

A Halflings of Smallburrow
Cozy Fantasy

Dusted in Snowflakes

T. M. Mayfield

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A Halflings of Smallburrow
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*To all the girls who were told
they were “too much”—you’re not
too much, they just needed to find
less.*

Author's Note

Buried in Friendship is a wholesome story about two halflings and their journey to a new beginning. What kind of halflings are they, you might find yourself asking? Well, they're not your average Dungeons and Dragons halfling but instead more like your Middle Earth variety.

It is also worth mentioning that you will find Eilaen has certain neurodiverse tendencies. She struggles with anxiety and needs her routine to stay grounded. Kaida, however, is Eilaen's polar opposite and platonic soulmate who is the epitome of ADHD personified. As an author with ADHD and a mother of neurodiverse children, I found it incredibly hard not to pour some of us into this book as I created characters inspired by two of my sweet girls.

Lastly, I want to thank you for taking the time to read my book. This is the culmination of my lifelong dream and I am so excited to see that dream being lived out thanks to Eilaen and Kaida, as well as the other residents of Smallburrow. Please feel free to message me any of your thoughts or theories. You can find me on Instagram by my handle, [@seetaylorwriteandreview](#). I would love to hear your live reactions and see your love for my Smallburrow inhabitants.

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One

On a cold winter's day, a bundled up halfling sat up in her warm bed and stretched. Looking outside of the window by her bed, Kaida was delighted to see that it was snowing. They were the largest flakes she had ever seen, and they filled her with such wonder. Though fall was her favorite season, there was no denying how the falling snow filled her with joy, the flakes floating like dancers as they sparkled in the sunlight. After a good, deep stretch, she rotated her body so her legs could dangle from the side of the bed, giving her the ability to slide her feet into her slippers before standing. She didn't care what Eilaen said, the floors were always so cold in the mornings and she refused to climb out of bed without the warmth of her slippers covering her fat toes.

On the hook next to her bed hung a robe, always within reach for those middle of the night trips to the toilet. It was visibly well-loved, Kaida having used it for years, and was her most worn article of clothing. The way the fabric clung to her like a tight hug and never failed to comfort her, especially when the cool air tickles her skin. The once bright yellow flowers were now faded, looking dingier and more faded every wash day. It was the coziest piece of clothing she'd ever owned, and she was already prematurely mourning the loss of it when it fell apart and she had to get rid of it.

With her robe wrapped tightly around her body, Kaida quickly toed the stairs on her way down as she tried to get into the kitchen as quickly as possible. The cold was already trying to nip at her nose and she was not a fan of waking up this way. The further down the steps she got, the warmer she grew. Just another thing about Eilaen to be thankful for was how she was always awake before the sun came up, giving her the time as well as reason to light the fireplace in the den before firing up the woodstove in the kitchen.

The sun's rays were drifting across the field between the house and the barn, a sight that was utterly breathtaking as

the sun glittered off of the snow-covered ground. Kaida squinted her eyes, quickly spying Tillard, that menacing pig of theirs, traipsing about in the snow. She giggled as she watched him toss his tail to and fro, trotting along as if it were a warm summer day and he had no cares in the world. With a snort, she shook her head and filled the kettle, setting it on the stove to begin heating up water for tea. While she waited, Kaida filled two muslin pouches with loose peppermint tea leaves and dropped a pouch into a cup for Eilaen, repeating the process for a cup for herself. She clapped her hands, dusting off the remaining tea leaf debris that stuck to her hands before she turned toward the island where her baking supplies resided.

“Hmmm. What to make, what to make?” she mused out loud, contemplating what recipe to start with for their breakfast.

As she glanced around the island, she raised her hands, summoning each ingredient to start to float into the air with her baker’s magic. She flicked her fingers back and forth as if she were scanning through a catalog, stopping only when she found what she was looking for. By the time she’d finished, she had placed the flour, baking soda, brown sugar, salt, curled chocolate shavings, and marshmallows on the top of the island before turning to summon the bowls, whisks, and pans she needed.

As she combined ingredients and worked her way through her recipe, she lost herself in her art, as well as lost track of kitchen and oven space. It wasn’t until Eilaen stepped through the door that Kaida realized she’d created *a lot* more than she had room in the oven for. *This is gonna take a lot of baking time*, she thought to herself before giggling.

“Kaida,” Eilaen said as she stepped through the doorway between the dining room and the kitchen. “What are your thoughts about checking out the bakery today?”

Kaida stopped halfway to the stove and spun around to face her friend. “*Today?* As in today, today?” she squealed. The excitement was almost enough to cause her to drop the pan of muffins in her hand.

Eilaen laughed and nodded. “Yes, Kai. Today. After breakfast, maybe?”

Kaida squealed again before rushing to the oven and sliding the muffin pan into its center. The two halflings worked together as they finished cooking their breakfast and making their cups of tea. After their work was done, they decided to sit in the den to eat in the comfort of their big, cozy chairs where the fire had made the air nice and toasty. The air smelled of freshly baked muffins and the bacon and eggs that were on their plates mixed with that of the burning fire. It created the perfect cozy atmosphere, and for a moment, Kaida debated on whether she truly wanted to leave the comfort of the farmhouse or not. Ultimately, she decided that it would be more than worth it to endure a few moments of icy temperatures if it meant being able to lay eyes on her new passion project.

While Kaida waited for the final round of muffins to bake, she cleaned the kitchen and slid the other three dozen of muffins into the ice box they’d recently gotten to store their food in for later. After they had cleaned up from breakfast and gotten dressed, the duo set off to the stables so they could saddle Mable and Sorrel and head into town. They chatted as well as they could, but between the chill that frosted over their lips and the jostling from their transportation, it was hard to keep up a steady, uninterrupted conversation. A groan escaped Kaida at this. There was little that she hated more than to be forced into riding in silence. Her brain would start running nonstop, and before too long it would end up being filled to the top with all kinds of thoughts and ideas.

As they journeyed, she tried to keep her mind trained on thoughts of what she wanted the bakery to look like. Just as she’d predicted, by the time they reached where the dirt road turned into cobblestone, Kaida’s mind was a jumbled mess. She knew that she’d have to see what she was working with before she’d be able to know what it was that she would do with the place. Excitement took hold of her once more, and an infectious smile swept across her face. Taking a deep breath to clear her mind, the jumbled thoughts within her quickly

cleared, stopping just as they reached the storefront's sidewalk and took in the sight in front of them.

Two

It had been two weeks since Eilaen had presented Kaida with the paperwork for the bakery they would co-own. Now, they were finally standing in front of the building together. Eilaen's slight unease at not knowing what to look for or where to start was visible on her face. Kaida's face, however, was lit up with excitement at the blank canvas in front of her.

"Are you ready?" Eilaen asked her.

"Ready," she replied with a smile, her sapphire eyes twinkling like stars.

She inhaled a deep breath and slowly took a step towards the door, her hands and legs trembling in anticipation. With shaking hands, she slid the key into the lock and turned it until she heard the click of the mechanisms. Easing the door open, she slowly stepped in and began to look around.

As soon as she stepped through the door, she stumbled down the small slope into a large, mostly bare room. She walked to the middle of the room before stopping, turning around in a complete circle to get a view of it as a whole. From where she stood, she could see perfectly through the large ceiling to floor windows that stretched from the side of the door to where the corner of the building was. In her mind, she could picture patrons sitting at tables next to the window, the falling snow illuminated by the soft glow of faerie lights.

Looking to her left, Kaida's eyes trailed down the interior long wall that would be *perfect* for lining up at least four self-serve glass cases for cookies, muffins, and small pastries. Spinning quickly to the wall on the right of the

window, she saw four tables and twelve chairs stacked together as they lined the wall. The wall directly in front of her, which was opposite the window, was the only painted wall in the room. It was the same, delectable shade of brown as the dark chocolate she loved to bake with, especially when combining marshmallows in the center of croissants, with a doorway close to the corner. This wall, she decided, would be the best place for a long counter to be built in front of it, and directly behind it would be a large mural painted on the wall. It would be the perfect place for a new register to be centered.

Eilaen stepped up beside her, interrupting her thoughts. “I see your mind turning, Kai. What are you thinking?”

Kaida turned to look at her friend and grasped her hands tightly. “It’s perfect, Ellie. Absolutely perfect.”

“You haven’t even seen the kitchen, Kai. What if-” Eilaen started to ask but Kaida stopped her.

“I already know,” she said with a smile, “that it’s going to be just as wonderful as you are. I know I have only said this a zillion times in the last two days, but I am so thankful to have you as my chosen sister, and constantly grateful to have you at my side to support my dreams as if they’re your own.”

Tears began to in Eilaen’s eyes at Kaida’s words, and she tightly embraced her friend. When she released Kaida, she sniffled and wiped her eyes. “Ready to go see, then?”

With a laugh, Kaida pranced toward the door on the dark chocolate colored wall and opened it with an exaggerated flourish. She took two steps into the room before stopping abruptly, a loud gasp escaping her. Concern washed over Eilaen’s face at the sound. Not knowing what had surprised Kaida, she walked in only a handful of steps behind her when she, too, stood in shock. Where they had expected a working kitchen was, instead, was something reminiscent of a desolate shack left to rot.

Kaida was shocked to her very core. She couldn’t wrap her mind around the state of the kitchen, especially since the

room they'd just been in looked like it was in perfect condition. Remodeling the kitchen could take weeks, if not months, and that would just be so they could get it in working order. Not to mention the financial costs that would accompany the work and the time it would take to complete such a project. Contractors, equipment, appliances... Kaida ran down the mental list she had from when she opened her Galbassi bakery. Her stomach knotted up as she began to fill with dread.

Without looking, she knew Eilaen was staring, patiently waiting for her response. Silently, she reached over and looped her index finger around Eilaen's pinky. It was a gesture she hadn't made since the halflings were young, only using it when one of them sought comfort.

Eilaen was the first to speak. "Ya know, Kai, with some hard work and a little extra grit, I *know* we can turn this into the kitchen of your dreams."

Kaida nodded as she blinked the tears away, trying to collect her thoughts. After a few moments, she wiped away the tear that had escaped and cleared her throat. "You're right, Ellie. All I need is a plan. Once I have that, we can turn this mess into everything I've ever dreamed of." She turned once more to face Eilaen and smiled weakly. "Now let's go home. We've got a kitchen to design."



After a sullen trip back to their home on the farm, Eilaen decided to make quick work to walk Mable and Sorrel to the stable to feed them and rub them down while Kaida made her way to the study. She was appalled by the sight of the bakery's kitchen and needed to write down the things she'd need to reconstruct it. After she fully processed the situation and had her plan of action laid out, she'd be okay. It would take a lot of time, and even more money, to build it back into a functional kitchen, much less into the kitchen of her dreams.

As she sat at the old wooden desk in the study, she began to make a list of the things she knew off the top of her head the kitchen needed. She knew that the counters would

need to be ripped out and completely rebuilt. She'd need a stove, although two would be ideal. She knew that the gnomish community a few towns over specialized in new, more efficient ovens and she began to wonder how much it would cost her to get one. As she wrote down the appliances on her list, she made sure to write an asterisk next to "*new stove?*" before moving it lower on her list. The walls needed to be repainted and the floors...

"Ugh. The floors," she audibly groaned as she closed her eyes, tossing her head back.

The existing floors weren't *awful* but they weren't in the best condition, either. In her mind, she was thinking of having slick, dark brown cobblestone on the floor. Just enough to fit the aesthetic she was going for but still giving her the ease of cleaning when she'd inevitably spill or drop something on them.

She continued to work on her floor plan even after she heard Eilaen open and close the front door making her way towards the kitchen. Even from the study, she could hear Eilaen ranting about Tillard squashing the acorn squash and mashing the pea plants. It wasn't long before the aroma of something delicious began to make its way into the study and Kaida felt her stomach grumble in response. She'd just finished drawing out her blueprint for the kitchen in the bakery when Eilaen knocked on the study door, letting her know dinner was done.

"Okay but come here first. I want your thoughts on this," Kaida said, rising from the chair with a stretch. She hadn't realized how long she'd been sitting in the chair until she felt the tingling in her lower legs as she stood. She shook her head hoping the wives' tales she'd heard about it helping the feeling going away were true.

Eilaen nodded and crossed the room, and Kaida excitedly showed her the floor plan. Then, she pulled out the list of things she knew they would need to buy and accomplish. After scanning the list twice and marking down a few objects of her own, Eilaen looked up and smiled. "I guess we have some shopping to do!"

Things I need for bakery

Big Stuff

Big sink (lots of baking = tons of dishes)

~~New stove (maybe!?)~~

Microwave (or whatever it's called. Ask Ellie)

Hot chocolate machine (yes please! Yum!)

Giant ice chest (gotta keep that milk cold!)

New stove (Only if feasible)



Other Stuff

bowls

plates

cups

utensils (baking)

pots/pans

utensils (eating)

containers



napkins



MISSING SOMETHING!?

Will ask Ellie later. She will know



Three

The next afternoon, the two halflings happily made the trip three towns over to visit Lyrica that way they could make a day of visiting the largest shopping center that Kaida had ever laid eyes on. She held Eilaen's hand as they both looked around, wide-eyed and amazed by the sheer number of beings. Kaida had never seen so many storefronts, which was saying something as she'd made several journeys to towns known for having exotic or other hard to find ingredients.

They roamed around for a short time, stopping when they found *The Gnomish Goods*, a store that specialized in new appliances and other fascinating mechanical contraptions. They stepped inside slowly, not knowing what they'd be walking into. The store was unlike anything they'd experienced in Galbassi or Smallburrow, and they were both taken aback by their surroundings. It was as if they'd just walked into another world entirely. There were machines and appliances that they'd never before seen the likes of. Kaida let out a loud gasp as she looked around. Everything was so shiny and looked so complex. Suddenly, she felt small and unsure, which was extremely rare for the incredibly outgoing halfling.

As they slowly strolled down each aisle, they grew increasingly curious by the vast amount of things they were seeing. Finally, a male gnome found them and stopped. "May I help you two halflings with something?" he asked as he looked at them through a pair of thick, round spectacles.

"Yes. Hi, I'm Kaida, and this is Eilaen. We're from Smallburrow, and we're opening a bakery. We're in need of appliances and were wondering if you'd be able to help us decide what would fit our needs in the best way? Everything is so shiny and big and incredible," Kaida replied with a wide smile that had her eyes shining with excitement.

“Yes,” chimed in Eilaen. “Everything is so overwhelming! There are so many options.”

“Well Kaida and Eilaen. If it’s help you need, then help you shall get. My name is Ginkom and I am completely at your service.” The gnome peered up at them again, taking them in before continuing. Kaida felt as if he were sizing them up by the way he looked at them. “If you would follow me through this door here, we can get started on sorting out what you need.”

He swept his hand and gestured in front of them, allowing them to pass through the narrow aisle. Once the three of them had passed through an unseen door to their right, Kaida was amazed even further by the large, shiny, top of the line stoves in front of her. They were nothing like the small wood stove they had at home. She leaned toward Eilaen and loudly whispered, “I think I have died and gone to some kind of baker’s heaven!”

Eilaen stifled a laugh as she leaned over and whispered in return. “I don’t think you know how to whisper, Kai.”

Ginkom cleared his throat to avoid interrupting the halflings, who clearly found themselves entertaining. “Now, Ms. Kaida. Please describe your needs for me. It will help me serve you best and allow us to pick out the items necessary.”

“I need a freezing case, two stove and oven combination things, and a *huge* sink. I would prefer it if everything matched. Oh, and whatever else you think I might have a use for, I guess, just in case I missed anything. We’re starting from nothing. Literally,” Kaida replied, looking at her list, rattling off what she thought Ginkom’s shop would have.

The gnome stood by and listened patiently as she explained her predicament and how the kitchen in the bakery was having to be completely refurbished. When she’d finished her excited rambling, she stood and fidgeted watching as he rubbed his chin for a moment. He appeared to be lost in thought. Standing still a moment more, he tapped his chin three times before his face lit up. “Aha! I have it. Follow me,

please. Right this way. Please mind the cables stretched across the floor. Don't want to trip over those."

Kaida and Eilaen followed Ginkom as he sped off towards the corner in the back, where the large kitchen appliances were located. Every time Kaida thought she couldn't be more impressed by the equipment being shown to them, Ginkom would walk them by another row of even *more* impressive appliances. After what felt like hours, the girls were finally done picking out their purchases for the bakery, as well as having snagged a few things to upgrade the farmhouse. After handing Ginkom their coins and setting up a delivery day for the following Friday, Kaida looped her arm in Eilaen's, skipping happily as they went to their next stop.

By the time they had arrived back at the farm, everything on Kaida's list had been selected, bought, and scheduled to be delivered the next week to the bakery, with the exception of the shiny new stove and the large upstairs heater that Eilaen had purchased from *The Gnomish Goods*. With the sky growing darker by the minute and both halflings exhausted from their extensive shopping, they each wandered on over to one of their neighbor's houses to invite them over for supper. By the time Kaida and Jareth entered into the house, Eilaen and Ms. Kestrel had already been at work in the kitchen, and dinner was almost done. The warmth of the house combined with the delicious aroma filling the air, was enough to calm Kaida's mind down from the swirl of thoughts that filled it.

"We're in the kitchen, slaving away, my dears!" Ms. Kestrel shouted after Kaida had announced their arrival.

Kaida kicked off her boots as Jareth hung his scarf and hat up on the hook closest to the door. A loud, hungry noise erupted from Kaida's stomach, causing Jareth to laugh. His laughter, being infectious as always, caused Kaida to begin to laugh with him. By the time they reached the kitchen to see Ms. Kestrel and Eilaen, they both had tears streaming down their faces and were clutching their sides, their stomachs hurting from laughing so hard.

"Wh-what are you making for di-dinner, Ellie?" Kaida asked between gasps.

Ms. Kestrel looked at the halfling in front of her and shook her head. “Kaida, you are a sight. We leave the two of you alone for a few moments, and you come inside looking like you’ve been bit by a tickle bug.”

Eilaen rolled her eyes at the sight of them, before shaking her head. She instructed Jareth to grab cups and cutlery for everyone and put them on the table. He’d finished setting the table right as Kaida had decided what she was going to whip up for dessert. In a flash, she put it all together and popped it into the oven. It didn’t take long for the aroma of the chocolate and hazelnut she used inside a thick, flakey pastry dough to begin filling the air.

The four of them sat comfortably around the table, and Kaida filled their friends in on their adventure, as well as their success at *The Gnomish Goods*. After she finished, she looked at Jareth. “Do you know who would be the best for the construction work for the remodel? The floor is *atrocious* and the walls are in deep need of some help in some sections. Oh, and I need painters. Oh! And someone who can build and put in counters and an island. Oh, and I need a plumber, Oh, and-” she rambled off through her list only to be cut off by Jareth.

“Whoa, whoa. Take a breath, Kai. Yes, I know exactly who you need to contact for help with everything you need but you’ve gotta chill. You’re going to run yourself ragged just *speaking* about what needs to be done. If you don’t pace yourself, you won’t be able to do what needs doing,” he said gently. Ms. Kestrel and Eilaen nodded in agreement.

Kaida made a noise somewhere between a sigh and a laugh, nodding. “You’re right. I know you are. I’m just so extremely excited that we’re *finally* doing this. All of the feelings are just building, and building, and building. I feel like my insides are going to explode!”

Before anyone was able to respond to her, Kaida gasped and leapt out of her seat, screaming about her almost forgotten pastries and bolted towards the kitchen. Moments later, a loud sigh of relief was heard before she hollered out that all was well and nothing had been burnt. The three remaining at the table sat still, anticipation filling the air as

they waited on her to reappear. When she did, she carried a large platter stacked high with the chocolate hazelnut pastries and Kaida could practically sense their excitement at dessert.

“Okay. Where were we? Oh yeah. Okay. So, my plans for the bakery. Wait, you guys dig in, but be careful. They’re hot! Anyways, like I was saying. Oh traps. Wait. I forgot the hot cocoa. One moment,” Kaida rambled, trying to reclaim her train of thought but instead only rambling in circles. Eilaen was fond of referring to it as “Kai chasing mice.”

When she brought out the hot cocoa, she’d been able to mostly organize her thoughts and began to explain her overall vision for the bakery. By the time Ms. Kestrel and Jareth left for the night, Kaida felt calmer about the things she needed to do before they’d even be able to *think* about opening. When the door closed as they left, she released a long breath.

After saying goodnight to Eilaen, she nimbly climbed the stairs, two at a time despite her friend’s pleas to be careful, visions of her new project running through her head. Though there was plenty of work to be done, Kaida knew that every moment of it would be worth it. Sleep came easily, her visions continuing in her dreams, even well after she’d fallen asleep.

Four

Two days later, Kaida found herself in front of the bakery once again. She could feel the smile on her face growing wider thanks to the frost left by the cold wind blowing across her face. The wind was blowing so fiercely it was throwing leftover snow into the air as it whipped around her. She took a deep breath in, closing her eyes. The crisp air caused her lungs to ache, but as she stood there with stars shining in her eyes, she saw her vision come to life.

Looking through the window, she could picture her fellow townsfolk as they sat circled around the tables. She could hear them laughing as they drank their hot cocoa and munched on their choice of cookies or flakey pastries. She could already smell the rich aroma of chocolate, nutmeg, and peppermint mocha as fresh cookies and cakes baked in the ovens, the kitchen door swinging open causing the scents in the air to stir around. The clattering of mugs and teacups as they were placed on saucers was so loud in her mind that she swore it was actually occurring inside the building she stood in front of.

The distant sound of heavy footsteps crunching through the snow pulled Kaida out of her head. Blinking rapidly, she looked over to see a dwarf moving towards her. Abruptly, he came to a stop in front of her, shoving his thick hands into his pockets and furrowing his brows. “Are you Kaida or are you Eilaen?” his gruff voice asked, his words rough and gravely.

She looked up at him. He wasn't much taller than she was, just enough to where for her to have to tilt her face up, and he smelled of wood shavings, iron, and coal. His face was barely visible, save for two patches on each side where his thick, bushy, reddish-brown beard didn't meet his lower lashes. His nose was wide, but not long. His eyes were the loveliest shade of yellow-green Kaida had ever seen and the thick brows that sat directly above them matched his beard.

There was something peculiar about this dwarf that drew her in. He made her feel safe, which was a strange thought since she'd never met him before. Though his body language suggested he was a no-nonsense kind of dwarf, she had a gut feeling that she could trust him.

“Oh! Hullo. I'm Kaida. Pleased to meet ya. And you are...?” Kaida cheerily replied, her voice trailing off at the end of her greeting.

“Name's Elkhean. Heard ya was lookin' for someone to do some work around a new bakery,” he replied, his tone a touch softer, his body relaxing a smidge.

“Why yes! I am. I was just coming in for the day. I have some deliveries that are supposed to be making an appearance today, and I wanted to make sure they didn't sit on the wet ground for too long.” Kaida smiled at the dwarf as she reached into her pocket for the keys Eilaen had given her.

Kaida slid the key into the lock and twisted it until she heard the soft click of the mechanism inside unlocking. The door took two shoves to open, the frame now swollen from the moisture in the air.

“Need to fix that,” Elkhean stated as he walked through the doorway, jotting it down in a small notebook he pulled from his pocket.

As the two of them entered the bakery, Kaida nervously watched as he looked around, seeming to inspect every inch of the bakery, writing notes with each observation. He stepped around the room slowly, trying not to miss a single spot in the entire lobby. After he seemed satisfied, he looked back at Kaida. “Kitchen's through this door?” he asked before walking through it, not bothering to wait for her confirmation.

Kaida walked through the door a few steps behind him, stopping when she heard him whistle. She winced at the realization that this remodel was going to be a lot more costly than she initially realized. She carefully stepped further into the kitchen, taking care not to distract him or draw any unnecessary attention to herself. She watched as he shuffled, squatted, stretched, and leaned. She listened as he made noises

that ranged from “hms” and “mhms” to grunts of disapproval and clucks of his tongue. After what seemed like forever, she finally found the nerve to stand next to him where he was planted in the middle of the room.

“So, erm. Mr. Elkhean, sir. What’s the, uh, problem?” Kaida’s words came out timidly. She could tell by the way he refused to meet her eyes that the news was going to be painful and she knew it would be better if it was given to her straight rather than him skirting around the problematic areas to spare her feelings.

“Well, Ms. Kaida. There’s good news an’ bad news. What would ya like first?” Elkhean asked.

Kaida winced. “The... The bad news, I guess?” Uncertainty filled her words, and it was obvious he noticed.

“Okay. Well, Ms. Kaida, I’m not in the business o’ sugar coatin’ the bad news. This place? It’s a disaster. It’s a wreck. I don’t know how long it was left empty, but time has done quite a bit o’ damage to it. Repairs ain’t gonna be easy or cheap. In fact, you’re lookin’ at two, maybe three months o’ work here.” He waited for a few moments for Kaida to process the news before continuing. “Good news is, I can do it all for ya. Floors, walls, counters, cabinets, paintin’, plumbin’. Ev’ry bit o’ it. Can even build a chimney and fireplace in the front for ya should ya want it.”

Shocked wasn’t even the word Kaida would have used to describe how she felt. “All... All of it? You can do *all* of it?” The words barely made their way off of her tongue.

“Yes’m. All o’ it. Well, me and my crew o’ dwarves. S’long as ya don’t mind me bringin’ in helpers. They’re included in the cost, not added in as extras,” the dwarf replied, nervously shifting from one foot to the other.

“Okay.” Kaida took a deep breath, slowly exhaled it before smiling. She turned to look at him. “Mr. Elkhean, would you like to come for dinner so that you can meet my business partner slash best friend? We can eat and discuss costs and other matters over some hot food rather than standing in this freezing building.”

He took a moment to consider her offer. As he did, the small patches of skin that were visible twitched at the edges of his mouth turned up in a small smile under his thick beard. The corners of his eyes crinkled as his mouth stretched out further into the first *real* smile Kaida had seen from him all afternoon. “Ms. Kaida, I’d love to be joinin’ ya for dinner.”

Kaida gave him her address, as well as directions, and told him that she’d meet him at the front gate when he arrived. He smiled at her again and, taking her hand into his, assured her that her bakery would be in good hands. Before leaving the kitchen, he looked around briefly one last time, promising that he would bring a detailed list of materials needed, as well as ideas of how to maximize the space within the kitchen itself. The two walked outside of the bakery, stopping long enough for Kaida to lock the door and pocket the key before they stepped off the sidewalk and parted ways.

Five

Kaida was on cloud nine when she arrived back at the farm a short while later. After walking Sorrel into the stable and taking care of her after their trip to and from town, she rushed back into the house and called for Eilaen.

“So, Ellie. What are we having for dinner?” Kaida said, pulling a small chunk of her lip between her teeth.

“I, uh... I don’t know? I haven’t thought about it. I actually didn’t realize that it was close to time to cook until you came barrelling through the door. Why?” Eilaen asked, cocking an eyebrow.

“I may or may not have invited someone to dinner. Tonight. Like *tonight* kind of tonight. A dwarf, actually. Well, more than a dwarf. He’s our contractor. I think? Or maybe our possible contractor? I don’t know. Either way, he’s coming for dinner so that the three of us can discuss everything as far as costs and materials and whatnot. So, what do you think is going to be for dinner?” Kaida knew that her nervousness was causing her to ramble, but she was struggling to stop talking.

Eilaen laughed. “Well, it’s cold out. I noticed a thin layer of snow when I was chasing Tillard back into the barn. That dreadful pig is going to freeze to death if he doesn’t stay in the barn with all the other animals in this weather. I suppose it would be best to make a big pot of soup. Potato or vegetable?” she said, offering Kaida the choice between their two favorites.

Kaida suggested vegetable soup, hoping that Elkhean would like it. *Come to think of it*, she thought to herself, *I don’t know much about dwarven eating habits*. While Eilaen prepared and cooked the soup, Kaida sifted through her cookbook to find a recipe for dessert, stopping when she found

one for peppermint mocha chocolate chip cookies. “Hmm”, she mumbled softly. “Never made this one before.”

As the dough for the bread bowls sat on the side of the island for their first rise cycle, Kaida began to summon over the ingredients she needed for the cookie dough. She was excited to find that she had just enough peppermint shavings for two dozen cookies and pointed them over to the side as she sifted through her stash of chocolate chips and substituted the milk chocolate chips for dark chocolate chips, craving the richness that they would bring. To her right, she lined up eggs, butter, and a vial of vanilla extract. In front of her, she drifted over a large bowl where she combined white sugar, brown sugar, flour, salt, and baking soda. When all of these items were blended together, she whisked in the chocolate chips and peppermint shavings. She then smoothly slid the bowl to the top right edge of the island before moving to collect her wet ingredients.

Slowly, she folded in the egg before blending the vanilla extract into the ingredients in front of her. Once the butter had softened, Kaida whisked it in until it was sufficiently incorporated into the mixture. She switched gears for a moment, turning back to the bread dough for dinner. After she punched it, she dumped the bowl onto a floured portion of the island and began to knead it before shaping it into the rounded shape she needed. After she had started the process to let it rise a second time, she whipped back around to where the cookie dough rested. Kaida then scooped it into identical dollops, dropping the little balls on the metal sheets sitting on the countertop in front of her. With a flick of her wrist, she opened the oven and slipped the sheets into the opened wood stove for baking.

It didn't take long before the deliciously crisp aroma of the cookies began to drift out of the stove, mixing pleasantly with the scents coming from Eilaen's soup. Needing something to do with her hands while she waited for the cookies to finish and for her to be able to put the bread bowls into the oven, Kaida filled the kettle and settled it on the hot stove.

Soon, the kettle whistled and she grabbed her teacup, pouring the steaming water over the tea leaves. The blend she had chosen was a lavender and lemon blend that she'd created on a whim. The lavender was soothing and mixed well with the twang that the lemon contributed. It made her feel bright, awake, and focused.

As she waited for it to cool, she wandered into the den to straighten up the couch and chair cushions, stroking the fire to ensure it would stay warm enough for their guest. She wracked her brain for any information she'd absorbed over the years, but quickly realized she didn't know much about dwarves. Most of the knowledge she'd obtained involved the professions they typically worked in, which mostly included heavy work such as blacksmithing, mining, construction, and geode sifting.

Other than that, she knew they typically didn't care for elves, they didn't really have much in the way of magic, they could hold their own when given copious amounts of mead or ale, and they *really* hated their lack of stature being used against them. She also thought she'd heard at one time that they preferred a meat and potatoes type of meal but wasn't sure if that was true or not. You couldn't always trust the Galbassi Gossip Network to get their facts correct in most situations.

She glanced at the small table she and Eilaen had recently bought for the den to work on plans for the bakery and realized it would be the perfect place to keep up with her lists, as well as the invoices and receipts for the renovations. Something in her told her that Elkhean would be the perfect dwarf for the job, especially since he was the only being to bother to show up and assess their property's current situation. She also appreciated how he had also asked to discuss everything pertaining to materials and costs instead of turning around and bolting straight out the door after seeing the project at hand. *No, Kaida told herself. There wasn't anyone else for this job. It's him. I don't know what makes me so sure, but Elkhean is the only being I want to make this dream turn into reality.*

She sat in her favorite chair and sipped her tea, the aroma of the bread baking beginning to drift into the den almost immediately after her bum connected with the seat. With a wave of her hand, she pulled the bread bowls out and, with Eilaen's loud, frantic guidance, gently eased the tray onto the island. Her magic was growing by leaps and bounds these days, and the new things that she could do had begun to appear almost daily. She'd just finished her cup of tea when a noise from outside caught her attention. Peeking through the den's window, she saw Elkhean approaching the gate.

“Ellie! I'll be back in a moment! Our new friend is here and I promised to meet him at the gate!” Kaida shouted, slipping her feet into her boots and draping her thick cloak around her shoulders.

She opened the door, immediately being greeted by a frosty gust of air and her nose instantly felt cold as ice. Closing the door behind her, she walked the short trek down the path and to the gate. As she reached her side of the gate, Elkaen had reached his. She smiled at him and waved vigorously, unlatching it so he could step through. Quickly, she ushered him to the door, but not before wondering how he wasn't frozen to death without thicker clothing and more layers.

“Good evening, Elkhean! Did you find us okay?” she asked nervously. The effect he had on her was slightly unnerving. It was a sensation she wasn't used to feeling. She'd never been so nervous around anyone in her entire life.

He grunted a noise that she took to mean yes and motioned for him to follow her into the house. The moment the door was shut behind her, the warmth that filled the entryway began to envelop her, thawing her nose out. With a shudder, she slid her cloak and boots off, placing them against the wall in their designated places.

“Through here. Follow me,” she told him as she steered him towards the den. Once they reached the den, she stopped and turned back to him. “You're more than welcome to sit here in the den, or you can follow me into the kitchen and meet Eilaen. It's up to you.” She gave him her best smile

and turned to walk into the kitchen, hearing his heavy footsteps trail behind her. Once in the kitchen, she beckoned him into the room rather than the doorway he stopped at. “Elkhean, this is Eilaen. She’s my best friend, soul sister, and business partner.” She turned to Eilaen. “Ellie, this is Elkhean, our new contractor. At least, I think he is. He certainly seemed as if he was confident in his ability to complete every single one of the jobs we’ll need done to open the bakery.”

She could feel her cheeks turning as red as the thick tomato paste Eilaen used in the vegetable soup. As Eilaen and Elkhean acquainted themselves with one another, Kaida turned her focus to the bread bowls and sliced into them, hollowing them out to hold their soup. When finished, she gently slid them onto plates and poured soup into the center of each one. After clapping her hands together to dust the crumbs off, she turned back to Elkhean and Eilaen and smiled. “Dinner is ready!” she exclaimed, grabbing three large, wooden cups and carrying them to the table.

She came out of their stockroom carrying two pitchers of mead, and Eilaen grabbed hers and Kaida’s plates. Elkhean picked up his own and followed the halflings into the dining room. After they were all seated comfortably, they began to eat. The room was almost too silent, the atmosphere thick with a strange mixture of awkwardness and anticipation, the tension waiting on someone to speak first and break it. It made Kaida’s skin crawl, and she could feel her mind trying to spiral with the thoughts being held captive for too long. She had never done well in silent rooms for this very reason.

Determined to be the one to break through the thickness, she looked towards the dwarf who, if possible, looked just as uncomfortable as she felt. “Thank you so much for joining us tonight, Elkhean! I wasn’t sure what dwarves preferred food wise, so I hope this is okay?” she asked, uncertainty twisting through her.

“Yes. This is good. My compliments to the chef. I’m assumin’ that’s you, Eilaen?” Elkhean replied, looking up at Eilaen for the first time since sitting at the table.

“Yes! Thank you! But if you think the soup was good, wait until you try Kaida’s cookies! They smell wonderful and taste even better than they smell,” Eilaen replied, beaming at Kaida.

“Speaking of, I’ll be back in a moment!” Kaida lept from her seat and made her way into the kitchen, returning to the dining room in just a few moments. “Here. Try these! I made a new-to-me recipe, and you will *not* believe how amazing they are until you eat one.” She offered cookies to Eilaen and Elkhean before grabbing one for herself.

Elkhean finished his and then asked for another before eating the second just as quickly as he ate the first. By the time the girls had each finished two cookies, their new dwarven companion had devoured a dozen of the cookies on his own. Eilaen’s eyes looked at the platter and then back to Elkhean in surprise, while Kaida did her best to suppress a surprised giggle. When finished, he wiped the crumbs from his mouth before draining his mug in one large gulp.

Wiping the beads of mead off of his mustache and shaking the remaining cookie crumbs from his beard, he looked at Kaida. “Ms. Kaida. That was the best little dessert I have ever eaten in my life.” He looked at the almost empty platter that sat on the table. “I’m sorry for eatin’ most o’ what you made. I don’t think I ever ate anythin’ that tasted like that,” he sheepishly grinned as he apologized.

Kaida beamed. “I’m glad you enjoyed it. New recipes make me nervous.”

Smiling, Elkhean thanked them both for their kindness and Kaida watched as the tension visibly melted from his shoulders as he began to relax. She couldn’t help staring, wondering what was going on in his head as he sat between the two of them, watching them intently as they discussed their lives but offering very little detail into his. *One of these days*, she thought, *I’m gonna get this dwarf to be comfortable enough around us to be himself. He just doesn’t know it yet.*

Six

Eilaen stood up and began to clear the table while Kaida set the kettle on the stove so everyone could have another cup of tea. After the kettle had whistled and she had poured the water into three cups, she selected three of the pre-bagged “after dinner” tea blend and dropped one in each before placing them on the tray before carrying it into the den. Once they had all gotten settled, Elkhean pulled out the sheet of supplies and costs from his pocket, smoothing the wrinkles out as he laid it on the table.

Kaida cleared her throat and readjusted in her seat, trying to get comfortable. She felt her nerves trying to creep in, and she tried her hardest to shut them out. *Just this one conversation*, she told herself. *Keep it together, Kaida. Get through this one conversation and you know it’ll get better.*

She sat up in her seat, propping pillows up on her sides. These discussions could get long winded, and she didn’t want to risk getting distracted because she was uncomfortable. “What direction do you think we should go in, Elkhean?” she asked with a smile. She hoped she appeared as professional and confident as she thought she had, but she could never be sure how she appeared to other people. Her brain got in the way too much. Placing her cup and saucer on her table, she laid her hands in her lap, drumming her fingertips on her thighs as she tried to keep the rest of her body still.

“Here’s my idea. We replace every bit o’ floor here in the kitchen. That’ll allow me an’ the crew to get in there an’ get the walls replaced where the rot has ruined it the most before layin’ down any o’ the new floorin’. Once we get that done, we can paint and then lay the floor. Then build an’ put in the counters that you have designed. After that, we can go in the lobby an’ fix whatever damage that may be hidden within the walls or floor. Mind you, that with the amount o’ damage in the kitchen, there’s a high probability it’ll show up in somewhere in the lobby, too. If not now, then in the near

future. I've seen it in the mountains when fixin' dwellin's an' buildings damaged by stone, weather, an' water."

He placed the cost sheet on the top of the pile of papers that rested on the table between the three of them. The amount listed was almost enough to make Kaida puke. In an attempt to hide her impending panic, she tried to do the mental math on how much more they needed for the repairs, the sum being about three times more than she had in her meager bank account. She looked at Eilaen. "Ellie, we don't have to do this if you don't want to. We can always try to find somewhere else, anywhere else. Somewhere that doesn't need so much work if--," she began.

Eilaen immediately cut her off. "No such thing will come from your mouth anymore, Kaida Louise. You fell in love with this property for a reason, and I have no reason to suspect that we cannot find a way to make this work." Turning to Elkhean, she asked, "what do you think the timeline would be?"

"Dependin' on how bad the floor an' walls are between the rot? Two, maybe three months. If it's worse than I think it will be, four at the most."

Eilaen nodded and Kaida could tell she was mentally calculating the costs. Before Kaida could speak again, Eilaen addressed the dwarf in front of them. "Well, Mr. Elkhean. If you think you and your crew can get this bakery into tip-top shape, then you're hired. How soon can we get this going?"

"Well thank you, Ms. Eilaen. Let me talk to my crew tonight, and then I'll be gettin' back to ya in a day or two, if that's okay. Just need to touch base with them an' make sure no one has any current projects." Elkhean replied, the corners of his eyes wrinkling slightly with his smile.

Eilaen nodded. "That's fine. We're not in a huge hurry, but we would like to get the bakery off the ground sooner rather than later. Especially seeing as spring is on the horizon and I won't be able to help as much once the weather gets warmer. If you don't already have plans made, we would love for you to come back for dinner tomorrow. We can get to

know one another better, as well as continue going over Kaida's designs and floor plans."

The smile on Eilaen's face warmed Kaida's heart, and she was incredibly thankful to have a friend with who was blessed with excellent decision-making skills. Eilaen always knew the right questions to ask and thought everything over before she would bring it to the table for discussion. Kaida turned back to Elkhean and smiled again. "I look forward to working with you and your crew over the next several months, Elkhean! I can't wait to meet them and get this party started!"

"An' I with you, Ms. Kaida," Elkhean responded with a lift to one corner of his lip. The smile reached his eyes and the gesture caused them to sparkle in a way that Kaida hadn't seen from the dwarf in the short time she'd known him.

At the end of the meeting, Elkhean gathered his things and made his way out the door, bidding the halflings a good evening before closing it behind him. Once she knew he was out of earshot, Kaida looked at Eilaen. "What did you think of him?"

"He definitely appears to know what he's doing, and he seems very confident in his ability to complete the jobs at hand. He had all of his facts and figures sorted out, and it doesn't seem like he's going to charge more than the work is worth. With what we still have left from your winnings at the Autumn Festival and what I have from Grandpa in the bank, I have no doubt we'll be able to afford the costs. It just may take more time to make it back than we thought, though, depending on how fast the bakery takes off after opening," Eilaen responded.

Kaida nodded in agreement. Her mind began to spin and whirl with her dream turning into reality. She got up and drifted into the kitchen, grabbing their teacups as she went so she could pour them each another cup of tea. It was time for their nightly routine involving a hot cuppa and sitting in front of the fireplace, relaxing and unwinding from their day. Eilaen cozied under her favorite blanket and nestled in her favorite chair, current book in one hand and her tea. In her own seat, Kaida began flipping through her favorite recipe catalog to see

what would be best for bulk baking, and what would do better being made and brought into the bakery from home. By the time they were ready to retire for the night, she'd marked four recipes per season that she would save exclusively for the bakery with plans to look through two more of her recipe catalogs the next day to make sure there was nothing else she wanted to offer her customers.

It didn't take them long before both halflings were yawning so much that their watering eyes prevented them from seeing more than five seconds at a time. Sleepily, they made their way up the stairs and stumbled into their rooms. They yelled to one another from across the hall, shouting their nightly sendoffs, and slid into their beds, leaving their doors cracked so the warmth would fill them.

Seven

Three days later, Kaida found herself standing knee-deep in the freshly fallen snow as The Gnomish Goods' delivery gnome unloaded the two stove-oven combos that Kaida and Eilaen had ordered the previous week. Elkhean and his crew arrived almost as soon as the delivery gnome pulled off of the road, ready to get started.

"Afternoon, Ms. Kaida," Elkhean said with a nod. "These here are my crew. We plan to work hard until the job is done. Right, dwarves?"

A chorus of voices grunted in agreement and Kaida gave them her biggest smile. "Well, if you are ready, then let's get started, I suppose! The Gnomish Goods just delivered my stove-oven combinations and sat them in the lobby. I hope they won't be in your way."

"Even if they are, we can move 'em. Shouldn't be too heavy," Elkhean replied with a hint of a smile.

"Nah. Not too heavy at all," another dwarf, this one with a bright red, wiry beard and crisp green eyes.

As they trailed into the bakery, Kaida was amazed by how similar, yet different all of the dwarves looked. Most of them looked to be either siblings or related in some other manner. They were all built in a way that seemed sturdy and strong, a visible difference between the dwarves and halflings as races. Instead of axes and swords at their hips, they each carried a large sledgehammer on one side. On the other side hung a wide variety of tools that stuck out of a worn, leather pouch that was latched onto the woven leather belt that wrapped around them.

As Kaida looked back at Elkhean, she noticed how the corners of his eyes crinkled whenever he smiled at her—a tell-tale giveaway as to whether his smile was genuine or not.

She found it endearing and hoped she would be able to see it more often. She barely knew him but felt a pull towards him in the strangest way. The more time she spent with him, the more he filled her mind. She wanted to learn everything about him. Somehow, she knew that he was meant to be in her life in some capacity and that, even when the renovations were over, she'd still have him around.

Following the dwarves, Kaida closed the door tightly behind her to hold in any remaining warmth within the bakery. Before she was able to turn around, she heard the sound of metal being shifted around the room as the dwarves moved the appliances out of the way so they would be able to move easily in and out of the kitchen. Kaida was surprised to hear the sound of something large slamming against what she was almost sure could have been either the floor or the wall, though she couldn't be sure without going in there. She stood there for a moment, trying to decide whether or not she truly wanted to do that. *No*, she thought to herself. *I definitely do not want to go in there.*"

No, what she actually needed to do was to go home and bake. Not only to clear her mind, but also because she still had several orders of pies and cookies to bake for customers. The orders didn't stop rolling in just because a bakery was being remodeled, and with the extra expenses it was going to bring, she knew she needed to take all of the orders she possibly could. Thankfully, with the Winter Feast and family gatherings that were coming up, she knew she'd get a decent amount of orders. On the other hand, though, she knew better to count her chickens before they hatched. Before heading home, she needed to stop by the mayor's office and talk to Urzal and Mayor Luddie about what they would need for the Winter Feast and get the deposit for the ingredients and materials needed.

She walked over to the kitchen door, and cracked it open without looking inside. "Hey guys, I've got a few errands to run and then I have to head back to the farm for a little bit. I have a few orders I have to take care of and deliver, but I'll be back this afternoon. Don't leave until I get back! I'm bringing back treats for everyone and I want to see your faces when you

eat them,” she yelled, hoping they heard her over the banging and clattering that was going on within the room. She didn’t lock the door behind her this time, trusting Elkhean and the other dwarves to hold things down while she was gone.

□□□□

The moment Kaida arrived back at the farm, she heard Eilaen’s screams coming from behind the house. Even though she couldn’t quite understand what was going on, she was certain Eilaen was screaming “Tillard” and “meathead”m along with something about being on the center plate at the Winter Feast. She chuckled for a moment before sighing and trudging through the snow towards the backyard, listening to Eilaen’s shouts and Tillard’s squeals as she walked.

The closer she got to the barn, the louder Eilaen’s screams grew. “Tillard! Get back here before you squash more of my plants, you stupid meathead. Don’t give Jareth or me any more reasons than we already have to send you to the butcher’s block.”

“Ellie. What’s going on?” Kaida yelled.

“Oh good. You’re home! I thought you were sticking around the bakery today to wait for your ovens to arrive?” Eilaen cried.

“I was *going* to. The ovens were both delivered, and they are *gorgeous*! I only came back because I remembered that I still have to bake four dozen apple pie cookies for Urzal and use that new recipe to make two cinnamon roll pies for that cute elderly goblin couple we booth next to,” Kaida replied, standing with her arms crossed across her chest, watching Eilaen chase her arch enemy.

Eilaen stopped jogging for a moment and turned to look at Kaida. “You know, when *you* needed *me* to help the time Tillard ran amuck in the kitchen, you got mad when I stood there gawking,” she huffed as she tried to catch her breath.

“That, you silly goose, was because that stupid pig had *ruined* an *entire day’s* worth of baking for a competition I

was entered in for the nest day. Not to mention the fact that he *ruined* the kitchen!” Kaida stuck her tongue out at Eilaen as she jabbed her fists onto her hips.

Eilaen laughed. “You’re right, Kai. You’re right. Okay, I give up. C’mon, let’s go inside. I’ll just leave him out. He’ll either figure out how to get back in there or he’ll freeze. Whatever. I don’t even care anymore.”

“You really think he’ll run away?” Kaida asked, a smirk on her face.

“Nah. We couldn’t get that lucky,” Eilaen responded, laughing as she linked her arms in with Kaida’s.

The two of them trudged through the thigh-deep snow to the front of the house, the snowflakes growing heavier and bigger with each step they took. By the time they reached the door, the blanket of snow was so thick, they could hardly see their hands in front of their faces. They rushed inside, quickly closing the door. Shivering, they kicked their boots into the corner and shrugged their cloaks off. Kaida went straight for the kitchen to fill the kettle so they could both have a fresh, hot cup of tea while Eilaen rebuilt the fire in the den’s fireplace. Once their tea had been drunk and the fire was blazing warmly, Eilaen snuggled up in her chair with her book while Kaida returned to the kitchen. She needed to begin collecting the ingredients for her orders, as well as the muffins for the dwarves, so she could get them baked and delivered before heading back to the bakery.

With the ingredients floating around in the kitchen, Kada felt more comfortable within her own skin than she had all day. She allowed herself to get lost in her head as she effortlessly began to combine all of the necessary ingredients for the apple pie cookies, the dough forming as if by magic. Once the cookie dough was finished and needed to chill, she sent it over to their cold box and then turned so she could begin working on the filling for their centers. As she worked, she began humming a song her mother sang to her when she was a tot as she peeled the apples and took out their seeds. Then, she put them in a pot with water, brown sugar, and cinnamon. As the apple mixture began to heat, she quickly

mixed up the ingredients needed to make a flakey pie crust for the cinnamon roll pies. It was a recipe she knew so well, she probably could have made in her sleep. By the time the dough was turned into a crust, the apple mixture on the stove had finished. Carefully, she moved it off of the stovetop and transferred the mix into a bowl and sat it in front of her on the island so that it could cool for a few moments and she had a better chance of avoiding any filling burns. While she waited, she pulled the dough out of the ice box and scooped out twelve identical scoops, dropping them onto a pan and pressing their centers into the shape of a tiny bowl, dropping spoonfuls of the apple pie filling into the center of each cookie. She repeated the steps for the second dozen of cookies, settling both trays into the oven, side by side.

As she gave them time to bake, she crooked her fingers to bring two more lined cookie pans to the island, gently placing them where the cookies had been only moments before. On one pan, she sat the two whole pie crusts, and on the other, she placed strips of crust that would make the swirly rolls everyone knew and loved when it came to cinnamon rolls. She lined the pie crust strips side by side, coating each of them with the buttery cinnamon sugar mixture she's created. Once the pies were assembled, she slid them to this side and waited for the cookies to finish so she could replace them with the pies. The aroma of apples, cinnamon, brown sugar, butter, and pie crust filled the room as she worked. Just moments later, the magic within her began to cause her arms to feel tingly, signaling that the cookies were done. Opening the oven with the twist of one hand, she beckoned the cookies out with the other and transferred them to a cooling rack near the sink while slowly coaxing the pie pans into the oven with the hand that opened it.

While waiting for the cookies, she made herself a cup of tea and sat down on the stool that resided at the edge of the island. Inhaling the intermingled scents from her tea and her baking, she closed her eyes and smiled. *This* was her definition of peace and happiness. Before long, the tingling in her body began to stir once again. With a downward flick of her index finger, she opened the oven and removed the cookie pans,

settling them on two cooling racks that had been placed next to the pies. Once the stove was closed and she was sure everything was baked, she began to tidy up her mess in the kitchen. The size of the messes she could make never failed to amuse her, seeing as she was just one halfling and always used magic to do every step of her “dirty work”. As she was sizing up the damage done, she heard the sounds of Eilaen’s footsteps making their way through the dining room.

Kaida could practically feel Eilaen’s eyes staring into her in disbelief as she shook her head while walking through the kitchen. “Ya know, Kai. I don’t think I will ever understand how someone with baking magic can make such a mess while, well, baking. You’d think the process would be so much cleaner considering you don’t actually touch or pour out any of the ingredients. In fact, as far as I’m aware, you don’t even *touch* anything until it’s time to dig your hands into *whatever* it is that you’re making at that moment.” Eilaen leaned against the island and smiled, laughing at Kaida while Kaida stuck her tongue out at her friend.

“If you really must know, Ellie, it’s a mess because baking is messy. Regardless of how you go about the process. Flour puffs, milk spills, and butter creams. My gran used to say, ‘if you don’t make a mess, then you didn’t put enough heart and love into it’, and I’m inclined to believe her,” Kaida retorted before smiling again.

Eilaen walked further into the kitchen and stopped in front of the sink. “Okay, Sassytrousers. Would you like help washing these dishes so you can deliver these goodies faster and get back to the bakery?” she asked. Without waiting for Kaida’s answer, she pushed her sleeves up and tied her apron strings across her back.

“You know, Ellie? I’d love that,” Kaida replied.

Side by side, the two halflings talked and laughed while scrubbing dishes, only stopping when they were finished. After the last of the dishes were dried and put away, Kaida took off her apron and dried her hands. She then went into the storage room and selected two disposable pie cartons and two large cartons for the two dozen cookies, as well as a

basket big enough for the two dozen muffins she'd baked earlier that morning for the dwarves. After both orders were properly packaged, she waved goodbye to Eilaen, grabbed the muffins she'd baked earlier that morning, and left to head back into town.

Eight

After traveling back into town and delivering the orders she'd finished, she made her way towards the end of Market District, where the bakery resided. When Kaida approached the building, she heard the most awful noise coming from inside. With her eyes wide and her insides feeling as if she'd been shaken around, she ran inside, almost dropping the basket of muffins in her hand. Cautiously, she cracked the kitchen door open and stood in the doorway. She was entirely unprepared for the sight before her. Standing in the kitchen was the group of dwarves, each armed with the sledgehammers she'd noticed on their hips, somehow seeming even bigger than they had that morning.

The noise, she quickly learned, was caused by them taking turns plowing those very sledgehammers into the floor in pairs. She stood and watched, amazed by the amount of progress they'd already made in clearing out the rot in the flooring.

It was so loud with them taking turns slamming into the floor, she didn't hear Elkhean approach. He stopped at her side, standing close enough to her for their arms to touch. Leaning in, he spoke loudly to be heard over the commotion. "Not nearly as bad as I was thinkin' it would be, Ms. Kaida. I say we should have your place up an' goin' in a matter of two months at the most."

Kaida turned to look at him, surprise lining her features. "Only two? Are you sure?"

"I believe so. Give or take a week or two, dependin' on supplies and such. O' course, it also depends on the counters cooperation while bein' built," he said, nodding at her.

"That seems so fast!" Kaida exclaimed. Remembering the basket tightly clutched in her hands, she looked up. "Oh! I

brought these for you and the crew. They're only banana nut chocolate chip muffins, so they're not much. But at least they'll be yummy." She beamed when he smiled and gently took the basket from her hands. She felt her skin tingle when his hand brushed hers and it felt as if a meadow of butterflies now filled her insides.

"Thank you, Ms. Kaida. Even if they don't like 'em, I know I will. 'Specially if they're anythin' like those cookies you made last time I was over to eat," he said as he reached inside the basket for a muffin.

He bit into it, barely able to stifle his groan of delight as the sweet blend of the bananas and chocolate filled his mouth. Kaida laughed at him, still unused to the way he responded to her baking as if it was the best thing he'd ever eaten. Upon seeing and hearing their leader's reaction, the other dwarves made their way to where Kaida and Elkhean stood. Curious, they each reached into the basket to procure a muffin, instantly enamored by what they found. They quickly devoured a muffin, followed by two. The crew devoured the muffins until even the smallest crumb was gone, the basket in Elkhean's hands being left completely empty.

The red headed dwarf, who introduced himself as Gromm earlier in the day, begged her to bring more back the next day and promised to bring her coin in exchange for enough to take him to share with his wife. She nodded, telling him that she would make sure to bring double the amount in the morning and all of the dwarves cheered.

Elkhean seemed to thoroughly enjoy the scene in front of him, leaning his head in her direction. "Ya know, it's been quite a bit since I've seen 'em so excited over food. I don't think you know what you're gettin' yourself into." He laughed and handed her basket back to her.

She laughed. "Maybe I don't. Or *maybe* this is my way of convincing all of you to stick around after the job is done," she mock-whispered as she arched an eyebrow.

Elkhean looked at her as if he were trying not to laugh, but after looking at her face for a moment longer, his large,

booming laughter escaped. It was one of the most beautiful laughs Kaida could remember hearing from a male of any race, and she thoroughly enjoyed hearing it.

□□□□

By the time Kaida finally returned to the farm for the night, the sun was well on its way to setting behind the mountains. Before leaving the bakery, she made sure to give Elkhean the extra key she and Eilaen had made for him that would allow him to let himself and his crew inside in the mornings that Kaida couldn't get in due to baking and delivering orders for her customers. He assured her that they could manage it and told her to take her time. With a playful wink, he promised her the building would still be standing whenever she got there. Before locking up for the evening, she asked if he'd like to come to dinner the next night. When Elkhean accepted her invitation, Kaida did everything she could to hold in the squeal of delight that threatened to escape her.

Once inside the house, Kaida stopped in the den and stood in front of the fireplace. Eilaen had been kind enough to light it before leaving to meet with some of the townsfolk to deliver the vegetables she'd been able to keep growing, even with the snow on the ground. Once the heat had seeped down into Kaida's bones, she went into the kitchen to warm up the soup Eilaen had left for her to share with Jareth, knowing she wouldn't be home in time to cook dinner. Before the soup had even had the time to warm to a simmer, there was a knock on the door, followed by the sound of Jareth's voice in the entryway.

“Kaida Lou! Are you here yet? I can smell something cooking and it's not burnt!” the Fae male called out.

“I'm in the kitchen and no! It isn't burnt. I'm still heating it up, ya nut,” she replied.

It only took moments for him to appear beside her, pulling out a stool from the island and planting himself on it. “So there's a chance that even after all this, it could be inedible? Are you going to bake me something to replace it? I

am *starving*, Kai. Starving. That menace pig had me running around more today than usual, and that's saying something." He paused for a moment to shuffle around on the stool and looked at her. "How's the remodel coming at the bakery?" he asked.

Kaida looked at him excitedly. "Great! I think it is, anyway. It's only day two, but they've already made quite the improvement on pulling out the rotted flooring. I have to admit that when I came back after coming home for a bit, I was nervous because there was such an awful noise ringing out from inside. I didn't know *what* was going on. Turns out they were just removing the flooring and there was nothing to worry about. I took some of my banana nut chocolate chip muffins for them to eat, and wouldn't you know it? They thought the muffins were delicious! I don't think I've seen anyone other than you eat my treats so quickly."

"Don't tell me you're giving away all my treats, Kaida. It would break my heart if I had to really share them—I mean you," Jareth replied, overdramatically flinging his hand onto his chest in faux offense.

"No, you goose. I would never give someone all of your treats. I'm just making sure that I bake enough to share with our new friends. That's all it is. Besides, you know what they say, right?" she responded with a little extra sass.

"A friend in need is a friend indeed?" he asked.

"No!" she giggled. "Sharing is caring!"

The two of them talked about Kaida's layout and design for the bakery as they dished their soup into their bowls and sat at the island with their food and ale. As they ate, a familiar sense of peace surrounded them. It wasn't a sensation she'd been well acquainted with until they moved to Smallburrow. It was warm and calming, even with the icy wind and snow raging outside. Not for the first time, Kaida was thankful that they had the means to sit in warmth—both emotional and physical—regardless of where they were in their little farmhouse, especially when she remembered how a lot of

the homes in her former town weren't made for the intense weather like they were getting.

She tried not to think about the life she had left back there—the sadness that she felt with anyone but Eilaen. Though everyone had been nice to her, nobody had tried to understand her in the ways Eilaen always had. Nobody ever had, not until they had moved here and she'd gotten to know the townsfolk and had been wrapped in love by Ms. Kestrel and Jareth. She'd always been seen as weird, as different. She was always “*too bouncy*” or “*too loud*” or “*too much*” for everyone. Even her own parents struggled with her uniqueness, the tension only growing thicker once she began to show her affinity for baking magic.

She'd never forget the way her elvish family reacted when they found out that her power was one of yielding baking ingredients, as well as baking enchantment. After that, she'd only been laughed at and made fun of when with family unless there was an event where her magic was deemed as beneficial to them. She never told them how their teasing and words made her feel, but every time she was around them, she felt herself wanting to shrink into herself and hide. They made her not want to use it at all. It had taken her a long time to not be self-conscious of the beautiful skills her magic allowed her to wield. She was glad she was no longer in that frame of mind and was able to do what she loved without worrying about what anyone thought. Her magic was beautiful, it was comforting, and most importantly, it was uniquely her.

Jareth's voice brought her back into the here and now when she heard him calling out her name, trying to get her attention. “You okay, Kaida? It seemed like I lost ya there for a minute.”

“Yeah, yeah. I'll be fine. I'm just tired. Between keeping up with orders and trying to get the bakery up and going, I haven't been sleeping much. My brain is too busy running circles around the rest of me. You know how I am when I get excited about something. I can't turn my focus off, no matter how hard I try,” she replied, laughing weakly as she tried to shake off the feelings of insecurity trying to rise up

within her. She felt the overwhelming urge to shove her hands into a large wad of dough and find her peace again.

Jareth nodded as he took another bite of his soup. “Did you ever decide what colors you wanted to paint the walls?” he asked.

“Not officially, but I *think* I’m down to an icy blue or a mint green. I think either color is going to look so lovely against the dark cocoa brown accent wall. Ms. Kestrel is supposed to be asking a friend of hers what color would be better for some kind of fling sheen? Or something like that. Honestly, I don’t even know, but you know how that silly gnome is when she gets something into her head.” She laughed again before making a mental note to ask Eilaen what it was that was supposedly important about the wall colors.

Jareth laughed with her and patted her head before they began discussing the winter produce program that he and Eilaen had created to provide fresh produce to the townsfolk. Eilaen stayed so busy lately trying to ensure that her deliveries were made on time that Kaida barely saw her between making her own deliveries. Their conversation in the kitchen earlier made her realize how much she was missing having cozy nights inside the house together, just the two of them.

As the sky grew darker and the snow finally began to let up, Jareth decided that it was time for him to go home. He hugged Kaida before putting his cloak and boots on, closing the door tightly behind him. Kaida poured her a second cup of tea, grabbed her favorite blanket from the basket sitting behind the couch, and picked up her book before she plopped herself down in her chair to cozy up and read. She’d barely gotten the second page read before her eyes began to grow heavy, falling asleep before Eilaen had even gotten home.

Nine

By the time they'd reached the two-week mark in their renovations, Kaida was more than impressed by how quickly Elkhean and his crew had made progress within the bakery. They'd already managed to clear out every rotten board in the floor and laid the new ceramic tiling Kaida had picked out. As of that morning, they had begun the process of tearing out the walls, starting with the long wall that the stove and sink would be placed along.

"Hey there, dwarf-chahos!" A chorus of groans filled the room. "Dwarf-chahos is out okay. I'll figure this out eventually. Anyway, I'm back! I have a new flavor of cookies for you guys to try out!" Kaida yelled as she walked through the kitchen.

She had been able to hear the loud muttering from one of the dwarves in the kitchen before she'd been able to pull the front door closed. At the beginning of the remodel, she would have slowly crept into the kitchen, but now, she recognized this for what it was—the sound of a hangry dwarf. The moment the kitchen door opened and she stepped halfway into it, the room grew silent, even before they caught a whiff of what the basket in her hands held inside. She lifted the basket and all six dwarves cheered, laying their tools down to walk over to where she was standing.

"New recipe, men! Tell me what you think," she said as she passed the basket around the room.

The groans that came from each of the dwarves paved the way for the smile that formed on Kaida's face as she watched them devour the entire basket of its contents in less than five minutes. After the crumbs were wiped from their beards and dusted from their hands, a chorus of gruff voices calling out "thank ya, Ms. Kaida". With a smile, she performed a curtsy before laughing so hard she almost fell over. She dropped the basket down on the floor near the exit and walked around the room as she inspected their work while trying to stay out of their way.

"You have all been so busy! I'm so impressed. Ya know, Elkhean, when you told me that you thought you could get this finished in two months, I wasn't sure if you'd be able

to do it. There was just *so much work* that needed to be done. It seemed almost impossible and if Eilaen would have let me, I probably would have just chosen somewhere new. But no, she encouraged me to keep pushing on here when we hired you fellas, and I am so glad she did! I just want to thank you all for all of the hard work you've put into my bakery! Can I... Can I just keep you forever? Because I'm pretty sure I have decided you're my family now." Kaida asked before she could stop herself. As soon as the words had left her mouth, her mind began reeling.

Anxiously, she bit her lip as looked around the room, half expecting them to refuse for one reason or another. Instead, she was met with smiling eyes with each face she glanced at. Elkhean was the first to break, his loud, booming laugh cutting through the silence. He was soon joined by the laughter of the other dwarves. Kaida was the last to laugh, feeling at home and comfortable with the group of dwarves she'd quickly grown to love and view as family.

"Ms. Kaida, if you want to keep us, then keep us you shall," replied a dwarf named Bronn as he clapped a hand on her shoulder. The gesture was almost hefty enough to knock her over, but his firm grasp held her steady.

A melody composed of the sounds of agreement came from the other five dwarves, filling Kaida's heart with warmth and love. But none of their 'yeses' meant as much to her as Elkhean's did. They'd spent a lot more time together than she had with the other dwarves. After weeks, she had finally been able to pick up on some of his quirks and cues. It was a feat she hadn't been certain would happen when she'd first met him, even though she knew in her heart she could wear anyone down—even him. She smiled at him, not expecting her heart to begin to patter quickly when he returned the gesture before turning back to the dwarves.

"Let's get back to work! We're on a deadline here!" he yelled as he winked at Kaida while picking his oddly normal sized hammer up to begin working on reconstructing his section of the wall.

By the end of the day, they'd managed to completely tear down the long wall and had it mostly back up with fresh, rot-free wood. As Kaida stood back and looked at it, she was flooded with emotions and wished Eilaen had been able to come with her to see what she saw. In the very center of the wall, the crew had hung a hand carved sign that said, "Kaida's Place", painted in the prettiest ice blue she'd ever seen, the details standing out beautifully against it by being painted the same dark chocolate shade that matched her accent wall in the lobby.

Elkhean snuck up behind her, something he had begun doing once he realized even her elvish hearing couldn't always pick up the sound of his steps and put his hand on her shoulder. "Ya like it?" he asked. His question was laced with something that didn't match the confidence he typically exuded. If Kaida didn't know better, she would have thought that he had asked for her approval and was nervous for her answer.

"I really do. It's beautiful. Who painted it?" she asked as she turned to look at him, though something inside of her told her that she already knew the answer just based on his overall expression of pride and anxiety.

"I did, Kaida. Seemed like somethin' needed to go on that wall an' I couldn't think o' a better thin' than a sign with your name on it. As I was workin' on it, I remembered all the times I heard you mentioning how the brown and blue would look good. I believe your exact words were that they would be 'lookin' lovely together', if memory serves me right. It all just came together after that. I was even thinkin' we could make a big sign to hang outside the buildin' for ya to match, if ya want us to," he replied, staring deeply into her eyes.

She could have almost sworn she saw an emotion held in them that she hadn't seen before. Before she could figure out what she had seen, their moment was over. With another small smile, he turned around and rejoined the crew as they finished boarding up the wall. Words escaped Kaida for the rest of the afternoon and she made herself busy in the

lobby with arranging the table and chairs, as well as the shelves and glass cabinets that had been delivered earlier that day. She tried to busy her mind with things other than the dwarf leader in the next room, but he never strayed far from her thoughts. As she worked, she slipped into daydream after daydream—each of them revolving around him and her in the future, together. Always together.

By the time she decided she was done for the evening, she was able to stand near the door and see the dining area she had envisioned for so long as it formed before her eyes. Now that she had the tables and chairs, she had the dimensions she needed to order the tablecloths. The countertop and hot chocolate table that she was going to put along the cocoa wall would be custom built the next week whenever Elkhean and the crew received the cabinetry supplies—it was going to match her counters and island in the kitchen—and her register would arrive any day now. She still needed to order the curtains, dishes, hot cocoa machine, and faerie lights to line the windows. She pulled a scrap of paper from her dress pocket and jotted those things down, knowing she wouldn't remember otherwise.

It was dark when she finally locked up for the night. Unusual for her, she was the last one to leave and she couldn't shake how strange it felt. The crew had plans under the mountain, so they'd left earlier than usual, their absence leaving the bakery eerily silent. The sharp wintery air made her lungs ache with the first deep breath she took. Though it hurt, the bite it brought with it helped to clear her head as she walked across the street to collect Sorrel. She'd been kept nice and warm in the stable Mayor Luddie had hired the dwarven crew for recently to be built to house the townsfolk's horses when they were in town on business. It was one of the first improvements Mayor Luddie had made for Smallburrow residents since Kaida and Eilaen had moved to town, and it was largely due to the expansion of business that had started coming in from the smaller communities close by. The warmth that filled the stable sent a shiver down her spine, the kiss of heat defrosting her nose just enough to feel it. She felt the raw

nerves under her skin as she wiggled her nose around, quickly mounting Sorrel so that she could get home for the night.

Thankfully, even though it was freezing and there was a light dusting of snow falling, her ride back was completely uneventful. Upon arriving at the farm, she was delighted to find Eilaen standing outside, waiting on her. “What’re you doing outside, Ellie? It’s a lot more than just a wee bit nippy out here and you are barely dressed well enough to be out.”

“I came outside to make sure that the animals’ stoves were still going, and they had enough wood inside of them to be sufficient so they would last all night. Then, I was planning on touching up the garden once more for the day before it began to snow, but I was minutes late doing so. The snow began just as I was walking up to the tomatoes. Thankfully, I was able to get everything warmed up and thriving again so it should all be okay until morning when Jareth comes to handle his round of magicking the plants. Even though my power has grown a lot over the last few weeks, it still wears me out. Anyways, I was just about to head in when I heard you and Sorrel coming up the road. You know, you’d be a terrible thief. You couldn’t ever sneak up on anyone. Your humming always gives you away.” Eilaen stopped to laugh. “Here, let me have her and I’ll put her up for the night. You go on ahead and eat. Dinner is on the stove and should still be warm enough to eat. Nothing fancy. I just made a simple shepherd’s pie tonight,” Eilaen responded, taking reins from Kaida so she could lead the donkey away to get her rubbed down and settled in beside the food and heater for the night.

Once inside, Kaida took her time getting out of her cloak and boots, relishing the peaceful quiet that always settled over her home at night. As much as she genuinely loved having the dwarves around and despite how strange the silence was without them this afternoon, they truly were a rowdy bunch. The commotion of their “demo and remo”, as she called it, definitely did nothing to help with the noise either. After eating and warming up, Kaida relaxed in her chair with a cup of lavender tea and discussed the day’s events with

Eilaen. The aroma of the lavender mingling with the woody scent of the fireplace had a calming effect and was almost sedating after the long day that she'd had.

“Oh, Ellie! Are you busy tomorrow?” Kaida asked suddenly after draining her cup.

“Actually, I'm not. I was thinking that I could come to the bakery with you and see everything! Jareth and I have been so busy lately making sure everyone has what they need and it's prevented me from being able to stop by like I hoped I'd be able to. I haven't been able to come in, which I *know* you already know. It makes me feel awful. Here I am, supposed to be your business partner, and there's been no 'me' to be partner with,” Eilaen said, her expression turning sorrowful.

“It's okay. I promise! I understand. Your dream is taking your time, and that's okay. I know you love me, and that you love the bakery. There will be plenty of time, especially as the weather warms up in a few months and you don't have to tend to the garden as much,” Kaida reminded her softly. “I can't *wait* for you to see the progress Elkhean and the crew have made! It's amazing. I never knew a group of dwarves could move so fast!”

Eilaen laughed as Kaida described how the dwarves always devoured her cookies or muffins quicker than Jareth ever had. They talked and laughed, sometimes to the point of bringing tears to their eyes and stayed up chatting well into the night. By the time they were stumbling up the stairs, the clock was chiming that it was two am, and Kaida knew she'd be tired in the morning. This time she'd spent with Eilaen tonight was just the balm her soul needed since she'd opened up the doorway to the hurtful memories she always kept locked up tightly. She fell asleep with a smile on her face, extra thankful that night for her best friend sleeping down the hall.

Ten

The next morning, Kaida was woken by the scrumptious scent of bacon, eggs, and fried taters on the stove. She stretched, yawning as she sat up in bed. Before leaving her room, Kaida got dressed, her body begging for an extra layer due to the light nip in the air that she assumed was caused by Eilaen coming in and out. She ran her fingers through her hair to tame it as best as she could, her green tresses still wild from sleep. A grunt came from her as her fingers got stuck in a faerie knot. Rolling her eyes, she descended the stairs as she thought to herself, *those aren't even accurately named. Faeries don't form knots like these.*

She hopped off the last step with a yawn and turned toward the den. There was a noise coming from the kitchen, which she assumed was from Eilaen clanging the dishes around since the smells of breakfast were so thick. She stopped at the archway that separated the kitchen from the dining room, amazed at the sight before her. Not only was Eilaen cooking breakfast, but Ms. Kestrel was mixing up cake batter. In the distance, she could hear the desperate and frustrated sounds of Jareth trying to wrangle Tillard back into the pen.

“Did you set up a breakfast party without telling me, Eilaen Adah-Mae?” Kaida asked, laughing at the way Ms. Kestrel and Eilaen had both startled. Somehow, Ms. Kestrel managed to keep the batter from spilling, even when her hands flew off the whisk and bowl and went straight into the air. Eilaen, however, dropped the pot she'd just finished drying. It landed on the floor with a loud *crash!*

“Well, Missy. You know it isn't customary to tell the birthday girl about a surprise *before* the surprise actually happens,” Ms. Kestrel replied after she'd had a moment to catch her breath. Expertly, she transferred the mixed batter from the large bowl into the pan and slid it into the now-opened oven.

It wasn't until that moment that it dawned on Kaida that she'd forgotten all about her birthday between running orders to customers, as well as everything she'd been doing in the bakery. "You guys are the absolute *sweetest!*" she exclaimed, throwing her arms around both her best friend and the elderly gnome in front of her.

Just then, the front door opened and shut with a slam. The three of them whipped around to find Jareth stomping into the kitchen, a scowl covering his face.

"Eilaen, *why* is Tillard still around? What purpose does he serve? I just don't understand how such a pig can be allowed to stay here when all he does is ruin things and get into everything he shouldn't," Jareth ranted, not noticing Kaida standing in front of him.

"Because of *her*," Eilaen retorted with a smile as she jabbed her finger in Kaida's direction.

Jareth looked where she'd pointed and his face changed from a scowl into a smile. "Happy birthday, Kaida!" he shouted, wrapping his arms around her as he scooped her up for a hug.

Once he put her back down, she laughed. "Thank you, Jareth! Oh, and just so you know, *Tillard* is still here because I have read several books on how pigs in areas like ours have a natural tendency to dig up truffles. I'm determined to witness Tillard do this. He may not be worth much, but if he can dig up even one of those bad boys, then he'll be worth something. That's why. Trust me. If *any* pig can do it, it's that big ole meathead." She put her hands on her hips and stuck her tongue out at the Fae standing in front of her.

"I have no idea what you're talking about, but knowing you, you won't stop until you get what you're looking for. I guess I can understand why he's still here. But can you at least find a way to keep him where he belongs?" Jareth asked as he rolled his eyes. "Because potential truffle finder or not, we need to find a way to lock him up to keep him out of the vegetables. He's wearing me thin with how much I have to patch things up after he's torn through the plots."

Kaida gave him a sympathetic nod before moving on. “So, what’s on our agenda today then, pals?” she asked after the four of them had made their plates and sat down at the dining room table.

“Ms. Kestrel is going to go with me to deliver produce orders to everyone in town so that Eilaen has all day with you. Then, we were thinking about eating dinner here tonight. Maybe you can invite a certain dwarf you talk about so much?” Jareth answered, giving her a look.

“What’s the look for Jareth?” Kaida asked, feeling her cheeks as the heat crept up on them.

“You know *exactly* why he’s looking at you like that, Kai,” Eilaen said, laughing.

“Oh, you guys are nutty ninnies. There’s nothing going on there. We’re just... Friends. *Just* friends. Nothing more,” Kaida explained, her statement growing more defensive.

“Okay. Okay, you two. Leave her alone. We treat our birthday girls like the birthday queens they truly are around here,” Ms. Kestrel said in her grandmotherly way, winking in Kaida’s direction as she passed the syrup to her for the pancakes that were sitting on the table.

“Yeah. I’m the birthday queen, you nuts.” Kaida laughed as she stuck her tongue out at them before crunching on the slice of bacon in her hand.

After they had all finished eating, Jareth and Eilaen cleaned up before the girls drifted outside to the stables. Once they’d saddled up Mable and Sorrel, they began their journey into town. Though the wind wasn’t blowing, Kaida was sure that she could feel ice dripping down her nose instead of rivers of snot, a curse she’d encountered every winter since she could walk.

When they had almost reached the inn, they checked Mable and Sorrel into the stables across the street. Once they were sure everything was in order at the check in, they counted to three before opening the door and quickly ran across the road to the bakery. Unsurprisingly, the door was

unlocked and they were able to walk in without worrying about keys in frozen fingers. Kaida was astounded, however, to see the dwarves had gotten the fireplace in the dining area patched up, cleaned out, and lit. No more need to bring in heat enchanted stones to warm the place up anymore. The warmth felt like heaven across her still partially frozen face, filling her with a giddiness that had her jumping up and down while clapping her hands and squealing in delight. Eilaen stopped in front of the fireplace, her hands stretched out in front of her, and looked around. Kaida could see the amazement and surprise as it washed over her face.

She looked around for a few moments before finally finding Kaida's face again. "Kai, I knew you'd said they were fast, but I never could have imagined! This is *incredible*! Let's go into the kitchen! I want to see what they've done with it all." She grabbed Kaida's hand, Kaida groaning about the loss of heat from moving away from the fire before she was ready. Together, they quickly made their way across the room and into the kitchen.

The moment Kaida stepped inside the kitchen, she was blown away. The entire kitchen had been finished, so much having been finished since the day before. On top of the walls being finished and fully painted, the crew had also installed both stoves, as well as gotten the kitchen sink in place, the water piping placed and running in all the right places. When she turned around to look for the dwarves, she couldn't find them—not a single one.

"That's strange. The door was unlocked, the fireplace was going, and the lights were on. They should have been here. I wonder where they've gone off to," Kaida mused, tapping her finger to her lip.

Before Eilaen could offer any suggestions for their whereabouts, the bell over the door rang as the door opened, and the sounds of the rowdy dwarves filtered in from the lobby, the group laughing and joking amongst one another.

When they stepped into the kitchen and saw Kaida, a chorus of cheers rang out. Elkhean pushed through to the front of the crowd and smiled broadly at her. "Happy birthday,

Kaida!” he exclaimed, wrapping his arms around her in a hug. Together, the rest of the dwarves circled her, tossing her up on Elkhean’s shoulders.

Kaida’s hands flew to her mouth as she squealed in surprise, her heart thumping rapidly inside of her chest. *Please don’t drop me*, it seemed to shout within her. “What are you silly dwarven geese doing? How did you know it was my birthday? I didn’t remember until breakfast, and I’ve been having this same birthday day for the last 26 years!” Her sapphire-colored eyes sparkled with the shine of excitement, tiny tears threatening to well up in them at the thoughtfulness of everyone around her. This was the *last* thing she had expected to happen when she and Eilaen decided they’d head into the bakery to work on things today.

“Well, ya see, Ms. Eilaen over there mentioned it when she came by last week,” Elkhean replied, nodding his head in the halfling’s direction.

Kaida’s head whipped around to where Eilaen was standing next to her. “You- You told them?” Kaida asked in surprise.

Eilaen nodded before responding. “I came by one day last week to ask you something, but you hadn’t made it back from running an order out to wherever Nadles was that day. I *may* or *may not* have mentioned that today was your birthday. And these nice dwarves over here *may* or *may not* have wanted to surprise you because in your sweet, amazing, unique Kaida way, you have charmed them just as you do everyone else. Also, I hope you don’t mind, but I *may* or *may not* have also invited them to dinner tonight.”

Kaida couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “But... But does Ms. Kestrel know? Did she make enough cake? Do I need to make anything? Oh nuts. I need to go bake.” Kaida’s frantic rambling began to increase in speed the more she spoke.

“Kai. Hey Kaida... Oh for goodness’ sake. Kaida Louise!” Eilaen said loudly. Kaida stopped speaking, mouth still gaped open, and looked at Eilaen. Eilaen took a slow,

deep breath before speaking again. “We have everything handled. No, you do *not* need to bake anything unless you *want to*. Yes, Ms. Kaida *does* know. Yes, she *did* make a big enough cake, or she will have made a big enough one by the time we get home tonight. You, my dear friend, are going to calm down and relax. It is your birthday. You’re the birthday queen, remember? Isn’t that what you were telling us just a bit ago while chomping on that delicious, crisp bacon? And no, Kaida, you *cannot* give me that look. Tell your face to stop speaking.”

Kaida couldn’t remember the last time she was struck silent by Eilaen. Fatter tears began to well up in her eyes as she threw her hands around her friend’s neck and squeezed her tightly. It had been so long since someone else had overseen all of the details and she was left with none to handle. Sniffing, she let go and wiped the tear that tried to escape her eye. Turning around, she faced the dwarves.

You... You are all coming to my house? To celebrate? My birthday? To celebrate little me?” she asked, still sniffing and still in shock.

Elkhean stepped closer to her and pulled her hand into his. Kaida looked down, the familiar strangeness of her small hand cradled inside of his large one not going unnoticed, nor did she miss how nice it felt as his thick fingers curled up around her own. She looked up at him and smiled, her lips quivering from emotion.

“Kaida, why would we not want to celebrate you? You, who are the most unique halflin’ any of us have ever met? You have brought us more happiness an’ cheer than any of us have had in a long time. Not everyone is as kind to us dwarves as you have been, ya know. You even got us addicted to those blasted baked treats o’ yours. Nothin’ under the mountain compares now,” the dwarf said softly, wrapping his free hand around hers.

As if suddenly remembering they weren’t alone, he released her hands and stepped back, blushing. She felt her face growing warm in response yet again, knowing that the entire room had more than likely witnessed the subtle shift in

their relationship. She watched as he took a long step backwards and heard him clear his throat as he smiled at her, the corners of his sparkling eyes crinkling as he did.

“Alright, ya lazy brood. If you want to be eatin’ anythin’ at Kaida’s when we go an’ celebrate tonight, I suggest you be gettin’ back to work. We have lot to do before we stop for the day.” Before he turned to face the crew, he looked at Kaida. “By the way, your table decoration whatevers were delivered just before we left. I left ‘em on the table in the back corner.” And with that, he turned to pick up the saw on his left and began to work on the countertop he’d created for the island.

Kaida and Eilaen left the kitchen to find the package. The tablecloths and linens were the prettiest icy blue Kaida had seen. As she unfolded each of them, she couldn’t stop the squeal that released or the little dance that her feet would do at the sight of them. Eilaen helped her drape them across the tables as they went across the room. The sight was a breath of fresh air. Kaida was ecstatic to see her dream panning out. This had been an amazing birthday, and she wasn’t even halfway through the festivities.

As she and Eilaen worked together on decorating and cleaning the dining area, her mind went back to Elkhean and the moment they shared in the kitchen just a bit ago. *What did it even mean?* she asked herself, his words spinning around her head over and over again. *Surely, he doesn’t... No, nobody has ever wanted me romantically. I’m sure I’m just misreading it. After all, we’re just friends. Just... Friends. Aren’t we?*

Hours later, she and Eilaen dusted the lint off of their hands and let the dwarven crew know they’d see them at the farmhouse soon, the bell chiming as they opened the door to leave. Their ride home was fairly quiet, both halflings tired from the hard work they’d put in at the bakery. Once home, they took turns bathing and getting changed. As Eilaen waited on Kaida to finish, she put on a kettle of water and poured the both of them a cup of tea.

Eleven

By the time they'd both bathed, changed, and drank their tea, Ms. Kestrel was knocking on the door. Her arrival was closely followed by Jareth's, who knocked twice before letting himself inside. The four of them sat in the den so that Jareth and Ms. Kestrel could hand Eilaen the gifts they'd gotten for her. The first gift she selected was the gorgeous sparkly blue bag Ms. Kestrel had brought with her. Kaida let out a loud gasp when she opened it. Inside of the bag was a set of professional cooking utensils, the handles painted in the same shades of blue and brown Kaida had chosen for the bakery. Jareth, too, had gotten her something for the bakery. Instead of being something small and easily portable, though, it was large and heavy. So heavy, in fact, that Jareth had barely managed to get it into the house by himself. Taking the paper off of the box and reading the lettering printed across the side, her eyes widened and her jaw dropped. The box held a brand new, shiny hot chocolate machine unlike anything she had ever seen.

Her head whipped around to look at Jareth. "Jareth, I cannot accept this. It's too much!" Her excitement was barely contained and she felt as if she was going to explode.

"Yes, you can. And yes, you will. It'll be perfect for the bakery! You mentioned a few weeks back that you wanted one for in there near where you were putting that table near the fireplace. Though, you'll need some fancy mugs..." Jareth trailed off, his lip twisting up and brows furrowing in thought.

"An' that's where I come in," a familiar voice ran out from the entrance of the den.

Kaida didn't even have to turn to know who it was but she smiled anyway. Like he often did at the bakery, he'd entered so silently she hadn't even known he'd arrived. When Elkhean walked around the couch, he gently placed a large,

wooden crate down on the table in front of her. With the pry bar connected to his hip, he popped the top of it off with ease. Kaida stood, having to stand on the tips of her toes, and peered in the box. Even still, it was almost too tall to see, so he picked the crate up and sat in on the floor just as gently as he had the first time.

Nestled inside the crate were the most beautiful ceramic mugs she'd ever seen. They appeared to be intricately hand painted with cookies, some with bites taken out of them, some with crumbs underneath, and some left whole. She gingerly picked one up, barely wanting to breathe on it for fear that she'd shatter it. On the front of them, a plaque with the words "Kaida's Place" was painted, the sign matching the one Elkhean had hung in the kitchen.

Her eyes grew cloudy with tears. Of all the thoughts she had at that moment, the most pressing one was that she couldn't stop wondering what this big, handsome, brute of a dwarf thought of her constant affinity for conjuring tears when faced with all kinds of situations. This time, however, she didn't bother to wipe the tears off of her face as she looked at him, barely noticing the other dwarves that had filled the room since he'd walked in.

"These are the most beautiful mugs I have *ever* seen in my life, Elkhean. Thank you so much." Leaning in, she gently placed a kiss on the sliver of cheek not covered by his beard and patted the other with her hand.

"You're welcome, Kaida. Bronn's wife painted 'em. She said it was her thanks for the treats and for gettin' him to shut his hole every once in awhile," he said, smiling back at her and wiping the tear away that was now streaming down her cheek. "I figured a beautiful halflin' deserved beautiful mugs for the bakery of her dreams. Even if they couldn't possibly match her beauty."

Unlike earlier at the bakery, Elkhean didn't step back from her this time. Instead, he stepped closer and pulled her into his arms. Without any hesitation, she wrapped her arms around his neck as far as she could, allowing him to embrace her. After a few moments, they released one another and

stepped apart. Kaida could feel the heat as it crawled across her face, and the look she saw sweeping across Elkhean's made it spread even faster. Kaida looked down at her feet and clasped her hands together, twiddling her thumbs awkwardly.

Ms. Kestrel stood and announced she was heading into the kitchen to begin dinner and invited Eilaen to go with her. Jareth, sensing that Elkhean and Kaida needed a moment alone, motioned to the others who followed him but not before waggling their eyebrows at Kaida or hollering at Elkhean when they passed by the two of them. Once they'd left, Kaida looked at Elkhean, pleased to see the pinkess that had swept across his face was still visible. *At least it's not just me. Nuts. Why am I like this? And why is he just staring at me? Did I do something wrong? Have I read into this? Crackers. I knew I did. I knew it.*

Before she could say anything, Elkhean, who was still staring at the floor, cleared his throat and mumbled something that she was unable to hear well enough to understand. When he saw the look of confusion on her face, the dwarf coughed and took a deep breath before looking up at her again. "Kaida, I want you to know that I think you are amazin' an' nothin' like anyone I ever met before. When I met you on that first day, I knew there was somethin' special 'bout you. An' I just want you to know that I have enjoyed workin' in the bakery an' getting to know you. The problem is, you see, our work is comin' to an end soon an', well, I don't wanna stop bein' 'round you. I- I've kinda grown to.. Well, the thing is..." his voice trailed off as he took another breath and tried to collect his thoughts. "The thing is, Kaida.. I really like you. Well, more than like you. I'm interested in pursuin' somethin' more with you, if you are also interested in that sorta thin'. Cus like I said, Kaida, you're somethin'—no someone— incredible an' I wouldn't ever forgive myself if I didn't at least ask ya."

Kaida stood still, unable to respond. This was the last thing she'd expected to happen. The longer she stood without speaking, the more nervous Elkhean appeared. He opened his mouth more than once to say something, but stopped himself each time as if he was trying to give her time to process and respond.

When her brain finally caught up and fully processed what he'd said, she took his hand into hers. "Elkhean, this was the last thing I would have thought to have happened today. I honestly thought it was all in my head and to hear all of those kind and wonderful things you said. To hear you speak about how you see me in a way that nobody other than Ellie has ever seen me... It wholly took me by surprise. I just... I don't..." She stopped speaking for a moment and tried to calm her thoughts so that she could speak without inserting her very large, very hairy foot into her mouth and ruining this moment. She closed her eyes for a moment and took a large breath before trying to speak again. "I never thought anyone would ask me to be more than friends or want to pursue anything with me. And I'm scared that if we do this, if I say yes, that you'll change your mind once you realize I'm honestly not all cookies and cake batter. I'm just... I'm a whole mess. Honestly, you haven't even seen the mess that I can be, or the mess that I can make. I'm scatterbrained with everything except baking. And I can't even cook! The only reason I haven't starved is because I let Eilaen cook so everything is actually edible and not burnt to a crisp. I ramble *a lot*, in case you haven't noticed, and I have such a terrible temper some days. And when I bake, I put my all into it and block out everyone and everything around me. And on top of that, I don't... I don't want you, yes you the wonderful and kind and amazing dwarf that you are and that I have grown to care for. I don't want you to be the next person to find out who I am and say that I'm *too much*."

His gaze softened as he looked at her. She knew that he had no way of knowing how hard it was for her to be as emotionally vulnerable with him as she was currently. In the back of her mind, she was desperately hoping it wouldn't change his mind about pursuing a relationship with her. She didn't want this to end before it had actually started. It felt like eons before he spoke and time started again.

"Kaida, do you honestly think I'd go into this without considerin' the ways that you might be a mess? Or thinkin' 'bout all the ways that you might think that *I* am a mess? Whether you know it or not, I know more about the ways you

are a mess than you think. I've seen you get frustrated an' angry when tryin' to get somethin' just right an' it doesn't wanna go your way. Kaida Love, if you, who is the one person who holds the most sunshine in my life, are not all cookies and cake batter, then I can promise I'm not either. But whether you realize it or not, you could never be *too much*. Not for Eilaen, not for Smallburrow, and definitely not for me. You will *never* be *too much* for me, Kaida. So if me bein' able to spend my days with you means that I have to spend every day remindin' you o' that, then I'll gladly do so."

He brought her hand up to his face and gently pressed his lips to her fingers. Even with this, all she could think of was how amazed she was by how small her hands looked in his. Before she could form the words to respond to him, they heard the sounds of everyone coming into the den from the kitchen. In only a few moments, the room was filled with the joyful noises of Eilaen's, Jareth's, Ms. Kestrel's, and Elkhean's voices rang out with something off-tuned that was supposed to sound like "Happy Birthday", while the other dwarves were cheering her name and singing "for she's a jolly good halfling!" When they were done singing, they all clapped and Kaida closed her eyes tightly, made a wish, and blew out the large candle.

The ten of them went into the dining room and sat the cake on the table where Ms. Kestrel cut and served it. When she was passing plates around, she made sure to hand Kaida the largest piece from the corner, more specifically the one with the most icing. They all partied and had fun, dancing around the kitchen and laughing the night away. Kaida laughed until she cried, happier than she had been in so long. The family she celebrated with today was the only family that she wanted to be with. It was the family she chose and would forever cherish.

Almost as if she'd only had time to blink, the large clock next to the den's entryway rang eleven o'clock. Noticing the time, Ms. Kestrel, Jareth, and the dwarves announced that they all needed to head home and thanked Eilaen and Kaida for allowing them to celebrate Kadia and her birthday with them.

Kaida walked everyone to the door and bid them all a goodnight, hugging each of them just before they stepped through the doorway outside. Elkhean was the last to leave, almost as if he were giving her time to answer him before leaving. With a tender hug and a peck on the cheek, he wished Kaida a final happy birthday and stepped outside.

Just as the door was closing, she found her voice. “Elkhean, wait.” The door stopped, and he reappeared on her side of it, making sure it was shut so the cold air wouldn’t blow in. “Before you go... Yes. I do want to have a relationship with you, and not just a friendship. I don’t want to stop seeing you every day when you’re done and I want to be around you as much as I can. You’re amazing and wonderful and sweet and kind. Even if you don’t show it. You make me feel warm and fuzzy. And safe. You make me feel safe. And I’m sorry it has taken all night to find the words to say it out loud to you. Unless you’ve changed your mind since earlier this evening. If that’s the case then-”

“Kaida. Please stop talkin’. You’re ramblin’, Kaida Love. I haven’t changed my mind but if you don’t stop tryin’ to get me to, then I’m goin’ to have to grab a han’ful of snow an’ throw it at you,” he replied, smiling and he leaned in and kissed her forehead. “I’ll see ya in the mornin’ at the bakery.”

Before the cold air could even reach where she stood, he had closed the door behind him, and she heard his name benignly chanted when he’d caught up with the rest of the dwarves. For a moment, Kaida could have sworn she’d heard the sounds of the dwarves singing their mountain songs as they walked down the road. With a sigh of happiness, Kaida walked into the den where Eilaen sat on the sofa, snuggled up with a cozy blanket, their cups of tea on the small table in front of her. The two halflings squealed in delight as Kaida filled her in on all of the details from the two conversations she’d had with Elkhean since he had arrived at their home.

Moments before the clock struck twelve and her birthday officially ended, Kaida and Eilaen slowly drifted up the stairs, bid one another goodnight, and slipped off into their rooms. She slept peacefully, her dreams filled with happy

thoughts of a certain dwarf and a certain halfling living happily ever after, baking cookies and cakes for the rest of their days.

Twelve

Three weeks had passed since her birthday, and it was finally time for Kaida to stand inside of the finally finished kitchen in *Kaida's Place* for the first time. Her eyes were lined with tears as she turned in a full circle to see everything in its place. It was so much better than she could have even imagined it would have been. Both of the stoves were positioned against the wall where the door was, their placement perfect for moving things back and forth from the counters or island. To the side of one, the counters stretched across the length of the kitchen wall, her shiny stainless-steel sink settled directly in the middle. Beside the other sat the giant cold box for her cold ingredients such as butter, milk, and cream.

In the center of the room sat the island of her dreams. It stood to her hip with the butcher's countertop stained in the darkest, richest brown she'd ever seen. Specialty crafted shelves lined each of the four sides where her bowls, pans, and other baking dishes could stack perfectly. Her brand-new utensils from Ms. Kestrel rested on top, right in the middle for all to see. Every one of her most used ingredients had their own place, the shelves still needing to be stocked with the actual ingredients. Even with all of the beautiful work that each member of the dwarven crew had worked their heart as soul to accomplish, Kaida still could not deny that her favorite addition to the kitchen was the sign crafted just for her by the most wonderful dwarf of all.

A knock on the door startled her as it informed her that she wasn't alone. It swung open as she turned, and Eilaen popped into the kitchen. "It's beautiful, Kaida. Absolutely beautiful. I can already smell the cookies and pies baking. And the space. Look at *all* of this space!"

“You know what the best part of it all is, Ellie?”
Kaida asked with a smile on her face.

“No. More. Kitchen. Tillard,” the two halflings said at the same time before erupting into a fit of giggles.

“Oh. By the by, Ellie. I don’t suppose you happened to see whether a delivery had been made when you got here?”
Kaida asked.

“I didn’t. But then again, I didn’t look very hard either. There are so many boxes in there that need to be unpacked that I could have easily missed anything new,”
Eilaen replied, looping her arm around Kaida’s.

The two of them left the kitchen and walked around the dining area, unpacking and placing items on tables, walls, and the hot chocolate bar that Kaida had positioned behind the register counter. The beautiful glass pastry cases had been delivered the day before, and the dwarves had helped Kaida line them up against the wall closest to the door. Elkhean and Jareth had then spent the entire afternoon hanging curtains and the faerie lights over the large front windows so that Kaida and Eilaen could put the tables and chairs in front of it.

After they’d unpacked all of the crates and had put everything in its place, Eilaen told Kaida she was leaving and would see her at home for dinner. “Make sure you invite Elkhean over tonight! Ms. Kestrel said she misses him. He’s not been over in a week and I think she loves him more than us at this point,” she yelled as the door closed behind her.

Kaida shook her head and laughed. Elkhean had been fully grafted into their little family without any hesitation, as had the rest of his little group. Everything was coming together so beautifully, and Kaida couldn’t remember the last time that she felt so happy and whole. Her dream bakery was so close to being ready for its grand opening. All it was missing was ingredients and a few more things she was waiting to be delivered. Not only had she come to Smallburrow less than six months ago and had immediately been accepted by everyone in town for who she was instead of what she could do, but she’d been able to piece together an

amazing family with her best friend. The cherry on top of it all was that she had even been able to find someone who cherished her for being herself when she's almost given up on anyone deciding she was worthy of their love and attention.

Taking a step back, she smiled and sighed. This truly was a beautiful life she was living. She walked to the register counter and opened up the two crates that had been placed there when she arrived that morning. They were both stamped with the word "*fragile*" in bold red lettering and she had a good idea of what was included inside of them. She squealed loudly when she lifted the item from the first one, delighted that her hunch had been proven to be correct. Inside each of the crates was a custom-made glass cake dome that would be placed on either side of the register that sat on top of the counter.

Placing them where she had envisioned them, she clapped her hands in excitement. Now all that was missing was the register itself, which *should* have been delivered the week before but had yet to make its appearance. She'd decided the night before that if it hadn't arrived by the time she was leaving the bakery that day, she would have Elkhean go with her to stop by The Gnomish Goods when she went to Lyrica so she could get the rest of the utensils and bakeware, as well as place bulk orders for all of the ingredients she needed to prep the bakery for opening day.

Kaida smiled when she heard the sounds of dwarvish cursing outside the bakery and shook her head. The bell over the door rang as Elkhean walked in with a large crate in his hands. "Where can I put this down at, Kaida Love?" he asked. His voice was slightly strained as he struggled under the weight of the crate in his hands as he hoisted it across the room.

"The register counter. Please mind the cake domes! They just came in and they are *gorgeous!*" she replied in her sing-song way.

When he placed it on the counter, he stepped back and took a deep breath. "Ya know, I'm not sayin' I'm the strongest

dwarf on this side o' the moun'in, but I didn't expect that box to be so heavy. What's in it, anyway?"

"I have a sneaky suspicion that I know what it is, but I'm not really sure. Let's find out together!" she replied enthusiastically.

She pulled a chair over to the counter and stood up in it so she could see, and Elkhean held her hand as she stepped up on it to keep her steady. The top of the crate was barely secured, making it easy to pull off. The moment Elkhean had it dislodged from the crate, she threw it to the side. When she saw the crate's contents, she let out a squeal so loud that it could have broken the windows.

"My register!" she exclaimed. Without remembering she was standing in a slightly unstable chair, she did a happy dance, only to cause the chair to wobble. Just as she was falling off of it, Elkhean's hands caught her. After helping her stand on the ground and making sure she was steady on the ground, he looked at her with his eyebrow cocked.

"You gotta be more careful than that, Kaida. You coulda fallen and cracked your head open. Then you may have forgotten all about me and I woulda had to woo you all over again," he said, attempting to assume a stern facial expression and stance.

With her hands on her hips, Kaida stuck her tongue at him. "I'll have you know, Mister Dwarf, that I am *very* graceful. And even if I *would* have fallen and forgotten you, you managed to woo me once. Couldn't you have done it again?"

"Aye. I'm sure I could. But that's a lot of work, ya know. I di'n't think I'd ever actually get to say the words to ya. Opportunity just presented itself, I suppose," he said, tilting his head to the side.

She smiled and wrapped her hand around his. "I suppose it did." She stood on her toes and kissed his cheek. "Do you think you could pretty, pretty please get it out of the crate for me?"

Even though she couldn't have been absolutely certain, she thought she'd seen his cheeks turn pink as he nodded and smiled back at her. He went into the kitchen to grab a ladder the dwarves had left the week before. He unfolded it and guided it over until he was right next to the crate before climbing up the first three steps. With a few grunts and groans, he had the register lifted and asked Kaida to move the crate. He quickly sat it in place as soon as the crate had been moved, the register coming down with a thud. The cake domes shook and Kaida held her breath, terrified that they were going to fall before she would be able to reach them. Thankfully, they stopped shaking just before she could even move a finger and she released a breath of relief.

With the cake domes positioned on either side of the register, Kaida took a step back to see the final result. Everything looked perfect! All that was missing were the cookies and pastries she was planning on putting under the glass lids. Elkhean descended the ladder, replacing it in the kitchen.

When he'd come back into the dining area, she looked at him, visibly confused. "Aren't you going to take your ladder with you?"

"No. We have plenty of 'em over in the shop. Thought I'd leave it here so I don't have to haul one around when you need one. Besides, I think I may be ready and willin' to stop workin' with the rest o' the crew," he admitted, looking at the floor.

"Stop working with the crew? Why? Did something happen? Is everything alright?" Kaida asked. Her heart started to race and her mind began to churn frantically.

"No, no. Nothin' happened. Nothin's wrong. I just see my life movin' in a diff'rent direction. That's all it is. I promise," he assured her, lacing his fingers through hers the best that he could.

"What do you mean?" she asked, confused.

"Well, it seems real likely that you'll be busy with the bakery an' you're likely to be bitin' off more than you can

chew workin' alone and such. I was thinkin' that, if you wanted me to, I'd help you run this place. After all, I know how to run a business an' manage orders an' invoices an' such. Lighten your load so you can focus your heart on the parts that I know you love the most," he replied.

Yet again, this dwarf standing in front of her left her speechless. She was utterly stunned by his offer and the changes it would mean for him. He was willing to give everything up under the mountain so he could work here with her? *Not just* willing, she said to herself. *But he actually* wanted *to*. He was *offering* to. She found herself being surprised more and more every day by this beautiful, wonderful soul standing in front of her. She could feel herself falling more in love with him at the very idea of working together, side by side like she had been dreaming of since the night of her birthday. Three months ago, she never would have thought that they would have been standing where they were now. But now? Now she could see it as if it were already happening.

"Are... Are you sure? You don't- don't have to," she began, stumbling over her words. She hoped he was about to shut her up because she knew once she started rambling, it would be very difficult to stop.

Elkhean stepped closer to her, wrapping her within his arms and resting his bearded chin on the top of her head. "I know I don't have to. You should know by now that there's nothin' I do that I don't want to do. I *want* to do this. I *want* to spend every day with you, in whatev'r way I can. I don't know if you noticed this or not, Kaida. But I am really fond of ya, whether you think I am or not. An' I can easily see myself spendin' the rest of my life with ya, if you'd want me to," he said without moving.

"You- you want to- to spend the rest of your life with me?" she asked, tears forming in her eyes.

"Aye. I do," he replied, pulling back to look at her face.

“And y-you really want t-to spend your days h-here, working with me?” she sputtered, trying to keep herself from dissolving into a puddle on the floor.

“I really, truly do. More than anythin’ else in the world,” he promised. His eyes had yet to leave hers and she could see the emotions he wasn’t saying within them.

“I...” she started slowly. “I think I would like that, too. Because, I have *also* become increasingly fond of you, Elkhean. In fact, I might even be so bold as to say that I’ve fallen in love with you.” Standing on her tiptoes, she placed another light kiss on his cheek, the realization washing over her. “Wait a moment. Elkhean. Did... Did you just... Propose? To me?”

“Not officially, I don’t think. Only ‘cus I haven’t given you this yet.” From his pocket, he pulled out a small, black box. Opening it, she saw a ring unlike any she’d seen before. Handcrafted from iridium, it had three glittering amethyst stones sitting on top. The sides both had an engraved flower, their stems woven together as they wrapped around the length of the band.

As he dropped to his knees, he held it out for her. “Kaida, will you do me the honor of marryin’ me and makin’ me the happiest dwarf in the world? I promise to love an’ cherish you for the rest o’ our days. We can bake cakes and cookies and whatever else it is that your heart desires. Jareth an’ Eilaen an’ Ms. Kaida can come ov’r for dinner as often as they want, as long as you don’t cook. We both know that Eilaen done told me all the tales o’ your cookin’ I ever need to know. Kaida Love, I just can’t see myself with anyone else other than you. Not since the day we stood side by side in the snow an’ you introduced yourself to me. I think I fell in love with you right then an’ there.”

With a squeal, Kaida leapt into the air and screamed yes, wasting no time in tackling him to the ground as she jumped toward him and pulled him into a tight embrace. With her hands on either side of his cheeks, she pulled him in and nuzzled his nose with hers, smiling the largest smile she’d ever smiled. ‘

This was the very definition of happiness, she realized. This is what happiness should have always looked like for her—being loved and adored by someone who looked at her like she hung the moon. Hand in hand, Elkhean and Kaida locked up the bakery and left for the farmhouse to give her family the news.

Thirteen

A month after Elkhean's proposal, the bakery was finally stocked and ready to make its grand opening. Kaida refused to plan a wedding before it was opened, holding firm to the idea that it would be too much for her sanity to plan two large events at the same time, especially right before the Winter Feast was held. Elkhean and Eilaen agreed with her, especially after watching her stress over the details of planning the bakery's grand opening.

The night before, she'd stayed up way too late to make sure she had enough cookies, cakes, pies, and bread baked. The new ovens within the bakery were kept hot and she put them to the test with steady use. The scents of freshly baked bread, peppermint, and chocolate filled the lobby where Eilaen was busy with preparing the tables for customers the next day. Jareth and Elkhean were kept running back and forth from the farm to the bakery as Kaida would discover things she'd left behind after she'd moved all of her favorite baking supplies over the day before.

It was well into the night before Kaida was comfortable enough with her work to head home. Before locking up for the night, she ran through the inventory one final time. The glass cases each held three dozen donuts, four loaves of freshly baked bread, and two cakes with pre-cut slices already made. The cake domes on either side of the register each contained two dozen cookies with more stashed away to refill as necessary. Elkhean had encouraged her to allow him to build two large shelves to place on the wall next to the glass cases to place muffins, tartlettes, and cookies on for easy access for customers. Looking at them with their baskets empty and ready to be filled in the morning, she was glad she agreed.

She took a deep breath before walking through the door, the bell chiming its goodbye. With the door locked and faerie lights switched off, she and Eilaen made their way to the wagon and left for home, exhausted and feet aching from standing and moving around so much. They barely spoke as they shuffled through the door, the frigid wind blowing hard enough to almost knock them over. Working in silence, the halflings made sandwiches and tea for two, taking their meager meal into the den to sit in their chairs and eat while allowing the fire to warm them. It didn't take long to scarf their food down and decide to turn in for the night, the dishes they'd dirtied being placed in the sink for the next morning.

After climbing into her bed, Kaida knew that she'd be hard pressed to actually fall asleep, equal parts of nervousness and excitement flowing through her body. When she did fall asleep, it never lasted long, and by the time she woke the next morning, she was certain she'd been awake and tossing more than she'd actually slept. She quickly jumped out of bed and headed down the stairs to the kitchen, pleased to find that Eilaen had been awake and out of bed long enough to make them both their morning tea.

After they'd cleaned up the messes created from the night and breakfast, the two halflings got dressed and Eilaen went outside to quickly tend the animals, as well as the garden. When she had finished, they both bundled themselves up in their cloaks with their hats and gloves tugged onto their heads and hands, and then strode out the door and situated themselves in the wagon. Both Jareth and Ms. Kestrel had decided they would make their own way to the grand opening, neither of them wanting to interfere with Kaida's ability to come and go as she pleased or to have to wait on them. Even though she was sad that they wouldn't be arriving with her, she understood their reasoning and thanked them for caring so much. They had been such an integral part to her success, even before today, and she knew she'd never be able to thank them enough.

As they made the trip into town, Kaida's nerves were lit up with excitement. Everyone had worked so hard for so long to get the bakery up and going, not even including the

time she and Eilaen had spent saving up and looking for the perfect location. Kaida's Place was her pride and joy, even more so than Kaida's Bakery had been in Galbassi. She couldn't believe how much love and dedication had gone into remodeling and renovating her Smallburrow bakery.

It was the venture that she and her kindred spirit had decided to embark upon together, an experience she would never forget for as long as she lived. Ms. Kestrel, being the adopted grandmother that Kaida had always wanted but never had, had even gone through all of the tablecloths and cloth napkins, embroidering them with a dark chocolate colored thread with the initials "K.P" for Kaida's Place. Jareth had procured her hot cocoa machine. Her fiance had fallen in love with her there, and she had fallen for him. Not a single ounce of anything that had gone into this had happened without being touched by love of some sort.

Without turning to look at Eilaen, she took her hand and gave it a tight squeeze. "Thank you, Ellie. For all of it," Kaida said, trying to keep the tears that had formed from falling. "I couldn't have done this without you. By making your dream come true, you helped me do the same for mine. I will never forget this. Ever. For as long as I live, you will always be my kindred sister, my platonic fated mate. I love you."

She heard the effect of her words on her friend before she turned to see the tears that began to fill her eyes. Eilaen squeezed Kaida's hand in return before responding. "I love you, Kai. This adventure never would have happened without you pushing us into it. We both know that. Now look at us. We're living our dreams. Both of us. Together. Just like we'd always planned. I love you, too."

When they had almost reached the bakery, Kaida was filled with pride and something else that was unfamiliar to her. All she could see was the line of people waiting for her, Jareth and Ms. Kestrel heading up the front of the line with Urzal and Mayor Luddie standing right behind them. Eilaen dropped Kaida off in the front of the bakery and promised to be back after boarding Sorrel and Mable. With everyone cheering and

waving at her, she felt like a star. From somewhere in the middle of the line, Kaida heard her favorite group of dwarves as they hollered her name and began to chant it, the rest of the crowd following suit.

Scanning the line to look for them, her heart soared when she spotted Elkhean and noticed his green eyes shining. Even from where she stood, she could see the love and pride he had for her within them. If she wasn't on her way into the bakery for the most nerve-wracking experience of her life, she may have melted on the spot simply from the way he looked at her. Waving back to everyone and hollering "hey" as she walked by, she took a deep breath before unlocking the door of the bakery and closing it behind her. The first thing she did before going into the kitchen was lighting the fireplace to kick the chill out of the air that had settled during the night.

Before she could open for everyone to come in for the first time, she needed to finish filling baskets and cases, as well as setting out the plates, cups, and cutlery for those who chose to eat in the lobby. By the time the fire had done its job and the room was no longer cold, the items she'd baked for the shelves were warmed up and arranged in their specific baskets, the mugs that Elkhean had made for her were out on the hot cocoa table, and there was a small stack of linen napkins on each table. She had even decided to place disposable plates and napkins beside each of the baked treats and breads, just in case they were bought by a customer who was on the go.

Finally, she took a step back and was more than pleased by what she saw in front of her. Everything was perfect. Once Jareth, Ms. Kestrel, Eilaen, and Elkhean had made it inside to stand by her, she smiled. "It's showtime, you guys! But before we open for business, I want to thank each and every one of you for all of your love, help, and support. You have all been so incredibly important in getting Kaida's Place to where we are today, and I couldn't have done it without you. So to show you my thanks, I want you guys to all have these."

She pulled four small boxes out of her apron pocket. Each box contained a silver chain with a charm attached with

Kaida's Place on one side and the owner's name on the other. She handed them out and held her breath as she waited for them to open their gifts. She had contacted Nadles weeks ago, and the hard-to-find gnome managed to find someone Kaida could contact who would be able to craft them. She had worried they wouldn't arrive on time, but then they'd come in a week early—a fact that stressed Kaida out even more because she hated sitting on gifts instead of giving them out immediately.

After everyone had thanked her and hugged one another, there was not a dry eye in the room. Kaida wiped her face and dried her eyes. Taking a deep breath, she smiled. "Let's do this!" she squealed.

Kaida and her friends walked out the door where Elkhean cleared his throat to quiet the crowd down before motioning to Kaida.

"Ladies and Gents, Orcs and Trolls. Thank you so much for coming out today to celebrate the grand opening of Kaida's Place! We have worked so hard to bring this to you so that I can serve my favorite community all in one place." She stopped to get the large scissors from Mayor Luddie. "Thank you, Mayor Luddie. Phew! Eilaen, can you grab one of these handles? These are a lot heavier than I thought they would be and I honestly might drop them." She laughed and Eilaen took hold of the top half of the scissors.

"And now, we present to you—," Eilaen began.

"Kaida's Place!" the two of them shouted together as the scissors sliced through the large, thick red ribbon in front of them.

The crowd began to cheer again, and the crowd soon followed after Kaida opened the door and quickly made her way to the register. Within moments, the dining area was full of townsfolk as the line trickled in, anxious to get out of the cold and excited to see what Kaida's Place had for them. The murmurs of the customers soon filled the room, the voices mixing together and buzzing in Kaida's ear where she stood at

the register with Eilaen on her right side and Elkhean on her left.

The afternoon was a whirlwind as people continued to come and go in waves, the outpouring of love and support for her showing in their smiles, as well as their words of encouragement. Though Kaida had stocked the shelves to maximum capacity, she soon found herself in the kitchen, baking more chocolate peppermint mocha cookies. They were selling faster than almost anything else, the second most popular option being apple pie tartlets that she'd decided to make at the last minute the night before.

By the time evening came and the bakery had closed, Kaida found herself blissfully exhausted. Every moment leading up to this day, as well as every moment since the bakery had opened, had been more than worth it. As she closed her eyes and soaked in her victory, a large and familiar hand grasped hers.

She didn't have to open them to know who it was. Smiling, she leaned her head to the side, finding and resting on the chestplate of Elkhean's shirt. He stroked her hair for a moment with his free hand before placing it on her shoulder. "You did amazin' today, Kaida Love. I am so proud o' you for the hard work you put in this place," he praised.

She opened her eyes and turned to look at him. "It wouldn't have been possible without you. If you wouldn't have taken a chance on this project with all of its faults and issues, then this never would have happened." She rested her hand on his cheek. "Thank you for the hard work that *you* put into it. Words will never be enough to show my gratitude."

Leaning over just slightly, he pressed a light kiss on her forehead. "Let's go find Eilaen and Ms. Kestrel an' see how prosperous you were today, eh?" he asked with a smile.

She nodded before lacing her fingers in his. Hand in hand, they walked into the kitchen where Ms. Kestrel and Eilaen sat at the counter, taking count of the coins and paper bills that had rested within the register just an hour earlier.

“If my calculations are correct,” she heard the elderly gnome say. “Kaida has made a grand total of four hundred and twenty-five coins, as well as three hundred paper bills.”

Eilaen asked, “how much are those paper bills worth in coins, Ms. Kestrel? I’ve only ever seen the coins.”

The elderly gnome paused for a moment as she tried to convert the Trollish currency into coins. “One paper bill is worth ten coins. So, three hundred times ten is three thousand. Kaida is a rich halfling.”

“Are- are you serious? I made *that much* today? Are you sure?” Kaida asked, lost for words.

Surely Ms. Kestrel had miscounted somewhere, someway. There was no way she’d made so much in one day. She could feel her heart pounding in excitement at the knowledge of what that much money could do for Eilaen and herself, as well as the community as a whole.

“Girlie, I have never been more certain. You can ask Eilaen. I had already counted twice before you came in here because I was sure I was miscounting.” The elderly gnome’s eyes showed that she was telling the truth.

Kaida squealed so loudly that Eilaen and Jareth had to cover their ears, the noise being too much for them.

“I think this calls for a celebration!” Elkhean exclaimed.

Kaida whirled to look at him and he winked at her just before he went to open the kitchen door, opening it just a crack at first. As the crack widened, she could hear the sound of the doorbell chiming. A second later, the chattering of the dwarven crew she’d grown to love filled the room as did the smell of something hot and delicious. She clenched her hands and jaw in excitement, trying to keep her body from literally jumping for joy. She couldn’t have imagined a better way to end this day. Her family, her friends, and her love. This was what her life had forever been missing. This was what she’d found when she’d moved to Smallburrow.

Now there was only one thing left between her and planning her wedding to the dwarf who'd brought her so much happiness in such a short amount of time.

Winter Feast.

Fourteen

All around the town square, Mother Winter showed her presence. Between the soft falling of snowflakes and the slight crunch of footsteps in the already fallen snow, the atmosphere was set. The tables all over the square were lined with twinkling faerie lights, the chairs covered in enchantments to keep the furs that lined them warm and dry. The tree that had been erected and decorated in the very center was decorated with an array of reds, greens, and silver; the lights that were wrapped around it were reflecting the colors across the residents and their seating.

Kaida felt as if she were in a dream. She'd never seen anything so breathtakingly beautiful before. Under the tree, she saw some of the most intricate wrappings on packages and boxes, gifts from one resident to the other in the spirit of love and friendship. All around her, the townsfolk of Smallburrow were celebrating one another, as well as the season. The air was full of emotions and magic, the hum of it sliding across her skin and causing her own to want to come out to play.

It was times like this that Kaida almost wished she had an elemental magic within her like much of her elvish family. She never understood why it was that hers came in the form that it did, but as she watched those she loved happily enjoying what her magic *could* do. It could bring love and happiness, comfort during sadness, closeness when shared. Once again, she was reminded that, though unconventional, her magic *was* important magic— especially during the winter when all anyone wanted to do was get warm and cozy with a treat.

A bodily warmth filled the space next to her. Looking over, she saw Eilaen and smiled. “Hiya, Ellie. Whatcha doing?”

“Trying to stay warm. What about you?” Eilaen replied as her hands rubbed her arms up and down, trying to create friction to keep warm.

“Enjoying the beauty that is winter and snow and everything around us, of course! Tell me, Ellie. When was the last time you’ve seen such a wondrous sight?” Kaida asked, a dreamy expression coming over her face.

“Honestly, I can’t remember. I just wish it wasn’t so cold,” Eilaen grumbled. Kaida laughed at her friend’s honesty, even though it was given crankily.

It was then that Kaida spotted Jareth and Elkhean approaching, the two deep in conversation. When Elkhean laughed and smacked Jareth’s shoulder, Kaida laughed again at the sight of Jareth almost being knocked over by the impact. Trailing closely behind them were the four dwarves that Kaida was sure she’d never see Elkhean without, even after they were married. Before the group could reach them, Ms. Kestrel’s voice sounded from behind her.

“Kaida Girl. Have you even started planning your wedding? There seems to be much to do and we’re now almost finished with both of the events that were causing your wait, you know,” the elderly gnome asked impatiently.

“I’m ashamed to admit that I have not. But I suppose you’re right. It’s time to start planning. Wanna come see me at the bakery tomorrow and we start planning?” Kaida replied. “That works, girlie. That works. Happy Winter Feast, my loves,” Ms. Kestrel said, hugging them both tightly. Turning to where Jareth and the dwarves had stopped, she smiled. “Happy Winter Feast, gentleboys.”

“Happy Winter Feast, Ms. Kestrel,” the chorus of voices rang out.

Urzal’s voice sounded from somewhere around the tree, calling for the elderly gnome for assistance. With a wave, she left, promising to see Kaida and Elkhean the next day at the bakery.

“What was that about, Kaida Love?” Elkhean asked when she was out of earshot.

“Wedding planning begins tomorrow, apparently. She’s already fussing. I suppose we’re in for a long day. I suggest you get to buttering Eilaen into making us real food to eat because treats will only get us so far,” Kaida laughed.

Elkhean stifled a groan, but only barely. Jareth whipped his head around, eyes wide. “Does this mean that there will be a cake tasting?”

“Jareth, you’re not even the one getting married. Why would you be part of the tasting?” Eilaen asked, rolling her eyes as she smacked his chest.

“Well, we all know that I’m down for anything as long as Kaida’s in charge of the baking!” he exclaimed with a large smile.

“Just not as long as she’s the one cooking!” Eilaen countered, laughing.

“Yes, yes. We all know. I bake, Eilaen cooks. That’s the only reason I haven’t starved to death since I moved in with her,” Kaida agreed.

Kaida’s proclamation brought the entire group to laughter. Near the tree, Mayor Luddie announced it was time for the Feast to begin, causing the group to branch off. Eilaen and Jareth sat with Kaida and Elkhean, while the rest of the dwarven crew sat at a table next to them, never far from their leader.

Leaning, Kaida whispered, “Whatever are they going to do when you’re not the one in charge of them, Elks?”

“I have no idea. They’re goin’ to be lost, huh?” was his reply.

Kaida nodded before turning to face the center of the square where Mayor Luddie, Urzal, and Ms. Kestrel all stood, the tree to their backs.

“Townfolk of Smallburrow! Thank you for attending yet another Winter Feast. Our decorating committee has

outdone themselves yet again. I want to extend my thanks to them for all of their hard work. Yet another year has almost come and gone. Tonight, we gather to celebrate the year as it's coming to an end, as well as the friendships we have with one another. As a reminder, everyone received the name of their giftee several weeks ago. Each gifter selected a gift for their chosen person, wrapped it with care, and then placed it under the tree.

“In a few moments, Urzal will begin to select gifts from under the tree and call out the name of the giftee. Once in their possession, the gifter will stand. Once this is done, it will be time to feast! I want to thank Eilaen and Jareth for the produce that has gone into tonight's meal, as well as Kaida for the treats and breads that she so generously baked and donated to us. With the help of her husband-to-be, Elkhean.

“Now, without further ado, I present to you, the Tree of the Winter Feast!”

With this, he clapped. Behind the trio, the tree suddenly lit up— the lights twinkling like stars in the sky. Kaida stared in awe, amazed by the sight in front of her. “It's beautiful,” she breathed.

Elkhean turned to look at her. “But not as beautiful as you, Kaida Love.”

Without a glance in his direction, she laid her head onto his shoulder and wrapped her fingers in his. With a sigh, she happily breathed in the atmosphere around her.

Peace. Love. Friendship. Hope. This is what the air felt like.

Peppermint. Candied sweet potatoes. Ham. Honey glazed carrots. The aromas of the various food items intermingled as they were brought out and placed on the warmth-enchanted tables. At the end of the table rested cakes, cookies, and pies. Kaida had spent so much time and energy dedicated to baking for the feast that she couldn't even remember what she made for each food.

It didn't take long until the last food platter was placed on the table. As soon as the trolls who had been assisting in bringing out the food had been seated, Urzal began calling out the names of the giftees. After what seemed like forever, Kaida's name had finally been called. Stepping up to the tree, she saw Ms. Kestrel standing and her eyes welled with tears. Of all the residents in her little community to be her gifter, she was given the opportunity to be loved a little more by Ms. Kestrel. She unwrapped the purple paper from her gift before taking the lid off of the box hidden underneath. Inside was the prettiest pair of knitted gloves and a matching hat that she had seen in years, not to mention the softest that her hands had ever touched.

She immediately slipped the hat onto her head before sliding her hands into the gloves. A warmth blossomed within her, and she knew that it wasn't only because of her new homemade winter gear. She ran over to Ms. Kestrel and wrapped her arms around her, sobbing into her shoulder.

"Thank you so much," she whispered after a few moments. She pulled back and, sniffing, saw that the gnome's eyes were also watery.

"You're welcome, Kaida Girl. But really, it is I who should give you my thanks," she replied. "You and Eilaen have filled my life with so much love. You've filled my heart with something I didn't know was missing. So please know that you will forever be my greatest gift given."

Squeezing her once more, Kaida walked back to sit next to Elkhean who took her hand into his. After a dozen or so more townsfolk were called, it was finally time to eat! And eat they did. Though Kaida had seen the way the dwarves ate when invited to her home, she'd never had the pleasure of witnessing them eat during an event with copious amounts of food. She watched as they went back and filled plate after plate, even marveling at how much Elkhean had heaped onto his plate during his third trip to the serving table.

"Where- where do you put it all?" Eilaen asked, her eyes as large as the cookies on her plate.

“In my belly, o’ course. Where else would it go?” he asked with an eyebrow raised in jest.

“That’s what I’m talking about, bro!” Jareth exclaimed, giving Elkhean a fist bump.

The girls both rolled their eyes, thoroughly enjoying how close Jareth and Elkhean had gotten over the last several weeks. With as silent as her fiance could be and as socially inept as her neighbor was, Kaida had been worried that they wouldn’t get along in the first place, muchless have had personalities that would have majorly clashed. Had she been forced to pick one, she wouldn’t have been able to. Thankfully, that wasn’t a choice she’d been forced to make.

Hours went by and the halflings had danced and chatted and carried on as if there were no worries. Truthfully, there weren’t. Not right now. All was right in their little nook within the world. Smallburrow had cured sadness and loneliness neither of them had known they’d harbored. It had given Kaida a chance to finally feel comfortable with who she was the way she was. She no longer felt the need to wear a mask to change how she presented herself in order to be accepted within the society she so desperately wanted to belong to. Eilaen had frequently thanked her for bringing them on this journey, but Kaida knew that her soul sister would never know how much this journey had given her, as well.

The moon and stars had already begun to sweep across the sky when the town as a whole decided that it was time to call it a night. With a kiss to her forehead, Elkhean bid her goodnight and promised to see her in the morning at the bakery. The trip home was silent, the halflings exhausted from having the time of their lives. Sleep came quickly and easily.

Fifteen

Why Kaida thought that getting married immediately after the Winter Feast when it was *still* snowing and freezing outside, she'd never know. Despite Kaida's questioning, Eilaen had reassured her several times that everything was going to be perfect. Together, Kaida and Elkhean had worked closely with Urzal and Ms. Kestrel over the last several weeks to plan the most amazing winter wonderland wedding that anyone had ever seen in the history of Smallburrow's existence. The ceremony was to be held in the community center with the reception across the road at the bakery. Kaida, being the perfectionist she was, had decided to allow someone else other than Eilaen to make everything food wise for the reception. She refused, however, to let anyone else touch even a minor detail on her wedding cake other than herself. Even though it took her three days of baking and decorating, it turned out exactly as she'd always dreamed it would.

Finally, the day had arrived. Kaida woke up to Eilaen jumping into her bed, landing directly on top of her. The halflings dissolved in a fit of giggles just before erupting into joyful shrieks. Eilaen sat up and looked at Kaida. "Are you ready, Kai? Because today is *your* day. After today, you'll no longer be my Kai, but you'll be Elkhean's *Kaida Love*." At this, Eilaen pointed her finger towards the back of her throat and pretended to gag, sending Kaida into another fit of laughter.

"Yes, Ellie. I'm ready. More ready than I think I have ever been. Though, I do have to admit that I am sad to be leaving our farm life behind. Poor Tillard. Whatever will he do without me assisting you in chasing him around?" Kaida asked, leaning to lay her head on her friend's shoulder. "Promise me you'll let me know at first sign of truffles being dug up so that I can come and see. I would hate to miss such a glorious thing."

“Why you are so obsessed with that, I will never know. And on your wedding day, nonetheless!” Eilaen said, shaking her head.

Kaida stuck her tongue out at Eilaen, causing her to laugh before deciding it was time to climb out the bed, Kaida scrambling to climb out only steps behind her. The two halflings ate their breakfast and began to get ready for the wedding. Ms. Kestrel soon arrived to help them both with their dresses and hair, and Jareth said he’d come over before they left so he could ride with them.

After working all day to get ready, it was finally time for Kaida to put on her dress so they could head to Mayor Luddie and Urzal’s house. Ms. Kestrel helped Kaida into her dress, zipping it up in the back after Kaida’s arms slid effortlessly into the sleeves.

As Kaida turned around, she heard the gasp from Eilaen as she revealed her completed wedding look. Her dress was white with shimmering silver snowflakes embroidered on the bodice. The sleeves were lace and the hemline of the dress was long enough to cover her toes, replacing the need for slippers once they had reached their destination.

In her hair was a silver wreath, the leaves shimmering as it was woven through braided green sections that Eilaen had assisted her in creating. Though she wore no jewelry other than the ring Elkhean had crafted for her, she had never felt more like a princess than in this moment.

“Kai, you look beautiful,” Eilaen breathed, her voice barely more than a whisper. Kaida faced the elderly gnome beside her, wiping the tears streaming down her face and placing a kiss on her grandmotherly cheek.

Stepping over Kaida’s dress so she didn’t step on it, Eilaen leaned in and pulled her into a tight embrace. “Honestly, Kai. I am so happy for you. I have never seen you wear a smile on your face as big as you have since meeting our dwarven crew.”

Kaida looked at her friend, adoration shining in her eyes. “Thank you, Ellie. I’m so thankful for you and your

reluctant acceptance on us embarking on this journey to Smallburr together.” Tears began to well in her eyes. Smiling, Eilaen swiped a finger at the lone tear that strayed down Kaida’s cheek.

A knock at the door signaled that Jareth was there. Kaida’s insides began to tremble with anticipation because that meant one thing: it was time to head to the ceremony. Squeezing Eilaen’s hand, Kaida turned to walk out first. “It’s time to go! Come on or we’ll be late and I *refuse* to be the last one to attend my own wedding!” Turning with a wink, she glided out the door in a way that was purely Kaida.

Taking a deep breath to steady her nerves, Kaida counted to ten before stepping out the door. The air outside smelled like snow and new beginnings. She could hear her heart beating in her ears as it threatened to go through her chest. It was now or never, she thought. And never wasn’t an option. Climbing into the wagon, she ventured towards the dwarf waiting for her in town.

It was time. She was ready. Their life together was finally beginning. And what a beautiful beginning it was shaping up to be.

Epilogue

“Come with me, Kaida,” Elkhean said, holding his hand out to her.

Accepting it, she allowed him to pull her along on the secret adventure he’d planned, stopping midway to place a blindfold on her face to avoid ruining the surprise. After she’d counted two hundred steps, they stopped and she longed to lift the covering over her eyes to see what was in front of her. She could hear the sounds of the melting icicles dripping off the trees and shrubs around them. Winter was leaving and spring was on the horizon.

“No peekin’. This’ll be worth it. I promise,” Elkhean whispered in her ear. “I’ll be back in just a moment. Stay put.”

She began to fidget with her fingers in an attempt to keep from sliding the blindfold off of her face. The anticipation of what was to come was almost too much to bear. She hated surprises and not knowing what was going on, unless *she* was the one throwing the surprise. But she trusted Elkhean. Even when he was grumpy and couldn’t sit still from the lack of doing something—anything—with his hands, he’d never given her reason to feel otherwise. So she continued standing there, tapping her fingers together to avoid bringing them to her face and moving the cloth that covered half of her face.

“Okay. Are ya ready?” he asked. She could hear the anticipation bubbling over with his tone.

Nodding, she found herself smiling. “I’m ready. Now tell me what’s going on you silly dwarf.”

She felt the heat of his body as he stepped close to her again, the backs of his fingers grazing the smoothness of her cheeks. He pecked the tip of her nose before his hands moved to the back of her head. “On the count of three, I’m goin’ to remove the blindfold. One, two, three.”

Light exploded around her and it took Kaida a few moments of blinking to adjust. When she saw what was in front of her, a cry of surprise rang out. He'd brought her to a field of crocus flowers, their bright and vibrant purples surrounding her on all sides. Turning, she looked at him with tears in her eyes. "Elkhean, this is incredible. But how?"

"I may have asked Jareth to work some o' his magic for me. I love you, Kaida and have since that snowy day. It was as if you were a familiar song callin' out to me and I couldn't resist humming along. Dwarves don't even hum, ya know. An' then I think I fell deeper for ya when you agreed to spend our lives together. Now it's time for the next step." Grabbing her right hand into both of his, he gripped both of her hands in his before continuing. "I want to build our house here. In the middle o' this field. It's close to the bakery an' not too far from Eilaen."

Stunned, she brought her free hand to her mouth in surprise. This was the last thing she'd expected to come out of the mess of the week they'd had and she didn't know whether to be delighted, surprised, or anything in between. Lowering her hand from her mouth, she placed her palm on his cheek. "Elkhean! This is wonderful! I would want nothing more than to build our own house here."

Tears of joy began to flow down her face as he stood in front of her, beaming. Kaida would do anything in the world to see him smile at her like that. "We'll begin as soon as the ground is dry enough to not get stuck in the mud."

Feeling her smile growing wider with each heartbeat, Kiada began to laugh as she considered the wonderful future in front of her. He scooped her up and twirled her around, her green hair floating in the breeze.



After the last of the snow had melted and the dwarves had built Kaida's new home, Kaida and Eilaen stood in the den of the Kaida's new home, the air warming as the last days of winter were coming to an end. All throughout the house, there were bouquets of flowers. The entire house was decorated in a

way that was uniquely Kaida. On the porch were blankets and a large swing, big enough for Kaida and Eilaen to sit comfortably when Eilaen would visit. Kaida had been baking all day, enjoying the warmer weather. Every detail was perfect from the coziness factor down to the faerie lights wrapped around every surface possible, making the home feel extra magical.

The porch was decorated with foliage that was the epitome of every springtime fantasy setting. The scent of the growing grass and blooming flowers drifted through the air. There were signs of life and new beginnings everywhere the halflings looked.

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About the Author



T. M. Mayfield is a small town author who loves all things fantasy. She is currently working to make her dream come true. When she isn't writing or editing, you can find her snuggling her cats, homeschooling her children or picking fights with her cinnamon roll husband.

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