



*Love Potion*

FOR THE

ALPHA



ALICE COLDBREATH

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# 1

## *Wick Manor House, Little Wick, The Summerlands*

The two young women stood side by side surveying themselves in the long glass on the far wall of the upper solar. Fires burnt brightly in the sconces as well as in the large stone hearth behind them. Still Isolde shivered despite the mild April evening. She smoothed the skirts of her green gown and checked the lacings that ran down her sleeves showing the white chemise underneath. It was her favourite dress, but she never deceived herself she had any claim to beauty even decked in her finest gown. She was just... altogether too rounded. Her face, her belly, her thighs, it had ever been the same since she was a small chubby child. She sighed and turned to face her stunningly slim younger sister Miriam. The contrast between them had always been a cruel one.

“You just have to snare his interest Isolde,” her sister told her fiercely. “Otherwise, all is lost for Benwick and me.” Her voice trembled with emotion and Isolde guessed she had been crying all afternoon about her fate since their father had told them Lord Mallon-Garth was coming to their manor house on a bride-finding mission.

Isolde gazed at Miriam in dismay. “But how am I to do that with you by my side?” she pointed out reasonably. “No man will ever look at me when you’re close by!”

A look of cunning stole over her beautiful sister’s face. “Ahah!” she said, reaching into a leather pouch that hung from her hip belt. “That’s where you’re wrong... not if you’re wearing *this*.” She pulled out a tiny glass bottle and held it up to the light.

“What is it?” asked Isolde hesitating as she stared at the tiny glinting vial.

“It’s a tincture. A potion devised to drive a man mad with lust.”

“Lust?” squeaked Isolde, glancing nervously over her shoulder. What if Aunt Enid was close by? She’d surely beat

them both! She lowered her voice. “Where did you get it? How do you know it works?”

“A hawker sold it me in Great Wick last feast day when father took me to the cathedral to pray for the men’s safe return from the wars. He swore it had powers as it is brewed from the bones of a holy virgin.”

Isolde frowned. “What would holy virgins know of lust?” she pointed out reasonably making Miriam pout.

“Don’t be tiresome Isolde! This is the answer to our prayers!”

“Have you... have you perchance had a sniff of it?” asked Issy. “Or... tried it out even?”

Miriam tossed her dark curls over one slight shoulder.

“I have no need of it,” she sniffed. “Benwick hangs off my every word.”

That was true enough, thought Isolde. And that was why Miriam was determined not to catch the eye of their illustrious guest, Jorah Mallon-Garth. Her sister had secretly pledged herself to their childhood friend over six months ago. The news of their father’s guest, who was apparently on a bride promise, had sent Miriam into a frenzy of fear as the family beauty.

“Quick, dab some on now before our aunt comes up to fetch us for the banquet.”

“Very well.” Isolde’s hands shook as she pulled out the tiny cork and dabbed it onto one finger before patting her neck gingerly.

“Goodness, you’ll need more than that,” cried Miriam, surging forward. “Why on earth have you swathed yourself in so many scarves?” she scolded pulling away at the layers of silk wrapped about her sister’s body.

“I’m trying to hide my bosom of course.” Isolde frowned. “You know what Aunt Edith says.

“All you’re doing is hiding your waist,” snapped Miriam. “Why do you insist on listening to our aunt anyway?”

Everyone knows she's a dried-up old spinster! What would she know about how to display your figure to advantage?"

Isolde grimaced as her sister sloshed the oily fluid into her ample cleavage. "Brr, it's cold!" she complained. "And oily. Don't use anymore for Lord's sake!"

Miriam pulled back, a frown on her face.

"I can't smell anything!" she admitted, cocking her dark head to one side. "Can you?"

Isolde sniffed. "No," she admitted. "At least... maybe just faintly. It smells like plums."

"Plums? Not... anything a bit more exotic?"

Isolde hesitated. "Are plums an aphrodisiac in some parts?" she hazarded.

"Not that I've ever heard," muttered Miriam darkly. "That hawker better not have spun me a yarn!"

Isolde tried not to worry it might have spotted her undergarments with grease. That would be hard to explain on the next laundry day. *Why Aunt, I have always suffered from greasy bosoms!* She couldn't see it washing somehow, not with her aunt or in the soap tub.

"Now, try not to talk of the commonplace or mundane like you usually do, Issy," her sister coached her as she seized her long brown braids and swiftly re-plaited them where they looked untidy.

"How do you mean?" asked Issy, her eyes widening.

"Try not to talk of the harvest or livestock or what the sexton preached of in church last week."

"But that's what's happening in my life. It's what I know." She broke off at her sister's exasperated sigh.

"And that's why you have no suitors Issy!" her sister blurted in annoyance.

"Of what should I speak of then?"

“Try to talk of... ideals. Of spiritual aspirations. Of ...tales of heroism or romance,” her sister recommended hesitantly. “Men like that.”

Issy tried not to show her panic. “But I don’t know anything about those things!” she protested. “This will never work Miriam!”

“That’s why the gods gave you that bosom you fool!” snapped her sister. “Why will you simply not use it?”

“My bosom?” echoed Isolde aghast. “Wh-what on earth does my bosom have to do with anything?”

Miriam plunked her hands on her hips.

“Do you want to save me, your only sister?” she asked wheedlingly.

“Of course, I do.” Issy bit down on her thumbnail. “The gods know I would do anything for you.”

“And you want me to have the bridge-groom of my choice, not some awful brute—I mean, not some complete stranger,” she amended swiftly, “who couldn’t possibly hope to win my heart?”

“Well of course...”

“Then take off your chemise,” urged her sister grabbing her dress sleeve and dragging it down her shoulder.

“But the potion...”

*“The potion may need a little help!”*

“Our aunt will *never* allow me in the great hall looking like... like this!” stammered Issy ten minutes later divested of her shift undergarment and laced back into her outer dress only. “I look like... a...” Words failed her.

“A trollop,” agreed Miriam nodding her head and looking somewhat awe-struck.

“I was going to say inn wench! An inn wench of ill repute!”

“It’s the same thing Issy, you silly goose!”



“*Please* don’t make me do this!” she implored her sister, a clamour of terror raising in her throat. “I’ll die of shame! Father will beat me tomorrow if I sit at the table showing everyone my chest!”

“No, he won’t. Not if you’re slung over Mallon-Garth’s pommel being ridden back to the Winterlands.”

“Slung over his what? Is that stable slang?” asked Isolde faintly.

Her sister ignored her, ducking into a dark cupboard to retrieve a jug of mead. “Drink this, for courage,” she urged her, raising the jug to her lips. Isolde’s protests were stemmed as the sweet fluid poured into her mouth. “Quick, now I’ll wrap this scarf around your neck and our aunt will be none the wiser... Wait until we get past the second or third course,” her sister instructed her firmly. “Wait until his eyes are on you and then fling it off and show him your bounty.”

Isolde moaned faintly.

“If possible, try and brush past him or even thrust them under his nose like this.” Her sister demonstrated with an arch of her slender back. “Mayhap touch your neckline with your finger like so, as if you’re caressing your skin; draw his attention to your female charms.”

“*What?*” Isolde stared at her sister aghast. “Where did you learn this?”

“It’s womanly arts Iss. It’s high time you learnt some. You’re three and twenty, not some child in the nursery. And if you can get close enough to him he may even be able to smell those magic plums.”

“*Magic plums?*” Issy’s head span.

“The potion, Issy, the potion. Concentrate for the gods’ sake!”

Both girls whirled around anxiously as their aunt swung the oak door open and beckoned for them.

“Oh Lord!” moaned Issy. “Saints preserve me!”

Jorah accepted another flagon of ale from his host as the two girls were ushered into the great hall by their formidable looking aunt. He surveyed them both as he took a long draught of his drink. The ale was pleasantly sweetened, he thought, with honey which made it much more enjoyable than the usual bitter fare. His eyes were drawn back to the prospective brides as their father stood at the table and cleared his throat with import. The first candidate was dark and slight and entered with a graceful swish of her hips as she glided across the rush-strewn floor, her eyes downcast with what he already suspected was false modesty from her polished entrance.

“My youngest daughter Miriam,” intoned his host eagerly. “She’s reached her nineteenth birthday ‘tis true, but I’ve felt no undue haste to wed her off, beauty that she is.”

Miriam raised her vivid blue eyes at this point to clash with his and he could see she had been crying tears of anger at some point that day. He winced inwardly. Temperamental and difficult, he thought without enthusiasm. So much for the reputed family beauty. *Moody bitch wouldn't be getting near my bed!*

“Miriam will play the lute and sing for our entertainment tonight,” pronounced her father with satisfaction. “She’s a rare talent and not just a pretty face.”

Jorah almost groaned. She was a bloody musician too. It was one thing he took no pleasure in.

His man at arms and companion Sir Alfric leant toward him. “The girl’s a beauty no mistake,” he rumbled in Jorah’s ear. Jorah shrugged; his eyes drawn to the second female following in her wake. This one had light brown hair in braids which hang down to her waist and big grey eyes. Her form was plumper and more rounded than her sister’s although from the way she’d swaddled herself against curious eyes she may as well be in nun’s garb for all he could see of her form! He glowered with annoyance as he plucked at a bunch of grapes a

servant held up to him. The fool almost dropped the fruit on his feet.

“Y-your pardon m’lord,” he stammered, backing away and colliding with Jorah’s squire.

“Easy Jorah,” murmured Alfric sounding amused. “You’re scaring the help!”

Jorah opened his mouth to give a scathing retort when he noticed the ready if somewhat hesitant smile of the plump sister who was gazing in his direction, bobbing him a curtsey.

*Eager to please*, thought Jorah grudgingly. He felt the beast within stir with interest which surprised him. He shifted in his seat as Miriam hissed at her father.

“Oh aye,” said her father hurriedly, clearing her throat. “And this is my elder daughter Isolde. A good girl,” he added judiciously. “She’s a great help about the place.”

Isolde’s smile turned a little glassy.

“Welcome to Wick Hall all,” she stammered obligingly before going to seat herself between her sister and father.

“Ow!”

She stumbled back finding some invisible obstacle before blushing and then re-thinking her strategy.

“Excuse me, sirs,” she apologised, elbowing her way determinedly between a clergyman and her father’s steward to sit directly opposite him on the bench.

Jorah’s eyebrows rose at her blatant attempt to win his attention.

“Determined wench,” he murmured in grudging admiration.

His friend snorted. “She’s the elder. She must be desperate. She should have been wedded and bedded years ago.”

Strangely enough, the thought made his throat go dry and he continued to watch her covertly as the first course was paraded around the banqueting table by a procession of servants, but after such a bold start the lass had grown timorous. She barely

lifted her gaze from her plate and her cheeks had turned scarlet. He found himself feeling slightly disappointed. When she nibbled on a sweetmeat with her white even teeth he found himself leaning forward, his eyebrows snapping together and his inner wolf bounding up with a growl. For a moment he thought he felt a flash of recognition as if he knew her but at that very instant a cloying scent reached his nostrils making him recoil in alarm. Rancid fruit, he thought distractedly, glancing down the table at his host's spread. But all looked as it should. He turned his head sideways to see if Alfric had noted it, but found his companion looking at him expectantly.

"...foregone conclusion," his companion was murmuring.

Jorah realised his friend had been speaking to him and he hadn't even heard him.

He shook his head slightly and turned back to gaze at the older girl. "What's your age wench?" he demanded imperiously, raising his voice above the clamour of conversation about the table. All fell quiet in an instant and you could have heard a pin drop.

The pastry slipped through her fingers and fell on her plate with a thud. "Me?" she squeaked.

"Aye you," he growled, narrowing his eyes.

She lifted her chin and straightened her back. "I am three and twenty, my lord," she told him in a louder voice though it quaked slightly.

Alfric was right; she should have been wedded years ago. He shot a glance at her father whose eyes had practically started from his head. "You are not betrothed or promised to anyone?"

Not that he cared, he would simply have her father break it. Still, he liked to know up front if he had rough ground to cover. He was a soldier after all.

"No, my lord." She looked astonished by his question and swallowed nervously before licking her bottom lip.

His eyes flew to her sweet full lips, and he almost bared his teeth. Almost. His inner wolf growled low and long.

“Nor widowed?” he ground out. She was old enough truth be told.

“No, my lord.”

“A virgin then,” he grunted taking another swig of his drink.

“Er, yes my lord,” Isolde answered, a hot flush of colour rising into her cheeks.

She looked like a doe in his cross-bolt sights. Frozen with fear. He felt his pulse low in his groin. If only that damn rancid stench wasn't filling his nostrils and making his head pound. He couldn't concentrate on the matter at hand. Not with the pain that was threatening to blossom through his skull. Where the hell was it coming from?

Suddenly a strumming struck up and Jorah realised her bloody sister was about to start singing for them. He glowered and dragged his gaze back over to the dais where she was sat bathed in candlelight in her light blue gown. He supposed she made a pretty picture if you were into that sort of thing. Which he wasn't. She tossed her dark head of curls and started singing in a sweet high voice about some ill-fated pair of lovers whose doomed passion burnt out too soon. With effort Jorah managed to stop himself from gritting his teeth. He abhorred this kind of maudlin sentiment. Gazing back at the table he could see everyone else was rapt, gazing at the girl in stupefied gratification. Miriam had her eyes closed as she soulfully wailed the chorus. He winced, how many verses would there be to this plaguey song? The lovers couldn't perish fast enough to his mind! Jorah found his gaze drawn back to the other sister who was nervously tugging at the scarf about her neck. She looked up and met his eyes with a start of embarrassment. What was she doing? he wondered, suddenly intrigued. She looked guilty as hell. He went to take a bite of his venison, but the pain in his head became a wave of nausea and he dropped the meat instead. When he looked up again Isolde had shed her neck scarf and he practically started out of his seat with an uttered oath.

*Gods teeth!*

Before he knew what he was doing, he was striding around the table, seizing her by the elbow and yanking her off the bench.

Her pretty tits jiggled as she was bounced up off her seat.

“Lord Mallon-Garth!” she exclaimed breathlessly as he dragged her to his side and flung her scarf back over her exposed cleavage with unsteady hands. Vaguely he noted that the music had stopped, and everyone was staring at them agog.

“I’ll take this one,” he pronounced thickly and then fell forward, planting his palms on the table to steady his balance. A trencher of apples and a roasted boar’s head fell to the floor with a loud clatter.

“Jorah!” Alfric was up out of his seat, a look of concern plastered across his face.

“It’s naught. A headache,” he ground out before everything started spinning and the whole world turned black.

Isolde felt terrible as she pulled on her thick gray woollen day dress the next morning as soon as she heard the cock crow. Poor Lord Mallon-Garth had passed out cold thanks to their wicked plot! She had an uneasy feeling his companion, Sir Alfric, somehow suspected her perfidy. His gaze had been almost accusing as they had stared at each other over his fallen friend's huge body. She shuddered. If he knew his lordship had passed out from a surfeit of lust he would be furious! Her hand picked up the tiny bottle from where she'd hidden it in her undergarment drawer and she withdrew the tiny bottle to stare at it once more. How could something so small be so potent? It was terrifying stuff indeed.

She glimpsed in the big round glass and frowned at her appearance. Quickly she plaited her long brown hair into two smooth plaits and flung them over her shoulders before adding a large, patterned sash across her breasts, tying it around her waist to try and disguise her large chest. She wished she wasn't so bosomy! True, her hips were big too but she longed for a dainty feminine figure like her sister's or even her skinny aunt. Alas, Isolde was blessed or cursed with a healthy appetite and constitution, and she loved her food. She doubted she'd ever be remotely waif-like. If it wasn't for that dreadful concoction handsome Lord Mallon-Garth wouldn't have given her a second glance, she thought dolefully. He was so tawny and golden like a lion with his colouring, his full lips, strong jaw and those terrifyingly icy blue eyes. He was like a god, all tall and muscular and well... *beautiful*. How on earth could he ever be appeased with her dumpy little mousey self? she thought distractedly. It would never work! A lion and a mouse! Plus she had used over half of the bottle at the feast last night! How was she supposed to get through years of marriage without it to blind him to her faults? It was completely hopeless. The most she could hope for was a long betrothal giving Miriam time to run away with Benwick. If she wasn't made of sterner stuff, she would have sobbed as she made her way down from the upper chambers to slip out of the back door and escape into the cold grey morning. Drizzling

with rain, thought Isolde distractedly as she slipped down the gardens towards where the livestock was kept. Hearing the hens crooning to greet her she relaxed into her usual routine and fetched them a pail of grain before sitting on the low wall and scratching one of the spotted pigs on their long hairy backs.

“Good morning Bess,” she murmured as her feet were soundly snuffled. “How’s my good girl?” Bess lifted her snout and chewed on half a turnip.

“I may have gotten betrothed last night,” carried on Issy conversationally. “Then again, I might not, as he was under a powerful influence.”

Bess snorted.

“I know,” agreed Issy. “It was pretty low of me. In my defence it wasn’t my idea.”

Bess shifted a little closer. “What does he look like? Well...” She tapped her finger against her chin. “If I told you, you still wouldn’t believe me. What if I were to tell you he was amazingly handsome like a hero out of a ballad. Only not so pretty. More sort of, rugged and well, *dangerous* looking. Like an outlaw. Only with better teeth.”

Bess sniffed.

“It’s true I tell you.” Issy frowned. “I know it sounds made up but when have I ever lied to you?”

Bess turned her back and shuffled off in search of more sustenance. Issy sighed and stretched her legs out before her, then groaned when the drops of rain started to fall thick and fast. She’d find no peaceful refuge out here, she thought sadly, looking up and seeing nothing but storm clouds.

“What’s wrong Bessie?” asked Issy as the pig shuffled off again with an angsty squeal before bolting away from her. “You seem skittish today, girl.” She frowned looking around. None of the animals seemed to want to know her today. The free ranging hens had all run up to the far end of the field as soon as they’d gobbled up their feed and the pigs had abandoned their low-walled sty to join them. Usually, they



enjoyed a bit of human company. The rain set her clambering to her feet with a heavy sigh. Clearly, she was not in favour today. Swinging the bucket, she made her way towards the nearest of outhouses and ducked inside. It would shield her from the worst of it before she navigated the five-minute walk back to the house.

“Brrr!” The spots of rain had been cold, and she hadn’t thought to throw on a cloak before she’d left the house. As she leant across to place the bucket on one of the shelves, she heard a steady panting sound and realised belatedly she wasn’t alone. Dropping the pail with a clatter she wheeled around.

“Who’s there?”

Two pale blue eyes glinted at her from the darkness of the far corner of the barn. A flash of white teeth heralded the suggestion of a low rumbling growl. Issy gasped and held her breath, realising why the farm animals had been shunning her. They must have scented the intruder in their midst. She froze, her eyes straining to see what was in the shadows. Whatever it was, it was big. Big and black and hairy. She swallowed; from its size it could even be a bear although she knew they were rarely seen outside of the forest. Her mind balked at what her senses were telling her. Long muzzle, sharp teeth—wolf! But wolves she knew were grey and had pale yellow eyes so it couldn’t be a wolf, right? That meant it had to be a dog... She knew her father kept hunting dogs over in the long barn two fields away, but they were kept well away from both the livestock and the house. Vaguely she tried to remember the name of her father’s favourite.

“Prince, is that you?”

She’d only ever seen Prince at a distance, as their father insisted; they were working dogs not pets. This one certainly did not look like anyone’s pet. Suddenly she realised why her father would never let any of them come near the house, a decision she’d always disagreed with until now. She’d thought a pet dog would be a pleasant companion but this one was clearly not domesticated.

“There, there,” she cringed, her voice wobbly. “Good boy, Prince. Good boy.”

The animal crouched, still snarling as Issy’s eyes darted to the door and she licked her suddenly dry lips. Could she make it to the door before he pounced on her? It was doubtful; he’d be on her in an instant. She whimpered softly before realising he was slowly edging away from the door. She drew in a sharp breath as he moved slowly but surely away, no longer blocking her exit from the barn. Expelling the breath swiftly she took one shaky step and then another towards the murky grey daylight. Forcing herself to move slowly and not provoke the beast she made steady progress until she stood on the threshold itself. Turning her head slightly, she blurted a hasty, “Thank you, Prince.”

And fled.

From the shadows Jorah’s hackles slowly went back down as he steadied his breathing enough to begin the transformation back into man-form. His senses were rioting. His wolf-self was going crazy with the need to pursue and subdue the fleeing female. *Isolde*, he hissed through his teeth which were now receding back into the gum. If the trace didn’t linger of that accursed perfumed oil on her skin, he didn’t know if he would have been able to contain the impulse to attack her. To bite her. To mount her. He breathed out through his nostrils. The sickly-sweet smell was still permeating the air and making his head swim. *Damn it!* It was fainter this morning but still pungent and vile. Why had she smothered her body in that filthy perfume? Under it he could faintly smell her own natural scent and that he realised with surprise was what was sending his wolf-senses into overdrive. He growled and shook his head as his limbs transformed and his body shifted. The air rippled around him as he flexed his rearranged muscles and sinew. For the first few moments his wolf senses still remained even though he was now a man. He wrinkled his nose; the barn smelt of animal feed and wood. His inner wolf yammered for his attention. He wanted her. *I know*, he told himself silently, but the wolf still twisted and turned within him trying to tell him something. *All is well*, he told himself. *We’ll have her.*

*There's no impediment. She'll soon be ours.* But still, it wouldn't settle. He frowned as he retrieved his clothes from where he'd stashed them behind some hessian sacks. Inside he was howling with frustration.

His hands shook as he pulled on his shirt and black leather tunic. This was bad. Women didn't usually affect him this way. Was it really a good idea to take this one to wife when she was already sending his dual nature into turmoil? He wanted few things from his impending marriage. An easy biddable wife who would help with the running of his home was paramount. For this reason, the elder Merrell girl had seemed a suitable candidate. She wasn't a beauty who'd cause him trouble with his lusty pack. She seemed pleasant enough with her hesitant smile and soft curvy body. He swallowed down his furious lust remembering her exposed breasts from the feast the night before. True enough, he hadn't intended to announce his choice quite so soon but the combination of her buxom display, his savage reaction to it, and his bewildered senses had culminated in his declaration. Damn his overloaded senses for causing him to pass out straight afterward! He hadn't regained consciousness until the early hours of the morning when he'd awoken in his bedchamber to find his squire asleep in a chair at his feet. Gregory's face had been white and pinched with worry as he'd explained that Alfric and two other manservants of Merrell's had been forced to carry him to bed! He flushed with annoyance to think they might consider him a fool who couldn't hold his ale! It was the girl's damn perfume that was to blame! That and his own rampaging lust. It hadn't been a good combination. He laced his doublet distractedly and then fastened his sword-belt before emerging cagily from the barn. He took in a couple of deep breaths of country air, relieved to find he wasn't surrounded by Merrell serfs bearing pitch forks.

She can't have run back and raised the alarm then. He smiled slightly at the thought of her speech to him while he was in wolf-form. Oddly enough, her words had soothed him slightly though they'd made no earthly sense. Who the hell was this Prince she spoke of? A nasty snarl echoed in his head at the thought she might have her own beast already. No, that

couldn't be right, he consoled his wolf-nature as it plunged and reared in fury within. His eyes widened in alarm. He needed to appease his animal nature and fast or there would be consequences for the wench. She'd find no gentle bedding if he continued like this. Striding towards the house he resolved to go and seek out Merrell for his consent. It would be a given of course, but the old man might balk at his undue haste. Too bad. As far as he was concerned the female was already his.

## 4

Issy had no sooner scooted back to the house then she was waylaid by Benwick her sister's betrothed.

"Is it true Iss?" he demanded, dragging her into the gallery. "Mallon-Garth's offered for you?"

Issy blanched. "Not exactly." She bit her lip. "How much has Mirrie told you?"

He coughed and lowered his eyes. "Well... she told me about the love potion if that's what you mean." He had the grace to blush. Luckily Benwick had been a childhood friend to the both of them, so she didn't feel unduly awkward.

"Oh. Well. Lord Mallon-Garth was a bit overcome," she admitted embarrassedly. "I don't know if what happened really constitutes an offer of marriage. He said he'd take me and then he passed out cold."

Benwick looked pained and ran a distracted hand through his brown curly hair. He was good looking in a boyish way and Issy had always understood how her sister had fallen for him until now. Now she thought of icy blue eyes and a strong manly jaw. She shivered, pulling the wrap she'd snatched up on her way in closer about her.

"You could hold him to a breach of promise if he tries to back out today. There were witnesses surely? Mirrie said half the county was invited." He scowled at his own lack of invitation.

"That's an exaggeration," she replied quickly. "Mirrie was probably overwrought."

"At least she never caught his eye," breathed Benwick thankfully. "I was so sure she would." Issy grimaced. "Not that you don't deserve a second look Issy." He grinned. "You know what I mean."

"I haven't seen him this morning," Issy continued, letting him off the hook. "But then half the house has not yet risen. It's not yet nine."

“I was hoping to see Miriam,” he confessed scanning the hall.

“It’s doubtful she’ll be up and about,” she told him kindly. “Do you want me to pass her a message? If my father sees you, he’ll be cross. You know how he’s taken against you since you asked after Mirrie’s dowry.”

Benwick sighed.

“Your father’s a tight old buzzard.” He frowned. “How can I afford to take a wife without a dowry? You’d better hope he’s more generous with Mallon-Garth or he’ll be withdrawing his offer for you.”

Issy sniffed. “Then you’d better hope he’s more generous at the prospect of getting me off his hands,” she replied tartly making Benwick smile again.

“You know I didn’t mean anything by it Iss,” he said reaching out and grasping her below the elbow. It was a platonic gesture inspired by years of friendship, but Issy heard the low rumble start up behind her almost before she was aware that a tall figure stood behind them. Benwick’s mouth dropped open and he took an involuntary step backwards.

Issy turned her head and beheld Lord Mallon-Garth stood in a somehow aggressive stance, glowering at the pair of them.

“Lady Isolde,” he growled.

“My lord.” She bobbed him a curtsey, fighting down a hot blush of colour. “Right glad I am to see you looking better this morning. Are you feeling recovered after your night’s sleep?”

He continued to gaze at her as if she had not spoken and then turned to look pointedly at her companion and gave a slight rise of eyebrows.

“Oh! This is my—a friend of the family,” she corrected herself hastily. “Benwick Price.”

Benwick gave a stiff bow. “Your servant, my lord.”

Jorah turned back to Isolde without responding. “Your father?” he asked shortly.

Isolde's eyebrows shot up at his intentional rudeness. What was his problem? His manners had seemed abrupt last night, but she'd given him the benefit of the doubt due to his having been soldiering for the last three years.

"My father is probably at breakfast in the great hall," she answered coolly. She turned back to Benwick. "You must excuse Lord Mallon-Garth's manners," *or lack of them* she left unspoken. "He's not had any civilising influences having been at war." She heard a sharp gasp but realised it was Benwick who was gaping in horror. At Mallon-Garth she shot a levelling look only to find him regarding her with a somewhat stunned look in his eye. He recovered swiftly, holding out one arm.

"You'll come with me Miss Merrell," he stated rather than asked.

She inclined her head regally and took his arm, deciding not to push it. "That would be most kind of you milord."

\*

*Bloody hells!* Jorah thought, fighting down the clamour of his inner self to assert himself over her. Never mind ripping the male threat limb from limb! Where was the biddable wench he'd thought to find now? Not only was she inciting him to violence by consorting with the opposite sex, she was also showing an inclination to defy him. *And the ring wasn't even yet on her finger!* He tensed up as he got a whiff of the cloying rancid fruits making him jerk his head back.

"My lord?" she asked, sounding concerned. "Has the headache returned?"

"It's nothing," he answered tersely. "You said last night you had no suitors."

Her step faltered. "I haven't," she lied through her pretty little teeth.

He gave her a steady sidelong glance. While it was true, she was no beauty, she did have charms enough he noticed anew as he looked at her slightly upturned nose and large black-fringed grey eyes. That plump, pert little mouth that

didn't seem to have a problem with flouting him. And that was leaving the curvy little body that so inflamed him out of it. He gritted his teeth. "Who was that then?"

"I told you who he was when I introduced you," she told him mildly. "An introduction you chose to ignore."

He halted and squinted down at her. Who the hell did this little wench think she was to rebuke him? His inner wolf flattened his ears and whined. Of course, his wolf didn't give a damn about the fact she was impudent. A few nips would deal with that and a bedding. But he cared. He'd wanted her to be buxom and bonair in bed and board. The old wedding vows. Cheerful and pleasant, willing and complaint. He didn't need some sharp-tongued shrew ripping up at him at every turn making his life a living hell. He was annoyed, disappointed even. The shyly smiling female from last night who'd tried to catch his attention had promised something else. "You said you were still a maid," he pointed out grimly.

She stared at him. "My lord," she spluttered and tried to draw back her arm.

His inner wolf didn't like that and neither did he. *No matter*, he decided with a shrug retaining his grip by taking a firm hold of her upper arm. The flesh felt smooth and softly rounded even under the wool of her sleeve. He shivered whilst acknowledging that touching her made him feel strangely calmer. He had no intention of relinquishing her to a prior claim. It was her own fault for not declaring it openly the previous evening. Now her fate was sealed.

"I need to speak to your father," he told her. "About the wedding arrangements."

Her colour drained at that. "Really? You're sure?" she stammered.

"Oh aye," he assented grimly. "I'll have you."

Her eyes went wide at that, and he could hear the increased heart rate, the pulse in her neck. His inner beast liked that. Liked it when she got flustered and her hand trembled on his arm. It promised a sweet sexual compliance that licked up his



spine and set his own pulse racing. Oh yes, Isolde Merrell was his, maid or no. The thought was a strangely satisfying one considering the cold rationale that had led him into seeking a human wife. If he wasn't careful, he'd lose sight of his original intentions altogether.

## 5

Isolde slammed her sister's bedchamber door and stood with her back plastered against it. Miriam, never an early riser, grumbled raising a tousled head from her sheets. She groaned.

"What time is it?"

"Never mind that," urged Issy pushing away from the door. "I think Mallon-Garth is quite mad. His wits are disordered."

Miriam sat straight up in bed.

"He's withdrawn his offer?" she wailed. "Oh *Issy!*"

"Far from it," she answered her sister, tight-lipped.

"What?"

"He declares he has every intention of... of *having me.*"

Miriam's eyes shone.

"That's *wonderful*," she breathed. "I must confess I was worried he might take it back this morning after the rush had worn off. Did you reapply?"

"What?"

"The tincture! Did you splash some on this morn?"

"No of *course* not!" she replied in frustration. "I nearly killed him with it last night!"

"What are you babbling about?" demanded her sister, flinging off her covers and heading for the water ewer.

"If he'd hit his head on the table on the way down, we would have brained him to death! It's a mercy he still has his wits about him! Even if they are scrambled," she added dolefully.

Miriam poured water into a bowl distractedly and then began splashing her face with it. She shivered. "Why does Jean insist on bringing my water at the same time as yours," she moaned. "It's gone quite cold!"

Issy ignored her and sat on the bed. "I hadn't thought this through," she said wringing her hands.

Her sister turned to look at her. "What's this? You wanted to end up like our aunt, a drain on your brother-in-law? Or perhaps you fancied entering a convent?"

"Don't be nasty."

"It's the cold hard truth," said her sister throwing aside a towel. "We are women, and these are our choices. We may as well be realistic."

"What, that you marry your childhood sweetheart and I end up being bedded by a stranger?" asked Issy somewhat hysterically.

This brought her sister up sharp. She softened her gaze and made her way around to where Isolde sat.

"Don't be like that Iss," she said placing her hands on her shoulders. "You'll soon bring him to book. You know how capable you are. That's why father doesn't want to lose you. You run this house, not Aunt Enid. Father will be lost without you. We all will."

Issy sniffed.

"He's... he's a bit..."

"Scary?" guessed Miriam biting her lip. "Huge?"

"Scary and huge," agreed Issy hiding her face in her hands. "I don't know what to do with him."

"You'll figure it out," soothed Miriam. "You always do. Remember father's horse? You have a way of soothing savage beasts."

She guessed it had sounded more comforting in Miriam's head than it did out loud.

By the time the sisters had descended to the great hall their father had already had a private interview with Lord Mallon-Garth. He looked shell-shocked; his uneaten breakfast sat in front of him as he rubbed his nose and stared into his tankard. Their aunt surveyed them sourly.

“Good morning father, Aunt Enid.”

“Well, he still wants you,” said her aunt sourly. “Your father checked first thing this morning in case it was the drink talking last night.”

“The drink?” she repeated stupidly, staring at her father who fidgeted miserably in his seat.

“’Tis sorry I am to lose you daughter,” he mumbled looking tearful. “I never meant to... you’re far too useful around here for me to hand you over. But somehow...” He sighed miserably. “He’s not the type you can say nay to.”

Miriam gave a crack of laughter. “Good gods, surely you can see this is a good thing for Isolde?” she demanded. “Lord Mallon-Garth has wealth, lands, a fearsome reputation as a warrior in the field. He can give her riches, children...”

Isolde sank back down into the chair with a moan. “Is he really such a catch?” she asked sounding stricken.

“Yes indeed,” her father responded dismally. “Even in this provincial backwater his reputation has preceded him. You must have heard tell of his prowess on the field of battle? The crown prince himself awarded him with two estates after the campaigns at Matteia and Domorne.”

Isolde’s gaze met her sister’s over their father’s fluffy white head.

“Why on earth did he come to our family to find a wife?” asked Miriam sounding stupefied. “It doesn’t make any sense!”

Their father started guiltily. “That was a favour to me,” he admitted colouring slightly. “I did his lordship’s father some small service some years ago... but I never dreamt...”

“What small service?” put in their aunt bluntly. “Don’t be coy Godfrey. It’s most frustrating!”

Their father coughed.

“As you know I am a merchant, and it was with the purchase of a sale of land. There’s no mystery around it. He promised to look me up at a future point and do me a good

turn if fate decreed.” Her father shook his head mournfully. “Why his son wouldn’t take Miriam is anybody’s guess.”

“Father!” huffed Miriam. “For my part I am heartily glad that he’s chosen Isolde.” She tossed her head.

“Well, he means to have you,” sniffed their father woefully looking at Isolde. “And I’m sorry to tell you this daughter, but he’s not a man for waiting. Today is to be your wedding day.”

Isolde’s jaw dropped. “Wh-what?”

“He’s keen as mustard.” Her father shrugged. “And means to carry you off with him before the week’s out.”

“Carry me off?” she repeated dumbfounded. “Leave Wick Hall?”

“It’s disgraceful,” tutted their aunt. “No formal betrothal. No bride clothes. No bridal banquet... What will our neighbours say? She’s being carried off like a hostage in a raid!”

“My poor little Isolde,” said their father looking pained. “A bride!”

Issy moaned faintly raising her hand to her throat. “I can’t believe this!” she choked out.

Her sister was at her side in an instant. “There, there Isolde. You’ll handle this well. You’ll handle *him* well. I know it.”

Isolde stared up at her. “But Miriam...” she answered softly. “The potion...”

Miriam was there in an instant, cutting off her words. “There sister,” she said loudly. “You’re not to turn maidenly now. It’s long past time you were wed. Father’s been selfish trying to keep you an old maid for his own convenience. He should marry again.”

“Marry again?” screeched Enid looking outraged. “My poor sister is not yet cold in the grave.”

“She’s been dead for fifteen years!” pointed out Miriam tartly. “Either that or you can take up the reins of the

household Aunt. Why should Issy have to do it all?”

Before their indignant aunt could reply, Miriam had pushed away her plate of bread and refused a bowl of pottage with a grimace. “We need to sort out her wedding gown, Aunt.”

Enid dragged back her seat. “True enough,” she agreed. Let us go up to the solar and get to work.

“It must have long full sleeves,” stipulated Miriam excitedly. “There’s that bolt of scarlet velvet we haven’t used...”

“Not scarlet, it would look hideous with that mousey hair!” objected Enid.

“A low neckline is essential.”

“Certainly not! And you needn’t think I didn’t notice that stunt of yours last night at dinner, Isolde,” her aunt scolded. “Utterly shameless. No wonder the poor man fainted from shock.”

Issy blushed. She’d started to think she’d gotten away with it unseen by anyone save Lord Mallon-Garth.

“I thought you said it was an excess of wine,” retorted Miriam spiritedly. “You can’t have it both ways.

## 6

“Are you sure you’re yourself again, Jorah?” asked Alfric sounding disapproving. “I’ve never known you to faint in your life!”

“I didn’t faint,” snapped Jorah with irritation as he dismounted from his horse after a guided tour around his prospective father-in-law’s estate. “I... passed out.” He handed his reins to his squire and glared to find him avidly listening. “It was nothing!”

“You’d barely touched a drink,” scoffed his friend. “And you’d eaten well at dinner. I almost started to suspect...”

“Suspect what?” asked Jorah dryly as they started to walk away from the stables. Sir Merrell’s steward who’d guided them was walking far enough ahead for them to converse in private.

Alfric bobbed his head in embarrassment, lowering his voice. “That they’d poisoned you.”

Jorah stopped stock still. “Poisoned? Don’t be ridiculous. Why should some provincial little baron who barely knows me take it upon himself to murder me?”

“I don’t know,” admitted his friend distractedly. “But I’ve known you to go days without sleep or food and never lose consciousness.”

“My head ached,” he replied testily. “And there was a strange smell that affected me.” He cast a sideways look at his friend. “Did you catch a whiff of it?”

“A strange smell?” He shrugged. “No. But that wasn’t the only odd thing.”

“What then?”

His friend hesitated before coming to a standstill. “Your choice of bride,” he said, levelling a straight gaze at him. “Why pick the plain dumpy one and not the beauty?”

Jorah felt his inner wolf turn and snarl and was surprised to find his hands had curled into fists. He purposely breathed out

and un-balled them slowly,

“You think her plain?” he forced himself to ask calmly.

Alfric was eyeing him uneasily. “You don’t?”

“No,” he answered shortly. “I don’t.”

Alfric’s eyes widened perceptibly. “I see.”

“Do you?” asked Jorah, shrugging as he felt the dangerous moment pass. “I’m not so sure I do.”

“Well, she’s not your usual type.” Alfric shrugged. “But mayhap that’s no bad thing. You shouldn’t choose your wife like you do a doxy when all’s said and done.”

Jorah gave a short laugh as he thought of the bold-faced camp follower who had been his last mistress. She’d been an exquisite piece, auburn hair, violet eyes and a mouth that could make a man weep. He frowned bringing Isolde Merrell’s face to mind. Why did the thought of those clear grey eyes make his gut clench? Her attraction for him wasn’t a straightforward one that was true enough. He passed a hand over his face and felt his stubble. “I need to shave,” he muttered. “We’re to be wed today.”

“Gods they’re keen!” blurted Alfric sounding thunderstruck. “Are you sure you shouldn’t check the girl’s credentials, her reputation locally....”

“I stipulated the wedding date, Alfric.”

“Oh. Oh well.” His friend coughed awkwardly. “In that case...”

“I want to get back to my lands,” he sighed. “They’ll be facing wrack and ruin in my absence. My uncle’s been unwell, and no one’s been acting as estate manager in my absence. My pack is set at odds with one another without my Beta in place.” He gave Alfric a significant look.

“I wasn’t about to let you go off and defend king and country without me,” he muttered. “We thought your Uncle Cedric would hold it together...”



“Well, the best laid plans...” Jorah broke off seeing his friend’s stricken expression. “Never mind, we’ll soon be back at Varkash Keep and get it all in order again.” He clapped Alfric on the shoulder.

“Do you mean to tell her—I mean, the Lady Isolde about... the pack? *Before* you’re wed, I mean,” asked Alfric.

“No,” answered Jorah shortly. “No, I don’t.”

“Ah well, I suppose you know what you’re doing,” answered Alfric sounding anything but.

Jorah inclined his head. “I’ve already outlined my reasons to you for this marriage,” he pointed out.

Alfric hesitated. “I know the situation between your parents was far from ideal but...” Jorah’s face turned stony and Alfric realised his mistake at once. “Your pardon, forgive me.”

Jorah swept his hand in a swiftly dismissive gesture. “Believe me, I’ve thought this through rationally and without emotion clouding my judgement. I’ll wed a sensible human female who will know her place. Namely to be a comforting wife providing a comfortable home. And my heirs. That’s it.”

“And you don’t intend to mate her?” asked Alfric even though he already knew the answer.

“Certainly not.”

Alfric glanced at Jorah’s closed off face with a small frown. He knew nothing of women but even he had an uneasy feeling his friend was making something of a mistake.

They were to be married as the sun went down in late afternoon. The bishop had ridden down from Great Wick after his summons, for which he was handsomely paid. There were few guests, mostly just the Merrell servants and serfs. Isolde was wearing a midnight blue velvet dress which she, her sister, and her aunt had hastily sewn together with long sleeves that draped all the way to the floor and a jewelled girdle belt that was her mother's.

"You'll have to show your waist for once," pronounced her sister with satisfaction. "And I think the neckline should be lower."

"Certainly not!" objected Aunt Enid. "That would be most unseemly."

"She's wearing a white shift underneath anyway," scowled Miriam. "She may as well display all her assets for once."

As their aunt started to bundle Isolde's hair into a net, Miriam reached across and twitched it out of her hand.

"She's a bride, her hair must be loose."

"She's not in the first flush of her youth," pointed out their aunt tartly.

"She's a bride," repeated Miriam obstinately. "It must be loose."

Their aunt tutted but let her have her way.

Isolde fretted and fiddled with the jewelled belt with nerveless fingers.

"Father's giving you that in place of a dowry." Miriam nodded. "It's a wonder Lord Mallon-Garth will allow it. He must want you pretty badly Iss."

Issy's hand fell away from the ornate copper links. "Well, it's not as if he needs money or lands," she pointed out hollowly. "Did you realise he was so rich and famous when we went down to the feast?"

Miriam nodded slightly.

Issy cursed softly seeing their aunt retreat to the far end of the room to sort through the cloaks for travelling clothes for the morrow.

“Maybe he would not have picked either one of us,” she pointed out quietly. “Did you ever think of that? The favour father had done his was some trifling affair. Maybe he would have just moved onto another family to look their daughters over. Now, thanks to that potion I’ve falsely snared him for a husband.”

“So what?” Miriam shrugged. “You deserve a rich and famous husband as much as any other girl. More so, as you hadn’t much time left before you dropped off the shelf from extreme age.”

Issy’s slippered foot shot out to nudge her sister in the shin. Hard. Miriam laughed before turning suddenly serious.

“Have you enough to get you through the bedding?”

Issy stared. “I’m not putting on anymore of that awful potion!” she whispered furiously as the meaning of her sister’s words sunk in.

Miriam tugged on a lock of her loose hair. “Don’t be foolish Iss,” she urged her in a low voice. “Just this one last time. To ensure he... erm, rises to the occasion.” Her cheeks were bright pink by now.

Issy blinked at her. “If you think that without it, he would be unable to *perform* the groom’s duties then it bodes ill for our next thirty years of marriage, sister,” she pointed out with dignity.

“Once he knows you, of course he will be smitten,” argued her sister spiritedly. “But he doesn’t know your finer qualities yet,” she pointed out. “He may need a helping hand.”

Issy blinked back the sudden tears rushing into her eyes. “What a false bride I am,” she whispered sadly. “If this were turned into a ballad, I would be the villain!”

“Of course, you would not!” argued back Miriam. “Men are fools. We women must sometimes show them the way. That is all.”

Issy gaped at her. “What if he passes out again?” she whispered furiously. “Then there would be no consummation of the vows at all, and the ceremony would be invalid.”

Miriam rocked back on her heels considering this. “You’re right,” she conceded at last. “We’ll just have to hope a residue remains on your skin. Mayhap you could wear the same chemise again. The one we spilt it on?”

Isolde nodded at last. “I suppose,” she sighed. “It’s not very romantic, is it?”

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It was an observation she sadly revisited again and again as the day progressed. Their ceremony was a hasty affair. There was no ring and Lord Mallon-Garth did not meet her eyes once during it but stood in stony silence apart from repeating the vows at the right moment. Issy glanced timorously up at him several times, but he did not turn to her even once. When she’d first appeared in the vestry his head had jerked up and his eyes had narrowed with displeasure.

“What is that perfume you’re wearing?” he’d gritted out as though pained.

Isolde swallowed nervously. “Perfume?” she’d echoed faintly. “But I’m not wearing any...” His burning gaze scorched the lies on her tongue. “Unless you mean the one I applied last night that still lingers on me...” she amended hastily. “’Tis a scent my sister gave me. She bought it on a saint’s day. From Great Wick.”

“It doesn’t suit you,” he answered crushingly. “If you know what’s good for you, you’ll leave off wearing it.”

Isolde stared. *He couldn’t know! Could he...?*

“O-of course,” she’d murmured obligingly. “If it pleases your lordship.” *After all, she didn’t intend to wear that damn perfume ever again!* She’d thought his stern-faced companion, Sir Alfric, had looked at her with something

approaching approval at this. She'd coloured guiltily feeling like the worst kind of fraud. She hadn't managed to eat more than a bite at supper despite the hurried array of dishes the kitchens had managed to lay on with fish and meat pies, stewed fruits, and roasted joints of meat.

All too soon it had been time for the bedding and Isolde found herself escorted up to the biggest guest bedchamber by her aunt, her sister, and her father's steward's wife. Divested of her gown they helped her into the bed and left her sat there in her shift shivering beneath the covers despite the roaring fire in the grate. A murmuring of masculine voices outside the door heralded the arrival of her husband. Isolde swallowed nervously and pulled the sheets up to her chin. She could hear her father's unhappy tones wishing the groom good speed. Funny she hadn't realised till today that she was her father's favourite. He'd had tears in his eyes for most of the day! She hunched her shoulders and hunkered down further in the sheets. Just then the door cracked open, and Mallon-Garth appeared in the doorway, looming and massive in the flickering firelight. Issy swallowed. Now she'd find out if she should have doused herself with the last of the lust potion. Taking a tentative glance up at his furious face she suddenly wished she'd drained the bottle.

\*

Jorah slammed the door on the worried faces of both his father-in-law and his second in command. *Damn fool tradition*, escorting the groom to the bedchamber. He was glad the bedding hadn't occurred back at Varkash Keep where it would have been accompanied by a lot of bawdy jests and leering from his pack. He could do without that bullshit. He turned and started to strip, unbuckling his belt and dragging his tunic up and over his head. He only gave his quivering bride the most cursory of glances.

"Get over here," he growled. Damn, she had him edgy with need and hunger. He didn't feel like himself at all. It was hard to concentrate with that infuriating smell emanating off her.

"Wh-what?"

He sloshed some water from a ewer into the basin. “*Here. Now,*” he barked out and was glad to hear some rustling behind him in the vicinity of the bed then some soft footfalls. He steeled himself up to look around at her. *Holy hells!* Her shift was practically translucent. His mouth went dry at the sight of her full figure. He could see the soft shadow of her woman’s hair beneath her chemise and round high breasts. He reached out towards her and grasped her firmly, pulling her into his arms. She gasped and he felt himself harden and lengthen behind the suddenly tight press of his pants. Unable to help himself he plastered himself up against her back. The soft press of her flesh even through her shift made him close his eyes with pleasure. Then that damn scent assailed his nostrils again making him jerk back his head with a bitten off curse. She trembled in his arms. “Hold still,” he bit out reaching out for a washcloth. He dunked it in the water before wringing out the excess water and then dragging it down her throat. She jumped.

“What-?”

“Hold still I said.”

She tipped back her head and blinked up at him as he scrubbed behind her ears and down her neck. He dunked the cloth again and swirled it around in the lukewarm water before squeezing it and returning again to her throat. This time his hand slid down between her lovely breasts. Her breathing hitched at this, and he could almost feel her heart thudding in her chest. He swallowed, his head starting to pound as he tried to concentrate on the task in hand. He was breathing hard through his nostrils as he watched her nipples pucker and harden under his rapt gaze. Unable to help himself he dropped the cloth and dragged his hands up her soft body to cup her full plump breasts and squeeze them, dropping his face to her shoulder where he inhaled her clean, feminine scent. She moaned softly and squirmed against his front. Hauling her up like that meant her plump bottom nestled against his rock-hard cock. He growled with pleasure and then almost howled when the lingering traces of that foul perfume permeated his senses. He almost dropped her, only just remembering to keep his hold of her at the last minute.

“W-what is it?” she gasped as he reeled towards the bed and dumped her on it.

He wheezed, passing a hand over his eyes. “That damn scent... It’s killing me.” She glanced up at him with those big grey eyes. Something pierced through his shrieking senses. *Guilty big grey eyes* he realised belatedly, his gaze narrowing on hers. “What did you do?” he barked out.

“I’m so sorry,” she winced. “I didn’t think it would have such a strong effect. You’re not going to pass out again, are you?”

“You didn’t think *what* would have such a strong effect?” He stared at her thunderstruck.

She licked her lips, almost distracting him if it weren’t for the shooting pain in his skull. “The perfume,” she whispered wretchedly. “My sister gave it me. We thought that if... Well that you would not want me... So, I wore it and I shouldn’t have. It was wrong. You must be furious...”

He stared down at her in dawning astonishment. The wench had deliberately worn the perfume to affect him like this... He was completely floored that she could be so duplicitous. She seemed such a tasty little morsel lying before him even now with her round white limbs, her rosy, pink nipples and lips. Her abundant loose hair, not a rare shade or colour ‘twas true, but it was so shiny and thick he wanted to bury his nose in it. And in the matching curls betwixt her pale plump thighs. But it was all a lie, all this luxuriant, pliant female flesh before him as clearly the female had decided to render him impotent on his wedding night. Deliberately. The pounding in his temple now was from fury. “Sly wench,” he gritted out. There was no way he could rut between her thighs with her pores giving off that loathsome sickening smell of rotting fruit. Clearly, she meant to thwart the consummation tonight, but to what purpose? He cast about for a reason and the only one that sprang to mind was that curly-haired lad she’d been whispering with earlier. He almost snarled in fury which made him sway on his feet. She leant up on one elbow hastily as if to rise. “Stay where you are,” he ground out glaring at her.

She lay back down. "I'm sorry," she whimpered.

So, she didn't want him to bed her, he thought angrily. And her methods of prevention had been most effective. Still, there was another way he could make her bleed on the bedsheets to prove she was now his, maiden or not. It would also get his inner wolf off his back. He was yapping and keening now enough fit to bust his aching head open. "Pull up your shift," he ground out.

"What?"

He clambered onto the bed, grabbing her legs behind the knees and pushing them up. "Pass me down a pillow," he rasped.

She was gaping at him open-mouthed, propped up on her elbows. "But what are you-?"

"Pillow."

She twisted round to grab a pillow and he snatched it off her shoving it under her bottom elevating her hips. Gingerly he lowered himself between her legs till he was resting on his elbows. He sniffed. Down here the rancid fruit smell was fainter. She'd slathered the damn perfume on her throat and breasts, not her thighs thank gods. Though the pulse beat just as strongly down here as it did in her neck and he knew women a-plenty who applied their scent down below. None of them respectable. He lowered his nose until it was pressing against the springy light brown curls on her mons.

She made a yelping sound above him that excited his wolf-side. *Easy*, he cautioned himself. *Don't lose control*. Even though she'd shown herself treacherous and untrustworthy, he didn't want to hurt the little bitch. Female. *His wife*, he amended to himself silently. Her own natural womanly scent was directly under his nose now, soothing him. He breathed it in, luxuriating in the rich aroma of human female. *Anxious, somewhat aroused female*, he realised with relish. *Delicious*, his teeth descended, and he began to salivate. Maybe she'd realise what a mistake she'd made incapacitating him on their wedding night now. He extended his tongue to give a long



swipe through her tempting nether lips at this point and she let out a shriek almost coming off the bed.

“*Gods!*” she squeaked. “Why, what are you—?”

He growled not inclined to speak to her right now and lowered his head again, dragging his long tongue through the sweetly glistening pink flesh. His cock twitched painfully at the thought of the tight, moist welcome she’d give him.

“*My Lord!* I—I must protest!” she panted, trying to squirm out of the iron hold he had of her. He smiled grimly against her pretty little cunny. His arms were hooked under her thighs and up and around in a punishing grip. There was no way she was going to get away from him now. He closed his lips around her little pearl and gave it a good sharp suck before laving it with his tongue.

“I don’t know what you’re—” She broke off her words with a low groan. “Oh—ohhhhh! No, no you mustn’t! Oh *gods!*” Her hips bucked up once, twice, and she shrieked as she creamed right into his hot mouth. He lapped at her, pushing his tongue deep into her passage to seek out every last delicious drop of her moisture as she panted and bucked and shrieked under his ministrations. As he did it, he pumped his hips, rubbing his hard cock against the mattress like a horny youth unable to stop himself. He could feel her tight little cunt spasming around his tongue as she took her pleasure, cursing and wailing, begging, and pleading with him in broken phrases that spoke of total inexperience in oral pleasure. *Gods*, her cries aroused him almost savagely. He grew so hard he felt dizzy. He deliberately extended the experience for her, licking and suckling her right through her climax, drawing it out until the tremors shaking her body grew fainter and fainter and still he swirled his tongue to capture every last drop of her essence. He lifted his mouth of her at last with reluctance and gazed at her shaken flushed face.

“Why on *earth*—what *was* that—?” she panted in bewilderment.

“This bit will hurt,” he told her grimly as he pulled her legs firmly apart staring down at her creamy right thigh before

lowering his mouth, opening wide and then biting down hard on her soft flesh. His wolf howled triumphantly as her sweet blood ran over his extended teeth and he finally came, spilling into his breeches for the first time in years. His head rushed, and as if from a distance, he heard her shrill scream. Greedily he allowed himself five seconds to fill his mouth with her rich blood, savouring the indescribable taste on his tongue. He deliberately let two or three drops trickle down from his lips onto the bed sheets before swallowing it down in a gulp. Then he licked at the puncture wounds, allowing his saliva to run down his tongue and into her torn flesh, healing and closing over until she was whole again. He was panting hard by the time he lifted his head and her eyes had drifted half shut with exhaustion.

“You’re mine now,” he growled low in satisfaction.

She merely moaned faintly in reply. He would have liked to have crawled up and over her before collapsing in a heap, but the smell of the damn scent was still too strong on her upper body where she’d been twisting and turning, the warmth of her body making the fruity odour more pungent.

Instead, he needed to get out into the fresh air away from the perfumed air which was almost like poison to him. He staggered to his feet and over to the casement which he flung wide letting the night air in. He took some great gulping breaths of fresh air, before realising the contrast was too swift as his stomach started to clench and roil. With an oath he seized the empty chamber pot in the corner and vomit.

Issy had never felt more wretched in her life. That wicked lust potion had driven her new husband completely out of his mind. *The things he'd done to her!* She'd never be able to look him in the eye again! And the poor man would never be able to face himself, she thought rolling over onto her side and looking to the doorway where he slept buck-naked on the floor. Last night after throwing up violently he had managed only to wash his mouth, face and well—crotch area before stripping off completely and collapsing in the corner as far away from her as he could manage. She'd crept out to empty the chamber pot and refill the ewer with clean water in the early hours and then snuck back in.

Of course, it had meant stepping over him both times and when she'd re-entered the room, he'd been lucid enough to grab her ankle and roll onto his back staring up at her blankly. She'd whispered his name and he'd relaxed and rolled back onto his side releasing her. She'd done a quick strip wash, scrubbing at her throat and breasts herself this time in the vain hope of removing the last of the potion. The hawker had never warned Miriam it might drive a man to *perversions*, she thought with a sob. She closed her eyes and whispered a frantic prayer that he would not remember what he'd done when driven out of his mind with lust or her own wicked reaction to it, she thought wretchedly.

For Lord Mallon-Garth was innocent, she reflected; his actions had been the frenzied result of a force he could not control. Her own brazenness had no such excuse. How *could* she? How could she have sobbed and wailed and clawed at the bedsheets in pleasure like that beneath his mouth? Unless... she frowned, dabbing a towel over her damp body. Unless... she too had been affected by the potent aphrodisiac...? She stilled and considered this possibility with dawning hope. Yes, that *had* to be it! She herself had fallen victim to the smell of magical plums! Hearing a faint groan from the corner she dropped the washcloth and scampered back over to the bed, hiding herself beneath its covers. That was when she spotted the drops of dried blood on the sheet.

She gasped. So he *had* bitten her! She'd thought she must have imagined it when there'd been no scarring! She dragged down the covers and inspected her right inner thigh by the grey early light coming in from the window. She traced her finger over the smooth flesh. *Was there a very faint scar there?* she noticed sitting upright. *There was!* But it looked like she must have had it for years for it to have faded out like that... She looked up in consternation to find his steady gaze watching her. She blushed and pulled the sheet back up.

"You're well?" he asked huskily.

"Aye my Lord," she managed to stammer back, a hot wash of shame sweeping through her.

"Good. We'll be setting off in two hours at the latest."

"That soon?" She could see her answer had displeased him as soon as she'd uttered it. "I mean, I might not get to say goodbye to everyone," she added softly.

His gaze was still hard. "If you mean Benwick Price, you said goodbye to him the moment you wed me," he bit out harshly.

Issy's mouth dropped open. *Benwick Price?* She was surprised he even remembered his name when he refused to speak to him the day before!

"I did not mean Benwick," she denied lamely.

He made a noise of irritation and rose swiftly to his feet showing his complete nakedness as he scooped up the sheet and approached the bed. Issy made a strangled noise and shrank back against the headboard. He rose an eyebrow at her before tossing the sheet next to her and giving her a significant look before turning back around and heading for his clothing. Issy tried not to stare when she saw his man-root was half erect. Being around animals since a young age she knew what that meant and felt her cheeks flame as she took in the length and breadth of it. *Gods!* He was huge. She felt suddenly relieved he hadn't taken her virginity with it last night. She'd never have been up for a three-day ride afterwards to his

home! She averted his eyes as he dressed once again all in black and used the fresh water to wash.

“I’m going out for a run to clear my head,” he uttered flatly. “When I get back you best be dressed, packed, and ready to depart, *my lady*.”

Issy didn’t answer though she did wonder at the mocking tone. And what did he mean by a run? He must have meant a ride surely. She watched him stride from the room without a backward glance and only then did she emerge from the covers to start pulling on her underclothes. She heard a hasty step on the stair and then both her aunt and sister burst into the room. With astonishment she noted her aunt’s eyes were reddened from crying.

“Oh Issy,” she blubbed coming around the bed and flinging her skinny arms around her neck. “Your poor, poor girl.”

Issy stared across at Miriam who was regarding her with mingled fascination and horror. “It’s alright, Aunt Enid,” she said awkwardly patting her on the back. Her aunt had never been one for displays of affection. Her aunt pulled back on a gasp.

“You’re right,” she said in a wobbly voice. “Quite right. And I hear that it is never so bad as the first time.” She couldn’t quite meet Issy’s confused gaze. “Sensible girl. You have always been the sensible one.”

Issy gave a forced smile. “Yes, that’s me.” *Sensible Issy who’d snared her husband with a lust potion!*

Her aunt saw her strain and burst into fresh tears. “Was he very brutish?” she whispered. “Poor Girda said you screamed blue murder!”

Issy’s face flooded with colour. “Girda?” she repeated. “What has Girda to do with anything?”

“Well, I left a servant on the stair in case you had need of anything...” babbled her aunt.

“Girda had no right to say any such thing!” said Issy hotly. Her ears burned to think of the gossip below stairs. “I can

assure you Lord Mallon-Garth acted... entirely as he ought!" she finished awkwardly avoiding her sister's raised brows.

"Well of course, it is his right, but I do think he should have shown a more chivalric restraint," her aunt twittered on as she started fastening Issy's lacings. "Girda said you begged something piteously..."

"Please Aunt!" Issy shut her eyes in mortification. It was so humiliating! She realised her sister was pulling resolutely on the bedsheets. "What are you doing?" she faltered as Miriam shook out the blood-stained bottom sheet and headed towards the window.

"It's for the showing," her sister said stoutly. "To prove he took your maidenhead."

"Oh gods!" her aunt moaned. "My poor little Issy!"

All in all she almost felt relieved that they would be leaving Wick Manor shortly. She didn't know how many more blows her dignity could take!

It was drizzling with rain for the first hour or so after they left Little Wick. Issy pulled her new fur-lined cloak tightly around her, feeling oddly touched that her aunt had handed it over from her own private stash. Her new husband had provided her mount, a lovely chestnut mare she had named Beatrix, shortened to Trix. Jorah rode in front next to Sir Alfric and she and Geoffrey his squire came next and then a couple of pack horses brought up the rear. She tried to engage Geoffrey in some conversation, but the youth was at that awkward age where he bobbed his head a lot and blushed furiously whenever women addressed him.

“You must be looking forward to getting back home to the Keep, Geoffrey,” she ventured. “Have you been away from home long?”

“Three years milady,” he answered reluctantly, mumbling his words.

“Your family must have missed you.” He shrugged and sent her an inscrutable look. “Your parents surely?”

He shrugged again. “Don’t have any, milady.”

“Oh, I’m sorry Geoffrey. You’re an orphan?”

He growled and muttered something under his breath that sounded like, “May as well be.”

She shot him a searching look but clearly Geoffrey had no intention of following his statement up. “What’s Varkash Keep like, Geoffrey?” she persisted. “Is it a big place?”

He perked up a bit at this. “Gonna be even bigger now his lordship’s been granted the two neighbourhood estates by the prince,” he boasted. “Gonna be the biggest spread in the Winterlands.”

“That sounds impressive. I’ve never been to the Winterlands. Do you think I’ll like it?”

Geoffrey shot a look of scorn at her. “It’s a far finer place than yon father’s piddly manor house.”

“Geoffrey!” Sir Alfric half-turned in his saddle. “You’ll keep a civil tongue in your head when you speak to the Lady Isolde!”

“That’s alright Sir Alfric. I don’t mind a little colourful language,” she retorted brightly.

Geoffrey flushed and shot her a resentful look. Isolde sighed. She doubted she’d get any further conversation from him now. Glancing at her husband’s back she suddenly got the impression he was listening to every word they’d exchanged, despite the fact he’d been conversing with Alfric the entire time. This was confirmed when he and Geoffrey swapped places around an hour later.

“How are you holding up?” he asked giving her a sidelong look.

“Fine. Thank you for Trix. She’s such a beauty.” She patted the mare’s neck.

He smiled slightly. “You’re welcome.”

Isolde blinked. She didn’t think she’d seen him smile before. Even grudgingly. He was so good-looking it made her stomach lurch.

“It’s colder in the Winterlands, you’ll have need of that warm cloak.”

“Will it really take three days to arrive? Where will we overnight?”

He gestured to the pack horses. “We’ve got pavilions packed up to use since it’s doubtful we’ll come across many inns on our route.”

“Pavillions? I’ve never stayed in a pavilion before. Won’t it be cold? To sleep in a canvas room?”

“You won’t be cold Isolde,” he promised in a low voice giving her a long look.

Issy found herself holding her breath before expelling it with a *woosh*. She realised he must be talking about body heat. That they would stay warm together. Her mind raced and she wondered frantically about the lust potion. Would it



still affect him now on the third day after using it? She bit her lip and lowered her gaze to stare at Trix's mane. Would he expect to consummate their marriage tonight? She cringed at the thought of Sir Alfric, or even worse, Geoffrey overhearing them. "H-how are you feeling now? After your sickness last night?"

He shifted uncomfortably in his saddle. "I must apologise for that," he said stiffly. "I'm not usually so affected. As I hope to prove to you."

Issy cleared her throat. "I must apologise again... for the perfume," she carried on awkwardly. "I never dreamt it would affect you so adversely..."

He narrowed his eyes at her. "Least said about that soonest mended," he said abruptly. "But if you ever try to control me thus in the future you will not like the result, by the gods."

Issy gulped. "No, I promise you," she answered faintly. "It was a terrible mistake."

She managed to hold his gaze, but only just.

He gave an abrupt nod. "We'll speak no more of it then."

"Thank you, my lord." She was frankly surprised he was letting her off the hook so lightly considering the unspeakable things she had driven him to do last night. She clutched her reins with nerveless fingers.

He leaned forward in his saddle suddenly, his gaze intent on her. "You don't need to be afraid of me, Isolde," he said quietly. "Not if you're open and straightforward with me in your dealings. I don't mean to be an unreasonable husband. I believe we can deal well together."

Issy stared back, mesmerised by his low and sincere tone. He had snarled and scowled his way through the feast and last night he had seemed like a man possessed. At this very moment, this was the most reasonable she had ever seen him. "Yes, I would like that too," she answered. "Above all things."

"Good." He gave her an appraising look. "In spite of last night, I believe you can give me what I want." He looked her up and down although in truth she realised he could not see

much beyond her thick cloak. “And in return I can give you wealth, security, status, comfort...”

Issy tried not to frown at his words, but in truth she found them lacking somehow.

“My words displease you?” he asked coolly.

*Oh, he was a shrewd one*, she realised with a start. Or did she merely convey her every thought with her face as Miriam had so often claimed? “What of... affection? Of... mutual respect. And children my lord?” she asked haltingly. “Those are the things I always hoped for from marriage.”

He smiled, a more relaxed smile this time. “I can give you those things Isolde. In time.”

She expelled a breath she hadn't known she was holding and gave him a shaky smile. *And love?* She had not had the nerve to voice that and knew instinctively he would not have reacted well to such a demand. She would have to settle with affection and respect, she realised dolefully. Which were extremely good things in marriage, she told herself sternly, and more than she deserved considering how she had been carrying on the last few days. After all she was lucky, he hadn't taken her over his knee or had the marriage annulled. Incredibly lucky.

## 10

Jorah spurred his horse on when they reached the next landmark, the effigy at Maidens Barrow and nodded to Alfric for his second in command to join him as he rode a little ahead. He signalled to Geoffrey that he was in charge for now. The young man nodded and puffed out his chest.

“I want to set up camp before we lose all light. We should be able to reach the valley before dusk.”

Alfric nodded in agreement.

“Agreed. It would be hard on Lady Isolde to expect her to push on any further today. She’s an indifferent rider and we have covered many miles today.”

Jorah nodded before adding softly. “I’m going to show her tonight.”

Alfric angled his head sharply. “Show her?” he echoed.

“The nature of the beast.”

Alfric gaped at him. “Why in gods’ names would you do that now Jorah?” he demanded in a shocked undertone. “She could try running from us. Fleeing back to her father!” Jorah snorted. “I’m not saying she’d get away from us, but why risk it?” flung back Alfric.

“You think I should wait till we’re back at the Keep and then lock her in a tower until she gets over the shock? With the whole pack aware of her every reaction?”

Alfric paused at this. “There is that,” he conceded. “But even so... She’s a gently raised Summerlands girl...”

“She’s three and twenty,” interjected Jorah mildly. “She’s a woman.”

“She’s ... somewhat naïve,” pointed out Alfric. “She’s what you wanted. A simple, uncomplicated human female. Her reaction... to this, to what we are... it won’t be good, Jorah. I hope you’re prepared for that.”

Jorah shrugged. “Women can be pragmatic when they have to be. She’ll get over it.”

Alfric shook his head. “I hope to gods you know what you’re doing Jorah,” he replied heavily. “This could make our journey ten times more difficult. Add days to it if we have to force her every step of the way!”

“Please,” protested Jorah derisively. “Are you suggesting that battle veterans such as you or I would be slowed down by one reluctant bride?”

Alfric simply shook his head again and turned his horse back to appraise Geoffrey of the plan to set up camp over the next hill.

Jorah watched him feeling strangely irritated by his attitude towards his mate—*no, wife’s aptitude. Why had he thought mate?* he wondered with alarm. That had been the whole purpose to selecting a human bride. He did not want a mate. He never wanted to be that dependent on another being for his own happiness, nay his very peace of mind. There was no middle ground when it came to being mated. Once you had committed to your mate it was for life. Their presence was essential to your well-being, your *balance*. If you took an untrustworthy female to mate as an Alpha it would jeopardise more than just your own existence; you could condemn your entire pack.

Jorah did not intend to go down that dangerous route, not with the example of his own parents before him. Hence his vow to marry a sensible, down-to-earth female with no pretensions to setting the world alight with her beauty or wit. Isolde already had two strikes against her, he thought darkly. She had already taken a lover before him. The thought angered him more than he cared to acknowledge. And she had chosen to wilfully sabotage their marriage bed. But his decision to overlook that gave him leverage when it came to his own secret. In truth, he had been more than lenient considering her transgressions. If she had any sense, she would acknowledge as much and come around to the fact her new husband was a werewolf without too much hue and cry. He pulled back on the reins and brought Warrior to a stand-

still as he waited for the others to catch him up. He realised he was being arrogantly over-confident in his expectations from his new bride, but he didn't give a damn. He would bring her to heel before this night was out or his name wasn't Jorah Mallon-Garth.

\*

Isolde had watched her three companions set up the two pavilions with interest. They had clearly done this many times before and moved swiftly and in common purpose. In no time at all they had pitched the first tent and then started on the second. Feeling she couldn't sit idle while they did all the work she took a bucket down to the nearby river and collected several pails of water before she started to rub down her horse. She had only got so far as removing the saddle and blanket before Jorah came up behind her, towering over her and took the brush out of her hand.

"Rest," he'd said briefly. "You've had a long day." He pointed at the first tent. "Your things are in there. Get comfortable and we'll see to the horses."

"Very well," she conceded. "But perhaps in a little while I can help prepare some food?"

"Just rest. We've got everything covered," he told her turning back to Trix and giving the mare some water to drink.

Isolde tried not to stare at the breadth of his back and instead trailed in the direction of the first tent. She was curious about what it would look like inside. "Thank you," she called out before ducking inside to where Alfric and Geoffrey were still occupied with their tent which was set a few metres away. Alfric nodded though she thought he looked strangely tense. Inside the pavilion she was pleased to find a comfortable looking bed set low to the ground. She hoped they would start a fire soon as night was starting to fall and the temperature with it. She should really think about unpacking her essentials for the evening and then brush and rebraid her hair, have a quick strip-wash, but ugh, there was such a chill in the air that the thought was unappealing to say the least.

Her eyes darted back to the bed and her hand shot out to stroke the thick furs piled up on it. They were soft to the touch, and she sighed. Surely it wouldn't hurt for her to just have a very quick lie down? After all, her new husband had bade her go and rest. She was stiff and exhausted after riding for so many hours and a nap would surely set her to rights? Biting her lip Isolde quickly shed her cloak and started tugging at her lacings to remove her stuff gown so she could slip under the covers in her shift and undergarments only. That way she could completely relax. It took longer to achieve with cold stiff fingers, and it was several long moments later that she finally divested herself of her gown and dove under the pelts with a soft groan. She closed her eyes and regulated her breathing forcing herself to relax. As soon as she relaxed, she knew she would start to warm up. *Deep breaths Isolde*, she told herself, shifting around the mattress until she found a spot that felt exactly right. It really was quite comfortable considering its proximity to the ground, she thought drowsily.

She wouldn't fall into a deep sleep, just a light doze. As soon as she heard the fire crackling outside, she would get up and re-dress herself for supper, she promised as her thoughts started to slide away. *Yes, as soon as the fire was going...*

*Mmmm, so warm*, thought Isolde some time later snuggling into the fur beside her. The warm breathing fur. Isolde's eyes flew open as her chest thudded in alarm. It was dark in the tent. There was a faint light only projecting from a guttered candle on the chest beside the bed. On it she could see a plate had been set for her with some roasted meat and biscuits. It was pitch black outside the tent. She must have slept for hours. But more alarmingly she was tightly wrapped around an extremely large furry animal. A big solid muscular animal. And she had no idea where her husband was. For all she knew this creature could have swallowed him whole! Cringing she tentatively lifted her head from what she was realising was a thick furry barrel-like chest. Her wildly beating heart almost thudded to a halt.

What the hells was this huge beast? Whatever it was she was clinging to it with her one leg flung over it! Too frightened to call out, Isolde tentatively tried to raise her

shaking leg off it but heard a soft growl from somewhere above her head and froze. She held her breath and slowly tilted her head to look up. Two steely blue eyes lazily flickered open and gazed at her down a large black muzzle before shutting again. It was Prince! She'd know that terrifying visage anywhere! But what was he doing here? Her mind reeled. She must still be dreaming surely. Why else would Prince have followed her from her father's house? *If this was Prince*, she thought slowly. He still looked more like a huge overgrown wolf than a hound. Unless... This was Jorah's dog and had been all along? But then where was Jorah? Surely, he wouldn't let his dog sleep in her tent while he remained elsewhere. And what time was it? Despite her anxiety, her stomach rumbled. She was thirsty too. There was no way she could fall back to sleep now with all these thoughts chasing through her head. Oh yes and the mind-numbing fear of the supposedly savage wolf she was currently cuddling! Feeling like the worst kind of fool, Issy cleared her throat. "I'm thirsty," she whispered softly. "Prince, I need to get something to drink."

She felt rather than heard the faint rumbling in the dog's massive chest beneath her. *Please don't let him be snarling*, she prayed as she raised her head and started to untangle her limbs from his. His eyes shot open, and he stared at her accusingly.

"I won't be a minute," she told him soothingly as she inched to the edge of the bed."

He rolled abruptly onto his front. He really was as big as a bear she thought, swallowing as she reached for the glass of water someone had left her. She gulped down a few mouthfuls watching him over the rim of the glass. He watched her steadily back. It was a little unnerving.

"Good boy," she told him in a voice that only wobbled slightly. *Gods, was he a northern wolf? Were they all this big?* "Did Jorah tell you to watch over me? Your master?" she ventured. He didn't react to the name. She set the glass down and reached for the plate of meat. "Do you want some?" She took a piece and ate it before offering some to him. He

seemed to be staring at her rather than the meat, she thought with trepidation. “Not hungry?” He lowered his head, still watching her. There was something about his eyes that stirred a vague memory. “You’re not Prince, are you?” she said uneasily. “I’m pretty sure my father’s kennels never saw anything like you.” She drew up her knees and balanced the plate on them as she continued to tuck into her meal. She was hungry even if it was tasteless fare. Who had cooked it? she wondered, as she had slept away oblivious. Prince, as she had no other name for him, continued to watch her keenly. She finally set her plate down and then drained her glass.

“I don’t know where my husband is,” she told him. “Do you?” His eyes flickered at that. “Never mind.” She sighed moving slightly back onto the mattress. “Please don’t bite me.” He shifted on the mattress as if giving her more room to roll back to her previous position. She hesitated and he gave another soft growl.

“Oh, very well,” she said weakly as she rolled into him. “Bossy aren’t you,” she commented before softening the blow with a stroke of his chest. He sighed at this and stretched. “I suppose you are tame after all, boy,” she said softly. “You’d never guess it. You look terrifying.” He yawned making her smile against his fur. “Well, you’re certainly warm,” she sighed happily and reached her arm around him again. He shifted slightly and settled back against her. Well, who’d have thought giant wolves made such comfortable bedfellows? she thought drowsily as her eyes drifted shut. Although she was curious about where Jorah had got to, she simply couldn’t keep her eyes open a moment longer.



Jorah had woken in the early hours with Isolde's curvy little body pressed up against his back, her hands buried in his fur, her breath warm against his neck. His wolf actually liked it. He felt languorous and content and didn't want to transform back into a man. As a man, his body's reaction was a lot more disturbing in its urgency to get physical with her. In his wolf form this was as close as they would ever get. He felt peaceful and the only discordant note was the faint lingering of that wretched scent. His wolf could bear it only because it liked everything else about the soft press of her flesh. *Stay*, his wolf rumbled as Jorah put out his inner feelers to transform. *We can't*, he frowned back. In wolf form his human voice wasn't as strong and he had to work harder to exert his will.

He was ruled more by his basic drives, to feed, to run, to sleep, to hunt. And apparently to sleep with his human wife hugging his back. *Mine*, growled his wolf proprietarily. Jorah raised his head reluctantly. *Yes, ours*, he agreed surprised he needed appeasing. His wolf didn't understand the human bit of signed paper that legalised their union. His wolf only knew they hadn't exchanged the three-fold mating bond of blood, spit and essence. *We're not doing that*, he reminded himself and felt his lip rise into an answering snarl of displeasure. *We don't need it*, he told himself stubbornly. He was pissing his wolf off.

Jorah cast a quick glance over his shoulder as his wife murmured softly in her sleep before bounding up and springing from the bed. His wolf snarled in displeasure as his four feet hit the floor, but Jorah forced him to pad from the tent on his huge paws. He needed to get away from her to where his head was clearer, and he wasn't tying himself up in knots. He bounded down the hill towards the river and dunked his head beneath the cold water before shaking the water drops back over his powerful shoulders. Still in wolf form he made his way warily over to Alfric and Geoffrey's tent. Geoffrey was sound asleep, but Alfric's eyes were open.

“Well, I didn’t hear any screaming,” his friend commented, propping himself up on his elbows. He nodded to a pack full of clothes on the far side of the tent next to Geoffrey. Jorah padded in their direction before he shifted and changed back to his human form. “What did she say?” Alfric persisted as he dragged on some clothes.

“Not much.” He felt strangely reluctant to discuss his inner turmoil over Isolde even with his oldest friend.

“She saw your wolf form though?” He nodded briefly. “And her reaction was...?” Alfric prompted.

“It’s not the first time she’s seen it.”

“What?”

“She saw me once back at her father’s house, the morning after the feast.”

Alfric looked thunderstruck.

Jorah sighed. “She mistook me for her father’s hunting dog.”

Alfric continued to stare. “She’s not simple-minded Jorah. How could she possibly think that?”

Jorah thumped the clothing pack until it resembled a cushion and then flung himself back against it. “I don’t know. She was trying to rationalise the impossible?”

“So why don’t you enlighten her?”

“It’s not... turning out to be as straight-forward as I thought it would be.”

Jorah glared at his friend daring him to say, ‘I told you so.’ Alfric forbore to comment, just raised an eyebrow.

“My wolf,” continued Jorah. “It likes her.”

“Well, that’s a good thing surely.”

“When I’m in wolf form, yes.”

Alfric puzzled this one out. “And when you’re not in wolf form?”

“It’s constantly clamouring for me to mate her.”

“Forgive me but... wouldn’t it just be easier to give it—yourself—what you want?”

Jorah shook his head impatiently. “You know why I can’t do that,” he growled. “That’s the very reason I settled on her in the first place. So, I wouldn’t need to take a mate.”

“Yes,” snorted Alfric. “You just want a human marriage.”

“Exactly.”

“But you’re not human Jorah. Your wolf won’t understand it.”

Jorah glowered, but he was just starting to realise how right his friend was. The wolf was giving him problems. He had not foreseen this. His wolf had *never* given him problems before! Even now the damn thing was whining inside him, wanting him to return to Isolde’s side, dwelling on how soft and warm she was in his bed. He scraped his hand across his face and scowled. “It was actually far easier being in wolf form around her.”

Geoffrey shifted in his bed roll and Alfric and Jorah lowered their voices.

“It’s still a couple of hours until daybreak,” pointed out Alfric. “Maybe you should just go over there and consummate your union. It might make the wolf back off if you at least bed her.”

Jorah swore. Of course, with his enhanced wolf senses his Beta would know exactly how intimate he had been with Isolde thus far. There wasn’t much privacy in a wolf pack. Still, he might have a point. And he might calm the hells down once he’d had her. At any rate, *it couldn’t get any worse.*

Isolde murmured as the bed shifted and Jorah slid in beside her. He inched closer to her relaxed body cautiously aware that his hair was still wet, and his skin was chilled. She flinched momentarily at the contact and then sank back against him letting her warmth slide over him. Gods, she felt good. He slid his hand over her ample hip and across her soft rounded belly. She was so soft. She mumbled something he

couldn't catch; his wolf yipped he would have caught it if he'd been in wolf form.

Jorah ignored him, propping his one elbow on her pillow and dropping his head into the curve of her neck and taking a tentative sniff of her skin. Only a faint trace of the perfume now remained. Although it made his nose crinkle with distaste when he caught it, it wasn't enough to nauseate or detract him from his goal. She was far too enticing, and he felt the slow pulse in his groin kick in at her proximity. All that soft flesh pressed against his eager muscle. He could smell her true scent now the perfume wasn't drowning it out. She smelt feminine and delicious. He growled softly pressing himself up against her more firmly. Her thin shift didn't really conceal much, and it had ridden up to her thighs anyway beneath the covers. He dropped his hand from her stomach to caress her bare thigh. He could feel himself hardening against her delightfully rounded buttocks.

"Isolde," he whispered lowering his face to her cheek and feeling an absurd impulse to—what? Kiss it? He hesitated. He wasn't much for kissing. During bed-play his canines tended to extend which could be hazardous. Plus... nipping and licking were more of his thing. She turned slightly.

"Jorah?" she breathed, her eyes fluttering open.

He caught his breath. Was that the first time she'd uttered his given name? He felt strangely light-headed. She smiled faintly before her sleep-glazed eyes came more into focus. "Have you been outside?"

He nodded slowly and slid his hand across from her thigh to cup her firmly between the legs.

She gasped. "*Jorah!*"

He brushed a thumb lazily through the soft covering of hair there remembering it was the same colour as the warm brown tresses spread over her pillow. Her breathing rate increased, exciting his wolf, but he was determined to stay in control. He slipped a finger between her nether lips finding her moistness there as she squeaked and bounced back against him.

“Wh-at?”

“Shhhh,” he soothed her, brushing a chaste kiss against her forehead. *What the hell. If he wanted to kiss her, he’d kiss her.* She was his wife after all. It was oddly satisfying. He pressed on her shoulder urging her to roll onto her back. She turned, giving him better access to her delectable body and he shifted to loom over her in the grey half-light. She stared up at him, her eyes very wide. She smelt faintly anxious and a little excited under that irritating scent. His wolf clamoured, but he did his best to shut him out. *I’m taking my time, quit trying to dictate the pace.* Unable to help himself he kissed her again, slightly to the left of her mouth and then slightly to the right. She turned her head both times too late to meet his lips with hers. She made a faintly frustrated noise and he found himself biting back a smile. She was pressed against the mattress now, caged in by his own much larger naked body.

“Open your legs and bend your knees,” he murmured as his thumb slid to press lightly against her clitoris. She whimpered and did as she was told. “Good girl,” he whispered as he circled it gently with his thumb, dipping it back to find her growing more slippery from his attentions before returning to tease her bead. He remembered how pink and pretty she was down there and felt his mouth start to salivate. Still, there were other things he wanted to taste, he reminded himself sternly as his gaze dropped to her heaving chest. Like her magnificent breasts. He could plainly see her rose-pink nipples through the tissue-thin chemise. The quivering pale mounds were so full and abundant he was mesmerised by their rise and fall. He remembered how they’d captivated him at her father’s banquet and groaned as he lowered his head to nuzzle their peaks, rising stiffly against the fabric.

Isolde let out a strangled noise as he closed his mouth over one, wetting it through the material, sucking it and then laving it hard with his tongue. She quivered against his fingers between her thighs, breathing hard and clutching at the mattress sheets. He had to remember not to let his full weight crush her as he rolled more firmly into the cradle of her hips and slid a finger into her wet slippery cunny. She jolted and let out a shuddering breath. She was tight. He pressed deeply,

making her moan as she pressed back against him. He returned to her breasts, one large hand dragging the dampened fabric away from her lush fullness which sprang free to his gaze.

“Gods, *Isolde*,” he groaned seeing her bountiful tits uncovered. He’d known they were impressive but naked they surpassed even his dreams. He returned to licking and sucking as much of their soft creamy abundance as he could fit into his voracious mouth.

“Oh gods,” she cried out bucking beneath him.

She was gloriously sensitive as his mouth travelled over and around the valley of her breasts, ravaging everything with his tongue and the hot suction of his mouth. He could feel what he was doing to her as she grew wetter and wetter with every slide of his tongue and plundering mouth. He slid a second finger and then a third into her spasming cunt as she thrashed beneath him, coming so beautifully over his hand he almost wanted to weep. He hooked his fingers deep and held them there until her limbs stilled and her hoarse cries ceased. She stared up at him, her lips wobbling, her eyes full of astonishment and wonderment. Had Benwick Price never made her come? he wondered, making the wolf howl at the mention of his rival as it clamoured for him to stake his claim by burying himself in her up to the root. He shifted over her, letting her feel his furious cock, which by now had its own heartbeat and was pointing straight up to attention and demanding its own fulfilment. She drew in a shuddering breath,

“You’re big. So big,” she gulped.

“Yes,” he answered harshly. “But not so big you can’t take me.”

“Can I—?”

She reached with a shaky hand to touch him and feel around his girth. He hissed low between his teeth.

Her wide eyes flew to his. “Sorry, did that hurt?”

He grimaced. "I'm too close for you to pet me," he told her grimly.

Her hand fell away. "I understand," she said closing her eyes and falling back on the pillow. She looked terrified, he registered with some small part of his brain that hadn't completely shut down as all the blood rushed to his cock.

He hesitated as a dim suspicion started to dawn. "You have...? I mean, you and Benwick...?"

Her eyes flew open. "Benwick?" she echoed looking utterly dumbfounded. "You mean my sister's Benwick?"

He felt something unclench in his stomach. "Your sister's?" he repeated slowly.

She nodded. "They're engaged to be married."

"So, you...?"

She gazed up at him, her eyes clear. "Benwick's only ever been a childhood friend to me."

He let out a slow shuddering breath. *So, she was still a maid.* He felt oddly euphoric, triumphant even. His wolf was still pushing for him to take her, but he felt calmer now he knew the truth. She hadn't been trying to put him off with that foul perfume due to another man. He lowered himself slowly onto her again, his elbows on either side of her shoulders rubbing his hard cock against the wetness between her open legs. She closed her knees against his hips holding him in place. He looked down at her face. *Beautiful. Mine.*

"I'm going to kiss you now," he said warningly.

She looked a bit startled but held her face up obligingly. He lowered his own, hoping his elongated teeth wouldn't be an issue. He kissed her mouth very gently. Back and forward, over her pretty, full lips. She liked it; he could tell from the soft murmur she gave. Her knees pressed in hard gripping his hips against her. *Oh, he liked that.* If that was her reaction to being kissed, he would soon change his attitude towards it completely! He gave a soft moan and rocked his hips against her at the same time as snaking his tongue against the seam of her mouth demanding entrance. With a slight exclamation she

complied, opening her mouth to him sweetly. He slid his tongue inside at the same time as he adjusted the angle of his cock so he could start the slow push into her tight channel. She tensed, but he felt her try to relax against his invasion almost immediately. He slid back around to stimulate her clitoris, needing her mindless and wanting again. Her hands flew up to grip his sides, her fingers digging into him. *He liked that too.* He nipped her bottom lip encouragingly making her give a breathless squeak. “Kiss me back,” he demanded gruffly.

*Demanding bastard, aren't I?* he thought with a shiver all the way down his spine as he felt her tongue gently stroke against his. He thrust hard unable to help himself as he slid further into her tight virgin sheath. She gave a strangled moan, her hands sliding around his back to clutch against him. The fact she pulled him closer rather than trying to push him away did strange things to him, making his chest feel constricted.

He tore his mouth away from hers, breathing hard. “Am I hurting you?”

She hesitated; he could see her discomfort plainly, but his thought processes were shutting down in the sheer pleasure of feeling her so tight around his cock. He wanted to push all the way in so bad he could feel the blood roaring in his ears.

“No,” she whispered, and even though he could see the unshed tears in her eyes telling him her lie, he thrust again, tearing through her maidenhead and seating himself fully into her sex. She gave a muffled cry into his shoulder, which made him pause only for the briefest of instants before he surged forward again, his hips starting to roll almost against his will. *Gods! The feel of her!* His wolf was howling now, his teeth down. His eyes rolled back in his head from the mind-numbing bliss. He tried to hold back, but he just wanted to spill his seed in her. To give it all to her. To erupt deep within her. In some dim recess he acknowledged this would be the one time he could come hard without first seeing to her pleasure for she could find no pleasure in this joining. Her sharp breaths against his chest told him of her pain. He could



smell the tears that silently spilt down her cheeks. He could not regret them as they caused a savage pang of joy that he was her first. It was brutal of him, but at least he was honest. With a deep groan he finally heaved and spilled long and deep within her. Grunting and groaning his release went on and on, his hips rolling and pummeling as he luxuriated in the feel of her soft yielding body. He collapsed spent on top of her, still buried in her long after he should have pulled out if he was more civilised. He dragged her head back from where it was hiding against his chest and kissed her hungrily trying to convey how pleased he was by her sacrifice. She clutched at his sides and kept her eyes closed as he licked the trail of tears down her cheeks.

“Isolde,” he whispered reverently before gingerly withdrawing from her and moving down to inspect between her legs. She started to struggle at that until she realised the futility of it as he kept her firmly pinned. Still, she squawked slightly at the indignity as his tongue sought out her virgin blood, lapping it up from where it smeared her thighs. “Mine,” he rumbled deep within his chest as Isolde collapsed shakily back against the pillows in surrender as he gluttonously licked until she was clean. “All mine.”

She was shivering by the time his head emerged from between her thighs and he pulled her firmly into his embrace, her back against his front as he settled them back into the furs, making sure every inch of her was covered. He could feel his eyes drifting shut even though dawn could only be minutes away. Finally satisfied he dropped his chin to rest in the spot where her neck and shoulder met. He felt spent. He’d given her his seed. His spit. His wolf raised its head. *Everything apart from our blood.*

Issy woke three hours later and covertly watched as Jorah washed and dressed. His body was a work of art, she thought reverently before shutting her eyes when he turned in her direction. She didn't feel ready to face him yet. How could he seem satisfied with her plump, commonplace, homespun self? Yet he'd seemed mightily pleased with her last night. Or this morning. Or was that just because she'd been a virgin? Or maybe the potion was still in effect, she thought miserably.

She had no idea when he'd got the wrong impression about Benwick! And even more astonishingly, there had been that one moment just after she'd achieved rapture when she'd looked right up at him—*really looked*—and seen his eyes, those ice blue eyes and realised that had not been the first time she'd seen them that night. But the first time they had been framed in the face of a giant wolf. *And how could that be?* She hugged the pillow tight and furiously thought. She must have been dreaming. Still... that was the only explanation that made any sense. But it had seemed so real! She heard Jorah's footsteps approach the bed and then felt a ringing slap to the rump.

She let out a muffled shriek and sat up.

"Morning wife," he said gravely, he narrowed his eyes. "I knew you weren't asleep."

She stared at him aghast. "I was!" she spluttered. "How dare you!" She felt her face redden at the lie even as his lips twitched. Was he trying not to laugh? She scooted across the bed away from him suddenly only too aware of her state of undress. She must look a sight! She could feel her hair all tumbling down her back. Clutching a sheet to her chest she darted a look at him. Sure enough he was watching her closely. She thought his nostrils flared. If he laughed, she'd never forgive him! Glancing accusingly up his eyes she was surprised to find they weren't remotely laughing. If anything, he looked a little tortured.

"I'll fetch you some water," he said hoarsely.

“That would be most kind,” she answered with as much dignity as she could muster.

“Stay there,” he said gruffly before disappearing out of the tent.

*Not likely*, she thought darting for some more substantial clothing. She stripped off her thin shift and replaced it with a thicker cotton undergarment. Furiously she finger-combed her unruly hair into some semblance of order before smoothing it down over her shoulders. He reappeared at this point with a basin of water which he brought round to her side. She dipped her gaze when she saw how proprietarily his gaze roamed over her.

“Thank you,” she murmured as he placed it on the chest by her side.

He turned back and drew breath as if to speak to her and suddenly it seemed imperative that she forestall whatever words he was about to utter. She surged to her feet. “I do apologise for falling asleep last night before I had a chance to help prepare the meal,” she blurted out breathlessly. “It wasn’t my intention to shirk my duties.”

His eyebrows rose.

“You more than fulfilled your duties last night Isolde,” he answered meaningfully which made even more colour rush to her face. He placed two large hands on her shoulders holding her still. She realised she only reached his chest in height and felt ridiculously small stood next to him. “How are you this morning?” he asked in a low intimate voice which made her head swim.

“I’m fine.” She cringed, avoiding his gaze. *Oh, my gods, could it get anymore embarrassing?* Her face must be lit up like a beacon!

He cleared his throat. “If the—er—ride becomes uncomfortable today you must tell me, and we’ll stop.”

*Aarrgh!* Issy fought the urge to slap her hands over ears. “Mm-hmm, I’ll do that,” she mumbled, tucking her hair behind her ears.

“You have nothing to be embarrassed about,” he told her huskily. She didn’t dare look him in the eye. Suddenly she felt his finger tilt up her chin and she had no choice. There they were, icy blue just as she remembered them, and surrounded by black spiky lashes. But then she noticed a warmth in their depths she hadn’t noticed before and drew in a shaky breath.

“Don’t be shy with me Isolde,” he whispered, and almost as if compelled against his will, his head abruptly swooped forward and he pressed his lips to hers for a long moment. She froze feeling his warm firm lips pressed against hers. If only. If only she could pretend he was kissing her for her own sake! Always she had the horrible guilty notion it was that accursed potion that wrung any impulse out of him where she was concerned. She could see the conflicted look in his eye. As if he didn’t really want to kiss her at all! And that was when she realised how much under its influence he must still be!

She could have cried. She was a wretch, a horrible scheming duplicitous wretch who had trapped him into marriage with a dumpy plain wife! No doubt his people would be horribly disappointed he had not brought some raving beauty home who would match him in looks. They were a mismatch. A terrible misalliance and everyone would wonder why the hell he’d dragged her home with him!

He drew his head back and closed his eyes briefly before reopening them.

“Put some clothes on,” his voice rumbled deep from his chest, and he stepped abruptly around her before exiting the tent.

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*What the hells was wrong with him?* Jorah started pulling down the second tent even as Geoffrey sat fastening his bedroll. He should be fine now the marriage was legalised. He’d been fully sated not three hours ago and here he was again with a raging hard-on and having to fight the impulse to throw his new bride down on his furs and rut her like a bitch in

heat! He could feel her reticence over accepting even the chaste kiss he'd given her. Gods knew she wasn't ready for his cock again quite so soon. Not with her poor ravaged little pussy. *My pussy*. He cursed horribly as he tore down the shell of the pavilion and bundled it tightly. He was going to scare her if he wasn't careful. After making her sleep with his wolf last night too, he reproached himself savagely. So much for his brilliant plan!

He'd meant to wake her when he'd brought in her supper, but she'd been sleeping so soundly he hadn't had the heart. Then he'd wanted to transform, to reveal all, but she'd snoozed through that too. In wolf form he'd thought to climb in with her for just a moment, but she'd been so damn accommodating in her sleep. The moment she'd closed her arms around his neck he'd melted into the biggest lapdog this side of the Sehora Mountains! He was a disgrace. He didn't even know how he'd answer if she quizzed him over possessing a wolf-hound. He had no clue. He didn't want to lie to her, but he also sure as hells didn't want her to run screaming from him like Alfric seemed to think she would. Not now he'd been between those glorious thighs of hers. He swallowed. Bloody hells!

His 'uncomplicated' human wife was tying him in knots! Sleeping with her en-route to Varkash had been a mistake. Now all he wanted to do was lock himself in a room with her and mate her. Of course, there were no convenient rooms as they still had a good sixty miles to cover before they reached the town of Estragore where they were supposed to meet his brother Baris before travelling the last hundred miles to Varkash. He felt his stomach clench with dissatisfaction. He'd barely sampled his new goods and having to ration himself like this was making him edgy with need. Alfric and Geoffrey had wordlessly started packing up the tent materials with him, but he was immediately aware when Isolde emerged from his tent with her hair re-braided into the two long plaits that hung down her sides again.

She had a look of forced cheerfulness and determination about her as she called to Geoffrey and then started pulling out their food stores to put some breakfast together. He managed

to catch her eye and she gave him a shy smile before returning to cutting slices of bread for their repast. He wondered if she was sore from his manhandling last night and was glad he'd managed not to bite her again. That might have frightened her, and he didn't want that. Not before she understood it was territorial, a claiming and not an act of violence. He frowned moodily as he moved over to help Geoffrey with dismantling their tent.

Just when he was going to explain to her about their family heritage was eluding him right now. He didn't like feeling like he had something to hide but he had no idea of when the right time might be to breach the subject. The thought of introducing her to his brother without preparing her for his family gave him a feeling of dread. Baris was far from subtle, damn his eyes. And they would be at the Keep by tomorrow night surrounded by his entire pack. If she didn't know before then there would be hell to pay. It wasn't surprising that he was glowering before they'd finished packing up camp. When poor Alfric made a move to help Isolde up onto her mount, Jorah felt himself growling low in his throat. His Beta backed off immediately and he boosted her up himself. Almost instinctively Isolde kept her hand on his arm as he settled her on the saddle, soothing him. She gave him a nervous smile as he finally released her with reluctance. The journey was different from the day before, in that he was tormented if the wench was ever out of his sight. He rode behind her for the second stretch as he didn't want a crick in his neck from forever swivelling back to check on her progress. His wolf fretted and keened wanting to hear her voice for fuck's sake! When he did allow himself to ride by her side their stilted conversation wasn't enough. He wanted to reach out and touch her hair, to feel her skin, preferably underneath his.

They hadn't gone more than thirty miles before he realised this wasn't going to work. He needed to be physical with her for his peace of mind. Alfric kept darting alarmed glances at him and he realised what a moody, skittish bastard he was being. "Pull it together Jorah." he warned in hushed tones the next time he pulled forward. "We're only halfway there if we want to make it to Estragore by nightfall. What's wrong?"

Jorah grit his teeth. “Nothing. I just... need to be alone with her for a while.”

Alfric raised his brows. “Are you serious?” He cast a look over his shoulder to where Isolde was conversing with Geoffrey behind them. “Can’t it wait?”

“No,” he growled back before scanning the horizon. That was when he saw it, a hermit’s retreat up ahead. A small round house with a thatched roof. “I’ll take her up there.”

“Jorah, what are you doing?” demanded Alfric leaning across to seize his forearm. “She’s your wife damnit, not some common whore!”

Jorah yanked his arm back. “She’s my wife and I’ll do with her as I please,” he snarled baring his teeth.

Alfric reigned in his horse in alarm. “What the hells?” he muttered in alarm. “What’s wrong with you? You’re going to scare her Jorah.”

Jorah shook him off, turning his horse to approach Isolde and Geoffrey.

“Geoffrey, you ride on ahead with Alfric for ten miles and then wait. Lady Isolde is tired, so she and I are going to take a rest in the hut up yonder.”

Geoffrey’s eyes widened in surprise, but he nodded and dug his heels in his horse’s flanks to urge her ahead as Jorah fell back alongside Isolde. She turned to look at him in some concern and Jorah wondered if she could feel the sexual intent pouring off him.

Humans weren’t always the most instinctive of creatures after all. He reached across to grab Trix’s bridle and spurred her into a canter up the hill to the hovel. As soon as they reached it, he scouted around looking for its inhabitant, but he was nowhere to be seen, nor was a fire lit. He threw down a purse of silver as payment for their occupancy and then approached Isolde’s horse reaching his arms up to her. Her eyes widened but she slithered down into his arms obligingly earning an approving growl from his inner beast.

She almost stumbled as he pulled her inside the rough-hewn hut. Was he really going to take her in a hermit's hovel? he reasoned with his base self. The wolf snarled. *Hells yes, he was.* He cast about wildly for a surface other than the bed of hessian sacks in the corner. For all he knew it was crawling with lice. He was desperate, absolutely desperate to just sink inside of her and know a moment's blessed peace. The need was fierce, strong, and all-consuming. *This made no sense!* They were not fully mated. He'd taken her female essence into himself. He'd taken her blood. But she had only taken his spit, he reasoned when he'd healed her wound. And his seed. There had not been a three-fold sharing on both parts. She was going to take his seed again though, he thought with a growl. And now. He couldn't wait to give it to her. Not one moment longer. He considered pushing her down onto the floor onto her hands and knees, but the rushes looked none too clean and she was his wife after all, not some slut. He dragged a chair into the centre of the room and then jerked her back onto her feet when she went to sit on it.

"No, kneel," he told her. "Rest your elbows on the chair seat." He turned it to the side and urged her down. Issy's eyes were wide with questions, but he thanked the gods when instead of voicing them she just sank down and did as she was told. There was his good little wife. Gods, he loved it when she did his bidding sweetly and unquestioningly. "Isolde," he whispered huskily as he fell to his knees behind her and started hitching up her skirts.

She looked back over her shoulder at him in alarm, her lips trembling.

"My lord..." she whimpered.

"Shhhh, love. It'll be fine." His hands were shaking as he stripped her of her undergarments and started stroking and fondling her plump thighs and behind. "Damn you're perfect," he told her squeezing her pale creamy flesh. "I want you so badly. I need to be inside you, do you understand?"

"Is it... can you still smell the perfume?" she asked with a slight hitch to her voice.



“Not from here. At least, not strongly.” he said thickly. “But if I were to take you from the front... then yes.”

His hands slipped around the front and in between her legs.

“*Gods!* You’re wet for me, Isolde,” he hissed, his fingers slipping between her moist folds.

“Oh!” She bit her lip. “*Jorah!*”

He hesitated, feeling a strong emotion when she groaned his name. He wanted to hear her say it when he was deep inside her sex, moving inside her, exploding inside her. He wanted that more than anything. He groaned softly. Was he losing his mind? Was this a mating heat? And if so, why had he gone into it with this small human female who knew nothing about his kind? However, you looked at it, it didn’t make any sense. He slid a finger into her moist heat and up inside her.

“*Jorah!*”

She nearly reared up off the seat. He felt the sweat bead on his brow. *Gods, she was tight.* Too tight for him to take her like a rutting beast in a filthy shack on her knees. Gods damnit! He groaned and lowered his forehead to her back, resting it there while he prayed for the strength to let her get up. His wolf was clamouring like a motherfucker for him to mount her. He bit back a low snarl of frustration.

“W-what’s wrong?” she asked softly.

She kept very still almost as if she knew how close he was to snapping and going primal on her.

“What can I do?” she asked simply. “Tell me what to do.”

“Nothing,” he bit out. “Just let me rein it in. Just stay still and don’t make any sudden moves.”

“No, I mean...” She hesitated. “Like you did for me... On our wedding night.”

He froze.

“Can I do that for you... somehow? To give you relief?”

He swallowed. “Are you saying ...? You’ll take me in your mouth?” His voice sounded raspy even to his own ears.

She turned her head too quickly to look back at him and the wolf snarled. *Steady!*

“Yes,” she said sweetly. So fucking sweetly he almost came in his pants.

“I want to.” She licked her lips, not in a tease but because her lips were dry. Didn’t matter, even if she yawned, he felt it like a prick tease. He made a strangled sound in his throat.

“Alfric was right; I should never have dragged you in here.” He cast his eyes about the gloom of the hut.

“It’s not your fault; it’s my fault,” she said cryptically. If he hadn’t been thinking with his dick right then, he might have questioned what she meant. She pushed back against him, and he resisted, pushing back. “If you... if you sit on the chair...” she said breathlessly. “I’ll stay here, on my knees.”

“The floor’s filthy Isolde,” he groaned.

“My knees are already dirty,” she pointed out giving him a shove. “The chair.” She pushed him again and he rose unsteadily to his feet. Seeing her down on her knees so subservient made him even harder. *I am one twisted bastard*, he groaned to himself. Since when had he been into subjugating women? He unlaced his crotch; his fingers trembling, and pulled his swollen cock free from the confines of his leather trews sinking down onto the chair. He felt her breath on his dick and squeezed his eyes shut with a prayer for control as she wrapped her hands around him. Lowering her head, she licked over the tip with her little pink tongue.

He swore horribly, his cock leaping in her grasp. “Isolde, I’m sorry,” he gasped out. “But I can’t take it. I just can’t take anymore.”

“Tell me what to do!”

“Just—*fucking suck me woman!*”

Her eyes went wide, but mercifully she obeyed and lent forward taking him as far into her mouth as she could. The feel of her warm mouth and her soft hands squeezing him tore a deep groan from his chest as he flung his head back and clutched at the chair seat. He really tried to keep from

wrapping one hand around her braids but couldn't hold back and grabbed her by the hair anyway dragging her open mouth further down onto his furious cock. "Breathe through your nose," he ground out and felt her relax as she took his advice with a relieved murmur around his dick. Unfortunately, the sensation of vibration added to his almost mind-numbing pleasure and he hissed another few curse words as she took him deeper.

"Oh, fuck yeah," he moaned flinging back his head again. "Move your hands up and down my shaft," he demanded, thrusting his hips up into her grasp. She complied. "Harder. Suck me harder Issy. Like you mean it. Like you want my cum." He had to bite his lip when she obeyed, so hard he could taste his own blood. He couldn't stave it off much longer, he realised as he heard his harsh groans filling the hut, his grip on her hair urging her up and down on his cock, showing her the rhythm he wanted. The rhythm he needed to shoot deep into her willing mouth. He thrust up once, twice, three times and then he exploded with a bellow deep from his chest. "Drink me," he urged her hoarsely. "Swallow it."

He felt her stiffen with shock and then the almost painful pause she gave before he felt her first deep swallow of his cum. He felt it like a physical relief as he emptied himself into her mouth. "Swallow it all," he gasped out hoarsely, his fingers twisting in the nape of her hair to massage her neck and show his pleasure with her actions. Since he couldn't show it with words, he ran his hands over her tense shoulders and neck, kneading and stroking her as she swallowed the never-ending ribbons of seed he was releasing for her. The relief was almost overwhelming. The sweet, blessed relief of having her take it all. His wolf was keening with pleasure. He felt the satisfaction spread through him like a warm sweet balm to his soul. What the hells was wrong with him? he wondered in some deep recess of his mind. He'd never been this dependent on a woman for his pleasure. For his peace of mind. Nay for his *sanity*. But he shoved the thoughts back down. Right at this moment, he really didn't give a fuck. All he needed was Isolde and her sweet, sweet mouth.

When they emerged from the hut five minutes later, he headed straight for the well and fetched a bucket of water to wash her knees clean. She sat obediently on a low stone wall as he lowered her skirts again and on impulse pinched her chin. Gods bless her, she gave him a smile at this that went straight to his chest which contracted painfully. She should be calling him out on being a completely unreasonable bastard. He deserved no less for his ill usage of her. But she took the hand he held down to her and let him boost her up into her horse saddle without a single reproach. At least now he could see straight, he told himself as justification for his actions as he urged his horse Warrior forward into a gallop to catch up with the others.

When they reached Alfric and Geoffrey they wordlessly fell in with each other. Alfric had his lips pressed tightly together and wouldn't speak to him although he darted a few glances at Isolde to check she was unharmed. After a few glances he turned his burning gaze to Jorah full of reproach before looking away. He realised his Beta's sense of smell would tell him what had transpired in the hut but what the hell business it was of Alfric's he did not know, he told himself with a glower.

“Are you feeling better now Lady Isolde?” Geoffrey's clear voice rang out over the heavy silence.

Isolde gave a choked cough.

“Much, thank you Geoffrey,” she replied kindly. “Thank you for waiting for us.”

Jorah looked away guiltily as Alfric angrily shook his head.

They reached Estragore without further incident as night began to fall. Jorah plucked Isolde from her horse and placed her up before him on Warrior before they entered the walled city. He didn't want the guards approaching her or testing his patience by trying to touch her. She sat quietly in the circle of his arms. He rested one hand on her thigh and found himself rubbing it in what he hoped was a comforting manner. He could see her eyes darting here and there in the gloom catching the sights and sounds of the foreign city. He realised the accents even must sound vastly different to her.

"Have you ever travelled this far North before?" he thought to ask.

"No, my lord." She shook her head. "I've never been more than ten miles from my father's house before this."

He tightened his arm about her waist holding her close to him. She leaned back to rest against him.

"My brother wrote to me a month ago that he would be here in Estragore for a week for the festival of the moon rising," he told her in a low voice. "We'll look to meet him down by the docks. There's plenty of inns down there and we know his usual haunts. "

"Is he your only brother?" she ventured timidly.

"No, I've two. Ranulf is only seventeen; he's at home. Baris is a sword for hire," he said his lips thinning.

Isolde cast a quick look over her shoulder at him. "When did you last see him?" she asked.

He shrugged. "A year maybe."

"And how long since you were last at home?"

"Three years," he answered grimly.

"You must have lots to catch up on," she commented brightly.

He grunted and turned in his saddle to confer with Alfric about which direction to take.

Sensing his mood, she lapsed into silence and pondered her strange dream last night about the huge wolf with the pale blue eyes. The eyes so like Jorah's. Had it just been her mind playing tricks with her? Tapping into her bridal fears? Of course, there were stories told around the hearth at night on winter evenings. Tales of man-beasts, *werewolves*. She and Miriam had heard them a-plenty from travelling bards. But she'd never thought they were true—even North in the Winterlands. How could they be? They were just fables, to scare children.

But she knew what she'd seen. She thought back to that morning in the barn. The morning after she'd first seen Jorah Mallon-Garth. That was the first time she'd seen the beast she'd addressed as Prince. It seemed like too much of a coincidence that they'd appeared at the same time. The hairs on the back of her neck raised with instinctive fear. She gasped as she remembered the fact she'd seen the remains of the meal she had eaten that morning. *So, she hadn't been dreaming about the wolf coming into her tent!*

Jorah's arms tightened around her. "You've no reason to fear," he murmured into her ear making her jump. "I wouldn't let anything happen to you." She realised he was referring to their increasingly sinister surroundings as they neared the docks. But how had he known she was feeling afraid? She took a couple of deep calming breaths and leant back against him. *She was being absurd*, she told herself uncomfortably. She had nothing to fear from her husband. She could feel his big body surrounding her with his solid warmth. It must just be her nerves at leaving home and her family behind her, she told herself resolutely. *Keep it together Issy!* Being the plain one of the family she had to live up to the epithet of having good common sense. Only beauties like Miriam could afford to have histrionics.

It was cold and damp down by the docks and when they'd dismounted and had the horses stabled Issy kept close to her husband's side. The people they encountered on their way to

*The Slaughtered Ewe* inn avoided eye contact and scurried in the shadows. She knew her father would have said they were surrounded by thieves and scoundrels. She had a sinking feeling that he would have described their inn as a den of iniquity. When they entered the tap room everyone simultaneously stopped talking and turned their heads to stare at them. Issy shrank into Jorah's side and felt her hand taken in a firm grasp.

As soon as any of the gazes met her husband's they looked hastily away, and Jorah led their way to the bar where he negotiated two rooms and a table for supper. She dreaded to think what the bedchambers in this place would be like but Geoffrey, seizing their cloaks and belongings, followed a serving wench up the stairs to prepare their rooms. He nodded goodnight before disappearing and she realised he would not be joining them for their meal. Jorah tugged her into the adjoining dining area and Alfric followed close behind her, his mouth grim.

"I can't see Baris," he commented scanning the room.

"He'll find us no doubt," answered Jorah briefly. He headed for a free table on the far side of the room and sat next to her on the bench, Alfric opposite them.

"Ale," he ordered a passing servant. "A pitcher. And wine for the lady. What meat are you serving?"

The fare was basic, and Isolde suspected it would be bad. Still, she was hungry, and her belly would appreciate the meal however plain, so she vowed not to look too closely at the bread in search for weevils. Alfric, she noticed, was looking even more uptight than usual. She wondered if he was uncomfortable in their less than salubrious surroundings and eyed him with interest. He didn't touch his ale when it was brought to the table and Isolde added water to her wine as the flavour was strong and not altogether pleasant. She sipped at it sparingly and only Jorah took a good long draught of his drink.

She watched his eyes light up as a tall figure came stooping through the door, his head covered in a rough grey hood. She

glanced over; as Jorah was half out of his seat, she realised it must indeed be his brother. Just then the stranger's eyes alighted on them, rapidly passing over the three of them before resting a moment on Alfric. Then they darted back to Jorah. He smiled and she could see the resemblance at once to her husband as well as their massive size.

"Brother!" he hailed Jorah making his way over to them and dragging off his cloak. He and Jorah embraced. Issy glanced at Alfric who remained seated, a blank look on his face as the brothers exchanged greetings.

"I see you still have stoic Alfric in your keeping," Baris commented finally looking in his direction. "You look even paler and sterner than the last time I saw you," he laughed.

Alfric gave a tight smile. "Baris," he muttered. "You've grown taller."

*No love lost there*, thought Issy with surprise. She cast a look back at Baris who was now surveying her through shrewd appraising eyes.

"And who might this plump little partridge be?" he asked raising his eyebrows at her. "A camp follower?" he hazarded, removing his sword as he started to seat himself.

"She's my wife," rumbled Jorah. "And I'll thank you to keep a civil tongue in your head around her."

"Wife?" gaped Baris looking so stunned it was almost comical. "This little human wench?" He stared a moment before his gaze snapped into a thunderous frown. Jorah opened his mouth to speak but Alfric forestalled him, his hand shooting out to catch the other much larger man's wrist.

"Watch your mouth!" he said harshly. Baris stilled staring down at Alfric's fingers wrapped around his wrist. His knuckles were turning white. Issy paled realising Alfric must have him in a dreadful grip, yet Baris did not utter a single word of reproach, just watched him in an almost fascinated silence. Alfric swallowed, as if suddenly realising all the eyes turned on him. He released Baris with obvious reluctance. "Please excuse Baris, my lady," he said turning to Isolde. "He



is mannerless, coarse, and wholly unrefined. Barely fit company for a new bride.”

Baris smiled unrepentantly. “How well you know me,” he murmured. “Sister-in-law, is it?” he commented, rubbing his jaw. “An unexpected turn of events brother.”

Jorah shrugged. “It was high time,” he answered mildly, draping his arm across Issy’s shoulders possessively.

“It’s nice to meet you,” she interjected when she had the chance. Baris didn’t seem to want to meet her gaze, his eyes, a deeper blue than Jorah’s, kept slipping away. Instead, he kept asking his brother for details of his military campaigns until the food was brought over. Issy ate her roast mutton until her hunger was assuaged. It was quite tough and a little greasy but with some crusty bread she managed to almost finish it. Alfric silently handed her a cloth to wipe her fingers on and she thanked him with a smile. To her utter astonishment Alfric actually smiled back at her.

Baris dragged his chair back noisily making her jump and cutting the moment short. She glanced over at him and was startled to see her brother-in-law’s cold angry glare.

“Well, well,” he said mockingly. “What a cosy setup.”

“What’s that?” asked Jorah sharply.

“I never thought I’d see the day when you’d share a woman with your Beta, brother.”

Issy blinked as one moment her husband was sat next to her, and the next, the table had been overturned. Jorah had Baris by the throat and Alfric was shielding her from assorted flying plates, mugs, and cutlery. She gasped as a series of nasty snarls rent the air as if a pack of feral dogs had ransacked the place. All around her was the sound of people stampeding for the exit. Issy stared around Alfric to see two huge wolves in the centre of the room. She recognised Jorah at once as the huge black wolf with flashing pale eyes. He had the large grey wolf by the throat pinned to the floor. Baris, she thought with horror, was lying completely immobile.

“No!” Issy cried slipping from Alfric’s grasp to dart towards her husband. “Please don’t Jorah!” She flung her arms around his neck and buried her face in his fur. “Don’t! Please!” She squeezed as tight as she could to make him aware of her presence. She saw his eyes roll back to look at her and the snarling abated. She sniffed. She didn’t dare look at Baris, but she thought she could see his barrel-like chest rise and fall out of the corner of her eye.

“My lady.” Alfric’s voice was very calm. “He sees you. I think if you step back now, he will release his hold on him. Isn’t that right Jorah?”

Isolde shuffled back, breaking her contact with him. As soon as her fingers left his fur the growling started up again.

“My miscalculation,” said Alfric hastily. “Please keep your hand on him.”

Issy shot out her hand to place it on his back. The rumbling ceased again.

Alfric breathed out. “Jorah, come on now. We both know what a jackass your brother is, but you don’t want to kill him. Not really.”

There was a heavy pause before the black wolf opened his mouth wider and released the grey who immediately rolled onto his back in a sign of submission. Jorah’s head swivelled to look at her. She reached out without thinking and stroked his muzzle. He whined slightly and nuzzled her hand.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“I think our tab will be somewhat higher than anticipated,” sighed Alfric looking about them at the abandoned dining room and all the upturned chairs. Issy turned to look at him. “Keep your back turned my lady,” he said suddenly and Issy realised they must be transforming back into their human forms. She faced Alfric obediently.

“Thank you,” she said softly.

Again, he gave her a small smile.

“You’re very welcome,” he responded. “But really, I did nothing. You were the one who de-escalated the entire situation. He could have torn his throat out.”

Issy swallowed convulsively. “Surely not,” she protested feebly.

A hand landed on her shoulder and spun her around. Jorah was staring hard into her eyes. “When?” he asked harshly.

“I’m not really sure,” she answered, knowing straight away what he meant. “I kept thinking about it today on the journey and... I recognised your eyes last night. I just couldn’t quite accept it as truth.” She shrugged. “It seemed so fantastical.”

Jorah dragged her forward into his arms, pulling her onto his bare chest as he’d only waited to don his pants. She sighed and closed her eyes against his warm flesh rippling with muscle, letting him hold her close. He ran his hand comfortingly up and down her spine. She reached up her hands to hug his waist tightly. She felt immediately cherished despite the grubby tavern surroundings.

Baris coughed. “I can’t believe you’re *cuddling* in a dockside tavern,” he commented rubbing his neck tenderly. Issy could see the purple bruises forming there already.

Alfric growled at him. “What are you still doing here? I’d make a hasty exit if I were you.”

“Yes, you’d know all about hasty exits wouldn’t you Alfric,” Baris retorted bitterly.

“Enough!” barked Jorah. “I’m taking my wife to bed.”

“I’ll set things to rights with the landlord,” replied Alfric as Jorah swung her effortlessly up into his arms. “Let her get *some* sleep at least,” he hissed. Jorah stiffened and glowered at him before heading for the stairs. At his brother he didn’t even glance.

Issy wrapped her arms around his neck as he took steps three at a time. She wasn’t sure how he knew which room was theirs, but after a few short strides across the landing he was opening a door and, before she knew it, he had dumped her on the mattress and was tearing at his clothes in the effort to get

naked. She struggled into a sitting position, noting the mattress was somewhat dilapidated but at least the bedclothes were clean. As she reached behind her for her dress fastenings she peered about her at the room, illuminated only in the faint candlelight. She could see their baggage by the door and started to struggle off the mattress to fetch her nightgown, but before she'd taken even two steps from the bed Jorah was on her, spinning her round and yanking at her lacings. She heard a faint tear in the material as he dragged it from her shoulders.

"I can do it," she told him breathlessly fearing for her wardrobe.

"Not fast enough," he answered grimly as he tugged it up and over her head. He threw it in the far corner and then reached for her, his eyes almost wild.

"Jorah, can you please lock the door?" blurted Issy, conscious of the fact they were in a public inn. Anyone could come bursting in, she thought anxiously. He narrowed his eyes at her and did not remove his gaze from her as he steadily backed up to the door where he shot the bolt across. He was entirely naked, Issy noticed, her eyes growing huge as she noticed his heavy cock curving up from his strong thighs. He was impossibly erect. *What had gotten him so excited?* she thought swallowing. She felt a little scared after the events downstairs and was ashamed to feel the fluttering below her stomach. *She wanted him. She actually wanted his manhood deep inside her.* She backed up to the bed almost reeling at the revelation. He was stalking towards her now with a low growl—an actual growl! She supposed it made sense now, she thought, shivering in her thin shift.

The back of her knees hit the bed and she had no more room to back up. She licked her suddenly dry lips and heard his growl deepen as once again he span her round and then shoved her forward none too gently onto the bed. Issy squeaked as she fell face-first onto mattress. She scrambled to her knees almost in a panic as she felt his heavy body coming up behind her, making the bed dip with a loud creak. Suddenly her hips were seized, and she was pulled hard back against his big muscular body. She yelped, feeling his rock-hard cock against

her bottom. *What was he doing?* She cast her mind back to the hermit's hut that morning. Was this what he'd had in mind for her then but decided against it? She could hear his breath coming hard and fast as he pulled up her shift and pressed himself against her skin to skin. She bit her lip, biting back a breathless moan as she felt his excitement passing to her. She felt achy and heavy in her breasts, between her thighs. Whatever he was going to do to her, she would be willing, she realised, panting. Suddenly his big hard fingers were sliding into her wet warm cleft.

“So wet for me,” he groaned. “My good little wife.”

“Yes,” she breathed. “Yes.”

He hesitated. “I need to join with you now,” he told her huskily. “Next time, I'll go slower. I'll make it up to you.” His words were shaky, and she realised how close he was to losing control. Giving in to his beast. She shivered. Unable to help herself she pushed back on his two fingers, taking him deeper, up to the knuckle. He snarled, tearing his fingers away. She opened her mouth to wail at the loss but suddenly his broad cockhead was there, stretching her open, lodging himself into her tight passage. *Yes*, she groaned aloud. This was what she needed. His big nasty shaft, even though it made her eyes water. He shoved into her, his hips pushing forward, and she pushed back, keening in the effort to take him in. His cock inched slowly forward, almost painfully as he breached her with the thick purple head. She felt her tender flesh start to give, her natural lubrication easing his passage and suddenly he was sliding into her with a loud guttural grunt. Her hips were seized in an almost bruising grip as he slammed into her, balls deep, up to the hilt.

“*Jorah!*” She braced herself for the pain, but then it slowly dawned on her that there wasn't any. Her eyes flickered back open. She moaned at the sensation of fullness, stuffed with his huge man-root. *But she could take him*, she realised. He had been right about that. She bowed her back, shoving herself back against his hard hips, savouring bigness, his swollenness buried in her. She felt her sheath quiver as she luxuriated in the exquisite feel of being stretched around him.

He groaned, sounding almost in pain. He pulled back, his solid cock starting to slide out of her.

“No,” she cried out, before he thrust up again *hard*.

She moaned deeply as sensations of pleasure radiated out from where he impaled her. That felt so good. This time she let him retreat without protest but groaned even louder when he slammed back into her. She couldn't help it. She realised she was tensing and relaxing her body in rhythm to his thrusts. Actually, straining back against him whenever his hard hips surged against her bottom. He snarled again and somehow; she could tell it was with approval although she didn't know how. She could feel a tingling sensation deep inside and realised she was getting even wetter, giving him more of her natural lubrication to manoeuvre in and out with his deep hard thrusts.

She could hear it in the wet, squelchy slapping sounds they made whenever he pulled out and then pushed back in. She would have died of mortification if she wasn't such a heaving mass of arousal. *But, oh my, the sounds of their bodies were making her even more excited. He felt so good. Gods!* She didn't know what was happening to her, the bounce of the mattress springs, Jorah's grunts, the hard, rhythmic slam of his hips against her bottom. She was rolling her hips in a desperate collusion with his thrusting manhood, almost desperately seeking something, some end goal from the hard pounding she was taking though she knew not what. As the sensations swirled harder sending shooting sparks behind her eyes and making her breath catch almost painfully, she shrieked, suddenly clawing at the mattress, twisting and losing the rhythm as cries burst from her mouth and she hurtled forward into an almost terrifying bliss. She felt Jorah's hand on the back of her neck, pushing her face down into the mattress as he brutally pinned her in place for his thrusts, his pistoning hips never stopping the battering pace as she turned her face so she could draw ragged breaths, her cheek resting against the bedsheets.

She took his punishing strokes, unable to do anything else as he held her immobile while if anything he slammed into her

even harder and faster, a bellow bursting from his lips as he finally joined her in blessed oblivion, his seed bursting from him like a geyser. Her sheathe gently pulsated around him, as if delicately sipping at every last drop of his cum. After his groans of pleasure abated he leant forward covering her huddled body entirely with his, his face nuzzling against the back of her neck. She felt his tongue lap her there and inexplicably her womb quivered. Suddenly she felt his teeth there biting into her hard. She gave a strangled scream as she clamped down on him hard where he was still buried inside her. He gave a satisfied moan and gave her a few more shallow dips with his only half-erect dick. She breathed hard as her cleft quivered with the aftershocks of rapture. She whimpered feeling his chest heaving against her back.

“Are you well?” he asked, his voice gruff, and she realised he had not spoken throughout the mounting this time. Only growled and snarled. “Isolde?” She turned her head to look back at him, her cheeks flushed. He gazed down at her; his eyes had deepened to a warm turquoise-blue she noticed with fascination. She nodded and he hesitated before withdrawing from her with obvious reluctance. She unfurled herself from her ass up, shoulders down position and winced at her stiff limbs. He gave a muffled exclamation before pulling her back against him again and rubbing his big hands over the strained muscles of her arms, thighs, and calves.

He made a soft crooning noise. “Did I hurt you, sweeting?”

She shook her head, strangely moved by his endearment. He was gazing at her again, almost as if he could not tear his eyes away before lowering his face to hers and pressing a tender kiss to her lips. She closed her eyes and returned it. “Issy,” he whispered. She felt oddly touched by that too, his calling her by the shortened version only her family used. She turned in his arms to hide her face in his chest and cling to him. Her burgeoning feelings threatened to overwhelm her. He stroked her back. “Go to sleep now,” he told her in his rough-tender voice. She nodded, rubbing her face against his warm skin. It was all too much. She closed her eyes and fell into a deep comforting sleep.

Jorah woke with a start in the early hours. He realised there were people, likely inn staff, moving around downstairs. He squinted over at the window and could see the faint grey light. It was raining, but only lightly. Isolde was lying sprawled across his chest, her hair spread out over shoulder, their legs entwined. He angled his head to rub his jaw along the top of her head. She shifted slightly over him and sighed in her sleep. He thought she murmured his name which made his lips curve into a smile. He dropped his arm down to fondle her plump backside as he considered the fact his wife was now aware of his nature and had accepted it in the blink of an eye. He took her acceptance of his hard fucking as acceptance of his dual nature.

Only she hadn't just accepted it, he thought with satisfaction, she had revelled in it. She was a marvel, he thought squeezing one ample buttock. He felt a slight catch in his chest when he thought about her. Lying like this with her, skin-to-skin he felt peaceful, *right*. His inner wolf was calm and contented. But already he was anticipating herding her out of this shady inn and getting her back to Varkash. It was only a day's ride now until they reached there, and he could set her in his home where she belonged. Then all would be right with his world. He couldn't wait. Gently he rested a hand against the back of her neck, brushing her silky hair out of the way so he could feel for his bite-mark. He hadn't meant to mark her again like that. Now she bore his mark on her upper thigh and the back of his neck. He'd always had a tendency towards being a possessive bastard, but he'd have to reign it in, he thought with impatience. He traced his teeth imprints softly with the tip of his finger. She was so sweet. Her blood, her kiss, the nectar between her thighs. He wanted it always, only for him. That was why Baris' words had set him off. The scorn, the disrespect he had shown his mate had deserved his violence. He frowned. There it was again—*mate*. He shouldn't think of her as such. She was his wife. *Only his wife*. Baris would have to watch his step if he thought to



accompany them home to Varkash. He would brook no one insulting her. Not even his brother.

He'd waited for an hour, letting her sleep until daybreak, before he'd nudged her awake with kisses and his roaming hands. Once she was awake and breathless, he'd rolled her onto her back and buried himself in her soft pliant flesh. Then he'd gently fucked her, or as gently as he was capable of. The bed had creaked and groaned beneath them even though he'd stifled her moans with his mouth. He'd needed one for the road and he took his time bringing her to her peak this time, squeezing and rubbing her succulent breasts, sucking on her pretty nipples. Gods, he loved her lush creamy body. He never got jabbed with bony knees or shoulders or had to worry about narrow backs or hips bearing his weight. He could cut loose, really *let go* and not worry he was going to hurt her. Her luxurious padding was all the buffer his big hard body needed. He grasped her thick round thighs and pushed them up and out, deepening his rapacious thrusts until he came, shooting long bursts of cum towards her thirsty womb. He wanted her pregnant, he realised with surprise. Big and round with his child. Then everyone would know she belonged to him. His wolf growled liking the idea. *Poor Isolde. His wolf was a possessive bastard too.*

He'd stayed with her while she'd dressed, reluctant to leave her alone in a strange inn unattended. It had to be the first time he'd acted as lady's maid, he thought with a wry smile as he helped her into her shift after drying her off after washing. He couldn't help the odd sly pat or stroke of her soft curves, although she tried to hide them behind her towel or undergarments. It was amusing to see her blush after her inhibited behaviour the night before. He decided to indulge her strange ideas of modesty but only because he really didn't have time to strip her naked and show her how her whole body belonged to him now. It was still only early but he planned on getting her out of the inn before most of the guests would even have awoken let alone broken fast—if any customers were left after his and Baris' set-to last night. He realised their purse would be considerably lighter this morning after Alfric reimbursed the landlord for his loss of patrons. He shrugged. He could

afford it. His three years service for the king had left him plump of pocket with a small fortune to take back to Varkash and set things to rights.

He sat on the bed and watched as she combed and separated her long hair to braid it for the journey. Her hands deftly wove in and out until both long plaits hung down neatly from her face. "All done," she whispered.

He reached out and tugged one of her braids until she stepped forward between the V of his open legs. She laughed and bent forward to kiss him briefly on the forehead. His eyes flew to the mirror opposite to see if her parted hair at the back showed his teeth-marks at her neck. His wolf gave a gratified howl to see the faint, white scar. It had healed to almost nothing, but he and his kind would know it. He reached up to touch it with a gentle rub. Issy frowned as if suddenly remembering his bite, so he pulled her down for a more thorough kiss with his teeth and tongue. When he released her, her lips were puffy, and she wobbled slightly on her feet. He bit back a smile and instead surged to his feet. "Follow me close," he cautioned as he fastened her cloak around her and then scooped up their baggage. "Let's find the others."

He saw her pale slightly.

"I hope... They weren't in the next room?" she said looking horrified.

"No, the floor below," he reassured her, once again hiding his amusement.

"Oh good," she answered with relief, following him through the door.

They found not only Alfric and Geoffrey below stairs but also Baris lounging on a seat awaiting them. He rose his eyebrows at the sight of his brother.

"I'd like to come back with you, if you'll have me," Baris said with bare-faced nerve.

Jorah studied him a long moment before he gave an assenting nod of his head. "Now welcome my wife to the family," he said softly.

Baris obligingly bowed in Issy's direction. "Your humble brother-in-law," he said smoothly.

Issy dipped a shallow curtsy. "You're too kind," she answered without feeling.

Jorah smirked. *So, his wife did not like his brother.* That was fine by him.

"Are we breakfasting here?" interjected Alfric. "I dislike this place."

Jorah glanced around the empty taproom. "No, let us leave," he said shortly. "We'll break our fast after we have ridden an hour."

Alfric nodded approvingly.

"What's wrong with this place?" complained Baris as they made their way out to the stables. "It's one of my favourites."

"It would be," growled Geoffrey. The boy looked sullen and tired this morning.

"Watch it pup," sniped his brother.

Jorah rolled his eyes. He had forgotten how Baris could reduce a crowd into a rabble.

"Watch it yourself," snarked back Geoffrey. "You're no higher in the pack order than me!"

Jorah glanced down at Isolde to find her taking in their sniping with interest. She glanced up at him as if aware of his scrutiny.

"Is Geoffrey a... werewolf too?" she asked quietly as they ducked into the stables to retrieve their horses.

"Yes," he replied leading her horse Trix to one side for her to mount.

"And Alfric?" she whispered as he boosted her up into the saddle.

"Yes. He's my Beta, my second in command of the pack at Varkash."

She digested this with one rosy fingertip at her bottom lip. “Well, who’s been looking after the pack in your absence?” she asked wide-eyed. “If you and Alfric have been away for so long?”

Jorah cast a look over at his brother as he too mounted up on Warrior. “My Uncle Cedric,” he muttered swinging over his leg. “At least...”

Baris laughed from where he was tightening the stirrups on a large grey. “Uncle Cedric has barricaded himself in the Dower House with his books and his potions.”

“You should have stayed and imposed some order,” said Alfric tightly. “If that was the way of things.”

Baris shrugged. “Oh, I tried for a while... but you know what an undependable bastard I am. They all started to get on my nerves with their squabbling and in-fighting.”

Alfric shook his head angrily as he led his horse from the stable.

“How bad is it?” Jorah asked steeling himself for the worst. “Be frank with us.”

Baris sighed, heaving himself onto his horse. “It’s a shambles,” he admitted. “Most of the bitches have left for more affluent, stable packs.”

Jorah shrugged non-committally at that. “That’s only healthy,” he commented. “And prevents in-breeding.”

“Your strongest fighters—Ancel, Degore, Farmanus—all left to become mercenaries.”

Alfric groaned. “Not Farmanus,” he sighed. “I was training him personally.”

Baris bristled. “I’m a stronger fighter than him,” he boasted flexing a mighty arm.

“You ran off to become a sword-for-hire too,” pointed out Alfric coldly.

“Good point,” conceded Baris. “Well, maybe they’ll return when you’ve set the place to rights.”

“What else?” asked Jorah cutting him short.

They were all outside the stable now. Jorah, Baris, and Alfric rode three abreast with Isolde and Geoffrey and the pack horses close behind.

Baris had evidently decided to make a clean breast of it. He watched his brother warily. “The South tower collapsed completely in a storm eighteen months ago and has been left a ruin.”

“Did no one attempt to re-build it?” asked Alfric grinding his teeth.

“No, not without you to direct it,” teased Baris. “You’re the resident architect.”

“What about the fortifications? The walls?” questioned Jorah shortly.

“All crumbling to dust,” his brother admitted. “I told you, the place is going to rack and ruin.” He hesitated.

“What?” barked Jorah instinctively.

“There have even—been some raids on the outer-lying farms on your land,” he admitted heavily.

Jorah’s wheeled around. “What?” he barked furiously at this insult to his name.

“With the reduced men, the lack of funds...” His brother trailed off colouring slightly.

Jorah tightened his jaw at the blaze of fury he felt. Warrior stirred uneasily beneath him. He took a deep calming breath. “Raiders? Daring to hit tenant farmers on my land?” he repeated bitterly. He could hardly believe it. Some homecoming this was turning into. Baris’ revelations had put a damper on the mood for the rest of the ride. Jorah inwardly seethed for the next hour until they reached a small town where they stopped to take some repast. All of them were subdued in mood and Geoffrey kept loudly yawning.

“I’m sick of looking at your tonsils!” growled Baris taking a swipe at his ear across the table.

“Well if you hadn’t turfed me out of my own bed...!” snapped back Geoffrey. “I could barely sleep on that kitchen bench!”

Jorah looked up sharply at Alfric as a slow blush spread across his Beta’s cheekbones. It was no more than he suspected after scenting his brother on his Beta that morning. Still, it was a complication he could do without, and he wondered if it had been a mistake letting Baris return to the fold. His brother had always been an awkward, provoking bastard and that was without taking his sexual excesses into account. He didn’t want him upsetting his Beta with his faithlessness. What a nightmare this was all turning into, he thought darkly. His one consolation was his choice of bride, he thought glancing over at Isolde who was dipping her bread in some soup and delicately nibbling on it. He reached across on impulse and covered her hand with his. She smiled and they laced their fingers together wordlessly. Leaning back, he noticed the other three males watching him with thunderstruck expressions.

“What?” he asked narrowing his eyes.

“Nothing m’lord!” Geoffrey gulped returning to his food.

Alfric coughed discreetly and Baris smirked. He kept their fingers intertwined until they returned to the horses.

“I’m sorry everything’s going to be so difficult at first,” she said laying her hand on his forearm. “But I know you will have everything in order before long.” Her eyes were full of trust and honesty. He pulled her into his arms and held her for a moment, his face resting against the top of her head.

“I swear I will be a good husband and provide for you Isolde,” he said gravely. He felt her head nod beneath him.

“I know,” she said simply.

He breathed out. “It’ll take a while to straighten things out.”

“Yes.”

“Just bear with me, you year?”

“Of course.”

“The pack business can be... difficult. They’re a little rough around the edges.”

“That’s fine,” she soothed him. He heard a slight tremor in her voice.

“If anyone offers you any disrespect, I will throw them out,” he told her. “Without hesitation.” He glanced over to where Baris was mounting his horse. “I don’t care who it is.”

The rest of the ride was miserable as the rain drizzled down on and off and the sky was full of thunder clouds. By late afternoon they had reached the outskirts of his lands and Jorah felt his mouth thin to a straight line as he took in the dilapidated fences and great gaps in the marking of the boundaries. It was going to take a lot of work to get things straight. He glanced over at Alfric who looked similarly displeased. This would be no quick-fix project. It would take months to get things in order. They rode on, passing farms and fields until finally, just as night was falling, they reached the Keep at last. The grey stone outline rose stark and majestic against the dark blue skyline and Jorah felt his chest well up at the sight of his birthplace. He glanced across at Isolde who was sat up in her saddle gazing at it in what he hoped was awe.

“It’s huge!” she gasped. He urged his horse over to stand next to hers.

“You’re mistress here now,” he told her, feeling a surge of pride.

“I can’t believe it,” she said shaking her head. “If my sister—if my aunt could see this...” She turned to look at Geoffrey. “I see what Geoffrey meant now by calling my father’s house a piddly manor!”

Geoffrey turned scarlet and then ducked his head as he gave a reluctant chuckle.

“You like it?” Jorah asked, his voice low, meant only for her. It seemed suddenly important.

“It’s majestic,” she breathed. “How could I fail to be impressed?”

At her words he felt a warmth spread in his chest like a balm against his earlier anger. He had a feeling everything would turn out right after all.

The most overwhelming impression Issy was getting was the sheer size of the place. Even in the failing light she could



see Varkash was a huge and sprawling grey stone castle with four towers, one sadly diminished to rubble which must have been the south tower Baris spoke of previously. The tall windows were pointed with lead panes. Some of the panels were illustrated with coloured stained glass but she could not make out their decoration in the gathering gloom. The long approach to the huge front entrance was a path of gravel which was unlit. They had stabled the horses themselves as the groomsmen were nowhere to be seen despite Baris' repeated shouts. Issy stumbled on the overgrown path and instantly felt Jorah's steady arm around her.

She smiled up at him gratefully, but he was staring straight ahead at the house, which to all intents and purposes looked to be all in darkness. On closer inspection she could see a couple of windows on the top floor had faint lights in them. Jorah's expression looked foreboding. Isolde just hoped there would be at least one fire lit in the whole place, as she was shivering. By the time they had mounted the steps to the huge entrance Baris was hammering on the door and yelling fit to raise the dead. Isolde leant against the wall feeling done in. She felt someone press her hand reassuringly and was surprised to find it was Geoffrey who seemed slightly less shy and sullen now he was on his home turf.

"Don't worry my lady," he murmured. "Someone will be roused presently."

"Thank you, Geoffrey."

She was grateful for his words as Jorah, unwilling to stand around waiting, had now taken off on an inspection of the windows on the ground floor, peering through them in the dark and testing their strength. She sighed as Baris started cursing and swearing up a storm.

"There's a lady present," Alfric reminded him tersely.

Baris swivelled round to look at her before commencing pounding on the door with his mighty fists once more.

"Who will be home?" she murmured to Alfric. "Do you have a housekeeper?"

“I hardly know after three years, my lady,” he confessed. “I’m afraid this is a cold homecoming for you. Jorah will not be pleased.”

“It little signifies,” she answered. “We were not expected after all.”

Alfric frowned. “I did send word a couple of months ago before our discharge, but only Baris seems to have minded it.”

Isolde hardly dared imagine a household where Baris was the most obedient member. She wanted to ask if the servants would be pack members too but didn’t want to cause offence.

“Hark!” exclaimed Baris. “Someone moves within.”

“At last,” burst forth Geoffrey. “I’ll go and fetch his lordship.” He ran off into the darkness like a hare.

Isolde could hear nothing but trusted her companion’s ears were rather more sensitive than her own. Finally, she could hear the loosening of bolts and one of the two massive doors opened back a creak.

“Who’s there? Declare yourself?”

“It’s Lord and Lady Mallon-Garth and their companions, Varkash pack members all,” answered Alfric in ringing tones, elbowing Baris aside.

The door widened and a woman’s head peered out. “You weren’t expected!” she exclaimed.

“Evidently!” answered Jorah coming up the steps behind them. “Let us in!”

Isolde could see the interior of the Keep was hardly more inviting than the outside. The only light came from the lantern the female servant held aloft. She must have recognised Jorah, or at least the voice of authority, for she fell back and let them troop through.

“Where is everyone?” demanded Jorah. “Are you housekeeper here?”

“No sir.” She bobbed a curtsy. “My name is Matilda; I am a house maid here at Varkash.”

The woman had a great deal of composure, Issy realised, as she was neither babbling nor panicking at the unexpected return of the family.

“Who is housekeeper now?” asked Jorah narrowly. “Is it still Reynolds?”

“No sir. Mrs Reynolds up and left two years ago. It’s Miss Bronwen now.”

“Bronwen?” He frowned.

“As was your mother’s companion, your lordship.”

“I remember.” He didn’t sound pleased. “And where is Miss Bronwen?”

“I knocked on her door before I came down,” answered Matilda. “She said she would not come down at this hour.”

“I’ll fetch her,” said Geoffrey with relish as he ran for the stairs. Matilda stared after him. She muttered something under her breath and Isolde thought she said ‘*I can’t believe how much he’s grown,*’ but she could have been wrong. Baris murmured something about lighting a fire in the great hall and disappeared into the shadows.

“We need a fire lit in the master bedroom and hot water for a bath for Lady Mallon-Garth,” said Alfric. “Have we servants enough for this?”

“Please sir, begging your pardon but there’s only me,” answered Matilda smartly.

“Only you?” answered Jorah incredulously. He shot a look at his Beta.

“We have a kitchen maid too, but she lives out not in.”

“One housekeeper, one kitchen maid, one house maid,” repeated Alfric taking stock.

“There’s also two groomsmen and three groundsmen.”

“That many?” asked Jorah dryly. “Where’s the rest of the pack?”

“I told you,” called out Baris from the dark. It sounded like he was heaving logs into a grate. “They’ve all scattered to the four winds.”

“This is all that’s left?” asked Jorah sounding shocked.

“As you see, my lord.”

Jorah gave a bitten off exclamation before he too strode off into the dark in search of his brother.

“This way, my lady,” said Alfric taking her arm. “Matilda please bring the lamp. I wish to take Lady Mallon-Garth into the main hall.”

She followed Alfric from the wide hallway across the corridor and then into a huge wooden panelled Great Hall. She could barely make out the interior as it was so dark, but Matilda set the lantern down on what looked to be a huge banqueting table in the centre of the room. As her eyes grew accustomed to the dark, she thought she could make out suits of armour and large portraits adorning the walls, and possibly another staircase leading up to a gallery above them. Alfric led her to a wooden bench lined with cushions then pressed her on the shoulder to let her know he wanted her to be seated. She sank down gratefully into their yielding softness. Suddenly hands were tugging at her boots, and she realised Matilda was swiftly untying her footwear, although thankfully she left her, her cloak. “Thank you, Matilda,” she smiled.

The maid looked up at her, and for a second, Isolde would have sworn she saw pity in her eyes. “I’ll see if I can fix you something to eat from the kitchen my lady,” she murmured. “There’s some cold beef and mustard.”

“That would be fine,” Issy assured her. “Can I help? I understand we weren’t expected...”

At this moment a tall, tempestuous red head burst into the great hall. “I can hardly believe it!” she announced striding into the hall. “Why did you not warn us? We could have had a proper welcome for you all!” She ran to Jorah and embraced him hurriedly before launching herself at Baris. “I should be angry with you,” she told him coquestishly. “Thanks to your

defection both Ailynn and Edyth left to join the Canagan pack.”

“What’s it to do with me?” he asked shrugging her off.

She pouted before turning to Alfric with a smile and a small curtsy. “Alfric, you are welcome back also,” she said hesitantly as if less sure of her ground.

He nodded at her coolly. “We’ve brought Jorah’s bride home.” He gestured to Isolde. “Lady Isolde, this is Bronwen, a member of the Varkash pack and apparently acting housekeeper.”

“Pleased to meet you, Bronwen.”

Bronwen frowned and opened her mouth before closing it again. “*Bride*, is it?” she asked archly casting a look over her shoulder at Jorah.

“Aye,” he answered coming forward with a quelling glance. “Any reason why you’re not giving your curtsy to my wife, wench?” he asked.

She coloured slightly and dropped into a graceful curtsy. “You are most welcome at Varkash, my lady,” she murmured, looking up through her lashes at Baris who was staring moodily at the fire now roaring in the hearth.

During the next hour Matilda and Geoffrey rallied to bring meat and ale to the returning party. Bronwen hung about throwing leading remarks at Baris which were met with monosyllabic replies. Jorah and Alfric kept firing questions at Bronwen about pack members and the estate which she answered as best as she could but none of which seemed to please them. Isolde smothered her yawns as the heat from the fireplace slowly seeped into her bones. She slipped in and out of a doze, unable to help herself. The conversation about people and places she had never heard of didn’t do much by way of stimulation. She thought fleetingly of her father’s house. No doubt Aunt Enid and Mirrie would be sat in the solar speculating on her progress back to the North. She would start a letter to them tomorrow she thought... letting them know she had arrived safely at her new home.

Her eyelids drifted closed again and she slipped down an inch into the cushions. Alfric had tucked a blanket around her after she had finished her supper. *She liked Alfric*, she realised. Somewhere along the way he had turned from critic to her ally. And Geoffrey too... he was a sweet boy, if a little surly. It was good she already had at least two friends at Varkash. It was a start. She drifted off and only jolted back awake when she heard an angry exclamation. Her eyes flew open and she realised at once that it was later, at least a couple of hours had passed. The fire had died down in the hearth and was now a mere glow. Some instinct kept her still where she lay. She could see Baris' massive outline by the firelight. Only he and Bronwen were left in the room with her. It looked like they had exchanged words as Bronwen placed a hand on his arm only for him to shake it off.

“Why so stand-offish?” she asked mockingly. “Your vow must have passed by now. It’s not like you to remain a celibate.”

“My vow is none of your business Bronwen. We’ve never been anything to each other but pack members. You know that. And it seems your designs on Jorah have come to nothing.” He gave a harsh laugh. “He’s quite taken with his plump little human.”

“*Her?*” Bronwen snorted. “She’s no mate.” She tossed her mane of red hair. “She’s just his little pet.”

“Watch your mouth,” growled Baris. “Unless you want to be tossed out on your ear.”

Isolde heard footsteps entering the room and realised it was Jorah and Alfric returning. Baris and Bronwen sprang guiltily apart. Isolde kept quiet as strong arms gathered her up. *Jorah.*

“The master bedroom’s not fit for occupancy,” said her husband tersely as he swung her up and made for the door. “We’re taking your room Baris.”

His brother snorted. “Help yourself.”

“I intend to,” answered Jorah arrogantly as he started up the stairs. They were vast and curving and the walls were lined with many family portraits and old hanging shields and banners. Wolves’ heads figured prominently in their heraldry and coats of arms, she noticed, peeping out from under her lashes. *Well, that makes sense!*

“I know you’re awake, wife” he murmured as he mounted the steps.

She stole a look up at him. It was hard to see in the dim light of the staircase. “How could you tell?”

He smirked at her. “I can always tell. Hear anything interesting?”

She blushed. “Not really. Where have you been?”

“Trying to find us a habitable room,” he growled. “The place is a wreck. You’re going to have your work cut out. I know that much.”

Issy shrugged. “I’ll take that challenge,” she replied. “I’ve been running my father’s house for years.”

“You have?”

She nodded then realised he couldn’t see her in the dark. He really hadn’t bothered discussing her accomplishments with her father, she thought with sudden unease. The potion must have driven all rational thought from his mind! “Since I was fourteen.”

“Well, between the two of us we’ll get it whipped into shape,” he said grimly.

“Of course,” she told him as he nudged open the door to a first-floor bedroom.

“Gods knows why she kept Baris’ room in order and not any of those on the top floor.”

Issy thought she might know why, but she kept her silence.

“Where will Baris sleep?”

“There’s plenty of rooms on the first floor. This is just the biggest.”

“Oh.”

When he set her down, she realised there was a steaming bath in front of the merrily lit fire. She let out a grateful cry. “A bath! You have been busy.”

“Mmmm,” he agreed. “There are warming pans in the bed too.”

She sighed as he immediately set to unfastening her gown. Unlike the night before he didn't tear or tug at the stays, but instead deftly unfastened them, stripping off her layers and throwing them onto a nearby chair until she was stood completely naked. Then he led her to the bath, and she stepped into the fragrant water and sank down with a happy sigh. She watched through half closed eyes as he unfastened her braids and ran his fingers through them.

“Do you want to wash your hair?” he asked softly.

“Yes.” She hesitated to watch his absorbed face. “You're good at this.”

“You think I missed my calling?”

She laughed, realising he was joking with her and then sighed again as he massaged her scalp. His big hands were comforting, reverent even. He soaped her up and then ran the cloth all over her hills and valleys but didn't linger anywhere even though she felt herself blush when her nipples hardened, or his hand dipped between her legs.

“Tired?” he asked as he washed the last traces of soap from her hair, flipping the tresses over the side of the bath.

“I can hardly keep my eyes open,” she admitted as he left her side briefly to return with a large cloth to dry her off. He lifted her out and then set her down in front of the fire, enveloping her and then rubbing her down. She closed her eyes and let him take care of her, feeling cherished.

“Into the bed,” he murmured against her hair as he squeezed the last drops of moisture from its length. He turned back the cover as she clambered in and then drew it over her.



“Aren’t you coming to bed?” she asked when he didn’t immediately follow her under the covers.

“I need a wash,” he said, already shucking off his tunic. “I won’t be long.” She yawned and heard the soft splash of water as he stepped into the bath. She meant to sneak a look at him over the top of the covers just as soon as she’d rested her eyelids a moment, but they grew so heavy the forty winks stretched on until she felt the bed dip as he joined her in it. He drew her into the circle of his arms and kissed her cheek softly. Her sleepy smile turned briefly to a frown as she heard Bronwen’s words ‘*She’s only a pet*’ echo through her mind. Was that all she was to him? As if sensing her disquiet, he tucked her more firmly against his big warm body and rested a hand over her stomach. She stilled at once, comforted by his closeness. Immediately she fell into a deep, restful sleep.

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A loud heavy crash some hours later tore her suddenly from sleep’s clutches. Immediately she felt Jorah roll away from her with a muffled oath and surge to his feet, moving towards the source of the noise which appeared to be a stooped slight figure in their bedroom doorway. Issy sat upright, rubbing her eyes and trying to get her bearings. Jorah had seized their intruder and slammed him against the frame with a thud.

“What the hells—?” protested a slightly slurred voice. “Who’re you? Why are you in my room?”

“Ran?” demanded Jorah’s voice furiously. “Is that you? You bloody young fool!”

“Jorah?” The younger male slumped suddenly. “Don’t shake me like that; I’ve had a skinful!”

“You’re drunk as a skunk!” said Jorah in disgust.

“What of it?” asked the other belligerently. “You’re not m’father! First I’ve seen of you in three years!”

“Get out and find another room!” ordered Jorah angrily. “I’ll speak with you in the morning.”

Isolde clutched the sheets up to her chin as the other male peered around her husband suddenly.

“Who’s that in the bed with you?” he asked with sudden interest. “She smells delicious!”

“Ran!” Jorah grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and propelled him from the room with a growl as Issy watched with astonishment.

“Who was that?” she asked five minutes later when Jorah reappeared and slammed their door shut. He fetched a chair and wedged it under the handle.

“My youngest brother. Ranulf. You’ll receive a proper introduction in the morrow. And an apology,” he added darkly.

Issy lay in the dark worrying about what Ran had said about her smell. Could the potion still be working its magic on Jorah, even now? She chewed her lip.

“Did he scare you?” asked Jorah drawing her into his side again. He stroked his hand up and down her side, a soothing action at first but then more of a caress of her dips and hollows.

“No. I mean, he made me jump. But I think he was just as startled as we were.”

“Hmmm.” Jorah sounded aggrieved still but a little distracted. His hand curved over her hip to cup her bottom. “Still tired?” he asked solicitously.

She would have smiled at his obvious intent if she wasn’t still anxious about the effects of that damn lust potion. “Do I smell... funny to you?” she asked hesitantly.

“It’s a werewolf thing,” he answered swiftly. “Don’t let it bother you. Ran’s young and speaks whatever comes into his mind. When he said you smelt delicious, it just meant you smell like a sweet, soft woman.”

“Is that what I smell like to you too?” she pressed.

“No. You smell like *my* sweet, soft woman,” he growled, rolling on top of her and pinning her with his weight. “Last chance to tell me if you’re tired,” he warned her. “I feel like asserting my husbandly rights.”

“Well, you’re in luck, husband,” murmured Issy, glad the dark could hide her soft blush. “For I feel like indulging in my wifely duties.”

He laughed briefly at her words before giving her a soft yet thorough kiss.

“I feel lucky,” he breathed against her neck as his kisses slowly trailed down her body. “Very lucky indeed.”

Isolde was introduced to her youngest brother-in-law, Ranulph, at breakfast, or Ran as everyone called him. He was seventeen and had not yet filled out to manhood nor was yet full grown. He did not have Jorah or Baris' moodiness or height and grinned at her as Alfric introduced him formally.

"Lord, I've already met my new sister Alfric, no need to be so proper." He kissed Issy's hand and gave her a puppyish grin. She warmed to him immediately.

"You do not seem to be suffering any ill effects from your 'skinful' last night," she commented with a smile.

"Nor you from my brother's mauling," he answered cheekily.

Issy choked on her pottage as Alfric leant across and cuffed Ran around the back of the head.

"Have some respect; Jorah will throttle you."

"He already tried last night," complained Ran rubbing the back of his head. "He almost twisted my ear clean off!" He eyed Issy contemplatively. "Did you bring any ladies-in-waiting with you sister?"

"Sadly no." She dimpled at Ran's hopeful expression. She hoped he would not ask after her miniscule dowry, as her father's frugality meant she would contribute truly little to the renovations of the Keep. In the light of day, she could see how shabby and worn most of the furnishings appeared. It did not seem as though the castle had been looked after as it should have been. In truth it looked very neglected indeed.

"I could give you a tour of the Keep sister," offered Ran obligingly. "After we've breakfasted."

Issy cast a look around for Jorah, but he had no sooner wolfed down his breakfast then he'd wandered off with Alfric.

"They've gone to the study," explained Ran. "Jorah's itching to start making plans."

Issy nodded. “I would love a tour.” She smiled. “Thank you Ran.”

They started on the ground floor and worked their way up. The castle had many rooms and a spacious layout. Issy was impressed by whoever had planned its construction.

“Did your father build the Keep, Ran?”

“Nay, our grandfather. I’m named after him—Ranulph Mallon-Garth. His portrait,” said Ran, pointing to a painting of a fierce looking man with a bushy beard.

“You don’t resemble him,” mused Issy.

“No, thank the gods,” agreed Ran. “But if Baris were to grow a beard...”

Issy laughed. “Baris is far handsomer.”

Ran snorted. “Don’t let him hear you say so. His head’s already swollen from his reputation with women.”

“Is Baris such a womaniser?”

“Aye. Or at least... he was,” frowned Ran. “The last couple of years he’s been different. On a pledge or some such thing.”

Issy thought fleetingly of the conversation she’d overheard when she’d feigned sleep the night before. *Interesting. What was this vow of celibacy Baris had taken?*

“These are our parents, Frieda and Joffrey.”

Issy stared up at the full-length portrait.

“Were they both... werewolves?” she asked staring at the bold, vivid beauty of Frieda Mallon-Garth.

“Aye that they were,” shrugged Ran. “I don’t much remember them truth be told. My brothers and my uncle raised me.”

“Your sire was very handsome,” mused Issy. “He looks a little like Jorah, around the jaw I fancy.” His pale fierce eyes were like his mother’s, she thought.

Ran squinted. “Maybe,” he agreed off-handedly. “Apparently m’mother thought him an uncouth brute.”

“Oh.” Issy tried to hide how taken aback she was. “Well, I’m sure she became accustomed to his ways,” she added tactfully. “Marriage is about compromise after all.”

Ran cocked an eye at her. “For women maybe.”

Issy pulled a wry face. “With an attitude like that you may find it hard to find a bride Ranulph.”

Ran laughed. “Is Jorah so amenable? That’s not his reputation.”

“He’s been very good to me so far,” she found herself rallying in defence of her husband. “It has been three years since you’ve seen him,” she pointed out. “Perhaps he may surprise you.”

Ran gave her a thoughtful look. “He already has,” he answered cheekily.

“By marrying a human?” Issy asked boldly.

Ran coughed. “Maybe,” he admitted. “You’re the first in our family.”

Issy blinked. “Is that so?” She pondered this as they walked along the long gallery. *What did that mean?* she wondered. *Why had Jorah picked her?* She glanced back over her shoulder at the portrait of his parents. His father so broad and strong, his mother’s proud beauty. Were all werewolf women so stunning? she wondered uneasily. And if they were, then why had Jorah not married one? She thought guiltily of the small glass bottle hidden in the toe of her blue stocking. Was it her potion’s fault? “And what of you Ran?” she rallied, noticing her brother-in-law’s gaze grow curious at her silence. “How do you spend your time at the Keep? Do you have studies? Lessons?”

His expression darkened. “Aye, more’s the pity. My Uncle Cedric is the scholar of the family. He tortures me daily with the books. Now Jorah’s back I can resume my weapons training at least.”

“Where is Uncle Cedric? Does he live here in the castle?”

“Nay, the old buzzard likes his own company. He lives at the dower house close by. With his books for company.”

“Is he a widower?”

“Never married.” Ran shrugged. “He’s half monk. Always threatening to pack his bags and join the nearest monastery. Said he was only waiting till the three of us were fully grown.”

“That was good of him,” Issy replied. “My aunt moved in with us when my mother died. It’s good to have family around you.”

Ran grunted.

“Is he your father or your mother’s brother?”

“M’mother’s. He’s a Greyson not a Mallon-Garth.”

They had only the attics left to explore by this point. Issy wasn’t surprised to find they were full of tattered furnishings and ornaments. The Mallon-Garths had not thrown out anything for years it seemed. She needed to make an inventory, she thought tapping her chin. There were surely things that could be renovated, mended, and used to furnish some of the bare, empty rooms below.

“How close is the village to the castle?” she asked as they descended back down to the ground floor.

“Couple of miles.”

“And are the villagers...?”

“Werewolves?” asked Ran. “Lord no! At least...” He broke off. “There may be a couple now,” he admitted cautiously.

“How so?”

“Well, you see...”

“There you are!” Jorah bellowed from the great hall below them. Issy walked over to the edge of the balcony and leaned over.

“Ran’s been giving me a tour,” she called down.

Jorah frowned. "I meant to do that," he said distractedly. "I lost track of time."

"I'll show her the grounds next," added Ran, turning to her. "If you like." They were descending the main staircase now. Issy opened her mouth to assent.

"You will not," interrupted Jorah with a frown. He was standing at the foot of the stairs looking up at them.

"Why not?"

"Because it's not safe," growled Jorah darkly. "I've been hearing about the farms raided on the estate."

"Lord, not in broad daylight they weren't!" protested Ran. "And no one was hurt!"

"I don't care," scowled Jorah. "My wife won't be careering around until we've sent out a strong message that our lands are well-defended." He held out his hand imperiously to Issy.

"Well, will you show me around then?" she asked Jorah as she placed her hand in his. "You must be riding out soon to survey the lands?"

"Within the hour," he admitted. "But we won't be looking at the views Issy. We've work to do." He drew her into the great hall. "Once everything's been secured, I'll take you around and introduce you to all the tenants. You've just had a three-day ride across the country. You should rest."

Issy frowned. "Jorah, I'm a healthy young woman who is used to exercise," she answered with quiet dignity. She lowered her voice noticing that Ran was watching them with open curiosity. "I'm not fatigued or infirm or a child." *Or a pet*, she thought, her heart thudding. *I'm not your cosseted little pet!*

Ran made a choking sound and Jorah glared at him.

"It will take a while for you to make sure everything is as it should be," she continued. "Won't it seem strange to all your people if I'm not introduced to them from the outset? And I should like to see it and meet everyone."

Jorah gave her a steady look.



“We won’t be paying social visits, Issy. We’ll be taking stock of the land.”

She looked gravely back at him.

“I see.” She turned to his brother giving him her smile.  
“Thank you for the tour Ran.”

Jorah ground his teeth as he surveyed yet another tumbled down wall. He signalled to Geoffrey to add it to the list of repairs. His squire was hastily scrawling already on the paper.

“We should call in at the Roper’s farm,” suggested Alfric. “Enquire after how much loss they’ve suffered.” He turned to Baris. “You said they’d had livestock taken and grain and that was twelve months ago.”

“Aye,” his brother agreed. “And likely had more since.”

Jorah nodded briefly, glancing over at the nearby farm which showed in the distance. In truth he could not place the Ropers. His human tenants he had always left to be dealt with by his steward, but in the light of his defection he would have to get his hands dirty.

“Aye,” he agreed briefly, dragging his thoughts back from his dissatisfactory lunch back at the castle. Despite Isolde’s composure he had heard her accelerated pulse and picked up on a thousand indicators of her displeasure and he had felt it like a slap in the face! Gods knew why—a woman’s displeasure had never affected him before. If she’d railed at him or argued they could have had it out, but instead she’d just gone very quiet and withdrawn. He hadn’t liked it, he realised with surprise. *He hadn’t liked it at all.*

He hadn’t even realised he’d become so attuned to her mood. When the hells had that happened? He slackened his reins as Warrior took up a gallop towards the Roper farm giving him his head. If he could call his wife a shrew or yell at her it would have been much more straight-forward, he brooded. Why had she taken umbrage with him anyway? It made no sense. He felt like she’d pulled a sneak-attack on him which irked him but oddly not as much as the idea that he might have inadvertently angered her. She had no reason to be put out—he hadn’t done anything wrong! And she’d been all sweetness and light to Ran, he reflected with annoyance. Issy had no right to be taking up his thoughts like this when he had so much else to deal with! He’d chosen her because he’d

wanted an amiable wife who would know her place and not try to take over his life! He realised he had a glower on his face as they approached the farm and a broad, grizzled man in his fifties came out to cautiously greet them.

“Roper,” Baris hailed him. “Lord Mallon-Garth has returned to the Keep. Brother, this is Gideon Roper.”

“Roper,” nodded Jorah, narrowing his eyes as he saw the curtains twitch inside the cottage and an anxious face appear at the window. He caught scent of something and shot a sharp glance at his Beta.

“My Lord,” answered the farmer giving him a clumsy bow and baring his head.

“Who is within? Your family?”

“Aye m’lord. My wife...” He hesitated. “And our two grandsons.”

“I see. You have sworn fealty to me Roper?”

“I have m’lord.”

“Am I right in thinking at least one of your grandsons should be in training up at the Keep?”

The old man stiffened. “We had no such summons.”

“Summons?” Jorah sat up straighter in his saddle. “Are you telling me you are unfamiliar with our ways?”

The farmer scratched his head avoiding Jorah’s angry gaze. “Truth be told m’lord, since the old lord died, and you’ve been away, some of them ways has been relaxed so to speak...”

Jorah shot a look at Baris who shrugged. “Have we no cubs up at the castle?” he asked incredulously.

“Not that I know of,” admitted Baris at last. “Since most of the men left there’s been no one to do the training...”

Jorah made an angry exclamation. “This is unbelievable.” He raked a hand through his hair before making a quick decision. “Baris, you will resume the training of the new pack members.”

“Me?” Baris exploded angrily. “What do I know of cubs?”

Jorah shot him a furious look. “You really want to discuss Varkash pack business now?” he asked furiously. *In front of an outsider?* was the unspoken inference, but from Gideon Roper’s tight expression he knew exactly what Jorah meant.

“How old is the boy?” demanded Jorah.

Roper glared mutinously back at him.

“How old?” he bit out.

“Six year. They’m both six year,” he mumbled dispiritedly.

“Both?” asked Alfric with interest. “Twins?”

“Aye.”

“I will expect them up at the castle within the week,” said Jorah coldly.

The old man paled and bunched his hands into fists. “Aye m’lord,” he muttered bitterly. He did not raise his eyes, an act of defiance Jorah let pass as he signalled to Baris and Alfric that they were leaving. “Geoffrey, you stay and find out from Roper how many times they’ve been raided in the last twelve-month. Meet us at the next farm.”

“Aye my lord.”

“We’re visiting every farm and property on my land,” he told Alfric and Baris grimly. “We need to take stock and I don’t just mean of the land.”

No wonder the pack was depleted, he thought, enraged as he rode towards the next small holding. All of the old ways had been let slip. Pack members were growing up outside of the pack, ignorant in their ways! It was a disgrace. He had much more to repair than a few broken down fences, he realised savagely. Their whole pack way of life was had been left to erode away. The very fabric of their existence! He yanked his thoughts abruptly back when they crept towards the subject of Isolde. Fond of her as he was growing, his wife had to learn her place.

Isolde was starting to feel her way about the Keep now. From what she could make out almost all of its inhabitants were werewolf. The kitchen maid, Dilys, and the housemaid, Matilda, were both human and came originally from local farms on the estate although they now lived in the castle. Almost all of the tenant farmers were human families, but their interaction with the Keep seemed to be minimal. Isolde could not quite make the relationship out. Clearly Jorah was their overlord, and they were under his protection, but the tributes of fruit and vegetables received up at the Keep were very small Isolde guessed because most of the household were carnivore. When she'd asked about feast days and community events her words had been met with a blank stare. Clearly the relationship between the humans and the werewolves needed working on.

She had not been one week at the Keep before she'd figured out that without the human maids, service at the castle would almost have ground to a halt. The housekeeper, Bronwen, was a sullen she-wolf who seemed to resent being bothered by household chores and spent most of her time gazing out of the windows and moodily staring into space or stealing away and disappearing for hours on end at a time. It was the quiet, serious-minded Matilda who flitted through the rooms at early light to change the candles and dust and air out the rooms. Even though she was a house maid she seemed to have taken on the additional house-keeping duties simply because no one else was doing them. From what Isolde could make out, half of Matilda's time was spent mending and cleaning throughout the castle and making huge lists of repairs and provisions that would be needed for the upkeep of the place which Bronwen then just stuffed in a cupboard and neglected. As for merry Dilys, she kept the kitchen going, roasting meats and boiling broths and keeping the fires burning. She kept the copper pans shining and the huge range blacked and ever ready. The lack of accompanying dishes for her meats was due to the chronic under-staffing of the kitchen rather than Dilys' fault, Isolde realised almost at once.

“It would be nice to have some honey bees at the Keep, don’t you agree Dilys?” she asked one morning as she stood at the kitchen table making up a large batch of dough for bread. She had been at the Keep now for one whole week. Bread-making was another thing that was neglected, she’d found to her dismay.

“Bees, milady?” echoed Dilys looking up from the joint she was basting.

“Aye, bees. For honey. We could use the honey for making sauces, dressing the meat, sweetening dishes, even ale.”

Dilys’ eyes widened. “I don’t know of any estates in the Winterlands that keeps bees miss, I mean, milady,” she corrected herself hastily.

“Perhaps it’s too cold for bees then,” pondered Isolde. “But we should certainly trade for honey when we replenish our stocks. The stores seem sadly depleted,” she said hesitantly. “When is it that we travel to market to buy our spices and provisions?”

“Bronwen says we only need good plain food here,” answered Matilda from behind her. She was so light on her feet that Isolde had not heard her enter the kitchen. She was carrying a pile of blankets and bedding for the laundry.

“I see. But even so, there must be a journey to market once a month or every other month surely?”

Matilda shrugged, “Miss Bronwen does as she sees fit, my lady,” she demurred pressing her lips together tightly with seeming disapproval.

“Matilda has a lot of duties,” commented Isolde thoughtfully as she watched her disappear down the stone steps to the scullery. “She’s surely not laundress for the castle too?”

“Oh no miss. Mrs Hodniss collects it once a week. She and her three daughters take care of it.”

“Well, that’s good. It seems that you are both sadly overworked here at the castle. Why are not more staff taken on?”

Dilys' eyes were perfectly round with astonishment.

"Well miss... I mean, my lady." She hesitated. "It's because well..." She lowered her voice. "You see... only outcasts would work here my lady. People what have been thrown off by their family. No respectable women would work up here."

Isolde's mouth fell open. "But you and Matilda are both extremely respectable." She frowned looking over Dilys' neat and tidy appearance. The girl was always neat as a pin, her hair neatly fastened under her mob cap, her large white starched apron in place. And as for Matilda, the woman's appearance was always immaculate.

"Begging your pardon miss, but we b'aint. Both of us have been turned out by our families."

"Whatever for?"

Dilys hesitated. "Well miss, I can't speak for Matilda because she's been here longer'n me and she's a close lipped one. But as for me... Well, I'm... I'm mated with Jed and Roland. The stable hands." She kept her eyes resolutely downward, and Isolde noticed her hands shook slightly as she held the basting ladle.

"Mated?"

Dilys took a shaky breath. "It's complicated miss."

Isolde cut and shaped the dough in silence for a minute. "I'm sorry Dilys, I didn't mean to pry," she said at last with a reassuring smile at the girl. Dilys smiled back in relief.

"Thank you miss." She bobbed a grateful smile. "I hope I haven't said too much miss. I know it's not my place and didn't mean to cause offence."

"Of course not, Dilys," replied Isolde swiftly. In truth she wished the girl had told her far more. She had many burning questions but realised that pressing Dilys was unfair. She would have to go elsewhere for an explanation.

She saw her opportunity that evening as they undressed for bed.

“What does being mated mean?” she asked that evening as she brushed her hair and watched Jorah in the mirror. He almost dropped the shirt he had just removed.

He cleared his throat. “Who have you been talking to?”

“Oh everyone. The staff,” she answered airily.

“And they asked you if we were mated?” he demanded thunderstruck. He looked angry, Issy noticed as she watched his reflection.

She sighed. “No,” she admitted. *But why aren't we mated?* she wondered silently.

“It's a pack thing,” he said shortly after a heavy pause.

Issy frowned. It was becoming his standard answer for when he didn't want a topic of conversation to go any further. It was starting to grate on her. Anyway, she thought with a flicker of annoyance, how could it be a pack thing? Dilys was a human, and she was mated to not one but *two* werewolves. She opened her mouth to argue but then realised that Jorah was going back out. “Where are you going?” she asked, bewildered as he pulled his shirt back over his head.

“Out,” he bit out.

Isolde stared at him. “But you just washed up,” she pointed out. “Where are you going?”

“Isolde,” he growled. “You're my wife, not my keeper.” He slammed the door as he exited. That was another thing he was doing a lot.

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His little wife was tying him in knots, thought Jorah distractedly as he started to shift once he descended the staircase to the next floor. She was pushing their boundaries, prying into things he didn't want her to. *Were all human females this damn interfering?* Why wouldn't she bloody well stay in the place he'd allotted her? She was driving him crazy! Everywhere he turned people were asking about her, wanting answers.



Only this morning Ran had asked him what the problem was and why didn't he just up and mate her already. Impudent bastard, Jorah snarled. If he wasn't his younger brother, he'd have punched him in the face. *She's a sturdy wench*, Ran had commented, damn his impudence! *You won't break her!* Before he'd even known it, Jorah had him by the throat pinned against the castle wall. *'You don't look at my female,'* he'd ground out before he'd managed to unwrap his clawed fingers. Ran had stared at him as if he was deranged.

*'So, make her your Alpha Bitch,'* he'd wheezed. *'Then the pack will accord her the due respect.'*

*'The pack will show her due respect, because I say so,'* he'd roared back. But deep down he knew they would only see her as a human pet without the status mating her would give. He groaned. In truth, she was three parts mated already. He had only to give her his blood and it would be done. He'd never meant to let it get this far. Around her he had no control. It was frightening. He shifted fully and hit the stone floor on all fours, releasing his energy in a pent-up howl of frustration. His marriage, so calmly plotted, was not meant to send him into turmoil like this!

Throwing his energies into the estate was not occupying him as it once had. Always his thoughts strayed back to her. What she was doing. Her enticing scent. How far away she'd strayed from his side. Who was she conversing with? *What she was learning about his kind...* That was the problem. Isolde was constantly asking questions, forming opinions. The damn woman didn't seem to realise she should just sit around in her shift and wait for him to come home at night and ravish her! She didn't need to be poking and prying around Varkash Keep! Questioning the old ways, suggesting new improved ways to run things.

Only this morning Alfric had been rambling on about some harvest feast Isolde had suggested for the tenant farmers which he'd thought sounded like a good idea. Jorah had stared at Alfric, wondering when his Beta had decided that human females, something he'd barely tolerated in the past, should have a say in how Varkash Keep was run. It beggared belief!

Briefly Jorah acknowledged that when he'd wanted a capable, biddable human female to wife, one of the factors had been that she would know how to run a comfortable household.

Comfortable was one thing Varkash had never been. Its last mistress, his mother, had no interest in the daily running of a busy castle. It had lurched along, cold, unwelcoming, neglected. But now he had Isolde, he didn't want her running amuck sticking her pretty little nose into their accounts, their way of life. He wanted her naked. Locked in his bedroom. Away from prying eyes. There to see to his needs. *And he was very needy when it came to her.* It was like a thirst he couldn't slake. An itch he couldn't scratch. A slow and steady heating of his blood which started the minute he left her side and only her calming touch could sooth. He was reminded that he hadn't been buried deep inside her delicious, soft body since that morning when he'd rolled on top of her and thoroughly rutted her before breakfast. He needed her body like he needed air to breathe. Her glorious, generous body which she freely yielded and wrapped around him like a fragrant gift every morning and evening. *Gods*, he was in a bad way. Even thinking about her now, upstairs lying in their bed was making him salivate with need. This constant *wanting*. It was wrong. Something was wrong with him.

He'd *never* been afflicted like this before by a woman—either she-wolf or human. Was it because he'd bitten her? He paused in his thoughts. Had that triggered a mating process he now couldn't stop? He'd never marked a female before, but he'd never heard it doomed you like this! He'd never felt the need to mark another before Isolde. It had been an unstoppable impulse. Truthfully, he couldn't regret that he'd done it because it showed forever to their community that she belonged to him. Without some sign he'd probably have gone out of his mind. If he hadn't already, he acknowledged, wincing inwardly. He needed to get a grip. Isolde would have to learn her place. He'd show her. There was no need for him to be angsty like this when she was patiently waiting for him upstairs in their bed. He took a shaky breath. He would need to have a run in the woods for an hour or so before returning to her to make sure his rampaging emotions were under control.

He didn't want to scare her with his intensity of need. *Not when he was doing such a good job of scaring himself.*

Instead of making for the wood he made his way to the west wing where the younger pack members were housed. Geoffrey still had a room there although he was old enough now to move into the north wing. Military service had proved he was a man now even if he had only been a squire. He had taken on a big brother role to the cubs who had started to show up at the castle with red-rimmed eyes and dragging feet. Issy had shown a lively interest in the new pages—he had told her it was pack business and to leave it alone. Five had shown so far and no sign of the Roper twins. He ground his teeth. Their grandfather had two days left before he sent Baris to their farm to collect them. Stubborn old bastard. He rounded the corner and found his brother frowning over a ledger. He shifted as Baris was in human form.

“Brother,” he greeted him. Baris nodded towards a chair where some clothing lay. Luckily, werewolves were comfortable with nudity from a young age. Jorah pulled on some trousers and leant against one of the mullions in the arched window.

“Brother,” said Baris cautiously, lowering his book. “If it’s progress you want to hear of, I’ve none for you.” He sighed.

Jorah frowned. “What’s amiss?”

“It’s these cubs,” complained Baris. “A little bunch of snivellers. All they do is cry for their mothers. The humans have brought them up soft.”

Jorah blinked. “They want their mothers?” he echoed mystified.

“Two of them can’t even shift,” snorted Baris. “Their humans discouraged it.”

Jorah’s mouth tightened. “They’re better off among their own kind.”

“I know that,” snapped Baris. “It’s them that need convincing. Maybe you should have a word with them.”

“They’re scared of me.”

“They’re scared of everything! I’m not suited for this Jorah.”

“They need someone to teach them how to be wolves,” Jorah insisted. “You’re perfect for this.”

Baris grumbled. “Geoffrey’s better with them than I am.”

“Geoffrey’s still only seventeen,” pointed out Jorah. “But he can be your second in command if he wants. Actually, that might be a good idea,” he conceded.

“Second in command? The whelp defies me at every turn!”

“He’s not your biggest fan,” agreed Jorah with a reluctant smile. “But he knows from firsthand experience what it’s like to be a foundling wolf.”

“What about Alfric?” suggested Baris. “He was a foundling too.”

“Alfric is my Beta,” pointed out Jorah sharply. “I need his help with a million things around the estate. He can’t be babysitting the foundlings too.”

Baris growled. “Babysitting is not my forte either brother!”

“When they’ve grown a bit, you’ll be able to teach them soldiering and combat.”

“They’re still wet behind the ears!”

Jorah rolled his eyes. “Where are they?”

“I told them it was time for bed.”

“And they all went?”

“Quiet as mice. I guarantee one of them’s crying into the pillow as we speak. Or wetting the bed.”

“They’re the future of the Varkash pack,” Jorah reminded him direly. “You need to infuse some spirit into them.”

Baris groaned. “Easier said than done brother.”

“We should ask Cedric to speak to them. Do some weekly lessons,” suggested Jorah uneasily. “They’re all farm boys and need some education.”

“Aye, I’ll do that,” Baris agreed. “Have you taken her to meet him yet?”

“Who?” asked Jorah sharply.

“Isolde.”

“Not yet,” admitted Jorah. “I’ve had my hands full. The old buzzard should have come up to the Keep and met her! Word will have reached him by now that I have a bride.”

Baris grinned. “You know how he is. He’ll have his nose buried in some book.”

Jorah grunted. Baris had brought his wife to the forefront of his mind again and his wolf was yammering for him to return to her bed. He tarried instead, reluctant to give into his weakness. “You got anything to drink up here?” he asked turning to his brother.

Baris grinned, turning and reaching beneath his bed. “Only the good stuff for my Alpha,” he said tossing the bottle at him. Jorah caught it and yanked the stopper out with his teeth.

“Don’t mind if I do,” he said taking a swig.

He forced himself to stay conversing with his brother for another thirty minutes before returning to his own bedchamber. When he opened the door Issy was sat propped up on the pillows reading a book. She peered at him over the cover.

“What are you reading?” he grunted as he unfastened his borrowed trousers. Luckily, he and Baris were of a similar size.

She turned the book over as if reminding herself of its title. “Animal husbandry.”

He quirked an eyebrow at her. “I was always very involved with the livestock at my father’s house,” she pointed out. “You don’t have any here at the Keep.”

“We’re werewolves Issy. We don’t keep our prey in pens. We hunt it.”

“I suppose that makes sense,” she agreed as he climbed into the bed and immediately reached for her, yanking down the neckline of her nightgown to access her soft bosom. She let go of the book and let it slide to the floor with a thud. He fastened his mouth on one creamy breast and licked her pink nipple.

“Bronwen needs to go as housekeeper,” she told him slightly breathlessly as he kissed his way across to its twin. He supposed he couldn’t blame her, as in bed was the only place she had his undivided attention these days.

“Bronwen?” He frowned.

“The housekeeper,” she reiterated patiently. “She’s not particularly good at her duties. Matilda would be far better.”

“Matilda?” Why the hell was she wittering on about other women? he wondered distractedly as he ran his hands over her body. He needed to concentrate on the matters at hand. He didn’t want to think about other women when he had her where he wanted. Underneath him. His breathing caught as he marvelled in her soft creamy cool skin. She was so perfect.

“Matilda,” she repeated firmly. “She’s a very capable woman and already does most of the work.”

He jerked his head up in annoyance. “Isolde,” he growled with half a mind to roll off her. Something he couldn’t quite bring himself to do.

“Yes?”

“I don’t want to talk about the household!”

“You mean right now?”

“I mean,” he bit out, his hand sliding between her thighs to boldly cup her mons, “*ever!* You’re the lady of the house. You deal with it.”

“You mean, I can make the decisions... oh!” She shifted restlessly against his hand as his fingers began to slide between her pussy lips.

He growled into her neck, his incisors coming down. “Yes. No more talking. I want to fuck you.”

“Yes,” she agreed with a happy sigh. “I want that too. *Oh Jorah!*”

He growled with approval at her words. *Damn. The torture was worth it!* His wolf howled in agreement as everything clicked into place in his world. In the bedchamber his marriage was everything it should be. It was only outside of it that everything grew damn complicated!

Bronwen had not taken the news well. “Jorah will not stand for this,” she’d snorted, plunking her hands on her hips and flickering a contemptuous look up and down Isolde’s figure.

“I have already informed Jorah and he said the decision was mine to make,” answered Isolde calmly. She heard footsteps halt outside the door and was somewhat relieved to see Alfric poke his head in. He seemed to take in the situation in a heartbeat.

“She’s *trying*,” sneered Bronwen, “to dismiss a pack member from Varkash. A *human*.”

“Certainly not,” interjected Isolde smoothly. “I am simply dismissing you from the housekeeper role which you are not fulfilling adequately. I am not expecting you to leave your home.”

Alfric folded his arms. “A perfectly reasonable request,” he said, “in light of your under-performance.”

“I’m sure another role can be found that will suit you better Bronwen,” carried on Issy calmly. “I suspect you yourself are not happy in the housekeeper post.”

“You certainly don’t show any aptitude for it,” added Alfric scathingly.

Bronwen stared from one to the other in furious silence, her face turning red to match her hair. She shrugged a shoulder. “It’s obvious I couldn’t stay in Varkash after such an insult,” she sniffed. “No one would expect me to.”

“That’s your choice, Bronwen. No one is running you out,” put in Alfric.

“You both are!” she shouted furiously. “And it’s obvious why!”

Alfric’s eyebrows rose. Issy folded her hands and waited for the other woman to vent. She wondered now if the situation would have run smoother without Alfric. He seemed to have exacerbated things somewhat.



“Jealousy!” yelled Bronwen with satisfaction. “Both of you know that Jorah regrets his choice of bride! He was mad to bring a human back here!”

Alfric snorted as Issy forced herself not to react despite her heart plummeting to her slippered feet. “Rubbish,” he pronounced scornfully. “You’re the jealous one. Jorah’s never given you a second look.”

Bronwen rounded on him angrily, her lips pulling back to show her pointed teeth as she all but snarled. “And you’re jealous too,” she hissed. “Everyone knows how you feel about Baris! You couldn’t bear how popular he was with the pack females! And once you left, he turned back to us... As you feared he would!”

Alfric narrowed his eyes, but Issy forestalled his response.

“That is also untrue,” she put in loudly. “Everyone knows Baris has kept his vow of celibacy. Ran told me so. And you yourself blamed Baris for the women leaving, as he neglected them. You can’t have it both ways Bronwen.”

Bronwen’s jaw dropped as Alfric’s head whipped around to stare at Issy.

“Not quite so oblivious as you make out, are you!” Bronwen retorted bitterly.

“I’m not oblivious at all,” Issy answered solemnly.

“I’ll pack my things,” she muttered angrily. “The Canagan pack will be glad to have me.”

Alfric stood back from the door as she whirled out in a blur of fury. “Good riddance,” he muttered, but he kept his eyes trained steadily on Isolde.

She sighed. “It’s a shame for the pack to lose its last adult female member,” she tutted. “But I don’t think she’d have been happy here. Not really.”

Alfric pursed his lips. “She only hung around out of ambition. All her friends left months ago. We’ll rebuild the pack.”

“Yes, I’m sure you will.”

Alfric opened his mouth but then closed it again. “How did you—?”

“Know about you and Baris?” He nodded. “Um, it was kind of obvious you belonged to each other. Back at the inn,” she reminded him. “When you grabbed his wrist...”

Alfric winced. “I wasn’t sure you’d pick up on it...” he admitted. “But as Bronwen remarked, you are quite observant.”

She smiled. “Can you... mate each other?” When he stared back at her with troubled eyes she apologised, “Sorry, I didn’t mean to pry into pack business...”

“It’s not that,” he answered swiftly. “It’s just... not everyone is so open-minded about same-sex pairings. But yes, we could be mates. I just... wasn’t sure if I could trust him. So, I’ve held back.”

Isolde nodded. “But if you were mated, then he would have to stay true, isn’t that so?”

“It is, but that wasn’t good enough for me. I wanted to know he was dependable. That he could stay faithful. That I could depend on him.”

“And he did.”

“So, it would seem,” agreed Alfric. “Although he did seek me out a few times in between.”

“I wonder if that was one of the reasons, he left Varkash in the end,” pondered Issy. “It would have been difficult trying to live down his reputation whilst keeping his vow. Also, as a roaming sword for hire, he could hook up with you every so often at least.”

Alfric looked startled. “I never really thought of that,” he admitted. “Ran really said that about Baris being faithful?”

“Yes, he said he shunned all the females, though he didn’t really understand why his brother had turned celibate.”

Alfric laughed suddenly looking as though a weight was off his shoulders. “Thank you, my lady.”

“Please call me Isolde.”

“Isolde.” He paused. “I wasn’t convinced when Jorah was so adamant he would take you to wife. But now I know he was right. That you were right for this place.”

Issy stared back at him, oddly touched by his words. “Thank you Alfric,” she said softly. “That means a lot to me. I know you and Jorah are very close and how highly he prizes your opinion.”

A soft knock on the door made them both jump. Matilda poked her head around the door.

“Please my lady, I’ve a gentleman here requesting an audience with you.”

“With me?” she asked astonished. “Who is it?”

“A local farmer.” She hesitated, shooting a look at Alfric. “A Mr. Gideon Roper.”

Alfric frowned. “He asked for Lady Mallon-Garth?”

“Yes, sir.”

Alfric shot Issy a startled look. “Have you been introduced to Mr. Roper?” he asked.

“No... at least.” She looked at Matilda. “Isn’t Dilys’ surname Roper?”

Matilda bobbed a curtsy. “This is her uncle milady.”

“Then send him in Matilda,” answered Isolde resolutely, ignoring Alfric’s look of displeasure. “I believe Dilys is estranged from her family,” she said by way of explanation. “And Matilda, that position I spoke to you about?”

Matilda’s eyes flew wide. “H-housekeeper milady?”

“Yes indeed. The position is now vacant, and I would be very happy if you would take it. We can discuss the raise in salary and your own private quarters later.”

Matilda turned pink. “Thank you so much my lady!” she gasped. “You don’t know how much this means to me!”

“You are extremely deserving of it, Matilda. Indeed, you have already been doing the job to the best of your abilities for some time now.”

Isolde crossed the room to take a seat in the chair by the fireplace as Alfric shifted uneasily in his position by the door.

“Isolde, I think this farmer is here to speak about a different matter other than Dilys,” he said. “Jorah will not be pleased when he hears of this.”

Isolde’s eyebrows rose. “What makes you think that?”

“I think it’s pack business he’s here about.”

“I thought he was human?” Isolde frowned as she heard footsteps approaching down the corridor.

“He is,” sighed Alfric looking resigned. “It’s his grandsons who are not.”

She realised she could make out smaller footfalls along with the larger measured strides.

“Steady boys,” came the farmer’s deep country burr as a quick knock on the door announced their arrival.

“Come in,” called Isolde. Her curious gaze was met by two apple-cheeked young boys and a stout older gentleman who dragged off his cap and regarded her with frank open appraisal.

“Am I h’addressing Lady Mallon-Garth?” he asked abruptly.

“Indeed, you are,” she told him with a smile. “I am happy to make your acquaintance.”

He gave a stiff bow, asking his grandsons something out of the corner of his mouth. To Issy it sounded like he said, *‘Well, is she?’*

“Yep, she be yuman all right,” answered one of the boys huskily.

Alfric gave a faint warning growl and they both stared at him with round earnest eyes.

“But he bain’t!” whispered the other one loudly.

“Er, please take a seat, Mr. Roper isn’t it?”

“That’s right,” he said cautiously. “How do ee know that?”

“You were announced. And I think I know your niece. A very hard-working girl and a highly prized member of our staff.”

“Aye Dilys,” he agreed lowering himself into a seat. The two boys lolled on the arms of his seat comfortably where they directed curious gazes around the room. “She’s the one who told me about you,” he admitted.

“Dilys?”

“Yes. Told me as her new mistress was human and very kind.”

Isolde smiled again. “I’m glad to hear you are still in touch. Dilys told me relations with her family were... strained.”

“Aye, well. Dilys is my sister’s child. They cast her off when she took up with them stable hands,” he admitted. “I don’t say as they were right to do that but... after what happened with my Elayne I can’t say as I blame them.”

“Elayne was our Mum,” put in one of the boys at this point.

“She died when we was born,” added the other.

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that boys,” Issy replied quickly.

“Me and the wife raised ‘em. They’ve all we got left! Their father, he didn’t want to know. Never even come to see her buried!” Mr. Roper’s hand shook as he retrieved a large handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose.

Issy shot a helpless look at Alfric; he looked stiff and awkward but seeing Issy’s face he cleared his throat. “Their father..?”

“Long gone,” Roper answered bluntly. “Took off three years ago for parts unknown. Gemel his name was.”

Issy saw Alfric's shoulders relax. Had he been scared they were Baris', Issy wondered looking at the two sturdy little boys?

"It'd break the missus' heart if they was taken away from us."

"Taken away?" Issy stared at him in confusion. "Who would do that?"

"Your husband, that's who."

"Now just wait a minute Roper..." interjected Alfric swiftly.

Issy sat up straight in her seat. "My husband?" She stared at the two dark-haired little boys trying to see any resemblance to her own golden husband. "But you said their father's name was Gemel?"

"That it were."

"You don't understand my lady," Alfric was telling her urgently. "Let me explain."

"Those boys," she said cutting through his words as a horrible realisation struck. "The new pages in the South wing. Have they been taken from their families?" Suddenly the dejected looking children trailing around in Baris' wake the last couple of weeks made sense. Jorah had told her it was pack business and to pay it no mind. Her blood ran cold.

"Yes, but they're werewolves," argued Alfric. "They belong here at the Keep."

"They belong with their families who love 'em!" shouted Mr. Roper. "Ain't that right boys? You wants to stay with your gran and granpappy ain't that right?"

"S'right!" the two little boys growled low in their throats.

Issy stood up, crossing the floor of the room with a fixed smile on her face. "Mr. Roper would you be so kind as to remain here while I go in search of my husband? I will have some refreshment brought to you here. Boys, do you like currant cake?"

They both nodded. "I'll have some brought to you." She nodded at Matilda who hurried away to fetch them some repast. Alfric was directly behind her,

"Isolde, Issy..." he appealed to her desperately.

"Where is Jorah?" she asked without even turning her head.

"He's meeting with Baris and Cedric in the West tower. It's pack business..."

Issy raised a hand to forestall him. "I'm afraid I'm no longer going to back down when someone utters those words at me Alfric," she said quietly but with a steely undertone. He lapsed into silence but kept up with her as she strode in the direction of the west tower.

Jorah was pouring over the plans of the surrounding land while his uncle explained the south boundary placement when the door burst open and Issy sailed in without checking on the threshold. He gaped. His uncle lowered his eyeglasses.

“Ah, this must be my new niece,” Cedric observed blandly but no one was listening.

“A word if you please, my lord?” Issy asked brightly. Too brightly, her eyes had a frozen look about them that instantly put him on his guard.

“We’re in the middle of pack business Isolde,” he frowned, his gaze sliding to Alfric who had entered directly after her. His Beta had a slightly panicked look on his face which was unusual for the unflappable Alfric. He turned back to Issy and found she was tapping her foot against the flagstone. *Actually, tapping her foot at him!*

“It won’t wait,” she answered shortly.

“Like my brother said,” rumbled Baris, “we’re in the middle —”

Issy’s hand shot up for silence and *damn* if his brother’s words didn’t freeze on his tongue! The look on Baris’ face was priceless.

“What is it?” Jorah asked narrowing his gaze.

“Oh, it’s about those children you’ve stolen from their families,” she said calmly. “I’d like you to give them back please. Now.”

There was utter silence in the room. He could hear someone breathing too loudly and frowned before realising it was himself. The spell was broken.

“This must be hard for you to understand as a human,” started Baris condescendingly.

Jorah wheeled around and slammed his palm into his brother’s shoulder. “Did I ask you to speak for me?” he asked menacingly.



Baris met his gaze, his own only wavering slightly. “No,” he admitted.

“Then kindly *shut the fuck up* Baris,” he roared.

His brother inclined his head and Jorah turned back to face his wife. She looked completely unruffled by their exchange. Jorah expelled a breath. “This is difficult to explain...” he began.

“Not really,” she cut in. “I take it they’re the bastard offspring of your pack with unmated human females.”

He felt like she’d punched him right in the gut.

“Dear me, she’s very to the point, isn’t she?” commented Cedric. “Fascinating. I wish I’d come up to the Keep sooner to meet her now.”

“Yes, that would have been the courteous thing to do,” agreed Issy with a sweet smile.

Jorah reeled, realising she’d just rebuked the oldest member of his family on his manners. He had to work hard not to let his jaw drop. Baris made a choking sound and Jorah swept around to give him a nasty glare. “The fact is,” he started again willing himself to remain calm, “that the offspring of such unions are not often wanted by their human mothers...”

“That’s bullshit Jorah.” She plunked a hand on her hip. “None of these children were left at your gate. You forced their families to give them up to make up your pack numbers.” Her lip curled on the last few words. “And even if they had been, *how do you know their mothers wanted to give them up?* Do you really imagine they had a choice? Or do you just not care?”

Jorah struggled with a comeback. *She had just sworn at him! In front of everyone!* He almost wished he hadn’t silenced Baris now as he floundered for words. “It’s not that cut and dried,” he protested sounding weak even to his own ears. “They need to be taught the pack way, how to hunt, how to defend themselves. How can humans teach them that?”

“I don’t know, with your help perhaps?” she suggested dryly. “You could tutor the boys here at the Keep once or

twice a week. That seems a far more sensible solution and one I'm surprised none of you could reach together." She cast a disparaging look over Baris and Cedric as well as himself. Jorah took a deep breath even as she turned to Geoffrey who was stood in attendance by the door. His eyes were wide with surprise. "Could you fetch Mr. Roper and his two grandsons here please Geoffrey?" His squire nodded and left *without even looking to him for confirmation of the order!* "Mr. Roper will be here any minute with his two excellent grandsons who he dearly cherishes. I want you to look at them Jorah and to make an *honest decision* as to whether you think being brought up by humans has made them deficient somehow. For my part I believe them to be very sturdy, well-adjusted young boys." She cast a stern look at the others. "I will expect you to make every effort to make Mr. Roper feel at his ease."

Baris stirred awkwardly and Cedric cleared his throat.

"But of course, my dear niece," he agreed affably.

"You too Alfric," she added quietly.

"I've already seen enough." His Beta shrugged. "I'm with you—they're far better off at home."

Jorah glared at him in disbelief. Alfric spread his hands and Jorah remembered belatedly that his own Beta was a foundling raised by the pack. He had not thought of that, he realised uncomfortably. Mere moments later the twins entered with their grandfather who was clutching his hat fitfully.

"Roper," he greeted him reluctantly.

"My lord. Make your bows to his lordship, you little bleeders!" he whispered loudly at the two bruisers staring around them in blatant curiosity. Their eyes flickered to Jorah without much interest.

"Boys, this is my husband, Lord Mallon-Garth. He leads the pack here at Varkash," Issy told them kindly. "And because you're special you have a place in his pack. Isn't that exciting?"

"Yus missus," agreed one of them wiping the back of his arm across his nose.

The other one just shrugged and wrapped an arm around his grandfather's knee.

“What do you think about maybe coming along to the Keep once or twice a week to find out all about being members of the pack, boys?” suggested Issy.

Jorah watched as the old man's gaze fixed on her with painful intensity.

“A couple of times a week?” he echoed hoarsely. “And they'd be allowed to come home?”

“What do you think, boys?” asked Issy. “I think your grandfather would feel more assured knowing you were still around the farm.”

“If'n anyone was to try and hurt our grandpa we'd fight 'em,” growled Gilby, bunching up his fists, his hackles rising and his eyes gleaming suddenly yellow.

His brother came to stand by his side immediately part-shifting, so his teeth came down. “We'd fight anyone,” he snarled, backing up his brother. “Anyone who threatened our kin.” He cast a mean look at Jorah who had to bite back a grudging smile at his gameness. Well, they certainly weren't cowed, he'd give them that much.

Uncle Cedric chuckled. “Well, there goes our theory that being raised by humans makes you soft,” he said slapping his thigh.

“And see how they're shifting like that,” acknowledged Baris grudgingly. “None of the cubs here at the Keep have mastered that.”

Jorah rubbed his jaw as Isolde turned to face him triumphantly. Clearly there was food for thought here. Their assumptions about raising the cubs were taking quite a bashing.

“What excellent boys you have raised Mr. Roper.” Issy smiled. “You and your wife must be very proud of them.”

Mr. Roper blinked, his eyes very moist. “That we are missus—I mean, milady. They's all we has.” He gulped

again. “Two days a week you say for lessons?” he repeated. “And they’d be home before nightfall?”

“Indeed, you’d be doing us a favour by letting them come here. I think their example would help. Especially,” she continued resolutely, “with their positive attitude towards humans.”

Seeing Baris’ mouth open to argue, Jorah frowned at him and gave a slight shake of his head. His brother fell silent at once.

Mr. Roper rocked back on his heels. “Ah well, when you put it like that milady...”

“Wonderful. Boys, do you think you would like to come to the castle once a week to mix with other wolves and learn how to hunt in a pack?” asked Issy turning to the children.

They squinted up at her. “So long as we can go home afterward,” said Gilby casting a glance at his brother who nodded in agreement.

“Of course,” agreed Issy after a brief glance at Jorah. “All the boys will be going home to their families. Where they belong.”

Mr. Roper cast a shrewd glance from Issy’s fixed smile to Jorah’s tense stance and, showing himself to be no fool, rapidly excused himself from the situation.

“Come along boys, your grammy will be waiting to hear the good news,” he blustered.

Baris took a step in front of the door to block the exit, but Jorah jerked his head and Baris moved obediently away letting the Ropers take their leave.

“We’ll see you next week boys,” Issy called after them. “Please give my regards to Mrs. Roper.”

Jorah breathed heavily through his nose; his every impulse trained on the female in front of him. *His mate*, his wolf howled. *No, not his mate!* He had to stop thinking of her in those terms, damn it! His wolf was clamouring with excitement at her show of dominance over his pack members.

His mouth was dry and his cock hard. She would be fierce in the defence of their cubs. *She was his Alpha Bitch. He wanted to impregnate her.* Dimly he was aware of his pack members Cedric, Baris, Geoffrey, and Alfric in the room but he couldn't focus on them while she was in front of him, crowding his senses, inflaming him.

She stared back at him, defiantly, her chest rising and falling. Showing no fear, despite her flagrant show of mutiny in front of a pack outsider. His nostrils flared. She had defied him openly in front of his pack—he should be furious. And he was, on some level. But that came secondary to his first overriding impulse—to fuck her senseless. Under her calm exterior he could feel her wrath pulsing out and damn, *it was exciting him.* He wanted to mount her now, for noisy, sweaty sex. He wanted it bad. His gaze flickered to Alfric.

“Out,” he managed to grind out. “All of you.”

Alfric hesitated only a second before barking some order at the others and they cleared the room. His Beta would have been able to tell exactly what his first impulse was, and it wasn't to punish his rebellious little bride. As the door slammed behind them, he started unlacing his crotch.

“Get here, *now!*”

Her eyes widened before narrowing. “You know I'm right,” she argued even as she came immediately towards him, appeasing him with her physical obedience if nothing else.

“No more talking! Lift up your skirts.”

Slowly she bent at the waist, not breaking eye contact as she gathered her skirts. “Children should be with their families Jorah...” she protested, her voice breaking off with an exclamation as he surged forward pinning her against the wall.

“You can just keep talking all you like,” he said gruffly. “You're just getting me more worked up.”

“I want you to send all those boys home to their families,” she said steadily as he bunched her skirt up around her waist and started shoving her underwear down.

“I heard you,” he grunted as he felt her soft naked skin under his hands and felt rational thought slip away. *This* was what he wanted. *Always this.* He cupped her full backside and pulled her up flush against his hard cock. She panted softly, her hands spreading across his broad shoulders to anchor herself against him. He liked the way she clutched at his shoulders. Almost he wished she had claws to sink in him. Her natural scent assailed his nostrils, musky, feminine, hot for him. *Isolde.*

“Wrap your legs around my waist,” he practically snarled, staring at her lush full mouth and wanting it on his so bad. But his teeth were down, *kissing was a bad idea.* He shook his head to keep hold of his rational thoughts. It was hard when she was pressed up against him, so abundant and lush and *his.* “Give me your mouth,” he heard himself growl. “*Now!*”

“You’ll send them home?” she asked stubbornly tilting her chin at him. He scanned her beautiful eyes. They stared at him straight and true. Wanting an answer. *Showing absolutely no fear.*

“Yes,” he hissed, sounding barely human.

She tightened her legs around his waist and drew herself up for his kiss, pressing her mouth to his and flicking her tongue along his lower lip. That was all it took. He pressed her ruthlessly back against the wall and ground his hardness against the cradle of her hips as his mouth slid against hers in a carnal kiss of hunger and urgency. His teeth were down but retracting them into the gum at this point was not an option.

She answered his kiss with almost equal desire as if he had ignited hers with the show of his. *Thank gods, he was not in the mood for foreplay!* He groaned as he tasted flecks of her blood against his tongue. His healing saliva quickly sealed any nicks from his fangs. Seizing her wrists, he pinned her arms over her head and thrust up into her, ruthlessly impaling her on an earth-shattering roar. His nature demanded that he dominate her now with his physicality. He felt the explosions of light behind his eyeballs at the burst of pleasure from being seated so deeply inside her. *Mine.* It took every last ounce of willpower to hold still for even a moment allowing her to

adjust to him. He realised with surprise that he was still in-tune with her body, her racing pulse, the rise and fall of her every breath. He could smell the scent of her desire enveloping him, inciting him.

He shuddered with pleasure, forcing his eyes open to look down into hers. Sure enough, she was staring back at him, her pupils dilated but her gaze direct, challenging. He thrust and she moaned, her heels digging into the small of his back as she arched into him. There were words he wanted to say, angry words expressing his displeasure at her flouting him in front of his pack, *in front of outsiders damn it!* But how could his lips form words of displeasure when she was pulsing and squeezing around his cock so sweetly that he wanted to howl like a wolf at the moon? Instead, he gave up on words and just grunted like a beast as he rutted in and out of her, his muscles bunching and straining, as he pounded and hammered into her again and again until she was pushing back against him, desperate for her own release.

Gritting his teeth, he pulled out of her, ignoring her wail of frustration, and sinking with her to the floor where he pulled her onto her knees and pushed her roughly forward into a position where he could mount her from behind. She tried to turn about to see what he was about, but he yanked hard on her hips, sinking back into her blissful tightness again, making them both moan at the sensation. Before she could draw a breath, he was pistoning his hips until he had the hard, fast rhythm that he wanted, that he *needed*. He could get off this way and leave her high and dry, he thought fleetingly. *That would be a fitting punishment for her.* He closed his eyes revelling in the feel of her soft cushioned body as he slammed against her delightful generous bottom, her soft quivering thighs. He wouldn't last long like this, already his balls were drawing up, preparing to release into her. It was too much stimulation. *Gods, he loved her curvy body.*

She gave a muffled sob and pushed back against him, seeking the friction she needed to come. His wolf was yipping at him to give his female what she needed, but his pride demanded he withhold it. Ruthlessly he suppressed his inner promptings and, bearing down on her, shouted out as he shot

into her with his explosive climax. He panted against her back, taking great gulps of air as the roaring in his ears subsided and his rioting senses simmered back down. He pulled out of her and immediately she rolled onto her back staring up at him mutinously. He did a double take at her flustered, annoyed expression. *So... she knew or at least suspected that he had deliberately withheld her pleasure. Good.* He crooked an eyebrow at her quizzically. “Something to say?” he asked pulling his breeches back up and tucking himself in.

She shook her head, glaring up at him. He extended his hand for her to take but she ignored it, rolling instead to her feet and hastily righting her clothing. She refused to look at him as he exited the room and he emerged into the corridor, his satisfaction already seeping away. His wolf was angry he’d left her wanting. *That was the point,* he told himself crossly. He marched down the corridor heading towards the south tower. Suppressing the impulse to turn around and finish her off. The ‘biddable little wife’ he’d picked to make his life easier was turning out to be a total distraction. His heels struck the stone flagstones with a measured thud as he brooded heavily on the situation.

Of course, she wouldn’t understand about the foundlings. They weren’t human and belonged with their own kind. It was madness leaving them to be brought up by humans. And yet... those Roper boys had more spirit than the five miserable cubs upstairs who’d been taken from their humans. Could it be that they were somehow weaker by being separated from them? He scratched his head distractedly. But this had *always* been the way things were done at Varkash... since his great-grandfather’s days. Who the hells did Isolde think she was to question the ways of their pack? He fumed silently as he mounted the stone steps up the tower. And half the human families didn’t even want the cubs anyway! At least that was what he’d always been told... In his grandfather’s time they used to be abandoned at the Keep gates by their mothers. The cubs were from unmated werewolf couplings with humans. They were unwanted, illegitimate, and needed the protection of the pack. They were the *future* of the pack godsdamnit.



And now, thanks to his bloody-minded little wife he was going to have to break with tradition and return them all to their ignorant humans... He was only halfway up the tower when he found someone sat on the step waiting for him.

“Geoffrey,” he exclaimed with surprise.

“Are you going to do it?” the youth asked abruptly. “Let them go home to their mums?”

Something in his squire’s gaze made him pause, remembering that Geoffrey himself had been a foundling, brought to the Keep and abandoned. “Honestly? Yes, but I don’t know if I’m doing the right thing,” he answered heavily.

Geoffrey bit the side of his mouth. “Do you want my opinion?” he asked quietly. “As someone who actually has first-hand experience?”

Jorah sat down on the step beside him. “Has it been so bad, being raised by the pack?” he asked haltingly.

Geoffrey shrugged. “I don’t know any better do I? I was told my mother didn’t want me. That humans reject my kind. But that wasn’t true.”

Jorah stirred uneasily. “Well in some cases....”

“Not their cases. Their families didn’t want to give them up. They’d raised them.” He turned to look Jorah straight in the eye. “And not in my case either.”

Jorah stared back. “No?” he asked.

“My mother’s right here at the Keep,” he said softly. “She didn’t leave me here. She came to stay close by me always.”

Jorah’s eyebrows shot up. “What?”

“I don’t expect you’ve ever noticed her. She’s beneath your notice on two counts. One, she’s human and two, she’s a servant. She’s lived under the same roof as me for fifteen years, but I never got to call her mother.”

“When did she tell you?” asked Jorah slowly.

“She didn’t. We’ve never spoken above a few words.”

“Then how—”

“You think we can’t identify the scent of our human family members, my lord?” Geoffrey’s lip curled. “They’re just as much a part of us as the wolf. That’s what you don’t understand. To us, they’re the same as pack.” He stood up and took a step down the staircase.

“Where are you going?” Jorah called after him.

“I’m going to speak to my mother,” he answered resolutely.

Jorah listened to the ring of his echoing footsteps as he disappeared down the tower before turning back and mounting the rest of the steps thoughtfully to the top.

Baris was stood awaiting him with his arms folded. “Tell me you told her to mind her place, brother,” he seethed.

“We’re taking them back to their families this afternoon,” replied Jorah steadily.

His brother’s jaw dropped. “You’ve run mad! I don’t know how she’s done it, but she’s got her claws in you something fierce...”

Jorah slammed his palms down on a table surface making the books lay on its surface jump. “Watch how you speak of my ma-wife,” he shouted. “You watch your mouth!” His brother ground his teeth. “She views things with a fresh pair of eyes,” Jorah carried on more calmly. “Some of the old ways—they need updating.”

“Updating is it? Not just torn apart?”

Jorah eyed his brother heavily. “Has Alfric ever spoken to you of his experience being raised by the pack?” he asked softly.

Baris flinched. “No,” he admitted defensively.

Jorah smiled at him coldly. “Maybe you should ask sometime?”

His brother coloured hotly. Of course, his Beta had never spoken to him about it either but after Geoffrey’s comments

his eyes had been opened to the fact it was an upbringing that —*lacked*.

“We will *ask* their families if they’ll be willing to bring the boys to the Keep twice a week for... *pack lessons*,” he improvised. “That way we can build a connection with them. Make sure the pack’s future is secured.”

Baris shrugged. “Whatever you say brother,” he muttered with a disapproving shake of his head. “I just hope you know what you’re about.”

“What’s that?” Jorah asked narrowing his eyes.

“Your little human... she’s really got you by the balls, brother.”

Jorah gave a short mirthless laugh. “Careful Baris,” he cautioned, “last time you insulted her she had to save your hide.” He looked around the room slowly. “She’s not here to swoop in and defend your miserable ass this time.” Baris stiffened.

“You and Ran will be accompanying me to the farms this afternoon as emissaries for the pack. It’s an order not a request,” Jorah informed him. “Have the boys rounded up with their stuff in the next half hour.” His brother nodded briefly, and Jorah made his exit.

He felt a lot lighter on his way down the stairs than he had on the way up. Like a burden had been lifted. He was doing the right thing. It was a conviction that only grew over the next few hours as they returned each of the boys. The reunions were heart-wrenching. Almost he shuddered to see the depth of feeling between the cubs and their human families. What he’d nearly done horrified him. He found himself actually *apologising* to his human tenants. His reception into their homes was awkward at best. To break the ice, he found himself talking of a harvest feast they were planning up at the hall for tenants and pack members alike. Of a new way forward where all the people of Varkash could work together toward the common goal of getting the place back on its feet, irrespective of human or wolf. He found

himself telling them of his human bride who he wanted to introduce to them, their new mistress.

Their distrustful expressions had turned to dazed astonishment. He felt like an asshole. This was what he should have been doing instead of repairing the physical broken down fences on his estate. He got first-hand accounts of any raiding that had occurred in his absence. He promised to be a better master, a vigilant overlord who would protect them all in future. All of them agreed to let their cubs attend lessons at the Keep twice a week. Ran had emerged from his thunderstruck silence to add a helping word here or there. Baris had been largely silent, but he had patted each of the boys on the shoulder before they left and accepted any oat cakes or salted meat tentatively offered by way of hospitality. Jorah could feel both his brothers' gazes on him as they rode between the farms.

"Lord Jorah, I believe you've become a politician," marvelled Ran. "I've never seen the like!"

Jorah grunted. "We've got much work to do," he reflected grimly. Always his thoughts kept returning to Issy who was rightly pissed with him. His wolf was pacing with agitation at having left her so many hours ago at the castle in anger. *We'll make things right with her*, Jorah promised under his breath, trying to soothe his own lupine nature. *She'll forgive us*. Of course, his wolf didn't think that was good enough. He was still angry he'd denied her rapture that afternoon and had just selfishly used her body for his own ends. Jorah closed his eyes briefly at the memory. *Yes, that was a mistake. I was angry*, he conceded. *We'll make it up to her. With the feast*. His wolf didn't know fuck all about feasts and continued to snap and snarl at him in irritation.

Dark rainclouds were gathering overhead before they were even an hour from home and the heavens opened. By the time they rode into the stables, night had fallen, and they were sodden to the skin. Jed and Roland, the groomsmen, were there to take their horses from them for a rub down and Jorah returned to the house in some haste. The house was very quiet, and he almost thought everyone was a-bed when one of

the maids came sailing out of the sitting room and helped remove his coat. She'd been crying, he noticed with surprise, but when she saw him looking at her closely, she gave him a genuine, if slightly wobbly, smile that touched her eyes. And suddenly he knew.

"It's...Geoffrey's mother, isn't it?" he asked quietly.

She bobbed a curtsey. "Yes, my lord. Matilda your lordship."

"Matilda."

"Her ladyship has made me housekeeper here," she said proudly. "I'm to have my own quarters and everything."

"I'm sure you deserve it," he answered gravely.

"Thank you, my lord."

He hesitated. "Is Geoffrey in the sitting room with you?" he asked nodding to the room she had emerged from.

She nodded. "Yes, my lord."

"That's a good lad you've got there," he said. "It must have been very difficult for you."

Her mouth twisted. "It doesn't matter now," she said lifting her chin bravely. "Now we can be together. And he understands. He forgives me."

"It isn't you that needs forgiveness Matilda," he said solemnly. "I hope you know that."

She trembled a moment before dropping him another curtsey. "Thank you, my lord," she whispered.

Baris and Ran came through the door cursing the rain and struggling out of their wet things.

"You can get your own suppers," Jorah told them loudly. "Matilda is otherwise occupied taking tea with Geoffrey. Her son."

He didn't wait for their reactions but started up the stairs to his own bedchamber.

“Her ladyship retired early with a headache my Lord,” Matilda called up the stairs after him.

*I bet she did*, he thought grimly and was half expecting to find the door bolted against him when he reached their temporary room. Instead, he found his wife bundled under the blankets so far over to her side that she was practically balanced on the edge of the mattress. She had drawn the sheets right up over her head. She was so rigidly still he knew she was wide awake. He could feel her shallow jerky breathing. *Gods, had she been crying?* He crossed the room cautiously to the nightstand and gave himself a wash and dried his wet hair, glancing over at her every so often and clearing his throat. No reaction. He stripped down and made his way to the bed, yanking back the sheet and climbing in beside her. If anything, she pulled even further away from him. He shot out his arm and grabbed her, concerned she might tumble down onto the floor at any minute.

She gave a muffled protest at that. “I’ve got a headache,” she flung back over her shoulder. “Let me alone!”

“I don’t think so,” he rumbled back at her, dragging her against him. She was deliciously warm even though she was struggling and resisting and making noises like an annoyed kitten.

“You’re cold!” she complained crossly.

“Mmm, I’m chilled to the bone.” He shivered. “Why don’t you warm me up?”

“Because I don’t want to!” she spat back. “You’re a pig!”

He gave a surprised burst of laughter feeling overwhelming relief. He’d been scared she’d been sobbing all afternoon feeling lonely and miserable in a strange land thanks to his churlishness. Instead, she’d been mad. *Gods, she was full of surprises.* He felt a burst of gratitude that he’d hit on her in the marriage stakes. She was a revelation.

“But you like pigs Issy,” he reminded her huskily. “I remember you particularly sat on the edge of a pig sty discussing your engagement with one.”

She glared back at him over her shoulder. “What?” she gasped sounding outraged. “I most certainly did not—”

“Yes, you did,” he argued firmly. “I remember it distinctly. The sun was shining off your hair and I thought I would like to eat that female and I wasn’t thinking about the pig.”

She squinted at him suspiciously. “It was raining,” she said witheringly. “It was drizzling on my hair getting it damp. And you weren’t there!”

“Oh yes I was,” he pointed out smugly. “I was in the shed, remember?”

She stilled at that for a moment as she reconciled her memory of the beast she’d called Prince in the shed with her husband. “Oh,” she said lamely before rallying. “So, you were eavesdropping on me and Bess.”

He ran his hands down her sides. “Yes,” he admitted, pressing a kiss under her ear. She squirmed. “What a very ungentlemanlike thing to do!”

“But you were saying such very interesting things,” he teased. “Like how amazingly handsome I was and how madly you had fallen in love with me...”

“I most certainly was not!” she huffed.

“Yes, you were,” he answered smartly, rolling her onto her back so he could look into her eyes. Problem was when he did that, he could see the hurt lurking in their depths. He turned serious rapidly. “Don’t be angry with me anymore Iss. I was an ass and I’m sorry.”

She expelled a puff of air, lowering her eyes.

He tipped up her chin. “I took all the boys home, every one,” he added softly. “You were right. Their families were overjoyed to have them back.” He swallowed. “Our way was wrong. We won’t do it anymore.”

Her gaze flickered to his briefly. “You have my word,” he added. He felt a pain in the region of his chest when a big fat tear rolled down her cheek.

She wiped it away quickly, nodding at him. “Very well,” she sniffed and then rolled back on her side away from him. He inched closer again until her back was flush against him and rubbed her hip.

“Do you forgive me?” he added in a low voice.

She nodded again, tucking the blanket up to her neck. He dropped his face to her neck, cuddling up to her. It was strangely pleasant. He wrapped his arms around her soft cushiony body. He’d been hard since he’d climbed in the bed, but she was pretending not to notice it bumping against her plump buttocks, demanding attention.

“Geoffrey’s with his mother too,” he added conversationally. “Did you know he was a foundling?”

Her head turned sharply at that. “He—he did mention not having any parents,” she admitted reluctantly.

“Yes, it turns out his mother is Matilda, the new housekeeper,” he carried on hearing her soft gasp.

She rolled onto her back to stare up at him. “No! Really?” Her eyes got a distracted look. “So that’s it. That’s why she was cast out by her family... because she had Geoffrey.”

He nodded. “Then she applied for a position here at the Keep to be near him by all accounts.”

“Poor Matilda!” she breathed.

Unable to help himself he slid a palm over her soft round belly, stroking her in what he hoped she would think was a comforting manner.

“How did Geoffrey take it?” she asked swivelling her gaze to him anxiously.

He pursed his lips. “Turns out he always knew. He could tell by her scent that she was his mother.”

She went still at that before sighing. “I suppose that’s quite comforting really.”

He crooked an eyebrow at her.



“I mean, if we have a child... even though I won't be a pack member. It'll still know that we belong together...” She looked up at Jorah and he lowered his face to hers, touching their foreheads.

“All our children will know that they belong to you,” he promised her, sliding his hand down to firmly cup her mound.

“That's good,” she breathed.

“I can make it better,” he promised, wilfully misunderstanding her. “Let me make it up to you Issy.”

She frowned.

“This afternoon,” he expanded meaningfully. “When I was selfish.”

Her breathing hitched. “I don't—”

“Please Iss,” he begged huskily. “I need to. Let me. My wolf won't give me any peace until you've come all over me.”

She blushed. “Well, when you put it that way,” she murmured.

And then he proceeded to devour her with his mouth over and over again, her breasts, her cunt, telling her in filthy detail how delicious she tasted, how he couldn't get enough of her scent, her taste, how she was his and only his. He used his clever fingers, even the slope of his nose to stimulate her clitoris until she was nothing but a melted puddle of satiated lust, her voice hoarse from crying out his name. His wolf howled triumphantly as she tipped once more over the edge into bliss beneath him, bucking like a wild thing.

“Please I can't take anymore,” she begged as soon as she surfaced from the tidal wave of pleasure that had submerged her. “Please, just come inside me now.”

He hesitated, torn at her invitation. He hadn't meant to penetrate her with his cock at all, this was about penance, not slaking his own lust. He shook his head even though he was sure his balls had turned blue by now.

“This is about you not me,” he reminded her.

She stared. “What? But—?”

“I came this afternoon remember?” he pointed out grimly. “And I didn’t extend you the same courtesy.”

Her jaw snapped shut. “Jorah...”

“One more, you can manage one more orgasm,” he told her disappearing between her thighs again.

“No,” she protested weakly, grabbing his hair and pulling his head back up so it rested on her belly. “Please have mercy. I just... I like it best when you’re deep inside me,” she told him dreamily. “You feel so good.” She hesitated. “Your cock, please I want it,” she whispered turning the tables on him. Her gaze flickered as she sought for inspiration. “You’re so long and thick... and hard.”

He groaned. *Now she decided to talk dirty to him? Of all times!* “Gods, Issy... My self-control is hanging on by a thread...”

“So let it go,” she told him simply.

He threw back his head and closed his eyes before inspiration struck. He clambered up and collapsed on his back beside her. “Very well, so here’s what we’re gonna do,” he told her his voice raspy with need. “Come here.”

She rose up onto her knees approaching him gingerly. “What are you...?” She frowned watching him place his hands behind his head.

“Come and sit on me,” he said glancing down at his neglected cock which was angry and swollen and standing straight up from his muscular belly.

“Sit on you?” She fell back on her haunches, biting her lip. “How...?”

He tightened his abdominals and sat up in a fluid motion, seizing her by her upper arms and hauling her onto him until she sat firmly astride. His hands stroked over her smooth round buttocks. “I won’t last long,” he warned thickly. “I’m too damn close. You’re so damned desirable, Issy. My Issy,”

he told her, his voice almost shaking with need. “This way you can take me nice and deep. You’ll be in control.”

“Your eyes... are so turquoise,” she told him, hesitantly touching his face. “Did you know they change colour? When you’re... well, in bed.”

Slowly, he shook his head, looking up at her. “Issy?” he asked huskily.

“Yes?”

“I want you to ride my dick. It’s about to explode.”

“Oh...” She cast a look down and wrapped her fingers firmly around it making it jump in her grasp.

“Take me inside you.” He groaned as her hands took his shaft and angled it towards her pussy. She inched forward until she was poised directly over him.

“Take me deep,” he growled.

She rose up, then sank down on him with a whimper.

He moaned loudly. “So wet,” he groaned, thrusting up into her heat. “Gods, you feel good Issy. Take what you want,” he urged her, his hips writhing underneath her, bucking her up and down his length easily. “Take me.”

She picked up his cue, rising and falling in an undulating rhythm that made him bite his lip, cry out, letting loose a series of strangled howls.

“All is well, Jorah,” she breathed. “You can let go. You can come.”

“Not—until—you—do,” he vowed punctuating each word with a deep groan. “*Fuck!*” He reached up behind him and seized the headboard. “That’s it, sweetheart. Keep doing me like that.” He squeezed his eyes shut, unable to take the visual stimulating of her bouncing on his dick in front of him any longer. *Fuck he was gonna shoot if she didn’t come soon!* Then he felt it, *thank fuck*, her sheath starting to clench and pulsate around him.

“Uhhhhh Jorah,” she keened as she came powerfully, contracting around his dick until his hands shot down from the headboard and clasped her hips in a vice-like grip forcing her to ride him hard as he thrust and thrust into her tight, squeezing pussy. He roared, bellowed like a bull, shot like a geyser until she had drained him of every drop of his cum. Then they both collapsed back onto the mattress, utterly spent. When she stirred minutes later, he pressed his hand flat against her lower back keeping her where she was, unable to bear separating from her yet, wanting to remain intimately joined to her for as long as possible. This was when he felt most at peace, like all was right with his world. *What the hells is wrong with me?* he wondered faintly. And even worse, *why don't I care anymore?*

Issy was making her third batch of dough when Matilda's quick step was heard outside the kitchen.

"Sir Cedric's here," she announced. "He's asking for you, my lady. His niece."

"Is he now?" she asked archly as she removed her apron. "Dilys, I leave this in your capable hands." She hesitated before turning back and picking up a plate of cooling biscuits off the side. She winked at Dilys. "We'll get a taste test while he's here."

When she entered the sitting room Uncle Cedric's tall thin frame was stooped peering at the flower arrangement over the mantel.

"Most curious selection of flora and fauna," he commented turning to face her with a small bow. "Your work?"

"Actually no, our new maid's. She's from the village."

He turned with a look of surprise. "From the village?" he repeated, adjusting his glasses that sat perched on his rather hooked nose. "You astonish me dear Isolde."

"Yes, Moira is human," admitted Isolde placing the biscuits on the table. "The youngest daughter of the landlord from the tavern. Please take a seat Uncle."

She sat herself down as Matilda entered with a pitcher of juice and two goblets.

"And her family is agreeable? Or has she been... er... compromised by one of ours so to speak...?"

"No, no," replied Isolde hastily as Mathilda withdrew. "She's quite uninvolved with the pack. Her father has five daughters and Moira shows no aptitude for bar work. She's quiet and would much rather work behind the scenes so to speak. She's quite unmoved by the whole werewolf situation."

"Well, that's something at any rate. You could certainly do with some more hands around here. Though I can see you've

already worked wonders with the place,” he said gazing around. “Are those new curtains?”

Isolde beamed. “Indeed, they are. And you’re the first man in the family who’s noticed without me pointing them out.”

He smiled, shaking his head. “The Mallon-Garth male does not have much of an eye for detail. I, however, am a Greyson. We notice such things.”

She poured the juice and handed him a glass. “Well, this is very pleasant Uncle.”

He coughed delicately. “And most definitely overdue my dear niece. It has been most remiss of me. You must forgive me,” said Uncle Cedric apologetically. “But I really had no expectation that you would prove so interesting.”

Issy shot him a narrow-eyed look lowering her drink. “Because I’m a human?” she asked with a slight edge to her voice.

He hesitated. “Because Jorah’s always made it perfectly clear to me that he intended to marry some dull little female who would do his every bidding without question.” He peered at her over his spectacles. “I’m happy to see you have disappointed his expectations.”

Issy beheld him speechlessly. “Is that really...?” She swallowed. “Really what he always wanted?” she asked slowly.

Uncle Cedric inclined his head in acquiescence. “Yes, my dear. But you mustn’t blame him altogether. I’m afraid it’s a result of his upbringing.” He sighed.

Issy chewed on her lip, struggling against the impulse to pry. “I’m sorry uncle,” she exhaled finally. “But you can’t just let slip a juicy tit-bit like that and then clam up! Jorah’s never mentioned his parents to me.”

“No, he won’t my dear,” he concurred. “It’s something of a closed book as far as Jorah’s concerned. He was the oldest you see, so it hit him the hardest.”

Issy folded her lips as he helped himself to a biscuit.

“These are really very good,” he commented maddeningly.  
“Nutmeg?”

“Yes.”

“Wherever did you...?”

“I sent Geoffrey and Ran on a spice run to Haldorne,” she answered swiftly, naming the nearest city.

“That must have taken them two days!” he exclaimed with shock.

“Yes, I thought it would be a good bonding trip for them.”

He lifted his eyebrows.

“They’re of an age but apparently have never been close,” she explained.

Cedric regarded her with a fascinated eye. “And did it work?” he asked resting his chin on an upturned palm.

“Seems to have,” Izzy answered breezily wondering how she could bring the conversation back to Jorah’s childhood. She pushed the plate of biscuits towards him. “Have another biscuit.”

Uncle Cedric chuckled. “You’re a very resourceful woman, my dear Isolde.”

“And that’s a good thing, right?” she asked uncertainly.

“Well, I think so,” frowned Cedric pursing his lips.

“... And Jorah?” she asked tentatively, tapping her teeth.  
“Not so much?”

“Perhaps... I should tell you about my sister...” suggested Cedric.

Issy’s eyes flew to his. “Your sister?”

“Jorah’s mother. Her name was Frieda.”

Issy’s thoughts flew to her stunning portrait in the gallery. Jorah had inherited her fierce cold eyes and red-gold colouring.

“Sadly, her mothering instinct was not strong,” continued Cedric. “She was not a nurturer.” He shook his head. “Her union with Joffrey was not a happy one.”

“Jorah’s father?”

“Their mating was a matter of pack alliance. It was not borne of affection.”

“But once they were mated...?”

“Frieda felt trapped here at Varkash. She missed our old pack. She was an artist. She made the stained glass in the windows. Beautiful is it not?”

“Very,” agreed Issy automatically. She frowned. “She surely did not leave? Not with three sons?”

Cedric steepled his fingers. “Several times I’m afraid,” he admitted gravely. “It caused very bad feeling between the packs.”

“I didn’t think... once a couple were mated that could happen?”

“She always returned, but it was done grudgingly and with ill-grace. She made poor Joffrey’s married life a misery. She had no time for any of their sons.”

Issy fell back in her chair, taking this in. She imagined Jorah as a little boy and felt a pang.

“I’m afraid that Jorah’s pattern for the perfect wife is based on the mirror opposite of Frieda.” He shot her a narrow look. “Probably why he decided on a human bride.”

Issy digested this slowly. “Ran did say I was the first human in the family.”

“He was correct.”

Cedric watched her reaction covertly as he sipped at his juice.

“So... when Jorah says he wants a biddable wife,” puzzled out Issy, “it’s because his own mother led his father a merry dance.”



Cedric choked on her choice of words. “You make it sound much more jovial than it was. Growing up he and Baris knew nothing but domestic strife. Ran mercifully remembers very little.”

“I see.” She supposed it made sense. “And yet you chose to stay at Varkash?”

“Oh yes.” He nodded. “I’ve always been something of an oddity among my kind with my love of books and learning. I found I fitted in better here than in my original pack. Plus...” He shrugged. “My nephews needed me. After Frieda died, Joffrey was distraught. In spite of everything. He only outlived her by a twelve-month.”

“That’s sad,” reflected Issy. “So, you were a something of a surrogate parent for the three boys.”

“I did my humble best,” he murmured. “But I don’t flatter myself that a dry old scholar such as myself was much of a substitute sadly.” He gave her a level look. “I think Jorah, on some level at least, must have realised you have everything he has ever wanted.”

Issy thought uneasily of the potion bottle hidden in her drawer. It was a nice theory, but she doubted it very much. She gave Cedric a strained smile. In spite of everything she rather liked Jorah’s eccentric uncle. “That’s sweet of you to say, Uncle Cedric. I hope I can make him happy. But in my father’s house my practical skills were prized. They were my strong suit.” She hesitated. “You see, my sister was the beauty of the family. If Jorah doesn’t want me to organise his household, then...”

“Oh, you must carry on of course!” enthused Uncle Cedric. “You’ve made such an interesting start. It’s the talk of the village. Apparently, word has even spread as far as the neighbouring packs.”

Issy plunked her glass down. “How?”

“Well, your ex-housekeeper has now defected to the Canagan pack; apparently she’s been busy.”

Issy stared. “Bronwen? And how—do you know all this Uncle Cedric?”

“Well, my dear, I didn’t completely sever all contact with my old pack.” He smirked at her surprised face. “And from what I hear, we may even have one or two come along to your banquet next week.”

“From the Canagan pack?” Issy asked, her eyes opening wide. “Who?”

He coughed delicately. “Young Geoffrey has a sweetheart I believe.”

“Geoffrey?”

He nodded his head. “I believe he wants to introduce her to his er... mother.”

Issy gave a surprised smile. “That’s sweet.”

“And possibly a few ex-pack members who may regret defecting before Jorah’s return.” He drained his glass with relish. “Of course, you realise all eyes will be on you.”

Issy lowered her drink and pulled a wry face. “Thanks for the warning Uncle.”

He chuckled. “You’d do well to be prepared.”

“Do you think it’s a good idea? A banquet with all the tenants and pack sat together in one place, here at Jorah’s table?” she pushed. She gave him a challenging look suddenly realising that she wanted him to declare himself unequivocally as in her camp.

“I think it’s your official debut at Jorah’s side,” he said dryly. “And your chance to show everyone exactly how things stand between you.”

It was three weeks later when Issy stashed her latest letter from Miriam in her drawer and made her way across the newly decorated master bedroom. All of their things had been transferred to their new rooms as well as some large handsome pieces of furniture she'd found in the attic that had just needed new upholstery. She and Matilda had been fiendishly busy the last month getting things ready for the Harvest Feast. The Keep had been a hive of activity. Dilys had been roasting and baking constantly for the last two weeks non-stop. Matilda had polished every piece of silver in the castle and every wooden floorboard. Isolde had stitched curtains and cushions and banners and pelmets in order to get the place looking its best. They had known no rest.

Even Alfric and Geoffrey had joined in with the cleaning, so large an undertaking it had been! But it had been worth it, she told herself with satisfaction. Even Jorah had been taken aback by the result of their efforts. Uncle Cedric himself had said Varkash had never looked so grand. Moira, the new maid from the village, had made a huge arrangement of plaited loaves and wheat and fruit platters to adorn the long tables set up in the great hall and stacked high with plates and polished pewter service. Isolde turned in her seat as the bedroom door opened behind her and Jorah entered.

She swivelled back to face the mirror. "I was starting to wonder where you'd got to! I've put out your change of clothes..."

He came up behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders. "Just having a quick word with Ran and Geoffrey," he said looking at her dress appreciatively in the mirror. "Very nice."

"You don't think it's too low?" she asked anxiously.

He ran a finger along the neckline making her shiver. "Only if you were going somewhere without me," he said leaning down and placing a kiss on her neck.

“What were you talking to Ran and Geoffrey about?” she asked with a sudden frown. “They haven’t fallen out again surely? I thought ...”

“No, no nothing like that,” he said absently. “I just wanted a quick word about the new maid. The human one.”

“Moira? Whatever for?”

He met her puzzled gaze in the mirror. “Because after all your hard work I don’t want past mistakes repeated. They’re both young and unmated...”

“Oh.” Comprehension hit. “Well, I don’t think you need to worry Jorah...”

“No, apparently not,” he agreed. “Ran says she’s ugly and Geoffrey...”

“... is courting,” finished Issy nodding in agreement. “Although Ran should not say poor Moira is ugly. She’s not ugly. Just a trifle... plain,” she stated firmly.

“How did you know Geoffrey is courting?” asked Jorah drawing a gold chain which flashed with red stones from his pocket.

“Oh, one hears these things,” she said airily, watching him as he placed the necklace around her throat and fastened it. “I don’t want to give away my sources... Is it a problem she’s from another pack?” she asked.

He gave a quick shake of his head. “How do you like it?” he asked as her hand flew to touch the gold filigree and large red rubies.

“It’s beautiful Jorah.”

“It was my mother’s,” he said shortly. “And now it’s yours.”

“Mine?” she breathed. “It’s gorgeous.”

He drew something else from his pocket. “This is new. I wasn’t quite prepared for the wedding day, but I understand a ring is customary...”

She held out her left hand and he slid the thick gold band onto her third finger. The gold glinted there almost up to her knuckle. “Now everyone can see,” he told her in a low voice.

She looked back over her shoulder. “Thank you, Jorah.” She took his hand in both of hers. “I’ll do my best to make you proud.”

“You always do.”

She swallowed, feeling a sudden lump in her throat.

He tugged on her hands drawing her to her feet. “Ready to face our guests?”

“As I’ll ever be,” she joked. “Have you met our temporary kitchen staff?” she chattered nervously as they made their way along the corridor. “Their father spared all four of them from *The Lamb & Goat* for the evening to serve for us so Dilys, Matilda, and Moira can join in the festivities.”

“Aye, they’re handsome girls,” he murmured. “It’s lucky the youngest is so ill-favoured or having her under our roof could cause us problems.”

“She’s not *ill-favoured*, Jorah,” protested Issy in defence of the youngest and fifth sister. “She’s just shy and a little awkward...” Issy let her words fall away as they reached the gallery overlooking the Great Hall. Jorah led her right up to the rail and their guests below all broke out in a spontaneous applause as he raised her hand high in greeting. Issy felt her breath catch as she looked down on the people gathered below, all their faces shining in the candlelight. It looked so beautiful, and everyone was smiling and cheering. She felt her eyes well up. She felt at home, she realised. She hadn’t thought of her father’s house as home once in the last couple of weeks. Varkash was her home now. *When had that happened?* she wondered in a daze as her husband led her down the steps and up to the head table. Alfric, Baris, and Ran sat there with Uncle Cedric all awaiting her arrival. They stood as she approached, making sure she had a nod and a smile for all they passed. She could see the Ropers were there with their grandsons and some of the other boys she recognised as being ex-pages. They were all accompanied by

their families from their farms. Dilys was sat flanked by her two mates Jed and Roland from the stables. Geoffrey was sat between his mother and a dark-haired girl with amber eyes who watched Isolde with an openly curious expression. To her right were two large males Issy had never met before, but she saw Jorah nod to them in greeting and guessed they must be from the Canagan pack.

There were scores of people she barely recognised, although the odd face stood out. Mrs. Hodniss, the laundress, with her comely daughters and their families. Everyone there had some connection with Varkash or owed their livelihood to the estate. There were even some villagers present including the pub's landlord. His four lively daughters entered bearing platters of food which they began to distribute among the tables. Jorah pronounced everyone welcome in a ringing voice and then they were seated. Issy was astonished to hear the strum of a lute starting up and then a melodious voice began to sing a ballad she recognised as a singing troupe began to weave in and out of the tables with their lutes and timbrels and brightly coloured clothes. Her mouth opened in an 'oh' as she turned to face Jorah.

"Music!" she breathed happily. "Oh, it's beautiful!"

He smirked. "Listen," he said angling his head. "This song's written just for you."

Issy craned her ears and realised that though the tune was familiar the song lyrics had been altered so the refrain was to 'Fair Isolde, Lady of Varkash.' She blushed. Although familiar with the practise of tailoring songs to one's hosts she had never had a song dedicated to her beauty before. The lyrics were piling it on a bit thick, she thought with embarrassment as the lead singer's pure voice sang out about her spurned ex-lovers expiring from broken hearts and withering away with disappointment. She shot a look at her brothers-in-law. Ran was openly laughing and Baris looked like he was finding it hard to keep a straight face. "I never thought we'd have players at Varkash, brother" he said shaking his head.

Jorah shrugged. "Issy likes it," he said by way of explanation.

"I do," she agreed stoutly, picking up her knife and cutting a piece of meat. "I've missed hearing my sister's sweet singing voice."

Jorah winced. "Aye, I remember it," he agreed grimly.

"You did not enjoy her singing?" she asked, startled.

"I had a headache," he reminded her.

"Oh yes." She found herself assailed by unpleasant memories of that accursed lust potion.

"What's wrong?" he asked her, squeezing her knee under the table.

"Nothing at all," she told him with a reassuring smile, but the truth was she couldn't help thinking uneasily back to that night at her father's feast by way of contrast. So much had changed since then, she told herself firmly. Surely Jorah now appreciated her for herself and not just her sly deception? Still, a little voice in her head whispered she would never have secured so fine a bridegroom without the aid of that wicked potion. All of this, she thought looking round at the flickering hall around her, the hubbub of talk and laughter, is built on a falsehood. *If only he knew...* He would not be looking at her with such a steady gaze of admiration, she thought unhappily as he urged everyone to be upstanding and raise a toast to his wife. She stood smiling in acknowledgement of everyone's toast, raising her own glass to bid them all welcome. She could feel the Canagan representatives' eyes on her and wondered what they made of such a plain and dumpy little human having secured such a great Alpha. Did they wonder what spell he'd fallen under? She didn't even bring him a decent dowry, she thought fingering the links of the belt her father had given her. She hoped Jorah would never come to regret their mismatched union, she thought dashing away a tear. She would need to do everything she could in order to ensure he never would.

He leaned in. "Isolde?"

“It’s nothing, I’m just feeling a little emotional,” she told him huskily. “Everyone has made me feel so welcome.”

“This is your home,” he reminded her. “*They* are our guests.” He reached his hand out to rest it over hers, his fingers tracing the thick gold band on her third finger. She nestled closer to him as he poured her some mead and slid his arm around her rubbing her back. For a minute she thought he would pull her onto his lap, but he didn’t. If they were alone, she realised, he would have done, and it warmed her heart. She smilingly took the mead from his hand before a crash sent Jorah springing from his chair. Issy wheeled about in her seat to find where the altercation was at. To her surprise she found it was Geoffrey who was facing off against a much bigger male she didn’t know, who had his arm circled around Matilda’s waist. One look at her maid’s pale face told Isolde his attentions weren’t welcome.

“Take your hands off her,” growled Geoffrey. “She’s mine!”

“Yours pup?” laughed the older man. “Why, she’s old enough to be your mother!”

“She is his mother,” pronounced Jorah, his voice carrying right across the hall. “Release her Adamar. Now!”

The other male’s lip curled back in a low growl as Ran and Baris appeared on either side of Geoffrey in a show of solidarity. Adamar, with ill grace, released Matilda who walked straight to her son’s side. A low loud murmuring filled the hall.

“So, this is how the Varkash pack operates now is it?” bellowed Adamar, looking around the room in contempt. He spat on the floor. “I see more farmers here than warriors!” He laughed. “There’s talk of your head being turned by your human *wife* Jorah, but I little credited it until I saw it with my own eyes.”

“Well now you’ve looked your fill,” replied Jorah. “And can leave.”



“Leave? Aye, I’ll leave,” sneered Adamar. “I had thought to return to the Varkash pack but now I’ve seen how humans are prized over wolves. I’ll not be back.”

“You’ll not be welcome,” was Jorah’s stern reply. “Get. Out.”

Adamar scowled and nodded to his companion who was still seated next to Geoffrey’s sweetheart. They both rose reluctantly and followed him out of the hall as the farmers all started drumming their feet against the floor and handclapping in approval.

“Aye, we don’t want your like,” yelled out a voice that sounded suspiciously like Farmer Roper as his two grandsons booed and cat-called enthusiastically.

“Dear me,” chuckled Uncle Cedric. “Adamar won’t like that at all, poor fellow. He’s quite sensitive under all that posturing.”

“He seems a horrible man,” shuddered Issy as Jorah sat back down by her side.

Jorah sighed. “He’s a strong fighter. I had hoped he’d return to the fold.” He nodded at Alfric who rose to go and follow and check their guests left the premises.

Issy rose her eyebrows. “If that’s what your ex-pack members are like then I’m glad they defected to Canagan.”

Jorah frowned. “Things are different now, that’s all. In the past...” He broke off with a shrug. “She may be Geoffrey’s mother, but she’s not pack.”

Issy stiffened. *Not pack.* She noticed Uncle Cedric’s hawk-like gaze on her although Jorah seemed oblivious. She breathed out, uncurling her fingers from where they’d balled into fists. Was that what it came down to at the end of the day? She felt her spirits plummet. Alfric re-entered the hall moments later, Baris along with him.

“They’ve left,” Alfric murmured taking his seat.

“Good riddance,” growled Baris surprising her. “We don’t need the likes of him.”

Jorah looked up in surprise. “I thought you and Adamar were friends.”

“Not anymore,” answered Baris shortly.

Alfric placed a hand heavily on his shoulder making him jump. “Me and Baris have an announcement,” he said looking at Jorah, Issy, and Uncle Cedric.

Baris turned to him in surprise. “We do?”

“We’re to be mated,” continued Alfric steadily.

“Dear me!” exclaimed Cedric, reaching for his spectacles which were on the end of his chain. “This is unexpected!”

Baris’ jaw had dropped. He closed it with a snap, turning to his brother.

Jorah cleared his throat. “Congratulations,” he said raising his goblet.

Issy joined him, toasting them and taking a hasty sip. If she didn’t know Baris better, she would think he was blushing. Issy looked around for Ran but he was sat with Geoffrey and Matilda quietly conversing. Matilda was smiling faintly and had a bit more colour, she noticed with relief. *Not pack*. It was a lonely middle ground occupied by unmated female humans involved with a wolf-pack, she realised suddenly. She shot a look across at Dilys whose plate was being automatically refilled by her two partners. Dilys was mated, and therefore *was* pack. But Matilda, although she had produced a werewolf from her own body was not. The pack was governed by a whole set of rules that made no apparent sense to Issy. And now she was part of it. Or rather she *wasn’t* part of it. For she, like Matilda, was not pack. Jorah had not mated her. He had not made her a part of it. She would in many senses forever be an outsider looking in. She swallowed, feeling suddenly cold despite the logs blazing in the hearth and shooting sparks only a few feet from them.

“Cold, sweeting?” asked Jorah solicitously, rubbing his palm up and down her arm. She forced a smile in reply.

“I’m fine,” she answered. *Fine*. She looked up, and noticing Alfric’s concerned gaze, she managed a more sincere

smile for him. “Welcome to the family brother.”

In the days following the harvest banquet Jorah felt strangely ill at ease. It wasn't just his Beta's decision to mate his brother that was irritating him. Issy seemed distant, almost *annoyed* with him. But he had done nothing to deserve her ire. He racked his brains in vain. She must just be tired from the exertions for the feast, he decided eventually. And she had been overdoing things to get the Keep in order. He told her to slow down, to take a day's rest but she seemed obsessed with keeping herself occupied and tucked out of his sight. He found himself having to seek her out endlessly where once she'd met him halfway. It was starting to piss him off. To make matters worse, Ran, for whatever reason, had been caught kissing the new maid in the herb garden. Jorah felt justifiably furious.

"I think it must have been entirely harmless Jorah," Issy had sighed attempting to soothe him when he'd ranted to her. "Moirra is not that sort of girl and Ran teases her like a schoolboy. I'm sure it must have been simply a gesture of affection between the two of them..."

"Harmless?" Jorah flung at her incredulously. "You think it harmless after all the work we've done to try and convince the farmers and villagers that Varkash isn't a stronghold of lechers waiting for the first chance to pounce on their daughters? You think if Ran got this servant pregnant then people wouldn't judge the pack...?"

"I don't think for one minute that Moirra would get pregnant; she's a very respectable girl," cut in Issy spiritedly.

"Don't be bloody naïve Issy. She's the daughter of a publican."

Issy bridled at this. "What does that mean?" she demanded, narrowing her eyes.

"It means," he answered crushingly, "that Ran would not have honourable intentions towards a barmaid."

“Because she’s too low class or because she’s human?” she asked softly.

“Don’t try and make this about something it isn’t!” he flung back at her.

“No, I *mean* it Jorah! If Moira was a young she-wolf whose father happened to run the village pub, would you have such a problem with Ran consorting with her?”

“Gods, Issy, don’t be bloody ridiculous,” he replied coldly. “I married a human, didn’t I? That means I’m not biased against wolf-human pairings.”

“Not exactly,” she answered bitterly. “Because I’m not your mate am I Jorah? You never actually took me to mate and while we are on the subject,” she said drawing in a ragged breath, “why *exactly* am I not your mate? Explain that to me!”

He stared back at her speechless. He hadn’t seen this attack coming at all.

She swallowed. “Am I not good enough?”

He opened his mouth to respond but she cut him off.

“Because if it is just the werewolf way of marrying then why exactly *don’t* you want to mate me? And it’s *not* because I’m human so don’t even try that one! Dilys is human and she is mated to *two* werewolves!”

His mind raced. *Dilys? Who the fuck was Dilys?* Somehow, he knew that would not be the right thing to say. “Werewolves are *different*,” he seethed, slamming his palm down on the table to emphasise his uncompromising words. “Sometimes they have polyamorous pairings, hell sometimes they have same-sex pairings. It must seem very shocking to you, but it’s just something you’ll have to accept that you’ll never fully understand.”

“No, *you* don’t understand!” she screamed back at him, thumping the table herself and making the candlesticks jump. “I’m not shocked by *any* of those things! I believe people should be happy and if that is what’s right for them, then they should do it! Gods, you’re so fucking patronising sometimes!”

Jorah almost reeled.

“Human this and human that! It makes me sick how you all look down on us like we’re insects somehow crawling around the floor at your superior feet!” Instead of bursting into tears, her voice was literally shaking with rage.

He stared transfixed by her fury. He should be disgusted, he realised in some small part of his brain; this was entirely the kind of wife he didn’t want! Some shrewish harpy with a sharp tongue. But somehow... his wolf was whining with excitement to see his mate, *no not his mate*, he amended hastily, to see his *female* so enraged. He wanted to push back to have... Jorah broke off at the nature of the beast’s thoughts. *Angry sex*. He drew in a deep breath. He wanted angry, hot, sweaty sex with her. His dick leapt in his pants. He could have groaned. Not a good idea. Humans were more fragile; you couldn’t bite and nip them whilst you fucked. And he sure as hell didn’t want to shift even partially when inside her. That was out, so instead he narrowed his eyes to slits and glared at her.

Once she’d backed down, he could soothe his beast. “I’m not discussing this with you,” he told her enunciating each word coldly. “I don’t need to explain my motivations to you or justify myself. This is the last time the subject will *ever* be broached between us, do you understand?”

She glared at him, her chest heaving, her eyes glittering. *Gods*, she was magnificent. *And he was not fucking her across this table no matter how much his wolf yammered for it*. Suddenly she was striding towards him, and Jorah blinked as she grabbed his hand, raised it to her lips, and then sank her teeth into him, *hard*. His brain shut down. His whole world tilted sharply on its axis as his wolf howled long and deep with carnal lust. Everything went black. Jorah panted, shaking his head to find her pressed underneath him on the hard table surface. He drew in a ragged breath, bringing his eyes back into focus. He was so hard it hurt, pressed intimately against the cradle of her hips. If their clothes hadn’t been a barrier, he’d have been impaled deeply inside her. He groaned, realising she still had her teeth clamped tightly around his

hand. Her eyes squinted up at him defiantly. *She wasn't scared.* The realisation sent another surge of lust licking up his spine. Her teeth were the blunt teeth of an omnivore which meant although they had dug right into his flesh, sending a little semi-circle of aching pain-points somehow shooting sparks up his dick, they weren't sharp enough to pierce his skin. If they had been... he shivered. She would have taken the decision out of his hands and made him her mate. Gods knew why, but that excited him so bad he could barely see straight.

"Release my hand," he ground out, his voice deep and gravelly and oh-so-turned-on.

She shook her head, wringing another groan from him. He was going to come in his pants if he wasn't careful. He wanted to tell her to bite down harder, to bite him to the bone. "Get off me Issy!" he roared in a panic at the direction of his rampaging lust.

She released him on a gasp, and he sprang back from her, holding his injured hand out. Her teeth-marks were deep pale indents in his skin, standing out livid from the angry red flesh. If he was human, she would have bruised him. As it was, he could see his healing factor kicking in already. He stared transfixed, unable to tear his gaze away as her mark on him faded, leaving a bitter after-taste in his mouth. His gaze flickered up finally to find her pale and horrified backing towards the door, her mouth trembling.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered. "I should never have—" She shook her head. "I don't know what came over me..."

He stared at her. *She's my Alpha Bitch, snarled his inner-wolf. Mount her now. Give her our blood.* He swallowed, fighting it, fighting himself. "Get out now," he bellowed at her. "Now!"

Issy turned on a sob and ran to the door, fumbling with the doorhandle.

"I'll be upstairs in half an hour. You'd better be naked by the time I join you," he shouted after her, striving to get his low and angry voice under control.

She didn't react to his words, just wrenched the door open and fled through it.



Issy's feet hit the gravel with a crunching sound as she fled down the drive towards the Dower House. She had a stitch in her side but kept going on adrenaline alone, sobbing slightly as she drew in her ragged breaths. She wasn't much of a runner if truth be told; she wasn't really built for it. Still, she ran now as if a pack of wolves were on her tail. Or rather just one, their Alpha. Their big, angry Alpha who she had just sunk her teeth into like an angry little kitten.

Finally, she rounded the end of the avenue and saw a faint light from Uncle Cedric's austere grey stone home. She wheezed and collapsed against the big oak door, rapping on the knocker. Distracted she noticed it was in the shape of a wolf's head. *Naturally, it was.* She heard rustling within and tried to remember the name of Cedric's maidservant. A sullen little thing, Martha. It wasn't Martha whose head appeared around the door now though, but Cedric himself. He was in a deep red and rather shabby dressing gown. He peered at her without much surprise.

"Oh, my dear," he tutted. "He's managed to drive you away at last, has he?"

She burst into noisy tears.

Two cups of a strange drink made from nettle leaves and hot water later between them, Issy blinked at Cedric through her swollen eyes and tried to follow what he was saying without much success. He was talking in a soothing voice which washed over her like a balm to her red raw soul. The words didn't really matter, his tone was sympathetic and understanding and in some peculiar way he made her think of her father who was never remotely comforting. Perhaps it was just his age.

"I'll have to go back soon," she murmured dismally. "He said he'd be up to look for me soon."

He shot her a searching look. "Oh, I don't think so, dear," he said mildly. "I think you've been far too patient for far too long."

She blinked at him, her eyes filling with tears again. “It’s not his fault,” she choked. “I’m not his mate. He never wanted me to be.”

Cedric sighed, drumming his slim fingers against the arm of his chair. “That stupid boy.”

She wiped away her tears fiercely. “Sorry. I’m not usually so emotional.”

“Is it possible you may be pregnant my dear?”

She almost dropped the cup. “Pregnant? N-no... at least, I don’t think so.”

“Just as well if you mean to leave him.”

“Leave...?” She slumped back in her seat. “Leave him?” she whispered.

“Of course, it would cause him terrible pain, but that would be his own fault. I’m sure he has tried his best to tie you to his side with every bond he has but the one he should have given you in the first place.” He rose up from his chair and started pacing about his sitting room restlessly. “He would not have rationalised it like this of course. Jorah, like most of our kind, acts mostly on his instinct. Naturally,” he added bitterly, “the one area where he should have let his instincts rule him, he chooses to resist.”

Isolde stared at the tall slender old man moving around his room so over-crowded with huge, stacked piles of books and overstuffed furniture. Talking about her leaving her husband as if it was the most natural thing to do. *It must really be hopeless*, she thought.

“Of course,” he said thoughtfully. “You realise that although he is not your mate, you are definitely his.”

Issy set her cup down with a clatter. “I’m sorry?”

“There is so much superstition and ignorance around the lore, even amongst our own kind.” He smiled at her kindly. “Another cup?”

Mutely, Issy held out her cup and saucer to him. “How do you mean?” she asked hesitantly. “I don’t understand.”

“The mating process is three-fold,” he told her. “Blood, spit and essence. Both partners must take of the other.” He passed back her cup now re-filled with the warm liquid. She nodded, taking a tentative sip.

“Now I know from your scent that Jorah has bitten you, marked you. He took your blood.” He hesitated. “By the same token, I know he has fully taken your spit and essence.”

Issy choked on her drink. She didn’t really want clarification around those embarrassing areas.

“He has er... kissed you deeply...”

“Yes, yes,” she agreed hastily. “Yes, he has.”

He cleared his throat looking relieved that he could move on. “But you have not taken his blood into you. You have only taken spit and essence. This means the mating although three parts done is not complete.” He looked over at her. “Do you see?”

“I think so... But that is what he wants Uncle. He doesn’t want to complete it.”

“Madness, utter madness,” sighed Cedric. “Once he bit you and started the process, he will be driven quite mad until it is finalised. The urge to make you his will be all-consuming. It’s plain for all to see how much he desires you.” He coughed apologetically.

Issy started guiltily. *No*, she thought sadly. *That is just the lust potion.*

“That is um, why he will have been acting with such irrational jealousy. The insecurity, the bad temper, the unreasonable demands. His wolf will be pushing him like the very devil to get the deed done.”

Issy sat very still. She took a deep breath. “Uncle Cedric, I want to tell you something.” She looked up at him steadfastly. “You will be a good deal shocked and I fear your opinion of me will suffer considerably. Still, I cannot in all conscience keep it to myself any longer.”

His eyes widened. “You intrigue me, dear Isolde,” he said gently.

“I’m afraid that neither Jorah nor his wolf chose me,” she said in a small voice. “In truth, I forced his hand.” Her eyes flew to his looking for his horrified reaction.

“Dear me, how interesting,” he said stirring some honey in to sweeten his drink. “And er, how did you achieve this singular feat?”

“I... I wore a love potion on my person on the night he met me. In fact,” her face flamed but she was determined to get the whole truth off her chest, “it was a tincture designed to drive a man mad with lust.” Her hand shook and tea spilt into the saucer.

For a moment she thought Cedric looked like he might laugh.

“How resourceful of you! Young girls can be so ingenious these days,” he murmured mildly.

Issy stared wondering if he had heard her right. Perhaps he was a little deaf?

“I deceived him. So that he would pick me and not my sister,” she said loudly. “By wearing a lust potion.”

“And was it of your own making?” he asked with interest.

“Um, no. My sister bought it from a hawker. Apparently, it was brewed from a holy virgin’s bones.” She cringed at how awful it sounded but Cedric only nodded politely.

“I would be most intrigued to see it. Most intrigued.”

Issy’s eyes widened.

“Do you have any left?”

“Uh, yes,” she agreed feebly. “There is a small drop still.”

“I wonder if I could trouble you to let me, have it?”

Issy set her cup down, a horrible suspicion dawning. “It’s very wicked stuff Uncle Cedric. I wish I had never used it. I really couldn’t...”

“Not for my use, dear child,” he reassured her with a small smile. “But rather—to make an antidote.”

“An antidote?”

“If I was to analyse the contents, I could determine its ingredients and then from there I could brew the antidote. It would be an interesting experiment don’t you think?”

Isolde stared.

“Then you could find out.”

“Find out?” she echoed, clasping her hands together.

“Find out if he really is attracted to you or if it was all down to your potion.”

“Ohhh,” she breathed out raising her head. “I see!”

“Martha!” called out Cedric only raising his voice very slightly. The door immediately creaked open and there stood Martha who had very clearly been listening in on every word just outside the door. She didn’t look as surly today as she usually did though, instead her gaze kept skittering to Issy with some emotion Issy couldn’t quite identify. Then she realised with a jolt what it was. Admiration! The little wolf-wench admired her duplicity!

“Martha my dear, I need you fetch something from Lady Isolde’s chamber up at the Keep. Do you think you could do that without being detected?”

“Of course,” agreed Martha with the faintest hint of scorn. “I could be in and out of there quick as a wink and no one any the wiser.”

“Excellent, where do you keep it Issy my dear?”

“In my bottom drawer wrapped in some navy stockings,” she answered with alacrity.

“Martha, it is imperative that no one sees you removing this very tiny glass bottle from Lady Isolde’s room.”

“Course,” she agreed, bobbing her head.

“It is likely the Keep may be in some disarray due to Lady Isolde’s disappearance. Everyone will likely be somewhat distracted.”

Martha bobbed a curtsey, her eyes very wide. She backed out of the door without once taking her round brown eyes off Issy.

“I think you have found a new admirer,” chuckled Cedric.

Issy bit her lip. “I really don’t think she should be looking up to me after what I’ve done,” she wavered uneasily.

“I see nothing wrong with her taking you for a role model,” he answered with a smile. “You have a great deal of initiative and good sense.”

Unsure how he could think such a thing after what she had just confessed, Issy plucked nervously at her sleeve.

“Do you really think they will have noticed my absence at the Keep already?” she asked nervously.

“Sure to have,” he answered cheerfully. “And it won’t take long for Jorah to track your scent here either. In fact, I expect him imminently.”

A thunderous great knocking started on the front door, as if on cue.

Issy shot out of her chair.

“I don’t want to bring any trouble down on you—” she started in alarm.

“Nonsense, my dear. You sit back down.”

“It’d be better if I just—”

“No, no. You’re not going back with him tonight. I actually think you should stay here for a few days. Let him realise what he’s missing.”

“But—”

“Yes, my dear. It’s best to let him stew. I really think you’ve taken enough from him lately.” He fixed a stern look

on his face. “Don’t make me revise my good opinion of you,” he said sternly.

Issy gulped. “He’ll be furious,” she warned him even as she sank back onto the seat.

“Oh yes,” he said pressing his lips together in disapproval. “I imagine he will be. He’s always liked his own way. No matter what you hear, don’t stir from this spot.”

She nodded and he smiled at her.

“Good girl.”

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Jorah hammered his fist against his uncle’s door. He knew for a fact the old bastard was not hard of hearing. Isolde’s scent had inexorably led him to the dower house, and he could tell she’d been in some distress. He cursed. “Cedric!” he shouted.

Finally, one of the windows on the first floor creaked open and his uncle’s silver-grey head popped out.

“Jorah, the hour is late. I am not in the habit of receiving callers into the night.”

“Well, I think you’ve received one caller in the last hour at least,” he responded dryly. “Kindly hand over my wife.”

Cedric’s bushy eyebrows shot up. “Lady Isolde is a person, Jorah, not a possession. And she will be remaining here for tonight. And indeed, the foreseeable future.”

Jorah took a step back. “What?” He glowered up at his uncle. He felt, beyond reason, irritated that he had not opened the door to him, probably expecting he would barge past. Canny old goat.

“I’m afraid she does not wish to return with you,” his uncle replied calmly.

“She said that?”

“She did. It is unfortunate, but you could hardly expect a lady of her spirit to accept such an insult.”

“What insult?” he all but roared.

His uncle narrowed his gaze. “Kindly moderate your tone, nephew,” he said loftily.

Jorah ground his teeth.

“I refer of course to your decision to withhold her rightful place at your side as your mate.”

Jorah sucked in a breath, but his uncle held out a hand forestalling him.

“Kindly do not give me a rehash of your paltry motivations. I am all too familiar with them and I abhor cowardice.”

Jorah bit back a curse.

“Lady Isolde has journeyed miles from her homeland to a join a family, nay, a pack of which she knew nothing with far more courage than you demonstrated in entering matrimony. She puts you to shame.”

“I want to talk with her,” Jorah ground out, his patience surely tried.

“Unfortunately, that won’t be possible. She was understandably distraught, and I administered a sedative. She is fast asleep.”

“If you think for one minute that I am leaving her under your roof...”

“And if you think,” bellowed Cedric suddenly furious, “that she could possibly come to any harm in my house after the way you have treated and devastated her in yours then you have taken complete leave of your sense boy!”

Jorah rocked back on his heels, stunned at his mild-mannered uncle’s ire.

“I said she’s asleep. If you’ve any sense left rattling in that head of yours, you’ll think on your situation tonight and come back with your tail tucked ‘twixt your legs in the morning!” He cast one last reproachful look at his nephew. “You really have made an utter hash of this nephew!” The window slammed.



Jorah stared up at it in consternation. *What the bloody hells had she said to Cedric to get him all riled up like that?* he seethed. He'd never even heard him raise his voice before, let alone shout! He cast a last look up at the windows to see if he could see the lurking silhouette of his errant wife anywhere in sight before he took off pacing up the drive to the Keep, muttering dire consequences.

Over the next couple of days Jorah found his patience sorely tested as a series of people dropped in on him unannounced to give him advice on how to keep a wife. It was astounding how everyone seemed to think they would be able to handle Isolde better than he had. He bit off Alfric's head for the second time that morning before his Beta retreated muttering under his breath about his foul temper.

"I'm well aware of the fact you think I've been nothing but a beast to her since I wed her," he shouted after him as Alfric slammed the door.

"You've never been anything else!" Alfric shouted back at him in an unusual display of temper. "I wash my hands of you!"

Later that same morning Baris appeared in the armoury while Jorah tried to keep himself occupied. He looked up as his brother hovered purposefully.

"Something to say?" he demanded.

"You look like hell," said his brother flatly. "Have you even been sleeping?"

Jorah stared at him. "I slept fine."

"Really." Baris snorted. "We could hear you pacing a hole in the floor past midnight."

Jorah bit his tongue. "You don't even like her," he reminded his brother tersely.

"Who said I don't?" protested Baris. "I'm starting to come around. I mean, I never met a woman before who could get you dancing to her tune."

"Shut the hell up."

Baris sat down beside him with a sigh. “You may have to accept you’re not in control here. Why don’t you just high tail it down to Cedric’s and grovel.”

Jorah ground his teeth. “I’m not going back down there for her,” he insisted. “She can come back to me.”

“I hope it’s worth it, brother. You got your pride but it’s not going to keep you warm at night.”

Jorah had to get up and walk away.

Ran had appeared in his study the third morning with the human maid in tow. *To explain*, he told his brother. Jorah looked up from his ledger with his most fierce glower but the solemn girl before him gazed steadily back seemingly unaffected by his temper. She certainly didn’t look much like a tavern wench in her buttoned up brown sack gown and unflattering mob cap.

He sighed. “Very well, go ahead then,” he said with as much patience as he could muster.

“You see my lord, when Ran kissed me—it was an experiment only. Not a real kiss. Far from it. As you can see, I’m not the sort of girl that boys kiss. Villagers or wolves,” she added gravely. She spoke her words so seriously that it gave Jorah pause. He shot a glance at Ran who was looking suspiciously virtuous.

“I had no idea my brother was so interested in scientific trials,” he said bitingly. “I’m afraid you must explain to me why you felt the need to—er—experiment with kisses?”

“You see, it has always been my intention to join a convent as soon as I reach eighteen. So, I can study books and Latin. Ran was endeavouring to show me what I would be missing out on. We both confirmed that I am not cut out for kissing at all. I would be much better off at a nunnery.”

Jorah shot another glance at Ran who had the grace to look slightly discomforted. Looking back at the girl’s round green eyes Jorah realised she was entirely sincere.

“I see,” said Jorah wearily. “Is it too much to ask that you might be done with any similar experimentation for the near

future?”

“Oh yes, my lord,” she agreed folding her hands together. “I don’t see any need for any further tests.”

Ran scuffed his feet and frowned.

Jorah shrugged. “Well, that clears that up then,” he said. “You can both leave now and go about your business.”

They both started to move away when he changed his mind.

“Hold—you can wait a moment. I have something further to say to you. Ran you can go.”

Ran surprised him by stopping in front of the door and then turned back resolutely to stand by Moira’s side, lifting his eyes in a head-on challenge. Jorah’s eyebrows rose. He had no idea Ran possessed a protective bone in his body.

“Moira, isn’t it?” he ground out irritably.

“Yes, my lord.”

“If it’s books and Latin you want, you could do worse than approach Cedric. He has need of someone to pass his knowledge onto and sadly none of us ever had the remotest interest.”

Moira stared, a pink blush spreading across her face as her composure slipped badly. “But... would he really take me as his apprentice?” she blurted. “I mean... I’m human... and a female.”

Ran’s head turned sharply in surprise at her enthusiasm.

“Well, as Alpha of this pack, what I say goes,” answered Jorah coolly. “And I say you are a prime candidate for the position.” If it pissed off his uncle all the better in his eyes! Though he had a suspicion Cedric wouldn’t even blink an eye at gaining such a novice.

Moira took a jerky step towards him. “My lord! I—I would like it above all things!” she stammered, wringing her hands together. “Why, it’s like a dream!”

Jorah caught Ran’s sour expression with satisfaction as he realised his brother would have liked to have seen such an

enraptured expression after he had kissed her. *Well, well*, he thought grimly, his black mood lifting slightly for a second until he remembered there was another human female taking up Cedric's time currently. *His* human female. His brows snapped back into a frown.

"Leave me now," he said abruptly. "I've things to do."

Moira backed towards the door, missed it, and bumped her head on the wall. Ran reached for her with an exasperated look on his face and shepherded her through the doorway. He shot a look of puzzlement at Jorah as he left. As well he might, reflected Jorah, dropping his head into his hands. He never would have even contemplated such a thing three years ago. Entrusting pack secrets to a human. But his views had changed. Issy had changed them and there was no turning back now. He was doomed. And it wasn't just his family who seemed hell-bent on discussing his missing wife with him. Every time he turned around someone was tutting or shaking their head at him. Either that or he got the silent reproachful look from his servants. Even his groomsmen waylaid him when he went for his gallop on the second morning.

"They can be tricky m'lord, see? Yuman womenfolk," proffered Jed giving him a sympathetic look. "You have to learn to mind 'em when they gets a bee in their bonnet."

Jorah bit his tongue and waited for them to pass him his saddle.

"Our Dilys, she gets in a rare taking sometimes," joined in Roland as he hooked the bridle over Warrior's head. "But we wouldn't be without 'er milord. Not for a million."

"I'm sure you wouldn't," he ground out. "I'll take it from here." They looked at one another shaking their heads before leaving him to it. Their disappointment was palpable. *It's not me that needs talking to*, he thought savagely. *Why is no one beating a track to her door to plead my cause?* His own thoughts brought him up short. Not that he would do any pleading. He frowned. He'd done nothing wrong. Warrior was skittish and veered away from him, sensing his black mood. He had to reign it in, but he was finding it hard to

concentrate on anything else. Since when had his frame of mind depended on a woman? Baris was right, he was losing it.

On the third morning Jorah was astounded when his uncle breezed into the pack meeting as if he hadn't been harbouring his nephew's fugitive wife for the past few days. Jorah was vaguely aware of Alfric and Baris stirring uneasily on either side of him.

"Ah good, refreshments," commented his uncle, helping himself to a small glass of mead from the tray. "How civilised." He smiled around at everyone vaguely. "Have we reached 'any other business' yet?"

Jorah breathed steadily through his nose, intent on keeping his temper.

"Did you have something you wanted to raise Cedric?" interceded Alfric frowning.

"Dear me yes." He placed his glass down, tenting his bony fingers together. "It's about our Alpha's mate."

It went deathly quiet.

"I don't have a mate," Jorah answered in his most lethal voice.

"And therein lies the problem, dear boy," sighed his uncle. "I propose that the situation is rectified with all due haste."

"I have no intention of taking Isolde as a mate," Jorah answered coldly.

He heard a dissatisfied murmur from his assembled pack, but Cedric held up his hand.

"Jorah's quite right of course," he concurred mildly. "We simply have to face facts. While Isolde is a pleasant young woman, their marriage was a mistake and simply has not worked out."

Jorah bit back his retort with an effort. He narrowed his eyes, suspecting his uncle of trying to play the devil's advocate. Luckily, Alfric snatched up the gauntlet meaning he didn't have to.

“I disagree,” Alfric argued hotly. “Isolde was like a breath of fresh air to Varkash. The tenants like her, the servants like her, *the pack* likes her...”

“My dear Alfric,” responded Cedric reproachfully, “you have me all wrong. I also like Isolde a good deal. But all of our feelings count for naught if Jorah does not consider her to be a fit mate.”

Jorah felt his fingers tighten involuntarily around his tankard. “Being a fit mate has nothing to do with it,” he stated coldly. “Fit or not, I vowed never to take a mate. You know this.”

“Yes, dear boy. I remember quite well, you telling me on your fourteenth birthday,” Cedric replied calmly, taking a sip of his honey fortified wine. “And do you remember what I told you?”

Jorah gave a dismissive wave of his hand. “Something about her finding me,” he answered with a short, disbelieving laugh.

“And I stand by that statement.” His uncle nodded sagely. “You, unlike myself, are not suited for bachelorhood.”

Baris snorted.

“And so,” continued his uncle as if no one had interrupted him, “once Lady Isolde has been dispatched back to the Summerlands we can concentrate on having an inter-pack event where several females can be paraded for your inspection.”

There was a murmur of protest from Ran and Geoffrey at this, but Jorah’s exclamation drowned them out.

“What?” Jorah heard himself snap. “Isolde will not be returning to the Summerlands.” It was all he could do not to snarl.

Cedric’s white eyebrows drifted up. “That would be most unfair on her, my boy. Even though you do not want her...”

“Stop talking bloody nonsense!” Jorah found himself growling.

“...I am sure there are many human males who would not find her entirely lacking in charm...” carried on his uncle steadily, as if he had not spoken.

Jorah brought the flat of his hand down on the tabletop with a bang.

“There will be *no other* males!” he roared. “It isn’t wise to incite me like this old man!”

Cedric regarded him with bemusement. “But my boy, I don’t understand. Isolde herself quite realises there can be no future for the two of you...”

Jorah heard a sudden roaring in his ears. *She had said that? No future for them?* It took an effort to bring himself back to listen to Cedric wittering on. He felt an acrid burning in the pit of his stomach to think of her saying such a thing.

“It’s a pity, but maybe you should have picked the family beauty after all,” rambled on his uncle. “Issy is a homely little creature and will be much happier with some second son, maybe a country squire who could give her lots of children and won’t mind her organising his life.”

Jorah actually felt winded, as if someone had punched him in the gut. He couldn’t even speak, imagining this bumpkin squire his uncle thought would suit *his* Issy better than him. He was so incensed he wanted to throw his uncle across the hall. And who the fuck was he describing as homely?

“You see, she is under no illusions about any so-called claims to beauty.” Cedric gave a pitying smile. “Back in her father’s house she managed the running of the household to prove herself useful, worthy of his notice. When she has tried the same tactic here to win your regard... well, she met with nothing but resistance.”

“What the hells are you talking about?” Jorah growled, finding his voice. “I gave her complete free reign over the running of the house.”

“I think not my boy,” his uncle remonstrated. “After all, how many times did you tell her something was pack business and not hers?”



That brought Jorah up short.

“She realised there were large areas of your life that she would never be permitted access to. And quite right too,” he added rallying. “After all, she would always be an outsider.”

Jorah felt his blood run cold. “Never that,” he argued, but his tone lacked conviction even to his own ears.

“But of course, she would be. Even as the mother of your cubs, unmated she would never be part of your pack.”

Jorah swallowed. “You don’t understand...”

“No Jorah,” replied his uncle gently. “It was you who did not understand. If you wanted her purely as human chattel you should never have bitten her.”

“Chattel?” he repeated incredulously. “That is not how I—how I see her.”

“Isn’t it? His uncle shrugged. “What other view is there? Pray enlighten me? Us,” he said sweeping wide his arm to show the rest of his pack staring at him intently. Alfric, Baris, Ran, Geoffrey, even Matilda who had appeared in the doorway with another tray of refreshments.

“She is *mine!*” He wasn’t sure he’d even said it aloud until he saw looks of satisfaction cross Alfric and Ran’s faces.

“I’m afraid not,” his uncle sniffed plunking down his empty glass and gesturing for a refill. “She’s a practical woman and knows when she’s not wanted. She’ll not stay around waiting to be told to leave.”

“*What?*” For a long moment he contemplated grabbing his uncle by his scrawny neck. “Where is she?” he ground out ominously.

His uncle frowned slightly when he realised Matilda was not going to bring him that drink. “Hmmm? Right now?” he asked with a shrug. “Somewhere on the road leading south out of Varkash.”

“She’s what?” thundered Jorah shooting out his seat so fast he overturned it.

His uncle focussed his gaze on Jorah with effort, as if he'd almost forgotten what they were talking about. "Oh, my friends from St. Anthony's collected her over an hour ago," he answered airily. "They've set off on their annual pilgrimage to the Summerlands. They took Isolde with them..."

In the three long strides it took for him to reach the door Jorah transformed and bolted from the room like a bat out of hell. His ears were ringing, his chest burning, his vision blurred. *She was leaving him!* In all the possible scenarios he'd played through his head, he'd never envisaged that. *He'd* felt their bond even without the threefold mating. He'd known she was his, that she belonged at his side. And foolishly, he'd thought she felt it too. That she would have known, no matter what bullshit he was spouting, however much of an asshole he was being, that they *belonged*. But apparently not.

Apparently, his beautiful wife thought she was rejected, found lacking, *not wanted*. The thought sent white-hot pain lancing through his brain. His wolf howled within him, tearing, and shredding at his soul with his vicious claws. *It was his fault!* He'd hurt her; through his own insecurities he'd caused her pain. *She had no illusions about any pretensions to beauty*. His uncle's words had been like a slap to the face. He found her so beautiful it almost hurt. *Perhaps you should have picked the family beauty?* He was reeling. Is that really what she thought? He could barely remember her insipid sister! And had she really felt that he had deliberately shut her out? His paws hit the gravel track leading down to the dower house and he increased his break-neck speed. His stomach clenched and roiled when he picked up the scent of the wagon and several holy men which led to his uncle's house. Cedric hadn't lied. The monks *had* passed this way. Some part of him had held onto the vain hope his uncle might have fabricated the story in order to punish him. But no, his nose told him otherwise. He had to stop himself from howling with rage and loss when he traced Isolde herself joining the wagon. *No! No, no...* He hurtled along the track. *Not my Isolde*, the refrain sounded over and over in his pain-drenched mind. *I can't lose her!*

His worst fears had all come true, despite his precautions, his dogged determination to stay aloof from that measure of bond, that measure of affection. Almost *because* of his fears, they had become true. Instead of showering his bride with his affection, he'd grudgingly given her only aspects of it and never freely. He had given her crumbs from his table instead of setting her at the head of it. He was a cursed fool! Everyone had tried to tell him, his family, his pack, even his tenants... They'd all recognised her for what she was. His mate. And he'd refused to listen. He'd driven her away. When he thought of her hurting because of his stupidity he felt he could lose grip of his sanity. Go hurtling into the abyss of pain that hovered on the edges of his mind. His wolf was clamouring, forcing him off the road and—what? He realised he was plunging straight into Felan woods. He tried to pull himself up, but his wolf was having none of it. *Her scent, her glorious scent, he yipped in triumph.* And then he realised... Isolde was somewhere in these woods. He stopped thinking altogether and just moved.

Issy sighed, glancing down at her basket. She had almost all of the ingredients now, all save one which Cedric had called *Aconitum*. He had included a drawing of the purple flower which she examined again before scanning the wood. This one was going to prove harder to find. She waved at the monks who were stood off in the distance collecting their own herbs and plants. Too far off for her to ask for some advice on where she could find this elusive *Aconitum*, she realised regretfully. Just then a rustling in the undergrowth caught her attention. *What was that?*

It was big, like maybe a dog... or a *wolf*, she thought in delayed reaction when a huge black beast burst out towards her, his pale blue eyes flashing like aquamarines. Her own scream of shock was muffled as she realised almost at once who it was. She could hear the cries of the monks as they took flight, crashing through the trees in their haste to escape the giant wolf. Then right before her eyes he transformed into her big, naked husband.

Jorah stood staring at her, his eyes intense, focussed only on her. She didn't think he'd even noticed the monks. The basket fell from her nerveless fingers as he backed her up against the nearest tree.

"J-Jorah!" she blurted as he came up flush against her.

He lowered his head to lay his face against the spot between her neck and shoulder and inhaled deeply. Almost without thinking her hand flew to pet his head tangling her fingers in his hair. He groaned, opening his mouth to graze his teeth against her sensitive skin. Her eyes widened and she stiffened, anticipating his bite. She felt the soft kiss instead and was shocked to feel almost disappointment. He pulled back to gaze down at her.

"I missed you," he said brokenly. "I love you—*Gods*—you're the only woman for me. Just you and no one else, Isolde Mallon-Garth!"

She stared up at him. He took a deep breath, placing his hands on either side of her face gently, reverently.

“Don’t leave me Issy. Please. I’ve been such a fool, such a bloody fool.”

“I—”

“I couldn’t stand it,” he interrupted her, his voice shaking. “Gods! I love you so much...” He closed his eyes briefly and rested his forehead against hers. “Say you won’t leave me, please.”

Issy tore her gaze from his with effort as she struggled to remember what she needed to say. He looked so tortured; it almost ripped the heart out of her chest!

“Jorah, I need to tell you something and you won’t be happy...”

“You’re not going back to your father’s house,” he ground out. “We can work this out.”

“My father’s house?” she echoed in confusion.

“You’re mine and you belong here with me. You’ve belonged to me ever since that first feast when I laid eyes on you,” he told her grimly. “If I have to, I’ll lock you in my bedchamber for a month until you accept the truth.”

“Jorah!” she gaped at his words. “Would you just *listen*?”

“No,” he said, releasing her and stepping back to place both his hands on her shoulders, staring into her eyes. “We belong together,” he told her heavily. “You are my mate. And I’m yours. My whole life has gone to hell in the last two days. I’m miserable without you, half-crazed. I refuse to lose you.”

She swallowed a sudden lump in her throat. “Really?”

“Really,” he said, his gaze softening for the first time. “I want you to come home with me. Our home. And then I want you to complete our bond and drink my blood.”

She could feel the smile that curved her lips even as her eyes filled with tears. “I want that more than anything,” she told him in a choked voice. “But first I have a confession to

make. I hope it doesn't change your mind about me." Her voice faltered. "But I have to tell you."

He gave her a slightly wild look, as though patience was an effort for him at this point.

"What is it?"

Issy licked her suddenly dry lips. "I—when we first met. I wanted you to pick me, not my sister,"

He nodded. "Aye," he said huskily.

"I knew that I would never get your attention by fair means, so I—I..."

He bent his head slightly to catch her words. "Yes?"

"I wore a potion..." She gazed up at him with guilt-stricken eyes. "I cheated. It was a *lust potion*." She nearly choked over the words, lowering her eyes with shame. He met her words with utter silence. When she finally plucked the nerve to look up at his expression, she found remorse rather than disgust. That confused her. Why was he looking guilt-stricken?

"So... you weren't trying to prevent the consummation of our marriage?" he asked slowly. "The potion was to inflame my senses... not repulse me?"

She stared at him. "I don't think you understand..."

He groaned. "Just when I think I couldn't feel any worse, you show me I'm wrong, Issy. I see I also need to make our wedding night up to you."

"Jorah, I don't follow—"

"You were the one I wanted, not your sister," he answered shortly, reaching out his hand. "Let's get back to the Keep now. I need to be alone with you. Naked."

"N-no, Jorah!" She snatched back her hand eliciting a growl from him.

"My wolf is anxious for me to mate you," he answered gruffly. "Stop resisting us or I'll put you over my shoulder."

“Jorah! Did you hear what I said?” she squeaked in dismay.

He sighed before raking a hand down his face. “Try to understand, Issy. I’m desperate for you. Every fibre of my being is clamouring for me to mate you.”

She hung her head. “I know,” she whispered. “But that’s not down to me. It’s the potion. You never really wanted me. It was just the potion that made you think you did...”

Fingers under her chin jerked her face up to meet his incredulous gaze.

“Are you serious?” he demanded. “My gods... I hated that damn scent. You know I did. I vomited on our wedding night! Whatever the hell it was, it didn’t work on me. I picked you, *in spite* of that revolting perfume, not because of it!”

Her lips trembled. “I don’t think so,” she said sadly.

His eyes narrowed. “Nothing I can say can convince you?”

“No,” she admitted. “But that doesn’t matter,” she said rallying her spirits, “because Uncle Cedric has devised an antidote to it.”

“An antidote?”

“To free you from its influence. And then you can decide rationally if you really... want me or not.”

“That’s...” His nostrils flared. “Bloody ridiculous Isolde! I wanted you from the very first!”

“Because of the lust potion,” she pointed out, bending down to scoop up the fallen basket. “Not on my own merit.”

He shook his head. “You’re not making sense. That perfume mercifully wore off weeks ago.”

“It could still be affecting you,” she insisted stubbornly.

He puffed out a tortured breath. “I can’t believe this.” His voice shook with emotion. “I picked you because you were warm and gorgeous and because you made my wolf howl for you from the first. My beast would not be fooled by some

damn perfume Issy. It wanted you from the outset. It knew you were my mate, my only one.”

He looked so sincere she had to break her gaze from his.

“I need to be sure,” she insisted. “To be sure you won’t regret picking me.”

“I would never regret it, *never* Issy.”

“I just... I don’t want you to make a mistake...” She blinked away the approaching tears. “I don’t want to unfairly trap you.”

“*Gods!* Trap me? I’d willingly climb into a cage so long as you joined me there Issy. Don’t you know that?” He frowned sounding a bit hurt. “You can’t really think I wouldn’t have picked you...”

She snatched up Cedric’s list, avoiding his gaze. “It won’t take me much longer; I have most of the ingredients now.”

He made a sound of impatience. “Issy, I told you, it wore off *weeks* ago.”

“I don’t think so.”

“What?”

She swallowed painfully. “Look at me.” She made a sweeping gesture with her hand. “You desire me, above all other women?”

“Yes,” he growled.

“You think I’m comely. Attractive.”

“I think you’re fucking beautiful.”

“There you go.”

He frowned again. “I don’t understand.”

“I’m not beautiful Jorah. Far from it.”

He opened his mouth to argue but she held up her hand to forestall him.

“Please, I know what the sum of my twenty-three years has taught me. Trying to convince me otherwise is futile.” She



took a breath. “Before you came to my father’s house, I never received a single offer of marriage, Jorah. Not one. My sister on the other hand... Men approached my father all the time for her hand. So, you see, I know what beauty is.”

“Just because the Summerlands men are blind doesn’t mean —”

“Jorah,” she interrupted him. “Bronwen is beautiful. Yes, she is,” she insisted stamping her foot when he made a dismissive gesture. “You’re telling me you honestly think I’m more beautiful than she?”

“Yes, I do!” he argued.

“Then, that proves it,” she said raising her chin. “The potion is deceiving you and your senses. You’re not acting rationally.”

He glared back at her, and she could see his nostrils flaring with frustration, his brain racing to think of ways to convince her his attraction was real. She sighed and hitched the basket further up her arm, turning her back to him.

“I am happy to come back to the Keep with you Jorah but until we’ve determined...”

Issy squealed with alarm as her whole world tilted and two arms like steel bands scooped her up and then deposited her on the grassy bank flat on her back.

“I think, I’ve been very patient about this darling,” he said calmly as he reached under her skirts and dragged down her underwear. He whipped it off her ankles and threw it over his shoulder. “But it appears I have reached the end of my tether.” He slipped off her shoes and they too went sailing into the trees. She gaped at him. “I can appreciate that I have acted like a complete and utter fucking moron, so I can’t entirely blame you for this situation we find ourselves in.” He pulled down one of her stockings and then the other before grabbing her skirts and dragging them up to her hips to expose her naked thighs and belly.

He gave her a lascivious look before inching up her body to kneel on either side of her hips pinning her firmly in place.

“But really sweeting,” he carried on, expelling a breath as he settled his hard cock against her slit. “A lust potion? *Really?*” Issy struggled to sit up to try and reason with him, but he pressed a palm firmly between her breasts and pushed her back down. “I don’t think so,” he said looking down at her thoughtfully, and then he hooked two hands on either side of her neckline and tore them apart with a huge tearing rent.

“Jorah!” she spluttered in panic as her breasts spilled out. “The holy brethren are in these woods!”

He laughed shortly. “My poor little Issy, they scattered as soon as I appeared. You’re left all alone with your big bad husband who has every intention of hard-mating you right now against this bank.”

She felt her breath catch at his words. “Wait! Just wait a minute...”

“Oh, I’ve waited enough, Issy, and I’m not a patient man.” His eyes darkened to that deep turquoise she knew so well.

“I don’t want you to take this decision lightly!” she cried out. “Uncle Cedric told me... about your parents.”

He didn’t even wince. “Did he?” he answered. He reached out and palmed both her breasts, massaging them in round lazy circles. “You know, if you want to talk about unfair advantages,” he said thoughtfully, “these were your unfair advantage, sweetheart. They forced all rational thought from my head. I couldn’t stop thinking about what they’d feel like, naked to my touch. Like this.” His voice thickened. “Truthfully, I barely gave your sister a second glance. You say she was the family beauty?”

She nodded.

“Bullshit. You’re beautiful. The most beautiful woman I know.” He stared down at her, before pulling back slightly and shaking his head. “You know when I think about you dousing yourself in an aphrodisiac before attending that feast, I find myself *fucking furious* Issy.” His voice was still measured despite the words, although a little gravelly.

“Yes, I deceived you...” she agreed miserably. “You have every right to be angry.”

He smiled, a dangerous glint in his eye before continuing almost as if she hadn’t spoken. “An aphrodisiac is traditionally imbibed Issy, didn’t you know that?”

She shook her head, transfixed by his uncanny control.

“Otherwise, how do you know you will hit the right target?”

He watched her struggle to concentrate on his words as he plucked at her pink nipples and rolled them between finger and thumb. She was panting and making slight whimpering noises; she couldn’t help herself.

“If that potion your sister bought had been genuine, you’d have been thrown over the table and mounted by every man there.”

She winced at his words. “Oh...”

“Yes, ‘oh’...” he agreed. “Why would it only have worked on me? It makes no sense.”

She stared up at him in astonishment. “But...”

“If you weren’t so blinded,” he cut her off, “with this *fucking stupid* idea that you’re not attractive, you would be able to see the truth.”

He grabbed one of her wrists and placed her hand on his very hard cock.

“You’re the only one I want,” he pronounced clearly. “I want your body, mind, and soul to be bound to me. Forever.”

She sobbed, pressing her free hand to her mouth, tears spilling from her eyes.

“So, what I want, is for you to stop *leading me around by my dick* and make me your mate.”

She stared up at him indignantly. “I do not...!” she protested hotly.

“Yes, you fucking well do.”

“When have I ever...?”

He snorted. “Stamping your foot and telling me who I can find attractive,” he reminded her.

“Did I stamp my foot...?” she asked, her voice wobbly.

“Yes, you did, and you know you did,” he said huskily as he lowered himself down on top of her. “It’s a good thing I’m in love with you, or I wouldn’t put up with it, you *damn managing* woman.”

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Issy gasped but his mouth was on hers, warm and wet and thorough. She could feel his sharp teeth were down, but she didn’t even care if her tongue got nicked. He was rubbing himself against her now all over, his naked chest against her sensitive nipples, his erection against her cleft which had grown progressively wetter with his every word. He pulled back,

“Now you say it,” he prompted her roughly.

“I love you.”

His mouth was back on hers again, hard and demanding.

“Please,” she begged him, reaching for him, and placing him at her moist entrance.

He groaned as he sank into her willing flesh. “Such a willing little wife,” he moaned. “Gods, I worship this body Issy. Never doubt that.”

She panted and arched beneath him as gave her a few good pounding thrusts.

“When... when do I...?”

He looked down at her, his gaze not entirely focussed. “*Gods*, I want you to bite me, like before.” He shivered.

“Like before?”

“You made me burn woman.” His gaze darkened. “But then you ran from me.”

“I won’t do that again,” she promised on a whine as he slammed back into her on an upstroke.

“Damn right you won’t,” he promised.

“But my teeth—not sharp enough,” she pointed out panting.

He swore and she could tell he wanted her to pierce the flesh even though he could do it himself. Suddenly she thought of the blade she had been using for the herbs. She twisted in an effort to reach for where it had fallen from the basket she had dropped. Her fingers had just closed around it when Jorah’s hands gripped her hips even harder, and he slammed into her ruthlessly to keep her where he wanted her.

“*Jorah!*” she protested with a deep moan. “I was just reaching for this.” She showed him a small silver sickle knife his uncle had given her.

“Do it.” He nodded. “But... bite me first. Like before. You don’t know how many times I’ve thought about your bite Issy. How many times I’ve re-lived it... dreamt of it... over and over again.”

She stared up at him, moistening her lips. Clearly, he hadn’t been lying about liking the feel of her teeth. “Where?” she whispered, feeling pretty damn powerful right now.

“Anywhere.” He closed his eyes to stave off the approaching bliss. “Just... ah!”

She sank her teeth into the flesh surrounding his left nipple and she wasn’t gentle, somehow tapping into his need for her to really bite down and stake her claim on him as Alpha of the pack. He shuddered, biting back an exclamation. Quickly she jabbed the silver blade into the indents her teeth had made, puncturing him exactly where she had bitten. She felt his cock within her expand and then release hard as he threw back his head and gave a full-throated howl, holding nothing back. She dropped the knife and set her mouth against the pierced flesh, suckling his nipple into her mouth, drawing the blood out of him, hollowing her cheeks as she took the steady stream into her mouth, swallowing each time her mouth became full. He shuddered as she felt his cock once again pulse hard and release another stream of cum deep within her.

“*Gods yes,*” he moaned. “Suck me.”

So she did, trying not to worry that she was taking too much and he might become faint. It was hard to be too concerned when the whole time he spurted into her as her hips undulated against his, taking every drop of his cum, every drop of his blood. She felt his hand firmly cup the back of her neck, holding her in place against his chest.

“More, take more,” he urged, but she could feel he was already healing. She swirled her tongue around his erect nub lapping up the tiny drops that sprang out now from the small wounds. He groaned harshly. She felt her chest swell with exhilaration at the thought he was now her mate. He slumped forward over her breathing hard. Issy slipped her hands up and down his back, revelling in his strength and the feel of him. He placed his two hands on either side of her head, tilting her gaze to his.

“*Issy,*” he whispered reverently. “My Issy.”

She smiled happily up at him, happy tears filling her eyes. “Yes,” she answered. “Yes. And you’re mine too. *Mine.*” She felt his whole body shiver at her words and knew it was with pleasure.

“Yes,” he whispered. “*Always.*”

They walked back to the Keep hand in hand. It had taken a while for Jorah to retrieve her shoes and for Issy to try and salvage the indecently gaping neckline of her gown. As it was, she still had to hold it together with her free hand from where he’d wilfully destroyed it. They’d found a cloak one of the monks had dropped in their haste to flee the savage wolf and had managed to tie this around Jorah’s waist to conceal his nakedness. They made a ramshackle pair, but their mutually blissful grins showed they really didn’t care. Every so often they stopped to exchange heated ‘true love’ kisses, as Isolde now dreamily thought of them.

She couldn’t believe how her whole world had turned from bleak and guilt-ridden to dreamily perfect. Jorah wanted her and cherished her, but not only that; he thought she was his perfect woman. She kept darting glances at him to make sure

it was all real and not just an idyllic dream. *But no, he really and truly loved her.* And not only that, but she was also his actual mate now and part of his pack. She felt giddy with happiness. Drunk with it. Even in her dreams she had never dared hope for such a thing.

He squeezed her hand and laughed softly again. “An aphrodisiac,” he teased her.

She punched him lightly in the side. “Well, I didn’t know you were such a lusty wolf,” she protested. “On our wedding night...” She blushed in spite of the fact he’d just had her on her back in the woods.

“What? I was a sullen, moody bastard.”

“I thought the potion had driven you out of your mind,” she confessed, biting her lip. “And driven you to perversions.”

He gave a shout of laughter. “I barely touched you!”

“Yes, you did!” She lowered her voice. “Don’t you remember? With your mouth?”

He growled softly. “I remember it perfectly. And I want to do it again.”

“And to think! It had nothing to do with the lust potion at all,” she marvelled, ignoring his roaming hands. “But why did you think I had doused myself in something to put you off?”

He shrugged. “That potion smelled so vile to me. And... I thought you and that Benwick Price....”

Issy frowned. “I never understood where you got that impression!”

“I was damn jealous. And you’re the family beauty; I don’t care what anyone else says.”

Issy gurgled. “You’re crazed.”

“Only where you’re concerned.” He dragged her up against him for another lingering kiss which he only broke off at the sound of an approaching cart. He swore softly.

“Lord and Lady Mallon-Garth!” bellowed out the greeting from farmer Gideon Roper. “Steady girl!” He reigned in his

old dappled grey horse and did a double-take when he took in their appearance.

“Roper,” hailed Jorah, looking perfectly at ease in his knotted monk’s cloak and nothing else.

“Mr. Roper,” responded Isolde warmly. She smiled as Jorah kept his arm firmly around her waist.

“Can I mebbe give the both of you a lift back to the castle?” Gideon Roper hazarded, scratching his head. “You seem a little—out of the way.”

“That would be much appreciated,” answered Jorah surprising her. He lifted her up into the cart before him and then clambered up himself, then calmly seated her on his lap.

“Happen everything’s alright now up at the Keep?” asked Gideon, plainly agog at the recent turn in events. Issy beamed at him from where she sat on Jorah’s lap, his arms wrapped protectively around her, doing his best to preserve her modesty despite the ripped gown.

“Couldn’t be better.”

Gideon nodded. “If it’s not a liberty to say, I know all of your tenants will be happy about that m’lord.”

Jorah nodded. “Not as happy as me,” he admitted with a slow smile.

Issy once again swivelled her head to look at Jorah in astonishment. It wasn’t like him to be so open in front of non-pack members! It was almost like he was ensuring Gideon knew they were back together again... Issy glanced back at Gideon who was urging his horse on. He clearly couldn’t wait to get back and tell the missus all about it! And suddenly, Issy realised that was Jorah’s intention. He wanted the human tenants to know all was right with them again. She felt a warm feeling spread over her as she shyly stroked his arm. He captured her hand and raised it for a kiss into the centre of her palm, looking every inch the doting husband. Issy could see Gideon Roper’s mouth had split into a wide grin.

“Thank you. I hope we’ll see the boys this week!” Issy called as the farmer set them down at the Keep twenty minutes



later.

“Aye. They’ll be along mid-week as usual,” he responded, tugging his cap off as he bid them farewell.

“Such a nice man,” murmured Issy as Jorah’s arm went round her shoulders, hugging her into his side.

“Mmmm,” he agreed. “You realise he will be drinking for free at *The Lamb & Goat* all week on the strength of his tale. It would be the talk of the village before long.”

Examining his feelings, he realised, with surprise, he was happy about it. He wanted the whole damn world to know! They started up the wide stone steps but had got no further than the third step before an approaching cacophony of thunderous footsteps. He braced himself as Baris, Alfric, Ran, Geoffrey, Dilys, and Matilda came pouring down the steps all talking at once.

“Just wait a—” His words were cut off as Issy was snatched from his side and embraced first by Alfric who sniffed her and then grinned.

“Mated! Thank the gods he’s finally seen sense!” he said and then hesitantly placed a kiss on her cheek. Issy laughed and then was seized by Baris who grabbed her shoulders and lowered his head, so his eyes were level with hers.

“Just so you know,” he said, “Cedric showed me that potion. It was fucking vile. It had wolfsbane in it!”

Issy blinked and shot a look at Jorah. “Wolfsbane?”

He shrugged. “What did I tell you? Why else do you think I passed out and then vomited within the first two days of meeting you?”

“Well, you didn’t tell me that brother!” said Baris in disgust. “Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

“Just apologise dung-brain,” said Geoffrey scathingly. He was stood shoulder-to-shoulder with his mother.

“I was wrong. I’m sorry,” Baris responded looking contrite and wholly unlike his usual self. He paused. “Can we start

again? Alfric tells me I'm to thank you for my current happiness."

Issy looked from him to Alfric. Alfric gave a slightly awkward grin and wrapped an arm about Baris' waist.

"But I never did anything," she said, frowning.

"You told him I was true to my vow," Baris pointed out. "And that we belonged together."

She smiled. "I suppose I did," she agreed.

"My turn!" burst in Ran, snatching her up and spinning her round. "Why did you run off to the monastery? You could have just moved into my room!" He winked at Jorah who just rolled his eyes and folded his arms. He found to his relief that he could tolerate his family showering their affection on his mate now the three-fold joining was complete. His contentment suffered a jar when he saw Issy's ample bosom bouncing under the shredded fabric, but he managed to recover swiftly, consoling himself that she'd soon be under him again and away from prying eyes.

"Ran, put me down, I'm far too heavy! And I didn't run off to the monastery; it was all a misunderstanding!"

The others were pressing forward now. Matilda pushed her way to the front and pinned her own crisp white apron to Issy's chest to hide her bosom. He knew he approved of that female, he thought. Then they embraced laughing. Dilys the cook maid was crying into her skirts with happiness and even shy Geoffrey was embracing her with gusto.

Hearing footsteps on the gravel, Jorah glanced over his shoulders to see the wolf stable hands, Roland and Jed, leaning on their pitchforks and grinning. Some of the younger cubs were with them, staring with eyes like saucers.

"That's more like it m'lord!" one of them shouted. He grinned back. He'd have to give a pack feast to commemorate his mating, he realised. Invite all the tenants and their families... everyone. So, they could all see she was rightfully at his side where she should be. His wife, his mate, the centre of his universe. He looked at Issy's flushed cheeks, her happy

tears. She was surrounded by his pack who had somehow become her family long before he had made it official. He looked down, startled to see his uncle had appeared at his side with his thin smile.

“You found her then, I see.”

“Yes, I found her.”

“I always knew you would.”

Jorah realised they were neither of them talking about recent events, but rather a conversation they’d had many years before. “You sly old fox,” he said without heat. “You scared the life out of me.”

“You needed a good sharp, shock m’boy,” Cedric chuckled. “You should have seen how fast you moved—why you were nothing more than a blur!”

He grunted, not quite able to see the funny side yet. His uncle’s words had hurt, although he realised now, they had been to spur him into action. “You were right. About all of it,” he admitted suddenly. “Don’t go leaving us for St. Anthony’s anytime soon. We need you here. Our cubs will need a grandfather.”

Cedric started, and for a second Jorah could almost have sworn his sharp eyes turned misty. “I think you may have burned my bridges with the monastery, son,” he chuckled. “I suspect they won’t be coming this way again anytime soon.”

Jorah gave a small smile of acknowledgement. “Probably not.”

Someone cleared their throat next to him and he turned to see Baris stood there, arms folded against his chest.

“Now that you’re sane again brother, perhaps we can discuss my mating?”

Jorah frowned, his eyes still on Issy who was now telling Alfric something in an animated voice. “What’s to discuss?”

“Well.” Baris coughed. “I’m aware I probably should have applied for your permission before mating your Beta...”

Jorah swivelled on his heel to give him a dry look. "Please, I am well aware who was calling the shots with your mating."

Baris coloured slightly before laughing. "A fair point," he acknowledged with a shrug. "Alfric's always had me tied up in knots."

"I can hardly pass judgement after I made such a mess of mine," acknowledged Jorah with a tight smile. "Alfric's always been the only person who could keep you in line."

"So, you're not angry?"

Jorah found to his surprise he wasn't. "No."

Baris breathed out in relief. "Good." His brother quirked his lips ruefully. "Alfric's made it quite clear he's been your Beta much longer than my lover."

Jorah winced. That must be hard to take as a possessive male. His empathy surprised him, but that was no doubt due to Isolde. "He's a good man. Don't give him the run around, or you'll have me to answer to."

Baris looked startled. "We're mated," he pointed out. "And I've been entirely faithful to my vow for the last three years."

"I'm glad to hear it. That's how it should be."

Baris gave him a hard look. "You've really fallen, haven't you?" He chuckled. "I never thought I'd see the day!"

Jorah nodded calmly. He hadn't felt this calm and contented in years. *In forever.*

"Everyone likes her," his brother carried on, but Jorah wasn't listening. Issy was looking over at him and he held his arms out to her. She came to him immediately and he folded her into his embrace, holding her close.

"Let's go upstairs," he suggested. "There are too many people and I want to be alone with you."

She giggled. "Well, I feel the same way. Although it would be nice to all eat supper together."

"Breakfast," he amended with a soft growl.

“Breakfast?”

“I’m having you for supper.”

She sighed happily against him. “It’s a good thing I’m such a willing little wife.”

THE END

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Lady Linnet Cadwallader has been raised a helpless invalid in her own castle. Brought up to believe she will ‘never make old bones’ she lives a quiet and lonely existence, hiding away her excessive freckles and red hair from a world that believes her to be hideously misshapen and ugly.

Until one day her uncle arranges a marriage of convenience for her, a marriage in name only with a young puppet groom... but Sir Roland does not show up. In his place turns up his base-born brother Mason Vawdrey. And dark, forceful Mason is no-one’s puppet.

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