



Night's Bride (Ragoru Origins #3)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Chosen to be one of the first sent to the northlands as a bride for a triad of monstrous Ragoru, Emily Duert was determined to keep an open mind and make the best out of an unknown situation. Although she heard much about the aliens, it was difficult to know what was rumor and what was fact. To further complicate matters, rather than a triad, she was mated to a pair of twins without an alpha between them. It wasn't what she was prepared for, and yet she was surprised to find that the males were attentive and endearing.

Truth be told, Vikt and Vrel were nothing like what she imagined Ragoru to be like. Quiet and shy, neither male was aggressive much less a monster whispered about by humans. Despite the challenges presented by not having an alpha in their family, Emily found love and comfort with her mates only for everything to be thrown into uncertainty with the arrival of a lone male in the midst of a snowstorm.

With the Withering Nights approaching, can she protect her family and her heart from an unknown male? Is it her fate as a midwinter night's bride to find her happy ever after in the northlands, or will it lead her to only pain and regret?

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Emily Duert stared at the heavy shroud of snow-laden trees surrounding the transport and hugged her heavy cloak around her. It had stopped snowing early in the morning, but after several days of nonstop snow the accumulation was severe enough that the transport was moving sluggishly through it along the only clear route this far north. What was worse, gray skies hinted at more to come.

“We never should have agreed to come,” Trish whispered from where she was huddled beneath a blanket, her green eyes looking huge in her pale face with the smudges of exhaustion ringing them.

“You speak as if there was much of a choice,” Emily responded, her gaze shifting back to the deep shadows of the forest. “We were selected by lottery.”

“We could have run away,” the other woman protested as she shrank lower into her blanket. “I should have. I have family out west that would have hidden me. I know they would have.”

Emily snorted quietly with grim amusement. As if it were that easy. The High Council would have seen to it that they were hunted down and dragged back for transport. The representatives that were sent to her had been clear. There was no turning down the results of the lottery. Those chosen would go willingly in comfort, or in chains with no comforts or courtesy extended to them. It was easier to simply capitulate to fate.

Besides, it was not like life in the capital offered her much. Trish, from what she gathered, came from a well-off family. Not wealthy by any stretch of imagination, nor influential, but her mother was a professor and scholar of some repute and her

father a well-known administrator of the Holy Temple, which had afforded her a privileged life of comforts that Emily could only imagine. But that was the lot of the common workers and their families. Luxuries were few and life was harder. Truthfully, the thick fur cloaks that had been sent from the north for the brides practically bordered on extravagant as far as she was concerned. So much so that, though two cloaks had been left in the transport for them, she had not entirely believed that one was for her or dared to wear it until the transport had started moving.

She ran a finger along the fur against her neck although it caused the cloak's heavy sleeve to slip down to her elbow. It was the warmest and most comfortable thing that she had ever owned. While Trish was railing against the unfairness of their situation, Emily couldn't help but wonder if the fur cloak hinted at what sort of care could be expected as a bride for the Ragoru. The male birth rate was declining enough that the chances of marriage for someone as plain and ordinary as her among the commoners was getting less likely by the year.

"I hate this. I can't believe my family abandoned me to this with no comfort except a bunch of empty promises," Trish muttered miserably. Her lip quivered and suddenly she kicked out, her foot upsetting a serving tray that had been set up for their meal. "They are treating us as nothing more than cattle. I'm not a cow!"

Emily watched as the empty dishes clattered to the floor.

"It is not a death sentence," Emily quietly rebuked as she bent down and picked up the bowl that had rolled over to her feet. She set it on the table and frowned at the other woman. "Is it fair to not give us the choice? No, of course not. But if you are unwilling to give this a chance, then you are just going to make it harder on yourself. And on them when they've done nothing to deserve your contempt."

Trish's upper lip curled in a sneer. "Nothing to deserve my contempt? How about

expecting us to go through with this in the first place? The aliens who bartered the agreement didn't even stick around to see if anyone would be willing to do this. And yet these... Ragoru ... sent for us as if they have a right to us."

"That's not fair," Emily protested with a tired sigh. "They did not have any part in how the High Council decided to select candidates."

"That is beside the point. They shouldn't have sent for us at all! Who in their right mind would want to mate with them? The High Council knew that and that is why they devised the lottery, claiming that it is out of fairness. They knew that no matter how much they tried to spin it as an honor, no one was going to volunteer. It's sick! They are practically animals!"

"Obviously they are not animals if they had the thought to make you a cloak and send it along with fur blankets to keep us warm," Emily muttered as she turned back to her window.

She didn't know why she felt so offended on behalf of an alien species she had never met, but she did. They hadn't needed to provide anything for their comfort, but they had seen to it that they not only had the furs but, according to what she overheard from chatter among their escorts, they had also supplied much of the food being used on their journey north. Dried meat and fruit and plenty of nuts kept them comfortably fed over the long days.

"You do realize that this road only goes so far north, right?" Trish snapped. "They say that we are nearing the drop off point at the end of the route and that we should be there before sunset. A drop-off point! Don't you understand what that means? We are not going to just be left in the woods with these monsters, but we are expected to travel on foot through the snow, likely for days on end until we reach our destination. Through the snow! In winter!"

“That is usually when it snows,” Emily agreed, then bit back a small smile at the infuriated look Trish gave her. “Okay, I get why it sounds unpleasant, but the northern woods are a dangerous place during much of the year. They aren’t especially safe this time of the year either but at least some of the carnivorous plant life and larger predators will be hibernating. It’s actually the most logical choice.”

She almost expected the other woman to explode furiously at her, but instead, Trish sat back in her seat and regarded her with a thoughtful expression.

“If I didn’t know better, I would think that you are actually looking forward to this,” Trish grumbled.

Emily didn’t deign to reply. She was, in fact, relieved when silence once more fell between them. Hours passed and the forest seemed almost eternal in the way that it stretched on and on without little change. Only the angle of the sun shifting among the trees and catching on the snow made her aware of the passage of time, and even that disappeared entirely when it began to snow once more. The entire forest became gray and dark as fat snowflakes drifted down from the heavens, falling faster and thicker until the trees took on an indistinct appearance beyond their white veil.

At long last the transport jerked to a stop, and a flurry of activity just outside let her know that they had arrived at their destination as the sound of luggage being dragged out and the crunch of snow as it was quickly unloaded filled the air. Trish immediately cringed in response and drew up close to the wall opposite the transport door as if that would somehow save her. Emily eyed her as she gathered up her lone bag and looped it over her shoulder.

“Just how much did you bring?” she asked. “We were instructed to take no more than can be reasonably carried.”

“Two trunks are more than reasonable considering what I had to leave behind,” Trish

protested. “Besides, those monsters are huge. If they insist on dragging me from this transport, they will have to do it with the luggage also in tow.”

Emily grunted noncommittally but stood when the transport door suddenly swung open. A woman from the escort stood framed in the entrance, her hood and coat heavily covered in snow and her face ruddy with the cold, smiling up at her.

“Come on down—they’re waiting for you,” she added with a whisper.

Clutching her cloak tighter around her, Emily nodded and descended without a backward glance. Trish wasn’t her problem; that was for the escort service to figure out. Instead, her gaze fastened on the woods, eyes drifting searchingly among the trees for some sign of the males who had come to fetch her.

“Where...” she murmured to herself.

A movement caught her eye, and she froze as a pair of males suddenly drifted out from the trees, their gray fur nearly white with the snow and ice clinging to them, but the Ragoru were distinct and couldn’t be mistaken for any casual predator with their far larger build. It was only made all the more distinct by the fact that they each had two sets of arms and eyes—that gave them a more powerful and dangerous appearance. Their ears pricked toward her, and she frowned in confusion. Wait, just two males? Weren’t there supposed to be three?

Shadows moved at the periphery of her vision, and she turned her head slightly as three other shadowy forms slipped from the woods, but they ignored her as they headed directly toward the transport where the escort attendants were still struggling to get Trish out from its belly. Three for Trish, but only two for her.

That figured. It seemed even the Ragoru knew which of them was the greater value and worth the interest of a full triad. That stung a bit. Swallowing back her

disappointment, Emily mustered a nervous smile as she prepared to greet her mates.

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Vikt's ears pricked toward the female standing in front of them, and he exchanged a silent look with his twin brother Vrel. They were an unusual pair among the Ragoru who settled in the north lands, but they were fortunate that the development of what was called "the clan" allowed them to live quietly with their unique bond. That bond made it impossible for other males to comfortably accept them into their forming triads as much as it made it difficult for them to live apart from each other. While it was not uncommon for rogs to be born in multiples, they were typically sired separately. It was rare, however, for identical twins to be born and unheard of for them to successfully mate.

The clan changed everything.

As long as one of them was always available to participate in a hunt or with any number of tasks within the community, they were offered the same comforts, protections, and rights as any other Ragoru. As it happened, although being twins made their situation unique in terms of the lack of social hierarchy, there were a number of lone Ragoru and paired Ragoru who were accepted and indicated an interest in acquiring mates. And yet somehow they were selected in the choosing to be among the first to receive a human mate.

"She is disappointed," Vrel commented quietly, his green gaze drifting to the triad skirting around the human transport, patiently sniffing around their own female from a safe distance. His gaze moved to the female standing awkwardly in front of them and he sighed. "Of course. She expected a triad. What should we do?"

Vikt grunted without comment and shifted uncertainly in place. One of the most difficult things about their situation was that, because of their closeness, neither of

them had naturally stepped into the alpha position to take the lead. It left both of them riddled with uncertainty in nearly all situations that were normal among their kind, and it seemed that mating was going to be another. Clearly whoever selected them had not thought this part out, or the fact that it would be unlikely for them to effectively bond and reproduce with their mate without the proper triad arrangement to encourage fertility and dominance in one of them.

Their mate was bound to be disappointed in more than just the fact that she had less than a full triad of mates to please and satisfy her. There was also the fact that they suffered from an inability to extrude. It was a normal condition that afflicted many Ragoru males who lacked dominance and were not part of a triad where an alpha's lust could properly trigger it. He was not ashamed of it, but he was certain that this would disappoint her as well.

Vikt winced and shifted again, his cocks growing hard in his sheath. Just because he lacked the ability to knot and breed, or even extrude entirely without an alpha, did not mean that he possessed ineffectual equipment. It was just going to be a challenging obstacle.

Releasing another sigh, his ears twitched and flattened out to the side as he took a hesitant step toward her.

"You are—" he began as he took a step toward her before realizing that it was presumptuous to refer to her as his mate upon just meeting.

A hesitant smile flickered across her lips and her hands rose to draw back her hood. His tongue immediately fastened to the roof of his mouth as he stared. She was far more beautiful than he had expected. Not that he had not seen many humans outside of Eve, the female who worked hard with her mates to establish the clan community in the cold lands. He always found Eve pleasing enough to look upon, but this female—she was glorious. Her complexion had a light brown cast on the verge of

something almost golden that complimented the flecks of gold and hints of deep green within her brown eyes that gave her an appearance of warmth. A suggestion that was only amplified by the generous curves that shaped her form. He could scarcely believe that she was truly there for him and his twin.

“Emily Duert,” she replied in a sweet, mellow tone that made his ears tip toward the sound of her voice in pleasure. A hint of pink rushed to her cheeks and her lips twisted in a smile he understood to be awkward; he had seen Eve frequently wear that look when addressing new arrivals to the clan. “Actually, just Emily. I forgot that you probably do not use sur names. Ah, family names, that is.”

“We do not mind. If family names are important to humans, we can be Duert as well,” Vrel quickly interjected as he took a half-stumbling step forward.

Vikt grimaced as his twin’s ears flattened in humiliation at his own awkwardness. His brother was not usually so clumsy. It was only when he was nervous that it proved to be a problem. He did not do it intentionally, but it had not helped them find their place easily within the clan.

“Apologies,” Vrel murmured. “I am not myself.”

“I am Vikt,” Vikt compassionately interrupted his brother to save the male from further embarrassment. “This is my twin, Vrel.”

“It’s a pleasure,” Emily responded as she lifted her hand to her lips.

Vikt’s ears twitched at the surprising sound of muffled laughter. His gaze narrowed on her for a moment, suspecting that perhaps she was mocking his twin, but her eyes sparkled with such warmth that he could not believe it and was immediately reassured when she lowered her hand and gave Vrel a wry grin.

“I must apologize. I did not mean to laugh, but I am relieved to see I am not the only nervous one here.” She winced as a scream came from the transport behind them, and a look of resignation crossed her face as her eyes rolled skyward. “There is of course nervous, and then there is... that.”

Vrel grimaced in the direction of the transport, and Vikt followed his gaze... and blinked. Whereas their female had the appearance of warmth, this other female was nearly as pale as the snow itself. Even her hair was such a pale shade that her red cheeks and lips stood out brightly like stains of blood as she shrieked at her triad.

She was somewhat terrifying.

“They are truly going to take her?” Vrel whispered in awe as Emily also turned to watch the proceedings, her dark brows rising in a look of surprise.

“It seems so,” Vikt commented, his gaze following the triad as they patiently circled her, rumbling comforting growls at her.

“Ah, they probably shouldn’t growl,” Emily observed with a frown. “Growling isn’t typically interpreted as a positive reaction and will just make her more afraid of them.”

“Truly?” A look of surprise crossed Vrel’s face, and he glanced from Emily back to the panicking female. “Perhaps I should go warn Hazhel.”

He glanced at Vikt for affirmation, and Vikt nodded as he gave the triad an uncertain look. His eyes followed his twin as the male jogged toward the alpha. He hoped that the male took the suggestion gracefully. Some alphas could be unpredictable, and they did not know Hazhel well since he lived on the other side of the community from them.

Sighing heavily, he turned to Emily and gave her a faint smile as he waved a hand toward the woods. “Vrel will catch up. I will take you to the sled.”

“Sled?” She perked up as she glanced in the direction he gestured. “I will be sitting on a sled?”

He gave her a confused look. Did she think that he would make her walk? She was so small and vulnerable that she could not possibly keep up with him and Vrel in the dead of summer, much less in the snow when Ragoru were the most in their element. He had just assumed that they would need a way to carry her comfortably that would not potentially frighten their new mate. He was ashamed, however, that there had not been enough time for him to build a new one that was not stained from dragging larger prey.

“It is not a very nice sled,” he rushed to warn her. “We usually use it for hunting, but Vrel laid down some evergreen boughs to sweeten the scent of the wood and we covered it with furs to make sure that you will be comfortable.”

“That is actually very sweet, thank you,” she replied and took a step toward it. She immediately gasped in surprise when her foot became caught in the snow, causing her to stumble.

Vikt reached over and grabbed her arm to stabilize her and stop her from falling. It had been instinctual and yet the grateful look she gave him made his heart thump heavily with a flow of warmth settling into his chest. His ears twitched nervously as he released her arm, his gaze focusing on the pink rushing once more into her cheeks. She glanced at him uncertainly and he swallowed. Did she wish for him to assist her?

A nervous flutter of excitement took wing in his belly, and he stretched a hand toward her in invitation. He nearly died of happiness right there within his tracks as her expression brightened and she placed her hand within his.

Perhaps this was going to work after all.

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Emily gasped with laughter as snow surged over the sides of the sled, and she gripped the siderails harder as she giggled.

She should have guessed that they would be capable of quite a bit of speed.

In fact, Vrel had caught up with them so quickly that she imagined that they were keeping their pace moderated for her sake so that she didn't bounce too hard in the sled.

He had merely shot out of nowhere and come up alongside the sled only to quickly surpass it and join Vikt at his side.

He had jogged there with them complacently for a time but eventually broke away to scout up ahead, keeping in touch with eerie, echoing songs that they howled back in forth through the forest.

It was only when Vrel caught up to the other male that they enjoyed a brief rest sprawled in the snow while Emily stretched her legs, and then the twins traded places and resumed their journey.

She wondered how Trish was doing and whether her triad had been able to coax her into a sled without too much difficulty, especially considering she likely had to leave most of her belongings with the transport.

Trish had been upset enough and probably hadn't taken it well, which had accounted for the howls and shrieks that had followed them for a short time upon departing.

What had the escort company been thinking when they loaded all of that? But now, with the silence of the forest all around her, broken only by the sounds of the Ragoru and the sled cutting the snow, she hoped that Trish had found a small measure of peace with her situation.

After all, the Ragoru weren't the terrible monsters that Trish had been fretting about.

Quite the contrary.

In fact, Vrel and Vikt appeared more uncertain around her than she was around them, and that was a strange novelty.

The council had given her a small pamphlet that had been authored by one Evelyn Willock, so she knew that Ragoru family groups were generally comprised of three males, one of whom would be the alpha, around a central female who possessed all the authority within the family.

She just hadn't expected that to apply to her—a human.

Given that there didn't appear to be any sort of alpha between the twins to take on some aspects of the power-sharing dynamic, it gave her a shocking amount of power as Vrel and Vikt seemed to watch for her lead.

Even during their breaks, they waited patiently as they fed her until she indicated that she was ready to resume.

She wasn't sure how she felt about that.

It was heady, but it also made her very nervous.

Did she even want that kind of power with males who were supposed to be her

mates?

Her parents had never approved of her boldness, but while Vrel and Vikt almost seemed to welcome it, she couldn't help but think that it was partially because it took the pressure off one of them having to step into the alpha role.

That made it somewhat uncomfortable despite the sweetness of the twins.

It was most telling in the fact that, while they had warmed up to chatting with her as they traveled, they refrained from coming within touching distance unless she initiated it.

Otherwise, they kept their contact with her as brief as possible.

That stung a bit at first, since it almost came off that they didn't want physical contact with her, until she noted the way that they seemed to light up whenever she casually touched their arm or hand in thanks.

Oh, Blessed Mother, was she going to have to initiate sex too?

A blush worked its way up her cheeks, and she ducked down deeper into her furs with the hope that the males wouldn't notice it.

She was bold, but she didn't know if she was that bold.

She glanced uneasily toward the sun setting beyond the forest.

Its fading light was beginning to cast long shadows, and soon they would have to stop for the night.

Would they be looking to her to initiate sex tonight? Her lungs worked rapidly,

pushing air in and out in quick little gulps as she struggled to breathe through the anxiety suddenly crushing her.

It wouldn't be too much longer, and she swallowed back a squeak of dismay when the sled slowed and drew to a stop.

Her gaze lifted and fastened on the two males as Vikt and Vrel moved around to either side of the sled, their yellow eyes glowing luminously in the fading light.

Emily stared back at them uneasily but nearly laughed with relief when Vikt helped her from the sled and set her on her feet, his upper hands lingering on her arms only long enough to assure himself that she was steady before releasing her.

There was no undercurrent of some other expectation between them.

Vrel studiously examined the sled as he fussed over the binding and thoughtfully grumbled to himself, while Vikt was as polite and watchful as always.

His gaze followed her as she moved around the sled but carefully averted when she hurried toward the trees to relieve her bladder.

Although she was relieved that she wasn't expected to initiate sex in the middle of the woods, their reaction worried her even more when it came to the eventuality of having sex.

Shouldn't there be at least something to indicate that they were eager to have her as their mate? She wasn't entirely sure what was missing or if she was imagining it.

She bit her lip as she cleaned herself and straightened her clothes before returning to her "mates."

Their identical gazes turned toward her, and they immediately shifted, making room for her between them around the fire they had built while she was relieving herself.

She glanced between them as she dropped in the middle, but neither male made an effort to crowd closer. Instead, they thrust food and a waterskin into her hands and chatted amicably.

“It is not much farther,”

Vikt assured her with a smile, his slightly harder features setting him apart from the softer expressions of his twin. Even his ears seemed to be set more upright and alert while Vrel’s ears tipped in an expressive way that she found rather adorable.

“We have a small handful of nights for traveling at our current pace, and then we will arrive at the outskirts of our communal territory. From there it is only a short distance to our home.”

Emily gnawed on the dried meat and nodded. It was as far as Trish had said, then. She felt even more grateful that the winter made it possible to travel such distances far quicker with the use of the sled.

She couldn’t even imagine walking all of that on foot, especially not when the woods would be filled with predators at other times of the year.

“Our home is on the edge of communal territory but closer to the hunting grounds,”

Vrel quickly added. “We do not see others very often, but our stomachs are always full and Vikt is always finding good wood to season for me to add pleasing things to our den... home,”

he corrected, his ears flattening nervously.

She glanced over at Vrel, suddenly interested. The prospect of having a ready supply of food was great, but seeing another dimension to the males beyond successful predators touched something within her. “Oh, do you carve?”

The male’s ears flattened further to the sides with embarrassment, and he inclined his head. “I enjoy fashioning wood and raw clay that I can find and dig up. I also make pigments from experimenting with various plant materials,”

he whispered.

Emily’s brows shot up. She was impressed. She had heard some of the people living in the settlements farther from the citadels had taken to more natural crafts to supply themselves with since the trade routes from the capitals were slow and undependable at best, but she had never met anyone who could actually do it.

“That’s amazing, Vrel,”

she replied honestly. “I hope that you can maybe teach me a few things.”

His ears pricked at her words and his expression warmed considerably. “It would be a pleasure to have you assist me. My work is not much, but if you wish to learn from me, I would be delighted.”

Vikt scoffed in response, the bark of his laughter making his twin’s gaze shoot to him in affront as he handed Emily yet another large chunk of meat.

“He says his work is not much, but it is his work that is the most admired among this clan of Ragoru.

Males are always bartering some excess meat or supplies with the hope of filling their dens with pretty things for their females.”

Vrel's smile deepened, his ears tipping shyly, and Emily felt her smile grow despite her concerns. She glanced over at Vikt and raised her eyebrows. "And what about you? I assume that you do not just hunt and look pretty."

The male froze, and for a moment she was genuinely worried that she had somehow seriously screwed up and offended him. Then he cocked his head and a hint of a faint smile appeared at the corner of his mouth. "You think I look pretty?"

Emily sucked in a breath but gave him what she hoped was a confident smile. "Of course. Your pelt is soft and thick, and you are just..."

she faltered, heat rising to her cheeks, "amazing."

A genuine smile pulled at the male's mouth, and he bolted a chunk of meat.

"My skills are nothing like Vrel's.

He prefers to remain within and near the den.

He tends to the gardens and scouts the immediate area around the den for the best supplies, and crafts items for our comfort.

Hunting and looking pretty is accurate for my skillset, though I do a lot of labor to help Vrel with his work.

I dig the garden and the clay from the ground and cut the wood."

"He makes our furnishings,"

Vrel quickly inserted with a scowl. "And many of the things that we require to make our meals. He does the majority of the food preparation as well and has been learning

about foods that humans like.”

Emily pursed her lips, impressed despite herself.

Between the two of them, they were like the living embodiment of a domestic divinity.

It was no wonder that they lived comfortably just the two of them.

She wasn't even certain what she could even contribute to that. She didn't possess any great domestic skills and had been, in fact, preparing to go into a bookkeeping field within the capital.

“I... I am not sure how to compete with that,”

she admitted with a chuckle. “I never had any great skills around the house to boast of. I can clean and cook well enough to get by. I have neat penmanship and organization skills, however, and can keep a ledger and do other accounting.”

She was certain that they didn't understand what half of that was and yet the males only smiled encouragingly without a hint of mockery or doubt creeping into their expressions.

Instead of casting doubts on her usefulness, they encouraged her to open up more and talk about her experiences with work and life in the citadel until the forest had fallen completely dark and she was yawning around her words.

Only then did they gently suggest that she get some rest and follow her back to the sled where they curled up on either side.

Vikt's sharp teeth gleamed in the firelight as he yawned hugely but then settled down

on her right with a heavy sigh, his belly facing her while the denser fur of his back faced the elements.

Vrel had assumed the same position at her other side, and the warmth from their large bodies cocooned her completely beneath the furs as they slept peacefully through the night.

Chapter

Four

CHAPTER 4

V rel shyly glanced toward their mate, his mouth tugging in a small smile. She was so pretty, tiny, and soft. More than that, she was strong. She hadn't complained once during their long trek back to the northlands and had instead frequently worn a smile on her face even when the days were gray with falling snow. He observed her covertly as she explored her new home. Her expression was one of interest and open admiration, and he felt the same emotions boiling within him, but for other reasons.

His admiration was reserved entirely for the female standing before him. He admired her ridiculously tiny, pert little nose and the round fullness of her cheeks framed by stray locks of sleek brown head fur of the deepest hue. Even her mouth looked soft and delicate with its perfectly defined shape and dusky pinkish-brown hue that invited exploration in the way the softest petals of a flower begged to be touched.

And she was theirs. It defied belief that such a female could ever belong to him and Vikt. Truthfully, he would not believe it if he did not see her standing within his den with his own eyes. She was truly their mate to care for in all ways. All ways, even her most secret desires. What sort of desires did such a delicate human possess? Would she even be able to accommodate them? It did not seem that Evelyn had any such trouble with her triad, but Emily appeared far more fragile. She would have a tiny cunt, that much he was certain, and his mouth went dry at the thought of it stretching and clenching around his cocks as he rutted her throughout the Withering Nights.

A shiver ran over him and he turned away abruptly, swallowing a pant as he fought to control himself. How would they even survive the Withering Nights? It was close at hand and neither he nor Vikt were alphas. How would they even be able to tempt a female into copulation? Even lying night after night in the cold snow to douse their passions had not relieved him of the hot need that plagued him night after night. Now there would be no relief from their need by sleeping in the snow, and when their rut descended upon in the heat of the Withering Nights, it would be nearly impossible to ignore. Panic fluttered within him, and he exchanged an anxious look with his twin. It was not comforting in the least that he was not the only one concerned.

What would they do? He doubted that he could even convince his cocks to extrude, much less engorge enough to make fully mating possible.

“This... is not what I expected,” Emily observed aloud, interrupting the panicked lope of his thoughts and drawing his gaze back to her as she walked past him through the main room, running her hand along the mantle of stone hearth.

For a moment he was lost. His mind was so preoccupied on his dismal prospects for performance, and he stared at her blankly until she chuckled and gestured around her.

“This is not quite how I envisioned a Ragoru ‘den’ would look,” she explained with another low laugh, the sound of which rushed up his spine pleasantly.

“It is not a traditional den,” Vikt replied around a nervous cough, his ears flicking in betrayal of his nerves. No doubt from being interrupted from the same obscene thoughts that Vrel had also been suffering from. “These dwellings were already here and long abandoned by the time they were found and made into a home for us. Like all Ragoru, we modify it as necessary to make it more comfortable for us to live in, but it is mostly left intact and utilized for convenience. And in the hope that it will make the transition to the clan lands more comfortable for human mates arriving here.”

A tiny smile tugged at the corner of her mouth, and she nodded. “That is sweet. I would have gotten along just fine in something simpler, but I know there are many who would appreciate familiar comforts. Not that I will say no to all of this,” she admitted with another burst of soft laughter. “This is far more than most get to enjoy even in the capital.”

“It meets your approval then?” Vrel inquired cautiously. He just needed to be certain.

“Oh yes,” she agreed with a sigh, and her smile gradually bloomed and spread across her face. “It is beautiful. While it is more than I am accustomed to, it will certainly be no hardship to live here.”

Some of the tension gathered in the center of Vrel’s chest eased and he smiled back at her, his concerns about mating dissipating even as the heat within his belly stirred when she tugged her cloak from the gentle curves of her frame, creating an enchanting tapestry as firelight and shadows played over her every contour. It was only then that he noticed that the heat he felt was not only rising within him but was also filling the room around him from the fire dancing in the hearth. It seemed that someone from the clan had kept watch for signs of their impending arrival and had prepared their den for them to welcome their mate. Possibly Sabol. The male’s willingness to help even the most stubborn, scarred, and reluctant of Ragoru had become almost legendary among their closeknit clan.

And of course Sabol would have recalled that humans needed more warmth than Ragoru required. Vrel eyed Emily uncertainly, recalling once more that Evelyn was larger and possessed a thicker frame. It was possible that it was not yet quite warm enough for their female.

“You are certain you are warm enough?” he fretted as he stepped forward to take the cloak before Vikt had the opportunity to. “If you would like to continue wearing this while we build the fire higher, it will only take a moment.”

“No, no, this is perfect,” she assured him. “Besides, any warmer in here and I imagine it will be miserable for the both of you with all that fur.”

Vrel grunted and turned away with her cloak, unable to deny it. It was not yet beyond a temperature that he found comfortable, but it would not take much to make him overheat and have him panting without a scrap of dignity. He focused on the cloak instead, clutching it to him as he headed to the small storage space near the doorway that Evelyn had informed him was to hold such things. He could feel Vikt’s eyes following him enviously, but he ignored it. He made the first move so the opportunity to care for Emily was his at this time. His twin would find another opportunity to demonstrate his affection for their mate.

“Are you hungry?” Vikt’s voice rumbled from behind him, and Vrel fought the urge to smile. Of course the male would go directly to looking for an opportunity to feed their mate. Vikt’s first urge was always to feed everyone he cared for. “I have some root vegetables and there is some meat in the snow box—no, that is not the right word—ice box,” he corrected with a note of triumph.

“Perhaps in a moment,” she murmured, and Vrel glanced over at her curiously as he closed the storage space back up again. A pink color flooded her cheeks as she glanced back and forth between them. “Actually, since we are finally home, I was kind of curious how this mating thing works.”

“Works?” Vikt croaked, suddenly hoarse. His ears flattened to the sides nervously and he shot an uncertain look back at Vrel.

Vrel flattened his ears back at him in a clueless expression. Why was he looking at him? It was not as if he knew how any of this was to work without an alpha.

Her soft sigh filled the room, but the look she gave them was wry rather than disappointed. “I’m guessing that look means that you two do not know either.”

Vrel swallowed visibly. “It is not that... Not exactly. It is just that the alpha is supposed to...” His voice trailed off in embarrassment.

“I see,” she murmured, her gaze shifting between the two of them thoughtfully. “And neither of you is an alpha, I take it.”

Vikt grimaced, his ears flicking unhappily. “We are an unusual circumstance. While it is common to have more than one rog in a litter among our people, twins sharing the same sack are rare. Such rogs bond so closely that it is difficult for us to leave each other to find forming triads that would accept us.”

“And most alphas would not want a triad with two males bonded more closely to each other than they would ever be with him,” Vrel finished in a whisper. “We are not shunned by the clan precisely, but no one knows what to do with us.”

Her lips pursed in a fascinating manner as she regarded them. “I see. Okay, that explains a few things. I suppose I will need to take matters in hand to get everything moving along to make this official. Who wants to go first?” she asked, her fingers going to the buttons of her top covering.

Vrel’s eyes widened, and his mouth dropped open slightly with shock. He stumbled back as panic rose sharply with a bitter acridness within his belly just as Vikt backpedaled from their mate.

“Food first,” the male barked. “It is not good to... proceed... without being properly nourished. I think I have some extra tasty bits stashed in the snow just out back. I will get them now.”

“I will help,” Vrel volunteered as he hurried after his twin, shame making his ears flatten to the top of his head.

He could not believe he was running away from his mate and an opportunity to enjoy his first rut, but here he was, running, and their female's eyes followed them with startled amusement.

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Emily stared after them, unable to believe what she was seeing. Were they really running from her? Her first impulse was to take it as an insult but the whole thing was just too funny, and she had to admit that she was a little sympathetic. She hadn't been a virgin for some time, but it was clear that the twins were a timid pair and as pure as the snow falling from the skies just outside the door. She rolled her tongue thoughtfully within her mouth and considered whether she should go after them or not. Thankfully, she was saved from the option of chasing after them like a jilted lover by a loud knock at the door. The timing of it startled her but she hurried over with a burgeoning sense of relief and threw it open.

A tall figure wrapped so thoroughly in furs that it couldn't be anything other than a human stepped inside with a blast of snow and cold wind that made Emily shiver.

"Sorry, sorry," a woman's voice apologized from beneath the deep hood as she hurried into the house. A large Ragoru with steel gray fur beneath all the rapidly melting snow followed behind her. "Get the door, please, Sabol."

The male's bright yellow eyes fell briefly on Emily before turning back to his mate with obvious adoration. "Of course, rya," he rumbled as he turned and closed the door firmly behind them.

Emily watched the pair apprehensively but managed a small, uncertain smile when the woman threw back her hood to beam happily at her. The auburn braid thrown over her shoulder was threaded through with a number of smaller braids and ribbons, some of which terminated in tiny carved figures and beads that appeared to be made of bone. They clattered softly with the movement of the woman's head as she looked around the room with an air of satisfaction.

Just who was this woman looking around with such unmistakable authority? Was there some sort of ceremony that Emily wasn't aware of? She had assumed that the mating process was straightforward: be collected by one's mates, travel over an obscene distance in freezing temperatures, and then get plowed until incapable of walking—mating completed. So why did she have a strange woman standing in the middle of her living room?

“Sabol.” Vrel's surprised greeting alerted Emily to her mates' return. She turned her head to glance back at them as he dipped his head respectfully, his eyes shifting warily to the woman. “We did not expect you.”

“Apologies,” the woman replied. “I know that we are interrupting, but we wanted to be something of a welcoming committee for your mate. You know, beyond just the basics of warming your den for your arrival.”

“Evelyn.” Vikt rumbled with a brief dip of his head. “Your generosity is appreciated.”

Not just appreciated—Vikt sounded almost relieved at the interruption. Who did this Evelyn... Wait, Evelyn? Emily's head whipped back to her guest in surprise. “Evelyn Willock?”

“So you have heard of me.” The woman's cheeks, already reddened from the cold, took on a deeper hue. “I didn't expect that, not when I was so careful to keep my name off the reading material that I compiled for our new... ah... brides. Anonymity is safe, and it's a blessing when one doesn't want anyone arriving to the conclusion that one has more power and influence here than one actually does.”

She didn't want anyone deferring to her or expecting her to fight their battles for them. Emily could understand and appreciate that. She just wanted to be seen for what she was—just another woman mated to a Ragoru triad.

Emily gave her a sympathetic smile. “Understood. I will keep the knowledge to myself. I heard of you only in passing and then made it a point to read everything I could find on the woman who became a bride of ‘monsters’—no offense—and helped construct the current bridal arrangement. I hadn’t even believed that I would meet you here. The northlands seem so large that I figured that it was unlikely.”

Evelyn chuckled as she drew off her cloak and handed it to her mate. “A reasonable expectation. We don’t share information about the northlands with the capital or any of the other citadels. As I said before, anonymity is safe. In truth, while the homes—or dens as you’ll hear them more commonly called—were built spread out for the comfort of the originally intended inhabitants, they are still close enough together that the distance is equal to only a handful of blocks within the capital. My own home is almost within the heart of the den lands and is distinguished by a red door. A mark that my mates suggested as a color of welcome from their divine Mother Ewa to convey a place of safety.”

“I see,” Emily murmured in reply. “And so you are here to?”

“To welcome you,” Evelyn reiterated with a broad smile. “I would have brought gifts, but Ragoru are touchy about anyone offering something to their mate unasked. It is viewed as some sort of insult to their ability to provide and care for you.” Sabol nodded approvingly at her side, but Emily didn’t miss the slight roll of the other woman’s eyes. “I tried to explain that humans like things like sweet cakes and such, so stop by at my little red door sometime and I will bring you in for some tea and cake... or coffee if you prefer. Just this summer I headed over to the port for Northern Run Mines to acquire supplies in bulk. Blythe Manchen has become a good friend, and we radio frequently. She is happy to adjust her orders for me, so if you think of something you are missing just make a list for the next run. But I’m rambling. Just come by and we can enjoy something sweet without overstepping any mating boundaries.”

Emily bit back a smile as she cast a glance at her frowning mates and nodded. “I just might do that. It would be nice to be able to compare notes with another woman.” She definitely wasn’t going to seek out Trish if she could help it. And of course, now that she had the authority on Ragoru and human mating in her home, she couldn’t possibly miss the opportunity of having some questions answered. “Since you are here, perhaps you can help me understand this whole mating dynamic beyond what your pamphlet described.”

As expected, the scientist’s brows rose with interest. “Oh, was there some point that needed further clarification?”

Vikt rumbled behind her, but Emily tossed him a reassuring look over her shoulder. She was certain that this was embarrassing for them, but they weren’t going to get anywhere by not asking.

“From what they have told me, the alpha usually initiates mating. As twins, there is no alpha between them to... get things going, I guess you could say,” Emily explained as she fought back a blush. Okay, this was a little more awkward than she expected. “As all of the... plumbing... is internally contained, how do I—you know—prepare them?”

Evelyn glanced sidelong at her mate. “This is a thing?”

Sabol dropped his head and discreetly wheezed, which became a sharp hack when his mate jabbed him with her elbow. “Frequently,” he grunted as he rubbed his belly with one hand. “Many males have at least the potential to be an alpha and therefore do not suffer from such problems—which is why I could make you scream so deliciously when we met,” he added pointedly with a grin at his mate. “But many others are not so fortunate.”

Evelyn rolled her eyes at her mate before grimacing at her apologetically.

“First of all, ignore him. He can be an insensitive lout. As to your situation, I admit that is not something I considered when I selected them to participate. It is so hard to guess which Ragoru may have this difficulty and it’s not really information that they volunteer. I suppose that will need to be addressed as well,” she murmured thoughtfully to herself. “As we have quite a few males who are solitary or in duos—in fact, one pair recently brought back a female that they found along the southern edge of the Far Northern Forests—I didn’t suspect that neither of them would instinctively take a leadership role.”

Evelyn’s lips pursed thoughtfully and scrutinized Vikt and Vrel until they practically squirmed in place, their ears pinning back with such obvious shame that Emily regretted even asking. She took a step forward and opened her mouth to intercede, but Evelyn shook her head with a rueful smile as her mate grumbled at her.

“My apologies. I sometimes let my curiosity run away with me. While it is an interesting and unpredicted situation, it’s perfectly fine,” she replied, and Emily had the distinct impression the reassurance was as much for Vikt and Vrel as it was for her. “Ragoru are highly tuned to their senses. If they are more reserved in aggressive passions, you should be able to bypass it easily enough by focusing on making yourself aroused to the point that it triggers an instinctual response. And if they need a little help extruding fully and engorging, there is a thick cluster of nerves at the base of their sheath. A little pressure there will make them engorge fully.”

Emily winced. She wanted her to pinch them there ? Evelyn clearly interpreted her look correctly because the other woman laughed.

“It does sound uncomfortable, doesn’t it? But trust me, they will very much enjoy it. There is a certain rush of pleasure to it, as I accidentally discovered,” she confided with a blush.

Sabol coughed discreetly as he handed Evelyn’s cloak back to her, but it failed to

distract Emily from the heated look he gave his mate. There was no doubt in her mind which male received the accidental manual assistance. And she was glad that she witnessed the exchange too, because that made her feel significantly more confident about the whole thing.

“You have imparted your greetings, rya, but we should leave them to their mating. It is best that they get a handle on this before the Withering Days fall upon us,” he rumbled in a tone of adoration, though the smile he bent upon Emily’s mates was one full of encouragement.

“Yes, you’re right,” Evelyn agreed with a laugh and a fond look as she allowed her mate to help her into her cloak. “While the timing was planned out perfectly in terms of traveling, I have to admit that it does leave things a bit pinched on time when it comes to acclimating before being introduced to the rut.”

“Rut?” Emily echoed, but the other woman simply winked salaciously at her.

“You will see. I don’t want to ruin the surprise, but it’s wonderful. Oh, and don’t forget the red door whenever you want to chat,” Evelyn called over her shoulder as her mate herded her to the door.

Emily nodded as she stared after the pair, her mind awl. Beneath all of it, however, settled a resolve to mate with both of her males immediately. She wanted plenty of time to enjoy them and get to know them physically before they were all subjected to some sort of hormone-laden frenzy. She had heard of ruts before only in terms of certain animals during their breeding seasons and if that was what was going to happen, then she wanted to be well prepared.

But with her gun-shy mates, she was going to have to go about it in a less direct manner. That was fine. She’d never taken flirting beyond some casual petting—and certainly nothing just shy of pornographic—but there was a first time for everything.

She, Emily Duert, was going to seduce her mates.

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Vikt swallowed, his nostrils flaring as he cautiously scented the air. Heat had burgeoned within his belly at Evelyn's crude instructions, but smelling the interest on his mate sent a curious ache through him. It sadly failed to reach his sheath, but he was suddenly very curious and very eager to experience all the female had mentioned. He would give anything to feel the heady and slightly painful sensation of desire pounding through him that came with extrusion and engorgement.

His tongue slid over his fangs as he watched Emily eat. Her small teeth were visible between her soft lips as she plucked little bits of meat from the bone, the activity interrupted every so often by the sweep of her small tongue. The entire time, her brown eyes were fixed on either him or Vrel, studying them in turn. Vikt did not mind. He enjoyed being on the receiving end of their mate's focused attention. And he loved her eyes. The firelight caught the flecks of gold in their dark brown depths, making them luminous, though they didn't reflect the light like the gaze of a Ragoru.

His peripheral secondary eye turned toward his twin, and he nearly grinned at the smitten look on the male's face only because he was certain that he must be wearing an identical look. His suspicion was confirmed when Vrel's peripheral eye shifted toward him and the corner of his mouth pulled upward in a knowing smile. Yes, it seemed that they were both helplessly captivated by their rya. Unfortunately, the helpless part was an issue.

Vikt growled impatiently in silence at his quiet genitals. Heat filled his body and rushed through him and his cocks swelled with interest—but that was the most that they did. They did not leap within his sheath, nor did they force themselves out from his body with an eagerness to mate. There was nothing but a maddening desire that he was incapable of acting upon, a desire that grew more and more fever pitch, making

him shift uncomfortably in place.

Emily's brow furrowed slightly, and she set the bone down on her plate and proceeded to lick her fingers in a way that made him want to groan. Was she trying to torture them? She did not say anything, however. She simply got up from the table and left the room. Vikt stared after her for a moment in surprise but heaved a sigh of relief that he was now able to escape from the uncomfortable confines of the human chair.

Vrel winced and rubbed the base of his tail as he slid off his own chair with a grunt. "Remind me why we ate in here instead of sitting around the low table in the common room?" he grumbled.

Vikt shrugged, his ears flicking dismissively. "Because humans like it. We want Emily to be comfortable in our den so we should make the attempt to adapt to her customs."

"It's going to give me a bent tail," Vrel pointed out, and Vikt chuffed quietly.

The structure of the chairs was hard on the tail. They had long since moved the large human sitting area from the common room and replaced it with large plush pillows around the low table for their comfort, so it seemed a small sacrifice to eat in the human manner.

"Your tail will survive. It's far more important—" His words abruptly dropped off as his tail stiffened at the enticing scent drifting into the room.

It was rich and musky and immediately made him salivate as it caught him by the nose. He wheeled around, the fur of his mane fanning out as that between his shoulders and running down his spine rose with interest. He exchanged a glance with Vrel and followed his twitching nose to the source of the scent. They filed from the

human eating area, their steps quick with their eagerness. He could sense Vrel just behind him. He could hear the rapid draw of breath in excitement that seemed to strike a beat complementary to the pounding beat of his own heart.

Vikt shivered as they headed down the corridor that led to the sub chambers of their den. They had not yet shown Emily this part of their dwelling and yet she had found her way back there to their nest. His mouth went dry, and the thump of his pulse filled his ears in the silence. It was the only sound he heard other than the faint sound of something wet squishing like a plump summer fruit dripping with its juice. He swallowed back a groan as a heavy pulse rushed through his genitals. His seedsacks felt painfully full and growing more uncomfortable by the moment as Emily's scent bloomed around them.

"What is happening?" Vrel whispered uncertainly behind him. The male rubbed his ear nervously. "Is that scent from Emily? What is she doing? It makes me feel... odd."

"She is choosing, just as Evelyn instructed her," he replied in a choked voice.

Their mating was a strange one in that it was completely arranged, but he had assumed that they would still need to go through all of the rituals. Although Emily had spoken boldly, he had not thought that Emily would just take it upon herself to do this without the necessary steps.

"But... there has been no... demonstrating," the other male replied in shock. "There is a way that these things are done. The displaying, the choosing, and then the mating. Can she just skip?—"

"And what would you have her do otherwise?" Vikt growled back passionately as some of his own shock subsided, making room for common sense. "It is not like either of us is an alpha who can extrude for her approval and demonstrate his

superiority as a breeder. Is circumventing this step not the purpose of Evelyn's advice? There is no alpha to lead in mating—of course she must take the lead. She understood that as soon as she realized the extent of our unique situation, and it is why she addressed the matter to Evelyn. It was not to shame us but to solve the problem.”

Vrel whined uncertainly but it was a brief sound that terminated on a huff. “You are right. Do we go in?”

Vikt nodded and opened the door, and for a moment he could only stare in awe. Their mate was in the middle of their nest, her head thrown back and eyes shut with an expression of pleasure on her face. Her body gloriously bare of her coverings and her legs splayed wide toward the door, displaying her sex that he caught only brief glimpses of as her fingers slid over it. For a moment he could not breathe. He did not know why. It was as if he had forgotten how to as he watched her draw forth her own pleasure. The glide of her fingers was making the wet sounds, and the drops of arousal flowing from her slit were rapidly thickening the air of the room with the scent of her need. It drenched him, and her pheromones filled him completely when he finally remembered to take a breath.

He shivered with the need that hummed beneath his skin, and his ears flattened at the unfamiliar sensation. It was shockingly incredible but also so foreign that it sent a ripple of alarm through him. What if this changed him? What if the feeling tormented him perpetually without ever being satisfied now that it had arisen from some unknown part of him? It was a terrifying prospect, but beyond that was the instinct that had him prowling toward his mate without even consciously thinking about it.

Her eyes flew open at that moment, and her lips parted with a quiver as she released a soft pant of air. He did not stop moving but approached her spread legs and dropped between them with a reverent growl. There was so much he had not yet done. He had not made the offerings or presented gifts to his mate. He had not even yet addressed

Mother Ewa and the Dark Fathers in prayer for their successful mating. He could not deliver the mating bite yet until he had done at least that much. For now, he was helpless to do anything but to respond and accept his mate's choosing. He would complete the mating bond when the time was right, and she was sufficiently prepared for it. Afterall, he had not yet had a chance to warn her of it.

He would worship her for now and prove himself a valuable mate in his own way.

Vikt stared hungrily at her sex, watching the moisture gleaming from her petals as his mate slicked her fingers back and forth over them. Her fingers slowed and withdrew, as if she sensed his need, and he descended upon with a ravenous hunger burning within his belly. His tongue stroked over her sex, gathering her sweetness, and the taste of the pheromone laden substance lit him up from within.

He lapped at her eagerly, growling lustfully as he dragged her ripe flavor into his mouth. His tongue stroked over her slit, striking the little bud of flesh at its tip that made her whimper and grow wetter for him, feeding his hunger to an even greater urgency. In his enthusiasm, his broad tongue pushed inside of her, making her gasp and her hips rise, driving his tongue a little deeper within her. To his wonder, her snug channel convulsed around his tongue, releasing a flood of sweetness. Tugging his tongue free, making her moan anew, he lapped eagerly and began to establish a pattern of licking and penetrating her as a pheromone-driven euphoria hit him, making him growl ecstatically as he shook against her. The only thing that had not yet happened with extrusion. His cocks remained painfully locked within his sheaths as they swelled with need and jerked with an urgency to mate.

He shifted, adjusting his angle as he crouched over her, but he paused at the strange sensation of her foot brushing his inner leg seconds before the digits of her toes grazed his sheath. He trembled at the light touch but then curled into himself reflexively when the space between her big toe and second toe caught the back of his sheath. Pleasure burst through him violently as her toes curled and squeezed. A

deliciously agonizing pleasure ripped through him and some small amount of pressure popped as his cocks shot out hot and swollen from their sheath.

A gasp tore from him, his entire body trembling. Although the tip of his primary cock extruded multiple times a day, the pain and intense pleasure of full extrusion had never been within his ability to imagine. His primary cock seemed to have a pulse of its own as it flexed eagerly, the tapered tip pointing toward her sex with an unspoken urgency. Vikt shivered as her foot dragged once more along his sheath, grazing the base of his secondary cock briefly before she lowered her foot back to the floor. His gaze never broke from her the entire time so that he was could feast upon the way her eyes lit up with desire and mischief as she caressed him, revealing the depth of her need. Her pink lips tipped, and she gestured for him to come nearer with one finger.

Vikt did not even second guess it. He crawled toward her quickly, his body crouching over hers so that his cocks hovered above her belly. He felt something wet gather at the tip of his primary cock, and he glanced down just in time to see the blue fluid drip from his tip to splatter onto her belly. Emily murmured softly, and she repositioned her legs to a wider stance as she sat up and cupped the back of his neck. He instinctively lowered his face to hers, and his eyes slid shut with pleasure as her breath fanned over his face. It was such an intimate sharing that it nearly brought tears to his eyes, but even more so when her soft cheek and the corner of her mouth dragged along his muzzle in an exchange of scents.

A soft rumble of pleasure vibrated within his throat, and he followed her down as she lowered herself to the thick pillows of their nest. Her sigh of pleasure followed his movement when his fur brushed against her belly and breasts, and he captured the sound within his memory, savoring it. He was not an alpha, but he was bringing her pleasure. The realization swamped him with a sense of elation and true belonging. He was hers at that moment—entirely.

His primary cock slid and bumped against her belly clumsily, but she did not growl or

chastise him. Instead, she wiggled against him, her hips rising in silent encouragement as he shifted downward, his cock running against her topmost bud of flesh before sliding down toward her hot center. He nearly swallowed his tongue at the sensation of her wet heat opening in invitation in response to the light pressure of his primary cock against it. It was almost as if it was preparing to suck him in. His lengths quivered there for just a heartbeat or less before his hips shot forward instinctively, driving both cocks into her soft, welcoming channel. It parted around him with a wet gush and a sharp cry from the female beneath him.

Vikt froze, his eyes popping open with the rush of guilt assailing him that was made only worse by Vrel's anxious growl from his left. "Emily? Rya, did I harm?—"

"No, no. It just took me by surprise," she gasped into his fur. He felt her head turn and knew that she was looking over at Vrel to reassure him as well. In the meantime, her fingers burrowed deeper into the mane of Vikt's pelt around his neck and shoulders. "The... the pamphlet should have included this," she added with a shaky, quiet little laugh.

Tension drained from him at the sound, and his primary cock thickened in response to the vibration of her laughter passing between them. Without thought, he drew back a little and thrust forward again, drawing a growl from deep within his chest as her laughter broke off on a small cry of pleasure. Trembling, he gathered her closer to him in his arms and began to rock his pelvis against hers, shuttling his cock in shallow thrusts in a way that made her scent deepen and her arousal flood around his cock as he abruptly climbed to the pinnacle of her pleasure without a shout.

His own cock jerked in response, spewing long ropes of seed as her cunt latched in a hard rhythmic squeeze around him, but his hips jumped and he thrust harder in response, a growl rising louder from within him. This was more than just pleasure; this was a connection that he could never have imagined existing beyond the closeness he felt every day with his twin. He felt joined in every way to her, and he

panted with the euphoria spreading through him.

“Blessed Mother, it feels so good,” Emily moaned, and he growled his agreement as his thrusts grew more frantic with a building pressure calling to something primal within him.

He needed more. He needed her cunt to squeeze him harder and tighter, he needed to drive into its clutch deeper and faster. And so he did. He lost himself rapturously to it, and to the most exquisite magic and softness of his mate. He sought his pleasure within her, but also needed her pleasure in turn like a dying male sought a refreshing spring. Emily was his water and life. He had understood it before on one level. She was giving and sweet, as well as considerate and fun from the start. She gave of herself selflessly and accepted him and his twin. But now, buried within her, he understood it on an even more primal level as he met her hunger for hunger and desire for desire, the hot, engorged lengths of his cocks quenched within the pool that gathered at the apex between her legs.

He was one with her, and through that oneness his every stroke was aimed at bringing her cunt into a fluttering, pulsing state around him once more. It was only at the edge of his awareness that he heard Emily whisper to Vrel. He did not see the male move but the rapturous groan from the male made his eyes snap up and widen as he watched Emily’s mouth swallow the length of his twin’s primary cock as she gripped the secondary cock tightly within her hand. She pumped it as she dragged her mouth up and down and Vrel’s head sagged with obvious pleasure, his hips twitching helplessly as Vikt surged forward with a renewed feral need.

He drove his cocks hard and fast within Emily’s tight clutch, his pulse beating his pleasure as she whined around Vrel’s cock. His twin panted, his hips thrusting quicker, his glowing eyes lifting to meet Vikt’s with a stunned look burning with need. Vikt dropped his eyes, and his eyelid slid closed as he let the pulse of need consume him and become his own heartbeat as his secondary cock vibrated in time

with it. It flowed within the core of his own essence as the rut fell over him, driving him in a rhythm that had her writhing beneath him, her cunt squeezing fiercely with her pleasure. Her muffled cries became louder until he tipped over the edge, spraying his useless seed in stream after stream from his jerking primary cock deep within her as Vrel erupted with a shout.

Gradually his hips slowed and he sagged over her, petting her lovingly as Vrel dropped down into the nest at their side, his chest heaving with the effort it took the male to breathe. Vikt gave him a small smile, delighted to see the same wonder and adoration so clearly on his twin's face when the male stole an infatuated glance at Emily.

Vikt curled himself around her, his smile spreading. He would begin preparations for a proper mating immediately. He had no doubt now that Mother Ewa and the Dark Fathers had chosen correctly when they led Evelyn to select them. Though it pained him that he still would not be able to give her everything that an alpha would, he was determined to make sure that his love and adoration were all that she would need.

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Emily watched curiously from where she was reclined on a pillow near the low table in the living room as her mates attended to their various tasks. They had certainly been busy over the last few days. Vikt was constantly at the small shrine, one that she only just recently noticed over the hearth, paying respect to four carved figures set there.

“Vrel made these,” he had announced proudly as he lovingly set them on the mantle, one by one. He had delivered a teasing grin to Vrel, who had been reclined at her side. “He became very popular in the clan once Sabol saw them and spread the word. Even now he is still making the little gods for other triads,” he added with a chuff of laughter when Vrel’s ears lowered and flicked back with embarrassment.

He murmured to them now in a low voice in some sort of droning chant or prayer while throwing various dry flowers and sweet herbs onto the fire. She helped her mother often enough with reverence to the Mother to recognize the act of ritual and prayer. Vrel, on the other hand, sat in a corner of the room keeping busy with one of his many projects far away from where she reclined so as to not soil the cushions. It had become, more or less, their daily routine that was only interrupted when one of her mates left the house.

Overall, day-to-day life with her mates was not only good, filled with affection, hot sex, endearing antics, and laughter, it was also peaceful. And if it seemed a bit too quiet at times, it didn’t take much effort for her to kick the bee’s nest, so to speak, and stir things up. Despite their mild personalities, her mates possessed an unexpected playfulness with each other which they were happy to include her in. Just thinking about it gave her a warm, fuzzy feeling. She smiled fondly at Vikt’s backside, admiring his lithe yet powerful silhouette. Vikt and Vrel didn’t possess the

bulk that many other Ragoru seemed to have. From just a glance, she had seen how much larger Trish's triad was. Even Sabol, who possessed a leanness to him in comparison to those males, was comparatively large when compared to the graceful build of her mates. And yet she found lean strength to be beautiful and graceful like that of dancers.

She was quite fortunate to have a pair of males who were not only wonderful companions but enjoyable to watch. Not only was his bottom nice, but he had a very nice tail that was currently twitching tantalizingly at her. It was perfectly made to tug. And tugging on tails always led to being chased around the house until she was breathless with laughter, and occasionally even resulted in a good frisky romp. More than anything, however, tugging their tails had quickly become a sort of love language between them that brought them closer in a sense of play even when it did not lead to sex. It was that closeness she craved.

She licked her lips and crept closer to it but immediately froze when Vikt's ears turned toward her. She bit back a grin at the realization that she had been caught. He turned his head and peered back at her over his shoulder, his yellow gaze pinning her with a predatory light. The corners of his mouth curled faintly, and he abandoned the hearth to prowl toward her, his tail stiff except for the tip that flicked playfully. Emily giggled and scrambled back along the cushions, only to fall backward with a shriek of laughter when he pounced. His muscles coiled and released in a fashion that sent him vaulting onto her so that he landed in an intimate crouch, his muzzle brushing her jaw and neck. His breath teased her skin as he breathed her in. That was erotic in itself and would have stirred her arousal above all except for the fact that his two lower hands that were not bracing his weight suddenly climbed along her torso lightly, tickling her.

Emily burst out laughing as she wiggled in an attempt to escape the delicate brush of his claws over her.

“Vikt! You are evil! G-get off,” she sputtered around her laughter.

The male rumbled in amusement, his tongue flicking teasingly along her neck in cold, slick swipes that were somehow just as cold as his damn nose that he was tucking into the warm crook of her neck.

“If my rya is wishing to be entertained by me, then I’m happy to amuse her,” he growled playfully in response, his teeth nipping in butterfly brushes that made her elbow him in helpless protest. “It is not evil to indulge my mate’s playfulness.”

“Maybe I was staring because I wanted to jump your cocks?” she challenged breathlessly as she grinned up at him.

He smirked in reply and lowered his head so close to hers that she could see each distinct band of yellow and gold within his eyes. “When you want my cocks, you have an entirely different look and scent,” he murmured. “You may have been admiring your mate, but this is my playful rya. The one who wishes to play catching games with her mates like a little rabbit.”

She grinned up at him. “Are you saying that you like my tail?”

He chuffed at her, his four eyes gleaming with amusement. “I am saying that you are a ball of unfettered joy who enjoys chaos.” He glanced over at Vrel for confirmation. “Is that not right?”

Vrel coughed pointedly and straightened with a large bucket in his hand. “I have too much to do to be caught in the antics between you two again. I am going to go out and grab some snow to melt before I fetch my beeswax. I need to make up my wood polish so that I can get this finished.”

Emily glanced curiously at his work area but whatever he was crafting was covered

once more with fur. She made a face in protest. “You always keep your projects hidden away. Why won’t you just let us see them? We are your family.”

His head ducked slightly, his ears twisting back and flicking forward again bashfully. “Of course you are, rya, but it is not ready.”

Vikt chuffed sympathetically. “Do not tease him, rya. Vrel has always been this way since we were rogs. He enjoys the big reveal and gets even more restless and twitchy the closer to the end he gets. Go on then,” he said to Vrel, “before you come right out of your fur with your excitement.”

Vrel flashed his twin a grateful smile that completely melted Emily’s heart before hurrying out the doorway into the snow. The blast of cold air and snow was enough of a distraction from her shenanigans that she wiggled out of Vikt’s grasp only to give him a fond smile as she burrowed against his chest and into his fur.

He chuffed again as his warm hand stroked her back. “Cold again, Emily?”

She nodded against his chest. “I have to admit that the winters here are a bit more brutal than I expected.”

Vikt made a soft sound of agreement in his throat. “It can even be hard on Ragoru. In this weather it is easy for even a strong male to become disoriented and lost only to freeze to death before he can find shelter.”

Emily drew back to look at him with disbelief. “What is good is all that fur then?” she demanded. “You cannot tell me it is ornamental.”

“Of course not. We can withstand much that the world throws at us, but storms like this and the coldest of days and nights are something different to contend with. We are not gods,” he chided softly, and Emily felt her lips pull upward at his tone. Even

when she was being ridiculous, he did not raise his voice or make her feel stupid.

Tipping her head back, she rested her chin against his chest and smiled. “It is a good thing I have you to keep me warm. We humans are ridiculously fragile.”

“That you are,” Vikt agreed with a fond chuff of amusement. “But I happen to like small, soft, fragile females who have spirits far too big for their bodies.”

She grinned at that observation and was considering a good come back when Vrel burst back into the house in a state of panic. Her head whipped around to him in surprise, but she was not left guessing long because he gestured toward the door urgently as he looked over at Vikt.

“In... in the snow. I need you to help me,” he pled. He was so rattled that his voice practically shook, and Emily found herself quickly climbing to her feet in response only to be gently nudged back toward the cushions by her other mate.

“Remain here,” Vikt rumbled. “I will assist Vrel. We will be back shortly.”

Vrel nodded in affirmation, but he kept glancing back toward the door so anxiously that the idea of being left inside rankled. If there was a problem, she wanted to be by their side dealing with it, not hidden away from any potential threat. She frowned as she watched them slip out the door. It only took her a moment longer to decide to follow them. Fighting her way out of the cushions, she headed toward the door only to reel back at the last moment when it flung wide open again and both of her mates hurried inside, dragging something large in a pale silvery-gray hue between them. She gaped for only a moment before the snow blowing into the house reminded her to rush over and shut the door, then followed them back over to the cushions where they deposited an enormous Ragoru.

Her eyes went round as she crept up to Vrel’s side and studied the male. Other than

possessing a pale color compared to the warm sable gray of her own mates, he was much larger than Sabol, or any of the males in Trish's triad. The fact of the matter was, if he were standing, he would likely be a couple heads taller than her own mates and possess nearly twice their bulk.

Who the hell was he? Someone from the clan?

She didn't think so. After Evelyn, there had been no visits from any of the neighboring Ragoru. She didn't know how much of that was due to courtesy toward the newly mated and how much was due to their reluctance to share physical space together when unnecessary, but the pamphlet seemed to hint at a natural territoriality with the species. It didn't seem likely that a male would just show up randomly around their house.

"Do you recognize him?" she whispered.

Vrel and Vikt shook their heads in the perfect mirror of each other.

"We are not close to all of the clan, but we would recognize their scent markers from the respective territories within the clan's denning lands. He does not smell familiar."

Vikt scratched his ear. "He may be new. It does not happen often, but on occasion someone new will turn up looking for the promise of a home. I have never heard of anyone turning up during the winter."

Emily bit her lip as she stared down at the male. He was an unknown and that made her nervous about having him in her home. He was so much bigger than her mates that it would likely take him little effort to harm the males if he happened to awaken unexpectedly.

She could ask Evelyn for help... except she hated that she wouldn't be a part of the

trip down to the little red door that marked the woman's house. Her plans to hunt for it had been interrupted by the snowstorm that had descended upon the woods over the last few days. And now, because of said storm, she would be stuck at home while someone else went.

"I suppose we should fetch Evelyn," she commented with a heavy sigh.

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Vrel did not know how he ended up being selected to get Evelyn when he could barely speak properly to other Ragoru at the best of times. It was even more challenging to do so while her mates glowered at him, but somehow he managed to convey the situation clearly enough that not only Evelyn but her alpha, Thral, rushed out with him back to his den while another of her mates, Vrishna, went to fetch a healer. There was no complaint about having to step out into the snowstorm or attempt to delay things until the storm let up. They merely followed him out wordlessly at an urgent pace—so much so that Thral plucked his mate from the snow and carried her through the trees.

Truth be told, Vrel was not only surprised by that. More than anything, he was in awe of just how quickly Evelyn and her mates fell into a smooth pattern of response to his call for help. There was no question of how to proceed. Rather, Evelyn grabbed a pre-packed bag, and the males immediately scattered as they set about their own tasks in what appeared to be a well-choreographed plan. He suspected that it was not the first time they had to respond to an emergency situation with a new arrival.

Thank Efru. The Dark Father's halls of the dead may not be prepared to accept the large male just yet. He did not know if he could handle having someone expire right there in the middle of the den. His lower hands twisted anxiously as he led them inside and hurried to Emily's side where she leaned over the unconscious Ragoru.

Evelyn and Thral solemnly followed him over, their expressions grave. She lay a hand on Emily's arm with a murmured word that had Vrel's mate step back so that they could take over. He was just grateful that they had everything so under control because his insides were twisting with anxiety the entire way back to his den and continued to do so as he hovered around Emily, watching.

The male's eyes and mouth were immediately examined, and Vrel watched curiously as they ran their hands over him only to pause every now and then in their inspection.

"I do not see any wounds," Evelyn commented, and Thral grunted his agreement.

"He did not succumb due to any harm, or poisoning," Thral gruffly replied. "Nor does he appear to be weakened by starvation."

"Definitely not," Evelyn observed. "Wherever he was before arriving in our woods, he clearly was eating well. Even his fur shows signs of good health," she observed as she ran her hand along the pelt on his arm.

Thral's eyes narrowed slightly as they focused on her hand until she removed it with an unapologetic grin. He sighed, his ears flicking as he nodded in agreement.

"It appears that he did, in fact, merely get caught in the storm and was unable to find shelter before it penetrated his pelt enough to adversely affect him." His eyes lifted to meet Vrel's stare. "He is lucky that you found him. I am guessing that he was hunkered in the snow and curled up in an attempt to conserve body heat?"

Vrel nodded wordlessly. That was exactly how he had found him. For a moment he had thought that the male was dead. His first impulse was to flee from the corpse and find a way to hide it before anyone tried to blame him and his twin. It was a completely unreasonable reaction, but it would not have been the first time that they were blamed for attracting some kind of ill fortune due to their peculiarity and driven off by alphas they had approached when they were younger and more optimistic. He had only just been able to fight his impulse to check for signs of life. Discovering that the male was alive did not make him feel a whole lot better—a lone male could just as easily be a danger to them and their mate—but it at least calmed him enough to fetch Vikt so that they could decide together what to do.

He still did not know what they would do from there. A shiver of apprehension ran over him and he stepped behind Emily and curled all four of his arms around her, tucking her close to his body. He was certain that she could hear the worried race of his heart, but if she did, she did not shame him for it. She merely turned enough in his embrace to stroke his fur soothingly.

His eyes slid half-shut as he allowed the calm from her touch spread through him. But his mind continued to work anxiously beyond the physical comfort she offered. What if the male awakened and decided to challenge them for everything they had—especially for their mate? What would they do? How could they protect her? They would have no chance against such a large Ragoru, even with two of them against a lone male.

His throat worked nervously, and he looked over at Thral. “What happens now?”

Please just take him.

Thral’s ear twitched but he swore he saw a faint smile touch the corner of the male’s mouth—as if he knew exactly what Vrel was thinking.

“The healer is on her way to look him over, but I am certain that she will come to the same conclusion that it is best for him to rest here where he can remain warm and recover. It will not help him to take him back out into that weather,” the male gently pointed out.

Vrel’s ears flattened, and he exchanged a worried look with Vikt. Thral was far too observant, however, because the male chuffed with laughter.

“Do not worry so much. If he made it all the way to the clan lands, it means that he is unlikely to act aggressively against those who have taken him in. It could even possibly be good for you,” he added with a meaningful look that made Vrel’s

stomach sour.

His meaning was clear. They could potentially have an alpha for their family. Vrel's ears flattened further with misery. After so many rejections and being run off by alphas, and even having a male threaten to kill them on their old world to lessen competition for resources when Vikt and Vrel proved more adept at hunting smaller and quicker game, a potential alpha in their den was the last thing he wanted to entertain.

"We... do not have a good history with alphas," Vikt replied, giving voice to Vrel's worries.

Thral's ears twitched, a look of sympathy briefly coloring his expression. "Perhaps it is time for that to change. This place that we have made our home is different. The clan is a new opportunity... for all of us."

Vrel grimaced but inclined his head in agreement as Vikt also did so. He was not convinced, but he would care for the alpha and give it all a chance. And Father Zida, great hunter, preserve them if they made a mistake in this. His embrace tightened around his mate as he leaned into his twin's shoulder, watching everyone's movements. Tension coiled within him when the healer arrived with her son, the pair confirming Evelyn and Thral's observations in their hushed conversation. The elder female was spry despite the obvious stiffness in her movement and the slight opaqueness of her eyes as she ordered the younger male around as to what signs to check for. Were it not for the fact that they were suddenly acquiring an unknown alpha, Vrel would have been amused by their interactions. All he felt, however, was an anxiety that only climbed when everyone finally left, leaving behind necessary herbs to replenish the male's strength when he awakened.

He swallowed nauseously. "This will be good... right?"

Vikt's arm curled around him as they stared down at the sleeping male. "It will be good," the male confirmed in an uncertain voice.

It had to be good. They could not afford another disaster.

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Emily studied the unconscious male, pursing her lips. He had been sleeping for a whole day. Shouldn't he wake up soon? It would be good once he was able to leave so that her mates would no longer be distressed by his presence. Granted, it wasn't entirely fair for her to already be thinking about kicking him out when the snow storm raged outside in a whiteout, but at that moment she wasn't feeling particularly compassionate when she saw what the stress of the male's presence was doing to her mates.

Maybe he was faking it?

Leaning forward, she poked the side of his muzzle with a short little jab. Nothing. Hooking her finger, she pulled at the corner of his mouth, drawing back his lip to expose his massive canines. Yikes! She immediately released him and sat back disconcertedly, then jumped at the sound of laughter behind her. Her eyes leaped up to meet Vrel's amused gaze as he entered the room with a mug of tea and set it in front of her.

"Attempting to wake him up, rya?" he teased. "Here I thought we were enough company for you."

Despite his light tone and the note of amusement in his voice, Emily didn't miss the faint shadow of doubt in his eyes. That wouldn't do. She smirked up at him and shook her head.

"More like three is a crowd and I am trying to get rid of him quicker," she quipped. "If he were awake and able to move around by himself, we could probably push him off on Evelyn. And then he could be her problem to worry about instead of ours."

Vikt chuffed quietly as he joined them, his ears tipping toward the male curiously. “He does take up a lot of space.”

“Reminds me of the ratty fur rug my father insisted on keeping despite the fact that it was matted and beginning to fall apart,” she grumbled as she turned and grabbed her brush that she’d left on the small table to her right.

She stared at his mane with a grimace before carefully tackling it. With each tiny stroke of her brush, she gradually began working out twigs, winter straw, and bits of other debris that had become knotted in his once-wet fur. Even one small section of his mane was a terrible chore. She tackled it as patiently as possible, but at length she became increasingly aware of the weight of stares focused her way.

She looked up and had to bite back a smile at the jealousy stamped across the faces of her males, their eyes trained on the brush running through the alpha’s mane. Vrel fidgeted with a segment of his own mane, twisting it unconsciously as if attempting to knot it. She stopped mid-stroke and looked at them curiously until they became aware of the fact, and their eyes gradually pulled away from the male to fix upon her face. Their ears twitched in unison with their embarrassment, but Emily simply smiled in return, keeping her body language relaxed. She wasn’t the least bit upset at their show of territoriality, even if it was slightly misplaced. She knew that the best way to soothe them then was to remain calm and unaffected until they gradually matched her calm state.

Vrel’s ears twitched and pricked toward her, and slowly the tension bled from him. He glanced once more, warily, at the unconscious male before moving quickly to her side to crouch beside her. His reaction seemed to break whatever reluctance Vikt was feeling against standing down and the other male also hastened to her side. Grinning, Emily backed away from the alpha to make room for him so that she could have both of her males right beside her. Their warmth surrounded her as they crouched on either side of her, pressing in close against her. She burrowed into their warmth as eight

arms curled around her. Vikt's tail was just shy of grazing the alpha's face due to their position, but Emily chose to ignore it. As undignified as it probably was, the big male was in no position to complain. And even if he were, he could just suffer through it for a little while. It wasn't like Vikt's butt was directly in his face. So she didn't feel even a little bit guilty about indulging in the closeness with her mates as she brushed her fingers through thick fur at their jaws and sank her hands into the long, dense fur of their manes.

She leaned against Vikt, a contented sigh escaping her as his arms came around her. Settling against him, she brought her brush up and gently began to run it through Vrel's mane. His happy little rumble melted her heart, and she continued to pass it through the thick filaments as she admired the healthy sheen of it as his mane spilled over her hands. It was luxurious in a way that stood out starkly against the pitiful state of the alpha's fur.

Vrel pillowed his head against her legs and brushed his muzzle affectionately against her thigh. "If... if you had a choice," he rasped, "you would not leave us for a chance for a triad and a real family with an alpha, would you?"

Her heart ached at the worry in his voice. "No," she replied quietly as she continued to draw the brush through his mane. "I have the family I want right here. I'm not going anywhere."

Vikt's jaw brushed her hair for a moment before settling against the top of her head with a heartfelt sigh. He held her there, tucking her close to his heart as Vrel rested the weight of his head against her knees. The brush fell from Emily's hand, clattering against the floor as she clung to her mates in turn. Something seemed to pass between them in that moment—a deeper communion and sharing of spirit that brought them closer together as they held each other while the snowstorm howled just outside their walls.

There was no leaving them. Not when her heart spilled over with love for them and the memory of their touch was carved deep within her bones.

This was the forever that she'd been promised. The forever that she had not quite believed through the long trek to them. And now that she had it, she was never giving it back.

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Nash slowly awakened as if painstakingly surfacing from a pool of water. He dragged in a deep breath and shuddered as his eyes opened and he blinked groggily. He was inside. The glow of the fire was unmistakable even if his surroundings were unfamiliar, but at least it was warm. That much was encouraging, even if it was filled with the distinct scent of two Ragoru, and a third scent that was just as powerful but far sweeter and more pleasant that he could not identify. He swiped a hand over his face and sighed with equal measures of relief and exhaustion before turning his head to get a better view of his surroundings. And froze.

A dark gray male with a faint warm undertone to his fur was directly across the room from him. The male was smaller than the average Ragoru and possessed a slender build, but Nash regarded him warily, dread pooling in his belly as the other male turned, locked eyes with him, and also froze in place. The male did not appear aggressive, but that did not tell him much. How many males had he approached since becoming an adult— males who had appeared to possess desirable traits for his triad until they turned on him and drove him away? They had been small, vicious males that snapped their teeth threateningly until he gave up and continued on his way. It was better than the alternative where there would be a chance of hurting the other male.

Despite being an alpha fully capable of leading a triad, he was too large to reassure most males that he would not bully them, and not aggressive enough to enjoy the combative struggles that some males participated in to acquire their triad kin. He could have held them down and gently dominated them until he won their trust in his strength and their compliance, but it never seemed to be worth the effort when he did not enjoy utilizing unnecessary force. By coming to the northern lands in search of the clan he had heard of, he had hoped to find other larger males like himself who

would not be immediately predisposed to finding him a threat. It was just his miserable luck to run into not only a small Ragoru, but the smallest, daintiest male he had ever seen outside of a juvenile. Truthfully, dealing with smaller Ragoru was an exhausting situation that he simply did not care to repeat.

Unfortunately, seeing how he had somehow ended up inside a den with this male, he had the sinking feeling that he was not going to be able to run away to avoid a confrontation this time.

Might as well get it over with.

With an inward groan, Nash sat up and froze in surprise when the male scampered back nervously, his slender ears flattening as his yellow eyes went wide. Nash stared back, caught off guard. He was accustomed to the aggression of males off-put by his size and assumed that he would be cruel because of it, but this male wasn't just unnerved—he was genuinely afraid of him. From all appearances, he seemed to lack an aggressive bone in his body.

Swallowing back the bitter bile that had risen to his mouth, Nash immediately lowered his gaze slightly with the hope to put the male at ease.

“Be at ease. I will not harm you,” he quietly entreated.

From his peripheral eyes, he saw the male shiver but his stiff posture relaxed slightly as his ears pricked briefly toward Nash with curiosity.

“Who... who are you?”

“Nash.” Nash glanced up at him briefly but lowered his primary eyes, keeping only his secondary set directed upon the male as that would be perceived as less threatening. “I am confused. My last memory was that I was lost in the snow. Where

am I?”

“Th-this is our den... my brother, Vikt, and I.” The male visibly swallowed. “I am Vrel. We are members of Alpha Clan—first clan. Y-you are in the clan lands.”

Tension fled from Nash’s shoulders at the words. He had made it.

His secondary gaze roved over the smaller male, taking in his smaller features. It was rare for Ragoru to be born so small unless—a memory surfaced of a pair of twins his mother birthed when he was an older rog. Of a total of five healthy offspring she had birthed, they were the smallest. He had been enchanted when he first spotted them, but the magic of the moment had quickly become a nightmare when his mother, upon inspecting her young, broke their tiny little necks before handing them over to his alpha father. Nash had been struck with such grief and terror that he hid. He refused to come out of hiding, despite the signs of his mother’s own intense grief, until his second father found him and gently explained.

Survival in their world was hard. The two little ones were twins. They had shared a sack in their mother’s womb which, among Ragoru, was as good as a death sentence. It was an anomaly which caused stunted growth, made them more delicate, and because of that they would possess certain disadvantages that would make it difficult for them to survive into adulthood—and even if they managed, they would struggle to fit into a triad and mate. Culling them was a mercy in their world, even if a tragic one. One that his mother privately grieved over for the rest of her life. She never knew that he often followed her after that, her own shadow whenever she sought solitude. And it was a memory that continued to haunt him even as an adult when he finally came of age and left the den.

That this male and his twin survived was extraordinary.

“You are a twin,” he rasped aloud and then immediately regretted his words as he

watched Vrel flinch. “I do not mean that there is anything wrong with this,” he hastily explained, “I have never seen adult twins before.”

Vrel’s ears twitched nervously as he eyed him. “It is rare,” he admitted. “We were the only rogs born to our mother. She was unable and unwilling to exact her mercy upon us, as my alpha father put it.”

There was a hint of bitterness in the male’s voice, and it was clear to Nash that the alpha had possessed a different opinion than the mother. No doubt their mother protected them from the alpha when she refused to kill her offspring.

“Life must have been very difficult for you,” Nash acknowledged. “Not even in regard to your alpha father, but also from other Ragoru. And yet you showed kindness and charity in saving me when many Ragoru would not have. I thank you.”

Vrel’s ears pricked, a flicker of surprise crossing his face. “Th-these are the clan lands,” he replied as if that explained everything.

The corners of Nash’s mouth tipped. The male discounted his own generosity far too easily when it was something he had rarely been treated to among Ragoru. Clan lands or not, the twins had found him and chose to save him when they could have pretended otherwise and left him in the snow to die. Ragoru of Alpha Clan might have taken him if he approached and asked for charity and to be accepted within their clan, but he did not have as much faith that another Ragoru would have gone out of their way to save him from death.

“Still, I thank you for your kindness,” he rumbled. “There are many males who have seen a male like me and would have let me die due to worry that I would seek to harm them.”

The male’s ears flattened to the sides with obvious embarrassment, but Nash was

pleased to see him become more relaxed. Vrel peered at him, and to Nash's surprise the male took several cautious steps toward him.

"It did occur to me," Vrel admitted. "Not to leave you," he immediately amended with another embarrassed flick of his ears, "but that you might harm us... and our mate."

The last was said so quietly that, for a moment, Nash thought he had imagined it.

"You have a mate?" he queried, just to make sure he had heard right. He glanced around cautiously. "Your alpha?—"

"Oh! No, there is no alpha," Vrel interrupted with a nervous chuff. "Evelyn, the human who established the clan, thought that a mate would be good for us. She did not understand the... uniqueness... of twins."

Nash did not know a lot about twins, but this was one point his second father expounded on during his explanation: the reason why it was difficult for twins to be able to successfully mate. The uniquely close connection between the twins that made it nearly impossible for them to be accepted into a triad would also interfere with their ability to mate without another male to act as alpha. Neither twin would be able to take the position of alpha over the other. And yet they had a family because of the clan. It gave Nash hope. It also explained what that third scent was.

"How do you..." he began delicately, and Vrel's head dipped as the male gave another awkward chuff.

"Our Emily is not only very understanding but willing to assist us," he admitted. He fidgeted in place, his tail flicking nervously. "She is very strong, brave, and kind... and..." his eyes rose to lock directly in a faint, if very nervous, challenge with Nash's secondary eyes, "and she will never leave us."

Nash's mouth curved in response to the defiance. Despite his obvious unease, the male was letting him know in no uncertain terms that he could not steal their female from them. It was admirable and sweet to see that level of devotion and affection, not only on the part of the males but hearing it of the female.

"He is right," a feminine voice interrupted, startling Nash so much that his head turned toward the voice.

He had been so distracted by Vrel, and the den was so laden with the combined smells of the twins and their female that he had not noticed her approach. His breath left him, however, as he stared upon her. Humans possessed an unusual appearance that bordered on ugly in some respects and yet there was a uniqueness to it that was interesting. And with Emily, her interesting appearance was as captivating as her delicious scent.

"Emily, I presume," he rumbled.

She inclined her head in agreement as a second male, identical to Vrel except for the braid he wore behind his left ear in contrast to the braid behind Vrel's right ear, peered at him warily.

Her lips worked silently, and her gaze was guarded... cautious. He might have thought that it was entirely out of worry for her own safety if it was not for the way she regularly sought out her males with her eyes as if silently weighing their own wellbeing.

"I mean no harm," he repeated, lowering his head further. "And I extend my thanks to you as well for seeing to my welfare. And I also extend my appreciation to meet a female of such generous spirit as to be a loving mate to twins."

A look of surprise crossed her face, but she must have been educated by her mates on

the lot of twins because the icy reserve in her eyes melted a little and she exchanged a glance with the male behind her before once more meeting Nash's secondary eyes.

“Thank you, but it is not necessary. They are mine and I could do no less. Nor could I do less than what I did for you seeing that you were in need. But I am relieved to see that you understand the situation so well. And now that you are awake?—”

“Now we eat,” the other male, Vikt, interrupted as he exchanged a look with his twin before regarding Nash with outright curiosity.

Nash was not sure what Emily had intended to say but the disbelief on her face communicated that it was not that. But she did not disagree. Instead, she smiled and nodded, and he felt relief flood through him to such a degree that he dared to lift his primary eyes to them.

“I could eat,” he admitted, and her smile grew.

“Then we eat,” she agreed.

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Vikt tried not to stare at Nash, but as the evening wore on, the more excited he grew. Although the male was a very large alpha who could have easily crushed them, he radiated a kindness and propensity for cheerfulness that eased Vikt's heart. It gave him hope despite the fact that he had known far too many devastating disappointments from alphas in the past. Throughout their meal, Thral's words kept returning to his mind that the alpha's presence could be good for them. He did not think that the male was a seer and yet those words teased his consciousness.

Those words gave him further hope, but convincing Emily to accept a male she had been in a hurry to get rid of from the start could take a little more work. He knew that it was in part due to her sense of duty and affection that she wanted to protect them and preserve their feelings, but she did not understand how natural it was for Ragoru to wish for a triad in their family. If the male proved himself to be as good as an alpha as he showed himself to be, they could accept him easily among them and welcome his strength. But Emily had become comfortable, and he understood that it would need more coaxing for her to see the benefit of opening their family to him.

"You will stay with us, of course," he pointed out, taking advantage of the moment the conversation turned to the snowstorm. "It will get even worse before it eases up at all. We usually have one or two days of passable weather before—" He snapped his mouth shut, cutting off the direction of his thoughts, and gave the male a nervous smile. "Well, before it grows heavy again. There is no reason for you to leave when we have plenty of room. We do not have a spare nest, however."

Nash blinked at him, clearly startled by the offer, but the male's expression quickly softened with gratitude that sent a swell of warmth through Vikt. "My thanks. And do not concern yourselves. I can sleep well enough in the main chamber?—"

“No, that will not work,” Vrel interrupted, startling the alpha anew. Vikt bit back a smile, grateful that he and his twin tended to think and plot in the same direction. “It takes a lot of extra wood to keep that chamber warm enough at night with the temperatures dropping as they have. Now that you are no longer unconscious, you can join us in our nest to share in the warmth rather than exhaust the wood supply.”

Emily and Nash wore matching expressions of surprise as they glanced between him and Vrel before looking at each other uncertainly.

Emily cleared her throat and smiled at Vikt. “Are you sure that would not be awkward for you and Vrel?”

“Not at all,” he replied earnestly. “Sharing body heat to keep warm is common with Ragoru. Is that not the case for humans?”

Her cheeks pinkened faintly but she nodded. “It is known to happen. I just did not realize that it was something that Ragoru were comfortable with considering how territorial you are.”

He chuffed at her comment. “We have adapted to life easily in the clan lands, which makes me wonder what our homeworld was like before it began to die and if we did not live in a similar fashion. We like our private space with our dens, but we know and trust each other. On the hunt or even function communally we will rest close together to warm each other.”

“You do not know me,” Nash pointed out, but Vikt shrugged.

“We know enough and will know you even better before there is a break in the storm,” he replied. “In any case, you are in our den, so we have already accepted you into our most private space anyway.”

“Vikt is right,” Vrel joined in. “It makes little difference at this point. We might as well be warm.”

Emily’s mouth opened and closed a few times in surprise, but in the end she assented with a tiny nod. He did not push, nor did Vrel. If she had truly insisted that the male not enter their nest they would have agreed. He suspected why she had not. The alpha was very likable. She might not be ready to accept Nash as alpha—nor had he offered to be the alpha of their triad—but it was a positive beginning, and Vikt was even more encouraged by the humble agreement of the male as he glanced toward their mate shyly.

Oh, Nash correctly read her reluctance and was putting no pressure on her, but he was definitely interested, and he did not disdain Vikt’s company nor Vrel’s. It was looking even more encouraging by the minute.

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“It is late,” Vikt observed with a yawn as he rose from the large cushion he was stretched out upon. “Are you ready to rest, rya?”

Emily smothered a yawn and nodded but couldn't help an uncertain look in Nash's direction. He didn't meet her gaze nor move at all from where he lay staring up at the ceiling with half-closed eyes.

“I am ready,” she murmured aloud as she got to her feet.

“I am as well,” Vrel agreed as he too rose to his feet and stepped over the scattered cushions to join them.

“Nash?” Vikt prompted but the male's gaze shifted to the hearth.

“I will follow in a moment. I wish to enjoy more of the fire before it dies down. I will be sure to bank the coals before I join you.”

A look of impatience touched Vikt's expression, but it was so fleeting that Emily wasn't sure if she imagined it or not. It was quite possible that Vikt just didn't want the alpha to be alone his first night officially as a guest in their den, especially as it seemed that Nash was as much of an outcast among Ragoru as her mates were. They clearly felt empathy and a sense of kindred spirits with the male. However Nash felt about it, it was obviously a lot for the alpha to become accustomed to. Unlike her mates, he did not have a twin to share the burden of loneliness with over the years.

“Come on,” Emily murmured as she placed her hand on Vikt's arm, just in case he had any thought of protesting and making things awkward for the male. “Nash will

find us when he is ready.”

Vikt glanced down at her, and once again she swore that she saw a hint of frustration in his gaze but was distracted when Vrel joined her at her other side and lifted her up into his arms.

“Come, little rya,” he teased. “You are so tiny that the nighttime temperatures in this den will certainly sink right into your bones.”

“I’m not that little,” she protested with a mock growl and laughed when Vrel nipped her jaw so tenderly that she didn’t even feel a sting from his teeth. She only felt the erotic shiver that came from his fangs grazing her skin.

Adjusting the grip of his lower arms under her bottom, Vrel glanced over at Vikt and tipped his head toward the hallway. Vikt appeared reluctant to leave Nash alone but he nodded and, with one last parting glance toward the alpha, followed them down the hallway.

They made their way quietly to their nest but the moment they were behind a closed door, Emily giggled as Vrel’s muzzle dove down against her neck only to drop further into her cleavage.

Emily smiled and blocked the downward path of his nose with the flat of her hand. “Do you really think we should be doing this with Nash out there?”

Vrel lifted his head and gave her a curious glance. “Would you prefer to do it with him in here?”

She balked, her face flooding with heat. “That is not what I meant.”

Vikt chuffed and nudged Vrel with his shoulder gently so that he didn’t accidentally

drop her. “He knows that. He thinks he is being amusing.”

Emily bit back a smile as she gave the male in question a chastising look that he accepted with the grace of a mischievous smile proffered in return. Lowering his head, he rubbed his cheek against her lovingly before bounding energetically toward their nest.

Despite her words, Emily curled her arms around his neck between two of the bony defensive plates that protruded from between his shoulders and the back of his skull as he lowered her onto the pile of cushions and furs. Her fingers teased the long locks of his mane as she smiled invitingly up at him. He lowered himself slowly to her side, and one of his hands came to brush her jaw in cupping her cheek. Vikt rumbled quietly, the sound something like velvet buffing over her senses, and she shivered as he settled behind her. His hands skimmed her arms as Vrel petted her belly and waist with small, warm strokes of his fingers. Her eyelashes lowered with a sigh of pleasure as eight hands explored her, brushing over her in just the right way to send tiny butterfly tremors rushing all over her.

Her lips parted on a sigh as her shirt was pulled off her and Vrel’s cool tongue teased the sensitive skin along the top of her breasts. She was happy that she had stopped wearing bras because Vrel’s mouth closed around her nipple quickly and Vikt lapped at the other before tugging it gently into the depth of his mouth. Unlike the caress of their tongues under the contact with air, the inside of their mouths was hot, and each drag on her nipples between their fangs sent a pulse between her legs. The tantalizing sensation made her arousal bloom in a warm pool that gathered first within her belly, and then dripping from within her cunt.

Impatient hands tugged her skirt down around her waist and off her hips before Vrel gathered the material into his lower hands and tossed it impatiently aside. He panted eagerly as he stared down at her with hungry, luminous eyes.

Emily smiled coyly up at him as she sat up just enough to curl her fingers around his swollen sheath. He made a garbled sound of pain and desire as she rubbed her fingers over his concealed thickness. He still needed this from her—both of her mates did—but she never got tired of it. She treated it almost ritualistically now: petting and stroking their sheathes with her fingers until she worked her way down to its base. She could feel his hot precum against her palm where the very tip of his primary cock had emerged from its sheath. It trailed a slick path against her as she cupped him with her opposite hand while she continued to stroke him until his hips snapped up with each tug. Tiny growls erupted from him as he whined and writhed against her hold until at last she curled her fingers around that sensitive spot and squeezed so that his cocks exploded forth with a hot stream of precum bathing her hand.

“Emily,” he rasped, and she slid her hand down the length of his bared primary cock so that he trembled against her, his big body leaning into her with ecstasy.

“It’s okay. Just go with it,” she murmured in turn as she slicked her hand down the pebbly surface and thickly veined length of his primary cock.

The angled flat head covered an impressive area. From the tip to the bottom of the ruffled head was just a little over half the length of her palm. It was no wonder it felt so wonderful inside of her. Just beneath it, the bumpy length of his secondary phallus brushed the back of her hand, sending a little shiver through her. She gently squeezed its bulbous head, and Vrel’s breath quickened as his muscles leaped with anticipation. Leaning forward, she pressed a tiny kiss to its tip before dropping back to roll onto her knees and lift her bottom into the air. Vrel crept forward eagerly, and Emily reached behind her to grip his primary cock and bring the tip flush with her sex. He didn’t need any more encouragement than that. His hips snapped forward, driving the ruffled head into her channel, stretching her with a teasing, brushing sensation as he pressed deep within her.

Emily groaned and cupped his secondary cock beneath her palm to press it against

her clit, and every bump rubbed against her as his hips rocked gently and he thrust carefully within her. Vrel always treated her as if she were spun glass, and she always privately enjoyed it even when it frustrated her as much as it currently was in the midst of their intimacy. As thick as his primary cock was, she wanted and needed more of it. She pressed back, meeting him thrust for thrust as she squeezed his secondary cock so that he growled and his hips jerked and drove forward with his pleasure. He went with her playfulness, his hips kicking forward at every instigation so that he would ram his cock into her in ways that made her cunt clench pleurably around him. Finally, Vrel grunted and adjusted his position crouched over, his large body covering her, and his hips swived, burying his cock in her with a firm thrust that nearly drove her breath from her lungs.

“Our Emily,” he rasped into her hair. “Our mate.”

The muscles of his belly curled against her back, his breath coming in sharper pants as she whimpered with every thrust that drove him into her sheath and rubbed his secondary cock in a quick glide against the outer parts of her sex and clit until she could barely breathe properly with the combined effect. Hot pleasure began to blaze deep within her as his tempo quickened, and his primary cock barely withdrew more than a few inches before driving back in to fill her completely in a thumping crescendo that nearly lifted her off her knees as his cock drove repeatedly against the mouth of her womb. Emily began to cry out as she began to quiver and shake intensely with the rising pleasure.

She rocked back and forth on her hands and knees when she could, her breasts swinging freely as her sex rippled with the pleasure from the pendulous weight of their movement. Her sex creamed and dripped as his cock shuttled in and out of the slippery mess, thickening it with the streams of precum that his cock spat into her with every stroke. She was dripping with their mingled juices and yet it sent an extra curl of heat through her pleasure, and she was finally forced to brace herself as his hips took on a pulsing that made her toes curl and thighs clench seconds before she

exploded with ecstasy.

Vrel followed her over, his growls rising over her cries as he emptied himself into her with hot ropes of cum flooding her channel and bathing her deepest recesses. He pulled away with a moan, his cock tugging free in such a way that it sent a little pulse of pleasure rocketing through her.

Gasping, she fell forward on her elbows, and she focused on drawing in gulps of air as her body twitched with the spasm shooting through her sex. Vikt kneeled before her, watching her patiently. She knew that he would wait for however long it took for her to invite him to join with her. It was practically torture for him to stare so quietly at her, waiting expressionlessly while she felt as if she was still burning up inside with her desire.

“Come here,” she whispered and immediately smiled when he crept forward as he maintained his crouch, his gaze sliding over her in a manner that seemed almost reverent.

Come to think of it, Vrel had also worn the same expression. If it were anyone else, she might have been worried about having that much power and influence over another person. But with them it felt natural and right. It wasn't power over them but an exchange of power between them, each giving and taking in their own way.

She squeezed Vikt's sheath with slightly more force, and the male nearly doubled over with his groan of pleasure as his cocks shot forward, the upper cock driving into her mouth as her lips parted for it. Her mate snarled, his primary cock spasming as it pulsed its sweet, sticky substance over her tongue. Holding him tightly within her mouth, she stroked her tongue over the slick ruffles of its head, teasing and sucking on them until she felt the bite of his claws against her scalp and shoulders where he had come to grip her. Emily bobbed her head a few times, sucking and lapping against his length until he was nearly crazy with it, and the sting from his claws grew

sharper until she finally released him from her mouth with a gasped moan.

It didn't take long for Vikt to notice what he'd done and jerk his hands back in horror, but she merely smirked up at him as he stared down at her with wild eyes. Grinning up at him shamelessly, she leaned back and spread her legs in invitation until the male fell over her with a growl. His big body covered hers, and his hips thrust instinctively with his maddened desire. It was only by chance that he found the mark that first time, and not only his primary cock slipped within her readied sheath but his secondary cock split her well-lubricated ass upon its tip, stretching both holes tightly around him. Emily made a choked sound as she lifted her own hips in response, and Vikt's growl of pleasure vibrated through her. Although she'd had both of his cocks stuffed within her cunt before, this was the first time either he or Vrel opened her so completely.

Her ass and cunt squeezed in response, and Vikt flew into motion, his hips driving against her with the enthusiasm of a male who had been painfully aroused while his twin had rutted her. Now that it was his turn, Vikt coupled with her in complete abandon as he rocked in a frenzied tempo, his cocks plunging into her and filling her entirely. She writhed beneath him as her pleasure mounted far too rapidly and uncontrollably, and this had the consequence of rubbing her bouncing breasts even more rapturously against the hard muscles of his torso and his silken fur.

She cried out as she was pitched once more into ecstasy and her mate followed her over the edge with a snarl that vibrated through her, increasing her own pleasure until she gripped his fur viciously as she was caught in throws of her bliss. He did not protest her hold. Instead, his cock seemed to swell even more as it jerked, releasing hot streams with every grind of the ruffled head of his cock against the mouth of her womb, lighting up every sensitive spot there as she shuddered helplessly against him. She was still shaking when he withdrew from her with a whine and dropped to her side.

His arms closed around her, and he held her there against him until her shivering subsided. He cocooned her so thoroughly with his warmth that, as usual, she didn't immediately notice the work of her other mate in cleaning her gently but thoroughly between the legs. Emily rolled in Vikt's grasp just enough to smile sleepily over at Vikt as he watched her with frank admiration and adoration as he cleaned her. They always took turns with this responsibility but neither seemed to find it objectionable. They always looked just this pleased to be caring for her.

At last, Vrel tossed aside the rag and curled up on her other side, his arms tucking around her as well. They lay like that for a while, and Emily felt her eyes closing drowsily only to snap back open briefly at the sound of the door opening.

Nash.

The male's head turned slowly, his muzzle lifting slightly, informing her that he was sniffing the air. She wanted to bury herself in the furs out of sheer embarrassment, but the male didn't comment on it. He directed only the briefest glance her way, his gaze burning right through her with a strange intensity before climbing into the nest to curl against Vrel's side. His sides expanded as he took a huge breath and then he expelled it in a long sigh, his ear twitching slightly as he gave every sign of drifting to sleep.

Emily stared at the ridged back of his head for several minutes before she too finally allowed herself to slip into slumber.

Night after night they followed the same routine. They would eat and enjoy their time stretched out on their cushions in front of the fire, sometimes talking or playing games involving polished stones or notched sticks that each had a different value. In the end Vikt always suggested that they retire to bed and made a conscious effort to invite Nash to join them in the nest. Some nights he followed them back promptly, but more often than not he dallied a while, giving Emily time alone to enjoy

connecting intimately with her mates. He pretended not to know what they were doing. He never commented on it when he decided to stay back, nor did he comment on the scent of their passions when he joined them and dropped down into the nest at their side, or at any point the following day. He gave every appearance of being unbothered and having no reaction to the activities she engaged in with her mates or sleeping so close to her every night.

And yet every night she watched him sniff the air as he entered their nest. And every night she swore she saw the heat within his yellow eyes blaze and brighten with hunger just simmering and waiting for the right time. And gods help her that she had begun to look forward to seeing that hunger painted so starkly within his eyes.

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Vrel crouched low as he secretly regarded the alpha. He was not altogether certain that Nash did not know he was there, but if he did, he chose to ignore his presence. The male paced through the heavy snow, the falling flakes clinging persistently to his fur. The pelt along his shoulders, back, upper arms and legs, in addition to his long mane, kept the snow far enough from his body heat that he appeared coated in the dust of crystals.

His ears tipped toward Nash uncertainly and he glanced back toward the doorway. Vikt was inside assisting Emily with her bath. Vrel normally would be there as well, except he was distracted by the alpha's odd behavior. Nash truly wished to stand outside in the snow for such a long time. He enjoyed snow as much as the next Ragoru but with the snow whipping around the cold, cutting air, he did not understand the appeal.

"You may join me," Nash rumbled, his deep voice breaking the silence of the night.

Vrel's ears flattened slightly with indecision. Join him... without Vikt? It was unthinkable. While Vikt often hunted with the other males within the clan, Vrel had never spent company with another Ragoru without his twin as a buffer.

"Or not," Nash continued with a wry chuff. "I forget sometimes."

Bouncing uncertainly for a moment, Vrel finally stepped toward the other male, his ears lowering instinctively at the brush of falling snow. "What do you forget?"

Nash swung around, his head craning over his shoulder as he grinned at Vrel. "How it is with twins." He cocked his head. "Have you ever done anything without Vikt?"

Vrel swallowed but shook his head, his ears flattening completely against his skull at the line of questioning. “Only Emily.”

Nash’s brow arched, the pale snow clinging to him emphasizing his expression. “You have mounted your mate without him? That is bold. Even among triads, the interest in sharing is strong enough to discourage that. Males who are comfortable not sharing often are males who cannot truly share and seldom find a mate.”

“Not that,” Vrel hastened to reassure the male, embarrassment rolling through him. He was no deviant rogue to be worried about. “I meant to say that I spend time... alone... with Emily. Just no one else.”

He fidgeted in place, his paws scuffing the snow beneath him. “I am not a very good hunter,” he admitted. “Males who tolerate Vikt’s company think that I am useless.”

Nash frowned back at him, his concern evident on his face. “And Vikt allows them to speak in such a fashion about you?”

A smile split Vrel’s muzzle at the thought, and he shook his head with a chortle of amusement as he crept closer to Nash. “No. My brother is smaller than they are and does not enjoy violence, but he always gets in one good blow before they trounce him.”

A hard look crossed Nash’s face, and Vrel’s smile fell. He regretted saying anything now.

“They trounce him,” Nash repeated, his voice cool.

Vrel lifted his upper arms helplessly. “Have you not met us? My brother is braver and more outgoing than I am, but neither of us is strong... or large... or really capable of showing aggression and dominance. We are easy to overcome, and they do so to

make a point, for the same reasons that Vikt attacks despite the odds.”

Nash growled unhappily but settled heavily into the snow, tipping his head back and lifting his eyes to the bright moon visible between the branches of the nearest trees. Vrel’s gaze shot up to the beauty of the moon and dropped back to the male for a long moment before he crept over the snow, closing the distance that separated them. Lowering himself into the snow at Nash’s side, he gave the alpha a cautious smile when Nash’s gaze briefly flicked to him and warmed.

Vrel’s tension eased and his heart lightened as he followed the alpha’s form and leaned back to admire the moon. His breath caught for a moment at the sight of the pale moon riding high over the snow laden trees as it shone down at them from a break in the clouds. Its light sent a beautiful shimmer over the snow upon the ground and the faintest hint of luminance to the snowflakes falling from the sky. Suddenly he wanted to rush inside and rip Emily from her bath so that she too could admire the sight, but his mouth twisted wryly as he imagined what her reaction would be if she were thrust, soaking wet, out into the snow. Lacking in fur and size to keep her adequately warm, she would not be very pleased.

“You and your twin should not be fighting to survive alone,” Nash grumbled after a moment, his voice once more cutting the weighty silence. Vrel stilled as his chest tightened with fear and an undeniable surge of wonder. “Especially not with a mate,” he continued. “You can barely take care of yourselves, much less a mate.”

Vrel’s brow lowered into scowl at the insult—whether it was intentional or not mattered little. The male clearly thought that they were incapable. It seemed that the moment they had briefly captured fled. “You believe that we are incapable of caring for our mate?” he bit out as he shoved to his feet.

The glance Nash cast upon him was one of surprise. “No, not that,” he quickly objected. “I just mean that you deserve a triad—an alpha who will care for you. And

for your mate. It is difficult for any Ragoru without a full triad. Even for an alpha. You saw for yourself how close I came to dying on my own. All three of you deserve more,” he added, ears tipping uncomfortably to the sides of his head.

Peering at the male, Vrel’s annoyance fled, and a new warmth settled within the pit of him. Nash wished to join their family. He was certain of it. He did not understand how the alpha had resisted drowning in Emily’s musk night after night—and for a moment he had been concerned that Vikt was wrong and that the male was not affected by their mate.

It seemed that they were right after all.

Vrel met Nash’s gaze steadily and inclined his head in a stiff nod of acknowledgement despite the pool of nervous excitement gathering within the pit of his belly. “You are right,” he admitted as he turned away to head back to the house, hiding his smile until his back was turned to the male.

“You are leaving?” The note of disappointment was evident in Nash’s voice, and Vrel barely kept himself from trembling with excitement as he stooped to gather more of the firewood to warm the den.

A male wishing to join them was good fortune, but it was doubly more so that the alpha wanted to bond with them properly rather than simply desiring access to their mate. The latter happened more often than anyone wished to admit, especially with less desirable males attempting to join an established and strong triad that had perhaps lost a member to some detriment. A settled female was often worth overlooking such flaws. Nash gave him hope for the future of their den.

Vrel straightened and waved a segment of split wood at Nash with a smile. “Back to Emily. As much as I enjoyed this interaction, my mate is bathing, and I do not wish to miss all of it.”

Tucking the wood under his arm, he spun away, a wide grin stretching across his muzzle at the defeated groan that rose up from the alpha behind him as Vrel hurried inside. It was only a matter of time.

Dropping the wood in its proper bin and shaking the excess snow and water from his fur, Vrel trekked over to where the tub was set up in front of the hearth, his gaze alighting on his mate with delight. Submersed entirely in hot water, she was a vision to him with her wet hair slicked over her head and floating in the water that was deep enough to just barely cover the tops of her breasts. With the water and firelight, she had a warm radiance to her that made Vrel want to hold her tightly close.

Her eyes rose to him as he dropped beside her, his fingers teasing the surface of the water as he draped one arm over its side. Her lips curled in response as her gaze dropped down to his claws tracing little patterns against her wet skin.

“How was the weather outside?” she murmured. “The snow still coming down? You look slightly chilled.”

Vrel shook his head in denial but lifted his eyes to meet his twin’s gaze. “No. It was not too bad. Nash was out there, in fact.” He replied slowly so Vikt would catch everything he meant to convey. “And it was perfect. Better than one could hope for.”

“Really?” Emily laughed and gave an exaggerated shiver. “You guys are crazy. I wish I had thick fur like you.”

His gaze dropped to their mate and he smiled, his heart filling with adoration. “Unnecessary. We will keep you warm.”

“Yes,” Vikt agreed slowly, his eyes glowing with visible anticipation. “Very warm indeed.”

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Emily felt like she was in the middle of something that she did not understand the rules of. While she had been initially a little disappointed that she had not received a full triad, she had come to adore Vikt and Vrel and enjoyed their life together and had been content with the idea that they wouldn't allow any other Ragoru to interrupt the peace of their family.

And now there was Nash and things felt like they were shifting in unexpected but not wholly unwelcome ways. And it was the fact that she wasn't feeling a kneejerk reaction to reject the way things were changing that concerned her. Did she not feel the depth of feeling and commitment for Vikt and Vrel that she thought she did?

The idea that she could be so fickle unsettled her and made her anxious even as her affection for the big alpha grew as each day passed. And with the snowstorm blowing furiously outside, she could even get enough distance to truly test her feelings.

She exhaled in exasperation as she rounded the corner from the corridor leading from the sub chambers into the main room. She proceeded to stumble to a stop as Nash's head turned toward her and the male straightened from where he had been crouched beside the hearth, the prominent plating along his spine and the back of his skull somehow even more visible than that of her mates and more imposing.

"Emily," he rumbled in greeting, his deep voice vibrating in a way that made her pulse quicken.

"Nash. What are you doing here?" she inquired politely as she took a step into the room so that he wouldn't perceive any reluctance on her part when it came to being in the same room with him. "I thought your plan was to assist Vikt today to restock the

firewood in the back room from the outer building.”

He inclined his head in agreement. “We just finished. He sent me in ahead while he checked a couple of traps near the den for fresh game.” The corners of his mouth twisted in amusement. “He claimed that I was still recovering, and he did not wish for me to stay outside too long and sicken.”

Emily laughed softly despite herself. “That sounds like something Vikt would say. He has a big heart.”

“They both have this way to them,” Nash agreed with a chuffing chuckle of his own, his tail flicking with his amusement. “It is rare to see such qualities among Ragoru. Sometimes I wonder what we once were—if our species was more like those males before survival made us harsher and more aggressive to survive. We are predators first and foremost, but,” he shook his head in wonder, his ears flattening slightly to the side, “they make me hope that we must have once been better. And maybe could be again.”

Emily peered at him, surprised by his deeply contemplative words. Although the Ragoru were cunning and far from stupid, she didn’t expect that. Even Vikt and Vrel did not seem to spend much time reflecting on their past on their homeworld. They would answer her questions, but beyond telling her of the experiences that they remembered, they did not seem to give the past any great weight.

“That was then... before,” Vikt had replied with a yawn as Vrel grumbled in agreement. “That life was in a different world. It is not important. But life here, in the clan, is good. Our future here is all that matters. If we do our part, we will be happy and safe.”

Nash must have picked up on the direction of her thoughts because he chuffed quietly. “Vikt and Vrel do not speak of the homeworld, do they?”

She gave him a guarded look in reply, not wanting to unintentionally make her mates appear less in the alpha's eyes, but the male flicked his claws absently in the air.

"I mean nothing by it. It is normal, I believe. I would not be surprised if many Ragoru within the clan prefer to forget about our life there and who we were. Here there are safe territories and full bellies. It is comforting to forget the violence and starvation." A shadow passed over his face, but it disappeared altogether when he smiled at her. "I spent much time alone, which gave me a lot of time to think. And to wonder."

Emily nodded slowly in response. She could understand that. "Are you hoping to discover your past by coming to the clans, or to find something new?"

His yellow eyes blinked at her in surprise, but then he grinned, not the least bit affronted by her question.

"I think I was interested to see if it could happen. It seemed impossible," he admitted. "My decision was equal parts hope and curiosity. More than anything, I needed a place to belong." His ears twitched and he glanced back toward the fire. "I have been alone too long. It is not good for my kind. Being alone too long can cause rogue behavior and madness. I have lost so much in life—I do not wish to lose myself."

Emily fidgeted, suddenly disconcerted with the direction of their conversation. Despite feeling a strong draw to the male, she had blocked him out as strictly an intruder, a potential aggressor and threat to her new family. She hadn't imagined—or perhaps hadn't wanted to imagine—that he was a male with profound pain, damaged with the rest of his species in ways that she couldn't even begin to comprehend.

A world and a lifetime filled with starvation and violence as they fought every day to survive. The Ragoru were not invaders as so many people in the capital believed them to be—as Trish saw them. They were refugees from the edge of death given a second chance for a home and life that they had never experienced. Nash wasn't there

trying to disrupt her mates' happiness or to even force himself into their lives. Nash was just looking for a place to belong, a family, and chance alone delivered him at their door.

Her gaze lifted to the mantle level with his ear. The four carved images made by Vrel's own hand. She was never sure how much she believed in the Mother, but there was a softness sculpted in the female's expression despite her superior size to the male around her. Mother Ewa radiated a certain grace in that moment that could have easily been a trick of the firelight, but Emily was certain that a warmth was present within the small carved image. As if it were all meant to be.

Nash followed her gaze to the little figures, and he grunted softly in acknowledgment. "Mother Ewa and the Dark Fathers surely saved me that day when they delivered me through the forest and brought Vrel to me."

She swallowed and brushed her hands nervously against her skirt. "Do you believe that?"

The alpha glanced over at her in surprise. "There is no doubt. What else could it be but their grace that bestowed such good fortune upon me. It would have been enough to have been rescued from death's sleep in the snow, but to have found warmth and affection with Vikt and Vrel... and you," he rumbled in a husky rasp that shot to her belly. "It is every blessing I have ever wished and prayed for."

A blush rose into her cheeks and she glanced around the room, praying for something to distract her from the intensity of the moment. "Are... are you hungry?" she stammered. "There are some dried apples. Vikt and Vrel do not like breads or things made from dough—I think it may be due to Ragoru tastes," she added and internally winced at her obvious rambling. She drew in a steadying breath and smiled over at him. "They both agree that I make a delicious cobbler, if you would like to assist me."

His ears pricked with interest. “Assist you in preparing this food?”

“In baking, yes,” she agreed as her blush worked higher up her face. Please just hurry up and accept, or decline and put me out of my misery.

The set of his ears relaxed and he smiled, bringing warmth into his eyes so that they brightened like luminous pools that stole her breath. “I would be delighted.”

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Nash glanced around the space she called the kitchen. He was familiar with its location because Vikt and Vrel frequently disappeared within there, but he had not felt bold enough to explore the den in its entirety uninvited. He understood, in general, that it was the small food storage and preparation room. He recalled something far simpler in the den he grew up in, but the concept was not lost on him. Although food was prepared in the main chamber of the den, food storage was carried out in a series of small chambers interconnected by its own tunnel. The human-fashioned dens were designed a little differently, not only possessing a larger structure despite their diminutive size but also having numerous heat sources.

To his surprise, Vrel was already present in the kitchen. The male stood over a large gray boxy structure that radiated heat as he stirred something in a large vessel sitting on top of it. Emily went over to the male and drew his head down, and she went up onto her toes to rub her cheek against his and press her soft human lips to the side of his muzzle. Vrel's gaze turned toward her immediately, his tail flagging with pleasure. Nash shrank back slightly, uncertain if his presence was intrusive.

"Rya, did you need something from the kitchen?" Vrel inquired as he cast a curious glance in Nash's direction.

To Nash's relief, there was no hostility within the male's eyes or even a faint trace of annoyance. Just warmth and curiosity. His muscles relaxed as a feeling of peace and happiness flooded through him. He was not a stranger intruding someplace he did not belong. Vrel was treating him as a member of his family who just happened to unexpectedly enter the place where he was working.

She shook her head, and Nash felt immediately included within the circle of intimacy

when she turned toward him with a smile. “Not at all. Just keep doing what you are doing. We won’t be in your way. Nash and I are just going to be putting together an apple cobbler. I can sneak it into the oven once we are done.”

Vrel’s eyes left Nash and lit up with obvious delight as he glanced back toward his mate. “You are? Is there anything I can do to assist? This will keep well enough on its own for a while.”

Nash glanced back and forth between the pair, wondering if now he would be dismissed in favor of the male who was her mate, but to his surprise she reached over and grabbed his lower left hand, tugging him over to her side.

“Nash is going to help me put together the spices, and we will get started on the topping while you fill a basket with apples.” She directed the other male to the back of the room with a tip of her head.

Would Vrel object now to being sent away while he remained by her side? He eyed the male uncertainly, but he was surprised again when Vrel’s ears pricked and he nodded quickly in agreement as he headed toward the wall and picked up a basket stacked among others there.

Straightening with the basket tucked under his arm, he gave Nash a sly look. “Have fun and try not to breathe too deeply,” he advised with a quiet chuff.

“Not breathe?” he queried, his brow dipping in confusion.

“Ignore him,” Emily laughed as she wagged a finger at Vrel, who chuffed with laughter in response and fled through a small door at the rear of the room. Tipping her head back, she gave Nash an adorable lopsided smile. “He likes to tease me because I tend to be a little heavy handed when baking and there are a lot of spices. Apparently it makes Ragoru sneeze even more than it does humans.”

“I see,” Nash rumbled with amusement as he followed Emily to the shelves that spanned one wall.

He did not know exactly what was meant by “heavy handed” but he understood the result well enough to prepare himself. It still did not spare him when the small female sent up a dust cloud of a sweet spice that burned the inside of his nose like fire. He immediately whirled away from the table as his entire body convulsed with a sneeze that made all four of his eyes tear up. His fur shook with every successive sneeze, certain that his nose and eyes were about to separate from his body at any moment. It was sheer torture, all except for Emily’s little hand patting his arm sympathetically. He blinked down at her blearily once he got himself under control again, and she grimaced apologetically.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to send up that big of a cloud.” Her flat teeth pressed into her bottom lip in an expression of worry. “Do you want to sit it out? I can make them easily if you just want to waAAAtch!” she shrieked out the last word in surprise as he lifted her up and set her back in front the of the table.

“I wish to assist,” he replied calmly as he took his place at her side again.

She squinted up at him, doubt on her face. “Are you certain? I wouldn’t be offended if you decided to preserve your health.”

“I want to,” he reiterated. “My nose and eyes will survive—I hope. But even if they do not, this is a moment to treasure for me. I have no interest in giving it up.”

Her lips twitched and she huffed a tiny laugh that made his fur puff with an electric sensation of pleasure. “All right. I will try to be less enthusiastic so that we can do as little damage to your nose and eyes as possible,” she said as she reached for another container.

In the end they had a bowl filled with some sort of crumbling, sweet mixture and splotches of his pale gray fur were now an orange-red color for the mixture of flour and spices dusting him. He did not even notice it until Vrel returned with the apples only to stare wide-eyed at him as he deposited the basket onto the table.

“You... are very colorful,” Vrel chuffed loudly. “Even Vikt knew to stand back when she was throwing things into the bowl.”

Nash did not find anything amiss with his appearance—and in fact rather loved it for what it meant to him—but did not hesitate to share the love either. He pounced. Snatching the smaller male into his arms, he lowered his spice-splattered face against Vrel’s head and rubbed briskly, spreading the powder everywhere between them. Vrel howled with laughter as Emily giggled behind her hand as she backed a safe distance away from their antics, taking the bowl with her—perhaps to keep it well out of range of their play. The sound the male made was nearly hair raising but it made Nash chuff with his own deep chuckle as he rubbed more enthusiastically.

“Vrel! What...” Vikt shouted as he burst into the kitchen, small game dangling from his lower hands.

The male jerked to an immediate halt, his eyes widening as he stared at them and their mess. Nash lifted his head curiously, giving Vrel room to wheeze as the smaller male in his arms caught his breath. Vikt’s gaze darted between them before turning to Emily who stood at the far side of the table, biting her lip as she attempted to control her snorts of merriment. His gaze turned to them again, his eyes roving over them and his shoulders began to shake and vibrate even harder as his quiet chuffs growing louder until he was forced to support himself against the door.

Emily’s eyes narrowed on him, and Nash snickered to himself when she sat the bowl on the table and grabbed two big handfuls of the topping. Vikt’s eyes were closed in the midst of his laughter, so he failed to see what was coming until she gripped the

sides of his face and began to liberally massage the mess into his fur. His eyes snapped open in surprise but he only laughed harder as he pinned her to him and rubbed his messy face against hers.

Nash laughed, joy spilling through him.

This. This was family. The warmth of belonging and connection settled deep within him that continued to grow brighter as they cleaned up their mess and cut the apples Vrel brought together. Nash still was not certain what magic that Emily did from there, but the sweet smells that filled the kitchen a while later made his mouth water in anticipation. And he was not disappointed. After a filling meal of fat hoppers, the spicy-sweet fruit hit all the right spots and he swallowed it down, taking care not to burn his tongue in the process.

Mother Ewa, Fathers Efru, Zida, Bayda, I want a lifetime of exactly this.

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The cold air hit Vikt's nose as he stepped outside. The snow could be ignored easily enough but the wind bit mercilessly into his hide. He shook off the discomfort and forged ahead through the snow. Although there were hunting parties throughout much of the year to bring down the large game that roamed the northlands, no one ventured far from their dens with the approach of the Withering Days, leaving them to forage for food closer at hand. Vikt was not strong enough to bring down more satisfying game, but at least he had his traps and snares that he set out for long-eared hoppers and the burrowers with their long, fuzzy bodies and numerous little legs that carried them quickly over the snow. Both were plentiful in the woods and provided much in the way of meat for their den.

Vikt bound forward, his tail flagging as he hurried out of the doorway, but his ears pricked and he slowed, caught off guard by the silhouette of a large Ragoru standing just a short distance away. What was Nash doing outside while it was still dark in the early hours of the morning?

His nostrils flared, drawing in a musky scent. Strange. What was the alpha doing?

Drawing his tongue thoughtfully over his fangs, Vikt dropped low and crept toward the male, instinctively keeping downwind as he drew closer. He froze momentarily in surprise as he felt his cocks thicken and press downward against the opening of his sheath. His heartbeat quickened in response, but he gritted his teeth and continued forward until his eyes were able to focus clearly on the male in the dim light. Nash turned slightly in that moment, and Vikt's mouth dropped open even as his cocks slipped free at the first scent of the alpha's essence when the male's precum splattered from the tip of his primary cock over his fist and onto the snow.

Vikt grabbed for the tree nearest to him and dragged in a deep breath in an attempt to regain control, but the male's scent burrowed deeper into him. This was what they meant about the alpha's ability to trigger the rest of the triad into readiness for mating—and why it was important for males like Vikt who could not extrude on their own. It was not anything the male directly did, but the scent of his seed was poignant enough to cause his own need to jump at the ready.

He panted for breath, need coursing through him more strongly than he had ever felt before, as he watched Nash's hands grip his seedsack and rub the sheath and both cocks at once. His cocks were thick and long, the primary cock heavily veined with its engorgement. It flexed and jerked in the male's grip. Nash growled softly, panting as he stroked it quicker with his fist clasped tightly around it.

He stroked in time with Nash's strokes and choked quietly at the sensation of his pleasure rising. He rocked, thrusting into his fist as the alpha slammed his hips forward, grunting deeply until suddenly he growled and thick streams of seed sprayed from his primary cock onto the ground. Nash continued to thrust at the drop of his hand, his entire body quivering, his thighs and the muscles in his ass trembling with the force of it as he pumped the seed from his body. Vikt's pace increased in response as his imagination took over.

He imagined that it was not Nash's hand but Emily's tight cunt that the big male's cock was slamming into as his cock jerked and pumped his seed into her. That it was Emily's ass that his big body trembling against her with every thrust as he drove into her cunt. Vikt panted as pleasure rushed over him and he pictured his mate's cunt stretched tightly around the alpha's girth. Just as tight as the male hand circled himself as his fist worked the last of his seed free. A shudder overtook Nash and the male straightened, his ears pricking as he glanced toward a distant part of the forest, oblivious to the fact that his genitals were still extruded with his fading arousal.

Something had caught the male's attention, but Vikt did not care. It was likely an

animal moving through the woods. The abundance of wildlife was something that took time to become accustomed to. Meanwhile, the male's dripping cock kept him riveted, and Vikt stared until he felt his own cum drip from the tip of his cock and fall into the snow between his paws. Though it was without seed, the scent of it ripped free from his fascination and he scurried back toward the den as he clutched his own straining cocks in his hands.

The traps could wait. He was in no condition to see to them now. Not when ached with need.

Snarling quietly in his throat, he rushed through the den to the nest. He ran blindly, overcome with the dizzying arousal running through him as he entered the room, and he ended up tripping over Vrel and falling into the furs. Vikt sputtered as he rose from them and glanced back to find that his twin was still sound asleep despite the collision. He shook his head and surged forward, crawling on his hands and paws through the cushions as he headed directly for Emily.

Her scent filled his nose, and he nearly moaned with the pleasure of it as his cock spurted anew over his hand. He barely registered the feeling as he crawled to her. Finally, he settled into place as he crouched over her, a certain wildness overcoming him as he stared down at his mate. He panted as he shivered with need, his stomach tightening with the desire surging through him. This was not the rut—the Withering Days had not yet come, he could tell by the measure of control that he felt and the lack of pain despite the desire roaring through him—and yet it was startling with its intensity. Would he even survive a rut in this state with Nash so close, provoking his instincts even more?

“Vikt? Is everything okay?” Emily murmured, her eyes fluttering open to peer up at him with a foggy look of concern.

“It is well,” he whispered quickly. “But I am in need, rya. Please.” He drew his upper

hand along her thigh, and she shivered with visible pleasure.

She nodded, and he did not wait for her to decide how to initiate. He fell eagerly between her thighs with a snarl, drawing her legs apart as he attacked her cunt with his tongue. He swept it over her eagerly, dragging fast over the center of her pleasure to ready her. He licked her little bud and deep inside her until her channel spasmed, flooding her sex until she dripped with her pleasure. And still he pleased her while she whimpered and moaned, until she came a second time and he was certain that her body was warm and ready to take him.

Drawing back, he turned abruptly on her belly, startling a yelp from her as he drew her bottom into the air. He ran his hands over her soft, round ass and smiled when she pressed into his palms with a groan. It was not until she felt the pressure of his engorged prick at her entrance that she suddenly froze in surprise as she became aware that something had changed.

“Vikt... you are...”

“Yes,” he growled, dragging his muzzle along her neck. His tongue trailed a path along her skin there before withdrawing. “Just this once I wish to know what other males feel when they mount their mate, not requiring assistance, just following instinct and my hunger.”

He felt her body soften with her assent, the scent of her arousal blooming even thicker with her excitement at what he was about to do. Biting back an undignified whine of excitement, he covered her body with his eagerly and leaned forward to find her entrance with the tip of his primary cock. She opened, slick and hot around him as he drove into her. A garbled sound left him at the overwhelming pleasure but he rocked into her, his cock shuttling back and forth at an ever-increasing pace. She cried out beneath him, her cunt clenching and wringing his length as his secondary cock stroked her little bud. He grunted and growled, his hips snapping in a fierce

tempo as he rutted her. The room was rapidly filling with the musk of their sex and the wet slaps of his primary cock driving into her, fueling his lust even higher.

Emily climaxed again with a sharp cry, her muscles grabbing ahold of him and milking him for something that would never come. His seed was empty. He would never fill her womb, but he felt his sap rise in response to it regardless.

For some reason unknown to him, he looked up at that moment and drove into her with a sharp snap of his hips, drawing a startled moan from his mate, when his eyes fell upon Nash. The alpha stood at the entrance, watching them with a thoughtful expression, his lower hands between his thighs around the cocks that had extruded once more. Noticing Vikt's attention trained on him, the male paused uncertainly, but Vikt nodded with a grin. He would not deny the male the opportunity to experience the pleasure of witnessing this given what he had seen and its effects on him, which made this all possible. In fact, having Nash watching and stroking his cocks to Vikt's cock plunging into his mate was thrilling.

Vikt growled again, the sound lower and vibrating through his chest. His seedsack drew up, tightening with the dizzying pressure of his coming release. He panted in time with Nash, the male working his primary cock at an almost violent pace as Vikt's thrusts grew shorter and quicker, his cock pressing against the mouth of her womb with the instinct to breed.

Emily came again with a hoarse shout, her channel rippling and pulsing so tightly around his length that Vikt erupted with a snarl, his hips slamming against her as his cum painted her insides with every stream released from his cock throbbing deep within her clutch.

Nash's choked growl met his ears, and Vikt turned to see the male retreat quickly from the doorway as Vrel rose from the furs and made his way over to their mate. Vikt's gaze turned to his twin as he panted. He was almost disappointed to see that

his rutting had not affected his twin the same way it had Nash, but then he had not expected it to. He was not an alpha.

But he did have an effect on Nash, and he smiled as he fell bonelessly into the cushions, the scent and sounds of Vrel rutting their mate filling the room. It was nearly perfect. Once Nash joined them, however, it would be.

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When the break in the weather finally came, Emily was not prepared for it. She stood outside and stared out at the quiet, pristine forest beyond their home. The snow was deep, but it was traversable. Her stomach sank with the realization that Nash could leave now... and probably should take the opportunity to leave when he could so that he wouldn't get caught in the den with them during the Withering Nights. They were coming soon. She had overheard Vikt and Vrel quietly discussing it just the other day and how it would be difficult for Nash if he were stuck as an outsider within their den.

But... she didn't want him to go. The den would feel empty without him. And how could she even look forward to another Mother's Night without him there? Emily lifted a hand to her hair where the carved wooden toggle in the shape of a fish of all things held back the length with its leather strap. The gift was small and simple and offered with no little embarrassment on his part, but she loved it and had been glad that she had separated out some gifts for him from the ones that she had prepared for her mates. Seeing his happiness as he touched them had warmed her heart as much as the pleasure Vikt and Vrel expressed. And of course she had received all manner of gifts from those two, but not one had lessened the considerate little gift from Nash—a newcomer with little to nothing of his own.

The thought of him being alone again brought tears to her eyes, immediately followed by annoyance at the thought of another female in the clan potentially taking interest in him. It could certainly happen. Her mates had told her of untraditional mating instances, solitary alpha males who had previously had their seed awakened and lost their triads mating comfortably, or a pair of males with one female. Nash could find a female who desired him easily even if he did not find a triad.

But she didn't want him to, and she hated herself for the selfish thought. She wanted him to be happy but didn't want to let him go despite her own fears keeping her from claiming him fully. And she was afraid—afraid that the alpha wouldn't ultimately make her mates happy and be good for them.

The crunch of snow behind her alerted her to the lighter footsteps of her mates. Turning, she glanced over to her side as Vikt drew up beside her, his brows raising as his two nearest eyes focused on her.

“You are out here early, rya.”

She nodded. “I saw that the snow stopped.”

“So it did,” he agreed as he deeply inhaled the cold air. “It will be good to have a few days not caught within the den. We can enjoy the weather a little.”

“And Nash?” she whispered.

She felt the weight of his gaze turn on her. “And Nash, of course. There is no reason for any of us to feel as if we must be confined in the den right now. It is best for us all to take advantage of it.”

Emily sighed, uncertain if he was being overly literal or if he was intentionally baiting her to speak her thoughts. Either way, it was effective. “I meant to say—do you think he will leave now that the weather is nice?”

His expression turned curious. “Do you wish him to leave?”

She startled guiltily, uncertain of how to answer. “I... I'm not sure if I'm ready for him to leave,” she admitted. “But I don't want you to feel like you are being replaced, because that is impossible. You are mine and could never be replaced in my heart,”

she rushed in a panic, needing to get all the words out at once so that he didn't think anything of the sort for even a moment.

The corner of Vikt's mouth hitched. "Do you care so deeply about me and Vrel?"

"Of course," she replied. How could they possibly not realize? "I love you. Both of you. That means you and me, together forever. You are an irreplaceable part of me. And because of that, you two come first. I would never intentionally make a decision that I know might hurt you."

He nodded in response. "In that case, he should stay for as long as he is willing and as long as you desire. Vrel and I... we like him, rya." Vikt chuffed quietly. "Thral was right in that. Nash is good for us. He completes a part of us that we did not even realize was missing. What is important now is if you like him," he rumbled, cupping her face between his upper hands.

"I think I might," she whispered.

"Then I will stay," a deep voice cut in.

Emily's eyes flew over toward the entrance of the house where Nash stood tall, his eyes fixed on her as Vrel beamed happily at his side.

"How much did you hear?" she asked quietly.

A small smile pulled at the corner of his mouth. "Enough to solidify my own desire. Like Vikt and Vrel, I have found my family in these males—family that has been an open wound in my heart for much of my life. And you, Emily, are all I could have hoped for. I know that you are still uncertain, but I will stay. I will suffer anything to be here by your side until the day comes that you are finally ready to accept me as your alpha mate."

“He can extrude to display if you need him to,” Vrel offered from his side with such enthusiasm that Emily felt heat rush into her face even as Nash’s ears twisted back in obvious embarrassment.

“That is not necessary,” she choked around a nervous laugh. “I am certain that it is quite impressive.”

“It is,” Vikt assured her mellowly but grinned when she raised her eyebrows in a silent question. “Not much goes unseen around the den, rya. Nash tries to slake his lust on the far side of the house when he thinks none of us are paying attention in the early hours, but I frequently see him when I go out early to look for game.” His eyes glowed brightly with undeniable interest. “It would be a great pleasure to see him mount you, rya. You would never again need to assist us. The thought of it...” He shivered with a sigh, his words dropping away.

“This is not quite what I was expecting,” Emily admitted as she gave Nash a shy smile. “Are you certain? From what I’m told, when the Withering Days hit can be unpredictable. With Mother’s Night having passed on the solstice, it will descend soon. There may not be another opportunity to leave if you change your mind.”

“I am certain,” he rumbled as he straightened with determination to his full height. “Your males may need to restrain me before you retire but I will gladly suffer it.”

“Blessed Mother, that sounds cruel,” she muttered.

Nash flashed her a sweet smile. “You may think it is cruel because of the pain, but for me it is hope for the future. If there is even a chance, I will take it.”

A chance of it? It was less a chance and more a definite likelihood once she got over the shock of everything happening so quickly.

“Y-yes. I know it will happen,” she whispered. “You will be mine. I just... I need time.”

She felt terrible offering such a poor excuse, but Nash inclined his head, understanding bright in his eyes.

“Mating must be different between humans and Ragoru,” he mused. “So many things are, so it must be.”

Vikt nodded, and he glanced apologetically at Emily as if preparing to betray some secret. “It is. They wish to bond. This is something Thral explained to all of the clan males when he spoke of the arrangement with the humans. Even though Emily quickly bonded with Vrel and me, it was because she arrived with this expectation. We were already one in her mind. Even then, we saw that her heart bond with us was slower. With you, her heart bond is coming first. She just needs time to make you one with us as well.” He glanced back at her and his ears tipped toward her uncertainly. “I hope you do not mind that I shared this insight, rya.”

Emily shook her head, at once amused and rendered completely speechless. It seemed that they understood the situation a lot more clearly than she thought they did.

Nash nodded contemplatively as he regarded her. “It is natural if you need more time to adjust to the change. Just know that my certainty is clear now. Whenever you are ready, I am ready.”

“As are we,” Vikt and Vrel echoed.

Warmth spread through her at their words, and she was certain that she was blushing yet again. This time, however, it wasn't from embarrassment but utter happiness. Joy flooded her in such a way that she hadn't felt since she was a kid waking up on solstice morning with a small pile of brightly wrapped gifts waiting for her. It wasn't

often that her family had been able to afford such gifts for her, but they never forgot about her. She hadn't believed that she would know such joy again when she was sent so far from home, but here she was and there was no better gift than three males in front of her.

A smile bloomed on her face, and she spun away to run clumsily through the snow. "Well then, come on!" she shouted over her shoulder. "What are you waiting for? Let's enjoy this beautiful weather!"

The damn Ragoru had far better balance on the snow than she did, and their large paws kept them from sinking like a stone in the snow like she did, but it didn't matter. They had fun chasing each other among the trees. Vikt and Vrel teamed up and managed to drop Nash into a deeper snow drift, but the males emerged, chuffing their laughter uproariously as they shook the snow from their fur.

And at the end of the day? Emily drowsed lazily with them in front of the fire, feeling content and finally without worry as they piled together. Their soft ears flicked against her cheeks and jaws, and three heads burrowed against her neck.

It was a moment she wished could last forever. So she savored it, capturing everything meticulously within her memory where it could continue. Regardless of what the future brought, that moment would remain.

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Another storm was coming soon. Vikt could scent it on the air and would have welcomed it and the coming Withering Days if there weren't something else that he could not quite define. He knew that Nash also sensed it because the alpha often stepped outside of the den and spent long stretches staring out into the woods, his fur ruffled with his agitation. Vikt had not realized until that moment that this was what had instinctively drawn the male out, even in the worst weather, to stand guard over their den. Even without a commitment exchanged between them, he had been out there, protecting them against any coming danger.

"You worry too much. You always did have an active imagination," Vrel grumbled with a yawn when he poked his twin in the nose with his foot. He swatted his paw away and rolled over, giving him his back. "Go back to sleep."

"It is not my imagination," he whispered back vehemently. He hated it when Vrel downplayed his instincts. The male did not possess much in the way of basic survival instincts but chose to believe that Vikt was in no better of a situation. The truth was, as much as Vrel excelled with his crafting and artistry, Vikt possessed the keener senses of a hunter. "You would not say that to Nash."

Vrel snorted quietly in amusement. "Nash is an alpha. We are... us."

"That does not make me useless," Vikt growled in turn, hurt.

His brother rolled over, his eyes popping open with an expression of surprise. "Vikt..."

"Who is useless?" Emily murmured sleepily.

“No one,” Vrel retorted as he sat up from the nest. “Vikt, I never said that you were useless. I would never say that. You and me together, we are one.”

“But not the same,” Vikt growled in annoyance. “I may not be an alpha, but I am a hunter. I am capable of relying on my senses.”

Vrel shrank back, his ears flattening at the vehemence in his tone. “Are you saying that I am not?” he whispered.

Vikt immediately felt terrible, and he crawled close to his twin to curl around him. “That is not what I meant. We are twins, and as close as any two can ever be, but we are not the same.”

His twin shuddered beside him as he drew in a deep breath and let it go. “I know. I just do not like to think that we are not sharing all the same experiences. We have always been a part of everything together until recently.”

“Until me, you mean,” Emily murmured as she too sat up. “Do you feel some regret about mating, Vrel?”

The male thankfully immediately shook his head. Vikt did not want to contemplate what might have happened if he had hesitated.

“Never. It just made some things clearer,” he admitted. “And I loved it because I saw how you completed me in ways that Vikt could not... and then when Nash came along, he also did so. But it also scares me because I’ve always shared a world with Vikt. It makes me afraid that everything is changing and one day I will wake up and you and I will not feel the same.”

Vikt’s ears flattened with remorse, and he clasped one of Vrel’s hands in his and threaded their fingers together. “Having room to grow does not mean that I will ever

leave you. I like that I will be able to go and hunt with the other males to know that you will be safe. I like that I have Nash's companionship while patrolling near the den. And that you have Nash keeping you company here whenever I'm not here. And then there is Emily, who is the heart of our family and our den. But it's not just you and me sharing a world... now it is all of us."

"Right. I have the worst senses of anyone in our family but you three are stuck with me because we are one," Emily added as she threw her arms around their necks. Suddenly she blinked and glanced around. "Speaking of... where is Nash?"

"Here," the alpha rumbled as he stepped warily into the room. "I did not wish to interrupt, but there may be a problem that you should be aware of."

Emily frowned but staggered to her feet. Vikt rose and assisted her so that she did not lose her balance on the pillows and furs within their nest.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"There is a female here to see you. And she has her triad," he replied cryptically as he drew away from the door.

They followed him out of the room and down the hall that led to the main chamber. He understood immediately. A familiar pale female wore a nervous expression as she stood there amid her triad. She shot Nash a brittle, distrustful look but it quickly melted away and was replaced with a look of relief when her eyes found on Emily.

"Oh, Emily, thank goodness. Hazel did not recognize this male here and I was worried that something untoward happened to you," she said as she rushed toward their mate, her hands outstretched as if to snatch her away.

Vikt considered growling but Nash caught his eye and shook his head wearily.

Apparently he had become very familiar with her before coming to fetch them.

Emily glanced over at him and then Vrel and Nash uncertainly but did not rebuff the female as she grabbed her hands and drew her away from them. She did, however, attempt to extricate herself as gently as possible while attempting to draw the other female to a stop.

“Trish, I am all right. You never met my mates Vikt and Vrel, but you just dragged me away from them,” she added with a kindly chuckle as a look of mortification descended over the other female’s pale face.

“Oh! Oh, so sorry, Emily. I didn’t mean to... I just reacted.” She glanced over at Nash and jabbed her thumb in his direction. “And who is that one?”

“Patricia,” Hazhel drawled slowly, “I tried to explain to you that, while the male is unknown to me, he is clearly an alpha. Their alpha,” he said pointedly before glancing over at them apologetically. “My Trish is easily excitable, but forgive her as she is particularly overwrought right now. It seems that there was something that she failed to tell us when we retrieved her. In result, she had a very unpleasant shock.”

Trish twisted her fingers together and winced. “I’m sorry. My mind wasn’t exactly in the right place when we met. And I never truly believed they would do it.”

“Didn’t think who would do what?” Emily asked, her alarm growing palpably so that Vikt’s hackles rose warily in response.

“My brother. He was not pleased when mother and father sent me away for this mating. I admit that I may have cried a lot and made a huge fuss over it,” she added, her head hanging shamefully. “He promised that he would send someone to get me. That he wouldn’t let... let... monsters... have me. That he knew hunters who could make the whole thing disappear and bring me home where he could hide me. I

thought... I thought he was just making it up in an attempt to placate me so that I would cooperate. But he wasn't," she whispered.

Someone who could make the problem—the Ragoru—disappear? The only thing that he could imagine was something he had only heard of and yet it had given him nightmares upon first arriving in the clan lands. Vikt glanced over at Hazel for confirmation, and the male nodded.

Huntsmen were in the territory.

"It is just two of them and we managed to catch one as he was attempting to build a trap near our den, but the other escaped," Hazel grumbled. "We lost his trail quickly. The male is clever and disguises his movements with considerable skill. Truthfully, we would not have even known that they were there if one had not alerted Trish in an attempt to 'save' her. They did us a favor as our mate's impressive lungs were put to good use in alerting us, but the other huntsman was able to take advantage of the distraction to get away."

Vrel's ears twitched nervously as he glanced over at Vikt before looking over to Nash. "What do we do now?"

"All we can do is raise the alarm and keep watch," Nash growled, and Hazel nodded soberly as he and his triad gathered their mate to them.

It was clear that they were all still highly reactive to what they had experienced. He could not imagine being that close to losing his mate and his family all in one blow. Swallowing thickly, Vikt nodded in turn, which earned a glimmer of respect in Hazel's tired gaze.

He did not care what it would take—he was prepared to do whatever was necessary to protect his family.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:19 am

Every day was fraught with tension to the point that it felt as if they were walking on ice, every sound outside or even within their den a source of suspicion that had to be investigated. It was making them all paranoid. Even though the weather remained unusually clear despite the threat of snow in the gathering clouds, what should have been a time to enjoy breaking free from the confines of the house was overshadowed by a potential threat that had yet to be located by the clan. All triads were advised to remain close to their dens and protect themselves and their mates while those unmated formed hunting parties scouting the woods.

Emily was a little surprised that the clan hadn't called on Nash to help, since he was technically still unmated. Exactly the opposite happened. Upon word getting out of the huntsman, Sabol had made a point to stop by and suggest that the male remain where he was to protect them. It was put a little more delicately than that, so not to offend Vikt and Vrel by suggesting they were incapable of protecting Emily or their den, but the meaning had been understood. And it was perhaps that kindness in handling it, as well as her own mates' ability to accept the additional help and their own acceptance of Nash, that had helped keep feelings from getting ruffled as they settled in to keep watch and wait.

The only truly frustrating thing was that their home was far enough on the outskirts of the denning territory that they rarely saw other Ragoru from whom to get updates or any news that they might have to share. Hazel, whose den was more at the central part of the territory, stopped by a few times to check in on them. Emily wasn't sure if that was out of a sense of concern or if Trish stubbornly insisted on it, but she was grateful as it gave them bits of news. Each time he arrived it was with Trish and his triad brothers Vlok and Grund accompanying him, which spoke of just how careful everyone was being that the alpha insisted his family always be within his sight.

Emily shivered as she stared out the windows. The beauty of the forest seemed almost lost beneath the weight of danger. She had grown up idolizing the huntsmen as heroes who tamed the deadliest parts of the world, but she hadn't seen the sickness within the system and the dangers of their authority within the capital and citadels until more recently with the appearance of Ragoru. Yes, the alien species was frightening and strange, and the agreement that the capital had entered into had been new and frightening to say the least, but the bloodthirstiness of the huntsmen quickly became apparent in their ramping rhetoric. At that time it had still seemed something more like just a bunch of hot air among men who liked to talk, deserving nothing short of laughter and contempt, but she hadn't taken it seriously. But now, experiencing the reality of it, she was terrified.

She dragged the blanket higher around her as darkness began to settle in, obscuring trees and snow except that which was illuminated faintly with the light from the house. Large hands settled on her shoulders and waist as a comforting warmth seeped into her from the male standing behind her.

"Do not be afraid, Emily," Nash quietly rumbled. "I will not let any harm come to you or your mates."

Her heart clenched at his words even as she felt a wave of gratitude for his strength. He would protect them, perhaps even at great cost to himself, and asked for nothing in return. She turned slowly and his hands slid over to settle on her back as she rested head against his torso. Her head barely grazed his chest due to his massive size. It should have felt awkward, but the way he folded her into his arms made her feel cherished.

She was terrified—but she trusted Nash to help them get through it. Perhaps she could trust him with everything and more. She hated her uncertainty more than anything, but suddenly she was also very afraid that there was a chance that she would never get to know what could be between them if the huntsman had his way.

She was tempted to take the chance and just leap as her heart was directing, but she was also very afraid of handling things in a way that would have lasting consequences if she did not proceed carefully and thoughtfully.

Truth be told, she did not know what to do. And sadly, there was no one orchestrating her life this time. Even the males were leaving things entirely in her hands without any pressure or suggestions from them. It was her decision and never had she hated it more. Whatever happened, good or bad, she was responsible.

Nash's hand skimmed over her back comfortingly. "I would take the weight of your every burden if I could," he rasped. "As would Vikt and Vrel."

"I know," she mumbled. "But it would not be fair to you either to just dump it all on you. You cannot be responsible for every decision."

His hand stilled against her shoulders, holding her tightly to him. "Try me," he rumbled.

Her lips tipped in a smile at the heartfelt offer. "Thank you," she whispered into his fur. "I will consider your offer."

She wasn't sure if she could take it, but how she wished she could just hand it over to them.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:19 am

Nash woke abruptly, his insides burning with a fresh urgency. It was immediately followed by a sense of dread. Not just because he could hear the howl of the winds outside the house as the storm returned in full force, but because he knew exactly what this was, and with Emily so close and untouchable it burned through him with fiery agony and hunger, the likes of which he had never before experienced through all the ruts he had suffered. It clawed at him relentlessly, and he sprung up from the nest as he looked around in a wild panic for the way to escape.

The last thing he wanted to do was accidentally harm Emily in his current state. He did not feel in control of himself, and what little control he possessed was slipping by the moment as the hunger yawned and tore into him. It was a living beast within him, a monster that clawed up from the depths of his being in response to the musk of the aroused males, and Emily's scent thickened in unconscious reply to it as they slept. He stumbled back and shook his head in a desperate effort to clear it. At the edge of his vision, Vrel sat up groggily and Vikt followed with a low groan as the male looked his way.

"Nash... her scent," Vikt moaned, a husky, eerie sound that mated Nash's primary cock jerk as it spewed the first of its precum.

He swallowed and nodded as he grappled with his mind. "She is responding to us, to our rising pheromones," he explained, forcing the words out in a rough voice.

"She is going to kill me," Vrel gasped as he writhed helplessly in the furs. "This is going to kill me. This was Evelyn's plan... and Thral's. Especially Thral's plan. He wanted to torture us first until we just die from rutting."

“Shut it, Vrel,” Vikt groaned. “Or else I am going to be tempted to murder you and be a lone offspring.”

“You would not!” Vrel gasped in outrage. “No one else but me would put up with your moods.”

Nash smiled at the males’ dramatics. He was grateful for them rather than annoyed. It lowered the fever of his desire just enough for him to be able to think again with a slightly clearer mind. One thing about their behavior was not right.

“Focus on your blood bond with Emily,” he instructed them. “You are caught up in the power of the rut, but it should not be affecting you this way... not as mated males. You should only be feeling pleasure and a desire to please your mate.”

“We do not have one,” Vrel gasped, and Nash froze in horror.

“What do you mean you do not have one?” he growled. “That is the riskiest, most insane thing you could have done. You have no idea how you might have instinctively reacted, how you might have attacked anyone, mindless with the belief that they were trying to mate with her. Look at you,” he snapped. “You are already behaving irrationally. Worse, you lack the thread of control that you should have to prevent you from hurting your mate during the rut.”

Vikt gaped at him with a look of horror that crumpled into one of anguish. “We did not know.”

Of course they did not know. They were twins. With an alpha who would have preferred to kill them on sight, he had little doubt that such things were not discussed with them.

Nash dragged a clawed hand through his mane. He was supposed to be the only

irrational one being affected, not dealing with an entire den of them.

Trying to breathe as little as possible so as not inhale too much of her scent directly, Nash crept toward Emily and gently nudged her shoulder. Thank Mother Ewa that she slept lighter than the males she never mated.

“Emily,” he rasped on a strangled note.

“Nash?” Her face scrunched up slightly, no doubt smelling the heavy scent permeating the air, and sat up. Her gaze roamed the room and then paused on her males with a look of shock. “What the hell?”

“We have a situation,” he needlessly pointed out.

“I can see that,” she returned in bewilderment. “My question is why? What the hell is going on?”

“We apologize, rya,” Vrel said piteously. “We did not know.”

“Know what? And why do my insides feel like they are on fire? I feel...” Her eyes widened as a trickle of hot arousal ran down her leg. “Oh, Blessed Mother.”

Nash’s nostrils flared and he fought back the instinct to draw her back down into the furs and mount her. Very gently, he cupped her jaw in his hand and turned her head to look at him. “What you are feeling is the effects of the rut. The Withering Days are upon us and so your body is reacting to the pheromones we are putting out. You should understand what this means already, yes?” At her nod, he smiled comfortingly. “Your males, on the other claw, are suffering from a different problem.”

“Which is?” she whispered uncertainly.

He drew in a deep breath and immediately damned himself for the way her scent shot straight down to his cocks with hot urgency. “Your mating was never completed,” he explained.

Her brow furrowed in confusion. “Wait, Vikt did rituals for days, and?—”

He shook his head, interrupting her. “He began the process but never saw it through.” He paused for a moment, recalling waking and the sight of the offerings surrounding the little statues. “My presence interrupted it, did it not?” he asked, glancing over at Vikt.

The male grimaced and nodded, his ears pinning back against his head. “It did not seem right to do so while you were there at first and then...” he hesitated, his ears flicking uncomfortably.

“And then what?” Emily demanded, her voice strained with worry. “What could possibly justify waiting?”

Vikt lowered his head unhappily. “We did not know that this would happen. Vrel spoke truthfully. When Nash woke up and Vrel and I saw that he was a good and admirable male, we chose to wait so that we could all make the bond properly, together.”

Nash blinked at the male in surprise. It was the most foolish and yet endearing thing he had ever heard. He rested a hand over his heart as he regarded the twins.

“You greatly honor me with the depth of your feeling and that you were willing to wait for me—however unnecessary it was,” he added. “It was foolish, but the gesture humbles me.”

“You two are idiots,” Emily said, her words without heat as she looked upon her

males fondly for a long moment before glancing up at Nash. “How confident are you about all of this—me, them, our family?”

He peered back at her as understanding settled in place deep within him. She was frightened of making the choice and she was taking him up on the offer he had extended. His expression softened so that she could see the love and adoration he held for her.

“I have no doubts. This is where I belong. To you and to them, as your alpha,” he rumbled in reply.

She sucked in a sharp breath but nodded, a nervous smile playing about her lips. “Okay then. Let’s do this. I accept and choose all three of you. You are my triad, my mates. Nash is my alpha from this day forward until the day we return to the dust of the earth.”

Joy rose within him, overwhelming the hunger momentarily. He straightened to his full height in front of her and he restrained a smile at the way her eyes fastened on his extruded cocks and widened. Without a word, he made his way around her so that he could crouch in front of where she was sitting, staring into her eyes.

“Our blood, hearts, and souls will mingle. This night will break us down, destroy us all, but we will be reformed and breathe again, together as one,” he rumbled as he placed his upper hands on her knees and slowly parted them, revealing the soft flower resting between them. He glanced over at Vikt and Vrel who had managed to crawl to his side, their bodies trembling with their barely restrained need. He held their gazes, and they nodded, understanding what they were to do now as he turned his attention back to Emily. Their rya. “Through blood we arrive into the world, and through blood we are born again.”

The words left his mouth, and he lunged forward, his body covering hers as his teeth

gently pierced the tender flesh of her shoulder as Vikt and Vrel likewise delivered their bites. He drove his hips forward at the same time, stretching her cunt around his breeding cock as it pierced her and opening her slickened ass around his secondary cock. She jerked against him with a cry, driving him deeper as the scents of pain and pleasure rose from her. He continued to press into her with tiny pumps, giving her some relief and building her pleasure with rapid intensity before pushing deeper.

“Is that it?” Vrel whispered, but Nash shook his head.

“Through blood the bond is made. We have only done half of it,” he panted.

“She needs our blood as well,” Vikt murmured, finally grasping what needed to be done.

Together, as one, they bit into their palms, drawing their blood and painted Emily’s mouth with it and her tongue as it extended to swipe over her lips. She moaned as Nash’s hips shot forward, burying himself completely within her as the warmth of her awareness slid over his mind. He reveled in it and her newfound pleasure as he gripped her and pumped his cocks in and out of the sucking heat of her feminine sheath.

Her cunt was so tight around his shaft that he felt every ripple of pleasure from her body even as he felt it from their bond running over him in a white-hot tongue of bliss. Vrel gasped in wonder and moaned huskily in reaction, his partially extruded cock thrusting from his sheath fully for the first time without manipulation.

Nash smiled as the male reveled in the sensation, but his attention quickly returned to his mate as she filled his senses. His mate. He had a triad and a female of his own. He grunted as another wave of hunger hit him and he dragged her bottom up from the nest as his hips flexed against her, driving his breeding cock into the strangling grip of her channel over and over. A heaviness settled in his belly as his cocks filled her

and it dropped even lower into his seedsack. He growled with the pleasure of it, his claws scraping lightly against her skin, drawing tiny shivers from her that he felt echo along his shafts penetrating her.

He drove into her in earnest, a growl vibrating in his chest as he thrust. Her body tightened around him, making his every retreat difficult, but that just tugged at some deep thread of pleasure he never knew was there as he pulled harder against her resistance, sending tiny claws dragging through him ecstatically before driving home once more into her sheath. It continued to tighten around him in resistance as warmth flooded down his cock to a central point that seemed to bulge, the skin of his cock stretching and tightening with the sensation until he could no longer pull himself free beyond a certain point from the tight clasp of her cunt.

And then he felt it. The blessed culmination of all pleasures that the gods gifted to them. His secondary cock began to vibrate in her rear passage, stimulating his breeding cock in such a way that he felt his seedsack draw up tighter and his cock swell uncomfortably in preparation to breed her.

He panted raggedly as her channel clenched tighter and tighter, rippling and pulsing around him with its liquid heat, and her cries filled the room with her climax. It was the sweetest song to him, and he drank it in and continued to do so when it faded into a musical litany made of her every whimper, gasp, and moan as she writhed around the cocks piercing her. He rutted into her, his hips bouncing against her bottom at a speed that left her unable to move with him with no other option but to jiggle with every rapid thump of his thrust.

Pleasure wound tighter and tighter within him, the heat of it drawing through him and settling deep within him until finally it shot through him in an eruption at its pinnacle so that he roared his completion as his breeding cock released stream after hot stream of seed where it jerked in place, pressed firmly against her womb. Her shout followed his and she was still trembling with her release when he suddenly lowered himself

back into the nest, holding her tightly against him. Drawing back on his mating bulge as far as he could, he reached between them and pulled his secondary cock from her ass, leaving her open to her other mates.

“Join us,” he growled, and the other two males, who had been waiting at his sides, surged forward eagerly.

Vrel managed to get in ahead and pressed his cock into her ass with an eager thrust that momentarily made Nash’s eyes roll back in his head. It was not only his primary cock filling her ass that delivered such pleasure, but it was the secondary cock forcing its way partially into her cunt that made him shiver as the male licked her shoulder and back lovingly. Emily trembled and moaned between them, her cunt weeping continuously with a mixture of her own arousal and the excess of Nash’s seed. He planted his feet on either side of Nash’s legs to give himself more leverage as he surrendered fully to the rut, every thrust triggering a new stream of seed erupting from Nash’s cock until the male exploded with a snarl that sent Emily spasming around them both all over again with a piercing shriek.

Nash grunted as the male withdrew with another tender lick to her neck, but the moment Vrel was no longer positioned over them, he began to rut anew from beneath her as his seed continued to pour from him into her. She moaned and trembled in reaction, her fingers clinging to his fur until Vikt crouched over them, his eyes burning with hunger as his blue tongue slid along one fang. Suddenly the male dropped low, not even bothering to rut her ass like Vrel did. His thick cock pressed beside Nash’s and he pressed forward, drawing out a loud moan from their mate as he fought his way in, Nash’s seed spilling over his length. Since he could not get around the mating bulge, his effort forced Nash deeper so that their mate trembled between them and his secondary cock grazed Nash’s ass.

Their angle did not allow much in the way of penetration, but the pressure focused there as the male growled low in his throat and began thrusting had Nash shivering

once more as his muscles tightened with pleasure as Emily panted and moaned between them. And when he reached the peak of his climax and fell over its edge, it was with Vikt's throaty growl and their mate's cry of ecstasy within his ear. In that moment, Vikt's cock jerked madly against him in the throes of pleasure as Nash's seed erupted from him in a fresh stream as the shared ecstasy ran through them all.

Vikt remained in place for several heart beats but eventually withdrew to join Vrel. The twins curled together at his left with content smiles on their faces. For the first time, Nash understood that level of true contentment, and he smiled as well as he hugged Emily to him until his cock finally deflated and slipped free. He did not expect her to remain lying on top of him but that did not stop him from feeling slightly remorseful when she finally slid out from underneath his much larger body to nestle between him and her other mates. She smiled sleepily at them, her hands brushing over their fur lazily in gentle strokes that were only interrupted when Vrel suddenly bolted upright.

"It is the first day of the Withering Nights! I must go get my gift," he said as he shot up from the nest.

"Wait for me, I need to get mine as well," Vikt agreed, following after his brother, the twins both suddenly re-energized despite the frenzy of their rutting just moments earlier.

Nash stared after them in amusement, but when the twins left the room, he sighed heavily and looked at Emily regretfully.

"I did not prepare anything," he admitted in a thick voice. "I did not suspect... not before the Withering Days concluded."

"Shh," she whispered, touching the tip of his nose with her finger. He stared at it cross-eyed, and she smiled in response. "It doesn't matter. That you are here with us

is the only gift I want... this year," she teased. "You can spoil me next year."

The corner of his mouth quirked, and he inclined his head in agreement. "Next year," he promised.

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Vrel snuggled deeper into the fur pressed against his face. With their mingled scents he was not immediately sure if it was Nash or Vikt he was cuddled up to, and after several days of actively breeding their mate as the Withering Nights stretched on, he doubted he would have even cared anyway. But as the room was colder than normal, he burrowed against them with a content sigh. His ears flicked, chilled by an icy breeze, and he frowned.

When was there ever a breeze in the den?

He opened his eyes and blinked as he lifted his head, his nostrils flaring with curiosity as he sniffed the air. Smoke? With a yelp of alarm, he sprang to his feet and looked around. Vikt was gone—likely out checking his traps—but Nash and Emily remained deeply asleep and unaware of the danger. Dropping back into a crouch, he shook the alpha's shoulder.

“Nash. Nash, wake up,” he chanted in a panic as the big male rolled toward him and blinked up at him sleepily.

“Vrel? What—” The male stiffened as he caught the rapidly thickening scent of smoke and bolted up from the nest, dragging Emily into his arms as he straightened. His head whipped around, the numerous braids their mate had tied in his mane catching the erratic movement as they swung around him. “Where is Vikt?”

“Outside, I think,” Vrel replied as he also stood, taking care to keep close to the male's side as they made their way to the door. “He always checks his traps early in the morning.”

Nash nodded as he adjusted Emily's weight in his arms, clasping her firmly to his chest as they exited quickly into the hall. The smoke was thicker there and Vrel gagged a little as they ran toward the central room. Emily began to cough in Nash's arms, but the male's grip merely tightened as she began to instinctively struggle.

"Shh, shh," Vrel murmured, copying the soothing sounds she often made to the best of his ability. "There is a fire somewhere, rya. We are getting you out of the house."

"A fire?" She gasped and unsuccessfully attempted to bolt upright.

"Yes," Nash grumbled, and the male's ears flattened as the first wave of heat rolled over them as they exited the hall into the central primary chamber. "The den is burning. The fire is coming from the rear." He tipped his head toward the smoke rising in thick black clouds from the kitchen.

Vrel stopped in his tracks and stared in dismay. The kitchen was gone. All the food they stored, all the memories of cooking in the kitchen together, even the little wooden carvings that he had sitting on a storage shelf with the plan to trade them among the clan for little treats for their mate—it was all gone.

"Keep moving," Nash rasped. "We need to leave immediately."

Vrel nodded, his heart heavy. Somewhere at the back of the house, something groaned and collapsed with a crash and his ears pinned back sorrowfully. The den was groaning—dying.

"Vrel," Emily coughed. "Come on!"

His head swiveled toward his mate and he rushed to catch up, his feet carrying him swiftly over the floor. Then his eyes widened on the door just ahead of them. Why was it open? Nash noticed it too. The male drew up short, his head whipping around

wildly as his peripheral and primary eyes worked together, looking for another potential avenue for escape. There were none. The only other exit from the den was currently engulfed in flames. They could try throwing themselves against the windows, but the house had been constructed with the large wildlife that roamed the northern woods in mind, and while numerous were constructed too narrowly for even Emily to safely fit through if they were even successful in breaking the glass.

Nash met Vrel's eyes grimly. "Through the front. Run. Find Vikt. We will be right behind you."

Vrel reluctantly nodded and sprinted forward. He could hear Nash behind him, and he increased his speed as he bolted out the door and into the clean, cold air of the night. The wind and snow stung his face but still he ran, slipping through the trees. A loud snap echoed through the night air, and Vrel drew to an abrupt stop, his blood chilling as he turned in time to see a short metal stick strike Nash directly in the chest. Emily's mouth opened in a scream as the male went down. He hit the snow hard, his body turning at the last moment so as to not crush Emily beneath him. Vrel took several hurried steps toward the male, his heart hammering in terror, but skidded to a stop as a heavily cloaked human stepped out from the trees and stalked over to the fallen alpha.

The male raised a strange weapon and fired another metal rod into the male. Nash jerked, his blood spilling over the white snow as Emily's screams grew more frantic. Vrel took several steps forward, his ears flattening as he considered his options for attack as the human bent and grabbed their mate, dragging her from beneath the weight of Nash's limp arms. The alpha's head rolled in his direction, his yellow eyes boring into Vrel in a silent command.

Get Vikt.

Vrel swallowed and nodded. He hated it, but he understood. The huntsman was a

male who had brought down Nash, and who had not only eluded Hazhel but the entire clan hunting for him. Nash had known exactly what he was running out into. It was why he told him to find Vikt. Vrel was fast, possibly the fastest Ragoru in the clan, but he would not last even a moment against the huntsman without help.

But Emily... his eyes turned toward her worriedly. The male was holding her but, as of yet, was making no move to harm her. Perhaps he would not harm her. She was human. Trish said that her brother had sent huntsmen with the promise to rescue her. Perhaps he believed that he was rescuing Emily as well.

Vrel clenched his jaw at how sick the entire situation was. He wanted to blame Trish—it was hard not to—but the female's remorse had been genuine. She honestly had not believed that her brother would actually do it. Despite her initial feelings about the Ragoru, she had not wished for anyone to be harmed—and it was clear that was exactly what the huntsmen intended to do.

Spinning away, unable to watch for even a moment longer or risk losing precious moments in which something could potentially happen to their mate, Vrel bolted into the forest. His brother set his traps in predictable spots far from the den where wildlife would not be frightened away by their activity and scent. Unfortunately, it meant that Vikt was probably unaware of anything happening at the den, but the scent of smoke was spreading as the fire devoured their home. It would not go unnoticed long, even in Vikt's hunting grounds.

The trees sped by him as he ran, the dark of the night not so impenetrable to Ragoru eyes to prevent him from navigating them safely. He rushed between the trees, his breathing labored as he fought to maintain his speed, his eyes searching for any hint or sign of his twin until suddenly a shadowy body plunged between the trees and collided with him with such strength that they both dropped into the snow.

Vrel lay there for a moment, wheezing as he attempted to regain control of his breath.

At his side Vikt's familiar face popped up, snow sliding off him as he gave Vrel a wild look.

"What are you doing here?" his twin demanded, struggling to his feet. "We need to get back to the den. I saw signs that the huntsman had passed through the woods some distance from here and alerted Hazel. He went to gather the hunt while the trail was still fresh but told me to return home to alert Nash."

Vrel shook his head as Vikt bent and helped him to his feet. "Nash knows," he choked out, and his twin stiffened, dread filling the male's eyes. "He sent me to get you. The huntsman... Vikt, the den is on fire," he rasped. "Do you not smell it?"

Vikt lifted his head and scented the air curiously. It did not take long for him to take note of the smoke drifting through the air. He snarled and looked back at Vrel frantically. "Where are Nash and Emily?"

"Nash is lying in the snow, bleeding. Emily... the huntsman has her," Vrel replied as he spun back in the direction of their den. "We need to hurry. Nash is alive, but I do not know how much longer that will be the case. And there is no way to know what the huntsman has in store for Emily, but she was unharmed when I left."

Vikt nodded grimly as the male broke into a run to keep up with him, and they raced back through the woods. Even with the two of them, Vrel was not confident that they could take down the huntsmen, but they would try. He would do whatever it took to save his family.

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Emily stumbled through the snow, tears staining her face as she watched the fire climb higher and higher, engulfing the house. Several nearby trees were licked with flames, but the snow seemed to be keeping it from spreading through the forest. There would be no immediate danger to the clan if they were able to get it quickly under control, but the huntsman who gripped her hair in his fist was her most pressing concern.

His hands twisted and he shook her like a ragdoll. “Filthy fucking whore,” he bit out, and pain lanced through her scalp as he tossed her roughly into the snow. “You should have more appreciation for your savior and have been waiting to be rescued, not performing like a bitch in heat for those creatures.”

From her right Vrel’s menacing growl rose, and she caught a glow of his eyes just before the huntsman whipped in his direction, his weapon rising but far too late to take aim on the male before he disappeared once more. The huntsman lifted his crossbow warily and turned in a slow circle as he scanned the tree line.

“I know the rest of your triad is out there,” he said, his voice icy and steady despite being hunted. “Come out!” he bellowed.

Emily scoffed—she couldn’t help herself. “Yeah, that will work,” she muttered, only to curse when she received a boot to the face as he kicked her.

It was enough to send her onto her belly again and pain burst through her cheek, but at least he hadn’t kicked her with much force. He could have easily broken her jaw with such a kick if he wanted to. She was sure of it.

She wheezed with pain, clenching the side of her face with one hand as she looked up at him. “Why are you even here? Aren’t you at the wrong house? Trish said you had come for her, after all.”

His stony gaze flicked down to her dismissively. “We were sent to recover Patricia Ellensworth, but my orders were to terminate any males in possession of human females and turn them over to the Guild for... reconditioning,” he said with a sneer.

Emily recoiled at that single word, revulsion sweeping through her. That surely didn’t mean what she thought it did.

“What do you mean by ‘reconditioning?’ And why not just return women to their families if what you are doing is so noble?” she demanded.

A smile tipped his lips as they twisted cruelly. “Females who have fornicated with such beasts need to be reconditioned into accepting human men before they can be permitted to return to their king. Which means not only being hosed and scrubbed thoroughly to remove any trace of the beasts on her skin, but also being mounted by however men it takes to impregnate her. Once she delivers a human baby, she is cured of their taint. And before you ask, Miss Ellensworth’s brother found this acceptable, as you will find that most families would. And they get an heir out of it. It would not be the first time that families have petitioned huntsmen to breed them when available men come up short to marry into them.”

She gaped at him in horror. There were so many repulsive things in his reply, not the least of it being the forced impregnation, but her mind stuck on one glaring point. “Who the hell decides how many men it takes?”

His smile widened. “It depends on how many men volunteer for the task. Only a male of exceptional status who wants the female for himself, if he finds her to be of considerable value, could override this process.”

Emily gagged and immediately vomited into the snow. There was no way she could endure that. She doubted she could survive watching her mates die, much less what they planned for her. Any woman stolen by them would not only be torn from her family but forced to endure gangrape, impregnation, and any other abuse that the guild might decide to inflict upon them before even being able to seek reprieve to grieve. And even then, it would be with an infant sired from one of her rapists.

Her eyes lingered on the blood splattering the snow a short distance away and slowly slid to Nash. The male's head was turned toward her, his mouth open as he labored to breathe, his glowing eyes were dim but focused entirely on her as if she were his entire world and he wanted to capture that image and take it with him into death. She bit her lip hard as she swallowed back her sob. From the corner of her eye, she saw Vikt and Vrel prowling among the trees, their eyes glinting and winking out.

The huntsman glanced back over at Nash and tsked. "Still alive, are you? I will take care of that."

He lifted his crossbow, taking aim at her male's head, and Emily surged to her feet, unwilling to stand by and watch. She spun toward the huntsman as she rose from a crouch, her hands coming up above her head so that she gripped the crossbow and shoved it upward, pointing it into the air. She screamed her fury and saw the flash of surprise in his eyes for only a moment before they hardened once more, and his lips curled in a sneer.

"Foolish woman," he snarled as he shoved forward, driving his weight against her.

Emily stumbled backward as she attempted to maintain her balance, but her arms shook in protest as his weight bore down on her. She could only resist him for a moment longer, but that moment was all that was needed. Vrel and Vikt rushed from the forest at full speed, their lithe bodies a blur as they leaped at the huntsman.

He shouted as he backpedaled, whirling from her as he attempted to fight off the attacking Ragoru. They tore into him, their teeth gnashing and ripping into him as their claws tore into his flesh. They dragged him screaming to the ground and still he thrashed, his arms flailing and legs kicking out in an attempt to knock them away. Amidst all of this, Nash rolled to his side and pushed himself slowly to his feet. He was weakened but this was obviously the opening he had been waiting for—the distraction that would allow him to attack despite his current state. He staggered, blood seeping from his wounds with every movement, but he stalked forward, oblivious to his obvious pain. Vikt and Vrel released the huntsman at his approach and backed away, their muzzles and chests covered with the man's blood.

Emily walked toward them, and Nash glanced over at her from where he had come to a stop at the huntsman's side.

“You will not wish to see this, rya,” he growled, but Emily shook her head defiantly as she took her place at his side.

“Considering what that bastard had planned and the fact that he was about to slaughter my mates before my eyes, I not only need to see this... I want to.”

Nash held her gaze for a long moment before inclining his head in assent. She was their female, the head of their family, and she never felt it so much as she did in that moment. She had defended her family and now she would watch the huntsman die. She lifted her chin proudly, her eyes following Nash's movements as he stepped over the male. The huntsman was alive, his breathing labored, his wounds were terrible but mostly superficial in their placement to cause the most pain as he slowly bled. Vikt and Vrel had been vicious in this, causing the maximum amount of suffering so that the huntsman could watch death coming for him.

“May Father Efru take him and curse him with further suffering in the next world,” Vrel spat, his bloody saliva staining the snow.

Nash paused over the huntsman, his hackles rising as his lips peeled back from his long fangs. The huntsman shouted in panic and attempted to lift his arms defensively, but it was useless against Nash's attack as the male dropped, his teeth descending.

Blood splattered everywhere, spraying her skin and her gown as the huntsman's screams filled the woods, and flames of their home brightened the night, illuminating every bit of the gory scene. Emily smiled coldly as she watched and when Evelyn arrived a short while later with a blaster in hand and her mates by her side, along with a small collection of Ragoru who had tracked the huntsman to their abode, Emily's smile widened in greeting. Hazel drew to a stop at what was left of the male's mangled head and stared down at it grimly before nodding respectfully to her triad.

"I would like to take the remains for my triad to dispose of in a way we feel is fitting, if we have permission. It is your kill," the male rumbled.

Nash nodded tiredly with a wave of his hand with a swipe of his hand but immediately sank into the snow with a pained groan as Hazel bent and dragged the shredded body of the huntsman away. Emily looked to Evelyn beseechingly, and the woman nodded as she gestured to her mates.

"Take him to the finished den not too far from here. It is as good as any and was being made ready for him anyway in case the twins didn't accept. As it seems that they are in need of a new home and the male is in need of saving yet again, we will just take him there now." She glanced over at the house and sadness stole over her expression before she glanced over at Vrel. "All of your beautiful things... I'm so sorry, Vrel. I'm sorry for the home and everything that you lost."

"We have each other," Vrel replied quietly. "Just save Nash, please."

Evelyn nodded solemnly. "You Ragoru are hard to kill, and big alphas like him even more difficult. Thankfully, the fire will be easy enough for the clan to contain. Now

let's get you home.”

Home. Emily leaned on her mates as Vikt and Vrel arrived at either side of her, their arms supporting her as other males hurried over to carefully lift Nash from the snow. It would only be home if Nash were there with them.

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For several days and nights, the healers worked on Nash. Their patient oversight as they took shifts cleaning his wounds and monitoring his condition was something that Emily would never forget, nor was watching the bloodied bolts being pulled from him as he groaned from the pain. It was little wonder that she was anxiously following him whenever he stood and made his way through the den.

“How are you feeling?” she asked as he lowered himself onto the cushions in the central chamber of their cozy den.

Her mate gave her a patient smile even though she knew she was being obnoxious. She just couldn’t help flitting around him with concern. “The same as I was just an hour ago. Calm yourself, rya. I am not going to fall over at any moment. I feel fine—just stiff from the wounds healing, and easily tired.”

“If you are tired, maybe you should go back to the nest,” she suggested, suddenly worried that he was overexerting and exhausting himself. “Maybe Vikt should retrieve the healer and?”

Nash chuffed and shook his head. “It is not necessary. You are worrying for nothing. I have suffered far worst wounds in my life. I will regain energy quickly, and then you will be complaining for when I must make up the lost time rutting you.”

She rolled her eyes at his words, but a fond smile tripped her lips. “It seems that we let a rogue into our den, after all,” she teased.

He grinned in response as he lay back against the cushions piled against the wall. The den was built much like a cabin, except that the front half of it was built within a

large, dug out area supported by stones and various plants to keep the rainfall from washing inside. It created a sort of illusion of a den dug out from a hill, as the rest of the den was built in the traditional manner, carved out from earth. It was surprisingly cozy. The ceiling was low to comfortably contain the heat, but it was high enough that Nash could straighten to his full height and still had an inch or two of spare room above the tips of his ears. There was even a stove installed in a constructed kitchen area, as well as a central hearth that kept the whole den warm despite there being numerous sub chambers to be filled with whatever they wished to store... and a growing family.

“Heal quickly then instead of talking about it. You are not the only one who misses rutting,” Vikt commented from where he sat beside the fire, supervising the roasted rabbits—or hoppers as her mates called them—that he had skewered there. His ears twisted back playfully as he glanced up at her. “Our mate is cruel in insisting that we all behave so not to make you suffer.”

“Be glad that at least the worst of the Withering Days were over when the huntsman attacked,” Vrel commented wryly as he entered the room, four wooden figures cradled gently in his hands. “It was bad enough that the human had us at a disadvantage by attacking when he did while we were still drunk with hormones, but at least we did not have to suffer in the aftermath.”

“Speak for yourself,” Vikt grumbled but his ears pricked to his twin. “Are those them?”

Vrel nodded shyly as he approached the mantle, and Emily smiled as she left Nash’s side to join him. Vrel glanced down at her, love brimming in his eyes as his thumb stroked over the small image in his right hand. Mother Ewa.

“I made these asking that Mother Ewa always bless you and the Dark Fathers protect you, rya. Before, I would have felt devastation and loss when our den burned down,

taking with it all the hard work that we poured into it to make it our own, but you gave me a new sense of home beyond those simple things. Because home is in you, and our triad,” he rasped. “And I will ever be thankful for having this gift in my life. So these... they are for you.”

One by one he placed the figures on the mantle, and while his previous carvings had been beautiful, these that he had constructed for it were even more so as they seemed to smile with utter benevolence and love. Vikt and Nash rose from their places, the latter with a painstaking grunt but he waved off the other male’s assistance as they joined Vrel and Emily to look upon the small statues.

“Now it truly feels like our home is complete. Good job, brother. This is your best work yet,” Vikt said, and Nash grunted in agreement.

“The gods surely blessed me to have brought me all the way here,” Nash observed quietly.

“They blessed all of us,” Emily corrected, her eyes tearing sentimentally.

She dabbed her eyes quickly with the hem of her sleeve and sniffed. Her bottom lip quivered as she mentally tallied the days. If she was not wrong, it was New Year’s Day. Vrel’s timing, as always, was impeccable. It truly felt like they were moving into a new beginning—together. Bowing her head, she whispered a prayer to the Mother, the memory of her mother’s hands moving over her prayer beads filling her mind as she thanked the goddess who could only also be Mother Ewa, for all the blessings she had received.

They gave her the family she never would have sought or thought she wanted. And she would forever be grateful for the day she was chosen to be their Withering Night’s bride.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:19 am

Six years later

Emily groaned, her hand going across her bulging stomach as she narrowed her eyes on the mischievous little monster grinning at her from where he pretended to hide behind his father's bulk.

"Dral, don't make me come over there and shake those cinnamon twist cookies out of you," she threatened. "Who told you that you could eat them? Those cookies were for our New Year's feast, not for you to gobble up, you little fiend."

"It wasn't just me," he protested with a little giggle. "Daddy Nash also ate some."

The male in question, having been betrayed by his own offspring, flattened his ears as he turned a look of shock to Emily. "I would never?—"

"Wait," she commanded, holding her hand up as she squinted at her mate. "Is that cinnamon on your muzzle?"

Vikt and Vrel stumbled to an immediate halt as they entered the room, identical looks of guilt crossing their faces as her eyes shifted to them and widened at the evidence of the sweet powder that she used on her special sugar bomb cookies coating not just their muzzles but the fur of their chests.

She gaped at them as she recalled the missing sugar bombs from the day before that she assumed were just a miscount. "All four of you... traitors!"

"Now, rya," Vikt cajoled, his four hands lifting to her in a silent entreaty. "It is not

that we are betraying you. Your cookies are simply too difficult to resist. And you like to hide them,” he pointed out in what he obviously thought was spectacular reasoning. “So we were obligated to eat some of them to tide us over to the feast.”

Emily shook a finger at them in exasperation. “You three are supposed to be setting an example for that one,” she said, gesturing to their rog. “You wish to raise an entire den full of cookie thieves at this rate!”

“But you enjoy making cookies,” Vrel interjected with a sweet smile. “And you love it especially because we are always happy to help—particularly Nash,” he added, to which her big mate nodded in agreement. “We are only thinking of you to give you a reason to make more and so that you know we appreciate them.”

She stared at her mates and choked on her laughter. The whole lot of them were devious and naughty as rogs themselves when they wanted to be. Even after six years together, they never failed to keep her on her toes and laughing. Even little Dral, who was the spitting image of Nash despite his nearly black fur thanks to her own coloring she liked to imagine, was just as precious and precocious. Life was never boring, and she wouldn’t have it any other way.

Despite the incident with the huntsman years earlier, and the rising threat from the citadels that eventually forced Evelyn to shut down communication with them, life was peaceful in the northlands. Trish had gone from a nervous, unhappy woman to a strong voice within the community as well as an accomplished huntress and surprisingly... a blacksmith. A trade that she had apparently picked up out of pure curiosity in her youth. They had also become close friends as the woman ended up settling within a den dug out not too far from their own territory so that the house could be available for one of the newer brides.

Having a friend within reasonable walking distance did much for Emily’s mental health, and Vrel had formed a close friendship with Grund, who had, under the tutelage of one of the newer residents in the clan, discovered a passion for gardening.

Vrel came out of his shell more with the offered friendship and Vikt spent more time with other hunters without guilt. And then there was Nash, sweet Nash who was content to stay at home and baby her and their offspring even as he dutifully guarded them. And if he enjoyed swapping stories and theories with Hazel, it was all the better.

In truth, Vikt was right all those years ago. Life in the clan was good.

Her laughter shifted to groan when the rog inside of her suddenly pressed downward, her hand flattening against her belly as her belly cramped in a familiar way that had her gasping as fluid splattered to the floor, soaking her underwear. She knew exactly what it was but still stared down at it for a long moment as her offspring made a gagging noise.

“Ewww, Mama peed.”

“It is not pee,” she corrected absently, and then her eyes rose to meet the startled gaze of her mates. “It’s time.”

Vrel nodded and quickly picked Dral up, carting the little one to Trish’s house where her friend would be eagerly awaiting news as her other mates sprang into action. And that was how they greeted the New Year, thanks to a pregnancy late in the season, with a fat little female with midnight black fur who squealed loudly in a celebration of life.

And Emily fell in love all over again. With her home, her mates, and the new little one who would brighten their lives with even more joy and chaos.

“Happy New Year, little Deva,” she whispered and pressed a kiss to the rog’s flat, wet little nose.