

ENCHANTED HEARTS BOOK I
A GOLDILOCKS RETELLING



GOLD & SHADOW



MADELEINE ELIOT

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To my younger self, who began this series in 2018, but never
thought she'd make it as a writer.

And to every girl (or guy) who just wants a grumpy, growly
bear to cuddle with.

Then the Three Bears thought they had better make further search in case it was a burglar, so they went upstairs into their bedchamber. Now Goldilocks had pulled the pillow of the Great Big Bear out of its place.

“SOMEBODY HAS BEEN LYING IN MY BED!” said the Great Big Bear in his great, rough, gruff voice.

The Story of the Three Bears, published in the collection English Fairytales, retold by Flora Annie Steel (1922)

GUIDE TO BJØRNESPRÅK

BY MELISANDE NIGHTSHADE

Bjørnespråk *BYORN-eh-sproke* — bear language

Bjørnspeider *BYORN-spi-der* — a gathering of bear dens to express grievances and resolve conflicts

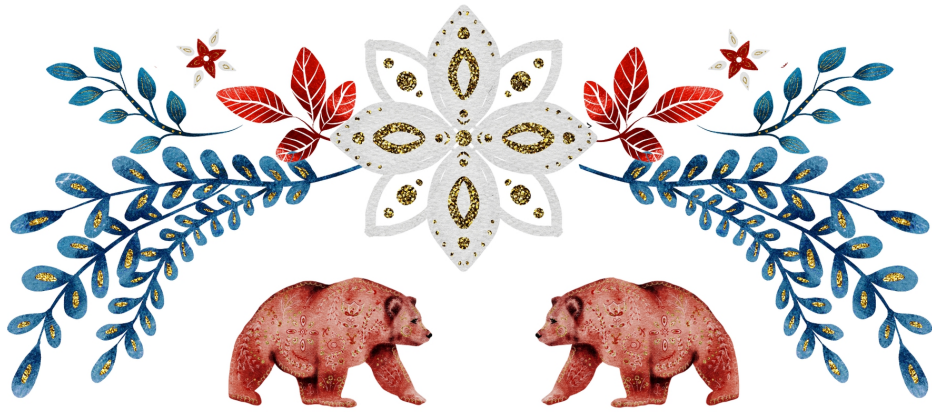
Kjære *SHAR-reh* — love, as in “my love.” An endearment usually reserved for mates.

Vegvísir *veg-VEE-sir* — a compass that guards the wearer so that they will always find their way





MELISANDE



CHAPTER 1

When I was very young, I loved the winter; the world covered in a thick layer of snow, the sounds of the forest where we lived dulled and sleeping under a blanket of white.

Gods, how I hated it now.

Not only did it make my job significantly more difficult, but I was cold and wet, and all I really wanted was to be home in bed in front of the fire with a mug of Izzy's special hot cocoa.

I shivered, the darkness nearly complete in this part of the Deep Wood, where barely man nor beast dared to live. Well, except for my sisters and me, but my parents had been a little...eccentric. Our small cottage was nestled in a clearing about ten miles west of where I hid, and I sent up a little prayer that my target wouldn't track me back to my family.

The tiny cabin I had been sent to on this job was dark, its occupant hopefully away hunting. All I had to do was sneak in, grab the amulet Victor wanted, and get back home without the owner of the amulet coming after me.

Easier said than done.

Victor Gold was a lucrative employer, a collector of curiosities and precious items who helped keep my sisters and me fed through the endless winter. Prior to Victor, I had used

my particular brand of shadowweaving to retrieve stolen objects, rather than do the stealing myself. But it turned out that crime *did* pay, and Victor paid in spades.

None of us were too good or too proud to take his money, agreeing to many jobs of a morally gray nature to earn enough to keep us fed and sheltered and warm through the twelve-year winter. Izzy's only reminder to me whenever I left on one of Victor's jobs was a terse, "Don't get caught."

I always kissed her cheek with my usual confidence, and promised to be home by supper.

What I hadn't realized this time was that it would take me an entire day to reach this remote cabin. I was in decent shape, as athleticism certainly helped with thievery, but the snow was high, and it had been slow going. I was winded and sore and felt about a thousand years old. Based on the rumbling of my stomach, I was definitely going to miss supper, and probably worry my eldest sister half to death.

I sighed, my breath fogging before me in the dark. If I didn't get out of the snow soon, I would certainly freeze.

I turned again to examine the little cabin. It appeared completely dark at first glance, but I was able to make out a very faint orange glow, and the faintest curl of smoke rising from the chimney. Smoke meant a fire, which meant warmth.

My plan solidified quickly. I would slip into the cabin, find Victor's blasted amulet, remain hidden and wrapped in shadows until early morning, then head out at first light.

I pulled my cloak more tightly around myself, willing it to warm me. It was old and careworn, but I couldn't bear to part with it. It was one of the few cherished items we had to remember our father by, and I didn't want to give that up.

I sighed, grimacing a little at what father would think of his beloved daughters now, all of us but the youngest engaged in less than legal pursuits. I shook away the thought, determined to focus on the job. Our parents were gone, and we were on our own. They had disappeared before the endless winter.

They weren't there when Ella cried in hunger nor when Calli couldn't get warm.

I *was* there, and times were desperate. I would do my part for my family regardless of the moral concerns it might raise.

Besides, desperation was good for business.

I pulled shadows over me like a cloak, the way I had done countless times since I had first learned to wield them at the age of thirteen.

It was just after mother and father had disappeared. The only sign that they still lived was a note, telling us to take care of each other. Days passed, then weeks, and Izzy calmly told me that there was no sign of either of our parents in any of the elven courts. She had even gone to the High King in Varenheim, the capital city of the Elflands, with no luck.

The shadows had burst from me that day like a physical manifestation of my grief.

Two weeks later, the endless winter had set in.

I pushed away the morbid memories, trying to focus on my work. The shadows hid me completely in the night, but I had to move slowly and brush away my footprints behind me as I went. I approached the back of the tiny cabin, hoping my trail would be less noticeable here than barging in the front door.

It wasn't perfect. In the daylight, it would be obvious that the snow had been disturbed. But I hoped that by night, if the cabin's occupant returned, they wouldn't notice my trail. Maybe new snow would fall and cover my tracks.

I sent up yet another prayer for snow, wishing for once that my little sister Calli, who had inherited my father's gifts for weatherweaving, had come along with me.

The solid wooden door to the cabin was, predictably, locked. But my shadows had never met a door they couldn't open, and so I speared a tendril into the keyhole, letting my magic do most of the work while I waited. A soft click told me that the shadows had succeeded in tricking the mechanism, and I turned the handle, hoping the door wasn't warded with anything nastier.

The wealthy usually relied on magic to safeguard their homes, which was much harder to trick than a simple mechanical lock. Despite owning a desirable artifact, the owner of this cabin seemed confident that the lock and the remote location would protect their home.

People could be very, very stupid.

A soft hoot startled me, and I turned to scour the tree line. I didn't see anyone, but a pair of lament eyes told me I was being watched. An owl, perhaps? With my shadows, I doubted it could see me, but animals had an uncanny way of defying magic and seeing right through it.

“Shoo!” I hissed, motioning it away, “I’m working.”

With a rustle of feathers, the owl took off, barely distinguishable against the snowy trees. I breathed out a sigh of relief and shut the door behind me with another soft click, the shadows still cloaking me in darkness. I had no idea what it must look like. Izzy described the shadows as a wedge of blackness that was somewhat person-shaped, but luckily it was dark enough that no one would bat an eye at my insubstantial presence.

Not that there appeared to be anyone around to see me. The cabin was dark, except for a fire burning in the hearth, which cast the bare wooden walls in a warm, orange glow. Something appeared to be simmering in a pot over a small stove in the little kitchen, and the smell made my stomach growl in protest at my lack of dinner.

I tried to ignore the delicious smell as I began to sneak through the cabin, alert for any hidden safe or box that might hold something of value.

Victor had been reluctant to tell me much about the object that he wanted me to steal, which was unusual for him. Normally he bragged in great detail about the properties of the objects he wanted, reminding me that he'd pay me twice what I could fence the object for, in case I got ideas.

“It’s a golden amulet, circular, with a bear paw in the center,” he had said, his usually dapper suit and dandy

appearance more haggard and drawn than normal. “And it is imperative that I have it by the week’s end.”

“The rush will cost you extra,” I pointed out, narrowing my eyes at him as he wiped his brow with a kerchief. We had met in the seediest tavern in Mysthaven since his offices in Fairwind were too far for me to quickly travel. Fairwind was also where Commander Everhart was stationed. The member of the High King’s Royal Guard was a thorn in any criminal’s side, and the less Victor and I were seen together in the city, the less likely he would discover either of our trails.

“I don’t care what it costs,” Victor said sharply, startling me a little and making me fumble the mug of ale I had been about to drink from. “Just get it done, Lis.”

“I need more to go on, Vic,” I replied, putting the mug down carefully as I studied my employer. “Where is it kept? Who lives in this cabin? What magic am I going up against?”

“None as far as I know,” he replied, waving off my questions like an irritable fly. “And I don’t know where it’s kept. If I knew that, I wouldn’t be paying you a small fortune.”

I grinned, pleased that my particular skill set would result in a lucrative payment. Perhaps I could refuse a few jobs if we were careful with the money. It would be nice not to risk my neck each night for one of Victor’s trinkets, although I couldn’t deny that I enjoyed the rush.

I let out a muffled curse as I stumbled in the dark, my knee cracking against a very solid wooden chest. *Focus, Lis.* I looked down, noticing a bear paw carved on the lid of the chest, which appeared to be sealed with flimsy brass locks. This would be an excellent place to store a bear-paw amulet.

I remained quiet a moment longer, waiting to see if anyone responded to the sound I had made. When no one came running, I loosened the shadows around me so I could see a bit better and knelt to examine the chest.

I didn’t even bother with the shadows this time as I put my elbow to the lock and gave it a sharp, downward jab. It sprang

open, the mechanism old and rusted, and I flipped the top excitedly, eager for my payday.

The chest was irritatingly empty.

I searched the whole cabin twice over and found nothing like Victor had described. Intuition told me that my fleeting hope of this being the wrong cabin was a forlorn one. It was far more likely that the owner of the amulet was *wearing* the blasted thing, and getting it off its owner would require a lot more hassle and finesse than simply stealing it in the night.

I sighed, slumping down on the worn, leather couch in front of the fire, my stomach now aching furiously in hunger. Whatever was cooking was surely more than enough for one person. I bit my lower lip, trying to decide where I could ethically draw the line in my thievery.

Hunger pushed me to move that line just a little further toward “wicked” on my internal morality scale, and I went to the kitchen to investigate.

It was some kind of meat stew simmering over the stove, and I ladled a healthy helping of the chunky, divine-smelling meal into a wooden bowl and spoon that were sitting out as if waiting for me.

It was utter heaven. I didn’t even care what kind of meat was in the stew. My stomach gave a rumble of approval at the meal, and I polished off the whole bowl, still feeling hungry.

Surely one more bowl wouldn’t go noticed.

I was rather full and sleepy when I finished, the effects of a full day of travel in the snow finally catching up to me. Whoever lived in the little cabin should have returned already, if they intended to return before morning. The wind had picked up, and the sounds of a howling gale outside told me that it was unlikely I’d be discovered by the owner, who was likely staying wherever they were for the night.

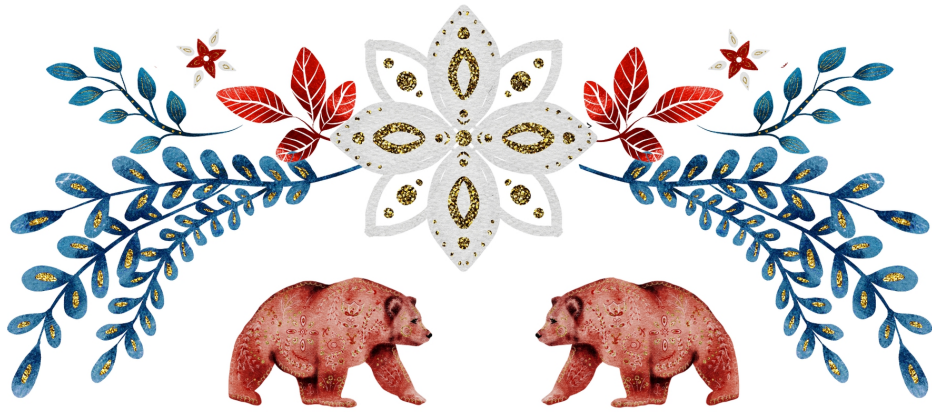
I replaced the lid on the now slightly less-full pot of stew and washed the bowl and spoon, careful to place them back exactly where I had found them.

I climbed the wooden half-log stairs, my brain barely registering where I was going as the plan solidified in my mind. I would lie down for just a few hours until the storm died down, then wait in the shadows until the owner of the cabin returned. From the second floor, I could hear if anyone entered the cabin and take to the shadows to evaluate how I would get the amulet from them. And if it was worth it to even try. I was skilled with daggers, but I preferred not to kill when possible. My skill set lent itself to stealth over strength, and murder was messy and dangerous.

No amount of money was really worth my life.

There was a single bed in the cabin, the lofted room above the living area large enough only for the carved wooden bed, which was at least twice as wide as my bed at home. I climbed atop it since there was no good place to hide anyway, deciding the need for rest outweighed stealth, but I was careful not to disturb the blankets as I cloaked the room in protective shadows.

I would just close my eyes for a minute or two.



CHAPTER 2

“Why are you sleeping in *my* bed?” a growling voice shouted, a blast of hot breath searing my face as I woke with a start.

There was a bear above me. A huge, shaggy, brown bear, with sharp teeth and a golden chain around its neck. Its claws poked holes into the feather pillow next to my head, and its black eyes bored into me as it bared its teeth in a snarl.

With a screech, I reflexively wrapped myself in shadow, rolling off the bed and onto the hard floor between the bed and the wall.

“Oh no you don’t,” growled the bear, which I realized was *talking* to me. It said I was in *its* bed.

A heavy weight landed on me, pinning my arms to the floor with large, warm hands.

Wait. Hands?

I was so surprised by the sight of the man above me—male, I supposed, based on the pointed ears—that I dropped the shadows and stared wide-eyed into his face.

“You were a bear,” I squeaked out stupidly, glancing down and blushing bright red as I realized that the male was completely *naked* on top of me.

Bearded and tattooed and naked.

His powerful arms pinned mine down, and his knees bracketed my thighs against the floor.

“And you are a thief,” the male growled, still sounding bear-like even without the fur and teeth and claws. His voice was deep, his hair and short cropped beard the same color of brown that his fur had been, but his eyes were a warm golden brown, not the black of the bear’s as he narrowed them at me. “Why are you in my house?”

My momentary panic at being called a thief and thinking I’d been discovered dissolved at this last question. Victor had left out that my target was a gods-damned *bear-shifter*, but he didn’t seem to know what I was looking for.

“I got lost,” I said timidly, trying to play the part of a lost and frightened girl, rather than a seasoned criminal. “And I was cold and I didn’t think anyone was home.”

“You were wrong,” the male said, the golden chain around his neck catching the light and drawing my attention. It looked to be a round, golden pendant, and with a lurch of my stomach, I realized what it was. A bear paw was engraved in its center, surrounded by symbols that matched the male’s tattoos.

Here was the item that Victor Gold had paid me to steal, clasped around the neck of an angry bear-shifter.

Fuck.

“Get out,” he rumbled, rising from the floor and releasing me as he backed away, still fully naked before me. I fixed my eyes on the ceiling, determined not to look at whatever was between his legs as I scrambled to my feet. When I risked a glance down, he was blessedly wearing trousers, although his feet and chest were still bare, aside from the golden amulet around his neck. Intricate tattoos crawled up his arms and across his chest, but I didn’t have time to study them as he barked out, “Now.”

“Please,” I pleaded, panicking as I was about to lose this job and the heavy payday that came with it. I mentally scrambled

for a reason to stay. A way to remain long enough to try to steal the amulet.

The male growled again, looking frustrated and angry as he grabbed me around the waist and hauled me up over his shoulder.

I yelped as he carried me bodily down the narrow stairs and opened the front door. A blast of freezing air greeted me, and then icy wet as he threw me into the freshly fallen snow.

It was still dark out, the sky the bruised purple of very early dawn. A wolf howled in the distance, and I felt the cold seeping into my bones as I sat in the snow.

“Don’t come back,” the male thundered, slamming the door and leaving me alone in the dark.

“Hey!” I shouted, scrambling to my feet and banging on the wooden door. “You can’t leave me out here in the dark! There are wolves!”

The door opened a crack, and the male flashed his teeth with a cold grin. “Better scamper home, Little Thief.” He threw Father’s cloak at me and slammed the door again. I didn’t even have time to protest the nickname before the window went dark.

I thought about several colorful swear words I could use, but it wasn’t worth it. I was already going numb from the cold, and more snow was landing in my hair and seeping into my clothes as I stood at the bear’s door.

I could leave, cut my losses, and tell Victor the job was a no-go. He’d be furious, but it would be the safest choice. Or I could find a place to take shelter and sneak back in after the bear had let down his guard. He had seen my shadow magic, but he didn’t know what I was after. At least, I hoped he didn’t.

What I couldn’t do was stay in the snow. I would freeze. Or be eaten. Or both. I had no desire to become a meat popsicle, and I was already losing feeling in my toes, so I decided to head off in search of some kind of shelter. Caves littered these woods, and there couldn’t be one too far from the cabin if the

bear-shifter hunted out here. I pulled on the cloak, thankful that I at least hadn't lost the heirloom.

Another howl sounded, closer this time, and I briefly considered climbing a tree before deciding that I really *would* become a meat popsicle if I climbed a giant wooden stick.

I trudged off, heading in the opposite direction from the way I had come and, consequently, the howls of the wolves. I would hunt for some kind of shelter, maybe build a fire, nap, and try to steal the amulet again when night fell. Izzy would be going mad with worry for me, but she knew that sometimes jobs took longer than I anticipated.

I was maybe an hour into my plan when it went completely to hell.

The growling came out of nowhere, and I whirled to see three wolves stalking toward me in the gray light, their teeth glinting white in the darkness.

Oh gods. Never mind the popsicle. I was going to be *breakfast*.

I quickly weighed my options, standing completely still in case the wolves gave chase. Should I make myself look big, or was that for bears? Did I take to the nearest tree? I was not a great climber, but maybe adrenaline would help. My heart was thumping so hard in my chest, I felt sure the wolves could hear it, and the sound of my blood pumping through me seemed to make them salivate.

"Easy," I said quietly, holding out one hand before me in supplication while I slowly moved backward.

The screech of an owl startled both me and the wolves, and with a growl of fright and fury, they pounced.

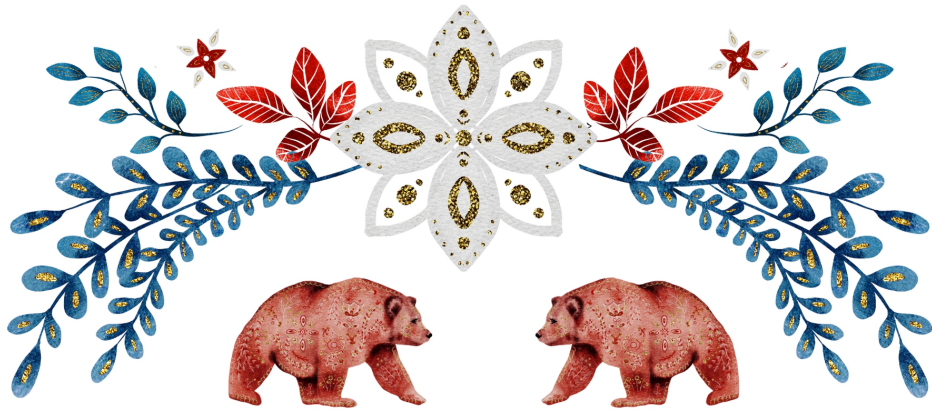
I was knocked to the side by a huge, brown blur as a roar rent the morning air. There were growls and screeches as I rolled to my feet, stumbling over the partially unbuckled snow shoes and toppling back to the ground. I felt something snap in my ankle and cried out, drawing the attention of the wolves back to me and away from the bear that had charged them.

The golden chain around the bear's neck told me it was the same shifter from the cabin, but I didn't have time to wonder why he had followed me as one of the wolves lunged for me. I twisted in the snow, crying out as sharp claws tore through my winter coat and drew blood. My ribs were on fire, and red began to dot the snow as I rolled away from the wolf.

Another growl sounded, and the wolf snarled as the bear charged him, tossing him against a tree with a sickening crack as if he were no more than a rag doll. The other two wolves whined as they scampered off, and the bear turned to fix me with a black-eyed stare and a snarl as I bled into the snow.

"You saved me," I said, my voice weaker than I had intended it to be. I tried to rise, but everything felt cold and numb, not just from the freezing temperatures. A pool of red was spilling out from me, and I had the sinking feeling that the wolf had done more damage than I'd thought.

The bear growled, the sound more concerned than angry now, and the last thing I heard before the world went dark was the shifter saying, "I have a feeling I'm going to regret it."



CHAPTER 3

Everything hurt when I opened my eyes.

On the bright side, I hadn't been eaten, but if I had, maybe I wouldn't be in quite so much pain. My ankle throbbed with each heartbeat, the limb feeling heavy and immobile. My chest burned, both the act of breathing and the skin around my ribs stabbing me with each breath.

"Why aren't you healing?" came a gruff voice.

I blinked the sleep from my eyes and found the bear-shifter in his fae form, sitting on a coffee table carved from a slice of a huge tree trunk, and looking at me suspiciously.

He wasn't naked this time, thank the gods. His clothing was practical but finely made, clearly expensive with a clean linen shirt and leather trousers. Some kind of knitted coat was pushed up at the sleeves to reveal muscular forearms. Tattoos of lines and shapes like those on his chest crept down to his hands, and his fingers bore symbols that looked like the runes in Izzy's old spell books.

His dark hair was combed in waves over his forehead, his beard neatly trimmed, and...

Gods. He wore a pair of rectangular black glasses that made him look more like a scholar than a shifter. I had a serious

weakness for males who looked like they could string two thoughts together.

“Well?” he pushed, raising one bushy eyebrow and jolting me out of my reverie. “You’re elven, aren’t you?”

“Half,” I choked out, wincing as I tried to sit up. The male didn’t move to help me, so I wiggled my body as best as I could up the pillows. “Only half-elven. It takes me longer to heal than a full elf.”

“That explains all the blood then,” he said gruffly. He was sitting with his forearms resting on his knees, his gaze intent on my face. “And the ankle.”

“Is it broken?” I hissed, trying to push myself up to look at the ankle. My boots had been removed, and the injured foot was propped atop several cushions and wrapped in linen bandages. Twigs had been wrapped up to steady the joint. I tried to wiggle my toes, which didn’t hurt as much as I thought it would. “Did you do this?”

“Sprained. And I did,” said the male, nodding at my foot. “Stitched the gash across your ribs too.”

I looked down to see that my shirt and cloak were gone, replaced by a bandage that wound around my torso, a lump over the injured area indicating it had been dressed. I felt myself flush as I realized he would have had to lift my shirt and camisole to clean and stitch the wound, and he likely had seen *everything*.

“Where’s my cloak?” I asked, panicked as I tried to sit up.

“Easy,” said the shifter, pushing me back down gently, his warm hand on my shoulder. “I have it. If you move like that, you’ll tear your stitches.”

I relaxed, allowing the shifter to guide me back down. “I thought fae couldn’t touch iron,” I said, feeling my side gently and wincing in pain. Surely an iron needle would have hurt him to use on me, but the stitches felt firm and neat.

“You thought right,” said the male, still unmoving as he studied me intently. “But I am a shifter, not fae, despite having a fae form. We are different.”

“Oh,” I said, unsure how to reply. “Sorry.”

I’d never met a fae or a shifter before. I knew there were many fae on the other sides of the Deep Wood, but the fae realms were at least a hundred miles away, if not more. Shifters sometimes came this far west to trade or hunt, but I’d never met any who lived out here.

The bear-shifter rolled his eyes, rising to his full height and glowering down at me as he threw a blanket atop me. “Well, I suppose you can’t walk back to wherever you came from like this, and I can’t drag you out into a blizzard without you freezing to death.”

I craned my neck behind me to look out one of the windows. Sure enough, wet glops of snow were pelting the glass, and a frigid breeze leaked in between the panes. I snuggled under the blanket more deeply.

“Thank you,” I said, trying to think how I might work this to my advantage. Was it ethical to steal from a male who had patched me up and sheltered me? No. But it was technically his fault I was in this mess.

Liar, said an uncomfortably truthful voice inside me. *He didn’t ask you to steal from him*. I ignored the voice, trying to think how I might charm the shifter into letting down his guard around me for however long I would be here. Based on the storm, maybe a day or two if he was serious about dragging me home.

The shifter grunted, skirting past the sofa where I lay and moving toward the small kitchen. His feet padded on the wooden floorboard quietly, and I wondered if he was barefoot despite the cold. The toes of my exposed foot were freezing.

“You lost a lot of blood,” the shifter called, the sounds of something clattering that I couldn’t see over the back of the sofa. “You need to eat.” He came back around the couch with a wooden bowl, possibly the same one I had used the night before. “Here.”

“Thank you,” I said, accepting the bowl and expecting to find more stew. I frowned at the mushy brown substance in the

bowl. "What is it?"

"Porridge," the shifter said as if this were obvious.

I tasted the porridge hesitantly, expecting another eye roll from the shifter. It was warm and thick and bland, not unpleasant but not particularly enjoyable. It felt like it stuck to my very bones as I swallowed it. I bet it would taste divine with brown sugar, or maybe with some salt, but I didn't feel like I should push my luck.

"What's your name?" grunted the shifter, watching me eat as if studying a creature of prey.

"Lis," I replied, trying to hide a grimace on a mouthful of mush. "Melisande, actually, but only my oldest sister calls me that. I'm just 'Lis' to everyone else."

"Lis," the shifter said, testing out the name like he couldn't decide what he thought of it.

"How do you wear spectacles as a bear?" I asked, my mind still jumping all over the place.

"You talk a lot," the shifter said, scowling at the question.

I choked on a laugh. "And you talk very little," I retorted, feeling irritated by the shifter's gruff manner. "What's your name?"

"My name is unimportant," he replied, still scowling at me.

"I told you mine," I pointed out indignantly. "If I'm staying here, shouldn't I at least know your name?"

"You broke in," the shifter replied, raising a brow at me. "You're entitled to nothing."

"Is this some strange shifter custom?" I asked, putting the spoon down to study the male. I thought I had read something once about fae names having power. Maybe shifters were the same. "A superstition about names?"

"No," the shifter replied, his brow somehow climbing higher. "This is about me not giving my personal information to a thief."

“Gods,” I sighed, taking another bite of the bland mush. “I already told you, I wasn’t stealing,” I lied, trying to frown as if affronted.

“You stole my stew,” the shifter pointed out. “And my bed.”

”I *borrowed* the bed,” I corrected. “And if it’s such an insult, I will pay you back for the stew. Or I’ll make more stew. I’m fairly good with a dagger.”

“I’m sure you’ll be able to hunt in a blizzard with only one working leg,” the shifter deadpanned. His brown eyes sparkled warmly, almost as if he were amused. “And I can see that you are overflowing with wealth.”

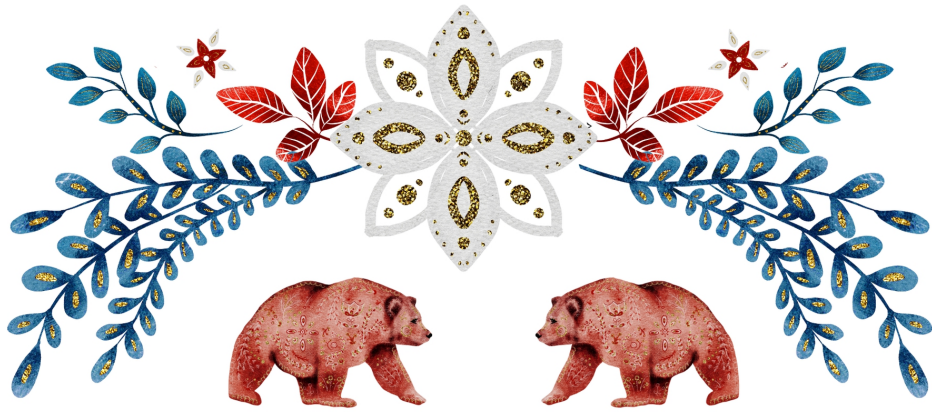
I scowled, feeling self-conscious about my tattered cloak and worn trousers. The shifter clearly had some wealth. The cabin wasn’t ostentatious, but it was comfortably appointed. A blush crept unbidden to my cheeks, and the shifter’s face softened.

“Forget the stew,” he said, taking my bowl and returning to the kitchen. I heard water running and assumed he must be washing it. He returned, pulling another blanket from a basket and dropping it over my bare toes as if he could tell they were cold. “I’ll think of another way for you to repay me.”

“If you’re going to demand repayment,” I said, feeling warmth sinking back into my toes, “then you can at least tell me your name.”

The shifter’s beard twitched, and I thought I had maybe won a smile. “Orson,” he grunted. “Now rest.”

I didn’t even have time to test his name out before he was striding away, his form changing to that of a bear as he barreled out the front door and into the freezing wind.



CHAPTER 4

Orson was gone most of the day.

I must have been more injured than I thought because I drifted in and out of sleep, the crackling of the fire and cozy blankets helping dull the aching in my ankle and ribs.

I didn't know much about shifters, but based on Orson's question about my healing, they must heal rapidly like full-blooded elves.

With a human mother, my siblings' and my elven gifts were tempered by human frailties. We healed more quickly than humans—it would be maybe two or three days for my ankle to be completely back to normal—but we would age much faster than full-blooded elves.

Despite this, we all had my father's amethyst eyes, pointed elven ears, and weaving magic. Father used to say that Frostwood magic, the magic of elves from his kingdom, was determined by the spirit of the elf wielding it.

Calli, my fiery second-youngest sister, was the only one of us who had inherited my father's weatherweaving. The rest of us had all inherited different gifts, each involving the creation and manipulation of some element.

Sometimes, I wished we had been born of Silvershade or Elandor, the other two elven kingdoms. Silvershade elves tended to have magic that improved their physical prowess, with keen eyesight, speed, and intelligence, and Elandoreans were said to have the ability to shift into a number of different creatures, distinct from shifters who held only one secondary form. Both magics would have been useful in this gods-damned eternal winter.

It must have been near evening when I awoke properly to find Orson in his huge bear form, his muzzle nosing the blankets and his black eyes catching mine as I opened them blearily.

“Are you...smelling me?” I asked, trying to sit up amid the nest of blankets and pillows. Orson growled deep and low in his throat, and I instinctively stilled as he finished his examination.

He shifted, the hairy male taking the place of the bear as he crouched next to me. He was once again completely naked aside from the golden amulet, and I tried to focus on the ceiling instead of looking down.

“I need to examine the wound,” he said, his voice still very bear-like. “Take off the bandages.”

He stood, revealing *everything*, and I blustered out a protest. “You can’t just—“

“If you want to die,” he drawled, throwing a blanket around his waist as he moved to the kitchen. “By all means, don’t.”

I grumbled, shimmying my way to a sitting position. My ankle was already significantly better, the throbbing now a dull pain rather than a sharp one, but the wound in my side ached fiercely. I adjusted the pillows under my foot until it was more comfortable, then began unwinding the bandages clumsily.

“You could be nice about it, you know,” I complained, feeling awkward as I voluntarily exposed myself. Orson was busy doing something in the kitchen and wasn’t watching my struggle over the bandages, thank the gods. “You don’t have to be all gruff bear all the time.”

“This is who I am,” Orson said simply, not looking up as he worked on something I couldn’t quite see.

I winced at the blood that had soaked through the dressing on my side, which crawled up from the base of my ribs across the side of my left breast. I tried to pull up the blankets so they would cover the rest of me, blushing furiously at the idea of this male I didn’t know having seen me already.

“Nudity does not bother me,” Orson commented, appearing at the end of the sofa, the blanket and his glasses, which he must have retrieved in the kitchen, his only clothing. He was holding a small stone bowl, and his eyebrow was raised at my struggle with the blankets.

“Clearly,” I quipped, throwing out an irritated arm at his bare and extremely muscular chest and arms. His calves and bare feet were also visible beneath the blanket, and for some reason the sight of them also made me blush.

He rolled his eyes, moving to sit on the coffee table next to me, the blanket falling open to reveal a muscular thigh. His bear paw amulet was still around his neck, hanging tantalizingly out of reach.

Gods above, this was torture on so many levels.

Orson didn’t stand on ceremony or wait for me to announce I was ready. He leaned forward, gently pulling the dressing away from the wound and grunted in annoyance at its inflamed edges. I looked down, surprised by the row of neat stitches he had made, and even more surprised at the infection settling in.

“You’re going to be fevered tonight,” Orson growled, spreading something cool and green across the wound that made me hiss. He didn’t apologize, dipping his fingers back into the bowl for more of the green paste. “This will help it break faster.”

“What is it?” I asked, my teeth gritted against the pain as I clutched the blankets to myself. It smelled faintly minty and sweet, but I had never seen healing magic like this. Izzy’s

blood weaving could heal, but it was much more potion-based and required, well, blood.

“Family recipe,” Orson replied, not looking up from his work. “Healing herbs ground into a paste.” He looked up after pressing a new white dressing to the wound, making sure it was fully covered. “I’ll need to re-wrap you now.”

“I can do it,” I said, trying to hold the dressing in place along with the blankets.

A gentle touch at my chin startled me as Orson tipped my face up to meet his eyes. “You cannot,” he said simply, his chocolate gaze melting some barrier in me. “And I do not care about nudity. I will not look at your breasts.”

I pursed my lips, flushing pink. I was feeling better than I had, but still weak. And it would be difficult to wrap the bandages myself without risking tearing my stitches. I sighed and nodded, and Orson took the bandages from me.

He pressed a warm hand to my side as I dropped the blankets from him to work, reminding myself that it didn’t matter, he wasn’t looking, and I’d never see him again after I had healed up and stolen from him anyway.

I heard his breathing hitch a bit as I dropped the blankets, but he didn’t pause in his work or comment as he wrapped the bandages tightly around me, making sure I could still breathe.

“Done,” he said, his voice a bit gruffer than it had been before as he sat back. His eyes were sparkling behind the glasses, and his beard twitched. “You have very nice breasts.”

“You said you wouldn’t look!” I exclaimed, cheeks flaming as I pulled the blankets back over me in horror.

Orson chuckled at my reaction, and I was doubly horrified to see that he had also had a significant reaction to my nudity after all, based on the bulge beneath the blanket. Gods, that couldn’t all be what I thought it was, could it?

“Consider it payment for the stew, Little Thief,” he said, a grin appearing beneath the beard. It was a well-trimmed beard, and it made me think that perhaps beards were my new

favorite form of male accessory. Beards and tattoos. “You’re ogling my chest, after all.”

I looked up, realizing I had indeed been tracing the tattoos across his chest with my eyes. “I am not.”

Orson laughed again, standing in all his blanketed glory now that things had clearly calmed down for him a bit. “A thief *and* a liar,” he quipped, giving me a heated stare. “Whatever shall I do with you?”

It turned out that the answer to this question was to hold my hair back as I vomited, the fever Orson had predicted hitting me as hard as the blizzard raging outside sometime in the night. My body was wracked with shivers as everything I had eaten in the last twenty-four hours left my system in a horrifying wave of nausea that prompted the bear to scoop me up and carry me to the bathroom before I ruined his rug.

After an hour of horror, Orson handed me a glass of water and a damp washcloth to clean my face.

“Tiny sips only,” he warned, pulling my golden hair back behind my shoulder. “Or it will all come back up.”

“I’m sorry,” I croaked, wiping the sweat and tears and sick from me with the washcloth before doing what he asked. “I honestly didn’t mean to cause you so much trouble.”

It was true, the golden bear paw hanging so close to me was a reminder that I had meant a totally different sort of trouble. Clearly, there was no way I could steal it in my current condition, and that nagging voice in my head told me it would be a shitty thing to do after Orson had taken care of me.

“It’s fine,” Orson grunted, the heat of his bare chest warming me in the chill of the bathroom. He had donned pants at some point in the evening, but his feet and chest were still bare. He must run warm because he was like a furnace next to me. “Can you stand?”

I pursed my lips and shook my head in embarrassment, feeling everything go rather dizzy at the suggestion. He sighed, scooping me back up as he headed for the narrow log stairs that led to his loft.

“Where are we going?” I asked through chattering teeth. My nest on the sofa was in shambles, but salvageable and warm with the fire blazing nearby, although honestly not as warm as I was being held against Orson’s bare chest.

“I can’t keep you warm down there,” he grunted, cradling me like a child. I should be embarrassed, but there was something comforting about being cared for, for a change, rather than having to be the one to do the caring.

Orson settled me in his bed on my uninjured side, piling fur covers over me before settling in behind me and wrapping his arms around me. There were blankets between us, but I still blushed as he held me the way a lover might. I was still freezing, but his warmth was helping.

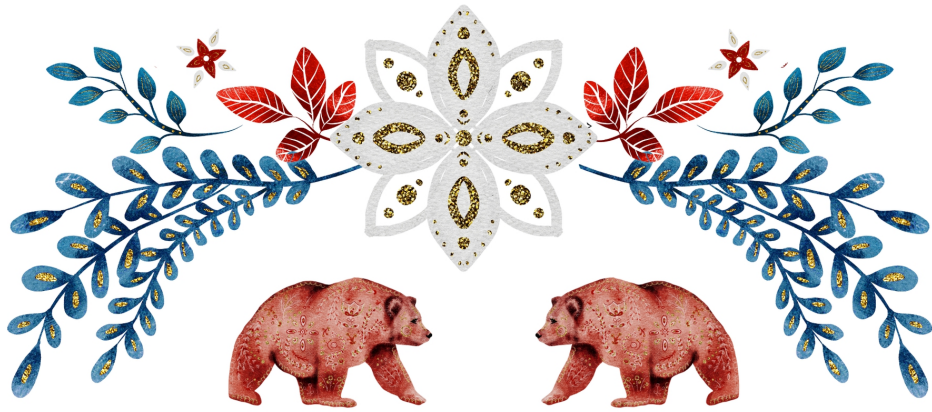
“You don’t have to—“

“You’re shivering like a leaf in a storm,” Orson grumbled, his face pressed against my neck as he inhaled, breathing me in. He must have removed his glasses for sleep because only warm skin brushed against me. “Neither of us will sleep if you don’t get warm. I promise not to ruin your virtue.”

“There’s not much to ruin,” I joked, finally feeling warmth seep into my bones as the bear-shifter held me.

His chest vibrated in a laugh as my tangled thoughts finally began to settle beneath his steady weight. “Even better,” he murmured, his nose brushing the sensitive skin behind my ear.

I could swear he smelled me again, but my limbs suddenly felt like lead, and I let sleep drag me away.



CHAPTER 5

I woke to glorious, toasty warmth and a hard male body pressed against my back.

Oh gods. Orson.

I tried to shimmy away from him, wincing as I jarred my ankle in the process. Orson grunted, pulling me flush against him with a firm arm.

Despite the blankets between us, I could feel another very firm thing also pressed against me.

Gods, take me now.

“Hey,” I hissed, trying to dislodge Orson’s grip on me. The shifter grunted again, nuzzling into my neck. “Gods above, you great beast, wake up.”

“I’m plenty awake,” he said, pressing his body against mine in a way that made warmth curl through me. “And I’ll be even more awake if you keep wriggling like that.”

I stilled, making him chuckle as he pressed harder against my backside.

This was a normal male reaction. It meant nothing. Males and men both often woke with certain...physical reactions.

Although this physical reaction was very, very hard and very large. I should be infuriated at his presumption. I hadn't given permission for this. Instead, molten heat flooded me at the feeling and my imagination started to run a little wild.

"Your heart is beating very fast," Orson rumbled, adjusting his hold on me. "Tell me to stop, Little Thief."

"I..." I gasped as his body pressed into mine again, finally jogging some common sense into my brain. "Stop."

Orson rolled away, leaving me oddly cold and bereft as he stretched, yawning loudly as if he hadn't just been essentially dry-humping my backside.

"That was unnecessary," I snapped, sitting up and pulling a blanket over my shoulders to cover myself.

"You enjoyed it," Orson replied, giving me a look of such male superiority I wanted to smack it off his face. "As did I."

"That will not be happening again," I said, not bothering to deny what we clearly both knew was true. "I don't even know you. And you don't know me. I could be anyone."

"I know enough," Orson said, having the decency to throw on a shirt. He tossed me one too, so huge it would drown me, but better than wearing only bandages. "You're a thief and a liar and have some kind of magic I don't understand yet. And you have nice breasts."

"Gods," I growled, pulling the shirt over my head. It smelled of Orson, like pine and cinnamon. I winced at the pain in my side, but it felt less fierce than the day before—more a dull ache than a stabbing pain. "I'm leaving."

"You can try," Orson conceded, leaning against the railing of the loft with his arms crossed as he watched me test my weight on my ankle. I could hobble, which was a significant improvement. "But it looks like we may be snowed in."

"What?" I scrambled to my knees, ignoring the jolt in my ankle as I rose to look out the tiny window above the bed. The blizzard had died down in the night, but snow was still falling on the fresh, white blanket, piled high enough that I could have jumped out of the window and landed safely. "Fuck."

“Are you in a rush?” Orson asked, his voice oddly strained at the question. He had left off his glasses, and I was trying to decide which version of him I liked better.

Both. The answer was both.

I sighed, sitting back on the bed and holding my injured ankle out before me. “I have six sisters waiting for me,” I confessed. “They’re probably worried sick.”

“Six,” Orson whistled as if impressed. “I’ve never known an elf to bear so many young.”

“My mother was human,” I said, looking up at him.

“Was?” he asked softly.

I nodded. “We’re on our own now, and they’re counting on me.” I was annoyed with myself for how my voice wobbled at this. It had been a long two days, and I was sore and tired, and the thought of Izzy and Lena, my elder sisters, trampling out into the woods in search of me terrified me.

“For what, Little Thief?” Orson asked, crouching before me on the bed. He put a big, warm hand on my knee, which steadied me somewhat, but made me feel unsettled in other ways.

“I was...doing work when you found me here,” I hedged, biting my lower lip. “All of my sisters work, but I tend to bring in the most coin.”

“What kind of work?” he asked, his voice more curious than suspicious.

“Odd jobs here and there,” I equivocated, hoping he wouldn’t press further. “Anyway, I was due back two nights ago.”

“Hmm,” Orson said, looking thoughtful. “Do you want to write them a note?”

“How would you deliver it?” I laughed, indicating the window. “There’s at least ten feet of snow out there.”

“I wouldn’t,” Orson replied, his beard twitching in another grin. “My friend would.”



“Your friend is an owl?” I asked once I had penned a quick note to Izzy that was vague enough not to give me away to Orson.

“You act like this surprises you,” Orson replied, scratching under the snowy owl’s beak. It rustled its feathers happily, holding out its leg obediently for the note. “Animals are loyal companions. It was this one that told me you’d broken into my house.”

“Snoop,” I hissed at the creature. This must have been the owl watching me the night I entered the cabin. Orson laughed, taking my note and tying it to the bird’s leg with a piece of string.

The windows on the ground floor were all snowed shut, so Orson had opened the loft window and whistled to summon the creature. It sat patiently on the lintel as flakes of snow fluttered in. I had to keep brushing them off the pillows so they wouldn’t soak.

“Owl and I have a mutual arrangement,” Orson said, tying a second knot around the note. “I feed him scraps, and he keeps an eye on the cabin when I hunt.”

“His name is just *Owl*?” I asked with a scoff. Owl gave me a haughty look, ruffling his feathers.

“He can’t exactly talk, Little Thief,” Orson replied, giving me an amused look. “So I call him what he is. Tell him where to go.”

“Oh,” I said, suddenly flustered. This meant telling Orson where I lived, and I was certain he would come after us once I had stolen his necklace, but I suppose I didn’t have much choice. If only we had a neighbor closer than three miles away, I would send the message to them to protect my sisters. As it was, I hoped Izzy knew enough defensive spell-work to keep out an angry bear.

Plus, Victor and the necklace would be long gone by the time Orson realized what I’d done.

I wondered for a moment why Orson lived in this cabin, so isolated from any other elves or humans or shifters. I didn't know if bears had packs, but clearly, Orson didn't.

"Lis," Orson said, nudging me with his shoulder. "The directions."

"Right," I cleared my throat, coming out of my reverie and trying to ignore how much I liked how he said my name. "It's about ten miles west. A cottage on the edge of the Deep Wood. About three miles northeast of Mysthaven."

Mysthaven was the closest small village to our cottage, populated mostly by out-of-work farmers who were struggling as badly as we were in the long winter. We helped where we could, and in exchange, they gave us work and kept our secrets.

Most half-elves or quarter-elves lived in tiny settler villages between the human and elven kingdoms, neither wholly accepted nor welcome in either. Victor Gold, though a human, conducted his business in Fairwind, the only major city between the human kingdom of Stalheim and the elven kingdom of Elandor.

Few were foolhardy enough to live as close to the Deep Wood and the shifter territories.

Except for us, of course.

"Why in the name of all the gods do you live *there*?" Orson asked, frowning down at me.

I shrugged. "We like our privacy," I replied, giving him a pointed look that said, *you're one to judge*.

Orson growled, nodding to Owl, who flapped off with a subdued hoot. "He'll deliver the message," he said, climbing off the bed and offering me a hand. "You and your sisters should move."

"Excuse me," I scoffed, crossing my arms and refusing his offer of assistance, "but you don't get an opinion."

"It's dangerous," Orson growled. I was kneeling on the bed still, and he moved closer so he was towering above me as if

to demonstrate the danger.

“We are powerful weavers, I’ll have you know,” I replied, poking him in the chest. The golden amulet hung temptingly over his shirt, and I tried not to stare at it as I continued. “We don’t need a *male* to protect us.”

“I didn’t say you did,” Orson argued, brows furrowing in irritation as he caught my hand to prevent a second poke. “But there’s worse than me out here.”

“Do you think I cannot handle you?” I asked, leaning back to try to put some distance between us.

Orson caught my waist with his free hand, caging me in. “Oh, I think you could,” he answered, his voice skittering up my bones as he pulled me closer. “And I would very much like to see you try.”

He grinned a little, his canines flashing a bright white and sending a jolt of panic through me.

Panic, and desire. There was something seriously wrong with me.

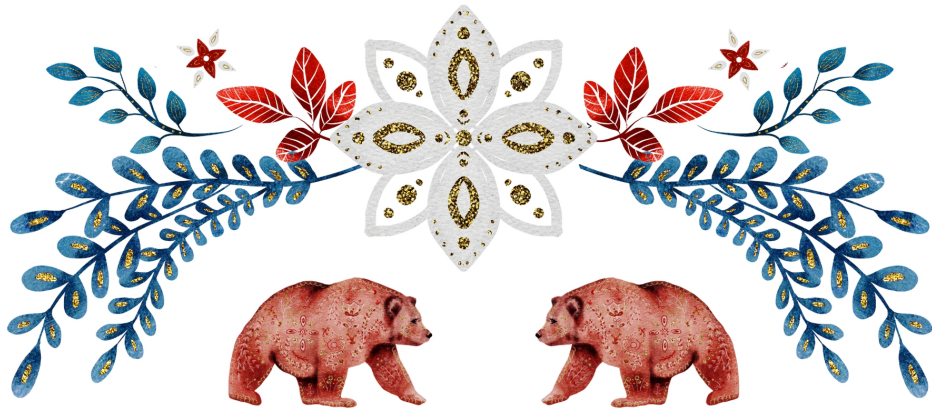
“Stop,” I said, a bit more breathlessly than I planned.

Orson stepped away immediately, his hands releasing me so fast I nearly lost my balance on the bed. “As you wish. I can wait until you ask.”

“I will not be asking,” I declared, scowling at the presumption.

I hobbled off the bed toward the narrow stairs, each step painful but manageable. My stomach rumbled, my fever clearly and truly broken, and my hunger returning.

Orson rumbled a laugh behind me as he followed me down the stairs. “We’ll see.”



CHAPTER 6

It proved to be very difficult to keep my distance from Orson while trapped in a tiny cabin with him. We kept bumping into each other and brushing against each other, and by the afternoon I was convinced he was doing it on purpose just to annoy me.

Unable to do much but hobble around, I settled on reading by the fire. Orson had only a few books—one on recognizing mushroom varieties, two volumes of history that looked very dull, and a battered old book of fairy tales that seemed rather out of place. I settled down with the book of fairy tales while Orson chipped at a chunk of wood with a knife, glasses firmly back in place, hacking pieces off and grunting in satisfaction every so often.

“You need a larger library,” I complained, lamenting his lack of selection. I had grown tired of the fairy tales after only the third one. They were very old fashioned, full of females being rescued by big, strong males, and they reminded me uncomfortably of my current situation. I wasn’t used to being rescued, and it made me feel strangely unsettled.

He grunted, the only reply I tended to get when I asked questions.

I tried again. “What are you making?”

Orson's eyes flicked to mine before he looked away, returning to his craft.

I sighed. "It wouldn't kill you to talk to me, you know," I said conversationally. "I have six sisters. I'm not used to the silence."

"I am," replied Orson tersely, still not looking up.

He was a hard male to read, flirtatious and suggestive one moment and closed off the next. I wasn't sure why, but I wanted to figure him out. Which was stupid, since I planned to steal from him.

"How long have you lived here?" I tried yet again, hoping to find a topic he actually wanted to discuss. I told myself that befriending him would help get his guard down for when I took his amulet. But truthfully, I was curious about him. "Do you have a family? Do bears travel in a pack? How often do you go hunting? Do you ever go into the village? What do you need the glasses for?"

Orson sighed, putting down his carving and giving me an exasperated look. "If we must converse, then you can talk first," he said, the longest full sentence he had spoken all day.

"Why?" I asked skeptically as Orson stood and went to the kitchen. He filled the kettle and set it to boil while fishing around for mugs in his disorganized cabinets.

"You want to talk," Orson pointed out, mugs clinking as he moved. "And I'm curious about you."

He returned to the armchair in which he had been sitting, handing me a mug of something hot and sweet. I accepted it, sniffing interestedly.

"Cocoa?" I asked, surprised that he would indulge in something sweet. He seemed like the meat and potatoes type, not the hot cocoa by the fire type.

"I make excellent cocoa," he declared, gesturing at me to try it.

I took a sip, sighing as the warm, chocolatey sweetness heated me from the inside out. "Almost as good as my

sister's," I said, giving him a nod.

"Perfect. Tell me about this sister," Orson said, sipping his own cocoa before returning to his carving. His eyes were focused on the little object, his dark hair falling over his brow as he worked.

"Well," I started, trying to figure out how much would be safe to share. "Izzy is the eldest. She makes the cocoa."

"And her magic?" Orson pressed, his tone one of interest rather than strategic interrogation as he continued to carve.

"She's a bloodweaver," I replied, thinking of how annoyed Izzy would be that I rather liked this cocoa. "She can heal and hurt with blood alchemy."

"Powerful," Orson murmured, gesturing for me to continue with a quick upward glance.

"Lena is the second oldest," I continued, warming to the topic. She's a dreamweaver. And then me."

"And you weave?" Orson asked, finally looking up from his work to give me a truly penetrating stare.

"Shadows," I confessed.

"Shadows," he repeated, his eyes narrowing.

I demonstrated by wrapping myself in darkness, pleased at his sound of surprise. Orson stood, walking around me and examining the cocoon of blackness with interest.

"Also powerful," he commented, placing a hand through the shadows. I dropped them, and he pulled back his hand just shy of grazing my cheek. "That's three sisters."

He returned to his chair and picked up the carving again.

"The twins, Sera and Mora, are mirror opposites," I said, thinking of my immediate younger siblings. "Sera weaves illusion and Mora, memory. Sera is flashy and Mora subdued."

"And the others?" Orson asked, blowing on the wooden trinket he was making. A small cloud of dust and wood shavings plumed into the air.

“Calli inherited my father’s weatherweaving,” I said, thinking of my pale-haired sister and her raging temper. “And Ella is the baby of the family. She’s a greenweaver.”

“Plants?” Orson asked in clarification, running his thumb over the finished object. I couldn’t see what it was, and I craned my neck to see as I nodded.

He whistled. “Seven sisters with such powers.” He raised a brow at me. “What work exactly is it that you do?”

“We...solve problems,” I hedged, thinking of the phrase we asked our clients to pass on when recommending us. “Of varying natures.”

“Uh-huh,” said Orson skeptically, leaning forward on his knees, the wooden object held between them. “And what *problem* were you trying to solve when you stumbled upon my cabin?”

“Oh, I...” I trailed off, unsure what to say.

“Because it seems to me,” said Orson, looking at me in a way that made it hard for me to break my gaze, “that a shadowweaver would indeed make an excellent thief.”

I fumbled my cocoa, Orson catching the mug before it spilled with one hand. “I—“

“You wouldn’t be planning to steal from me, would you, Lis?” Orson asked, taking my mug from me and placing it on the coffee table as he closed the distance between us. “Because that would be extremely disappointing.”

My heart pounded in my chest as Orson drew close, his face inches from mine as he backed me against the couch. Something about the way Orson caged me in, how he towered over me as he looked down, made my pulse race from far more interesting emotions than fear.

Perhaps I wouldn’t mind being dominated by him.

The traitorous thought didn’t have time to properly coalesce as a tap on the upstairs window indicated Owl’s return.

Orson scowled, his eyes still boring into mine. “Here.” He put the wooden object in my hand before turning from me and

taking the stairs two at a time. “Don’t move.”

I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I had been holding, cursing myself silently. How did a pair of warm brown eyes and a few muscles make me lose all common sense? Literally tell him anything other than the truth, Lis.

Before he could return, I examined the trinket, my determination to lie to him dying a painful death. It was a tiny wooden bear, carved roughly from a single piece of dark wood, its paws placed to make it look like it was running through the forest. I admired the little creature, astonished that Orson would gift me anything so precious.

He returned and handed me a folded paper. “I didn’t read it, in case you wondered,” he said, watching me as I took it, but didn’t open it.

“You *made* this,” I said, holding up the wooden bear. “And you’re giving it to me?”

Orson shrugged, frowning at the letter. “I can make many more if that’s your biggest concern right now.”

I pursed my lips, unconvinced by his deflection, but I unfolded the note as he wished. It was characteristically short, Izzy believing firmly in terseness:

Lis,
Gold’s men were here. Whatever trouble you’ve gotten yourself into, get yourself *out* of it. That’s an order.

Iz

“Typical Iz,” I sighed, folding the paper and trying to decide how I should deal with this. If Victor sent his henchmen to check up on me, they’d find an extremely territorial bear-shifter and a failure of a thief.

“I’m not going to ask you to tell me what it says,” Orson said, startling me. I had almost forgotten he was watching expectantly. “But I’ll only ask you one more time, Lis. Why did you come here?”

I opened my mouth, prepared to spin an elaborate tale of misfortune and woe, but Orson stopped me with a finger to my

lips.

“Don’t insult me by lying, Little Thief,” he purred, his body suddenly too warm and too big next to mine as he caged me against the sofa once more. “I can protect you, and I can probably pay you twice what whoever hired you offered, but only if you tell me the truth.”

Twice? Holy gods, I could take a whole year off with that kind of money, although there was no way Orson could afford Victor’s finders fee, never mind doubling it. His cabin was comfortable, but he couldn’t be as wealthy as Victor was.

“Why would you protect me?” I asked warily, my voice a little hoarse with his renewed proximity. I tried to think of a way to deflect, to push him away from the truth. “And why are you suddenly talking to me? Asking me questions? I thought you liked the silence?”

Orson smirked as if he could sense all of my thoughts perfectly. “I have my reasons,” he growled, stepping back and returning a safe distance to the armchair. “Speak.”

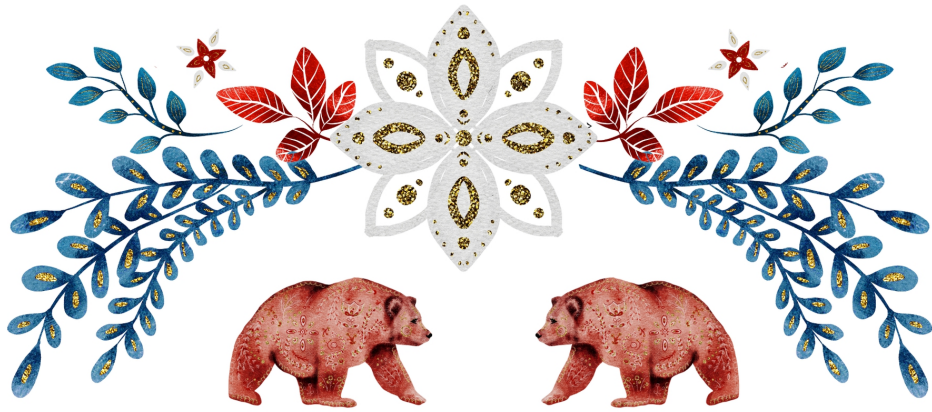
I sighed, feeling suddenly so tired. Tired of caring for everyone. Tired of thieving and stealing for Victor. Tired of the fear of being caught. My ribs still hurt and my ankle was stiff and all I wanted was to go home and cry on Izzy’s shoulder. I was overwhelmed and emotional, and Orson was studying me like he could read every emotion in my tangled mess of a brain.

I stroked my thumb over the little wooden bear and decided that I was too tired to lie.

“I was sent to steal from you,” I confessed, sinking back against the couch cushions with a sigh of exhaustion and, oddly, relief. “By a man named Victor Gold.”

If Orson recognized the name, he didn’t show it, keeping his eyes locked with mine as he sat next to me on the sofa and put a heavy hand on my knee.

“Tell me.”



CHAPTER 7

Telling Orson about Victor necessitated telling him my whole, tragic backstory, and two additional cups of cocoa were required to get me to the end of it.

I didn't cry, a fact about which I was quite proud, but his face had gone stonier and stonier with each new tragic twist of the story, and I was starting to fear that he would throw me out into the cold. The sun had begun to set while I spoke, and aside from asking the occasional clarifying question, Orson had been unsettlingly silent.

I finished the story sitting cross-legged, a fresh cup of cocoa in my hands and the little wooden bear in my pocket, while he contemplated the flames.

"Well?" I asked, anxiety riding me as he stared unblinkingly at the fire.

"Did this Victor tell you what this amulet does?" he finally asked, turning his attention from the fire to the golden disk around his neck. He lifted it, running a thumb over the face of it as gently as he had the little wooden bear.

"No," I admitted, restraining myself from reaching out to look at the pendant more closely. "He didn't really encourage questions." I gritted my teeth, remembering Victor's anger and panic the night he had hired me for this particular job.

And now here I was confessing everything to basically a stranger. And the intended target. Excellent life choices, Lis.

“How much?” Orson asked, rolling his eyes irritably when I looked at him confused. “How much did he offer you, Lis?”

“Oh,” I said, flushing at having to name the price. “Two hundred crowns.”

Orson laughed, the sound unexpected as he threw his head back. “You accepted this job for only two hundred crowns?” He looked at me, an astonished grin on his face, with a mixture of exasperation and amusement. “I’m honestly a little insulted.”

“That’s a lot of money!” I argued, gesticulating so wildly with my arms that Orson had to rescue the cocoa mug before I could spill the dregs. “Are you telling me you can actually afford to pay me double to *not* steal the amulet?”

“I can,” he said, no artifice or pretense in his expression as he leaned back on the sofa and studied me interestedly.

“How?” I exclaimed, again looking around the cabin in case I had missed some valuables from my initial perusal. “Not to pry, but—“

“I believe starting a question with that disclaimer is the definition of prying,” Orson said, regarding me with a raised brow. “You’ll have to trust that I can afford you, Little Thief. But I have conditions.”

“Of course you do,” I lamented, dropping my head on the back of the couch. “Why is crime never easy?”

Orson chuckled, brushing away a lock of my hair that tumbled over my face. “You reap what you sow, Little Thief. Do you want to hear my offer?”

“I suppose the alternative is you leave me out in the snow to freeze to death?” I drawled, giving him a sideways glance.

He laughed, the sound warming something in me. He had a nice laugh. “Something like that.”

“Fine,” I sighed dramatically, sitting up and fixing my attention on him. “What are these terms?”

“First, and most obviously, you *don't* steal my amulet,” Orson said, smirking at me through his beard.

“Fine,” I agreed as if it pained me greatly. “What else?”

“Second, you help me find out why Victor Gold wants this,” he said, tapping on the gold paw as he spoke. “Few know about it, and I’m very interested to know how he learned of it.”

“Okay,” I agreed. “Although I don’t know that I’ll be much help with interrogation. Shadows are not exactly scary when you’ve worked with them like Victor has.”

“You can leave the frightening to me, Little Thief,” Orson rumbled, giving me a heated look. “You’re probably the least scary person I’ve ever met.”

“Hey!” I protested, trying to scowl. It came out as more of a pout, and Orson laughed, which made me pout harder.

“Third,” Orson continued, returning to his offer. “You and your sisters retire from crime,” he said, holding up a hand when I would interrupt him. “And don’t lie and say that it’s only you. There’s absolutely no way a dreamweaver and illusionist aren’t working for nefarious purposes.”

“Ella follows perfectly legal pursuits,” I retorted haughtily, thinking of my innocent youngest sister, who was in her first year at the Royal University in Silvershade studying botany. We had scrimped and saved to send her, and it was yet another reason that I had taken Victor’s job. “And I can’t speak for them. I can try,” I conceded as Orson began to growl. “But four hundred crowns won’t last forever.”

“I’ll take care of that,” Orson responded cryptically. “I want your word, Little Thief, that this will be your last heist.”

“I didn’t even *heist* anything,” I protested, grumbling like a spoiled child.

Orson chuckled again, touching a warm finger to my chin. “Attempted heist, then,” he amended, gently guiding my chin so that our eyes met. “Promise me.”

There was something both serious and seductive in his gaze, like my promise would mean more than just ending my criminal pursuits.

“Half now,” I demanded, trying to maintain my facade of a competent criminal. “And I want to know what the amulet does.”

Orson laughed. “None now,” he countered. “And I’ll triple the payment.”

Triple? I licked my lips, imagining how far six hundred crowns would stretch. He must keep his money somewhere else if he wasn’t willing to pay me any up front, but the allure of so much was worth the risk.

I swallowed, “And the amulet?”

Orson frowned, looking down at the gold pendant. It looked positively tiny in his giant hands, and he sighed.

“The bear-shifters are not like other shifters,” he said, looking at me with a sadness I didn’t yet understand. “Others keep their minds when they shift, remembering their names. Their families. But the bears...”

He trailed off, looking out the darkening window, my stomach rumbled loudly, and he laughed, standing and going to the kitchen. The distraction seemed to help him speak of whatever it was.

“Lycon, the shifter god, was said to be in love with a female bear-shifter, Artis. But she refused him,” Orson said, telling the story as if it were a well-known fable. I knew very few stories of the gods, only that there had been several, and each had created a different race of peoples.

“In his anger, Lycon cursed the bears to forget themselves when they shifted,” he continued, returning to sit next to me on the sofa with two bowls of stew. “If she wouldn’t love him, then she could remain a beast.”

“That’s terrible,” I gasped, aghast at this manipulation. “No wonder she didn’t return his love.”

“Annwyn, the mother goddess, was angry that one of the gods had so abused his creations,” Orson continued, watching me eat with something akin to satisfaction. “She turned to Durin, the dwarven forgefather, and asked for his help.”

He touched the gold paw, then held it out to me to examine. “He crafted amulets imbued with dwarven blood magic. We call them “Artis’ Paw.” As long as we wear one, we remember ourselves when we shift.”

“You can’t shift back without one?” I asked, frowning at the intricate runes carved on the paw, so similar to the designs on the fingers that held it.

“No,” Orson said, gently taking the amulet and tucking it back down his shirt. “We become animals fueled by pure instinct. The first bears who shifted after the curse killed their children, their friends. They forgot themselves completely.”

“Gods!” I exclaimed, putting my hand over my heart.

He cleared his throat. “The families who were gifted the amulets passed them down to their children, and their children’s children, but there are a limited number.”

“Is that why there are so few of you?” I asked, guessing the reason for Orson’s isolation.

“Partially,” he replied. “Twelve years ago, about the same time as the endless winter began, several amulets were stolen. Shifters went missing. My den...”

He trailed off, and I didn’t need to know the rest to understand what had happened. They had been lost, and now he was alone.

“You think Victor knows who has them,” I said, thinking of his anxiety about this job. “The amulets, I mean.”

“It’s the first lead I’ve had in more than a decade,” Orson said, looking down at me, his jaw tight. “My mother was taken. My father killed. Their amulets stolen. And I’ve been hunting for them ever since.”

“Do you think it’s a coincidence,” I asked, chewing on my bottom lip, “that my parents went missing at that same time?”

That the endless winter also began around then?”

Orson gave me a look so gentle and understanding it made warmth curl in me. “Perhaps,” he said, shaking his head. “But I don’t really believe in coincidences, Little Thief.”

We sat in silence for a minute, only the sound of the fire crackling breaking the quiet between us. Orson had lost his family, just as I had. But I had my sisters. A purpose. He had been alone—truly alone—for twelve years.

“I’ll help you,” I declared, putting my hand over his and squeezing gently. “I’ll help figure out why Victor wants your amulet. Who is behind this, if I can.”

Orson put his free hand over mine and lowered his head so our brows were touching. “Thank you,” he said hoarsely, his eyes closed against whatever emotion he was feeling.

“For a price,” I added, trying to lighten the mood. “As we agreed.”

Orson laughed, lifting his head and smiling down at me.

“Good,” he said, as if that settled everything between us. “Then I think it’s time for bed.”

“Wait,” I protested, feeling my knees crack as he pulled me to my feet. “You haven’t told me how you can afford me,” I said, brushing a finger against the amulet where it was hidden beneath Orson’s shirt. It hummed faintly, and I pulled my finger back in surprise.

“I have not,” Orson agreed, standing and propelling me toward the stairs. “And I’m afraid you have to earn that knowledge.”

“How?” I asked, trying and failing to stop my inexorable movement toward the stairs. “I need to know if you’re good for the money.”

Orson laughed again, scooping me up without warning, “I promise you, Little Thief, I’m good for it.”

I yelped, grabbing onto his neck as he thundered up the stairs like a male on a mission. “What are you doing?” I asked, my voice both panicky and a little breathless.

“Protecting you,” Orson replied, dumping me unceremoniously on top of the bed. “As promised.”

“You can protect me from another room,” I pointed out, trying to rise. “I’ll sleep on the couch.”

“You will do no such thing,” Orson argued, pulling me back down until I was tucked firmly into his side. “I’m not risking you sneaking out in the night.”

“It’s freezing,” I argued, scowling at the shifter who was only a few minutes ago pouring out his sad story to me. “I’m not going to sneak out!”

He smirked, and all traces of sympathy for him fled. “Scared of a little cuddling, Lis?” he teased, pulling his shirt over his head and throwing it on the floor. He blessedly left his trousers on before he climbed into the bed next to me.

“I don’t believe that cuddling was part of my employment agreement with you,” I pointed out, scooting to the farthest side of the bed possible. The warm cinnamon and male scent of him would be too tempting to snuggle against if I let myself get closer.

“Consider it a new condition of your employment,” he rumbled, reaching out an arm to scoop me closer. I squirmed half-heartedly, and he held me more firmly, chuckling as I wriggled. “I’m a cuddler.”

“You are a brute,” I hissed, trying not to revel in the heat and firmness of his body against mine. “That’s not fair.”

“Trying to steal from me is not fair,” Orson corrected, still not letting me go. “I think I’m being exceptionally generous, paying you and feeding you and keeping you warm. I’m practically a saint.”

“Prick,” I grumbled, accepting my fate far more easily than I would have if it had been any other male holding me. “I happen to like nice males, just so you know.”

“I’m very nice,” Orson argued, trapping my legs under his as he settled in behind me. His voice took on a sultry tone as he added, “And if you’re very good, I might just show you how nice I can be.”

“Gods above,” I groaned, trying to shift. There was something hard digging into my thigh, and I pulled out the tiny bear, stilling as I admired the craftsmanship. “Thank you for this,” I added, some of the fight leaving me.

This bear had a soft side, and there was a growing part of me that wanted to explore it.

And the hard side. Gods, what was wrong with me?

Orson grunted in acknowledgment, shifting his arm under me so I could lie more comfortably. “Why thieving, Lis?” he asked quietly, his voice like gravel in my ear. “Why not use your powers for something good?”

“Really?” I asked, craning my neck to gape at him. “You want to psychoanalyze *me*?”

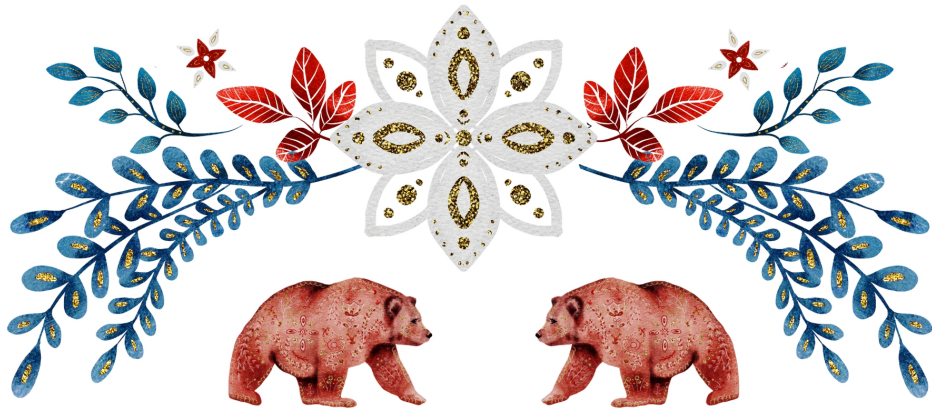
“Humor me,” Orson murmured, his voice more gentle than accusing.

I sighed, trying to decide how much to say. “Stealing pays,” I said, feeling Orson tense behind me as if he were disappointed in my answer. “When Victor offered me my first job, he saved us from starvation. And nothing is more important to me than providing for my sisters, not even morality.”

Orson relaxed, huffing a sigh. “That, at least, I can understand,” he conceded, holding me loosely but firmly. “There are a few people I, too, would do anything to protect.”

“Your family?” I asked, thinking of his loss.

“Them,” he agreed, his breath hot on my neck, “and right now, you.”



CHAPTER 8

I had never been both as irritated and as aroused as I was that second night in Orson's arms. Every shift of his body against mine made my breath hitch and sent sparks racing through me, which was ridiculous..

He was possessive and high-handed, and he had trapped me neatly in a deal he knew I couldn't afford to refuse.

And it annoyed me that he didn't *have* to make the deal. He could have banished me the second I told him the truth. Or threatened to eat me. Or delivered me directly to the High King's Guard.

The little wooden bear was sitting on the window ledge where I had placed it the night before, and I plucked it off to examine it again, the wood smooth beneath my fingers. What made this bear-shifter who had lost his family and kingdom so...kind? What made him take me in and stitch me up and hold me through my fever and give me gifts?

I was *so* falling for him.

Based on the light streaming in through the small window, it must be early morning, and I could vaguely see flakes of snow still falling and piling on the ledge outside. I replaced the little carving and tried to move, but Orson had me thoroughly trapped.

To be fair, I didn't try very hard.

"Why are you awake this early?" a familiar gruff voice said behind me. I tried to shift away, but Orson rolled me to face him. "And where are you squirming off to?"

He was warm, and he smelled like holidays and cozy fires, and everything I used to love about winter.

"Get off," I complained, pushing at his solid weight.

"I would very much like to if I thought you'd be interested," he rumbled, pressing his forehead to mine. "You smell like honey and elderflower."

"I...what?" I asked, too surprised to fully register the compliment or the innuendo. Gods, I had no willpower. How long had it been since I had been properly bedded? A long time. If all it took now was one warm, possessive male to get me going, I was utterly doomed.

"Nothing," he sighed, wrapping a strand of golden hair around one of his fingers, his eyes pinning mine. My breath caught, but he released my hair and rolled away before I could think what to say. "Breakfast?"

He escaped down the stairs, his trousers wrinkled from sleep and his chest still bare.

"Hey!" I shouted, chasing after him, my ankle almost fully healed, thank the gods. My ribs still burned a little, but it was more of a twinge than real pain. "I'm your employee now. You can't just flirt with me."

"Why not?" Orson asked, raising a brow at me as I came careening down the stairs and into the small kitchen. He was pouring what looked to be tea into a cup, thick slices of bread and sausages already smoking over the stove, and his muscular back was turned to me, his tattoos stark in the morning light. "Am I not allowed to find you attractive because I'm paying you?"

"I—what?" The tattoos were a damn distraction, the runes running over hard pectorals and down to chiseled abs.

He chuckled. “You said that already.” Orson turned and handed me a cup of tea as he perused my figure just as brazenly. I was still fully clothed, although a little wrinkled, but an edge of hunger flared in his eyes. “I’m not going to hide that I’m drawn to you, Little Thief. Why else would I have come after you when I sent you away?”

“You don’t just *say* that,” I argued, feeling a bit unmoored. “There’s...protocol.”

“Do I seem like a male who cares about *protocol*?” Orson challenged, his beard twitching slightly. “I don’t live in society, Little Thief. I say and do what I want. And I have no qualms about saying I find you attractive. You have a kind heart, you care for your family, and deep, *deep* down, you want to do what’s right.”

“I—thank you?” I said, feeling a little uncertain what to do with this string of compliments.

“It’s the truth,” Orson said with a shrug. “Just like the truth that there are some very specific things I would like to do with you, and to you, if you were willing.”

Orson had turned to flip sausages, so he mercifully didn’t see me blushing crimson.

“But you’re clearly not interested,” he added, dropping sausages on a plate and turning to hand it to me. There was still a slight twitch to his beard that made me think he might be teasing me, but his eyes were still hungry. Devouring.

Maybe I *wanted* to be devoured.

“I...” I opened my mouth and closed it again like a fish on land.

“Did I shock you into speechlessness, Little Thief?” Orson laughed, sipping his tea as he watched me fumble for words.

“I don’t really do casual romance,” I admitted, the words coming out in a bit of a jumble. He definitely didn’t need to know that my experience with romance was close to none, casual or otherwise. There wasn’t a lot of time for romance when one spent one’s life stealing and hiding from the law.

“Hmm,” Orson pondered, still studying me as he sipped his tea. “I wasn’t suggesting *casual*.”

“Gods, are you always this infuriating?” I hissed, feeling my cheeks flame at the suggestive words. The *tone*. “No, I’m not interested.”

Orson shrugged. “I’m honest, Lis. Brutally so. Let me know when you’re ready to be honest in return.”

I gaped again, but Orson just smirked, taking his breakfast to the coffee table.

I stayed in the kitchen and ate at the counter, feeling like I needed some distance from the suddenly bold bear-shifter. I couldn’t decide if I liked him better grumpy and growly or... well...hungry.

“Show me your magic then,” he said when he had eaten about six hundred sausages. He clearly needed to feed his muscles, but my gods, the male could eat. He put his plate in the sink, leaning against the counter to watch me finish my toast. “We will need a plan for thwarting your original employer, and I need to know what skills I’m paying for.”

“Could you maybe put on a shirt first?” I grimaced, gesturing to several miles of bare chest and tattoo. “It’s distracting.”

Orson grinned so widely that I caught a hint of sharp canines. “Distracting, huh?”

“Look, I can also admit that I find you...physically attractive,” I hedged, my blush sort of ruining my confidence.

“Just physically?” he cajoled, grinning in a strangely bear-like way.

“Yes! Nothing else,” I declared, feeling my blush creep higher. “Which is why nothing will come of it. But it would be easier to focus if you wore a shirt.”

Orson had pushed away from the counter and begun prowling toward me, and I didn’t realize he had me against a wall until I felt the rough wood against my back.

“Very well, Little Thief,” he agreed. “But only if you take yours off.”

“What—”

“So I can check the stitches,” he purred, crowding me against the wall. “Nothing else.”

“My side feels fine.” It was only a partial lie. It *did* feel significantly better after the fever and the green goop.

Orson waited, his arms crossed and his chest still completely visible.

“Fine,” I said, rolling my eyes and pulling the shirt over my head. The movement hurt, and I winced, and Orson gave me an “I told you so” look.

My breasts were fully wrapped by the bandages holding the dressing in place, and I began to unbind them defiantly, trying to call Orson’s bluff.

“Let me,” he said after the second pass made me hiss in pain. “Gods, Lis, you are a stubborn little thief.” He took the bandages from me, holding the borrowed shirt up and pressing it to my chest. “I won’t look if you don’t want me to.”

“Fine,” I said again, clutching the shirt to me like a lifeline. I lifted it only so he could unwrap the bandages, the two of us an awkward tangle of arms as he tried to give me privacy. My cheeks heated at his closeness, despite the shirt between us.

“Finally,” he said, throwing the bandages on the counter at his attention went to the injury. “This is what I get for doing too good a job.” I scoffed as he peeled the dressing aside to inspect the stitches.

“Well?” I asked, keeping my eyes locked on the beams of the roof, rather than looking down at the male inspecting my bare skin.

“Healing up nicely, I think,” he said, glancing up at me with a twitch of his beard. “Stay put. I need my glasses and I’ll get fresh bandages.”

I did as he bade, still feeling awkward with the balled-up shirt covering my breasts.

“Why do you have so many bandages?” I asked when he returned with a basket of what looked to be medical supplies.

He huffed a laugh, dampening a washcloth and pressing it to the wound. It was warm, like his hand, and I felt goosebumps break out over my skin.

“I’m injured a lot,” he replied, gesturing to his tattooed and—I realized belatedly—scarred chest. Many of the scars were hard to see, covered in inked black runes and swirling designs, but he’d clearly been in more than a few fights. “Bear-shifters are aggressive, especially in their youth.”

“Even with the amulet?” I asked, nodding to the gold paw on the chain around his neck.

He nodded, placing a fresh dressing to the wound and providing a clean roll of bandages. “Even then.” He looked up at me, his eyes a warm chocolatey brown as regarded me. “I’m going to have to wrap you up again, Little Thief. It will be easier for both of us if you lift your arms and drop the shirt.”

“I can do it myself,” I argued, reaching for the roll of bandage.

He held it just out of my reach, smiling faintly. “You won’t be able to wrap it tightly enough,” he argued, his beard twitching again. “I’ll even take off my glasses to make it harder for me to inspect your admittedly perfect breasts.”

My heart gave an odd stutter at his description of me, and I fought the flush that rose up in response. “I don’t need help, you know,” I said, still clutching the shirt to my chest, along with my dwindling composure. “I can manage on my own.”

“I’m sure you can,” Orson replied evenly. “But you don’t have to, Lis.” He reached up a hand, his finger grazing my cheek more gently than I would have thought it possible for him to touch. “Let me help you,” he repeated. His voice dropped to a husky pitch. “Please.”

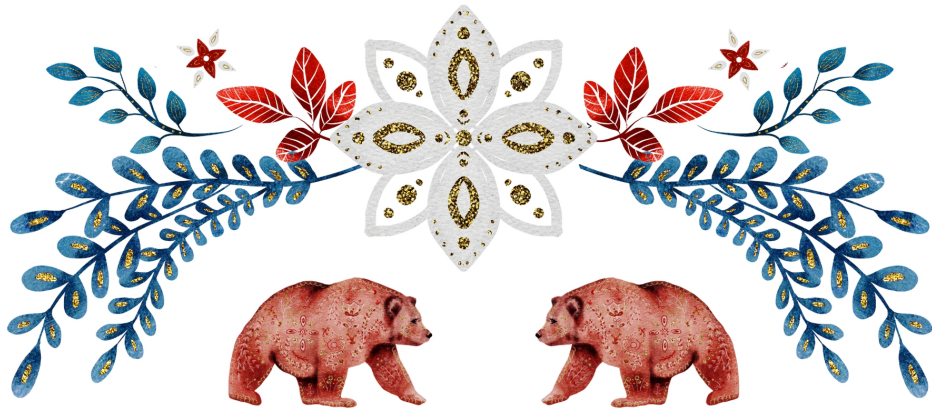
The cursed “please” undid me. I swallowed and nodded, my heart pounding rather hard as I dropped the shirt and lifted my arms just enough that Orson could get the bandage around me.

He worked quickly and clinically, covering my breasts first to offer me the semblance of decency.

“Done,” he murmured, tying the bandage off and picking up the shirt I had dropped. With a grin, he pulled it over his own head.

I gaped, and he grinned.

“Clothed as promised.”



CHAPTER 9

After insisting on Orson providing me with a replacement for the shirt he had stolen off me—which was technically his, but who was really keeping track?—I finally showed him my shadow magic.

We spent a good hour in the living room, Orson asking all manner of questions about how the magic worked, while I showed him the various ways I could utilize the shadows in my work.

“Thieving is not work,” Orson argued when I balked at showing him how I picked the lock on his front door. “Triple the pay, remember?”

“Fine,” I sighed, producing a thin spear of shadow and sending it into the locked trunk he had produced for me to demonstrate on. It took less than two minutes for my shadows to find and trip the internal mechanism, releasing the lock. “Happy?”

“Have you ever considered using these powers for good, rather than evil?” Orson asked, his eyes twinkling at me behind his frames in a way that told me he was amused. “Children’s puppet shows perhaps? Locksmithing for elderly widows?”

“Ha,” I deadpanned, crossing my arms and giving him an impatient look. “Charity doesn’t pay the bills or fill a belly.”

“I suppose not,” he agreed, his eyes still lit with amusement. “But it fills the soul.”

“Gods, are you a poet now?” I scoffed, flopping onto the sofa and trying not to wince as I overestimated the amount I had healed. I didn’t need Orson mocking me for re-injuring myself. “Is that how you fill *your* soul?”

“No,” he said, dropping onto the coffee table so that he was directly across from me. “My soul is focused on finding answers.”

“Oh,” I said, feeling a bit abashed. “We did *try* to look for my parents.”

“I’m not judging,” Orson said with a frown. “I had no siblings to care for. No remaining den mates. You have six sisters who need you.”

“Izzy did most of the work, truthfully,” I said, feeling strangely self-conscious and looking away to pick at a loose thread in one of the blankets. “She kept us all healthy and did most of the cooking. Lena kept the house and the younger ones in order. My magic just happened to be the most...well...lucrative.”

“And what would you have done,” Orson asked, tilting my chin up to meet his eyes, “if you hadn’t had to work? To steal?”

“I...don’t know,” I confessed with a shrug, feeling warmth coil in my gut from the way he was staring at me. “What would you have done, if you didn’t have to search for your den?”

“I would have had to rule, eventually,” he said, making me frown in confusion. “But I like to keep my hands busy.”

“Wait,” I said, scooting back on the couch so that he was forced to drop his hand. “Rule?”

“Hmm,” Orson said, looking slightly chagrined, like he had said too much. “I was sort of in line to the throne.”

“Bears have a throne?” I asked, my eyes going wide as I realized that I had been lusting after royalty, not just any bear-shifter.

“They do,” he replied, his beard twitching again. “All shifters have different leadership structures, but bears have a king. Or a queen.”

“And you are the prince?” I asked, feeling a little panicky as I reevaluated every interaction with him.

“I *was*,” he corrected gently, leaning forward on his knees. “But my father was killed when the den turned on each other, and my mother was one of the lost. So now I am Orson Asbjørn, King of the Bears.”

I blanched. “Should I...curtsy?”

Orson boomed a laugh, and the sound eased the knot of worry that had solidified with his revelation.

“Please don’t,” he chuckled, smiling at me with genuine amusement. “I wouldn’t know what to do with you if you curtsied.”

“Thank the gods,” I said, breathing a sigh of relief. “I’m not even sure I know how. Wait,” I added, sitting up a little straighter. “Is that how you can afford to pay me?”

Orson shrugged. “I am the sole protector of the remaining amulets and the wealth of the bears,” he replied. “I have... means.”

“I should be charging you more,” I grumbled, making Orson laugh again. “And what about the rest of the bears? Surely there was more than just your den.”

“There are others,” Orson confirmed. “I have met a few in my travels through the woods. They know their king by scent.”

“Then why live alone?” I asked, eyes darting to the runic tattoos peeking above his collar. “Why not form a new den?”

“Bears are solitary creatures,” Orson explained, his expression turning sad again. “We live only with our mates and cubs. We only gather in greater numbers during a

Bjørnspeider, when one den has a grievance with another or something threatens all of us.”

“And these disappearances don’t call for a Bjørnspeider?” I asked, fairly certain I had butchered the term. “You haven’t called one?”

“I was very young when I was left alone,” Orson replied, his tone going a bit steely. “By the time I knew enough to call one, we were too dispersed, our numbers too few.”

“Which is why you’ve been searching for them,” I concluded, understanding hitting with a wave of horror. “Oh, no.”

“What?” Orson asked, suddenly looking alert like I had noticed some threat he hadn’t.

“It’s just...” I bit my lip, feeling so devastated for him. “The bears who killed your father. They must have been—”

“My siblings,” Orson cut in, his face grim. “I was the youngest. My mother made me run. When I returned, they were dead, and she was gone.”

Gods, the idea that he had lost his entire family, including his siblings was too much. My heart broke at the idea of losing just one of my sisters, never mind all of them.

“Oh, Orson,” I said, placing my hands over his. His name felt strange to say aloud, and he too looked a little surprised by my use of it. I realized it was the first time I had actually called him by name. “I am so very sorry.”

“Thank you,” he said hoarsely, cupping my hands in his. He raised them to his mouth and placed a bristly kiss on my knuckles. “I’ve had a long time to grieve for them.”

“That doesn’t make it easier though,” I said, knowing that I couldn’t truly understand his feelings, but trying to imagine how I might feel in his place. “I’m sorry you’ve been so alone.”

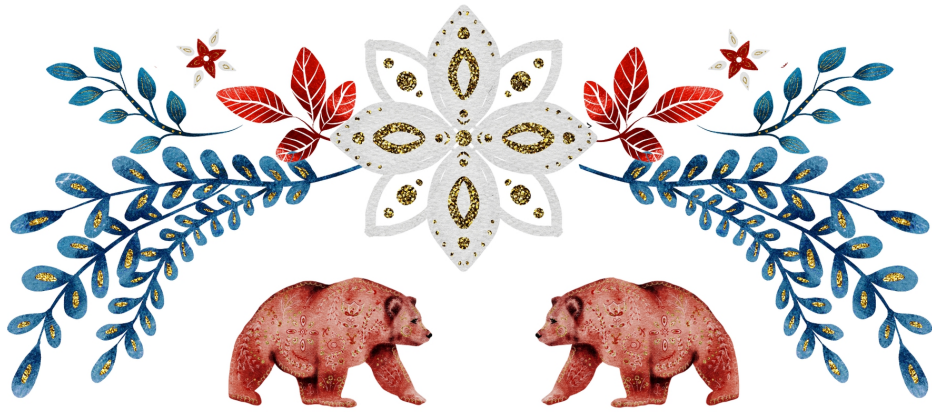
His eyes met mine, and something like desire flashed in them. Something warm and hopeful. “I’m not alone now.”

“You’re not,” I said quietly, feeling that fluttering in my heart again as he held my gaze.

Silence stretched between us as loaded as if we had filled the space with words. I took him in, his dark hair falling over his brow and his casual posture one of predatory grace. He watched me like I was his prey, and he wanted to pounce.

Gods, I wanted him to.

“We should plan,” he finally said when it was clear that I wouldn’t break the silence. The reminder that we had work to do jolted me back to my senses. “Tell me more about this Victor Gold so I can best decide how to eviscerate him.”



CHAPTER 10

The rest of the day passed both inexorably slowly and at lightning speed. Every brush of Orson's hand or knee against mine sent heat licking up my spine, and his heated glances were barely any better. Between these distractions, we planned a way to use my shadows in case Victor's henchmen showed up at the cabin, before moving on to discuss logistics of infiltrating his headquarters.

"Walk me through the guard rotations again," Orson said for the seventeenth time, removing his glasses to pinch the bridge of his nose in thought.

It was dark out, and several empty cups of cocoa and bowls of stew lay strewn across the coffee table, as well as crumpled-up paper and broken quill nibs. Ink stained Orson's fingers as he poured over the floorplan I had drawn of Victor's offices.

"I don't know all of them," I said exasperatedly. "Only that he always has two guards positioned here," I pointed to the doors that opened to Victor's personal office, "and several on every floor of the building."

"What does he use all of this space for?" Orson muttered, looking at the sheets of numbered floors. There were three, but I was only really familiar with Victor's office on the third floor.

“Storage of stolen goods,” I replied, pointing to the second floor, which I knew was something of a warehouse. “If he has other amulets, they’ll be here. Unless he’s already fenced them.”

“And here?” Orson asked, righting his glasses and pointing to the first floor. “This is the front for his operations?”

“An antiques shop,” I confirmed, remembering the stuffy, overly elegant room I always entered first when visiting my employer. It was, admittedly, a brilliant way to hide his stolen goods. Many were kept in plain sight as if legally bought and paid for, and the shop allowed him to flaunt his own preferred extravagance in a wealthy part of town where it wouldn’t seem out of place. “And two townhomes. The residents likely have no idea that Victor is even there.”

“Night will be our best bet,” Orson mused, turning to the rough map I had made of the surrounding streets. “With your shadows, of course.”

“Orson, we have been over this a million times,” I groaned, standing and stretching. I was stiff and frustrated, and if I had to spend more time platonically pouring over maps and strategy, I would scream. “I’m going to bed.”

“Do you want me to join you?” he asked, his attention still focused entirely on the maps.

I gaped. “Excuse me?”

“I said,” Orson turned the heavy weight of his attention on me, “do you want me to join you?”

He stood, moving with more grace than I would have believed of a bear as he prowled toward me, his eyes devouring me with each step as he removed his glasses and left them on the coffee table.

I opened my mouth and closed it again. This was becoming far too much of a habit around the bear king, and he smirked as if he knew exactly what I was thinking.

“I have to confess something to you,” he said, moving slowly so as not to spook me. I backed up instinctually until I hit the wall. “I know I promised not to look at your perfect

breasts. But I lied. I could see them perfectly fine, even without the glasses.”

“Scoundrel,” I breathed, not sure if I was capable of making much sense with him bearing—my ridiculous brain faintly registered the pun—down on me.

He shrugged. “Thief,” he accused in return, closing the last few inches between us as he leaned a hand on the wall behind me. “Are you ready to be honest, yet?”

“About what?” I asked, my voice coming out more breathlessly than I would have liked. My heart was thumping so loudly I was sure he could hear it, and the warmth of him practically seared my skin.

“About how much you want me,” he said looking smugly down at me as I gaped like a fish again. “I’ve told you, I want you. And I would like to share my bed for more than just sleep.”

“I...gods,” I exhaled, trying to calm my heart. “You can’t just—”

“We’ve been over that already, Little Thief,” Orson said, leaning closer so his breath caressed my face. He smelled like cocoa and cinnamon and toasty fires. “I do what I want.”

He leaned forward then, and I was certain he was going to kiss me until he tilted his head at the last second, placing a kiss to my jaw. It was feather light, but somehow still a hot brand against my skin.

“Tell me to stop, Little Thief,” he commanded, his voice a rumble as he repeated his order from what felt like weeks ago, but was only days.

He hovered, his mouth a hair’s breadth from my jaw as he waited for my command. I could tell him to stop. I had done so twice, and Orson had honored my requests. True, he’d been a bit handsy during the cuddling phases of our extremely short acquaintance, but I hadn’t told him to stop. I’d wanted him then, and I wanted him now.

I was drawn to him, and the need to explore this desire was chafing at me, whether or not I wanted it to.

“Don’t stop,” I whispered, feeling one large, warm hand curl around my waist as the other cupped the back of my neck.

“Thank fuck,” Orson growled, his lips beginning a slow exploration of the skin beneath my jaw as his fingers tightened on my waist. He hovered over my pulse, which I could feel fluttering against his lips. “Tell me if you change your mind.”

“Unlikely,” I gasped, feeling his hand slide lower to cup my rear as he gently scraped his teeth across my pulse point.

“I’m not a slow, gentle lover, Lis,” Orson warned, the evidence of his restraint clear in the slight quaver in his voice and the hard press of him against me. “Shifters are predators. Aggressive. Territorial. Dominating. I need to know if you can handle all of that.”

“I don’t know,” I confessed, my heart pounding as he tumbled a laugh against my neck. “I’ve never...it’s been... awhile.” My breath caught as he moved to the other side of my jaw, his beard scratching in a delicious way as he trailed his lips over my pulse there.

“Never?” he asked, stilling at my pulse.

“No, not never, you great furball,” I snapped, earning a laugh from Orson and a pinch on my behind for my sass. “I’ve been with men. A man. Once.” I blushed, remembering my one, fumbling experience several years ago at a party hosted by Victor in the city with one of his human guards. “I know where everything goes.”

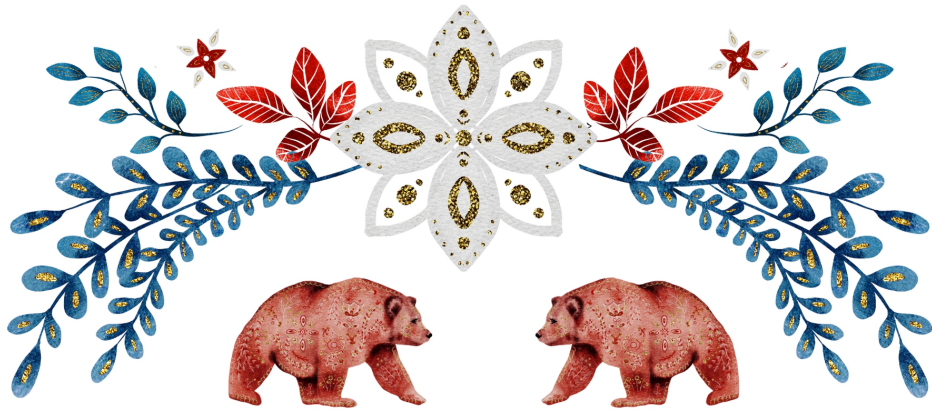
“Knowing where everything goes does not equate to experience,” Orson growled, pulling away to study my face. His beard twitched in amusement, but his eyes were fierce. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

Without fully thinking through what I was about to do, I pushed my shadows from me, sending Orson stumbling back and binding him with ropes of darkness.

“I can take care of myself,” I pointed out, smirking at his expression of disbelief and, strangely, delight.

“Good,” Orson rumbled. “Because as soon as you release me, I will no longer be holding back.”

I kept my shadows tight, biting my lip as I backed toward the stairs. “In that case,” I said, stepping carefully backward lest I fall and prematurely end the interesting activities that I was sure we were about to engage in, “you’ll have to catch me.”



CHAPTER 11

Orson was on me the second the shadows dropped. I had barely turned when he pulled me back into a bruising kiss, pushing me against the wall as he ravaged me.

It was a plundering. A ransacking. His tongue swept over mine in a deep, thorough exploration, a gasp swallowed by his answering groan as he pressed his body flush against mine.

Good gods, I may have underestimated a few things.

“Is it always that hard?” I rasped between kisses, pushing Orson back so I could breathe for a moment and contemplate my life choices.

“Yes,” Orson growled, his eyes practically glowing with need and his voice pitched low.

That was all the explanation I got as he reached for me again, his mouth covering mine with a needy growl of desire. He lifted me, and I wrapped my legs around his waist as he carried me up the stairs.

Gods, there was so much of him and so little of me comparatively. I was a bit worried he might actually be capable of hurting me, based on the size of him hard against me.

“I’ll take my time,” he growled, dropping me on the bed and looming above me, where he tore off his shirt. “Try for gentle.”

“And what if I don’t want you to?” I sat up, reaching for the ties on his trousers.

He laughed, stilling my hand as he bent to kiss me again. “Believe me, Little Thief,” he said, speaking against my lips. “I don’t really *want* to either. But I also don’t want to hurt you, and I’m significantly larger than you are.”

“Rub it in, why don’t you,” I breathed, gasping as he pulled my borrowed shirt over my head and untied the bandages.

“If this isn’t healed enough,” he warned, beginning to unbind me with his eyes eagerly devouring each new inch of skin he revealed, “then this stops.”

“You could just leave the bandages on,” I argued, willing my body to be healed enough for his approval.

“I will not take you by half measures,” Orson argued, his hands hot against my skin as he bared my breasts completely. He cupped my breasts, gently stroking my nipples with the pads of his thumbs. I shuddered, the sensation both foreign and somehow familiar. *Right*. “And if I can’t have all of you, then I’d rather wait.”

“So demanding,” I sighed as he peeled off the dressing and grunted in satisfaction. The stitches looked even better than they had this morning, the pink puckered scar faded significantly.

“These need to come out,” Orson commented, running a finger over his handiwork.

I shivered again. “Tomorrow,” I protested, reaching up to pull his face down to mine.

He growled as he covered me, his weight sinking down as he leaned into the kiss. I could tell he was bracing himself on the bed, the muscles of his back tense against my hands. What would it feel like to have all of his weight on top of me?

“More,” I commanded, trying to pull him down farther. “You don’t need to be gentle.”

“Stop tempting me,” he growled, scooping me up so I was farther back on the bed as his hands went to my trousers. “These have to come off now.”

“Mine but not yours?” I argued, trying and failing to grab for his laces as he worked at mine.

“All in good time, Kjære,” he said, finally getting the laces undone and tugging the offending garment down.

“What does that mean?” I asked, furrowing my brows at the unfamiliar word as I helped Orson remove my trousers. “Shah-reh?”

“I’m taking these off, unless you stop me,” Orson said, ignoring my question as he skimmed his hands up my bare legs and tapped my hips. When I didn’t protest, he tugged the flimsy undergarments away, leaning down to press a kiss to my navel with a growl in his throat. “Gods, Lis.”

I should have felt more self-conscious with his eyes roaming over me like a starving man at a feast, uncertain where to start. But the way he looked at me made me feel oddly powerful. Beautiful. Like he could never get enough of me. “Is it your turn now?”

“Not yet,” he growled, dropping to his knees and hooking his arms under my legs. He pulled me to the edge of the bed, and I squeaked out a tiny, half-hearted protest. “Tell me to stop if you don’t like anything I do.”

“What exactly are you—oh,” the sound escaped as partial gasp and partial moan as Orson lowered his mouth to me and kissed between my legs. He chuckled, pressing kisses to the insides of my thighs, to the space where my thighs met my body.

And then I felt his tongue.

I bucked against him in surprise at first, the sensation wholly unexpected and incredibly intimate. He chuckled against me, teasing me with a gentle kiss before licking over my center once more.

“Gods,” I gasped, sliding my fingers through his soft hair. “What are you doing?”

“Feasting,” he replied, moving his tongue as if he wanted to explore every crevice of me. “I’ve been wearing a shirt that smells like you all fucking day, and all I’ve wanted since putting it on is to bury my face between your legs.”

I made an absolutely indecent moan, and he rumbled another laugh against me, the sensation sending sparks of pleasure shooting up my spine.

“Please tell me I am the first to taste you,” Orson growled, his tongue finding a rhythm as he began to circle, the throbbing place between my legs aching for more.

“Territorial,” I breathed, tugging on his hair. “But yes.”

“Good,” he growled, his speed increasing as he began to experiment, sliding his tongue inside me between strokes. “Because this is mine now.”

One hand reached up, gently pinching and flicking a nipple as his other moved down. Pressure at my entrance started pleasure spiraling in me, and I almost came undone as he slid a finger into me.

“Not yet,” he murmured, gently stroking that finger in tandem with his tongue. “I need you to tell me how you like it. Is this too fast?” He flicked his tongue over my tightened bud, making me squirm with pleasure. “Too slow?” He moved his tongue in a slow circle around my center.

“Just right,” I gasped, feeling so much all at once it was a little overwhelming. Heat and friction and pleasure and just the slightest edge of pain all swirled together, building a pressure that needed release. “Orson, please.”

Orson rumbled a sound of masculine pleasure against me, continuing his pace and the delicious, torturous build until finally, I shattered. I cried out, twisting my fingers into his hair as if my hold on him were the only thing mooring me to the bed. The moment.

Little waves of pleasure swept through me as Orson kissed my inner thigh, my knee, my ankle, and stood. “Now, these

come off,” he said, unlacing his own trousers and removing the final barrier between us.

“Gods,” I whimpered, taking in the size of him. The length. “I’m not sure how this will work.”

Orson chuckled, scooping me up and plopping me back down unceremoniously on the bed before climbing over me and shifting to my side, where he propped himself up to look at me.

“You should know,” he murmured, twirling a strand of golden hair around his finger, “that it will be different from your other *experience*.”

He said the word “experience” as if mocking my single sexual encounter, and I scowled at him, wanting his mouth to be doing anything other than speaking at that moment. “Explain quickly.”

He laughed, trailing his fingers over my bare skin and circling sensitive peaks and valleys in a way that was definitely keeping my interest away from talking.

“Bears have a baculum,” he said, his fingers drawing patterns over my stomach and dipping lower. “It’s a bone that keeps us erect for longer than what you might consider average.”

“Why?” I asked, the question coming out breathy as his fingers dipped between my legs, brushing the already sensitive flesh there.

“For reasons that would take far too long to explain right now,” he growled, slipping a finger into me and back out again in a way that was both agonizing and glorious. “Just know that it will last longer. I’ll be in you for longer. And if you don’t want that,” he punctuated the statement with another gentle thrust of fingers, “we can continue to explore other avenues of pleasure.”

He dipped his mouth, taking a peaked nipple into his mouth and sucking gently. It was all I could do not to cry out.

“I want it,” I breathed, reaching down to stroke his hard length from root to tip. Orson shuddered in a way that made

me feel like a goddess, completely in control of his desire. “Please.”

Gods, he was so hard. And long. I wanted every inch of him.

He moved above me, leaning down to suck one nipple and then the other as he positioned himself. “Use your shadows if you want me to stop,” he murmured, capturing my mouth with his as he pushed in.

And in and in and in.

There was so much sensation. Filling and stretching and friction and weight. He cupped the back of my neck with the hand of the arm he had braced against the bed, using the other to guide my hips up to meet his until he was fully seated.

“Lis,” he murmured, kissing me too deeply for me to reply in anything other than a muffled moan as he began a slow, torturous slide out of me again. “Are you alright?”

“Gods, yes,” I moaned, feeling my pulse skitter with the delicious friction he was creating. “Too slow.”

“Trying for gentle, remember?” He nipped at my lower lip, holding himself steady as he almost pulled entirely away before plunging back in.

The sound I made might have been embarrassing had I not been fully invested in the sensations of the moment. His tongue plundering my mouth while his hard length plunged into me was a glorious contrast of sensations, and I arched into his touch, letting my shadows out to wrap around him and bind him to me.

“Now who’s territorial?” he teased, noting the shadows twining up his arm. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Stop taking your time,” I gasped out, fingers digging into his back as I tried to pull him closer.

“Are you giving me orders now, Little Thief?” he teased, slowing even more. “You seem to need reminding of who is in charge here.”

“Cruel bear,” I gasped, as his hand squeezed my rear on a slow thrust. He didn’t speed up, moving slowly enough to still

create friction, but not build it. “Please.”

“There are those manners,” he growled, nipping at my lower lip. “Please what?”

“Please, more,” was all I could get out, my breath hitching as he paused, fully seated inside me. I shuddered around him, feeling like I might die if he didn’t start moving again.

“Put your hands above your head,” Orson growled, refusing to move until I obeyed. He rewarded me with a tiny thrust that made me moan. “Now grip the headboard.”

There was something thrilling about being ordered around by him. I suppose I had been right about wanting to be dominated, at least a little.

The wood behind the bed was slatted, and I wrapped my hands around the bars as Orson pushed the pillows out of the way.

“Good girl,” he said. His head dipped to flick his tongue over a nipple, and I bucked, the words doing terrible things to my self-control. “Stop me if I go too hard.”

“You won’t,” I assured him, gasping in delight as he finally began to move, his body beating a steady rhythm above mine. “You can’t.”

Orson didn’t reply in words, his eyes piercing mine as he pounded into me, his speed increasing slightly with each deep thrust.

Gods, it had not been like this with that human guard. That had been fast and hard, fumbling hands and stolen moments and fleeting pleasure. This was a slow unraveling, a sensual undoing and remaking of who we were into what we would be together. A seduction of body and soul.

Orson kissed me, his tongue sweeping in time with each thrust until I was spiraling again, the building ache between my legs seeking release as I spasmed against him.

He chuckled, releasing my mouth and turning his attention to my neck, my breasts, my shoulders, all while he continued to spear into the deepest parts of me. Where one climax ended,

the next began to build, and I wasn't sure that the intense pleasure of it all was totally normal.

"Orson," I gasped, releasing the headboard to clasp his face. "I want you to come."

"I will," he assured me, his voice a growl as he placed my hands firmly back on the headboard, his hand holding mine in place. I wrapped my legs higher around his waist, feeling the need to hold on with something since my hands were pinned above me. "But I intend to savor this."

"Oh gods," I gasped, pleasure unspooling again and again as wave after wave of sensation wracked my body. I wasn't sure that I wouldn't split apart at the seams, my body floating away in a mist of sheer bliss.

"You are mine, Kjære," he said, using that foreign word again. My mind was only partially able to focus, so much of it taken over with pure physical sensation. "Say it."

"I'm yours," I moaned, the feel of him somehow becoming *more* as he thrust into me faster and harder and deeper. "Yours."

He roared, his face buried in my neck as he came, warmth and pleasure and slick heat unraveling me one final time as we came together.

My body shook around his, the feeling of Orson somehow still hard inside me courtesy of the baculum. He rolled, pulling me into his arms as he cradled me against him, still joined as if he would rather be no place else.

"It will be a minute," he murmured, kissing my sweaty temple, "before I can withdraw."

"I don't mind," I said, smiling tiredly up at him. "Will you tell me why now?"

"No," he grinned, tilting his head to capture my lips. "Not until it's relevant."

"And when will that be?" I asked, whimpering slightly as he shifted against me, causing his hard length to bump against a sensitive spot inside me,

“Later,” he replied cryptically, peppering kisses along my jaw and down my throat. It was an effective distraction, and I found I stopped caring about the whys and hows of it all as I drifted into a hazy, pleasure induced doze.

I wasn't sure how much time had passed, but I startled when Orson moved, shifting me so I was lying on one of his pillows as he went downstairs.

“Where are you—“

He was back before I could finish asking, a washcloth and towel in hand.

“Oh gods,” I grimaced, looking down. “The sheets—“

“Will dry,” Orson interrupted, pressing a warm, wet washcloth between my legs and wiping away the evidence of what we had done. It was such a tender, caring gesture, one that I had definitely not experienced in the frantic experience with the human guard. “You are more important.”

“I'm fine,” I said, flipping back and feeling utterly boneless as I let Orson tend to me. “Truly.”

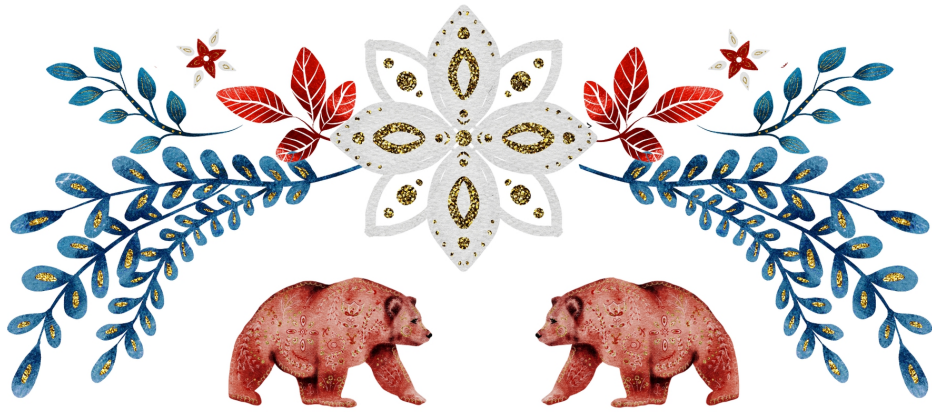
“Good,” Orson growled, pressing a kiss to the inside of my knee as he dried me off. “It can be a lot.”

“It was,” I confessed as he tossed the towels in a hamper and crawled back into the bed, folding me into his chest. “I loved it.”

“Good,” Orson said again, a chuckle rumbling through him and into me. He kissed the sensitive skin of my wrist, twining his fingers in mine. “You were perfect, Lis. So perfect that I intend to repeat the experience many, many times. If you are willing.”

“Hmm,” I said, pretending to contemplate the offer. “We'll have to see.”

Orson laughed again, pulling me in close to his body. The warmth and exhaustion and cinnamon scent of him lulled me to sleep, my dreams filled with only him.



CHAPTER 12

“What does this mean?” I asked, tracing a circular pattern on Orson’s chest as we lazed in bed the next afternoon.

We had slept late, waking to make love twice more before my rumbling stomach drove Orson to the kitchen, grumbling about ‘needy females.’ He had returned with tea and toast and sausages, and we had eaten in bed, falling back into each other once more.

Now I lay in the afterglow, examining the runic symbols tattooed into his chest.

“It is the *vegvísir*. A compass,” he explained, tapping the circle I had been tracing. “It guards the wearer so that they will always find their way.”

“Some of the symbols are the same as the ones around the outside of Artis’ paw,” I noted, comparing the tattoo to the amulet.

“The runes bind the spell of the amulet,” Orson replied, playing with my hair as I studied the symbols. “Think of it as allowing me to find my way back to myself.”

“Poetic,” I murmured, tracing the pattern of his tattoos down one arm to where they stopped at the second knuckle of each

finger. “When did you get all of these? It must have taken a long time.”

“It did,” he confessed, catching my hand and twining my fingers with his. “Each time I failed to find my mother. To avenge my father. Each time I tried and failed, I had something new inked onto my skin.”

I blinked, sitting up to gape at him. “There are hundreds.”

He nodded, pulling me back down into his arms. “There are.”

A low hoot outside the window made Orson stiffen, his senses seeming to go on alert all at once.

“What?” I asked, sitting up and pushing to my knees to look out the window. I couldn’t see anyone, but the snow was thick and the tree-line dense.

“We have company,” Orson growled, rolling out of the bed and shifting. It had been two days since I had seen Orson in his shifted form, but the sight was no less terrifying or thrilling. He was far larger than any fae or elf or human, at least eight feet tall on his hind legs, and large enough that I could probably ride him if I wanted.

I tried not to blush at my own inadvertent innuendo, climbing out of the bed and pulling on clothes. I hadn’t worn boots in days, but they were in Orson’s room ready for me, along with a pair of thick woolen socks I had never seen before.

“Are these yours?” I asked, holding the socks up for Orson to see.

He looked at me steadily, his ursine expression unreadable, but his eyes still a warm, chocolatey brown. “They are yours,” he replied, his voice a deeper growl in bear form that reminded me of our earlier, grumpier acquaintance. “I made them for you.”

“You made them?” I asked, pulling on the thick, woolen lovelies. They looked to be hand knit, a brown bear woven into the design on each side. “You knit?”

“I told you,” Orson growled, his muzzle turning slightly more pink at just the tip of his black nose. “I like to keep my hands busy.”

Carving, knitting, stitching up wounds. Busy hands indeed.

I laughed, resisting the urge to throw my arms around the great beast. “Well, I love them. Thank you.”

“You should stay here,” Orson growled, prowling to the stairs as he watched me pull on boots over the wool socks. My cloak had also been patched and mended, I guessed also by Orson, and I wondered when he’d had the time to do it all.

“Not a chance,” I replied, pulling my cloak over my golden hair. “This is my problem as much as it is yours.”

“Then stay behind me,” Orson grumbled, the stairs creaking under his increased mass. He almost flew down them, moving fast to get out and assess the threat before it could get to us.

I trailed after him, wishing I’d grabbed my knives before running out the door. I pulled on my shadows, keeping them curled at my fingertips just in case I needed them.

There were still several feet of snow blocking the door, but Orson threw all of his weight against it, and it budged enough to let me slip out first and help move some of the snow.

My hands were frozen and legs soaked in minutes, but we finally managed to get the door open enough to let Orson escape in his bear form.

“Why didn’t you just shift back to leave the cabin?” I complained, rubbing my hands against my thighs to warm them.

“Because that would mean being naked in the snow,” Orson rumbled. “I wouldn’t want all my parts to freeze off.”

“That *would* be a tragedy,” I agreed, scouring the tree line for any signs of movement. “Do you see anyone?”

“Not yet,” Orson said, his voice a deep whisper. “Stay here.”

He moved, faster than I thought a bear could move, darting into the tree line. I cursed, looking around and trying to decide

if I should follow.

It took me less than two seconds to decide I definitely *should* follow, and I ran as fast as I could through the deep snow to catch up.

Orson was growling, stopped just past the tree line, his sharp teeth bared as he scoured the trees. “Something isn’t right.”

As if he summoned them himself, barbed chains shot out of the snow, wrapping around Orson, who snarled and growled in fury and pain.

“No!” I shouted, lunging forward as arms grabbed me from behind. I called forward my shadows, wrapping them around one of the attackers, then sending them flying for Orson’s.

Pain erupted at the base of my skull, and I sagged in my attacker’s arms.

“I had hoped that it wasn’t true,” came an elegant voice from among the trees, a lithe form emerging with an immaculate velvet and fur coat wrapped tightly around him.

Victor Gold was not a handsome male. Only a quarter elven, he also lacked any particularly useful magic. But he made up for both shortcomings with money, wearing the most expensive clothes and buying the services and loyalty of magic wielders like me.

“Victor,” I rasped, my head lolling uncomfortably after taking a blow. “Please.”

“You and I had a contract, Lis,” Victor admonished, tutting as he stepped over the wicked chains and toward me and Orson. “A binding one. Did you think I wouldn’t find out when you reneged on it?”

“Technically I haven’t reneged yet,” I pointed out, wincing as my attacker pulled my arms tight. I tried to pull in the shadows, and Victor tutted again, withdrawing a blade and holding it to Orson’s throat.

“None of that, Lis,” Victor said, giving me a disappointed look. “Shifters heal fast, but not from mortal wounds. I’d hate to leave an even larger mess of things.”

I dropped the shadows, fighting back tears as he lowered the blade.

“I gave you one day” he said, sounding truly disappointed in me. “And yet, my guards tell me you’ve been lounging around in this cabin for three.”

“I was injured,” I gritted out. “And then the blizzard—“

“Yes, yes, so sad,” mocked Victor, coming to crouch before me. “But I have no use for a slow thief. Or a lovesick one.”

I looked at my employer, noticing the deep shadows under his eyes, his drawn, pale skin. He looked terrible, like he was being eaten alive by terror.

“I can help you,” I tried, hoping he would accept the bluff. “Whatever trouble you’re in, Vic—“

“Spare me,” Victor drawled, standing and returning to Orson’s side. He had fallen to the ground, the barbed chains biting into his skin the more he struggled. I could smell his blood from here, and it was all I could do not to be sick. “Your sisters have already agreed to pay off the *debt* you have incurred by your failure. I need no other help.”

“Please leave them out of this,” I begged, my vision clearing enough that I thought I might be able to get the shadows around Victor’s throat if I moved quickly. “I’ll pay the debt.”

“Too late,” Victor said, palming the golden paw amulet around Orson’s neck and tugging hard. The chain holding the amulet snapped, and Orson roared, his eyes becoming distant rather than the knowing look of the male behind the beast. He struggled against the barbed chains, animal instinct taking over as I begged Victor to stop. “I think we’ll leave you here, Lis. The bear can make a meal of you. Much easier to explain to your remaining sisters than murder, don’t you think?”

“You’re a coward,” I spat, straining against the hands of the guards that held me. “I can’t believe I ever agreed to work for you.”

“Cowards live, Lis,” Victor rebuffed, quirking a brow at me as he gestured to the guards. They dropped me, moving quickly to his side as one of his guards spun a hand, opening a

swirling section of sky that was a slightly different shade of gray than the rest. Fuck, he had a portalweaver. “Remember that as you are eaten.”

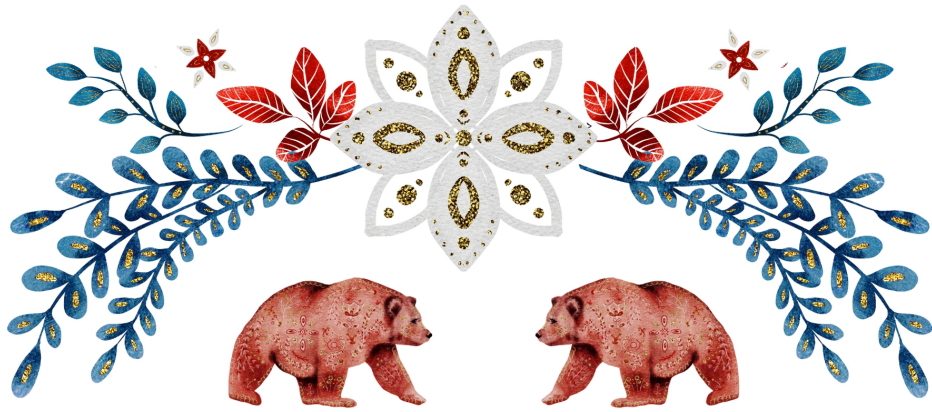
Victor and his guards disappeared through the patch of sky, the portal zipping shut behind them.

Orson had been growling and snarling at the chains trying to extricate himself. With no guards to hold them, he was able to move, but the barbs stuck to him as he tried to roll out of them, leaving streaks of blood in the snow.

He snorted at the blood, chains still wrapped around him, then looked up to meet my gaze.

A growl reverberated, saliva dripping from sharp teeth as Orson stood.

And there was no recognition in his black eyes.



CHAPTER 13

“Orson,” I rasped, scrambling backward until my back hit the nearest tree. “Orson, it’s me.”

The bear prowled toward me, his maw wide and dripping, eyes devoid of any warmth.

Should I run? I felt like running from a bear was a sure-fire way to get chased and possibly eaten. I was fast, but not *that* fast, my ankle still tender. The chains wouldn’t do much to slow an angry bear. I could climb a tree, but could he follow? A hoot on the branch above me made me look up.

Owl landed above me, hooting wildly as if to try and get through to Orson. I couldn’t decide how I felt about the owl. He had warned us about the ambush, but we’d still stumbled blindly into a trap.

“Whose side are you on, exactly?” I hissed up at the owl.

He dropped his gaze, turning his head at an unnatural angle, and hooted as if I should be able to understand him,

“Gods, now I’m talking to an owl,” I cursed, deciding that rising slowly to my feet would be a better defensive position if Orson tried to charge. “Orson, I need you to snap out of it. It’s me.”

Orson growled, still more beast than shifter. He was inches from me, his expression fierce, his blood still dripping in the snow. On all fours, he was almost as tall as I was, hot breath assaulting my senses as he growled again.

“Orson,” I beseeched him, injecting as much pleading and warmth into my voice as I could. “It’s me. It’s Lis. Little Thief.” The bear snorted angrily, sniffing at me as if trying to decide where to bite first. I put my hands on his muzzle, meeting his eyes as I tried one more name. “Shah-reh.”

The bear stopped, his eyes going wide as warmth crept back into them. He whined, the animal still in control, but tame. “Lis.”

“Gods, you remember me,” I cried, throwing my arms around his furry neck. The coppery tang of blood filled my nostrils, and I pulled back covered in it. “And you’re hurt.”

“I’m fine,” he growled, his eyes still blinking as if trying to take me in and focus on me. I gingerly reached for the chains, unwinding them and throwing them to the side.

“Can you shift?” I asked, dropping a kiss on his cold, black nose.

Orson growled, his eyes closing. “No,” he said as he opened them. “I cannot.”

“Okay,” I said, taking a deep breath. “One problem at a time. Let’s go home and take care of you.”

Orson grunted his agreement, pushing me ahead of him as if he feared losing sight of me completely.

We trudged gracelessly back through the snow, Orson grunting and snuggling as a thousand thoughts and questions raced through my mind. None of them were worth asking until I had taken care of Orson.

The door had been left open and snow had blown into the cabin. I entered first, Orson shaking his body to dry it behind me and splattering me in snow and blood. Lovely.

He grunted as if amused as he padded to the fire and curled up on the fur rug before it, dropping his head on a paw.

I sighed, closing and locking the door, then grabbing blankets from the couch. I stripped off my wet clothes, laying them out on the back of an armchair to dry as Orson watched me out of one eye, his gaze hungry.

“None of that,” I scolded, wrapping myself in a blanket and covering him with the rest. “Not while you’re an actual bear and you’re injured.”

“I’m not that injured,” he grumbled, reaching for me with a large heavy paw.

I skipped out of his reach. “But you *are* a bear. I’m going to change and dress your wounds, and *then* you get cuddles.”

He growled in annoyance and I tried to hide my smile as I went to scavenge some clothes and supplies.

Being a bear suited him.

It took an hour to fully attend to his wounds, Orson grumbling like a child every time I cleaned and tended a new gash. It didn’t make much sense to bandage a bear, but I slathered the wounds in the green paste he had used on me, hoping they would speed his healing.

He already seemed much better when I finished and he hooked me with a paw, pulling me into his side. “Stay.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” I argued, putting my hands up as he snorted and dropped his head next to mine, a large paw remaining draped over my chest as if he feared I would escape.

I languidly stroked the fur behind his ear.

“I could have killed you,” he growled, his voice a deep rumble, his body warm, and soft, and slightly green in places.

“Self-pity later,” I whispered, cupping his face in my hands. “What do you need?”

“You,” he replied, nuzzling into my neck, “Naked.”

“Still a bear,” I reminded him, smoothing the fur on his muzzle.

“I would still enjoy it,” he rumbled, shifting slightly so we were face to face, his paw pillowing my head on the fur rug. “Your employer is a delight.”

“Not sure that’s where we should begin this conversation,” I replied dryly. “But yes, villains aren’t known for being particularly considerate.”

“I’m planning to eviscerate him with my bare claws,” Orson growled. “And strangle him with his own barbed chains.”

“We have several pressing matters to deal with before you get your revenge,” I chastised, biting my lip to hide my amusement as I scratched his jaw.

He let out a noise closer to a purr than a growl. “Such as?” he murmured, his voice distractingly seductive.

“Such as retrieving your amulet,” I said, trying to ignore the building desire in my core. For a bear. Gods help me. “Questioning Victor about his buyer, eviscerating Victor,”— Orson laughed at this— “finding your family, and discussing exactly how I am able to speak to you when you told me that losing your amulet would mean losing yourself.”

Orson grunted, avoiding my eyes as he pulled me closer.

“Orson,” I demanded, speaking into the space just beneath his furry maw. “Why was I able to get through to you?”

“I have a theory,” Orson murmured, still not looking at me. “But I could be wrong.”

“Try me,” I said gently, tilting his muzzle down so he was forced to meet my gaze.

Orson swallowed. “Kjære,” he said, repeating the word that had gotten through to him. “It means ‘love’ in Bjørnespråk. In bear language.”

“Oh,” I said, something fluttering unevenly in my chest. “Love.”

“Yes,” Orson rumbled. “Only one bond could be strong enough that I would remember myself without my amulet. There are a few records of it, but I wasn’t sure it was true.”

“What bond, Orson?” I pushed, my stomach twisting in anticipation.

He let out a rumbling growl again, his beary face unreadable. “Mates.”

“Mates?” I asked, the word making something permanent and solid settle in my heart.

Orson shifted, lumbering over me and caging me in, his maw resting on my chest. “Shifters are primal. We have animal instincts,” he explained, his growl underlying the conversation. “Mating is a sacred bond in shifters, often said to be chosen by the stars. We mate for life, and never leave our partner. It’s ironic, considering Lycon wanted to punish Artis by preventing exactly this sort of bond.”

“Oh,” I said, trying to digest all of this. The closest equivalent among elves were probably lifebonds, in which two elves—or half-elves or an elf and a human—joined their lives through a sharing of blood and magic, tying themselves together for however long their lives would be. It provided humans with slightly extended lives, although at the cost of the elven life, which was always shortened.

The whole idea was very romantic, far more so than the simple idea of a legal marriage that bound the humans. I liked the idea that my father had loved my mother so deeply, he was willing to give up hundreds of years of life to be with her.

But the shifter notion of fated mates was also rather romantic.

“Is this because we...” I trailed off, feeling stupidly naive.

“Fucked?” Orson suggested, his grin a little terrifying as I turned scarlet. “No. The other way around, actually.”

“You suspected before,” I said, remembering his words before we had fully acted on our desires. “You called me ‘shah-reh’ then.”

“Kjære,” Orson corrected, as if that somehow fixed my mispronunciation. “It’s spelled K-J—“

“Nope, don’t spell it,” I groaned, putting a hand over my face. “Not if it starts with *two* silent letters.”

“The third letter isn’t even a letter,” Orson growled, pushing my hand away from my face. “It’s a ligature.”

“I will not be learning bear language today,” I declared, feeling a headache begin at my temples. “This is a lot to take in.”

“It is,” Orson said gently.

He licked my cheek, and I laughed. “Elves don’t have mates,” I pointed out, thinking of my father and mother.

“They don’t,” Orson agreed, shifting more firmly over me as if worried I might bolt. “I told you, we are primal beings. Far less civilized than you elves.”

“Technically only a half-elf,” I reminded him.

Orson chuckled, the sound mostly a growl, rolling and pulling me into his chest. “I could be wrong, Lis,” he said, resting his maw on the top of my head. Despite being a bear, he still smelled like cinnamon and pine. “But if I’m not, and you decide you *don’t* want this, I’ll figure out a way to tame my more...primitive urges.”

“What kinds of primitive urges?” I asked, trying to keep my tone teasing rather than ravenously curious.

“Like the urge to drag you to my den and bed you until you’re with child,” he growled.

“What?!” I exclaimed, my voice verging on a shriek as I shifted back.

“Sorry,” Orson sighed, giving me a look that might have been apologetic. It was hard to tell as a bear. “It’s a bear thing. Mating is all very wrapped up in sex and offspring. It’s why we have a baculum.”

“Did you...” My eyes widened as I tried to count days. No, I should be fine. “Remind me to have Izzy make me the strongest birth control elixir she can when we see her,” I said, flopping back down next to him.

“*When?*“ Orson asked, draping his paw over me possessively. “I haven’t scared you off then, after nearly eating you and threatening to impregnate you?”

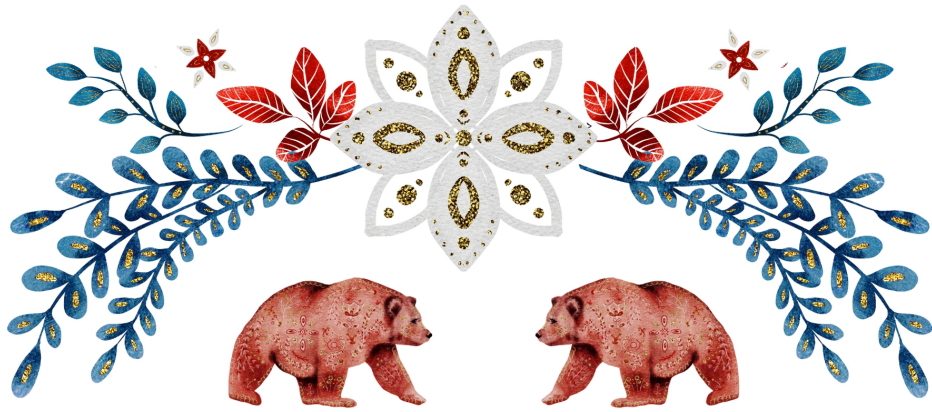
“Well, when you put it like that,” I teased, pretending to roll away. Orson caught me and rolled me back into his side.

“Truly though, Lis,” he said, his eyes big and brown and a little more feral than usual in this form. “Why aren’t you running for the hills?”

I kissed his nose. “I suppose it’s because I like you. I want to see where this goes.”

“I’d like that too,” Orson said, a rumbling noise of approval in his chest as he butted my cheek.

“But you might decide that *you’d* be better off running when you meet my sisters.”



CHAPTER 14

“Melisande Nightshade!” my eldest sister scolded, the rolling pin in her hand brandished like a weapon.

We had left for my cottage that same evening, Orson carrying me on his back. He had argued for going straight to Victor.

“What if I attack them?” he asked, nudging at my shoulder as I packed.

“I’ll bind you with my shadows,” I said evenly, giving him a smirk. “I’m very protective.”

“I’m dangerous, Lis,” he growled.

“So am I, Orson,” I argued, holding his muzzle in my hands to keep his eyes on me. “We would be fools to take on Victor Gold alone.”

“I’m a walking weapon,” he argued, his tone softening.

“You’re very scary,” I agreed, trying to look solemn rather than amused. “But we need a small army to infiltrate Victor’s offices. My sisters are that army.”

“Fine,” he huffed, bending so I could climb onto his back.

It turned out that bears could run rather fast, and it took less than an hour to reach my cottage. The owl had decided to join

us, hooting as he followed our progress and helping me remind Orson that he was more than a bear when he started to wander off course.

“What is with you and this owl?” I asked, scowling up at the creature. “How long exactly have you been friends?”

“He comes and goes,” Orson panted, continuing to run as we spoke. “But he always returns to these parts.”

It was twilight when we arrived, orange and purple shadows cast across the snow. Orson growled like a feral beast when he saw my sister.

“It’s just Izzy,” I said, relief flooding me to find the cottage and my sister both untouched by Victor’s wrath. I slid off Orson’s back and leaned down, wrapping him in my cloak as I took his muzzle in my hands. “Kjære,” I said, pressing my forehead to his.

The growling stopped, Orson licking my cheek. “I’m back.” I patted his nose before turning to face my irate eldest sister.

“Put the rolling pin down, Izzy,” I called out, biting my lip in amusement as I guided Orson forward. “He’s a friend.”

“You’re friends with a bear?” came a second high-pitched voice I recognized as my second youngest sibling. Calli poked her head out the front door, her silver-white hair falling over her shoulder in an untidy braid. “What have you done now, Lis?”

“I see you have a reputation,” Orson rumbled, low enough that only I heard. I elbowed him in the shoulder, making him huff a laugh as he prowled forward, keeping some distance between himself and my sisters.

“You’d better all come out here,” I said, wishing we could enjoy the cozy warmth of the sitting room. With seven full-grown females, the house was really too small, but we couldn’t afford to move, and the location offered us the privacy we needed in our line of business. I had been perfectly warm on Orson, but now I missed his furry heat. “Clearly, I have a lot to explain, and Orson doesn’t want to get too close in case he loses himself.”

“Loses himself?” Izzy asked, looking murderous. A thundering from the house floor made her sigh. “Gods, here comes the cavalry.”

My four remaining sisters raced down the stairs, a mixture of curiosity and hesitation on their faces.

“Ella is at school,” I reminded him, gesturing to the five females who were studying him. “And Izzy you met.” Izzy raised a brow and patted her rolling pin. “And this is Lena, Mora, Sera, and Calli.”

“A pleasure,” Orson growled in a way that told me he would rather have run straight for the city and skipped this little rendezvous.

“Everyone, this is Orson Asbjørn,” I added. “He was the mark I was supposed to be stealing from.”

“You were hired to steal from a bear?” Sera asked.

“He’s a shifter,” I corrected, bristling at my sister’s lack of tact.

“I’m guessing the plan went awry?” Lena asked, her lips curving in a slight, knowing smile. Lena was unnervingly good at sensing the truth, and strangely intuitive when it came to us. She must sense my conflicted feelings for Orson.

“You could say that,” I hedged, biting my lower lip. “The item allowed Orson to control his shift. He needs it back.”

“No offense intended,” Calli started, her skeptical expression making me wince. “But weren’t you hired to *steal* this item? Not retrieve it?”

“It’s complicated,” I replied, looking to Orson for assistance.

He rolled his eyes at my inability to confide in my own sisters. “I offered your sister triple what Victor Gold would pay to retrieve it.”

Sera whistled, and Izzy narrowed her eyes as she looked Orson up and down.

I turned to Orson, bending to speak in his ear, which was at my shoulder. "I can't take your money now," I whispered. "Not now that we're...involved."

"I said I'd take care of you," Orson rumbled back. "And your sisters. This changes nothing."

"So you're friends?" Mora interjected, her expression one of innocent interest. "Or *more*?" Her eyes glazed over, and panic struck me.

"Don't you dare, Mora," I snapped, turning to my younger sister. "No memory reading!"

She blinked, her eyes coming back into focus and a blush rising in her cheeks. "I can't help it when you project them," she argued evenly, crossing her arms. "*He* was thinking very vividly about one that you *definitely* don't want me repeating."

"Mora!" I hissed, flushing as crimson as my sister. Orson, to his credit, grinned in an unapologetically fearsome way. "That was private."

"What?" Calli asked, bouncing on the balls of her feet. "What's private?"

"That's enough," Izzy sighed, her cheeks also slightly pink at Mora's suggestive tone. "All sisters younger than Lis, go back in the house this instant."

My three younger sisters all complained loudly at this edict, but were convinced by Lena's threat to make them all dream of spiders for a week if they didn't go. Thunder rumbled ominously outside, a sure sign of Calli's displeasure.

"So," Izzy said, turning back to us still holding the rolling pin. Lena perched on a log, brushing off the snow before looking at me thoughtfully. "Explain."

I flushed. "It turns out that we are...or we might be...sort of...mates," I said, gritting my teeth as both of my sisters' brows shot up. "It's a shifter thing."

"Mates," Izzy echoed, looking between us. "How long exactly have you known each other?"

“Three days,” Orson said as if this meant nothing. “But my personal feelings for Lis have nothing to do with this. Think of me as any other client.”

“A client who is sleeping with our sister?” Izzy asked.

Orson made a choking sound, and I blushed as I retorted, “That is none of your business.”

“It is if you expect our help,” Izzy said, looking between us. “You used protection, I hope?”

“Do you love him?” Lena asked at the same time.

“Gods, kill me now,” I groaned, dropping my face in my hands as I leaned against Orson for support.

Orson cleared his throat, butting my shoulder with his nose in a comforting way. His voice was calm, but firm, his dominating tone turned on Izzy. “My feelings, and those of your sister, are unrelated to my financial offer. I have the means, and you have a skill set I need to retrieve my amulet. What Lis and I decide to do beyond that will not involve your opinions, although I would like to be a shifted male when I do them, rather than a bear.”

Izzy gaped at this, and I blushed even more crimson, but Lena smiled, giving me an approving nod. “I like him.”

“Gods above,” Izzy sighed, as if she had no patience for romance. “What exactly do you need from us, Lis?”

My heart leapt. They were going to help us.

“We have some supplies,” I said, gesturing to the pack. “But taking on Victor will require taking down his guards. I was hoping that Sera and Mora might help.”

“You realize that none of us will be able to work for Victor after this?” Izzy pointed out. Lena frowned. She hated working for Victor and crime in general, but she hated seeing her sisters go hungry more.

“We will find other clients,” I promised, grateful for Orson’s warm presence at my back. “We *have* other clients.”

“Not clients who pay like Victor does,” Izzy pointed out. She didn’t love working for Victor either—none of us really did—but he did pay the best rate of any of our other clients, and he almost always had work for one of us.

“I won’t let you starve,” Orson rumbled, the suggestion seeming to irritate him. “You won’t miss his employment.”

Izzy pursed her lips and looked at Lena, my two older sisters engaging in a rapid silent argument before Izzy threw up her hands.

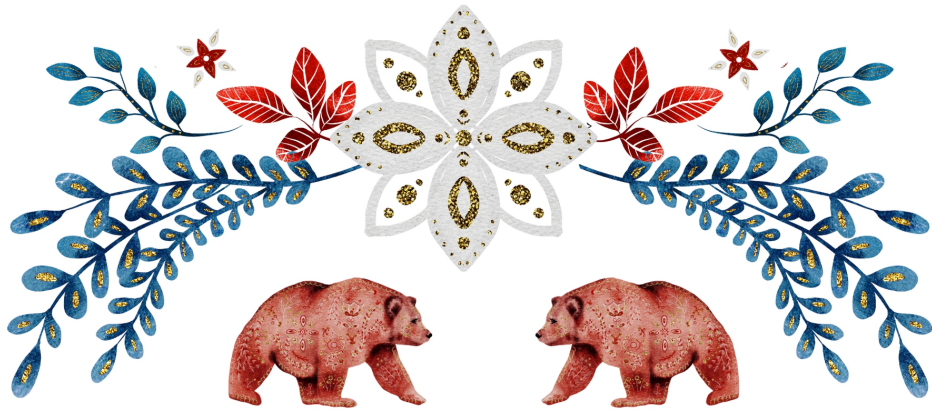
“Fine,” she relented, pointing an accusing finger at Orson. “But if anything happens to *any* of my sisters,” she threatened, her hair seeming to float behind her in an ethereal wind, “I will *personally* skin you and turn you into a rug.”

She strode back into the house, brandishing her rolling pin at my younger sisters, who had crept back down the stairs to eavesdrop at the front door.

Lena hopped off the log. “Don’t mind Izzy,” she said, giving me a hug, and then—to his great surprise—Orson. “She threatens because she cares.”

“I don’t plan to cross her,” Orson growled.

Lena smiled. “Good. I’ll start dinner,” she offered, gliding toward the door. “Oh,” she turned, fixing a sweet, gentle smile on us. “And if you hurt my little sister, I’ll haunt your nightmares for eternity.”



CHAPTER 15

We left my sisters two hours later, Izzy chewing on her bottom lip as she saw us off.

We had formulated the plan as Izzy and Lena fed us, making sure Sera and Mora both understood their jobs and the risks. Sera, as usual, was enthusiastic while Mora was reserved, but both agreed to help us.

Neither seemed too thrilled about the idea of riding on a bear.

“I’ll be fine,” I told Izzy, careful to keep a hand on Orson as he sniffed the snow. “All of us will.”

“You’d better be,” she warned, wrapping me in a tight hug. “Or I’ll have to poison your boyfriend.”

I rolled my eyes, climbing onto Orson’s back first to keep him aware while Mora and Sera climbed up behind me. We were dressed in the black tunics and trousers we favored for our more morally questionable jobs, all of us having sheathed our preferred lightweight daggers in various hidden spots on our body.

We were ready.

I spooled shadows around us, binding the three of us together and looping the shadow around my bear to keep us

steady on his back.

Mora grabbed my waist, and I hunched over, my fingers twining in the fur of Orson's neck as I spoke in his ear. "Let's go, Kjære."

He grunted as if he had already forgotten himself in the short time I had been out of his line of sight, and I prayed my voice would be enough to keep him together.

Orson took off, racing into the trees before I had time to warn my sisters to hold tight. The snow crunched under his paws as he ran, my shouted reminders redirecting him whenever he slowed or growled in confusion or changed directions. He might be aware enough with just me, but he couldn't stay like this.

We needed his amulet.

A hoot told me that Owl had decided to come too, and I rolled my eyes at the strange bird.

"Don't take this the wrong way, Kjære," Orson grunted as we neared Fairwinds, the dark forest thinning as lights glowed in the distance. "But your sisters are terrifying."

I laughed, hugging his neck a little tighter. "It's a miracle you survived."

"They love you," he added, his voice almost lost to the forest.

"They do," I agreed,

Sera complained loudly about her rear cramping, and I was about ready to strangle her when we finally made it to the outskirts of the city.

Both sisters slid off Orson's back first as I kept him calm. I dismounted when I was sure my sisters were far enough away that he couldn't get to them without going through me first.

"Come back to me, Kjære," I said, stroking his face as I looked around for the owl. He must have flapped off somewhere, possibly deciding we were not that interesting after all.

Orson growled, then shuddered, his eyes going warm and familiar again. “Sorry,” he rumbled. I enjoyed you riding me, Kjære.”

I laughed and kissed the top of his furry head. “I’m sure it’s only because of the sweet nothings I shouted in your ear.”

Orson’s responding growl was oddly sensual, and heat curled through my body.

“Ugh, get a room!” Sera drawled, crossing her arms and looking vaguely disgusted. “At least wait until he’s not a bear anymore.”

Sera and Mora were only two years younger than me, but it felt like more since I had helped raise them. There was a strange divide between us all, Izzy and Lena and me on one side as the providers after our parents disappeared, and the four younger siblings on the other.

I gave Sera a wry look. “I’ll leave you here if you’re not polite,” I threatened, trying to sound authoritative. “Orson and I can manage this alone if we have to.”

“Then why would you have come to collect us, dearest sister?” Sera cajoled, grinning widely and cheekily. “You need us.”

“Stop needling her,” Mora said gently, rolling her eyes. She was the only one of my younger sisters who was more like Lena, and consequently our mother, than Izzy and my father. “I swear, you just can’t stop yourself from talking.”

The two began a heated argument that I desperately tried to tune out, and I said a silent prayer of thanks that Izzy had convinced Calli not to join us. She had insisted she be allowed “in on the fun,” but had relented when Orson had told her there wouldn’t be room on his back and she’d have to be dragged along behind.

Orson was watching them with a wistful look in his eyes, and my heart broke for him that he hadn’t grown up with any siblings. At how horribly they had been taken from him.

“They’ll stop once we get moving,” I promised, adjusting the pack on his back and checking my daggers.

“I don’t mind it, Kjære,” he said gently, his eyes soft as he looked at me. “They’re very like you.”

“You take that back,” I demanded, trying not to smile as Orson chuffed a laugh. I was strangely glad he couldn’t shift right now. A feral part of me didn’t particularly like the idea of my mate getting naked anywhere near my sisters.

My mate. The words thunked into my heart like they had always been there, something missing that had been recovered. I swallowed.

“What’s wrong?” Orson asked, nudging me. “If you’re thinking what I hope you’re thinking, we definitely don’t have time for it now. I’d also be far too big for you as a bear.”

“You beast,” I said, giving him an exasperated look.

“I’m *your* beast,” he corrected, his breath warm on my face. “Don’t leave me alone with your sisters, Kjære. I won’t remember myself. Izzy will skin me if I eat them.”

“I’ve got you,” I promised, stroking his muzzle and kissing his nose. “You’d make a terrible rug, anyway.”

I turned away from him, motioning to my sisters to join us. “I’ll keep us wrapped in shadows until we arrive at the offices,” I said, reviewing the plan we had made to make sure we missed nothing. “Sera, you’ll disguise us to look like the guards when we are inside, and Mora, you’ll wipe the memories of anyone who sees us.”

“This plan feels overkill,” Sera drawled, toying with her own dagger. Izzy had made sure all of us learned to use them when we began taking on criminal work, just in case our magic ever failed us. She was the best, having been taught the longest by Father, but all of us had a knack for daggers.

They were extremely effective when thrown by shadows, and I kept several on me when I worked.

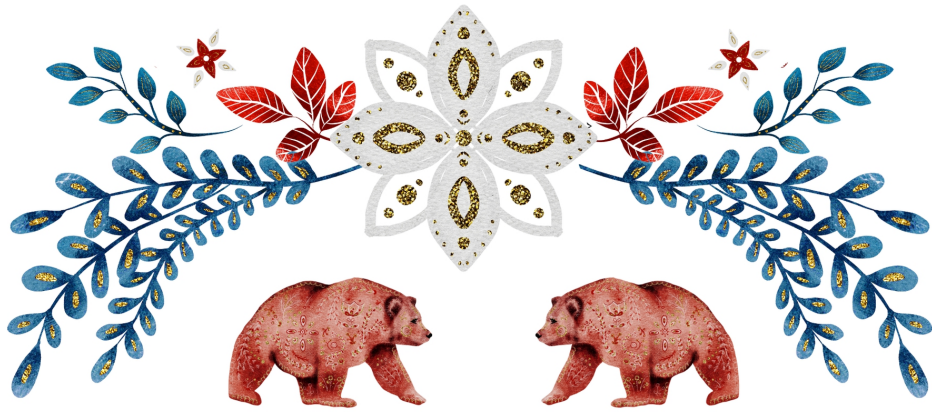
“Better prepared than dead,” I said, earning a shrug from my petulant younger sister. “If anything goes wrong, the two of you use your magic to get out of there,” I added, looking between the twins. “No reckless heroics.”

“I think your bear is the one who should be getting this lecture,” Mora said, giving me a knowing look.

I scowled. “This was a mistake.”

“Oh, lighten up, Lis,” Sera hissed. “We’re Nightshades. We’ll be *super* professional.”

“Famous last words,” Orson growled, his muzzle twitching suspiciously. “Let’s go.”



CHAPTER 16

Victor's building was in a wealthy part of town, all the houses and businesses respectably shuttered for the night. The antiques shop, which served as the front for his illegal collection of artifacts, was dark and locked, but light in the windows in the two floors above told me he was there.

Dark dealings were best done at night, after all.

The streets were dark and slushy with trampled snow, although they would probably be white again by morning. There was no guard at the front door, as such a thing would look too suspicious, but I was sure we would encounter one at the door to the back room and stairs when we entered, so I kept the shadows around us for as long as possible.

"Sera," I hissed, spearing out a shadow to begin working on the lock. "I need you to make us blend in when we go inside. A blob of shadows moving around will be just as conspicuous as all of us without a disguise."

"On it," Sera hissed, moving her hand delicately as she wrapped the illusion around us. She had tried to explain it to me once, the process of bending light to show what she wanted seen, but I couldn't really understand it. In a way, it sounded like the opposite of what I did, dispersing the light to cloak us in darkness.

I kept my hand on Orson's neck, afraid he might go full-bear if I lost contact with him.

A click told me that my shadows had freed the lock mechanism, and I gently pulled the door open, wincing when a bell announced our presence,

“Who's there?” shouted a male voice from the darkness,

Fuck, we'd already been noticed and it had been less than ten seconds.

“Mora,” I hissed.

“We need to get closer for me to wipe his memory,” she hissed back. “Sera, move the illusion with us.”

“I hear you whispering,” called the voice, sounding fearful now as a guard moved toward the seemingly empty doorway. Sera was a good illusionweaver. I knew we were completely hidden. “Come out now!”

Mora reached out when the guard got near enough, gripping his wrist tightly and whispering under her breath. The guard's face went slack.

“Go,” she mouthed, pushing us ahead of her while she held his wrist. “I'm right behind you.”

We passed my sister, who must be keeping the male's memories empty while we snuck past. As soon as Orson was out of the way, Mora let go, leaping back to the protection of Sera's illusion.

“What am I...” the guard trailed off, looking confused, and I gave Mora an appreciative nod. He turned back to us, seeing through us to the back wall as Sera kept the illusion up, sweat beading on her brow.

Magic wasn't infinite by any means, and there was a certain strain on both the body and the mind from using too much too fast. We needed to get to the stairs so Sera could drop the illusion.

“How odd,” muttered the guard, moving toward the door to shut it.

I pulled up shadows as we hit the back room, sneaking through the door and pausing to catch our breaths.

“Why are we sneaking when we could just be gutting?” Orson growled, clearly impatient without progress.

“Because most of Victor’s guards can wield magic,” I hissed, frowning at him. “And I’d rather we all survive this experience.”

I turned to my sisters. “I need you two to search the second floor for Orson’s amulet. It’s a round gold pendant with a bear paw inscribed in the center, runes all around. Look for any records or purchases or sales in the last decade while you’re there, too. We’ll go up to the third floor and confront Victor.”

“Are you sure you can handle Victor alone?” Mora asked, her face paler than usual after her use of magic. I probably didn’t look much better.

“Yes,” I hissed. “When you find the amulet, come find us. Hopefully we will have Victor subdued by then and we can figure out an escape.”

“I have an idea for that,” Orson rumbled enigmatically.

“Are you planning to tell us what it is?” Sera hissed, a brow raised at my bear.

“Later,” I whispered. “Go now. Look for the amulet. Victor may have several.”

Mora and Sera shared a glance, speaking without words in the way of twins, then disappeared, Sera already spinning illusions around them.

“You will tell me this plan at some point, right?” I whispered to Orson, pulling shadows to hide us as we ascended to the top floor. The stairs were narrow, and if anyone ventured down them they would certainly crash into us.

“All in good time, Little Thief,” Orson rumbled, his growl laced with amusement. “When we get to the top of the stairs, you will have to let me go.”

I started, barely registering my hand still on Orson's neck. "Are you going to eviscerate people?"

"Probably," he growled, rumbling a quiet laugh when I shuddered in disgust. "Do you mean to tell me that a hardened criminal mastermind like yourself has no stomach for violence?"

"I generally avoid disemboweling people if I can," I hissed, still feeling a bit queasy at the thought. "It's messy and hard to cover up."

"I am a bear," Orson pointed out. "We are expected to make a mess."

"Gods," I sighed, stopping at the door at the top of the stairs. "Let's *try* it my way first?"

"Fine," Orson grumbled, clearly irritated that violence would be the back up plan. "You have a soft heart. It's why I love you, Kjære."

"You—what?" I asked, my eyes widening at the bear.

He tilted his head, giving me an impatient sort of look. "You heard me, Little Thief."

"Okay, well," I said, fumbling over myself a bit. He loved me. He *loved* me. Did I love him too? "Crime now, confessions of love later."

"Fine," he rumbled, his eyes flashing with heat. "I truly can't wait to have my other body back. I have plans for what it will do with yours."

"You're a menace," I hissed. "Stop flirting. It's unprofessional."

I didn't give him time to respond, pushing open the door softly and hoping my shadows would disguise the movement.

It was a false hope.

The hallway was well lit, and I barely had time to throw my shadows out to pin the two guards to the wall.

"What the—"

“I’m going to strongly suggest you drop your weapons,” I warned, dropping the shadows around Orson, who prowled forward with his teeth bared.

The guards, one an elven female and the other a human man, complied, which felt far too easy.

“You,” I said, nodding to the elf. “What’s your magic?”

“Like I’d tell you,” she sneered. Her hand twitched as if trying to cast, and I sent more shadows to pin her. “There are six more guards in there, all with magic. You won’t make it out of here.”

“We’ll see,” I replied evenly, jerking both guards fast so they hit the wall, knocking them unconscious.

“Hot,” Orson growled as I pulled my shadows back in. “I’ll get the door.”

“I can—“

But before I could send my shadows to disengage the lock, Orson had already run at full speed at the ornately carved wooden double doors, clearly meant more for decoration than protection.

They banged open and Orson barreled in, attacking the first guard he saw with a swipe of sharp claws to the ribs.

“Orson!” I cried out, but it was too late. He had gone full-bear, and all I could do was mitigate the damage now. I threw out shadows, trying to pin the five other guards in place as Orson growled over his victim’s bleeding body.

“Lis,” Victor’s cold voice came from the desk, where he sat with his hands steepled as if expecting me. “I wondered if I would have the pleasure.”

Victor was clever and wealthy, but it struck me then that he surrounded himself with more powerful beings, hoping his wealth, influence, and ruthlessness would be enough to keep their puppet strings taut.

Mine had snapped.

“Will your lovely sisters be joining us as well?” he continued, pouring amber liquid from a decanter on the desk into a short crystal glass. “Or just your *friend*?”

“Give us the amulet, Vic,” I commanded, keeping my shadows out as I began to tremble from the strain. “And no one has to die.”

Victor looked at his fallen guard, an elf whose wounds were already healing. Orson hadn’t killed him, thank the gods.

“Did you really think you could come in here and steal from *me*?” Victor asked, his hand moving under his desk. “Really, Lis. I thought you were smarter.”

Orson prowled toward Victor, his teeth bared in a bloody, frothy snarl. The recognition was gone from his eyes, and I knew now he was surviving on instinct alone.

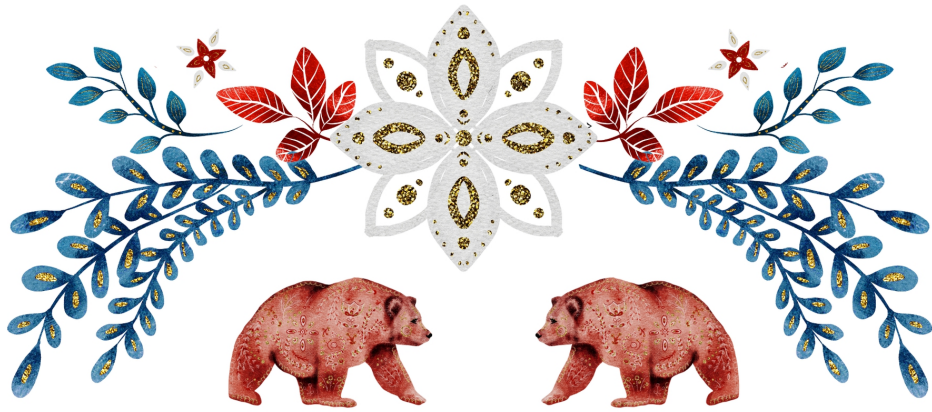
“I won’t stop him from killing you, Vic,” I warned, my arms beginning to shake as the guards struggled. I recognized one as the portalweaver from the woods, another as one of the guards who had held me in the snow when Victor had first claimed the amulet.

I pulled on my magic, wrapping shadows around the hilts of two daggers. I had maybe a minute before my magic would give out. I had never tried to hold this many people before, and I had to time my throw perfectly.

“Last chance, Vic,” I said, Orson taking another step toward his desk. Victor’s hand moved under the desk again, and I realized what he was doing. “Your other guards won’t be coming. My sisters are handling them as we speak.”

“You bitch,” Victor spat.

I chose that moment to throw my daggers as Orson leapt for the desk.



CHAPTER 17

My blades caught the portalweaver and the guard from the woods in the ribs, hopefully puncturing a lung. That would keep them down long enough for us to take care of the others without killing them.

Orson roared as I dropped my shadows, leaping over Victor for one of the remaining guards. I pulled two more daggers, preparing to throw them.

An arrow hit me in the shoulder, making me stagger, and I threw my next dagger. It hit the Silvershade elf in the throat, causing her to burble blood as she sank to the floor.

It looked like Orson had also caused lethal damage, mauling his guard so badly he was mostly unrecognizable. The last guard standing shifted, morphing into a huge silver bear to rival Orson's size.

An Elandor elf. She was fast, shifting between forms as Orson tried to land a blow, but I had to trust he had her.

I yanked the arrow out of me and turned my attention to Victor, who had gone pale and fearful in the bloodbath.

"We can work this out, Lis," he said, holding up his hands beseechingly as he backed away from me. "You want more gold? Your own house in the city? I can make it happen."

“You’re done, Victor,” I seethed, hearing footsteps in the hall. Mora and Sera came barreling in, both looking a little sweaty but at least not bloody. Sera moved to intercept the Elandorean while Mora came to my side, glancing quickly at my shoulder before pinning Victor with a hard look. “Give me Orson’s amulet and tell me who the buyer was.”

“I don’t have a name, Lis, you have to believe me,” Victor said, turning pleading eyes to Mora. “Search my memories. You’ll see that it’s true.”

“Do it,” I commanded, throwing out more shadows with a final push of effort to pin Victor in place. The move jammed my shoulder, but I ignored the stab of pain.

“I never liked working for you anyway,” Mora hissed as she grabbed his wrist, her eyes going blank.

I turned as Mora rummaged through Victor’s mind to see Orson advancing on Sera, who kept flitting in and out of illusion, her magic clearly failing her.

“Tell your boyfriend to back off,” she shrieked, looking panicked. Orson swung toward me, his expression feral and completely without recognition.

“Kjære,” I said, holding out my hand before the bear. My shadows were drained, the last of my power spent holding Victor in place for Mora, and Orson growled as if he truly was lost. “Orson, it’s me. Lis. Melisande. Come back to me.”

“Lis,” Sera urged, her hands going to her daggers. “Do something.”

“Orson,” I said, focusing all of my attention on him as I tried to force him back into his mind. “It’s me. Your Kjære. I broke into your cabin and you healed me and you knit me socks and you call me Little Thief. Come back, my love.”

Sera looked ready to throw her dagger when Orson shuddered, his big eyes blinking as he took me in. His lips curled back in horror. “Lis,” he growled, stepping backward. I didn’t let him run from me, throwing my arms around his neck as Sera blew out a relieved sigh. “You’re hurt.”

“It will heal,” I said, my shoulder stinging, but not badly enough to slow me down.

“I forgot you,” he rumbled, his voice pained as I buried my face into his soft, cinnamon smelling fur. “Again.”

“And then you remembered,” I said, stepping back to check him over for injuries. There was blood coming from somewhere, but it wasn’t a lot, and his fur made it impossible to tell. I was still bleeding too. We were all a bit worse for wear. “I love you.”

“Crime now, confessions of love later,” he rumbled, sounding entirely too pleased with himself. “Where is the amulet?”

“Mora?” I asked, turning with my hand still on Orson’s neck, just in case he got lost again.

Victor was slumped to the ground, his expression slack and my shadows still around him.

Mora was rummaging in the drawers of his desk. It looked like she had jimmed them open with a letter opener. “Is this it?” she asked, holding up something gold and round.

“Yes,” I laughed, the sound a blend of relief and mild hysteria. “Toss it here.”

She threw the amulet and I caught it neatly, looping the chain around Orson’s neck.

He shuddered, the bear dissolving back into a male. A very naked male covered in new wounds and scars. I sighed as my sisters yelped in surprise, Mora nearly toppling over in her shock,

“Wow,” Sera breathed, her eyes going wide as I glared at her. “What? I can’t help having eyes! Totally get the appeal now though, sis!”

“Not the first impression I wanted to make,” Orson growled, accepting the cloak I handed him to cover his nudity. We had left our pack in a nearby alley, and, of course, all of his clothes were in it.

I practically growled at Sera, who was still ogling my mate, Orson caught my chin. Gods, he had hands again. “Easy, Little Thief. I have eyes for only you.”

“You’d better,” I huffed, pulling the cloak tight and standing so my body blocked him from my sisters’ view.

“I’ll go get the pack,” Mora offered, a hand covering her eyes as she blushed. “Sera, come help me.”

“That’s a one person job,” Sera argued, still looking at my mate in an interested sort of way.

“*Now*, Sera!” Mora rarely pulled rank, Sera being older by several minutes, but my sister finally rolled her eyes and followed her twin after another growl from me.

“You have two minutes,” she warned, giving me a hard look. “Get all the mushy stuff out of the way before we return.”

As soon as they stepped into the hallway, Orson caught my waist, turning me to him and capturing me in a searing kiss.

For a blissful moment, it didn’t matter that he was basically naked, covered in blood, and surrounded by our enemies in a criminal lair in the middle of the city. I was home.

“So you love me, huh?” he said when he finally pulled away, his hands still tight on my waist.

“I don’t believe we’ve concluded the crime portion of tonight’s agenda,” I said, indicating Victor’s slumped form as my heart beat a wild rhythm.

“Lis,” he murmured, brushing a strand of gold hair from my face and making me look at him. “I told you. No expectations.” He leaned down to kiss me, his other hand snaking into my hair. “You can tell me if this is all too fast.” He pressed a kiss to my jaw. “Or too slow.” Another kiss to my temple. “Or just right.” He brought his lips to mine again, his tongue sweeping in and washing away all of my fears and doubts.

“*You* are just right,” I breathed, reaching up on my toes to nip his lower lip when he pulled away. I could hear Mora and

Sera thumping loudly down the corridor to warn us of their imminent arrival and sighed. “Let’s finish this conversation when we are properly alone.”

“Fair,” he agreed with a grin, planting one final peck on my lips. “I’ll be holding you to that.”

“Are you decent, Lis?” Sera shouted through the door.

“Gods, come in, you heathens,” I sighed, adjusting the cloak again.

Sera tossed me the pack, keeping her eyes carefully away from my mate as he dressed in proper clothes, returning the cloak to me when he was fully covered.

“You can look now,” he told my sisters. “Just not too long. Lis gets a bit possessive.”

I gave him a withering glare, and he chuckled, throwing his arm around my shoulders and guiding me over to Victor’s slumped form.

He still looked dazed, his eyes not entirely focused on anything in particular.

“Gods, Mora,” I said, reaching down to check his pulse. He was alive, at least. “How much did you take?”

“It’s possible I went a smidge too far,” she confessed, wincing at me. “I think I may have wiped him completely.”

“You wiped all of his memories?” Sera asked, sounding horrified. She looked at Victor appraisingly, cocking her head. “Impressive.”

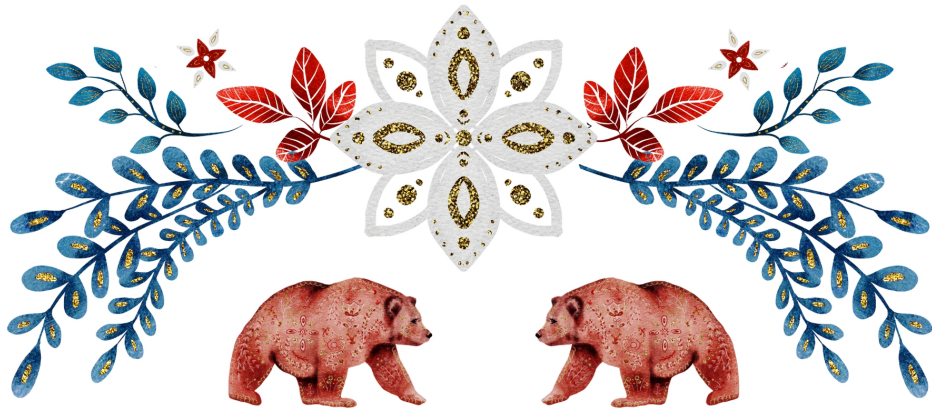
“I got a few things first,” Mora said conciliatorily. “He had three other amulets, but all went to private collectors. Their names should be in his records. He was also telling the truth about not knowing the name of his most recent buyer. He was...” she paused, frowning at Victor’s vacant face, “terrified of him. But no name or address. Just a deadline and a sense of dread.”

“Not what I was hoping for,” Orson said gruffly. “But it’s a start. Do you think you can find the other buyers, Mora?”

“Probably,” she said with a shrug. “His files are downstairs, along with enough gold to buy ourselves a palace in the city.”

“We are not keeping the gold,” I chastised, remembering Orson’s request that I give up crime. “Right?” I asked, turning to him for confirmation.

“I already put steps in motion to have it returned to its rightful hands,” Orson agreed. A distant hoot out the windows made me raise a brow at my mate. He grinned. “I’ll tell you later. Let’s get this information and get out before the whole city comes down on us.”



CHAPTER 18

“You all look terrible,” Izzy said, welcoming us back with her customary warmth. “I suppose you’ll be wanting breakfast?”

We had managed to sneak out of the building just as the High King’s Guard arrived, Commander Everhart looking thunderous as his subordinates stuttered over explanations.

He was a nice looking male, if only he were not quite so determined to arrest me and my sisters.

Orson had carried us home in bear form, and the deep circles under his eyes told me he needed a very long nap after this. Perhaps one with me curled up next to him. The thought sent heat rushing through me, as I slid down from his back, my own exhaustion palpable.

We had been slower on the journey home. It was midmorning and I was starving. Mora and Sera went into the house bickering, Lena smiling at them with relief.

Orson shook, the fur replaced by scarred, tattooed skin as I threw his shirt and trousers at him.

“I’m giving your sisters a bit of a show, I fear,” he murmured, stuffing his feet into boots and throwing on a jacket and cloak.

“Don’t tell me,” I said, my gut writhing with jealousy at the idea. “There’s something in me that wants to claw their eyes out for looking at you.”

“That’s the bond,” he explained, leaning down to kiss me. “Primal and uncivilized.”

“Charming,” I teased. “I thought this bond was hypothetical.”

“It was,” he agreed, throwing his arm around my shoulders. “But I think we will have to move it firmly into the realm of ‘thetical’ now.”

“Breakfast is all ready,” Lena announced, smiling as I tried to decide how I felt about this mini-revelation. Some part of me had already known it, but now I’d actually have to deal with it. “Pleased to meet you in the flesh, Mr. Asbjørn.”

“Orson, please,” he said, taking my sister’s hand in a firm grip. “Or Your Majesty, if you prefer.”

I elbowed him as Lena looked at me in question. “It’s a long story,” I sighed. “Best explained over pancakes.”

Orson was extremely forbearing with my sisters, answering their questions—some extremely personal—and good-naturedly praising Izzy’s cooking.

He explained some of the history he had told me and his ranking among the bear-shifters, leaving out the more fraught details of his past. He also promised to bring payment for my sisters in the next few days, since Victor was definitely out of the game.

By the time we left around noon to return to Orson’s cabin, my sisters liked him better than me, inviting him back for dinner and tea and target practice.

“I like how you were charming with *them*,” I grumbled as we made our way through the forest, moving faster again now that Orson had been fed about nine thousand pancakes. “When you could barely be civil to *me* when we first met.”

“You broke into my cabin intending to steal from me, Little Thief,” Orson rebutted, his tone teasing. “I *want* them to like

me. I need their blessing.”

“You just don’t want to be turned into a rug,” I argued, patting his furry flank.

“Also true,” he growled.

A hoot as the cabin came into sight told me the blasted owl had also returned safely.

“How exactly did you alert the High King’s Guard of our presence?” I asked, eyeing the owl suspiciously. “I’m assuming that was you?”

“It was Owl’s idea,” Orson chuckled. “A fitting end, don’t you think?”

“You can talk to the bird?” I asked, still skeptical of its strange behavior.

“It’s complicated,” Orson replied, pushing in his front door and letting me slide down from his back while he shifted.

No sooner than my feet were on the ground, Orson shifted and swept me up in his arms. He ran for the stairs stark naked.

“What are you—”

“Fucking now,” Orson growled, his eyes heated as he threw me on the bed. “Talking later.”

It was hard to argue with this plan, and Orson didn’t give me much of an opportunity anyway, pulling my shirt over my head and burying his face between my breasts. He slowed only when he had taken a peaked nipple into his mouth, a growl rumbling through him and down my spine.

“It’s been too long since we did this,” Orson rasped, moving his mouth to my other breast as his fingers teased the nipple he abandoned.

“It’s been barely a day,” I breathed, my body arching against his as his mouth and hands pushed all rational thought from my brain.

“Exactly,” he murmured, circling my nipple with his tongue and making me gasp. “Too long.”

He pulled back, and I caught him by surprise, rising with him to stroke his length. It was far larger and firmer in my hands than it had felt inside me, and my mouth went a little dry at the prospect of having him again.

“Lis, what are you—fuck,” he growled as I wrapped my mouth around the tip, swirling my tongue across the sensitive skin there. I wrapped my hands around his base, squeezing gently as my mouth explored every inch of him. He fisted my hair, groaning as I moved.

It was deliciously hot.

“You smell like cinnamon,” I told him, sliding my tongue down his length and sucking gently. He bucked, swearing. “And forests.”

“Stop playing, Kjære,” he growled, his fingers tightening their grip in my hair almost painfully. “Either suck me properly, or let me fuck you now.”

“Gods, you have a foul mouth,” I breathed, continuing to tease him. Truthfully, I was certain I would gag on such length, but I enjoyed his dominant posturing too much to let him have his way.

“You like it,” Orson rumbled, moving so suddenly he caught me off guard as he rolled himself under me. “Take off your trousers.”

“And you’re bossy,” I teased as he began to tear at the laces. I placed my hands flat on his chest, admiring the contrast between our skin tones. “What if I just want to admire you for a while?”

With a growl, his fingers became claws, and the trousers were shredded off me unceremoniously. “Admire later,” he commanded, lifting me over him until I was positioned with him at my entrance. “Now ride me.”

Heat pooled at this command, and I ached to feel him fill me as I forced myself slowly down, savoring each inch as I took him.

I gasped at the tight angle, feeling him everywhere inside me, and he groaned as if he were in absolute, blissful agony.

“Now move,” he commanded, lifting me by the waist and pulling me back down when I didn’t immediately obey. Gods, even like this he was in control, and a feral part of me reveled in it. “Faster, Lis.”

I obeyed as Orson used his hands to wring pleasure from me as sure as his cock. One thumb stroked idle circles on the sensitive spot above where we were joined, the other teasing my breasts, my lips, tugging on my hair.

“Orson,” I breathed. “It’s too much.”

“It’s not, Kjære,” he said, rising to clasp me to his chest and moving with me. “You can take me.”

I whimpered at the fullness, the pressure, and the building warmth spiraling up my spine and begging for release as I rode his lap, his lips taking mine in a feral kiss that mirrored the thrust of his hips against mine.

I cried out, the pressure flooding from me in a wave of pleasure as we rolled until Orson was atop me, his body still joined with mine and rock hard.

“Again,” he commanded, pounding into me, the tension building again at his relentless pace. He didn’t seem even remotely close yet, and I briefly worried that something was wrong until I hooked my legs around his waist and he groaned. “Fuck.”

“What do *you* like?” I asked, barely able to form the words at the pounding, steady rhythm that was driving all of my focus to that spot between my legs.

“This,” Orson growled, his eyes holding mine. “You. Coming apart around me again and again until there’s no doubt that you’re mine.”

It was enough to send me spiraling again, and Orson shouted a curse as my nails dug into his back and he spilled into me, his body shuddering above mine for what seemed like forever.

He leaned down, still hard inside me, kissing me deeply, his tongue sweeping in an exploratory arc around my mouth as he settled more firmly into me.

“I love you,” he murmured, his forehead pressed against mine as he moved so his full weight wasn’t on me, his body still very much a part of mine. I loved the intimacy of it, the feeling that we were connected in the deepest way two beings could be joined, and emotion welled in me at his words. “I want you like this forever.”

“I love you,” I echoed, the gentle brush of his nose against mine so tender compared to the sweet, pounding ache between my thighs. “And you have me.”



“So how exactly did you know that we were mates?” I asked, once our passions had cooled and I was tucked into his side, warm and cozy under blankets and furs with snow falling gently outside the window.

“It was your scent,” Orson murmured, his beard tickling my neck as he spoke into it. “Honey and elderflower.”

“What about my scent gave it away?” I asked, turning in his arms to face him.

I felt oddly possessive, not wishing to be away from him for any length of time, and he seemed to feel the same, dragging me down to the bathing chamber to wash off the sex and grime together, then taking me again against the cabin wall when he watched me soap up.

“It’s my favorite,” he replied, his tattooed arm draped over my waist in a comforting, heavy weight. “Mates give off a unique scent that attracts their partner. Very primal. Very uncivilized.” He kissed my nose, making me laugh.

“Cinnamon and pine,” I said, breathing in the scent of him that felt like it was a part of me now. “I didn’t realize it was my favorite.”

“Better get used to it,” Orson growled, rubbing his bristly cheek against my smooth one. “I intend to drown you in it.”

I laughed as he kissed me again, wrapping my hand around the golden amulet that had brought us together under such strange circumstances.

“What now?” I asked, tugging gently on the pendant and letting it fall back against his warm chest. “Do we go hunt down the other buyers? Start looking into this mysterious mystery buyer of Victor’s? What do we do next?”

“All of those things,” Orson said, his lips curving in a smirk. “Once we’ve had some time to settle into the bond. Say a month or two, naked in this bed. Then we can get started.”

“Sera will never wait that long for her cut of the payment you owe her,” I said, laughing as he buried his face between my breasts and breathed me in. “Be serious, Orson.”

“I was quite serious,” he declared, his voice muffled by my chest, “but if you insist, how about this?” He lifted his head, resting his chin on my sternum as he looked at me. “We get your sisters their money tomorrow, preferably around the same time that there will be pancakes.”

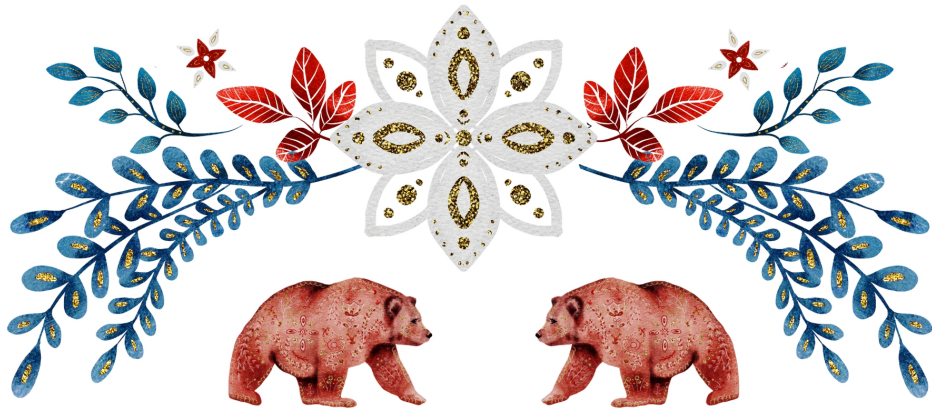
“A good start,” I laughed, running my fingers through his soft, dark hair.

“Then, we do whatever ceremony your sisters will likely insist on to make this official. Handfasting, marriage, lifebond, whatever you want.”

“I just want you,” I said, stroking the hair away from his brow. “But Izzy will likely insist on something a little formal. And then?”

“Then,” Orson growled, his voice a seductive rumble as he lifted himself over me, catching my mouth in another of his searing kisses. “Then I fuck you senseless for at least a month before we go hunting for the rest of the amulets. How does that sound?”

It sounded perfect, and who was I to argue with perfection?



EPILOGUE

CAPTAIN EVERETT EVERHART

“**C**ourtesy of Victor Gold,” I read aloud, crumpling the paper in my fist as I looked around the destruction of the office.

Whoever had tipped off the night guard had surely been involved in this affair to have alerted us so swiftly. There was blood everywhere, several pools of it where bodies ought to be, but had mysteriously vanished. There was a whole floor below filled with stolen goods, some items thought to be lost for decades, and even more illegally obtained items in the antiques shop below that.

Victor Gold was in custody, a list of his crimes supposedly left for me in the filing cabinet downstairs courtesy of his former accomplices. Something must have caused a falling out between them, and based on the state of the office, it had been deadly.

“What are your orders, Commander?” asked Jenkins, one of the younger recruits who was far too eager to prove himself to me.

I sighed, looking around at the blood and the claw marks and the general disaster as priceless artifacts were carried out of the building to be cataloged for evidence, the whole street watching with wide eyes and open mouths.

Of course, this would happen while I was already dealing with a royal murder, a string of unrelated thefts to the south, a plague of thorns surrounding Varenheim, and mounting pressure to find the cause of the endless winter.

There was only one family who could have their hands in so many proverbial pies.

“Take everything into evidence,” I said, nudging the leg of one of the injured guards who had been left for me to clean up. “And take Gold and his men in for questioning.”

“Gold claims not to know who he is,” Jenkins said, sounding apologetic. “But we can try, sir.”

“See that you do,” I said tightly, turning on my heel and heading for the door.

“And what are you going to do, sir, if you don’t mind me asking?” Jennings asked. I did mind, but I clenched my jaw, willing the frustration down deep as I leveled an icy stare at my subordinate.

“I’m going to pay a little visit to the Nightshade sisters.”

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To Shelly, for reading the book because she is my friend, and then deciding she loved it. I so appreciate your support and time in reading, even though I know you were busy.

To my ARC readers who took a chance on an unknown book and author, thank you for believing in me and loving free books.

Thank you to Chikovnaya from Canva Pro for the beautiful cover art that brought this book to life.

And finally, thank you, dear reader, for taking a chance on me. I hope you loved reading about Hadrian and Ember as much as I enjoyed writing them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MADELEINE ELIOT



Madeleine Eliot loves to read and write spicy romantasy with all of the best tropes. Dubbed the “Queen of Cozy” by her readers, Madeleine enjoys writing romantasy that is all vibes and spice, with a dash of adventure and world-building. She is always working on her next book, which is probably another spicy romantasy. Follow her adventures and latest

works at [instagram.com/madeleineeliotwrites](https://www.instagram.com/madeleineeliotwrites)

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