her itch.”

Aswan shared an amused glance with me over her head, and I mouthed, “ Pick your battles .” It was something every parent had to learn, and his answering smile told me he understood.

I was plating the last of our breakfast feasts when Benny slouched into the room,

rubbing his eyes and looking worse for the wear. I wanted to gather him in my arms, to rock him back and forth...but I also didn't want to push him. I was learning that preteen boys had a lot of emotions, and yesterday he'd needed me. Did he still need me today?

He didn't speak to anyone as he picked up his plate and slogged to the dining room, but I should have known his sister wouldn't pick up on his mood.

"Hi, Benny! Mom says we can go to the beach, but not bring Emmy, unless you say I can bring Emmy. Can I bring Emmy?"

Shaking my head, I joined the kids at the table. "That's not what I said. I said today was family only." I shot my oldest a cautious glance. "If you still want to go to the beach?"

"Yeah," he mumbled, staring at his plate. "But just family, Tova. Just us..." He finally lifted his gaze. "Where's Aswan?"

"Here." My Mate was suddenly at the boy's elbow. "I warmed up the syrup the way I showed you. Want some?"

But instead of answering, Benny stared up at him, his eyes serious. "Are you coming with us? To the beach today?"

I winced as Aswan's expression carefully shuttered. He placed the syrup near Benny's plate without dropping his gaze. "Do you...do you want me to?"

"Yeah." Benny swallowed. "You're part of our family, aren't you?"

"He's our nanny," Tova announced without looking up from her apparent attempts to mutilate her pancakes with her fork and knife. "Emmy says that means he's not really

family, not like Nikki is her stepmom.”

Benny hadn't looked away from Aswan, and seemed to be waiting for him to deny or agree with his sister. My Mate finally swung dark eyes—with a speck of green in them—toward me.

And I knew it was time.

With a deep breath, I pushed away from the table and moved to his side. I wrapped my arm around his waist, and when Aswan tucked me up against him, I saw our son's eyes follow the movement.

I smiled softly. “I'm sorry, Benny, that I've kept a secret from you.”

He didn't say anything, but Tova's knife suddenly clattered to the table. “I love secrets! I'm real good at keeping them!”

She couldn't keep a secret if her life depended on it, but I'd always loved her openness. So I smiled at both of them, glad Joshy was occupied trying to feed Mr. BunBun.

“I love Aswan,” I told them simply. “We've decided we're...” How to explain? In Aswan's eyes—in my eyes, we were already committed. “We're going to get married.”

With a growl of satisfaction, his arm tightened around me. “Your mother is everything to me, Ben.” His gaze included Tova and Joshua as well. “To an orc, the bond that we share is unbreakable.”

Slowly, Benny stood, his gaze flicking between us. It meant that he still only came up to Aswan's chest, but he tipped his head back to frown up at him. “Mom's been

married before.”

My heart clenched, but Aswan nodded. “And the man she was married to, the man who helped create you, do you respect him? Do you think he put you and your mother before anything else? Do you think the bond they shared—the bond you and he were supposed to share—was unbreakable?”

I held my breath until Benny shook his head, his jaw hard. “Even before he went away, I knew there was something wrong. He didn’t act like a normal dad. He didn’t...” Finally, he dropped his gaze to Aswan’s chest. “He didn’t love us.”

It wasn’t that simple, but I didn’t want to explain drugs and selfishness and jealousy right now. Ben likely had years of therapy ahead of him, and I’m sure this would all come out then. For now, the ten-year-old needed black and white.

So I nodded. “He didn’t love you the way Aswan loves you.”

“He saved me,” Ben whispered, gaze wide on me. “Yesterday, I was so scared, and there he was.”

“And he’ll always be there for you,” I agreed. “We both will.”

I felt Tova move to my side, and I wrapped my free arm around her without dropping Ben’s gaze. “I need you to understand that. Aswan and I are partners now.”

“That means he’s not the nanny anymore,” Tova announced, full of certainty. “He’s our stepdad.”

Benny didn’t look convinced. “Sometimes adults change.”

I hated that he’d had to learn that.

But Aswan pulled away from me to step up to Benny, placing his hands on the boy's shoulders. "Do you think your mother is going to change enough to stop loving you? To ever stop fighting for you? To stop protecting you?"

Our son was already shaking his head by the time Aswan stopped speaking. "Of course not."

"Then I want you to believe that I will never stop either. I love her, and I respect her. And Benjamin, I love and respect you."

His eyes were wide, staring up at the huge, gentle orc who held him. "You do?"

Aswan nodded once, solemnly. "I claim you, Benjamin Woods, as my son. My d'pin . I will love you and protect you until I die. And one day, when I am old, it will be your turn to protect me, because that's what parents do for their kitlings, and what grown kitlings do for their parents. But no matter what, you have my oath that I will not abandon you. I will not hurt you. I love you."

I saw Benny's lips form the words parents , but no sound emerged. Then, in a sudden surge, he threw himself against Aswan, hugging him fiercely, as Tova punched the air. "My turn! Do the oath on me now!"

Laughing, Aswan scooped her up against his shoulder with the hand not currently holding Benny to himself.

"I love you, Tova Woods, and I claim you as my daughter. I will not abandon or hurt you, because I love you."

"Yay!" She gripped his cheeks between her hands and kissed his nose. "Now do Joshy!"

“Doshy want more pa-cakes!” yelled the toddler, banging his fork against the tray of his chair. “BunBun hungee!”

Laughing with joy, I wrapped my arms around my Mate and our children. “I think Joshy understands,” I managed, as Tova pulled me into a chokehold. “Are we still on for the beach?”

Benny beamed up at Aswan. “Family only!”

“That means me too,” my Mate rumbled happily.

I stretched up on my toes to kiss his cheek. “Of course it does.”

“And Nana and Papa!” announced Tova. “She’s gotta wear her big floppy hat.”

“Is that okay with you?” I asked Ben, who nodded. “I think that would mean a lot to them.” To see their grandson so happy, and to see Aswan welcomed into the family. “I’ll call her.”

Aswan gently untangled us. “And Ben and I will make the picnic lunch.”

“Paninis?” our oldest asked eagerly, and when Aswan nodded in agreement, I was amazed—yet again—how the children had blossomed under his care.

Benjamin had found someone who could teach him woodlore and had fostered a newfound love of cooking, a male role model he could be proud to claim.

Tova had found someone with infinite patience, with enough time to make her a priority, and teach her what she was worth.

Joshua had found a gentle father, one who was stern enough to teach him what he

needed, and nurturing enough to ensure he learned to grow into a good person.

And me?

I'd found the most perfect Mate a woman could hope for: one who put our family first, one who took pleasure in my happiness, one who I could trust to never hurt me in any way.

"But first," Tova announced, skipping back to her table, "we gotta find some sumscream. And finish breakfast."

"Mo' pa-cakes!" demanded Joshua, pounding his heels against his chair. "Doshy hungee!"

Aswan was the first to break into laughter, and we all followed. Because that's what family was about.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:17 am

Aswan

“I claim you, Hannah Woods, as my Mate, with open hands and an open heart. I will serve you for the rest of our lives and do everything in my power to ensure you are happy.”

I loved the way she blushed, and now—with her wearing a pink sundress, standing in the shade of the oak tree in our backyard, in front of our friends and family—was no different.

“I claim you, Aswan Woods, as my Mate,” she whispered shyly, smiling up at me. “I will provide for you and care for you for the rest of my life. I will help you care for our family, although I know we can be overwhelming at times.”

Behind me, I heard her mother—who’d just rung the bell on her last treatment earlier in the week—snort happily .

And so, knowing Allison and Charlie were now as much of my family as Ben, Tova, and Joshua, my smile grew. “I love you, Hannah. Thank you for giving me three fine kitlings and parents I can be proud to love.”

Her blue eyes bloomed with tears moments before she threw her arms, bouquet and all, around my neck. “I love you, Mate.”

When my lips found hers, I heard Giza’s baritone roar, “ Mbaruk !” the congratulatory cheer I hadn’t heard in a decade. Simbel was next, “ Mbaruk !” and then the other males took up the shout as the humans joined in with their cheers and

whistles and claps. I even heard Memnon's grumbled, " Mbaruk " alongside his Mate's laughter.

I did not , however, hear Abydos's voice, because my twin brother had chosen not to return to Eastshore for this celebration, a combination of a human wedding and an orcish Mating ceremony. He'd texted a short impersonal note to let me know he was too busy with his work to travel at that moment, and I'd tried not to be hurt.

If my twin brother didn't approve of me finding a human Mate, then that was his own loss. One day, I hoped he'd return to Eastshore and share in my happiness, meet my kitlings.

One day.

The day was too special to be brought down by him not being here, and I was quickly swept up in celebrations with my new family—both human and the Eastshore orcs I'd lost touch with in the last ten years.

Good-natured Tanis and his talented Mate, Olivia, whom I remembered from the Denver facility, both exhausted from caring for their young twin sons.

Creative Karnak, who was helping to teach the humans about our world through his classes and art, and his Mate Jess, who basically ran the island.

Perpetually grumpy Cairo, who had mellowed slightly since his sunshiny Mate came into his life with her bake shop—Meli had made our wedding cake, which is one human tradition I was one hundred percent on board with. Her brownies still weren't as good as mine, but we'd had some fun arguments about recipes.

Young Luxor, with his constant good humor and easy way of looking at the world, and his far more serious librarian Mate Zoe...and the dog they brought everywhere

with them. It would be strange, had little Seamus not been so cute.

Charming Thebes, who had an online following and had been acting as a sort of orcish ambassador all these years, and his Mate Ashlyn, who had apparently single-handedly revitalized Eastshore's historic district.

Wise Giza, the male we all looked to for reminders of who we were , with his stunning younger Mate Harper, Eastshore's lawyer. Their daughter Raina was even cuter than Tanis's twins, which seemed impossible.

Responsible Sakkara, who had united us and kept us going, even through the darkest days. He'd taken the responsibility for raising sweet Emmy when her parents—our brother Dahshur and his Mate—had been killed. Sakkara's Mate was Nikki, who had been my Tova's teacher last year .

My younger brothers, Simbel and Memnon. They'd each found their forevers earlier this spring, which seemed amazing to me. Easygoing Simbel had found Marissa and her teenaged son, Patrick, while Memnon's Mate was Maya, more suited to his quiet nature.

And of course, Akhmim, who'd only just recently convinced his Mate that they were destined to be together. His Rosemary had been Ben's teacher last year, but I didn't make the connection until they arrived here at our ceremony.

Yes, it was certainly special to have so many people here sharing our day with us...but truthfully, I couldn't wait for them to all go home.

Eventually, they did, and I was left with my family. Hannah and my kitlings. Divide and conquer was the plan, so after I twirled Tova around and told her she was the most beautiful flower girl in the world—despite not knowing what a flower girl was—Hannah took her off to brush her teeth and get ready for bed, leaving me with

Joshua.

The little one was tired, I knew, but he babbled nonstop. My mind was already on what Hannah called the wedding night , so I'll admit I merely hummed and "uh-huh'd" when it seemed appropriate. Then, as I laid Joshua in the bed and tucked Mr. BunBun beside him, he grabbed my finger.

"You give night-night tiss?"

"Of course, buddy." I bent down and brushed my lips and nose through his soft, sweet-smelling hair. His scent was as much a part of me as his mother's. "Good night, Joshy. I love you. "

The toddler thrust his lovey at me. "Give BunBun night-night tiss!" he demanded.

Hiding my smile, I smacked my lips over the stuffed animal. "Goodnight, Mr. BunBun. I love you."

Satisfied, Joshua rolled to the side, taking his lovey with him. Eyes closing, he announced, "Night-night, Daddy. Wuv you."

Daddy .

I don't know how long I stood there, staring down at him, stunned. When I finally shook myself enough to turn away, it was to see my Mate standing in the door, a soft smile on her lips. I went to her, taking her hand.

"He called me Daddy," I whispered.

"I heard." Her smile grew. "He knows he's safe with you."

I glanced back at the toddler bed. “I wonder where he got the idea.”

Ben didn’t have to clear his throat for me to know he’d stepped out of his room; he was as much a part of me as the rest of the family, and I whipped my head around to check on him.

His bashful smile told me he wanted to speak to us.

At Hannah’s insistence, we’d found him a counselor on the mainland, someone with whom he could speak each week. Travis’s attempted kidnapping, and the fear we’d all felt, was slowly fading, and each day, I helped remind him how to be a kid again. Hannah’s ex-husband was back in jail in Nashville, and although she would have to travel there soon to testify against him, her lawyer was confident none of us would be seeing Travis again any time soon .

There would always be dangers to my family, but now they knew we were stronger together. I was strong for them.

“Thanks for standing beside us today, Benny,” Hannah was saying, reaching her free hand to our son.

Still blushing, he joined us, taking her hand but staring up at me.

“Um...I was the one who told Joshy he could call you that. Tova wants to call you Dad too, since she thinks whatever orcish word her friend Emmy uses is too hard.”

Stunned, I could only nod. I wasn’t sure if I was agreeing with the complexity of orcish titles, or that she should call me Dad .

Ben’s gaze dropped to his bare feet. “I, uh...I thought maybe, if it made things easier, maybe I should call you Dad too? I mean, so Tova and Joshy don’t get confused.”

Hannah had made a little noise that sounded suspiciously like a sob, but I couldn't tear my gaze away from this remarkable kitling I'd been entrusted with. My son.

My hand went to his shoulder, and I rasped, "Benjamin." I waited until his gaze had dragged, uncertain, to mine, before I swallowed and tried to find the words to continue. "I...I am beyond honored to be your stepfather. I am proud of the way you care about your siblings and their comfort, and the remarkable person you are becoming." I had to swallow again, because his teary-eyed gaze was becoming blurry as my own eyes watered. "I will feel that way, even if you call me by my name for the rest of our lives."

"You told me..." The boy dashed at his eyes, then mulishly set his chin and met my gaze. "You told me orcs choose new names when they, like, get to new parts of their lives, right? Well, this is a new part of your life."

I understood what he was saying. "I am Mated now, and my Mate has the right to give me whatever name she deems appropriate."

Hannah's arm slid around my waist. "I think I'm going to call you love. The rest of the world can call you Aswan. And the children..."

The boy's jaw hardened in challenge. "We're going to call you Dad."

My grin split my face as I pulled him to me for a fierce embrace. "And I couldn't be happier with my new name, son."

Ben's squeeze was every bit as important to me as his mother's.

After his goodnights, Hannah was the one to lead me to our bedroom. We undressed in silence, each in our own thoughts. It might be our wedding night, but it was...normal. Every day. I had the rest of my life full of nights like this...and I

couldn't wait.

“What are you thinking of?” she murmured once she was naked in my arms.

I grinned down at her. “How I could make tonight special for you.”

“It already is,” she whispered, stretching up on her toes to kiss me.

When I deepened the kiss, her arms went around my neck, and I lifted. I loved the way she wrapped her legs around my waist, uninhibited, joyful. The sweet scent of her arousal already perfumed the air, and my Kteer pulsed, urging me to pleasure my Mate.

I took my time, teasing her with my tongue and then my fingers, stroking her skin and kissing her sensitive areas, when I laid her on the bed. She was spread out before me like a feast, and I was a very hungry male.

Her nipples weren't terribly sensitive, and I knew she liked it when I used my tusks on them. Her shudders and moans told me I'd guessed correctly, but I couldn't wait any longer, and I moved my mouth down her stomach to her curls.

Hannah's legs went over my shoulders as I feasted on her sweet pussy. My tusks scraped along her inner thighs as my long, ridged tongue lapped at her dew. I made certain my claws were retracted when I finally began to stroke her, and moved my mouth to her clitoris.

“Aswan!” she gasped, her fingers digging into my hair. “Oh my gosh , there.”

Grinning, I pressed my tongue against the spot I knew she liked as my fingers curled forward. The pad of my middle finger found that rough spot behind her clit that drove her wild, and I massaged her from both sides.

The sudden tightening of her inner muscles told me it had worked, and when she came with a gasp, I eagerly licked her spend, trying to drink all of her down. I could spend an eternity between my Mate's thighs—Hannah was an addiction—but soon she was tugging on my hair, trying to pull me up her body.

"I'm not done with you," she muttered, and I smiled, allowing her to tug me from my favorite spot .

I pushed myself upright, only for her to plant her palms on my shoulders and shove .

When I rolled onto my back, she went with me, and I changed my mind. Had I thought between her legs was my favorite spot? No, being pinned down, with her tits hanging heavy above me and her hair framing her face as she smiled down at me... that was my favorite spot.

Hannah straddled me, her fingers circling my cock as she stroked, and my palms ran up her thighs to her hips.

"Hmmm. You're going to hold me down and fuck me, wife?" I teased. "Use my body?"

She'd positioned herself above me, her weight on my shoulders, my cock resting at her entrance, and now she smirked down at me. "I'm just being a good Mate," she announced.

I would have said something else—something loving, I'm sure—had she not sat back at that moment, impaling herself on my cock. Her orgasm was instant, of course, and she tossed her head back with a groan as her muscles spasmed around me.

"That's it," I murmured, my hands rising to cup her tits as she sat back on me. "Use my cock. Ride me. Take all you want from me, dkaar . Gods below, do you have any

idea how beautiful you are right now, Hannah?"

As I spoke, I flicked my thumbs across her nipples, and her wide-eyed, flushed gaze dropped down to watch me play with her breasts.

"You like that?" I murmured, even as I began to move, slowly flexing my hips upward. "You like to watch me play with your tits?" I tugged on the nipples, causing her to gasp, her lust-hazed eyes going to mine, and I smiled wickedly, thrusting upward into her throbbing pussy again.

"You like it when I treat them roughly?" I allowed my claws to extend, to dimple her delicate skin as I squeezed them, pulling her toward me. "You're such a good girl, to let your Mate treat your tits like this."

Whimpering, she braced her palms on either side of my head so I could plant my heels and thrust upward into her tight wetness. I kept up my litany of praise and crudeness, each one seeming to send her closer to pleasure.

Hannah's breath hitched as she matched my rhythm, her hips undulating with each powerful thrust. "Yes," she whispered, her voice husky with desire. "I'm your good girl, Aswan. Only yours." Her words were like a spark to tinder, igniting a primal, possessive fire within me.

I growled, my hands moving from her breasts to grip her hips firmly, my claws pressing gently into her soft flesh. "Mine," I affirmed, my voice a low rumble. "Every inch of you, Hannah. Every moan, every gasp. All. Mine." I punctuated each word with a deep, upward thrust, feeling her inner walls clench around me.

She leaned down, her hair cascading around us like a curtain, and captured my mouth in a fierce kiss. Her teeth nipped at my lower lip, and I growled in approval, my hands moving back to her breasts, pinching and rolling her nipples between my

fingers.

Breaking the kiss, she sat up, her hands resting on my chest. Her eyes bore into mine, fierce and full of love. "And you're mine, Aswan. My Mate." She emphasized her words with a swivel of her hips, grinding down on me, drawing a groan from deep within my chest, my Kteer lost to her.

"Yes, dkaar ," I grunted, my hips bucking up to meet hers. "Yours. Always." I could feel the pressure building, the heat between us rising. My hands roamed her body, touching, claiming, memorizing every curve, every line.

And with each of her gasps and moans, and that remarkably arousing way she wriggled against my thrusts, my Kteer howled with pleasure until I knew I was ready to spill.

Hannah's breath hitched again, her body tensing as she rode me faster, harder. " Now , Aswan!" she groaned, rocking back to meet my plunges. "I want you now ."

Well, I wasn't going to allow myself release without bringing her along with me, so I reached between us. My thumb found her clit, and I rubbed it gently, the way I knew she liked.

I could hear her heart pounding, her pulse racing. I pressed, circled, and her breath came in short, sharp gasps. "Come for me, Hannah," I commanded, my voice barely more than a growl. "Let me feel you come around my cock."

"Aswan!" she blurted, arching into my hold as her orgasm took her...and I allowed myself to let go.

With a groan, I thrust up into her pussy, spilling against her womb. I had come home.

And it was remarkable .

Forget any other position. This was my favorite position; my Mate milking me of all pleasure, my blood humming, my Kteer at peace.

Yes, this was where I belonged.

Hannah collapsed over my chest with a satisfied moan, and I smiled, gathering her to me. “Such a good Mate,” I crooned, stroking her back and hair. “Taking your male’s cum like that.”

Smirking, she pushed herself up to kiss me again, and I could taste her perfection.

It was a sweet kiss, a satisfied kiss...but under it all, I could smell the scent of her arousal wafting through the room. Ready for me again, soon.

She was the one to break away. “I love you, husband.”

Husband. Mate. Daddy . When I’d made the decision to leave my restaurant and the home I’d built in Bramblewood, I had never believed it possible to find such happiness. But now? Hannah had completed me, given me all of this.

My hands spread across her ass. “And I love you, dkaar .” Beloved . “Wife. Mate.”

Her smile turned wicked as she bent down over me again. “ Mine .”

“Yes,” I whispered, before I surprised a squeak out of her by flipping her onto her back and looming over her. “All yours.”

Laughing, Hannah’s arms went to my shoulders. “Now what?”

“Now, my love...” My lips found her skin as my fingers stroked her. “I’m going to make you scream my name.”

I kept my vow. It was, after all, my wedding night, and I was where I was meant to be.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:17 am

From My Orc Contract Husband

“Are you sure about this?” murmured Aswan under his breath from his place by my side in the front of the human church. “It seems sudden.”

Without glancing at him, I could imagine the concern in his eyes. “You’re just saying that because you and Hannah took your damn time getting around to Mating.”

“Yes, but this isn’t a Mating.”

From Aswan’s other side, Sakkara rumbled, “Isn’t it?”

I dragged my gaze from the door at the back of the church to slam into our leader’s. Sakkara had leaned forward slightly so he could see around Aswan, his expression carefully neutral. When he knew he had my attention, he raised one brow in challenge.

And I straightened my shoulders, my attention flying back to the door through which Sami— my bride —would soon step.

She was going to be my wife.

Not my Mate.

And that was okay.

“You’ll notice he didn’t answer,” murmured Aswan.

“That’s because he’s not sure what he’s doing.”

I’d asked Aswan to stand beside me for my wedding because apparently it was a human tradition to pick favorite friends and honor them by making them wear uncomfortable suits and possibly marry the bride if you chickened out. Aswan couldn’t marry Sami, since he’d Mated Hannah over the summer, but he was the most supportive of the males I knew.

And I’d asked Sakkara because he was responsible for me being on Eastshore Isle...and because he already owned his own damn suit.

I shifted uncomfortably in my new suit—Sami had insisted I buy one, and I figured if she was willing to marry me, this was the least I could do—and did my best to ignore the doubt my friends were trying to instill.

Or maybe not.

“Sakkara, surely you have access to some property for Tark?” Aswan really did sound concerned. “He’s only going through this because she’s his realtor.”

“Not true,” murmured Sakkara in return. “He’s going through it because the bank won’t loan him enough without a second income, so he had to find and marry the richest damn woman on the island?—”

Forgetting the organ music, forgetting the dozen or so people scattered through the church, forgetting the holy man who’d been waiting patiently all this time, I whirled on my friends with a snarl.

“Why do my reasons matter so much to you?”

Neither one of them reared away from my anger.

“Because we care about you,” Aswan said gently, one hand reaching up to rest gently on my shoulder. “And we don’t want you to do something you’ll regret.”

Like marry the most stunning woman I’ve ever met? A woman who made my Kteer purr and had my cock throbbing with need, just thinking of claiming her? A woman whose dry sense of humor made me laugh, and who was willing to take a chance on a future—no matter how temporary—with me?

A woman who needed me ?

Maybe the other male read something in my expression, because Aswan gently squeezed my shoulder, then dropped his hand with a nod. “Never mind.”

Sakkara shifted his weight. “This is about the foster system, isn’t it?”

I reined my expression back to neutral and straightened, turning back toward the pathway Sami would soon walk down. How had he guessed?

When Aswan hummed in question, Sakkara explained under his breath. “The state foster system prioritizes married couples?— ”

“Shut up,” I growled, not sure I wanted them to examine my reasons right before I made such a big change in my life.

“But you took Emmy—” Aswan began.

“That was different, because she was half-orc,” Sakkara explained. “Tark feels as if he needs?—”

“ Shut up ,” I hissed again.

The holy man, the one in the ill-fitting suit behind me, cleared his throat, just as the

music swelled.

And I was saved.

The door in the back of the church opened, and Sami's best friend stepped through. At least, I had to assume it was Riven, because she was dressed in a pretty pink strapless gown—the color Sami told me she'd chosen for the “wedding theme,” whatever that meant—and carried a small bouquet in one hand and a white cane in the other, which she used to tap her way down the aisle.

Sakkara stepped forward and took her arm when she reached the front, and her flirtatious smile was charming.

I'll admit that I wasn't paying much attention to her, though.

Because the door had opened again, and then Sami was there, meeting my eyes.

She told me that it was tradition for fathers to escort their daughters down the aisle to their future husbands, but since her father's death was what had put her in so much trouble already, she'd asked her aunt .

After all, Aunt Sharon was more family to her than her father had ever been.

The older woman wore a dress that was the same pink as Riven's, although more demurely cut, and her smile seemed a little fixed, as if she wasn't quite sure this was the right move for her niece.

Sami, on the other hand, never hesitated.

Her surety was one of the things I loved most about her; she knew what she was doing was the right thing, and I loved that confidence.

She walked toward me with her head held high and her shoulders back, that glorious golden hair sweeping down her back.

She'd chosen a pale green strapless gown for her wedding dress. I grinned, remembering how she'd said she wanted something practical, because how in the hells was this sparkly thing considered practical?

Maybe my grin was just what she needed, because I watched her jaw relax, and sensed the moment the tension in her shoulders eased. A small grin tugged at her lips, and I hoped she could sense that I wanted this.

Almost as much as I wanted her .

She needs you. You can save her. That's the only reason she's doing this .

And I would save her. From whatever danger threatened.

When they reached the front of the church, Aswan stepped forward to lead Aunt Sharon away, and then Sami's hand was in mine. I stared down at this fragile little female who was the strongest I'd ever met, who'd chosen me to entrust her future.

At least, a year and a day of it.

"Ready, dkaar ?" I whispered.

I don't know how the endearment slipped out. She wasn't my beloved, and we hadn't discussed having feelings for one another. This marriage was a contract, a business arrangement.

But she deserved some softness on her wedding day.

Sami's chin rose again, and the light caught on the pale green stones she wore at her

ear lobes. Peridot. I recognized it from my time in the mountains, and wished I had a stone to offer her for her throat. Wished I had anything to offer her.

But I was marrying her for money, so I couldn't afford to gift her gems.

All I could offer her was my strength, my protection...and for a year and a day, my heart.

"Ready," Sami murmured, her fingers tightening around mine.

I didn't see hesitation, didn't scent worry. My bride was certain this was the right decision.

And I would be too.

Taking a deep breath, I allowed her to lead me toward the holy man...and our marriage.