

A Ragoru Halloween Short



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S. J. SANDERS

HOWLING EVE

A RAGORU ORIGINS ROMANCE

SJ SANDERS

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Also by SJ Sanders](#)

[About the Author](#)

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CONTENT AND TRIGGER WARNINGS

Please be aware that this book contains graphic sex, violence,
and scenes of death on page.

CHAPTER
ONE



Skal was alone. He was old. He was scarred. And he was alone. He didn't try to follow the other males who formed triads and sought promised mates among an unfamiliar people—humans. He did not trust them. Their cities were loud, and they gathered like wasps on a hive, always ready to sting as far as he could see. Nor did he have any desire to form a triad. His males and his mate, like so many others before the passage, had died slow, terrible deaths on their home world. The gods were merciful in that he had never sired rogs only to watch them die as well. That he survived his mate was enough shame.

He was not a fool. He knew that this was a new chance and opportunity for males who lost their families to try again and had begun forming triads even before arriving to this world. He snarled unpleasantly at any male who attempted to approach him, ensuring that they would leave him alone. Skal was too old and too mean to welcome any other males into his company, and he had little interest in trying to attract another mate. He sought nothing more than some secluded place where he could pass what was left of his life in comfort and peace.

At least humans did not venture far from their hives, leaving much of the wilderness free. Much of it was filled with other monsters without a safe place to truly rest, but it was merely an inconvenience compared to what he had left behind. What he could sate his appetite on, he avoided as he continued to make his way among the vast stretches of land, looking for the place that he would call his.

He didn't need much. Many triads sought sprawling territories that would keep others far from their dens. He just wanted a small, defensible area that would make it easy for him to keep out Ragoru and humans alike.

Casting a look around the mist-shrouded forest, Skal rumbled in approval. He liked this place. Sheer cliffs of a mountain enclosed much of it, leaving only a narrow access point into it except for the forest that funneled into it from a small opening of land directly to the west. The mist poured in through the forest, gathering against the cliffs like water filling a basin. It was thick and dense, obscuring much of the woods within it. He was not a small male. Even among Ragoru, he tended to tower over most of them and was broader across the chest, and yet he felt comfortably concealed as he slipped through among the trees, the autumn leaves crunching softly beneath his paws.

His ears pricked, his sharp sight scanning for any hint of the dangerous predatory plants that grew where trees sprung up the thickest. He had to remain alert for their presence. Even a full-grown Ragoru could be pulled down by one of the monstrous plants and consumed. That aside, his stomach felt empty and hollow. Hunger gnawed at him. Traveling through the mountains had yielded little game, and now that he was in the woods, he was eager to search for prey.

His nose twitched as he slipped among the trees. He paused as he caught a faint, appealing scent. It was sweet, thick, and musky, with a sharp blend of spices that made him salivate. A branch cracked, and there was a rushed, rustling sound as something darted among the bushes. Skal's ear turned to follow the sound, but he dismissed it, suddenly far more intrigued by this new scent. Under the rich food smells, there was another tantalizing scent that he could not quite identify. It intrigued him, pulling him in as much as the other scent did. It pulled him through the woods and mist until a glow of light shimmered and broke through the haze. It pulled him up short because humans made this light, but he did not hesitate long.

The light was solitary and weak. A lone human or a very small number at most. Not enough to overpower a male such as himself. He would frighten them away and claim the territory and the delicious things within it for his own.

Skal's hackles rose with his excitement as he sped toward that light, watching as it grew bigger. He didn't stop until he was at the edge of a very small clearing where a human den sat in the midst without any others nearby. He slowly peered around, his nostrils flaring to pick up the scents. The tasty food smell was stronger than ever, but the other scent had grown as well and become more defined. A sweet human scent.

His head cocked curiously. This was unusual. Nearly all of his human experiences with human scents were stale and layered over each other repeatedly from the close contact that they seemed to enjoy with each other. They were not anything he considered appealing. It was actually the opposite. He disliked the sourness of human musk, but there was a ripeness and freshness to this human scent that made him lick his teeth hungrily. He was confused as to why it was alone, but he felt emboldened by it, too. There was no reason not to investigate. It had been so long since he felt intrigue over anything that he suddenly felt alive and excited.

Prowling through the darkening woods, he crept closer. His ears tipping forward, he cautiously scented the air as he closed the distance between himself and the human den, wary in case there was some sudden new arrival.

But no one came. There were no new sounds. No new unpleasant scents. Just the delicious scents that drifted from the wooden den, teasing his senses, and luring him in as much as the light called to him and invited him.

The hour was growing later, the darkness closing in among the heavy cluster of trees, and the mist thickened to a fog shrouding everything. It made his fur damp where it clung to him, and he wondered if the human knew that he was there. If the human could see his pale gray fur at all. If the human was scared.

Did he want them to be?

Skal wanted the territory and the strange den. But he also wanted the tasty things, including the human scent.

He would investigate and savor—and then he would decide if he would chase the human away or keep the human as his—as part of his new territory. He hungered for home and comfort, but these new scents made me hunger for something he hadn't desired for many turns of the seasons. He *hungered*.

CHAPTER
TWO



There was something out there.

Eve Brennon stood beside her window, staring out into the fog and heavy trees surrounding her home. She wasn't an adventurer to face the unknown. Over her transistor radio, she heard of the discovery of Evelyn Whitlock and had marveled over it at the time, even as she had shivered at what the agreements between their species and the aliens called Ragoru could mean. If she were Evelyn, she might have investigated and driven away whatever was hunting in her secluded woods. But she wasn't. Not even in the closeness in their names gave her an ounce more courage as she shivered and watched the fog crawl higher around her house with the arrival of night.

It didn't help that it was coming up on Halloween. Of all the things to survive from the old world, it was one of the few things that hung on with the most determination. No one forgot that it was the time of year when everything crept within the darkness and the worlds of the dead, the spirit, and the living encroached upon each other.

It was the perfect night to be eaten by some wayward monster, if there ever was one.

Eve shivered and drew her blanket around herself. Perhaps she should have moved into town like everyone insisted when her husband died, leaving her a young widow and all alone in the world since her parents had passed away years before in a freak accident. If she had, she would be protected by the town walls right now rather than all alone.

On the other hand, this was her home. She'd grown up here. The fog seldom lifted beyond a gentle mist, but she'd been born and raised there and could navigate her way among her orchards and raised gardens along the foothills without ever becoming lost or disoriented. She found it comforting, whereas her trips to the town market more often than not left her feeling terribly exposed. The power generator provided her with her few comforts and indulgences via satellite uplink. It was a solitary life, but her property was safe and cozy, and it didn't attract the predators among humans or wildlife that other places seemed to. Eve had never once felt even remotely uneasy in her little home... until now.

A shadow within the murky darkness shifted and moved. Her eyes warily tracked it as it seemed to slide closer from between the trees, her tongue glued to the back of her teeth. Her breath caught as the shadow loomed larger and two pairs of eyes glowed like luminous pinpricks cutting through the dark. And they were peering in her direction, as if something were out there watching her.

Her hands turned sweaty, and she wiped them on her thick, woolen pants as she tried to slow her rapid intakes of breath. It was possible that it could scent her fear from its current distance with the same clarity that it appeared to her watch. With its four glowing eyes and considerable size, there was no doubt in Eve's mind exactly what it was.

Ragoru.

It stood still for a long moment at the edge of the trees immediately surrounding her house and then slowly moved forward, a vague impression until the fog suddenly shifted and her eyes widened as she caught her first true glimpse of it, its pale, milky gray fur and enormous bulk just barely visible within the gloom, as if the Ragoru were an elemental demon materializing from the heavy vaporous cloud that filled her property.

Its jaw dropped, its mouth opening as it seemed to breathe deeply, and its teeth slid along its fangs, provoking Eve to wince in reaction as she withdrew a step from the glass that separated them. Its head cocked in noticeable response, its ears

twisting back as its fur seemed to expand as if its hackles were raised.

It burst from the fog then, streaking forward with such speed and blending into its surroundings to such a degree that she could barely track it. It didn't matter. She had no interest in standing there in front of the window on display, just begging to be murdered. She stumbled back, spinning around as her heart jumped violently within her chest. What was she standing there for? She needed to hide!

Biting back a fearful cry so that nothing escaped her but a whimper of dismay, Eve flew across the room but didn't get much farther before the door burst open with a vicious snap of wood, followed by a crash from where it collided against the wall. The snarled bellow that ripped through the room was brutal and deep, as if coming from the spirit of death himself.

All attempts to hold back her scream failed her in that moment, as she shrieked and spun around to face the danger as the monster crashed into her house as the fog billowed in through the door with it. She was certain her heart was going to burst from her chest, and she felt incredibly stupid to stop running when every instinct told her to go, go, go! But somewhere, self-preservation also kicked in, reminding her that it was colossally stupid to try and run from a predator.

Its paws slid a little on the waxed wooden floor with a screech of claws that sent it into the wall, but to her shock, it turned its back on her to bound into the kitchen, its tail a thick flag behind it tipped in a darker shade of gray. It was of a color similar to a strip of fur that ran down its back around the large, curved spine-like plating over its spine. Standing in place, she gaped at the view of its backside as it tore into her kitchen. She couldn't imagine what it was after until it scooped up her partially cooled pumpkin pie and drove its muzzle into it, snapping at the steaming pits of pumpkin with its long fangs.

She stared at the ruined pie forlornly and with no little shock as it went into the monster's maw, and words tumbled thoughtlessly from between her lips.

“Hey! Fuck off, that’s mine!” she snapped as she stormed forward and instinctively grabbed her broom from where it rested, leaning against her wall.

The creature paused, its ears turning toward her, and two pairs of eyes lifted to narrow on her in a threat that was a little less intimidating considering that the Ragoru’s muzzle was smeared with pie and its mouth bulging with it.

It gave her a thoughtful look as it lifted its head and swallowed. It cut an amused look toward her broom—which suddenly made her feel silly to be holding it—and proceeded to hold out the decimated remains of the pie in her direction.

“Don’t growl at me, puny human. There is plenty left,” it grumbled in a deep voice as it shifted position, its thick legs spreading wide, revealing a large, furred sheath. The sight of it made her thighs press together nervously with an unwelcome awareness that not only was she alone with a male Ragoru—a species who specifically were in an agreement with the government to mate with human women—but he could also be packing something large enough to practically split her in half. This was not the week of Halloween’s seasonal spooks and thrills she was looking forward to enjoying. Swallowing apprehensively, Eve wrenched her eyes back to his face.

“You know what—on second thought, keep it,” she amended hurriedly. “Just take it with my blessing and be on your way.”

He snarled, and something within her shriveled a little at the sight of all of those sharp teeth.

“Oh, I do not think so, little human. I do believe I will be staying right here,” he rumbled as he gave her a sly look. “You are free to leave.”

Wait, what?

“Excuse me, what? This is my home. I’m not going anywhere,” she replied. and she immediately winced when he snapped his teeth in response.

It apparently was not the reaction he was looking for, however, because he settled back further on his haunches and

regarded her quizzically for a long moment. He must have come to some decision, however, because in the next moment he resumed consuming the pie, ignoring her entirely. Eve stood there haplessly for a moment or two before setting the broom aside, slowly turning on her heel, and making her way back to the master bedroom, locking her door behind her.

Perhaps his demand was all for the shock effect. If so, he would get bored and leave if he didn't have an audience. She could only hope. Stripping off her clothes, Eve crawled into her enormous bed and pulled her blanket over her head. *At least he was alone and wasn't with a full triad—that was something, right?*

Her silent query to herself wasn't much comfort. She only hoped that he was gone in the morning, like every other bizarre nightmare.

CHAPTER
THREE



S kal snapped up the last remaining bites of the food stuff in his hand. It was hot enough that it still burned his mouth just a little and was in a hard vessel that was overly warm to the touch, but it was so delicious that he didn't give it much thought. He tested it with his teeth just to be certain that it was not edible before settling for licking the remaining flavor and bits from its surface as he stared at the closed barrier.

In spite of himself, he was far too intrigued by the little human who had dared to scold him like a rog.

He had not expected to find a female alone in the den. He inhaled again to see if he could catch a hint of any other humans. Certainly, a mate would not be far. With such a comfortably enclosed territory—and one that seemed exceptionally plentiful in game from what his nose had told him before he had become distracted—a male would not have traveled far from his den to provide for his mate. While the female's defiance was amusing to him, a male would be more of a potential threat that he would have to settle quickly.

To his surprise, the den contained no other scents than the female and food things. That puzzled him. Why would she be there alone? Ragoru females, when they were mature, wandered over vast territories until they accepted a triad as worthy to mate and denned with them, but unlike humans, who were smaller than their male counterparts, females were larger and far more dangerous of the species. Seeing a human female for the first time in passing had surprised him when he

noted how much smaller they typically were compared to their males. And this female seemed even smaller and more fragile in appearance than even those.

He did not enjoy the feeling of concern that tightened his chest at the thought of such a tiny female alone and providing for herself. Not that she did not have a big spirit. He smiled to himself. She had even lifted her sweeper against him. Although constructed differently, he recognized it as similar to one he had assembled himself of wild grasses and a spindly branch broken from one of the many trees that failed to thrive on his home world. His mate had trusted no one else but him to make such things as their sweepers and baskets since he had a patient and skilled hand, unlike the other males in his triad. Skal immediately thrust the memory aside, preferring to keep his mind on the present and the fascinating puzzle the female made.

She was frightened. There was no mistaking the scent of her fear. But she did not flee at his snarl or the snap of his teeth other than to block him out of that part of the den where he suspected she slept since there was no comfortable nest here. He assumed that humans were like Ragoru in this manner that they nested in a separate, more secure chamber further from the entrance. Since she did not possess the fur that his kind did, he suspected that her nest was a very fine one, lush and comfortable. He imagined her curled up in it, her delicate flesh warm and pleasant to the touch. He grumbled quietly to himself. He missed having a warm female to curl up with and breathe in her sweet scent.

He suspected that this female would be very enjoyable to nest with. He had no doubt that she would be comfortably warm without reaching a stifling heat that came with sharing a nest with other Ragoru. Not only that, but her scent was the sweetest and most pleasing he recalled ever enjoying, even if it was blunted by the barrier between them. He grunted quietly to himself, suddenly annoyed at it, but shook his head with self-disgust and set the pie dish on the table as he glanced over at the dying fire.

His mind was going in unhealthy and ridiculous directions. There was plenty of warmth here. He certainly did not need to curl up in a nest with a female who did not enjoy his company. Once was enough for that. Despite the fact that he was the lead male, and his mate chose him, he always suspected that it was born out of desperation as resources forced males to abandon old territories to hunt for new ones. He did his best to please his mate, but being tied to a female who chased him away at every opportunity was not an experience he was looking to repeat.

The fire was more than preferable, and the den was warm. There was even a sitting bench with a strange high back on it that he imagined could be comfortable enough when sitting and supportive enough to allow him to sleep on it. It was too short to accommodate his full size and nowhere near as plush as the sitting benches he once made, but it would do. But first, he would remove the dirt he brought into his new den. Dirt had a habit of creeping in on its own just fine, without more coming in on him.

Turning his back to the barrier to the nesting room, Skal went over and picked up the sweeper where the female had dropped, making short work of removing the dirt, dust, and flaky bits from his meal as he swept it all out the door. Setting the sweeper against the wall, he returned to the fire, banked it so that its heat would continue long into the night, and stretched himself over the sitting bench with a groan. His legs hung over the edge as he expected, but it was only a minor annoyance compared to the uncomfortable padding beneath him. He would have to fix that. He would hunt well to begin drying meat for winter while preparing the furs for his nest.

Idly, he wondered if the female would continue to stubbornly linger. He could not bring himself to actually hurt her in any way. The Mother would strike him if he ever dared such a thing. That he also did not have it in him to continue trying to frighten her was more surprising. She had earned some measure of respect from him. He would not be driven off, but he would not protest if she insisted on staying.

He might even enjoy it if she did.

CHAPTER
FOUR



He was still there. Eve could scarcely believe it. She peered out through the cracked bedroom door and eyed the massive Ragoru stretched out over her couch. Were they all so big? The couch was considered large to comfortably fit a family, and yet his legs hung over the edge, the arm of the couch supporting them at the back of his knees.

She gave his feet a curious glance. They were larger than those of even the biggest of men, or perhaps even larger considering that his feet were structured like those of a predator who ran, walked, and stood on their toes. The paws were thick with enormous, dense pads like those of a canine if a dog were ever born possessing such a massive scale in size. She wondered exactly how tall he was when he stood at his full height. Between all the running and then the Ragoru crouching while eating up her pie, she was uncertain just how big of a male he was. She shivered a little as her eyes ran over him. The high council really expected human women to fuck *that*? It didn't seem even remotely possible.

Scoping out the rest of the room, Eve noted with some relief that her grandmother's pie dish was lying unbroken on the table, and even the fire in the hearth was banked. It wouldn't take much to get it going again... and she was going to need it. Casting a dour look toward the broken door that still lay wide open—since clearly the Ragoru didn't even think of trying to, at very least, close it much less fix it—she shivered with the chilly autumn air that filled the house. It was just warm enough still from the banked coals to keep the fog from

drifting far into the interior, but it wouldn't stay that way with a new fire built up and the door repaired.

She bit her lip as she considered her uninvited “guest.” The broken door aside, he at least wasn't terribly messy. He didn't wear any clothes to leave strewn around the house like Victor had the habit of doing. Nor was there a trail of dirty footprints, as if he had swept all the debris that had come in with him out the door. Even the way the pie dish sat neatly on the table was politer than she expected. He could have cast aside the pie dish once he was finished, and it could have shattered all over her floor. She'd half expected to come out and find the entire place torn apart and covered in filth, and yet the broken door and the large male growling and rumbling in his sleep on her couch were the only things indicative of the Ragoru barging in last night.

For the first time since Victor died, Eve didn't know what to do. Victor had been the one to give her direction. She'd been young when her parents died, and she'd been lost with her entire world falling apart. Victor had swooped in out of nowhere like a hero. He wasn't from town—in fact, no one knew where he came from, and he never said, other than a few pithy comments that he traveled in from the east, but all she'd known was that he was there just in time to save her. Then, a few years later, he was gone, and it had happened all over again. Over the last year and a half, she'd had to learn to figure it out and survive on her own, and by the Mother, she would do it again!

Just... where to start? She usually went out to check the vegetables in the tiered gardens on the hills first thing once the fog settled into a light covering of mist for the day. On days when the fog remained thick, she stayed inside. The sun was shining, and the mist covering was light, but she was nervous about leaving the alien in her house alone. What if he woke up and barricaded her out of her home? He certainly seemed intent on claiming it for himself.

Eve jumped as a deep snort erupted from him, and her pulse picked up nervously as his eyes blinked open groggily. They swept over the room and focused in on her as he lifted

one of his hands and scratched the dense fur covering his chest. He sat up, and his tongue swiped over his sharp teeth and then rolled out as he gave a monstrous yawn. He watched her shiver in place for a long moment, and his mouth downturned with the lowering of his brow as he glanced toward the broken door. Without a word, he stooped down to add wood to the hearth and stoked the fire back to life before turning toward her.

Eve froze as he stalked toward her. He was even more massive than she had expected! He towered over her, with a chest that was so broad and a body so heavily muscled beneath all of that fur. Her neck craned back, and her eyes widened as he closed the distance between them. She swore she felt something magnetic pulling at her stronger with his every step. Something within his eyes seemed to brighten and fill with heat as he drew closer. Did he feel it, too? Her mind whirled with all the gossip that she'd heard in town whenever she went in to attend the market. Was he going to snatch her up and illegally claim her for his own without going through the proper channels in the citadel? Was he going to ravish her there in the middle of her house until she was so crazy that she begged him to stay?

She had no answer. All she had was the sudden race of her pulse and the strange butterflies fluttering in her belly in anticipation of the unknown and all possibilities, even as she dreaded them. Suddenly, he was there, right in front of her! The Ragoru was looming over her so closely that she could swear that she felt the intense heat coming off of his body and the soft, silky brush of his fur against her arm.

And he strode right past her.

She blinked and spun around in surprise to find the male's back to her, his head moving as he held the broken door and inspected it. Frazzled, Eve crossed her arms over her chest and focused on glaring at the door. The door that *he* broke. Size aside, the way he came through that door spelled out that he was nothing more than a brute determined to barrel through any obstacle to get what he wanted. She was glad that he clearly had no interest in doing all those things that the

townspeople gossiped about. She still wasn't convinced that they were in any way, shape, or form compatible. She was fortunate that the male was apparently no risk to her virtue.

Her mouth dipped a little as a sour feeling settled in her chest. Was there something wrong with her? Though he had his generous moments, Victor had been less than charitable in his comments about her abilities in the bedroom and had made no secret of the fact that he found her a little plain, especially since her figure tended more towards plump than elegant or athletic. But his cock had risen eagerly enough when they had retired to bed in the evening—it had been enough to ease some of her doubts. But now they were all rushing back to her. Maybe there was something lacking. None of the men in town ever offered for her, and it seemed that she couldn't even attract something as monstrous as a Ragoru.

A Ragoru who, with a shake of his head, just tossed her door out the doorway!

Eve gaped as her eyes followed the door to its undignified crash to the ground. "What are you doing? That's my door!"

The male gave her a cross look and rolled his shoulders. "It is broken."

She sputtered for a moment and drew in a deep breath as she aimed a tight smile in his direction. "I know it is broken. Why not just fix it?"

He tapped the spot on the frame where the metal hinges had pulled completely free. Worse, chunks of wood had been pulled away with them. Eve winced. That didn't look good.

"I do not know how to fix this. The wood here is damaged," he informed her gruffly.

"Whose fault is that?" she snapped before she could think better of it.

The moment the words left her lips, sounding a lot like begging for repercussions, she slapped her hand over her mouth in horror. What was she thinking? To her surprise, a soft chuffing rumble left him that sounded suspiciously like laughter, and all four of his gleaming eyes narrowed on her.

“Where I am from, we made and stored tools that we would use to repair our dens. It was different. We lashed tough hides over the entrance of our dens, but I am familiar with working with wood.” He gave the doorframe another long glance and nodded. “I carved many things. I could reshape this if you have something sharp that I can use. It would take me a lot of time to scrape this down this by claw.”

“Oh.” She gave him a curious look and nodded. “My father had tools stored in the attic. I don’t think they’ve been brought down more than once since he put them up there. Victor wasn’t much for fixing things, and I only needed to make a small repair in the kitchen once,” she added.

She knew she was rambling. The Ragoru certainly didn’t need to know that, and yet she was relieved when the large male nodded.

“Get them, and I will attempt to fix this barrier.”

Eve licked her lips uncertainly and was embarrassed by the warm feeling that rushed to her belly when his eyes seeped to track the movement of her tongue. “What then?” His head cocked, and Eve rushed to explain. “What will happen then? Are you going to kill me?”

His lip curled in an expression she hoped was disgust, and he shook his head. “Ragoru do not kill females.”

“Then what are you planning on doing with me?” Her words came out more of a pathetic squeak than she wanted, but the Ragoru seemed to take no notice of it as he grunted and leaned against the door to eye her patiently.

“I will do nothing. You live as you please,” he grumbled.

A tiny little spark of hope kindled within her, and she drew a sharp breath. “Are you planning to leave, then?”

“No.” And just that quick, with that one word growled at her, that little spark blinked out in a quick death. He scratched his chest and shrugged. “But I will not force you from the den. You may leave or stay as and when you like.”

Her brows knitted together as she regarded him. “You are telling me that you are going to *allow* me to live in *my* house?”

“My house,” he corrected with a sharp snap of his teeth that made her jump slightly in spite of herself. His pronunciation of the word “house” was strange, as if the use of the word was unfamiliar to him—but then he had been calling it a den. “I claim this territory. Males claim territory and set up their dens. Females pass through, and males accept this. I accept your presence.”

“Well, what if I don’t accept yours?” she bit back but was met with a bland look that told her all she needed to know regarding his opinion on that. Sighing, she rubbed her jaw and gave him a perplexed look. “Okay, why do you accept me?”

He shrugged and turned his attention back to the door frame. Eve eyed him for a long moment and sighed again. A stand-off wasn’t getting her anywhere.

“All right. I will be right back,” she muttered, and she stalked back toward the rear of the house.

It didn’t take her long to grab the box of tools and carry them down the ladder from the attic. She lowered them to the floor, a safe distance away from the alien, and gestured to the box.

“There they all are. I have no idea what most of them do, so I guess I’ll leave you at it. I will go see what vegetables are ripe in the garden.” She paused and squinted at him in suspicion. “You aren’t going to lock me out if I go out there, will you?”

He gruffly chuffed again in amusement, and she relaxed and felt a tiny smile pull at the corners of her mouth. With a nod, she slipped out the door but couldn’t quite stop the smile that broke out over her face and the tiny chuckle that bubbled inside of her. The nuances of the Ragoru’s facial expressions were a little harder to read than those of a human. He seemed pretty grumpy when he wasn’t laughing at her, but he was actually a bit funny himself. It was, without a doubt, the strangest situation she’d ever been in. but at least it was interesting. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad? If nothing else, the feeling of loneliness may abate some while he was around. It had been a long time since she had anyone there but herself.

CHAPTER
FIVE



Skal had planned on hunting that day, but fixing the barrier that the human called a door took most of the daylight hours. Mostly because he was nothing but a perfectionist. He worked the wood until it was smooth, and using a small boring tool that whirled to life when the female returned and pushed the end into the wall, he was able to reposition the metal parts and get the door secured in place once more. Although the tools and structure were unfamiliar and different compared to the den he had prepared so long ago, once he understood what he was supposed to be doing, and how, he found a peculiar satisfaction in it. There was something about the repetitive motions, the feel of the solid wood beneath his hands, and the scent of it that calmed him as he worked.

A grunt of satisfaction left him as he tightened the last metal piece and slowly stood. His eyes narrowing on the door, he carefully closed it, his ears pricking when the door aligned just right so that it snicked shut, fitting perhaps better than it had before. A smile stole over his face, and he experimentally opened it again and moved the door back and forth to test the door's stability. This was far better than a stretched hide. Releasing the door, Skal stretched the muscles of his back. They were tight from laboring over the door, but it was a good feeling. It spoke of accomplishment and the comfort of settling into his den and making it his own. Dragging in a deep breath of the cool air, *her* scent tickled his nose, drawing his attention to the lone figure picking its way through the fog toward the house with a large basket in hand.

His ears tipped toward her, taking in the soft sounds she made as she neared. The quiet draw and exhalation of her breath, the light crunch of leaves and greenery beneath her feet. Other than these soft sounds, she could easily be a living shadow herself there within the fog. An illusion to entice him from his den with the soft sway of her rounded hips with her every step. She did not have a tail to accentuate the movement, but he didn't find any lack in that. It was her scent that teased him and called to him through the fog that made his fur prickle with wariness even as his shafts thickened within his sheath.

A soft growl left him. With the fog between them, the female was a tantalizing thing—all scent and shadow that triggered an unexpected yearning within him. It was more than a desire to simply bury his cocks within a warm female body. There was a stronger desire that rose from the depths of him that he shied away from and tried to ignore.

His human was like a nishagolin—a spirit of the land who tempted unbound males to tie them to her and consume his seed to make the forests and mountains verdant with life. In the steady light within the den, he would not have believed her to be a nishagolin, but out in the ceaseless mists of the woods and the full ache of his seedsacks filling for her as her scent engulfed him, he could believe it.

Was this how she had first seen him? A shadow of the forest come to life? As a male of his size, she doubtlessly felt no seductive call that he felt now, but an unknown predator stirring in the fog, prowling. He wanted to prowl away from the den now and stalk his sweet quarry. His cocks twitched with their eager demand, but he snapped his teeth against the growl of need that attempted to rumble through his chest as the female suddenly emerged from the fog, her eyes wide and blinking as she jerked to a stop and stared up at him as if surprised to see him there. A faint pink stain rose to her cheeks, and her plush human lips parted.

“Oh!” She took a hesitant step back.

He blinked at the scent of her fear and took a step back as well, shaking his head to clear it from the fog of lust that had flooded him. What had he been thinking? His cocks had not

risen for anyone for revolutions, but they came to life for her? Not only that, but his entire ability to reason had completely deserted him, to the point of fixation on her approaching through the fog. It was alarming at best for a male who had no desire to be mixed up in such things again.

“Sorry. I didn’t expect to see you out here,” she said quietly, giving him a long, uncertain look.

Skal grunted and cleared his throat, dipping his head toward the door. “I fixed it,” he grumbled, intentionally drawing her attention to the repairs he made, all the while hating the fact that some part of him wanted her to see his work and be pleased by it.

Her large brown eyes turned the door and widened. “Oh! It looks as good as new! Better, in fact. I don’t think it ever hung quite so straight. You did this?”

The look she gave him was full of surprise but also pleasure, and it took all of his willpower not to preen like a newly mated alpha. Instead, he narrowed his eyes on her and huffed in mock offense as he pulled the door open for her.

“I am not a helpless Rog. I said I could repair the wood, and so I did,” he grumbled, gesturing to the lit interior. His muzzle wrinkled as he glanced up at the rapidly fading sunlight. “You lack fur, and it’s becoming colder. Get inside.”

Her lips pressed together, but he did not miss the faint upward hitch at the corner of her mouth. It sent a strange warmth within his belly as she passed him and stepped into the den. He ran his claws over his abdomen, scratching lightly. Perhaps he was allergic to something that the female had in her den that was making him feel odd.

“Well, it is better than Victor did,” she muttered in a low voice as she glanced toward the door in passing, and his ears twitched with curiosity even as something within him tightened darkly.

Who was Victor? A male? Skal’s lips pulled from his sharp teeth, a low growl rolling in his chest. He would not tolerate any other males there. An unwanted female was one thing.

Females were to be protected. A male he did not have to suffer, nor would he.

Setting her heavy basket on the table, she unwound the thick band wrapped around her neck and peeled off her outer covering, dropping them onto the very small human sitting bench. He eyed it speculatively, uncertain if it would even hold his weight as she continued on into what appeared to be a food preparation area at an unhurried pace.

“I noticed that you like pumpkin. I cut another from the pumpkin patch at the edge of the orchards. They need less fussing over than most other plants and do well with the extra nutrients and sun that they get out there near the mountain. Anyway, I thought I might make some pumpkin soup. I’m afraid I don’t have much in the way of meat right now, but it’s the least that I can offer,” she said as she bent down and pulled out a large, round metal container and set it on a metal surface in front of her.

Skal grunted. He should have found time to hunt. He could survive without the meat—it was something that he had done many times before, starving himself to feed his family—but for some reason it did not feel right that there was no good meat available for the female. Unwilling to touch the small sitting benches, he crouched low and rested his arms against the firm muscles of his thighs as he watched her move about the small space. He startled briefly when a flame sprung up without the use of the flint and ore that he kept in a small bag hanging from a cord and hidden in the ruff of fur around his throat. Discovering the valuable stones had been a moment of triumph, but now he wondered what more this new world offered. Dens made out of wood and now fires that sprung to life with just a move of the fingers. It was all strange and new.

Ears pricking, Skal watched her as she pulled out a large wooden board and a blade and began to cut into the large orange fruit. Its musky, sweet scent sprung into the air with each score of the blade into its meat. As if sensing his gaze fixed on her, her eyes flicked over to him for just a moment, and her lips twitched yet again, intriguing him with their delicate curl.

“I suppose that if we are going to be doing this, we might as well call each other something other than human and Ragoru. Or female,” she added with a wrinkle of her nose in obvious distaste.

He chuffed, the rusty sound springing unbidden from him. Perhaps it was getting a little tiring, though he was still tempted to think of her privately as a nishagolin who cunningly ensnared him within her territory. That he was not fighting for his freedom to escape the valley should alarm him, because that was yet another sign of a lone triad-less male being caught. He was not sure if he wanted her name, however. That was too intimate. Made their shared den a little too real for him. His ears flattened sullenly, and his mouth clamped shut.

“Okay,” the female hummed, giving him a wry look over her shoulder. “Well, suit yourself. I know that *I* would prefer to be called by my name if you are going to be sticking around. I’m Eve. Just Eve, nothing fancier than that. Eve Brennon, if you want my full name.”

“I did not ask or want it,” he grumbled sourly, ignoring the flutter of warmth in his chest at the sound of her name.

She gave him another sidelong glance. “Of course not. Me offering my name has nothing at all to do with you other than requesting that you use it instead of referring to me as something that makes me feel like less of a person. You don’t have to give me your name,” she added in a thoughtful voice. “I can just think of something better to call you. You mentioned rog. It sounds like a short version of Ragoru. I could call you that or Roggy.”

“No!” he barked, his fur bristling. She jumped and gave him a surprised look, and he swallowed back a sick feeling that rose from startling her. “Rog is a youngling,” he grumbled in explanation.

Her cheeks pinkened in that odd sickly way again and she gave an embarrassed laugh. “Ah. Sorry. I probably should have thought of that. It just sounded like it was a short, cute

way of talking of your species...I guess. Well, maybe something else then..."

"Skal," he snapped in exasperation. "My name is Skal."

Her lips curled with satisfaction, and she turned back to her work, dumping the pile of chopped-up orange vegetation into the vessel as she hummed softly to herself. Skal blinked, and he peered at her, his ears tipping toward her slowly as he wondered for a moment if this female was as clever as she was brave. Had he had been tricked? If so, then why was it that he didn't quite mind so much? It was extremely perplexing, and he found himself studying her, waiting for any other signs of the unexpected. Perhaps she was a nishagolin after all.

CHAPTER
SIX



Ever hugged her shawl around herself as she stared at the frost clinging to the living room windowpane. It had felt chilly when she returned from her gardens, but she hadn't thought it was quite that cold. This morning, however, had a stinging, abrupt chill to the air that had motivated her to stumble over the large Ragoru sprawled in her way as she hurried to start a fire in the early hours of the morning. The overnight frost wasn't unexpected... it was just inconvenient.

Although the harvest would keep fine for a while yet, it meant that she would have to quit putting off walking into town to barter for a new mule. Mechanical vehicles didn't hold up so well in the constant dampness of her foggy little valley. It was her grandparents who had traded in their large land-rider vehicle for a pair of mules and a sturdy wooden cart. Her parents replaced the cart a few years before they died, and it was still in good working order. Unfortunately, the old mule hadn't lasted beyond her last harvest. Which meant that if she wanted to haul in her barrels of apples and the harvest of pumpkins and vegetables to the market, she needed that mule.

An unhappy sigh left her as she clutched her shawl tighter. She could probably ride the mule back if she got one that was accustomed to a saddle, but it would be a several-day walk to get there. She shivered at the idea of camping out on the road. The icy overnight temperatures were bad enough, but the town itself was at the edge of the Habitable Zone, and her little farm was a little farther out than that. Predators seldom found their way into her valley, but in the thick forest outside of it, it was another story.

Nothing could be done about it, though. What bartering among the other farmers didn't take care of, she needed the credits for what she could sell to restock her supplies. Her tea, flour, and sugar were all getting low. Biting back another sigh, Eve pulled herself away from the window and headed toward the kitchen. She could hear Skal grumbling quietly to himself by the fire. She hadn't quite woken him when she tripped over his large, sprawled bulk, but from the way he was grunting in his sleep, she was certain that he wouldn't sleep much longer. It gave her enough time, perhaps, to collect some eggs for their breakfast. But first she would put the kettle on so that the water had time to heat while she was out feeding the chicken and gathering the eggs from the coop behind the house.

Tucking her hair behind her ear, Eve grabbed the kettle from the stove and stuck it under the faucet. Opening the lever, cold well-water splashed into the kettle. She usually only filled it less than halfway so as to not waste water, but there was also her guest—companion?—to consider. Did Ragoru drink tea? She didn't even know if he would eat fried eggs for that matter. Better to make enough for both of them, and if he declined, then there was no harm, and she would know better next time. It wasn't like her hens didn't produce more eggs than she'd ever been able to eat by herself.

Igniting the burner on the stove, she filled a large cup full of seed and fetched the collection basket down from where it was hanging by the door. A quick glance in Skal's direction affirmed that the male was still sound asleep, now sprawled on his back, the shorter fur along his muscles and belly showing off a distracting amount of impressive muscular definition. At that angle, it was harder to ignore the similarity in build between their species—if not for all the pale gray fur, a thick, rounded sheath that hid away his sex and everything inhuman below his knees and above the thick muscle of his pectorals. There was so much of him that was simply alien, but the sculpted shape of his torso made her cheeks flush with awareness, and she couldn't quite help glancing down curiously at his furred bulge and the full testicles that lay just behind it. She knew that he didn't wear clothes like humans did—who could blame him with all the thick protective fur

covering his body?—but given that Skal spent so much of his time crouching when he was at rest, Eve simply hadn't given much thought to what his body was like until seeing it spread out before her.

She ran her tongue along her suddenly dry lips. She knew that Ragoru and humans were breeding compatible—otherwise there wouldn't be women who were sent from the citadels to be mated with them following the agreement between the high citadel and the Feriknikal. She had just never really been able to conceive of *how* exactly it worked. Staring down at his torso, even with his cock hidden away, she suddenly had a much better idea of how a woman would fit against a Ragoru's much larger body.

Heat gathered within her and spread across her chest and deep into her belly as she stared, transfixed. His hips pumped up with a growl, the thick, dark head of a cock pushing through his sheath with a stream of hot liquid spurting down both lengths, causing an instantaneous reaction within her as a warm, musky scent hit her nose. Her belly clenched with excitement, and heat gathered between her thighs as his sheath stretched even further as a second cock extruded with the first. Holy Mother! Here she was just watching his dick make an appearance like a pervert.

Eve's eyes slammed shut as she spun away, her breath bursting from her in a tiny, humiliating pant. Blindly grabbing ahold of the doorknob, she hurried out into the cold morning air, allowing the door to swing shut behind her. She drew in a deep breath of the cold morning air and then another as she took a moment to allow her cheeks to cool. She fanned herself, her eyes roving around the foggy yard around the house, a soft, nervous chuckle escaping her.

Gracious Mother of All, that was something. She couldn't recall ever being that worked up—with barely even seeing anything at that. Even Victor, when he was excited and ready to fuck, didn't inspire such a strong reaction in her. And he had been considered very attractive by the locals when he moved into town. So much so that she had believed herself lucky to have attracted his attention and protection. Certainly,

several women in town had fussed over it, cooing over the way he was always by her side when she came into town, eager to help. Of course, she could have been flattered, and it only made sense to accept his proposal to ease some of the loneliness. She had just assumed that her lack of enthusiasm for intimacy with him was because she wasn't a very sexual person.

She had barely warmed with his impatient groping, but now she was burning up with desire with only a glimpse of what Skal offered as he slept. She shivered at the thought and hurried around to the back of the house, where she was promptly greeted by the cluck of her hens and the ornery call of her rooster as he hopped up onto the roof of the coop. His wings beat the air for a moment until he realized that she was scattering seed over the grass and dropped with a flurry of feathers down to eat with his ladies. Eve shook her head at them and continued to toss seed out away from the coop until her cup was empty and she could set it aside. Picking her basket up from the grass once more, she made her way over to the coop and hunted for the eggs among the little nests inside before scouting around the outside for any sign of eggs laid and hidden in the grass. Her lips curled with every recovered egg until she had nearly a neat dozen in her basket and a broad grin on her face as she headed back to the house with breakfast.

As it happened, it didn't take much to wake Skal up. The smell of hot eggs coming off the pan and tea brewing was soon accompanied by the quiet steps of a Ragoru coming to investigate. His twitching nose peeking into the kitchen was the first thing that she saw, and it was quickly followed by the rest of his head. His yellow eyes fastened on her and his tongue swept over his sharp teeth and muzzle.

"That smells good, hu—Eve," he corrected, earning a pleased smile from her at his quick recovery despite his mean glower.

"I'm glad you think so, because I made plenty. Come sit. I will give you the tea unsweetened, and you can doctor it as you like. There is goat milk and a small amount of sugar left in

the bowl.” She gestured to the set table, and he gave it a wary look as he slowly approached it.

Skal gripped the chair in one hand and wiggled it a bit before letting it go with a disdainful snort, his muzzle wrinkling in a clear grimace. She watched him from the corner of her eye as she flipped an egg, curious as to what he was going to do. Giving one final disgusted look at the chair, he stalked out of the house, the door slamming shut behind him. Eve stared at the door, her mouth gaping open in surprise, wondering if he had simply left her, but then jumped at the sharp crack that came from outside. It was followed by three others, and then suddenly the door flew open again, and Skal entered carrying a large log that she immediately recognized.

Nearly half her height and more than double the reach of her arms, the log he brought in was one that she’d used for chopping wood on. She couldn’t even lift the blasted log, and Skal carried it inside and thunked it on the floor at the table as if it were practically weightless. She stared at it, a protest forming on her lips as she thought about all the borrowing insects that he had surely carried in with it until she noticed that he not only stripped off the bark but several layers of wood growth while he was outside. Although it was possible that some pests lingered, Eve relaxed considerably as the Ragoru settled on it with a deep grunt of approval before picking up the teacup closest to him.

Bringing the cup close to his muzzle, Skal sniffed and carefully lapped at the tea. Eve swallowed back a laugh at the way his face twisted, and his tongue hung out slightly as he shuddered at the bitter flavor.

“Poison!” he snarled around a gag.

“No, I swear it’s not. Sorry,” she giggled. “I should have warned you that the tea is pretty strong without being fixed up at all. Just add a little cream and sugar until it’s how you like it.”

His eyes narrowed, his ears flattening suspiciously, but she just smiled at him guilelessly as she flipped the eggs onto the two plates on the counter in front of her. His eyes never left

her as he reached for the small pitcher of cream. He drizzled in a small amount and followed it with a small cube of sugar before taking another experimental taste. He grimaced again, but she was glad that his reaction was not quite so strong. He continued to tweak the contents of his cup as she loaded their plates with honey-roasted tubers and pumpkin, some sausage links she found in the cooling box, and a sort of milled grain pancake from a strain of wheat that was a combinant variation created from an indigenous strain hybridized with one from earth. By the time she brought the plates to the table, she was pleased to see that his hackles were no longer raised, and he was contently lapping at the tea in the cup. His ears pricked with interest, however, when his eyes fell upon the plates and his expression turned suspicious.

“You prepared all this for me? Why?”

She gave him a confused look. Although they ate fruit, bread, and small flaky bits of ghost cheese throughout much of the day, it wasn't like she hadn't cooked for him. Granted, the pumpkin soup, while filling, didn't quite have the same presentation as the spread now laid out before them. Eve looked over it and shrugged.

“I figured that I might as well work on using up some of what's left of my supplies and take the opportunity to fill my belly now before I make my way to town. You may as well enjoy it, too, since it will be the last of my cooking for a while. It will take me a few days to make the trip,” she hurried to explain when his brow lowered, “but I'm sure that you'll be glad to have the house to yourself, and there's plenty of game that makes its home in the valley. You're of course welcome to make use of anything you find—except my animals,” she clarified. “The goat and the chickens are off-limits. And the mule I bring back will be, too.”

A soft growl left him, his yellow eyes slitting, and for a moment Eve felt a fear conflict with a bizarre sense of arousal that swept through her.

“Why?” He snarled. “Who do you go to meet?”

“Meet?” She blinked at him. “Well, hopefully someone is willing to let me buy their mule off of them.”

Some very small amount of the tension around him eased. “I don’t understand,” he grumbled bitterly, and Eve gave him a sympathetic look. “You are speaking in confusing riddles, and I do not like it. Stop.”

Eve bristled, her sympathy waning rapidly as she glared at the male seated across the table from her in Victor’s place. Speaking in riddles? She did no such thing. She was simply being honest with him. It wasn’t her fault that he was dumped on her planet with the expectation to breed with humans that they knew nothing about. And yet *he* was angry with *her*. Part of her wanted to verbally strike back at him and give him a piece of her mind over his own social failings. There was no reason for him to be so snarly with her! She never appreciated it when Victor snapped or snarled at her over the most ridiculous things, but she had overlooked it because he was who she had chosen. That didn’t mean that she was going to take it from an uninvited Ragoru who had invaded her home. A sharp word lingered on the tip of her tongue, but she reluctantly bit it back as she considered the way he hunkered defensively over his plate, his ears laid back as if expecting some manner of retaliation.

She frowned at that and sighed heavily, drawing his wary yellow gaze reluctantly to her. That touched something within her. Although he was a very convincing brute, there was something vulnerable about the way he looked in that moment that touched her heart a little. She empathized with it because she often felt that way when dealing with the townspeople, after dealing with the small-minded meanness of so many of the people there. Despite how many people tried to coax her multiple times to move into town when she was left all on her own, she knew that it wasn’t because anyone there genuinely cared about her. And now she no longer had Victor to act as a buffer, allowing her to escape their attention, so now every interaction was one filled with anxiety for her.

Although she didn’t know what potential trauma Skal suffered to get him to react that way, she believed she

understood. He was confused, and for some reason, the idea of her meeting with someone upset him—perhaps because it made him suspicious that she was going to look for someone to remove him from her farm. He didn't trust her, and so he was relying on his instinctual impulse. She understood that. So, she merely needed to reassure him and explain to him exactly what she was doing.

“A mule is a beast of burden. An animal that will help me transport my crops to the town a short distance from the valley for credits or to barter for goods that I need. Things like the sugar and tea,” she pointed out. “Or the flour here in our pancakes. Unfortunately, my mule died after my last harvest of spring fruits, which means I need to make the walk to town to get a new mule. It is a long walk, and when I get back, I will need to work quickly to begin my harvest, so I guess this meal is kind of an apology in that I will be very busy.”

She cringed a little as he stared at her blankly, recalling that his offer to allow her to stay rather than chase her away didn't mean he would miss her. He had never explicitly shown any interest in having a companion. He probably didn't even feel the same consuming loneliness that she did. She was about to backtrack and apologize when he suddenly opened his mouth and surprised her.

“Show me this wagon.”

Leaving their plates on the table, she led him out into the side yard of the house where the two large wagons waited, already hitched together. Skal's gaze roved over them, and he gripped the shafts that would connect the modified wagon to a single mule's harness. He gave the wagon a sharp, speculative look and gave it a brief tug, grunting when it rolled forward effortlessly. His eyes fell on her, just as distant as ever, but they narrowed perceptively with a look that she couldn't even begin to decipher.

“I do not like your plan. The woods are dangerous, and you plan to walk far and all alone. I will do it. We will prepare your harvest, and I will pull your wagon.”

She gaped at him in shock. “Skal, that’s generous, but it will be very heavy.”

He snorted dismissively. “I have hauled many kills much larger over great distances to feed my family...” his voice faded, and a look of loss overcame him before he pushed it back away behind an inscrutable mask. “It will be nothing. You will have protection. And in town, you will make your trade and get your mule. Then we will return and prepare for winter.” He grunted, giving her home a cynical look. “There is much to do,” he grumbled as he stalked back into the house, assumingly for his breakfast, leaving her staring speechless after him.

Prepare? What exactly did he think needed to be done? There was absolutely nothing wrong with her home. After the harvest was brought in and her supplies restocked from town, she would have all that was needed. Wrapping her shawl around herself, she followed after him at a furious pace, determined to get some kind of answer from him over breakfast.

CHAPTER
SEVEN



S kal smirked humorously at the small female as he lifted a large gourd—a pumpkin Eve called it—onto his shoulder while she struggled with one a fraction of its size. This harvest thing that she was so worried over was ridiculously easy and actually quite enjoyable, too.

Over the past several days, he dug up thick tubers with his claws, snapped off and carried back gourds, and hauled in the bushels of apples that they had collected during the sunnier parts of the days when the mist was the thinnest. Bit by bit, he'd steadily loaded everything into the wagon. In between all of that, he hunted, sometimes going far outside the valley to search for bigger game that lingered in the outer woods so that he had their thick pelts to drag home.

It was a good life, with plenty to see and do to keep him well fed and active. He could feel his health improving by the day. In fact, his cocks had come fully to life again, aching as if he was preparing to rut. His seed sac was swollen and sensitive, and his cocks felt as if they were partially engorged at all times within their sheath. It was uncomfortable but strangely invigorating, making him feel young and strong again. And that wasn't the only thing making him feel that way. He woke up every morning, eager to not only to enjoy the simple pleasures of his new territory but more so the company of a particular human.

Eve was a surprise for him. Not only was she kind and surprisingly generous, but she was also turning out to be an interesting and amusing companion. He had not imagined that

after everything he'd suffered that he would want anyone to spend his days with, but he enjoyed having her there with him. She was... fun.

He blinked, paused with his head cocking, and repeated the word in his mind—tasting it. The idea of an adult engaging in fun felt entirely alien to him. His entire life since reaching maturity had been one of struggle and survival. Of mating and providing. But Eve simply brightened his day just by being herself and made him smile even at times when he wanted to sink into the depths of his own self-imposed misery. But even when he snapped or growled at her in his lowest moments, she took it in stride while pointedly telling him exactly what she thought of the way he was behaving. He would push, and she would stubbornly push back in return with surprising tenacity. And yet, she never held a grudge. She always had a smile for him, a thoughtful action, or a kind word. She was also full of laughter, which slowly began to draw him from the bleak isolation he had sentenced himself to.

His gaze slid over to her, and she looked up at that moment, a tired grin stretching her lips that made her cheeks bunch adorably and the corners of her eyes slightly crinkle. As he watched, she straightened, her hands flattening against her lower back and stretched as she looked around them with a pleased smile.

“Wow, this is going really fast! A few more pumpkins and I think we will be done loading up. That means we can head out tomorrow—or do you need a day to rest after all this back-breaking work?” she asked as she glanced over at him uncertainly.

Skal snorted in amusement and her grin widened, turning lopsided as her cheeks went pink with embarrassment.

“Ok, yeah, I'm the puny one. I know,” she chuckled. “Well, it's back breaking work to me. So, we leave in the morning then? We will still need to be prepared to spend one night in the woods each way so it's best to get an early start to make the most of the daylight hours.;

He inclined his head in agreement. “This is the best plan. I can see well in even faint light so we can leave before sunrise.”

A look of surprise crossed her face. “Oh! That would be wonderful. That means that we might even have time to set up when we arrive in town rather than having to wait until the next day. We might even be able to sell a little to get a few credits for a bed.” Her face suddenly darkened an alarming shade of red and she hastily waved toward the pumpkins. “Okay, I’m going to cut a few more for you to haul to the wagon and then we’ll be done. Let’s get this finished up and I’ll get supper going.”

He watched her for a moment longer as she moved a little further through the pumpkin patch and crouched once more to hack at the vine with the blade in her hand. A hatchet she called it. Although it didn’t cut quite as effectively or efficiently as his claws, it seemed to be very useful for a clawless species. Human ingenuity was truly remarkable.

His gaze remained fixed on her as he carried his pumpkin past, admiring the way her teats swayed rhythmically beneath her upper covering and the rosy tint to her skin as she worked. His cocks pressed uncomfortably against the seam of his sheath, and he bit back a growl. Efru take him! The sweet scent of her sweat and the fresh scent of earth and vegetation emanated from her was making him want to rub his body against hers so that their scents would mingle, too. Because she made his life feel full and he clung to it. Skal frowned as he set the pumpkin in the wagon at the edge of the tree line. If he were honest with himself that was part of the reason that he hadn’t wished for her to go to town without him. As much as he feared for her being out there alone, some small part of him had also panicked at the idea of suddenly being alone again. Not just alone physically but with all of the despair and loneliness that he’d felt before. It would have been as if he’d lost his mate and family all over again.

Oh. His ears twitched in shock. That was unexpected. Although the male Ragoru’s ability to bond quickly to a female they denned with was part of what allowed them bond

deeply with a female who had chosen them, he had not believed it would happen. He had not believed that his instincts had recovered enough from his loss to lock onto another female. He shook his head in wry amusement. He should have recognized the signs. His desire to nest should have been his first warning. But even if he had missed that he still managed to ignore the fact that he had instinctively endeavored to keep her within range of his senses whenever she was not in the den.

He groaned softly to himself as he stalked over to the next pumpkin and snapped it off its vine. He had mated himself to a female with whom he was not mated. Even without the physical mating to tie them together, he was feeling all of the effects of being a mated male. It was no wonder that his cocks were priming for her and his seed sack swelling. His body was recognizing all the signs of being a dominant alpha denning with a fertile female who accepted him in her company. Now how was he to explain it to Eve? It was clear that she had no idea either what they had done, either.

He had not wished to be mated again but now that it was done... any human who wanted to take her from him would quickly become a very dead human. Eve was his but he was lost as to how to go forward from that. He had not paid attention at all when it came to the instructions on human courting rituals for mating and had no idea of how to even convince his mate to accept him. Bayda, the dark father of desire, assuredly hated him.

CHAPTER
EIGHT



Skal circled the wagon, giving it a last-minute check. He gripped the shafts and pulled experimentally, grunting with approval when it rolled forward. Eve couldn't help but notice that he moved it far easier than her mule had ever managed with even a quarter less of a load. His head ducked as he peered at the end of one of the shafts and tapped a claw on the metal attaching piece toward the end. His brow lowered, his muzzle wrinkling faintly with his confusion.

"You said that this attached to your animal? How?"

"Oh, that just attaches to a harness. Thanks for the reminder," she sighed as she turned toward the barn. "We would need that for the return trip."

He made a dismissive sound and Eve rolled her eyes, her lips twitching a little as she stepped inside the dark barn. Normally she would take a lantern in with her, but she knew her way around by memory and was able to locate the leather harness and straps quickly. Piling them over one arm, Eve returned to the wagon. Skal's ears tipped toward her as his eyes fastened on them. She'd planned to just put them in the back of the fore wagon but found herself quickly relieved of her burden by the Ragoru.

Draping the straps over the front of the wagon, Skal held the harness out in front of him and peered at it with interest. Eve coughed and quickly pointed out the straps of the harness.

"This would go around the mule like... Oh!" She was startled as he removed the lower straps and swung the

remaining straps of the harness over his body. “You don’t want to wear that. You’re not a mule,” she said firmly as she reached for it to take it from him.

He immediately shifted out of her reach and pinned her with an annoyed look. “Why would not wish to make use of this? It appears that it would distribute the weight of the wagon nicely as I pull it.”

She could feel her cheeks heating. “But you’re not a mule,” she repeated. “If people saw you hitched the wagon like one that would think that you are no better than an animal. Beside you can pull it just fine without it.” She did not mention the way that they would laugh and whisper. She was used to it, but it bothered her that they would do that to Skal when he didn’t see it that way. She made another attempt to grab only for the male to skitter out of her reach again his ears twitching and pricking at her in a way that seemed adorably playful. The rotten male was laughing at her! She swallowed back her own laugh and scowled at him. “Really Skal, you look silly. Give it back!”

She lunged and he yipped in amusement, the sound drawing a giggle from her. He was really too ridiculous. His jaw hung lax in a lupine grin and a deep, sonorous chuckle rose from his chest. Shaking his head, he snorted and proceeded to tighten up the loose strap over his back, puncturing new holes in the leather with his claws to get it to fit close against his body. “I do not care what humans think,” he pointed out. “It makes sense to use it this way while I’m pulling it if it makes the task easier.”

Eve couldn’t argue with that, so she groaned quietly to herself in exasperation and watched silently as he quickly worked out how to hitch himself to the wagon. She could feel the heat rushing into her face as she watched him. It was just so wrong. But more than that, it was mortifying because it teased her with daydreams of having hold of his harness and having complete control over him as he pleased her. There was plenty of space along that thick collar strap where she could just loop her hand through and hold on to him while she rode him.

Blessed Mother! Where had that thought even come from?

She fanned her face rapidly with her hand. She prayed that the ground which just open up beneath her and swallow her whole if there was so much as the slightest indication of which she was thinking of on her face. Her eyes turned toward Skal and she groaned inwardly. He was watching her. His head was cocked and there was a look of concern on his face as he regarded her.

“Are you ill?”

Gods, yes. There was definitely something wrong with her to be fantasizing about a male who just days ago intimidated her and tried to kick her out of her own home. That he immediately yielded and had been great company since was rather beside the point.

“No! No, I’m fine,” she amended with a nervous laugh. “Just a little hot out here don’t you think?”

His expression turned skeptical, and he glanced over a tree that suddenly rippled with a burst of cool air. His gaze returned to her.

“No,” he replied flatly. “If you become ill, you will be seeing your... what do you call it?” he grumbled, scratching his jaw pensively with his claws. His expression suddenly brightened. “Ah. You will go see your doctor.”

Her mouth curled in spite of herself. “I will, huh?”

He nodded, his attention returning to the wagon as he resumed checking over the straps. “You will,” he affirmed. “I will not allow you to become sick. So if you are ill at all you will see this doctor and do whatever is required to get well.” His gaze lifted, his eyes piercing her with an authority that made her shiver.

Oh, she was in trouble! She didn’t know if she wanted to harness him or for him to leash her. At the moment both options suddenly seemed far too appealing.

“I’m fine. Really,” she assured him.

Skal eyed her for a long moment but then nodded. Giving the straps one last experimental tug, he turned forward, placed all four of his hands on the shafts and took several steps forward. His jaw dropped in another one of his grins and he nodded happily to himself.

“This will work! Climb in female and we will depart.”

Pulling a thick blanket out of a compartment behind the seat, she wrapped it around herself and climbed onto her perch. It felt a little weird not having reins to hold onto, but she wasn't about to ask him to strap anything else to himself just to make herself more comfortable. She certainly didn't need to encourage any more inappropriate fantasies about her Ragoru housemate. At a loss as to what to do, and without anything to hold onto, she put her hands firmly in her lap.

“Uhm, I'm ready,” she called to him, hating how it came out sounding like a question.

The wagon lurched as he sprung forward and Eve yelped as she promptly tipped and nearly fell backward out of the seat, and then promptly fell forward when it all came to a crashing stop.

“Eve! Are you injured?”

She could hear the frantic jingle of the straps and waved a hand. “Fine! I'm all right,” she laughed as she pushed herself back into a sitting position and brushed her hair out of her face. Skal stared back at her, one hand on a tether as he watched her with a look of shock and uncertainty on his face. “Really. The male never starts up that fast and you just caught me by surprise,” she teased. “I've got it now.”

She gave him a bright smile as she curled her fingers around the edge of the seat. He didn't look entirely convinced but he nodded.

“Start slower,” he grumbled to himself as he once again gave her his back and Eve bit her lip to stifle her laughter at the self-disgust in his voice.

The wagon creaked and this time rolled forward as he began to walk and then gradually built up to an easy lope as

they traveled along the little path that led out of her valley and onto the main route through the forest to town.

Skal hadn't been overexaggerating on his ability to pull the cart. He barely seemed to feel the strain at all as he pulled the wagon at a brisk pace though the muscles in his shoulders and back bulged. Judging by the way his tail swayed as he ran, she could almost believe that he was enjoying himself. She couldn't imagine why anyone would be so masochist as to be happy pulling a wagon with a hitched secondary wagon full of produce to the market with one human woman added to the weight. She resolved to get the best mule she could find so that he wouldn't feel obligated to do this again. She didn't know why he felt so protective of her that he would volunteer for something so degrading and exhausting but whatever the reason she was incredibly grateful to have been spared the walk.

She would have to do something nice for him. Perhaps dinner in town. The small hotel there had a restaurant and tavern on the main floor. Perhaps steak. The hybrid steer was said to be some of the best eating on the continent. As the day wore on, however, and he continued to pull at the same ground-eating pace, she revised her offering to two steaks before finally deciding that she would treat himself to anything he wanted to show her appreciation. Although they stopped for several breaks to relieve themselves and to share food and drink between them before continuing on again, Skal pulled the cart all day at a ground-eating pace without complaint or showing any sign of exhaustion or annoyance with the task. It was a bit of a bumpy ride for her since she was accustomed to the more sedate pace of a mule but once they shifted things around a bit after the first stop and Skal fashioned a sort of padded bed for her with the bedding she'd brought, she found the experience exciting.

Without the heavy blanket of fog everywhere, the forest was vivid with color from the changing autumnal leaves. The entire forest was awash in color in which Skal, who practically disappeared if she wasn't focusing on him in her valley, stood out boldly with his pale gray coloring. When he finally drew to a stop again, the sun was low on the horizon, making the

entire forest appear almost as if it were burning. The beautiful sight captivated her. It would soon be dark. Time to make a quick meal and set up get a bed made up around the fire.

Even stood and stretched, her eyes catching on a crimson leaf that dropped from the branches above and tangled in his thick fur. There were several others that had accumulated during their various stops that were beginning to get matted in. Although he regularly ran his claws through his fur to remove the large bits of them that he could reach, the smaller fragments dusted him like the bio-confetti that dropped over the town on Foundation Day. Perhaps she should get him a good grooming brush. Would she let her brush his shiny coat in the places he could reach so well? Cozy winter evenings of running a brush through his thick fur and then perhaps changing places while he used a more human appropriate brush on her hair invaded her thoughts as she climbed from the wagon.

By the time she was firmly on the ground Skal was already unstrapped and pulling the bedding and camping supplies from behind the driver's seat before she even had the opportunity to go back and help him. She frowned at him, feeling bit a useless and as if she was taking advantage of him but the Ragoru simply grinned at her as he stepped past her with his last armload and carried it to a small clearing of ground. She half expected him to just dump it with everything else and leave it for her to sort through and set up like Victor always did. Skal's neat piles were surprising but even more so was the sharp look he gave her when she stepped away to gather firewood.

"Where are you going, Eve?" he rumbled, his yellow eyes gleaming in a shade not unlike the burnished fire of the sky as they bore into her from where he was crouched over the bedding he'd just unrolled and straightened.

"Wood," she squeaked and immediately gave a nervous laugh. "Firewood. We're going to need some for the campfire."

He shook his head and pointed at the sleep roll. "Sit here. The woods are getting dark. Better that you stay here where it

is more comfortable and safer within the clearing. I will get the wood,” he rumbled as he straightened.

Her mouth went dry as her eyes fastened on the single bed roll. Would he sleep beside her? Ever since he showed up at her house, they’d always had a door between them with Eve on the bed and Skal sprawled in front of the hearth. He was probably accustomed to sleeping on the ground but the thought of him doing so while she was comfortable wrapped up in blankets on the bedroll didn’t sit well with her. The nights got chilly after all.

She nodded when he continued to watch her expectantly and made her way over to her makeshift bed. He remained standing in place as she lowered herself upon the blanket and she became uncomfortably aware of how close his thick thighs and bulge were to her face as she dropped to the ground. She blushed furiously, barely daring to breathe as hot arousal curled within her belly. From the corner of her eye, she watched as Skal’s tail lifted slightly and stiffened in an alert position. He chuffed then and turned away, leaving her alone on the blankets as he loped into the thicker trees.

Curling her legs up against her body to preserve warmth, Eve stared at the woods as she pulled out dried meat, bread, cheese, and some of the fruit she’d dried over the summer. She’d just laid it out neatly when Skal returned with not only a large amount of wood tucked under his arms but also large hybrid rabbits, for lack of a better word, that had rapidly spread over the continent along with the human colonists. He lowered the rabbits to the ground a couple of feet from her, his eyes flicking to the food spread out before ignoring it completely in favor of watching her guardedly.

“I would feed you,” he rumbled with a pointed look to the rabbits.

He wanted to feed her? He’d hunted for fresh meat for the table before but somehow that sounded a lot more intimate. She had to just be projecting.

“Oh. I would actually like that, thank you,” she murmured and quickly wrapped the dried meat back up, leaving the rest

for them to enjoy with the meal.

Skal gave an approving nod, his ears flicking before he crouched and got to work. His two sets of hands worked quickly as he meticulously built the fire, spit the rabbits, and set them over the flames to cook. He watched her a lot as he cooked, his gaze lingering on her only to drop occasionally to the rabbits as he rotated them over the flames. That focused look didn't waver when he eventually removed them from the fire, crouched at her side, and carefully, with the tips of his claws, peeled sizzling meat from them and held the bite-sized morsels in front of her lips.

Eve felt her blush climb hotter but leaned forward and ate the offered meat. The corner of his mouth inching up as if pleased persuaded her to take another bite, and then another. He ate in between the bites he fed her, his demeanor growing increasingly comfortable and, if she wasn't mistaken, happy. She was almost sad when the last bite of meat finally was eaten. She pulled out the large water bottle to rinse their hands, certain that was the end of whatever closeness that they'd been enjoying. His large body crowding hers on the bed roll minutes later was both a surprise and incredibly endearing with how eagerly he wiggled into the bedding her with, happily snuffing and rumbling to himself. That it also made her uncomfortably aroused was something she chose to ignore as she smiled and snuggled into his embrace as his large body curled around her.

It meant nothing. They were just two bodies sharing heat on a cool autumn night. As far as she observed, he didn't even appear to be interested in humans or anyone that way. But she fell asleep with a smile on her face because in her dreams she could at least pretend that just maybe it was something more.

CHAPTER
NINE



S kal did not care for the human town. It was loud and there were too many sights and sounds that threatened to swallow up his mate the moment his back was turned. There were also the strong smells that made him want to gag. It reminded him of when he was being transported from his home world and all the Ragoru were being held in large containment areas where they were provided food, water, and beds but little else—and no escape from the stench of so many bodies living in such a small, contained place. He shuddered with revulsion but kept his expression perfectly blank as he followed his mate on a winding path filled with various small structures.

The only thing worse than the smell was the busy swarm of humans everywhere. Although there were a number of humans who appeared to be curious of him, many appeared to be distrustful, wary, or even afraid of him. He had little patience for the latter, especially since he did nothing to earn that reaction except follow after his mate with the wagon, but at least they kept well out of his way. If they were not terrified, it seemed that humans had a tendency to mill about in a disordered fashion, many of them walking far too close to him and the wagon for his comfort. Or far too close to Eve. That annoyed him far more than any human accidentally touching him or stepping into his path, and it started happening the moment he had lifted her down from the wagon. Ever since, he wanted nothing more than to pick her up and set her right back in it again.

He didn't like her being on the ground where she could easily get lost among them. It was an uncomfortable reminder of how small she was, especially compared the males of her species who easily had a head over her. They ambled past her, often cutting her off briefly from Skal, providing him with a moment of panic before she came within view again. It made him uncomfortably aware of just how easily she could be separated from him before he could prevent it. And if that wasn't bad enough, it was clear that the other humans in the town didn't seem to mind bumping into her or pushing past her as if she were invisible. In fact, most didn't even seem to notice when they collided with her, much to his irritation.

His ears flattened as he eyed a pair of males walking up on her left as they talked, unaware of anything else going on around them. Skal's fur prickled as he eyed them, tension coiling through his shoulders. They were going to cut him off from Eve—again. A growl rumbled in his throat, just loud enough to bring the males' attention back to their surroundings abruptly enough that they stumbled into each other in their attempt to avoid coming anywhere near him or Eve. Skal chuffed softly to himself as they immediately collided with a larger male who promptly began shouting, causing the males to hurry off with a flurry of apologies. He quickly bit back his amusement and silenced it, however, when his mate glanced over her shoulder at him curiously.

Skal gave her a blank look of complete innocence, his pricking attentively. His Eve was not so easily fooled. Her brows rose speculatively as she quietly regarded him. The corner of her mouth twitched, and she shook her head as she faced forward once more and resumed leading him through the area that she called "the market."

"I know it looks pretty chaotic but be happy that this is a small town on the northern-most outskirts of the Habitable Zone. I've heard that the markets in the citadel are utter madness," she commented as she looked around. A smile suddenly broke out across her face. "Oh good! It looks like we are here early enough to pick out one of the better spots for our stall!"

He was not entirely sure what she was getting excited about. The cramped area into she had him drag the wagon barely gave him enough room to maneuver it into the position she wanted behind one of the wooden structures—a stall? He looked over at the humans in the space next to them. It was a family with small offspring wearing odd coverings playing around a block-like wheeled vessel made of metal that only vaguely resembled Eve’s wagon. Its back hatch was opened as hers had been while they were loading it, and there were several wooden crates and baskets that were visible just inside of it. They had stacks of...jars? Yes jars, that was the word... filled with some sort of golden substance in addition to various other containers stacked neatly.

“Hey Skal. I’m thinking we should put the pumpkin out in front of this largest table on the ground. With Halloween coming in the next few days, there will be families eager to get their hands on...” her voice trailed off as she turned and followed the direction of his curious gaze. Her high-pitched squeal made his ears flatten as he jerked back in shock and looked around frantically for any sign of threat. “Honey! Oh, and they have the special wax balms that they make restocked. Come on, Skal, let’s go check it out!”

The corners of his mouth curling at his mate’s demanding enthusiasm, Skal stripped off the harness and followed behind her. His fur immediately started prickling, however, as the smile the humans greeted his mate with froze on their faces as their eyes turned toward him. The female became impossibly paler than he already was and shuffled back, pressing her rounded body against her male. Hissing whispers to her offspring, she gathered her offspring close to her as Skal eyed them curiously from his peripheral eye, his primary focus remaining on his mate as she inspected the jars and small metal containers.

“Oh, you made more honey and mint salve! I must have some of this,” Eve gushed. She nudged him with her arm and nodded toward the jars filled with liquid gold. “Get two... no,” she squinted at him thoughtfully, “with the way you go through my sweets, a dozen jars just to be safe. If it doesn’t last until spring then we will have a problem,” she chuckled,

her eyes at last turning to the mated pair. “Oh! I’m sorry, this is Skal. He’s with me.”

“With you?” the male croaked. He exchanged a look with his mate. “Oh... I see.”

“It would be that one,” the female whispered, and her mate grunted in agreement.

Skal’s ear twitched and his smile flattened. He didn’t expect humans to be particularly welcoming or accepting of a Ragonu but he deeply disliked the way that they were speaking about Eve. The female gave her a strained smile as his mate held up another container and exclaimed over it.

“The same exchange as usual, yes?” she inquired. She tapped her chin, “Though with all of that honey perhaps you can let us have the whole bushel of apples, that crate of pumpkins over there... oh and some of your blackcrest berries.”

Eve looked up, her smile slipping so faintly that if he had not been focusing on his mate as he should, he would have missed it. “Actually, I do have credits...”

The female waved her protest away. “We are happy to help you.... A young widow all on her own. Well, not so on her own but a new start is also worthy of celebrating,” she chuckled. “Besides credits between friends is so crass. This works better for us, don’t you agree?”

She pinned Eve with her pale stare and Skal watched his mate’s lips tip upward uncertainly as she gave a small laugh.

“Sure, you are right.” She looked over at him. “Skal please go get the bushel...”

“No, don’t worry about a thing, I can do it,” the male interrupted with a fake laugh that made Skal’s hackles rise.

Why were they constantly interrupting and overriding his mate? He glanced over at Eve expectantly, hoping that she would insist that he intervene. Instead, she stood there with a polite smile on her face while the female carefully counted every jar and loaded them into a small crate.

Her eyes landed on the balm in Eve's hands. "Did you want the salve too? I can have Henry grab another container of berries for it."

Eve bit her lip and looked down at it, setting the small container down with a shake of her head. "No, that's alright. Maybe next time."

Skal bit back a growl of annoyance, keeping silent as he followed her back over to their stall. That was until he saw the male—Henry, lifting the largest of the melons onto his shoulder. His temper frayed but he held back his impulse to growl as he crept up behind the male.

"That was not part of the trade," he rumbled in his most casual tone.

The male's eyes widened, a look of fear flashing through them, but then he relaxed and gave another forced laugh. "Oh. This? Eve always gives the children one of her sugar melons. Isn't that right, Eve?" he called out to Skal's female as she came to a stop just behind him.

Skal's head dipped and he looked over at her, begging her to refute the male's words but she simply smiled weakly.

"Yes, of course. I'd forgotten. I hope your children enjoy it, Henry," she murmured as the male hauled the last of the food that he had come to collect with him without another word. Her eyes followed the male, and she grimaced as she looked back up at him. "I know. You don't need to say it."

"That they cheat you?" he growled softly, keeping his voice pitched low so that the other humans did not overhear them. "They took much for the little that they gave you. Even a sugar melon without offering you any small gift in return. They could have given you the salve for as much as they took from your supplies."

"I know it looks that way but really honey has a greater value to it than much of what I grow. It's okay, really." She put her hand on his arm and gently stroked his fur, the touch soothing him. "I know it looks bad, but they are good people and work hard for their little business... and he's right. The

last couple of years I always gave the children a little sugar melon because they always looked so longingly at them, and their parents buy so very little at the market. A sweet little treat is a small cost to make children happy.”

He sighed and briefly lowered his head to nuzzle her cheek. He did it quickly rather than extend it the way he longed to so not to make Eve uncomfortable. She was a good and generous female just as he thought. And because of that he would not point out that the melon the male chose was not a small one but the largest and nicest that they had picked. He kept it to himself and focused on trying to make his female happy. Her immediate peel of laughter at the brush of his fur on her cheek and neck made him smile as he withdrew, his heart filling with the sparkle of happiness and amusement in her eyes.

She was still smiling as she patted his arm and stepped back and she turned to survey the work still waiting for them.

“All right let’s get this done quickly and then I’m going to be the one to feed you, my brave defender,” she teased.

He snorted at the title, but he was secretly pleased. He liked that she would see him that way even though he had done nothing to truly earn it. And he was hungry, even if it rankled him that he was not able to be the one who provided for her. His mind turned to things that he could possibly make so that he might be able to earn these credits she spoke of to purchase things for her. The possibilities turned in his head as he moved containers. He could weave baskets and carve toys as he had for the rogs that had never come. He could even prepare thick furs once their own nest was taken care of. The idea thrilled him, and he completed his work quickly, eager to share his thoughts with his mate over their meal.

Some of his excitement dimmed, however, when he noticed the wide berth that the humans were giving them as the humans passed them on the street. It was even more noticeable when they stepped inside the building that Eve had chosen. Perhaps his plans wouldn’t work, after all. Not if the humans were so afraid of him that they weren’t even returning his mate’s greetings. Leaning in, he whispered in her ear. “You

mentioned a room. Perhaps I should wait there for you tomorrow.”

He noted the way her skin shivered and the faint scent of arousal stirring on her skin, but her eyes were clear of any hint of desire when she peered over at him, her brow knitting in confusion. “Whatever for?”

He gave a pointed look toward the human seating a pair of humans who had come in after them. “They are frightened of me. Perhaps too frightened to come near your stall.”

Eve huffed and then, to his surprise, chuckled. “Actually, this is pretty normal for me. I’m afraid no one in town quite forgave me when I refused to sell the property and move into town when my husband died.”

Husband... ah, her mate. He now recalled her mentioning a male but had not thought anything more about it when no one came and no scent of a male upon their den or on her. But Eve had been mated before and she too watched her mate die. It must have been some time ago, but Skal knew it was a pain that continued hurting.

Wrapping one arm around her from behind, he leaned his cheek into hers. “I recognize your loss and feel sorrow with you for it.”

Her small hand patted his arm and she let out a pent in breath. “You know something, I think that is the nicest thing anyone has said since he died. It wasn’t a great love match or anything, but I knew that I was very lucky to have him—the whole town knew and were quick to remind me of the fact at every opportunity,” she said drily. “He would make me so mad, and he was often pretty terrible to me, which I didn’t even see at the time. But it’s been hard to be alone without him,” she added in quiet voice that made his chest tighten.

It was. Even though he never seemed able to please his first mate and had felt little but duty toward her in the end, he had still cared and her death, and the death of his triad, had left him alone in the world. He had felt lost without them. Not just lost. It had felt like he had had a hole in his heart that ceaselessly tormented him... until Eve.

“I know loneliness,” he said quietly. “I have been alone since my family died. I never wanted another. I didn’t dare to wish for it.”

Not until you.

The words were left unsaid. He choked on them in shock because it was true. As much as his instinct had won out and mated him to her without his active awareness and participation in it, having Eve near him had begun to make him wish for it again.

She turned in his arms, her brown eyes filling with moisture, alarming him. What was the moisture? Was something wrong?

“Oh Skal. I’m so sorry,” she sighed, and her arms wrapped around him as she pressed her small body against his.

He froze in surprise but then melted into her. This was what it was supposed to be like between mates. He was certain of it. In that moment he would do anything for her—include ripping the head off the fussy male huffing impatiently at them.

His chest rattling with a quiet growl, he straightened, his arms tightening protectively around his mate. The male, sadly, was not as easy to intimidate as some of the others. He scowled back at Skal and cleared his throat loudly, startling Eve so that she jerked back and spun around with an apologetic smile.

“Oh! I’m so sorry.”

Skal’s scowl deepened. As if his mate had anything to apologize for. She did nothing wrong. But it seemed to work because the male relaxed a little and nodded.

“If you are ready, miss?”

“We are. It will be just the two of us.”

“Glad to hear of it,” the male replied drolly and Skal bit back his amusement in spite of himself. He imagined the human was quite relieved to know that there were not two other Ragoru due to arrive.

Without further comment, the male took them to a table some distance from the others and Skal gingerly seated himself. He did not fit very comfortably but it was worth it to share a meal with his mate. He perched on the chair as carefully as possible and stared at Eve, utterly enthralled with her. Her face pinkened under her scrutiny but he was starting to understand its correlation between her desire and other emotions, the subtle scent of which he was slowly beginning to identify. He was happy to let her order so that he could enjoy the moment. He could not decipher human symbols anyway and trusted that Eve would know what he enjoyed well enough to select for him. Hopefully the food was also worth eating. Even if it was not, he would pretend it was the best of meals for her.

“Tell me about this Victor,” he rumbled as the male left the table with her instructions. She glanced at him in surprise, and he grimaced at how jealous that sounded. “I wish to simply know more about him,” he explained, “since this town seems to expect things of you because of him.”

“Oh. Yeah, that makes sense,” she agreed. “It was kind of a whirlwind romance, if you know what I mean.”

He looked at her blankly. “I do not know. Among Ragoru the female chooses. The alpha males are drawn to her scent passing through their territory and present themselves in hope of claiming a mate for their den. Upon mating, the bond is made, and the triad attends to the needs of their females and rogs.”

“That is definitely different from how humans do things,” she chuckled.

Curious, he leaned forward. “How do humans select their mate?”

She shrugged but her eyes gleamed with unmistakable interest that made his heart pound and his cocks press urgently against his sheath. “Well, usually it is done by spending time together and sometimes small gestures. But mostly it is just being together and deciding if they are a match.”

“And this is what you did with Victor? And he was very good to you and proved that he would be a good mate.”

“N—no, not quite. But he seemed very polite and considerate, especially when I was still floundering on my own trying to run my little farm after my parents died. Everyone sort of pushed me into it. They told me how lucky I was and how I would be silly to not accept his offer. And I was lonely with no other family. It was a difficult time and it felt like he was all I really had since I didn’t have any friends in town,” she explained.

Her gaze shifted slightly to the right, staring behind him as a strange look—something of horror and shock—crossed her face. She blinked rapidly and he turned, peering curiously behind him. Not seeing anything to be concerned about, he faced his mate again as she took a large sip of water from one of the cups that were set out for them. She gave him a shaky smile but still looked a little too pale for his liking. “Sorry, I thought I saw something. Me and my overactive imagination,” she chuckled. “But I do love Halloween.”

He nodded, biting back his opinion as she continued to tell him little things about her time she was mated to male. Skal did not think that this Victor was so great of a mate—a wretched and useless male, in his opinion—but he kept it to himself/ He was glad when the conversation wound down and she was content enough with his brief story of his previous mated life that he could shift the conversation in a more pleasant direction.

“Tell me about Halloween,” he instructed as their plates were set before them. The aroma from the thick cuts of meat his mate ordered for him with the side of bits of vegetables made his mouth water.

As he hoped, her face lit up and she launched into the most ridiculous and yet fascinating tales of this human holiday that kept their discussion lively and amusing throughout their delicious meal. As well as it went, however, his mind kept returning to the way she had looked for a moment. What had she seen?

CHAPTER
TEN



For the first time in many days, Eve's eyes snapped open, her entire body rigid from the fading effects of the nightmare. She knew the reason for the nightmare. It was the same reason that she started having them a few weeks ago in the first place.

Victor.

She couldn't have seen him but for a moment there she was so certain that it was him standing just behind the crowd of people seated at their tables as the servers moved effortlessly between them. He had loomed there like a wraith, clothed in a black suit, his dark hair slicked back in his preferred style as he watched her with his cold, dark eyes.

She couldn't possibly be haunted but she was startling to feel like she was going crazy. It had stopped for a while there when Skal showed up, and she'd hoped that just maybe the hallucination was going away now that she wasn't alone. But now he was back, and she didn't know what that said about her mental state. Or what Skal would think if she told him that she was being haunted.

Not that she wanted Victor back, in any shape or form. She definitely didn't! She had Skal now and she was quickly discovering that she preferred the Ragoru and his gruff but sweet demeanor over that of her late husband. Skal doted on her and was considerate of her limitations while acknowledging her strengths in a way that Victor had never managed to. He even helped her out around the farm willingly without argument or complaint—and he wasn't even getting

anything for it. He certainly wasn't getting between her legs, demanding his due like her husband had done so often. She had loathed him in those moments since he rarely bothered to see to it that she was fully aroused or even orgasmed as he selfishly chased his pleasure. Since he'd been the one to take her virginity, her only experience of sex had been that of bitter disappointment. She was pretty sure she disliked sex and had rarely even felt aroused before Skal barged his way into her life.

And what if Skal asked her to spread her legs?

A quiver of arousal strummed through her and Eve shivered as her imagination conjured the memory of his thick cocks stretching his sheath as they pushed their way free. She was pretty sure she wouldn't object at all if he pushed his big body between her thighs. Even now, he was pressed up against her in the hotel bed that they were sharing, his large body curled around hers and her muzzle tucked against her neck, keeping her toasty warm. It would be so easy to rub against his sheath and just see where things took them.

Unfortunately, she was a huge coward and about as sexually daring as an unanatomical cloth doll that flopped wherever it was set down. She couldn't even verbalize her needs much less try to seduce the male behind her. She certainly couldn't just lie there any longer either, not without coming close to bursting into flames with the need gradually building inside of her. At some point he would be able to smell it and gods that would be embarrassing.

Groaning softly to herself, Eve wiggled out of his grasp, biting back an embarrassed giggle at the way he snuffled and snorted in complaint as she climbed free. His arms sleepily made to grab for her, but Eve quickly scooted back, nearly falling off the edge of the bed and onto her ass. Stifling another laugh at her clumsiness, she straightened and smiled down at him, admiring the big male filling her bed. His long fur was fluffed up and in disarray, giving him an adorably chaotic look. She tried to imagine what he looked like when he was young—as a rog. It was a shame he never got to be a father. He would make some pretty cute babies.

Her eyes slipped lower, and she stopped breathing as they fastened on the thick lengths of his cocks fully extruded and nestled against his belly. They had a wet, slippery look to them, possibly due to secreting a natural lubricant and she was dying to touch it to see how hot and slick it felt against her palm. She bit her lip to strangle back a moan of want. They had to have been pressing up against her ass all night. How did she not feel that? The temptation to slip back into bed was strong but she finally forced herself away from the bed and into the bathroom.

Rushing through her morning ablutions, Eve dressed quickly and, upon exiting the bathroom, picked up a small bag that she'd stashed among their things, a smile curling her lips. Although Halloween was still a couple days off, the children always got treats from the market stalls on the last market day before Halloween. She looked forward to it every year and had been heartbroken at the thought of missing out on this year before Skäl saved the day. It had been a bit last minute, but she'd busied herself all week making treats in the evening after she finished working for the day and she couldn't wait to see their little faces light up as they got a taste of the hard little candy bones and skulls that she had fashioned as she did every year. There were a few that had been sacrificed to Skäl's curiosity but there was still more than plenty to give to the children roaming about in their little costumes.

There was just one little detail she hadn't shared with the Ragoru.

She bit back a smile as she traced a finger along the sewn hem of the costume. It wasn't much since she really didn't have a lot of fabric to make a costume for a male of his size, but she was sure that it would look great on him—and even better, it would make him feel a little less alien to the townspeople as he celebrated their festivities with them. The cheerful jester collar with its little bells and the matching hat and cloak jingled softly under her touch.

She couldn't wait to see him in it. She was going to focus on that and the fun that they were going to have rather than hallucinations of Victor's ghost haunting her.

Behind her came a deep, rumbling sound and then a yawn. “What do you have there, female?”

Clutching her bag to her chest, she turned toward him with a grin. “A surprise.” A wary, hunted look immediately crossed his face and she chuckled mercilessly. “Don’t look like that. It’s going to be fun.” Reaching into the bag she pulled out their matching costumes. “Ta da! It’s a bit last minute and kind of on the simple side but that’s okay. I think we are going to look great.”

His ears immediately flattened, and her eyes narrowed on him, wondering if he was going to bolt. “You want me to wear... that? Why?”

“Because it will be fun,” she reiterated. “It’s the last market day before Halloween—you remember me telling you about Halloween, right?” He nodded slowly and her smile widened. “Good. Well, everyone in the market dresses up and the kids go running around collecting all of the treats. We get to give them out to them while we wear our costumes. Doing this is just part of being in the community. Besides, I love Halloween and I want to celebrate it with you.”

His stubborn expression softened. “You wish to celebrate... with me,” he repeated. At her nod, he sighed. “Very well. We will Halloween.” His ears twitched quickly in an expression she was beginning to note was his tell for his embarrassment. “I would wish to celebrate all things with you, Eve. If it makes you happy, it pleases me that you wish to include me.”

Aww my heart! Blinking rapidly so that the tears that threatened did fall, she grinned at him, practically wearing her heart on her sleeve as she stared up at him. “You are going to love this! And there will be plenty of treats around to eat!”

“Treats sounds promising,” he admitted. “Though there is one treat that I crave that this market cannot give me. Perhaps I will be able to savor it on your Halloween day?”

She flushed at the heated look he gave her, per pussy shockingly creaming. She made a choked off sound and chuckled. “Well Halloween always does promise the best trick

or treats,” she admitted, drawing a pleased smirk of anticipation from the male as he rose from the bed, his cocks waving at her enticingly.

He stood there for a long moment, letting her get a good eyeful. And look she did. She was pretty sure her mouth was hanging open as she stared at them, admiring their thickness and length, as well as the unique shape of them that made her clench her thighs together in attempt to control the hum of desire that tingled through her pussy. It lasted only a moment, but it was more than enough time to make her incredibly aroused before he smugly sauntered away, leaving her feeling achy and unfilled after awakening a raging series of sensations she'd never felt before. Her cheeks heated as she watched him head toward the bathroom, wondering what exactly she needed to do to get *that* trick or treat for herself.

Gods, don't let me make a fool of myself!

CHAPTER
ELEVEN



“I look ridiculous,” Skal grumbled, flicking a claw against one of the tiny jingling metal pieces hanging from around his neck.

His mate tsked and adjusted the material for him, a pleased smile lighting her face in such a way that it made him go all warm and soft inside despite the tight engorgement of his cocks that he was barely keeping within his sheath.

“Well, I think you look great,” she assured him.

He still did not see a point to their ridiculous coverings, outside of understanding that it was a strange human tradition, but it made him feel a little better that she was adorned in a similar way. As were the other humans throughout the market, though he found some of them a little disturbing. He stared at a male a short way down on the other side of the path. Did he intentionally wish to make himself appear as if he were rotting flesh? With his putrid hue applied to his skin, he looked like something that had been left dead and exposed for several days. How revolting. A shudder of revulsion swept through him. He was glad that Eve had not adorned herself in such a way. He wasn’t sure he would be able to stomach looking at her all day if she were.

Then again, it would probably help him keep his need to mount her in check. Despite her delicious scent, he was certain that his cocks would wither in his sheath if she looked like that.

The human offspring were a different matter. They bounded through the market in their odd coverings that made them look like all manner of creatures as they squealed with laughter while their weary but smiling parents following after them. It was strange for him to see females paired with one a single male rather than a triad but comforting at the same time that his mate would not have any expectations for him to find other males. There would likely be no offspring, however. That saddened him as he watched the way his mate smiled and fawned over the younglings. She would be a good mother to any rogs he gave her, but it was unlikely to happen for him without his triad, even if he felt the urge to breed now as much as he ever had then.

That they would breed, even if in just deed, he no longer had any question of. He had displayed for her as was custom and she had looked at him with desire and want in her eyes, and she had not rejected his offer. He would have attempted to rut her right there and seal the mating bond between them if she had not been eager to dress him in the costume and leave for the market. He entertained the idea of mating out in the forest on their way back to their territory but quickly abandoned it. He didn't want his first time joining with her to be on a forest floor. He would have her inside their den, her body splayed out before him in a place where she would be comfortable before he feasted upon her.

In the meantime, he would just enjoy the little ones even as he tried not to desperately wish for any of his own. They were nothing short of pure fun and delight to watch.

He smiled as he watched them from where he stood just behind Eve, his eyes following their raucous play as they went from stall to stall. Their parents always eyed him as they came up to Eve's stall, however, which was why Skal remained contently in the background as an observer as his mate handed out treats to the little ones and sold her harvest.

At least the humans were not daring to undercut his female this time. He made sure to loom directly behind his mate every time someone approached, his eyes narrowing on them as he watched them nervously hand the credits to Eve.

She shook her head in wonder as a family moved away and slipped the credits into her pocket. “I guess it’s really a good thing that you came. I don’t think I’ve ever made this much before. They always haggle me down to obscenely low costs,” she confided. “Far less than what the produce is worth. But it’s so hard for me to say no.”

His mouth twisted as he grunted and refrained from commenting. She would not have to do this “haggle” thing for as long as he was around. He clearly excelled at frightening humans into good behavior.

Skal understood their unease and capitalized on it when it came to their treatment of his mate. Despite their predatory nature and small physical tells that gave them away as such, humans had a softer appearance of a creature that could be prey, and who was entirely vulnerable to creatures they shared their world with. As a Ragoru, Skal was built like the predator he was, and could easily harm a fully grown human. It was wise for them to be cautious even if it did prick at him a bit because it meant that he had to keep a carefully reinforced distance from the playing younglings.

They were just so cute and squishy. His gaze leapt to another family with several younglings and his heart melted at the sight of the human infant in its mother arms. Rogs were just as tiny but far more active when they were born, but it was just so adorable with its little faced painted orange and wearing a costume like that of a pumpkin. All the younglings were. He wanted to hug them to him and rub his cheek against their round little faces. An image formed in his mind in which he lay int front of the fire as little ones crawled over his much larger body, their giggles in his ears while his mate watched and laughed from where she stood in the kitchen preparing what she called supper. The arranged eating times still mystified him, but it fit so well with this image that his heart clenched sorrowfully.

Shaking his head, he pushed away the useless daydreams and contented himself with playing spectator. Noting yet another youngling adorned as if he had bones covering over his flesh, Skal leaned in and whispered to his mate.

“Your species has an unhealthy interest in death,” he remarked.

And it wasn't just the costumes, it was that everywhere he looked there were skeletons or skulls displayed. They were clearly not real, but he found the frequency of them disturbing. The fact that they were more of the decorations that Eve seemed to enjoy made to resemble bones was the only thing that kept him from scooping his mate up and carrying her out of there.

Eve muffled a laugh behind her hand as the younglings and their parents departed and slowly looked around, the smile on her face growing. “I suppose that we do,” she admitted. “It is a time for remembering the dead and knowing that death doesn't mean the end. Some part of us goes on.”

He grunted. “I do not like to think of the dead. I prefer for them to remain buried so that the pain goes away. I do not wish for them to haunt me for the rest of my life as humans seem to prefer.”

“Well, what about your parents?” she countered, her eyebrow raising. “I admit that I don't give much thought to Victor when it comes time for the feast of the dead, but there are always my parents to remember who I loved very much and who loved me. It is good to keep their memories close to my heart on the days following Halloween. Or even my grandmother and grandfather who I loved dearly.”

Skal thought of his mother and the warm scent of her when he was young and the loving way that she used to stroke his wild fur even as she teased him about it. And learning to hunt at the side of his second father while first father remained home with his mother. Swimming and pulling fish from the shallow river with his third father too. His memories of them were bittersweet treasures. He had not seen them since he mated, but he was certain that they did not escape their dying world. They would have been too old to make the trip to the collection ships if they had even been alive.

“I would not mind doing so for my parents,” he conceded, his voice turning thick and gruff with his heightened emotions.

“Do the dead hear invitations to such feasts even on faraway planets?”

His mate’s expression gentled, a look of understanding warming her eyes. “Yeah, I really think that they do. Because you are here, and all of your ancestors remember you and look after you even if you don’t know or remember them.”

He nodded, his gaze trailing away and locking on a male standing a short distance from the stand. His ears tipped warily toward the human, alert to the fact that the human was eyeing Eve a little too intently even as he tried—and failed—to not be obvious about it. Skal immediately disliked him. Why would he be watching his Eve?

Noting the change in his demeanor, Eve’s smile slipped, and she turned to look over at what had caught his attention. The male straightened the moment she made eye contact and rolled his shoulders a little in a gesture that Skal suspected to be preparatory. He did not trust that. Eyes narrowing, he watched as the male adjusted his outermost covering and smiled. A growl hitched in Skal’s chest, but he swallowed it back when his mate’s elbow bumped him in warning. Ah... right. He was not supposed to actually growl at people. She had mentioned that during their meal when the conversation had turned toward the market.

It served its purpose, however. The male’s gaze shifted to him, and his smile slipped with uncertainty. It did not stop him from approaching but at least he was not aware of his exact position.

“Can I help you?” Eve asked, her tone light and friendly as she kept it for all of her customers. It seemed that Skal was the only one to be on the receiving end of the sharper edge of her tongue, but he didn’t mind if it meant that it was something special for him alone.

“Actually, yes, if you are Ms. Eve Brennon.”

His mate’s brows drew together. “I am, but I’m afraid I don’t know who you are.”

“Oh! My apologies,” the male chuckled, the sound ringing hatefully false to Skal’s ears. “I thought perhaps you might have recognized me from some of the vids or clips that Victor had. I’m his cousin, Paul Brennon.”

“I see. I can’t say that the name rings a bell... nor do I recognize you from what belongings my late husband brought with him. What brings you all the way out here, Mr. Brennon?”

“Paul, please. We are family.”

Skal’s hackles rose. This male was most certainly not her family. *He* was her only family.

“All right,” his mate agreed, her voice flat. “And what can I do for you, Paul?”

The male shrugged. “I just came to check up on my cousin since no one heard any word of him in a while. I tracked this place as his last known location, I guess if he’s late for the living that means that he passed on. May I ask when?”

“A year and a half ago. You should have received word. I filed the documentation for his death. It would have notified all living family members.”

The male, Paul, shook his head mournfully. “I’m afraid I’ve been part of an exploration unit outside of the habitable zone for the last couple of years. I was just released from service. Do you think I might be able to come out and pay my respects? I would like to see where he lived. I would like to get a few mementos from his belongings and perhaps visit his grave.”

A tang of unease drifted from his Eve as Ragoru pressed closer against her, providing the small amount of comfort that he could. She relaxed a little as she seemed to recall that he was there, supporting her, and shook her head.

“Honestly, I did not keep anything of Victor’s. He didn’t have much and what little he did have was nothing I was sentimentally attached to. I donated everything to charity. As for his burial, he was laid to rest right here in town. You are

free to visit him as you like. Please take no offense, Paul, but I like my privacy and there is nothing for you there, anyway.”

His lips pursed and there was a hard glint of annoyance in his eyes before it was covered by another one of the male’s fake laughs. “Well, perhaps I can just purchase the property from you? A struggling female all on her own can probably use the money a lot more than a farm and it would really mean a lot to our family to have something—even if it’s just property—to remember him by. He must have loved the place.”

Skal’s ears flattened. Although the valley was the ideal territory for his kind, he did not understand why a human male without the emotional ties his mate had to the place, would love it. It was such a strange statement to make to a mate left behind.

“No, thank you,” Eve replied, a hard note entering her voice. “I can appreciate your loss and am deeply sorry for it, but the land is mine and was left to me by my family. Victor was my husband, but the land was never his in any shape or form. It was my parents’ and my grandparents’ wish that it remain mine, and so I made sure of it. I have no interest in selling my home to you or anyone else.”

“I see,” he replied. His gaze turned toward Skal, his lips thinning. “And I suppose that you are one of those females cavorting with the monsters overrunning our world. Has he taken my cousin’s place so quickly?”

Red rushed into his mate’s face and Skal growled, at the end of his patience. The human’s aloof posturing failed him, and he scrambled back like a juvenile being taught some manners. Paul swallowed but nodded his head sharply as he took a step back, carefully avoiding the families moving past him.

“Very well. I see how it is. I admit that this is very disappointing. What a waste,” he grumbled, turning away.

Skal’s eyes followed him. He was pleased enough when the male left the market but not even the little ones swarming back to their stall could completely restore his humor. He

doubted that it was the last they would see of Paul. Males who thought they were cunning never gave up that easily.

He would remain on guard. Especially once they returned to their den. The male wanted their territory for some reason. If he approached again, the attack would be made there.

CHAPTER
TWELVE



Although she loved everything about the trick or treaters who flooded the market and made more credits than she ever had before—even more than when Victor was alive and handling the sales and finances—Eve was glad to be home. The encounter with Victor’s cousin had left her uneasy for the remainder of the day and throughout their entire trip back to the farm. Even Skal’s complaints over the mule as “smelly and foul-tempered” failed to entirely alleviate her grim mood.

At least she had a distraction now that she was home. Tomorrow was Halloween so she was busily making various treats and prepping the food she wanted to have for the dumb supper. She had explained the concept to Skal as she stood chopping food at her counter. He seemed to get the concept—all except why it was called dumb supper, which she never understood either, just that it was a custom handed down through her family for generations—much easier than how to carve a jack-o-lantern. She smiled over at the Ragoru as he sat crouched on the wooden floor in front of the largest pumpkin pulled from her patch. She had known immediately that it was to the one she wanted.

Skal wore a look of complete concentration as he held it firmly between his lower hands as his upper hands carefully cut some semblance of a face as she had described to him. It had quite a few pointed teeth and two sets of eyes, but she thought it was absolutely perfect. The male’s grumbling over using a knife rather than his claws and his initial awkwardness with it had been worth the final result. It had also been funny

watching him scowl at the knife every time it cut in a way he hadn't planned.

At least she cleaned it for him. Eve bit back a grin as she imagined the terrible mess that would have ensued if she hadn't. He would have had pumpkin guts clear up to his elbows staining all of that pale fur. She didn't know how he always returned from hunts so spotless, but she hadn't wanted to chance it with the pumpkin.

She began to whisk the spices and cream into the roasted and pureed pumpkin, her gaze drifting repeatedly to him as she worked. Thunder had been rolling overhead for a while, announcing the approach of a storm and she was certain that hot pumpkin pie would be just the thing to finish their evening. She would make two so that there was another for tomorrow. Her smile grew as she recalled just how fond Skal was of her pie.

Lightning cracked over her head and Eve jumped, upsetting the spoon from the bowl. The mixture splattered across the counter and her eyes glanced upward as she listened to the rain pouring down. From his place on the floor, Skal grunted and rose to his feet, hauling the pumpkin up with him. The candle she'd left out for it flickered in its wickedly grinning mouth, and smiled at it, appreciating how spooky it looked despite the brightness of the kitchen. Skal looked over at the door and back at her uncertainly.

“Are you sure you want this to go out?”

She shook her head. “Not tonight. We will put it out tomorrow night, that's the important night. Just set it on the small table in the living room. It will look appropriately spooky in there.”

He smirked down at his work and nodded. Just as he disappeared with the pumpkin into the living room another crack of lightning struck but directly overhead. Eve jumped, her heart leaping into her throat as the power flickered and went out, plunging the house into darkness. But that wasn't what made her shriek. It was the image of a man—the familiar

silhouette of her late husband standing outside the kitchen window in the rain, back lit by the flash in the sky.

“*Eve... My Eve,*” he called, his voice distant and echoing in a hollow inhuman sound.

She stumbled back from the window, her heart pounding in her chest, and screamed in earnest when she collided with someone behind her. Two sets of arms immediately wrapped around her, holding her close.

“Eve, what is it?” he rumbled quietly, his muzzle tucking behind her ear.

Her lips parted. She felt numb but she lifted a hand toward the window just as the lightning flashed again, the sound cracking violently over the house. Nothing was out there. She shook her head. That was impossible.

“I... I saw him. I swear he was just right out there,” she whispered brokenly around a sob, worried that perhaps she had finally truly lost her mind. “I heard him this time, too. I’ve never heard it before but this time he spoke.”

“Who?”

She turned in Skal’s arms, looking up at his four yellow, glowing eyes beseechingly. “Victor. I’ve been seeing him for weeks before you arrived, but he was there again. A—and I swore I saw him in town as well when we were at dinner. He looked just as he always did, and I thought I was just imagining him, but I know I didn’t just imagine him speaking to me. He called my name!”

The shadow of his head turned toward the window and she knew that he was peering out the window, his brow likely lowering in a scowl as he very gently pulled her away. “There is something not right about this, but it is not you,” he growled. “There is nothing we can do about it at this moment with the rain. I likely would not even be able to pick up a scent should I attempt to look now. We will secure our den and ignore it. Someone wishes to frighten you, but we will not give them that power.”

Eve drew in a deep breath and nodded. He was right. She didn't know why anyone would want to frighten her. It was true she never quite got along with the townspeople who thought her entire family were odd living alone so far from everyone else in their hidden little valley. The fact that most couldn't find the entrance to it if they didn't know the way did help rumors any. But she simply didn't understand who could have found their way there and why they would be so intent on scaring her.

“Wait! I need to put the pie mix in the cold box to keep it while we are without power. The generator can take a while to kick back on and I don't want it to spoil.”

Skal rumbled in acknowledgement and left her side, his soft footsteps heading back toward the kitchen and the creak of the cold box opening. She couldn't see anything at all in the kitchen. The only light they had at all was the dim glow from the living room from the fire burning in the hearth. A hand touched her side and she jumped, swallowing back another scream when three more immediately followed suit.

“Warn somebody when you're sneaking up on them in the dark,” she whispered.

The wind rattled the trees around the house, and the branches tapped on the windows and sides while the rain beat down with cacophonous thrum. Skal's hands smoothed along her arms and hips in calming strokes that gradually dissolved her tension.

She moaned softly as he rubbed just below her hip against the joint there. “Your hands are like magic. That feels so good.”

He rumbled quietly and his hands fell from her hips as he shifted positions and moved out from behind her to draw her by the hand with a seductive pressure toward the living room. Her breath caught in her throat as she followed him, her senses wide open and reeling in the darkness. Was this really happening?

Skal paused by the door, and she heard the locks click into place before they headed into the living room. The faint light

of the fire was reassuring after being practically blind in her own home and she turned toward it for a moment before her eyes searched out where she knew the window to be. She didn't like the idea of anyone potentially out there... watching.

“The curtains?” she whispered, and she felt his body sway as he stopped, and the soft sound of the living room curtains being drawn shut.

She shivered in relief and once again his hands returned to her, stroking along her arms and sides. They didn't drift anywhere particularly intimate but there was a sense of anticipation and maybe even a question in his patient, explorative touch. His muzzle brushed her neck, his soft fur caressing her skin and Eve sighed and leaned into him. He had an extraordinary skill of making her feel so alive. How was it that only Skal could ever manage to do this? How was he the only one to ever stir her desire?

As if to prove her point, his thumb grazed the underside of her breast and she arched into the touch, her breath shuddering out of her.

“I love the way that you respond to my touch,” he growled softly in her ear. “Even when you look at me, the dark points of your eyes expanding and the sweet scent of your desire stirring—even the color rising into your cheeks—all of it is perfection. I have never wanted as much as I have wanted you.”

The brush of his tail slid along the back of her leg beneath her skirt and Eve smiled as she leaned into him. He was reassuringly nonhuman, everything about him so different for the hard, indifferent hand of what she'd experienced before.

“I love the way you touch me,” she admitted breathless. “And the way you look at me as if you would eat me and savor every bite.”

His groan vibrated through her and she squeezed her thighs together to relieve some of the tingling need that was now centered on her clit and her slit that was quickly soaking through her panties.

“I would,” he rasped, his fingers sliding from her hip over her belly until they brushed her mons, trapping her cloth-covered clit between two of his fingers. “I would lap that this like I eat the filling from your pie. I know it will taste as good... better.”

Eve quivered as his fingers rubbed against the sides of her clit, pressing inward on the upstroke until she was sopping wet and trembling against him, her hips lifting into his touch. He was making a mess of her. She could feel her slick coating her thighs and the pulse of her empty, needy pussy. She jerked, an explosion of desire whipping through her as he pinched her clit between his fingers and gently tugged, as something hard, hot, and thick rubbed against her ass. She gasped aloud and moaned, and Skal’s chuckle rumbled just below it.

He nuzzled her ear and his hot tongue swept along her neck; the texture far bumpier than she expected. She wiggled against him and the lower hand that had remained on her hip tightened and dragged her firmly against him so that she could feel each engorged cock pressed against her clearly.

“I presented myself to you. I showed you all that I could give you, even as I realize I have also been showing you with every little the thing I did—trying to prove myself a worthy mate to a female I bonded to and half-mated without even realizing. A female I’ve come to adore and need with every part of my being.”

“And love?” she whispered.

“And love,” he affirmed, his teeth nipping gently at her neck. “The whole of me yearns only for you. If you would have me? I would be yours entirely.”

Her eyes squeezed shut, a tremulous smile curling her mouth. This was what it was supposed to feel like. Her heart felt full and an urge to laugh and shout out joyfully and scream overtook her all at once. She hadn’t imagined that he would feel that way, that she wasn’t just clinging to a male who tolerated his presence. He loved her and suddenly everything was clicking into place—a beautiful future that waited for him. But still she had to make sure that it wasn’t just a convenience.

“And if I said no?” She hated whispering the words and the pain they might bring him.

Skal’s teeth caught her a little more roughly, sending a shock of desire through her. “Then we will continue as we are, but I will not rut you. Not unless you are mine as much as I am yours. Regardless, I do not wish to live without having you with me. You have made me whole in a way I never thought possible.”

“Me, too,” she whispered, her smile growing freely as she leaned into his touch, her arm curling back behind her head to hold him to her the best she could. “I love you, Skal. I’m so thankful you barged through my door.

His breath fanned her cheek as he chuckled. “I am pleased that you shouted at me for stealing your pie. I may have started falling in love with you then, my brave little mate.”

Eve laughed at that and moaned against when his tongue swept across her neck once more.

“Do you accept me, Eve?” he rasped. “There will be no others. I will never seek another triad and never share you. I cannot share you after having you to myself. Perhaps I am selfish, but I will not allow another male here. Because of this there may not be any rogs for us, but will you love me and accept me as I am anyway, knowing my love for you?”

Tears sprung to her eyes at the pain in his voice and she understood that this was something that he was sacrificing for himself as well, all because he loved her so much that he couldn’t bear to share with a strange male. And in truth, she wouldn’t have him any other way. She loved Skal and felt completed just as they were. If rogs came then she would welcome them. If not, she wouldn’t grieve for what she hadn’t known. She had everything she needed right here already.

“You’re mine,” she whispered, and her squeal of desire as his teeth clamped on her neck as his fingers manipulated her clit and nipples, and her shout as her orgasm quickly followed, was lost beneath his possessive growl.

He stripped her methodically, his claws tearing through her clothes in his urgency. She ought to have protested but in that moment she didn't care. She could sacrifice one set of clothes for the greater good and pleasure of their mating night. The first graze of his hot cocks against her bare ass and lower back, however, was sublime. The thick length of the upper cock with its frilled head almost tickled while the bumpy lower cock drug against her like a hot, slick rasp of something pebbled with numerous tiny beads. Eve twitched against him, her hips grinding against him, needing him within her desperately. She breathed in that need with every breath, his scent filling her nose and lungs, making her body demand even more of him even as she cried out impatiently when his cocks slipped off of her as he adjusted their angle and then pressed upward.

His fat, upper cock burrowed slowly into her pussy, stretching her around his girth with ever gentle pump of his hips. The pull and drag was exquisite as he worked himself in until at last, he was fully inside her, his cock jerking inside her with a hot splash that had him growling into her skin.

And then he began to rock his hips against her, and she dove into pleasure and was completely lost to it.

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN



S kal pinned his mate to him, her pheromones hitting him as her body rocked against him with her release. She was so sweet, and her surrender tasted even better than he could have imagined. Even the tight grip of her cunt around his cock was beyond any pleasure he had ever known. He thrust into her steadily, holding back his instinctive need to pound into her as he allowed her small body to adjust and become accustomed to his size. With every withdraw, her sex sucked onto him, trying to pull his seed from him in the instinctive mating call before he thrust back in and growled his pleasure at the tight rhythmic clamp of her channel holding him tightly within her once again.

His mate was everything he could have ever wanted. Her body yielded to him with so much trust as she gave herself to him completely. His claws scraped gently across her skin, making her tiny body shiver against him as he worked himself in and out of her greedy little slit. His secondary cock ached and leaked its natural lubricant, demanding her sheath but he forced himself to be patient. She was not a female Ragoru with two channels to receive him. He had to prepare her accordingly so that he would not hurt her.

He rubbed a finger over the tight little bud of her ass and growled as he pressed against it and the little pucker tried to suck it into its hot little hole. Releasing his grip from her neck, he laved the spot with his tongue, growling softly as he continued to fuck into her body, his cock jerking and swelling with pleasure but unable to find true completion. He needed to knot her. The desire was overwhelming and bled through him,

demanding that he spin her around and take properly, burrowing both of his cocks at once into her little body.

“Have you been taken here?” He growled the words, practically biting them out with his demand.

She nodded hesitantly and then she gasped as he pressed his finger deep. “Yes! Please, fuck me there, too. Please!”

A rumble of pleasure echoed in his chest, and he gripped her with all four of his hands, shifting her just enough so that she was bent against the side of the couch and braced for his plowing. His hips swung, deep grunts rising from his chest as his cock drove faster and harder into her cunt. It wept around him, sucking at him wetly with each thrust until she went rigid beneath him, her cunt milking his cock voraciously until his hips shook and he growled and snarled as he continued to fight his way into her tight sheath. His first cum shot from him, the thin seedless spray of his first release, spraying its hot essence into her womb he grunted and snarled against her skin, his pelvis bumping against her ass as her jerked repeatedly against her, her cunt strangling his cock, trying to pull more from its hard length.

A sharp growl broke from him at this discomfort, and he pulled from her body and abruptly turned her so that she faced him. She stared up at him sightlessly in the dark, but he picked her up and carried her to the thick fur where he had been making his head in front of the fire and set her down withing its softness. He would rut her in her bed later, right now he wanted to claim her here where it was full of his scent.

Stretching his mate out over the fur, he covered her eagerly, his lower hands spreading her thighs for him. She gasped and undulated her hips, her lower lips slick and dripping with her need. Skal lowered his head and lapped at it and growled with pleasure as the flavor flooded over his tongue. The sweetness of her musk was potent, making him ravenous as he attacked her, licking and driving his tongue into every place he could reach as his mate squealed and ground against him until she cried out and coated his tongue with another fresh flood that made him ravenous all over again. He brought her to completion twice with his tongue

before he finally was sated enough to crawl over her, his cocks pressing against her. His slick lower cock pressed against her ass, and he pushed forward slowly, his breath hissing out in a soft growl as the ring of muscles there slowly stretched around him.

Eve panted beneath him, her moans and whimpers feeding his desire. He allowed his lower cock to get halfway in before withdrawing enough so that he could line up his upper, breeding cock and take full possession of her sex once again. His eyes rolled back at the pure ecstasy of her tight holes squeezing around him and the friction of his own cocks rubbing against each other on each side of her body's barrier. Drawing out, he pumped back into her, his body rocking with his climbing need. He kept his thrusts as slow as possible as his mate writhed and wailed her pleasure on his cocks but the way they squeezed around him trying to both drag him in deep and push him out all at once started a frenzy in his blood.

He rutted into her, and their bodies slapped against each other, their moans mingling. He could feel his seed boiling up and the sweet pressure of it that started within his sac as it drew up and in an electric pulse through his back and thighs. He caged her against him, enjoying the way her fingers gripped and pulled on his fur as she came apart again and again beneath him. The vibration of his lower cock in her ass had her lifting her hips to meet him, riding his cocks from beneath him even as he drove them down into her.

The swell of his knot when it came happened so suddenly that it caught him off guard. He had not truly expected it to happen since he was a lone male. But the pressure of it lodging with in the tight grasp of her cunt and the sound of her voice crying out in pleasure and shock made him rock against her in a fervor, enjoying each tug on his knot as it ballooned further within her and an electric pulse snapped through him as he ground helplessly against her with his climax.

He roared as his climax rolled through him, his teeth snapping down onto her neck, marking her forever his, drawing a scream of pleasure from his mate, her sheath tightening with excruciating bliss around his shaft as his cock

erupted within her. He gave her his seed with every shallow thump of his hips, his cock jerking repeatedly within her against the vibration of his lower cock stimulating and prolonging his eruption as he worked her against his knot. Eve's cries of pleasure filled his ears at the first spray of his seed and then again as his cock repeatedly sprayed its release.

The pulse of his hearts pounded in his ears as he remained over her for a long moment before slowly shifting them onto their side so that they could lay comfortably on the fur while they remained lock together. Eve stared at him with a dazed look, her breath panting out of her while her cunt continued to ripple around him pleasantly. He stroked her damp skin with his hands, savoring their differences and how soft she felt to him.

It was when while they were lying on the fur, locked together, that the light in the kitchen came on and Eve breathed a soft sigh. Her lips quirked tiredly as he looked at her questioningly.

“I guess this means I can get back to making pie.”

Chuffing, he rubbed his muzzle against her cheek and nose. “Any treat you make is always delicious, but I do not think that any can top the sweetest and most tasty one that you just gave me.”

Eve's laughter filled their den and his heart, and Skal could not wait to have a lifetime more of exactly this. He had waited all of his life for it and now that he had it, he would never ever let it go.

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN



S kal crept through the fog, his ears tipped and shifting as they caught every sound. The front of the house was just visible from where he stood, the jack-o'-lantern's cheerful light visible through the fog. It was perhaps the only thing that was. He blended well with it as if he were born for it as he stalked silently through its heavy banks. He had prey to catch.

He could hear them just ahead. He had scented them when he left their den. Two males, one familiar and one not. He had told Eve that was going hunting, to see if there was a catch somewhere close—and he did not lie, but he did not want his sweet mate to know the truth of why they were there, or how he disposed of them. He did not want her hurt more than she had already been by the deception of her previous mate. He had heard enough while tracking the two of them. They were just up ahead now, and he had them within his sights.

“I’m getting fucking tired of standing out here like a fucking ghost, Paul,” the thinner one hissed. “Fine enough thing for you to get the idea to moan through that device but I’m the one who had to stand out in the fucking rain.”

“We were both in the rain, Bradley. Grow the fuck up. You knew that this was always the plan. We were supposed to help Victor drive her insane and make her flee from the property. That vein of tribulum ore runs right through the mountains here. We would already be set up for life if Victor hadn’t suddenly died.”

The other male looked warily around. “What do you suppose did him in?”

“Like I fucking know. All I know is that we just need to wait a little longer and she will be out of here, believing that the ghost of her dear, dead husband was haunting her.”

Bradley shook his head and scoffed. “You’re right. She couldn’t be very bright if she believed that Victor wanted to marry a pitiful thing like her. I bet he had whores all through the town.”

“Of course, he did,” Paul retorted with a bark of laughter. “How do you think that he caught wind of this place. You even met one of them when he brought us up here—the married one whose husband runs the apiary.”

Skal’s eyes narrowed, anger curling through him. He had known there was something off about that female. He would speak to her. She would know the consequences that would come raining down on her if she tried to harm his mate in any fashion any further.

“He promised her all kinds of things I imagine. Probably promised her to get out of this town, too, if she helped him. Had several more women out there building him up, all looking for a payoff that would get them to the citadel.”

“Oh yeah!” Bradley chuckled. “Well Victor always a way of smooth talking the ladies right out their underwear. We may be twins but I sure as shit didn’t inherit that particular ability.”

“Eh, don’t worry about it. We will soon be rich enough that you can just buy whoever you want to fuck.”

“What about the creepy alien?”

“It’s attached to her, probably fucking her again as we speak. It will leave when she does, I imagine. I can’t see a reason that it would stay. The townspeople barely tolerate her. They certainly won’t tolerate a lone alien. And if it becomes too much trouble, we will kill it. Unlike Eve, no one will sound the alarm or go looking for a missing alien.”

The other male chuckled. “Yeah. When you’re right, you’re right. All right, I will scare her good this time now that

I don't have that damn rain pouring down on me. Just be ready with the device."

"I'm ready. Hurry up and get out there. My nuts are going to freeze off if I have to crouch out here much longer."

Bradley sauntered away with a wave and Skal's lips peeled back from his teeth, and he stalked forward, his tail flagging behind him, keeping him balanced as he moved quietly in a crouch. Bradley had stopped a short distance away to make himself more visible through the fog, leaving Paul behind him. Skal attacked swiftly and brutally, bringing the male down silently with a broken neck. Paul's broken body dropped at his feet, the sound making just enough noise that Bradley whirled around, his eyes wide with panic.

"Paul? Was that you? Where the fuck are you?"

"Not Paul," Skal growled as he rose up to his full height from the fog. "Death."

The male's screams were impossible to mute entirely but Skal relished the brief sound even as he snapped his neck, too, allowing his body to drop into the tall grass of the clearing. Bending down, Skal grabbed by leg and dragged him away, stopping briefly to grab the leg of the other male with another hand before dragging both bodies back into the woods. He dragged them perhaps a little farther than was perhaps necessary, but he did not wish to draw predators down from the mountain. Instead, he climbed just high enough to find a ravine to fling their corpses from, his eyes following their plummet with satisfaction.

He left without a backward glance, leaving them as food for the beasts, and made his way back into the valley and to his mate. The lit pumpkin smiled at him in greeting with its Ragoru grin and he grinned back at it as he stepped inside. The jack-o'-lantern might keep one evil away, but he would destroy all others.

His eyes fell upon his mate and warmth filled his chest as he watched her cut into the pumpkin pie with a sharp knife, the scar from their mating on full display. She was everything to him. He could never let her know that her previous mate was

only using her. All that mattered was them and all their tomorrows together.

Eve looked up from work and smiled. “Did you have a good hunt? The dumb supper is just about ready.” She gestured to the table that she’d painstakingly worked on earlier that morning adorning with black and little mementos of death as she called the small decorations of skulls that sat in the center of the table.

“Caught a couple of things but they were not worth keeping so I threw them back.”

She nodded. “Oh yes, I know how that is. When you see what you’ve got isn’t worth keeping, it is better just to rid yourself of it. Victor never understood that. He thought the fact that I cared for him and appreciated him being there to fill a void in my life meant that I was stupid and wouldn’t see through his little games, or not hear what he got up to when he visited town. He thought he was so clever, but not so clever not to taste the poison.” She shook her head. “Some part of me still missed him. I’m glad that he is haunting me today. I don’t think I would have been too happy with him if he had.”

Skal cocked his head and peered over at his mate, surprised. A bark of laughter escaped him. Here he believed his female to be so fragile. It seemed that he was wrong. “Did you kill him, love of my hearts?”

She smirked at him. “Who is to say? He was far too mangled by the beasts after falling down that terrible ravine for the coroner to tell me anything concrete on how he died.”

Growling, Skal came up behind her and hugged her to him. “My fierce, clever mate. I want you beneath me, now.”

And so, their dumb supper had to wait a little longer, and it became tradition to begin their Halloween evening by rutting before they supped with the dead. When the first rog came after their first winter together it was a surprise, but one greeted with a great deal of pleasure by both of them. Then a couple seasons later a second came, and then a third. A

communication with a female, Evelyn, and her triad in the northern lands confirmed the likelihood that it was due to him being a breeding alpha—however unsuccessfully—whose mate triggered his drive to return once more.

Skal didn't care too much about the details and neither did Eve. They tended to their territory and had to killed whomever they had to protect their family before the huntsmen started coming after them in greater numbers. Eve had cried when they realized that they could not stay, and so had the rogs who had known nothing other than their private little valley. Skal knew that he would miss it too since their den and territory held all the best memories for him. It was with heavy hearts that they gathered their rogs and all their possessions into their wagon and hitched the mule, Clara, to it to begin their trek north.

The mangled body of huntsman that he had discovered just outside their valley carved up and hung at their door, a warning to all who might try to claim the land. Let it be haunted forever, its fog shrouded orchards and gardens haunted forever—property of the dead.

Happy Halloween.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

S.J. Sanders is a mom of two kids and one adult living in Central Florida. She has a BA in History, but spends most of her free time painting, sculpting, doing odd bits of historical research, and writing. While she has more research-oriented writing under another pen name, her passion is sci-fi and paranormal romance of which she is an avid reader. After years of tinkering with the idea, and making up her own stories in her head, in 2019 S.J began to seriously pursue writing as an author of Sci-fi Romance utilizing her interests in how cultures diversify and what they would look like among nonhumans on an extraterrestrial world or in an otherworldly realm with humans interacting with them and finding love.

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