



ASH'S DESIRE

ALPHA BARBARIANS BOOK FIVE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LEANN RYANS

Ash's Desire

Alpha Barbarian's Book 5

Leann Ryans

Leann
Ryans
Not a lovey-dovey love story



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Chapter One

Raven

She trailed behind Lyric and Willow, ignoring the alphas staring at them. It was the same every time they came to the market, and it didn't seem like it was going to change, no matter how long she waited.

Hands curling into fists, Raven sucked in a deep breath and tried to keep her irritation from showing on her face. It was impossible for her to do what she needed with so many eyes on her. She'd hoped the novelty of new omegas would wear off, but even after being in the village for a handful of days it seemed like every alpha they passed stopped to stare.

Her head throbbed with how hard she was clenching her teeth, and she had to make a conscious effort to relax her jaw. Rolling her neck under the guise of turning to look at a trinket on one of the tables they passed, she decided she'd have to go with a different plan.

Maybe she could try what Rune had and stay behind at the cabin when the others went to the market. She could feign feeling ill, then slip away while everyone was gone. She doubted Rune would notice or say anything since the other omega tended to keep to herself, and while Raven had hoped to steal what she needed from the market where it was less likely to be missed, she'd just have to take what she could from Raider.

Guilt rose in her chest to add to everything else, but she shoved it away. He was the Chief here. He could replace anything she took, and her sisters couldn't keep waiting.

Raider had told them his men destroyed Siloah and everyone in it, but Raven had been the last omega dragged from there, and she'd seen what they'd left behind. There had been fires and damage and injured people, but what she remembered didn't seem as bad as they tried to make it out to be.

She was pretty sure Lyric knew it wasn't true either, but Lyric had no reason to return to Siloah. Her father was dead, and she was set to mate Raider. She seemed happy to stay in Tayueta.

Raven was sure it was the same for the others. Rune had mentioned her brother was killed in the fight, but she hadn't seemed upset about it. Raven had taken enough crap from her own family to understand the sentiment.

Willow was so meek and soft spoken she wouldn't go against anything she was told, and no one had no idea what was happening with Iris or Autumn, so Raven was the only one left with an interest in going home. While there was no desire to return to the control of her conservative father, she felt she had no choice but to go back to help her sisters.

Faking a smile and shaking her head when the owner of the table said something too fast for her to understand, Raven tucked her hands back into the cloak Raider had provided and caught up with the others.

The market had been a surprise when they'd first been brought to it. The Tayueta were just as willing to barter as they were to sell their goods for the little stamped chips they used as payment, and while there was a permanent shop built on one side of the clearing in the village center, it seemed like most buying and selling was done through the little booths and tables that popped up in the grass every afternoon. There was such a variety of things offered that even after a week of walking around she still didn't think she'd seen it all, and a part of her wanted to stay and explore and see what other differences there were between her people and this new clan.

But the image in her head of fire rising into the night sky as men laid bleeding on the ground haunted her. She knew there were survivors, but was her father one of them? What of her mother and sisters? If she knew things were okay, she wouldn't have felt the pull to return so strongly, but not knowing the state of her home left an itch under her skin that she couldn't ignore.

Plus, Raider's order to find her place and choose an alpha was no better than what she'd faced at home. Her father had arranged for her to mate with the alpha son from the neighboring farm, her meager protests about not wanting to be a farmer falling on deaf ears since she was the eldest and they needed the tie to keep things peaceful between their families. There was only so much land, and with all daughters, mating her to the neighbor was the best her father could do to assure he got to keep working his land as long as possible.

Having a choice in who she'd be mated to was better than she'd expected when she was kidnapped and stripped and thrown into a cage, but she had even less value in Tayueta, and Raven didn't know what they allowed their omegas. The disappointing life she'd resigned herself to was less threatening than one she didn't understand.

“What should we have for dinner?”

The question jerked her attention back to her current issues, three women staring at her as she blinked back at them. Raven couldn't remember the name of the one who was escorting them around the market. She was one of the ones who had been rescued from Siloah who came to teach them the Tayueta language in the mornings.

Raven wondered if the woman found it amusing that they were now in the position she'd been in for a few months, trapped in a new village, with a clan who spoke another language.

Except Raven had heard rumors of what had been done to them while they were in Siloah, and so far no one had been allowed to touch her or the others who had been taken, besides Raider with Lyric.

“The rabbit stew was good.”

Lyric smiled and turned back to the booth they were standing in front of, reaching for the vegetables she would need to make the meal. Raven didn't really care what they ate, but giving Lyric an answer was easier than saying so, and she didn't want anyone to get suspicious of her before she had a

chance to run. She couldn't keep waiting or there may be nothing for her to return to.

She had to hold back a snort. That would be her luck. To somehow get away, actually make it back home, only to find she was too late.

Or that she'd been completely wrong and Siloah really was gone, her farm and family with it.

She tried to dredge up the sadness she knew she should feel, but weariness was all she managed. Once again she had to be the responsible one and take on things she had no desire or idea how to do, and return to the place she'd spent most of her life dreaming of leaving.

Fate could be cruel.

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Chapter Two

Ash

“Ash, I’m glad you’re back. How was the hunt?”

A heavy hand landed on his shoulder as he stepped out of the tavern, Raider’s voice settling his nerves before he’d done more than tense. He didn’t spend enough time around others to be used to casual touch, but he trusted his Bruegar. Even the noise of the market got to be too much sometimes, which was why he tended to stay away unless he needed something. He preferred the company of his Nicaavet and the silence of the forest.

“It went well. The herd to the north is healthy and won’t hurt from a bit of thinning. I’m probably going back out once they’ve had a chance to settle.”

Raider raised a brow as Ash turned to look at him, and he noticed the woman at Raider’s side. She was one of the omegas they’d taken from Siloah, the one who’d been injured and who Raider had decided to claim for himself, though traditionally the omegas chose the alpha in Tayueta.

“You’re not going to stick around and woo one of the new omegas?”

Ash huffed, lips ticking up at the corner as he turned his attention back to Raider. His leader was easy-going, but he was still an alpha, and none of them liked others taking too much interest in their women.

“As if I need that headache. Dealing with one female that goes into heat is more than enough.”

His hand dropped to Zaida’s head, scratching behind her ears as she sat next to him. He loved the Nicaavet, and she was usually perfectly well mannered, but she could be difficult during breeding season.

Raider chuckled, shooting his omega a glance but keeping his lips sealed. Her narrowed eyes made Ash wonder how

much she understood since they were speaking Tayueta and she was still learning the language.

“The others are all stirred up over them so I suppose I should be thankful for one less alpha trying to win the attention of only three females. Some of these idiots...”

Raider trailed off, words turning into a low growl as he shook his head. The Tayueta seemed to be blessed with plenty of alpha warriors, but they were cursed with a lack of omegas. Raids when they were younger took not only the few mature ones they'd had, but even the babes, and it was rare for omegas to be born to beta couples. Their clan had made deals over the years for omegas to mate with, but there were still too few for the number of alphas, which was what had led to Raider's decision to take the omegas from Siloah.

“Things will settle down once they all choose a mate.”

Ash shot a glance at the woman beside Raider again. She hadn't been given a choice, but she seemed to be content with her future mate. Raider was Bruegar, after all. Status helped when love wasn't an option.

“Spring is a long way off,” Raider sighed.

Ash huffed again. Raider was right, and it was half the reason Ash didn't want to stay in the village any longer than necessary. A few days would give him time to rest and clean his things while the reindeer herd settled, then he could start tracking them again. Someone had to provide the tavern with meat, and it seemed like the alphas who usually hunted larger game would be sticking close to the village for a while.

Raider and his omega said their goodbyes and moved on, leaving him able to finish what he needed to do. Dropping off the meat had been his first stop, and he still needed to grab a few things from the market before going home. He didn't want to have to come back into the village if he could avoid it.

He haggled over a new bowstring since he'd snapped one while he was out and didn't have another for backup. After picking up salt and fire steel, all that was left was finding some new socks. No matter what he did, his either ended up with

holes, or completely disappearing, and knitting wasn't something he was capable of.

A knife on one of the display tables distracted him, the handle a beautiful glossy black-stained wood, and while he didn't need it, it was tempting. It came with a leather sheath with fancier tooling than what he'd need for carrying it, but he was capable of making one himself. The only thing that stopped him from purchasing the blade was the fact that when he picked it up, the grip was too short for his hand.

Sighing, he put it down with a nod at his clansman and moved on. He didn't really need another knife anyway.

The market was getting busier as more people finished their tasks for the day and converged in the village center, and he wanted to get home before anyone else stopped him. Once he found the old beta he usually purchased his socks from and bought what she had available, he slipped between the buildings and headed toward his cabin. While the Tayueta tended to spread out more than a lot of the other clans, his home was further than most since he'd wanted to be sure of his privacy when he'd built it.

The house wasn't much to look at. A rectangle built of logs with a window on each side, his stone fireplace divided a third of the space into his sleeping area, while the rest was left for everything else. He'd built his bedframe into the house, so his mattress went from wall to wall behind the fireplace, and the only other furniture in his room was a chest for his clothing, and another with extra bedding.

The main part of his home was pretty bare as well. A single chair in the corner between the fireplace and front window, a small couch facing the flames, and then a single table with two chairs pressed against the far wall beneath the other window. Besides a small sink in the far corner with a pair of cabinets above it, and a bearskin rug on the floor, there was nothing else but dust, but it was all a single alpha needed.

Zaida ran past him into the house, jumping into the chair and curling up in her favorite spot. He'd started out trying to keep her off the furniture when she was a pup, but it was the

one thing she'd been stubborn about and refused to learn, so he'd allowed her to claim the chair as hers. It wasn't like there was anyone else who needed the seat, so he ignored the hair and scratch marks on the leather.

His mind drifted for a moment to what it would be like to have someone to share his cabin with. To come home to a smiling face instead of empty cold and dust. To have a soft body to cuddle for warmth at night instead of lying against the stone of the backside of the fireplace.

Then he shook the dream away.

What female wanted left on her own for days or weeks at a time while he hunted? He didn't mind the walk to the village when he needed something, but he doubted someone would want to make it every day so that they weren't alone. And even if he'd been content to settle with a beta since there weren't enough omegas, he'd never felt any kind of connection to anyone in his village.

No, he was fine on his own. It was peaceful and quiet, the way he preferred, and he had Zaida to keep him from feeling lonely. He didn't need a woman he'd only end up disappointing.

Ash spent the rest of the evening cleaning up from his hunting trip, then making himself a meal.

He had pushed himself to get back as fast as he could with the meat after making his kill, only sleeping for a few hours during the night since he'd taken the reindeer down the previous evening, so he'd already been tired, and by the time he crawled into bed it was well past dark. He slept late into the day, until the sun peeked around the hide covering his window and woke him. Zaida was standing at the end of his bed, staring at him as if she thought perhaps he never planned to wake.

"I'm up, I'm up," he muttered, rolling upright and rubbing a hand through his beard. It had gotten longer than he liked, and while he'd bathed before crawling into bed, he still needed to trim it.

Tugging on his pants as Zaida danced in the opening to his room, he grabbed his knife as he headed for the door, knowing she needed to go out, and figuring he could do his trimming outside so he wouldn't have to clean up the mess.

The bite of the morning air on his bare chest was sharp when he stepped into the afternoon sun, but that wasn't what made him groan as he watched Zaida dash across the clearing around his cabin, letting out her high-pitched, hissing whine.

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Chapter Three

Raven

It had been easier than she'd expected to escape. After Rune moved out to apprentice with the healer, Willow, Lyric, and Raider were the only others left for her to slip away from. The alpha went out each morning to do whatever it was he did, and once their language lesson was done for the day, the others were ready to head into the village. It hadn't been hard to fake a headache and claim she wanted to take a nap while the house was quiet.

Raven had to squash the guilt over taking all the food she could find in the small kitchen. It wasn't much since they usually got what they needed for dinner and the following breakfast each afternoon at the market, but she'd ended up with half a loaf of bread, a couple apples, and a pouch of dried meat. Tying it all inside one of the blankets from the bed along with her change of clothes, she grabbed an extra fur and bundled it all beneath her arm as she slipped out of the house.

The air was crisp, shocking her lungs as she sucked in a breath as she dashed for the trees behind the house. The path to the village ran south, the direction of her clan, but she knew she was going to be followed. Her plan was to go north for a bit before circling around the village, hopefully throwing off anyone who tried to catch her.

Nodding to herself, Raven blew a stray curl from her face and started to run. She wanted her path to be obvious at first, to lead her pursuit in the wrong direction, but she'd have to be more careful when she turned to circle around.

She pushed through the underbrush, breaking branches and leaving footprints where the ground was bare between the trees. Trying to be obvious slowed her pace, but she still felt like she was making good time.

Gazing up through the breaks in the canopy at the mountains that loomed ahead, a shiver rolling through her limbs even as her body warmed from running. Siloah may not

have been as close to the mountains as Tayueta, but she'd still heard the stories of the monsters that lived near those craggy peaks, and running toward them went against everything her instincts were telling her. Many thought the stories weren't real, but she wouldn't risk the chance that they were.

She was huffing for breath before long, the bundle she carried awkward even though it wasn't heavy. Pushing her cloak behind her shoulders, she switched it to her other arm and let herself slow as she climbed a rise, the trees thinning enough for her to see more of the pale sky above.

When she reached the top she stopped to suck in a deep breath and looked back, lungs freezing before a spasm sent the cold air rushing back out of her mouth. The glow of accomplishment that had filled her only moments before was replaced by ice at the sight of smoke drifting above the treetops. It wasn't close enough that she thought she'd be heard if she screamed, but considering she felt as if she'd been running for the entire morning, just knowing she was still close enough to the village to see it was a blow.

Biting her lip to keep it from trembling, she blinked away the threatening tears and turned back the way she'd been heading. Her only choice was to keep going, because if she was caught, she doubted she'd be able to escape as easily again. This could be her only chance, and she wasn't going to waste it.

She set off again, careful as she came down the rise before picking up her pace. She wasn't far enough to start circling around yet, and whoever came looking for her would be an alpha, with longer legs and better stamina. If she let herself slow too soon, they'd have no trouble catching her.

She had to be smart.

Determination kept her going as her lungs burned and muscles protested. It wasn't that she was some frail omega who did nothing more than sit around all day, she was used to working the fields with her family, but that had never involved running for long periods. It was a controlled, steady process, and winter was the slow season. The harvest had already been

brought in and they had turned their attention to canning and preserving what wouldn't be used or traded before it went bad. They'd been stuffing themselves with the bounty, and she'd gotten soft.

When she stumbled and was forced to drop the bundle she carried to catch herself on a trunk, she cursed. While sweat trickled down her spine, her hands were chilled from the air rushing past them as she ran, and the sting of the bark against her palms was a sharp counterpoint to their throbbing.

Her thighs trembled as though they were going to give out, and already she felt parched from panting through her mouth as she ran.

It wasn't until then that she realized she'd forgotten to bring anything for water, and there wasn't a stream in sight. Not knowing the land, she had no idea if there was one close by, or where she would need to go to find drinkable water, and while she remembered passing a lake on their trip to the village, it had been two day's ride to the south.

Raven knew she wouldn't last that long if she didn't find water before then. She may not have been facing the heat of the summer when dehydration was an obvious concern, but her body was still losing moisture, and as an omega, she was more vulnerable.

A whimper escaped before she could swallow it back. The angle of the sunlight told her it was still only late morning, and she already felt like a failure. She had been aware of how ill prepared she was to make a long journey alone, but she couldn't believe she'd forgotten the most important thing.

“What else would you do with your life? You're an omega, Raven. An omega's only purpose is to obey her alpha and provide him with children. You belong in the house, not off wandering about, pretending you can do something else.”

Her father's words from when she'd told him she didn't want to mate the alpha he chose and remain a farmer echoed in her mind, tightening the band around her chest. He would have been shaking his head and looking down at her right if he knew what she'd done, scoffing at even the idea of her being

capable of making it back to Siloah on her own. He wouldn't have been proud of her for trying, he'd have been pointing out everything she'd done wrong and calling her a fool.

Gritting her teeth, Raven pushed away from the tree and snatched her things from the ground. After gulping down another breath, she set her shoulders and forced her legs to move, ignoring the dryness of her mouth. She was close enough to the mountains she was bound to find a stream eventually, and no matter what her father had said, she was capable of more than being a broodmare. Making it back to Siloah would prove it, and then maybe he'd listen to her. Maybe she would still have a chance to choose.

A soft snort escaped as she hopped over a fallen branch. That was as likely as her making it back with no other problems, but if she could believe in one, maybe she could convince herself to believe in the other.

She needed some kind of hope for the future she was running toward.

Judging the sun was finally at its peek, she looked around, trying to decide how to hide her trail. It was time to start circling around if she wasn't going to add even more distance to her trip since she was moving further away from Siloah. She had to hope she'd gone far enough to make whoever followed her think she was heading for the mountains and the clans on the other side, not turning back to head home.

A fallen tree ahead gave her the chance to break her trail if she climbed along it to the boulder holding up the far end. Despite the cold there wasn't any snow to hold tracks, so that was one less worry, and the pine needles around the tree would help mask what little of her scent might remain if an alpha made it that far before it dissipated.

There wasn't anything more she could do.

Chapter Four

Ash

“Ash, we need your help.”

He whistled for Zaida to come back to him, trying to think of a reason for Raider to be at his cabin. While he helped anytime the clan needed warriors, there had been no signs of a coming attack, nor did he think Raider was going to leave the village again during the depths of winter. Especially with new omegas that needed to be guarded, both from others, and from their own.

The muscles along his back tightened at the thought, suspicion growing as Raider trotted across the clearing so he wouldn't have to shout. His Bruegar knew he had no interest in the omegas, and he had a feeling that had something to do with what Raider was coming to ask of him.

“One of the omegas is missing. We checked the village and I have men doing a more thorough search now, but I think she's trying to run.”

Ash sighed, glancing up at the sun. It was already heading for the horizon, the glowing ball sitting at the top of the mountains to the west. The light would begin fading soon, and it wouldn't be long before it was dark beneath the trees surrounding the village.

“How long?”

Omegas were small, and without knowing the land and having the proper skills, she wasn't likely to be able to outpace him, but if she had enough of a lead, he might not find her before true night fell, and while they kept the area close to the village clear, there could still be predators in the forest.

“Lyric and Willow left her at the cabin at midmorning when they went to the market with Mina. She'd claimed her head hurt and she wanted to nap, so they stayed out longer than usual, and it was after noon before they returned and found the house empty. They didn't think anything of it until she still

hadn't returned when I came home. I was dealing with an issue with the alphas and another of the omegas..."

Raider trailed off, running a hand down his face with a low growl.

Sighing again, Ash shook his head and turned toward his door.

"Let me get dressed and grab my things."

Zaida followed him into the house, glancing at the door when he left it open. She headed for her chair until he grabbed his boots, turning mid-step to come circle him, ears pricked forward.

"Yes, Zaida. We're leaving again. We have a job to do."

Her entire body stilled before she let out a huff and blinked at him as if she didn't understand. She helped him hunt, but she knew they should be home for at least another day or two, and they never left the cabin so late if they were going out.

"We're hunting something new this time," he said as he stood and reached for the shirt he'd left hanging in front of the fireplace to dry.

The tip of her tail curled before she flicked it and turned to wait for him by the door. She might not have understood everything he said, but she knew what hunting meant, and as content as she seemed to laze around his house, she loved having a job to do.

The fire had burned itself out while he slept, even the coals having gone cold, so once he slipped his knife into its sheath, put on his coat, and grabbed his pack, he was ready to leave. He always repacked after cleaning his things, so he had water and food and everything he would need, even if it took longer than he expected to find the missing omega.

He closed the door behind him as he walked out, Raider still waiting where Ash had left him. The other alpha's eyes raked over him before his chin dipped in a brief nod and they headed for the path that led back to the village.

“The men should be done searching through the houses by the time we get there, but I doubt they’ve found her. There was a fresh trail behind my cabin heading north, but no sign that anyone abducted her.”

Thinking one of the alphas had taken the female was logical, but taking her from the Bruegar’s house would be suicidal. Raider had given orders not to touch them before they’d even entered Siloah, and while Raider was a decent leader, Ash had no delusions about what he’d do to any alpha who disobeyed and tried to take one of the omegas against her will and his orders. He agreed she’d probably ran on her own but didn’t understand why she’d gone north.

“Anything missing?”

Raider huffed as he stomped along beside Ash.

“A bit of food is all I can tell. Not enough to get to the mountains, much less anywhere else.”

Ash grunted. Either the escape had been based on opportunity, or, more likely, the omega didn’t know anything about traveling long distances and what she would need. A knife was the most essential tool, and he was sure Raider had plenty around his home and had checked to be sure they were still there.

Ignorance could explain heading north as well, though that could also be as simple as her trying to avoid the village. Going east would have made more sense, but maybe she had a reason for not taking the shortest route around the main cluster of homes.

None of it mattered. The little omega had no chance of outrunning him, even with the lead she had. He only hoped she didn’t end up injured since she didn’t seem to be woods-wise. If she was smart she’d stop for the night, and if he was lucky she’d light a fire and lead him right to her.

“She won’t be gone long enough for the food to matter.”

Raider cocked a brow as they made it to the edge of the village center. Three other alphas were heading straight for them, and Ash had to assume they were the ones Raider had

sent looking for the runaway. Since they didn't have a female in hand, it was obvious Raider had been right.

"You'd be surprised what they can do when they're determined."

Ash scoffed at Raider's words, dropping his hand to Zaida's head and giving her a scratch.

"Yeah, but nothing can hide from Zaida. Unless the omega's foolish enough to risk her death taking a swim in the river, Zaida will track her down."

Raider flashed him a grin before turning to the others and taking their report. They'd knocked on every door and the girl wasn't anywhere to be found, so he dismissed them and motioned for Ash to follow him back to his cabin.

Raider's omega was standing in his doorway when the house came into view, another tiny female peeking out around her while Hunter stood guard outside. His leader's female didn't wait for him, dashing past the older alpha to confront them before Raider could show Ash where he'd found the trail.

"Did you find Raven? Is she okay?"

Raider pulled her against his chest, petting her hair back and letting out a muted purr before kissing the top of her head and pushing her an arm's length away again. Ash understood the omega's language, though he wasn't as fluent as Raider, which was probably another reason Raider had chosen him to follow the missing omega.

He filed his quarry's name away, knowing it would be better to use it than call her by her designation when he found her.

"I told you to stay in the house, Lyric. Raven's not in the village, and I don't think anyone took her. Ash is going to follow the trail I found behind the house and bring her back."

Lyric's face scrunched up as if she wanted to argue, but all evidence pointed to one conclusion. She turned her gaze to Ash, looking him over before her shoulders drooped and she nodded.

“I’ll grab something with her scent on it so you can track her easier.”

He was impressed by the offer. The missing omega was her clanswoman, and she likely understood the urge to run, even if Lyric herself was willing to stay. Some would see giving him Raven’s scent as a betrayal, but a female alone in the woods who didn’t know how to take care of herself was in danger, and she could be saving her friend’s life.

“I would appreciate that. It’ll help us get her home safe.”

He had to speak slowly since it had been a long time since he’d used her language, but he was glad he remembered it. Not being able to communicate with the omega when he found her would have made things more difficult, and he didn’t know how well she understood Tayueta yet.

Lyric returned quickly with a small pillow clutched in her hands, passing it to Raider who handed it over to Ash. An article of clothing would have been easier to carry with him, but since the omegas had arrived with nothing, it was likely she hadn’t left any in the house.

Lifting it to his nose, he sucked in a deep breath, the smell of strawberries and peppers filling his lungs. A strange combination.

It was laced with the sweet undertone that marked her as omega, and he couldn’t help the way his cock stirred. She was a ripe, young, unclaimed female, and knowing he was about to hunt her down only stirred his instincts more. He couldn’t help the way his body reacted.

His own scent must have betrayed him.

“Ash, the rules still apply. You may punish her if necessary, but—”

He held up his hand, cutting Raider off. He didn’t need to hear the rest because he had no intention of doing anything with the omega other than returning her to where she belonged.

“I understand. With luck we’ll return by morning.”

Raider huffed as if he didn't believe Ash would find her that fast, but he turned and started walking toward the back of his house. Lyric had returned to the cabin, and Hunter gave him a nod when their eyes met before Ash followed after his chief.

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Chapter Five

Raven

The fourth time she fell she couldn't force herself to get back up. Her hands stung from the sticks and rocks they'd scraped against on the forest floor and the top of her foot throbbed where it had connected with a fallen branch she hadn't seen. Her knees echoed their protest at meeting the ground roughly so many times, and she was too tired to keep fighting the urge to stay where she laid. The darkness beneath the trees was total, the moon either not high enough, or the canopy of needles too thick for the moonlight to break through to show her a safe path.

She had turned east at noon, climbing along the fallen tree to the boulder, then staying atop rocks or fallen needles that wouldn't leave tracks until the sun moved down the sky far enough for her to feel confident that no one could pick up her trail. She'd run as long as she could, but eventually the need to conserve moisture and energy forced her to slow. There had been a small stream where she had stopped to eat and drink her fill in the afternoon, but with nothing to carry water in, it was a distant memory after forcing herself to move on.

She'd continued even after the sun sank behind the mountains, leaving the forest in twilight. Even when the light faded past dusk to dark, she had pushed on despite having to slow further. There was no way for her to gauge how far she was from the village, and it would be her luck to have circled around only to end up right beside it again. She hadn't wanted to stop until she was sure she was beyond the reach of any pursuit, and she'd kept walking in the hope that she would find the fields surrounding the lake, but she couldn't go any further.

Feeling through the dirt and debris of the forest floor, Raven shuffled forward on her knees until she found the base of another tree. It wasn't as large as she'd have liked, but it was wide enough for her to lean against. After moving a few sticks and prying loose a stone embedded near the roots, she turned

and settled against it, dragging her bundle into her lap and picking at the knots with stiff fingers.

The temperature had dropped with the loss of the sun, and the already chilly day had become a frigid night. Her nose and cheeks were numb, her fingers and toes burning when she forced them to move.

The bread and apple had been her late lunch, so all that was left of her food was the dried meat. Trying to ration herself but knowing she'd never sleep with the way her stomach grumbled, Raven stuffed a single piece into her mouth before putting the rest in her lap. Pulling her knees to her chest, she tucked the blanket around her legs and feet before laying the fur overtop it. A bit of wiggling allowed her to close her cloak over it all, creating a little pocket that slowly warmed. The hood over her curls protected her ears, and all she had to do was rest her forehead on her knees, and she finally got some feeling back in her face.

There was no way to know how long she sat there. Every little sound made her jump, jerking her head up to stare blindly around at the darkness, heart pounding behind her ribs as she gasped in the freezing air. She tried to stay alert, but her body was so exhausted she kept drifting off only to be startled awake again. By the time she realized she could make out the shape of the tree across from her it felt like days had passed instead of only a single night.

Grunting as she unfolded her stiff limbs, she popped another piece of the dried meat into her mouth. There was no reason to keep wasting time if she wasn't sleeping and she could see enough to walk again, and her body was demanding she find more water. The leathery hunk of meat resisting her attempts at chewing wasn't helping, but her belly demanded *something* if she wanted to keep going.

Raven's little bubble of warmth dissipated as she stood, a shiver shaking her frame once she was upright. She was tempted to put her extra clothing on overtop what she wore, but she was filthy from falling so many times and the extra leggings weren't loose enough to be able to pull overtop the pants she already wore anyway.

Bundling them back inside the blanket, she tied the whole thing around her waist before pulling the fur around her shoulders beneath her cloak. It was bulky and made it harder to move, but warmth was more of a concern than speed when her breath was visible and there were tiny dots of ice decorating the ground.

Throat scratching as she swallowed, she looked up and tried to judge which direction the light was coming from. It was still so weak there was barely more than a pale glow between the trees, so she sucked in a deep breath and turned to the left, hoping she faced south. If nothing else, she could correct her route once the sun rose higher, and perhaps she'd find water, or finally find an opening to the sky so she could see where she was going.

Raven walked and walked, the pale light between the trunks never growing brighter. Her stomach grumbled and she chewed on more of the meat. The itch in her throat became a dull throb in her skull, thirst taking over her thoughts as she forced one foot in front of the other, even her eyes feeling dry and gritty with each blink.

When the trees thinned and the first fat snowflakes came drifting down between the branches, all she could do was stare.

“Really? Cause things weren’t hard enough already, let’s make Raven’s life more difficult and snow on her too. She wants water? Let it fall from the sky! Frozen.”

She glared up at the tiny spot of dirty grey she could see between the branches above. Fists clenched in her cloak, she ground her teeth before returning her attention to her surroundings. If she couldn’t see the sun, she had no way of telling which direction she was walking, and she didn’t want to admit the sight of the clouds sent a bolt of fear through her chest. She had no shelter, and after spending the night huddle against a tree, she knew if it snowed, the little she had wouldn’t be enough to keep her warm.

“Wouldn’t that be perfect? Prove your father right and die in the forest alone, cause you’re nothing but a stupid omega who

thought she could do something on her own.”

She started stomping forward again, determined to keep moving. The worst outcome would be that she had somehow gotten turned around and was heading back toward Tayueta, otherwise, any progress would help. And even if she was heading in the wrong direction, it was better than staying where she was.

Her irritation helped warm her, but her quick steps made her start panting again, which only made her mouth and tongue drier. It was bad enough she would have been tempted to lean her head back and try to catch the snow if there had been a large enough opening in the branches above to let enough through to make it worth the time it would take.

She started to growl but the vibration felt like it was ripping the parched tissue of her throat and she cut it off with a whimper. It wasn't that she'd thought it would be easy to get back to Siloah, but it seemed things were turning out more difficult than necessary, and unfortunately, she only had herself to blame.

Stumbling on, legs and feet adding their complaints to the list of abuse her body was keeping, the sudden appearance of something large and dark ahead made her jump back with a scream. Tears pricked the corners of her eyes from the pain the sound caused. She couldn't even feel the impact of her rump with the ground since the blanket and bundled clothing helped pad her landing, but her throat felt as if she'd swallowed a coal.

Staring at the beast, it took a moment for Raven's brain to process what she was looking at. She'd never seen one before crossing into Tayueta territory, but she'd seen enough of them around the village to recognize the strange-looking Nicaavet bred to guard and hunt with the warriors.

Her head whipped around, eyes wide as she searched for sight of another person. She had no idea if any of the creatures roamed wild in the forest, but either way, its appearance was bad news for her.

Pushing to her feet with slow, careful movements so she didn't startle the animal into attacking, her heart fluttered in her chest as she tried to decide what to do. If it was wild and considering her for a meal, she'd be better off trying to climb a tree, but if it belonged to one of the Tayueta, she needed to run.

Muscles twitching with indecision, a sharp whistle from behind made it for her and sent her bolting through the trees.

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Chapter Six

Ash

It was midmorning and Ash had yet to catch up to the little omega, though he knew they were on her trail. Zaida had her scent, and even when he'd lost it for a period, she had never wavered.

A part of him was irritated he was still out tromping through the forest after her. He had better things to do than chase down a misbehaving omega, but he was apparently the only one with the skill that could be trusted to do it since he wasn't interested in mating any of them.

A larger part of him was impressed. Raven had made it farther than he'd expected her to, and the trick she'd pulled using the downed tree to break her trail and double back had been smart. If she believed her village had truly been destroyed and she wanted to escape Tayueta, heading north over the mountains to the clans on the other side might have been a logical course, and many alphas would have assumed that was what she was doing, but it was clear once her course turned she had only been trying to lead her pursuit astray.

Having slept late the previous day, he'd continued to walk through the night, making a small torch to carry through the darkest hours. He'd only stopped to make a quick meal of a rabbit Zaida caught for him before pushing on, wanting to close the distance between him and his quarry while she slept. The area they were passing through was safe enough from predators, but anything could happen, and he didn't like the thought of her being alone if she was somehow injured.

They'd found where Raven had spent the night not long after the sun rose, so Ash knew they were getting close. Zaida ranged ahead of him, circling back to check in periodically as she'd been trained. When he didn't spot her past her usual time, he gave a sharp whistle.

Her high-pitched answering yip told him why she hadn't returned, and he broke into a trot. The trees were too dense for

him to see far, but her call had been clear.

She'd found the omega.

The sound of crashing and panicked steps echoed back to him, and he increased his pace as he picked up more of Raven's scent in the air. The blend of strawberries with a slightly peppery undertone was strange, but it wasn't unpleasant. It left him wondering if she'd have the same burn her scent suggested. She clearly wasn't a meek omega like the other still at Raider's home, or she wouldn't have run.

Ash caught sight of the cloak billowing behind her first, snorting as she tried to yank it from the clutching branches of a bush it had snagged on. Cloaks were nice for riding or walking around the village since they could cover more, but they were a poor choice for running through the woods.

Zaida darted in from the side, going for Raven's ankle the way she would have herded a deer, and he let out two, quick whistles, calling her off. He knew how sharp the Nicaavet's teeth were, and Raven's skin wasn't as thick as a deer's hide. One wrong move and the omega would be crippled for life.

"Raven, stop."

The undergrowth was getting thicker as the trees thinned, and a layer of snow coated the ground ahead of them, hiding potential hazards. Even without Zaida's help the woman could end up hurt if she didn't stop running so fast she couldn't watch where she was going.

The omega's hood fell back, revealing a mass of blonde curls, but she refused to listen. If anything, she ran faster, cutting so close to the trees he worried one wrong step would send her head-first into one of them.

Zaida kept pace at her side, no longer harassing their prey, but enjoying the chase. Ash knew he could catch the omega, but at the speed she was going he didn't like the risk that he might hurt her. Raider had said to return her in the condition she'd left, and while he'd been referring to *other* things, Ash didn't want to be responsible for injuring the omega.

Giving a trilling, six-note whistle, he ordered Zaida to herd Raven to the right toward where he could see the trees clearing away. He didn't remember the area well enough to know how big the space was, but hopefully he would have the room he needed since the omega showed no signs of giving in. He was a few strides behind her, close enough to smell the sweat and fear rolling off her and hear her heaving breaths, but she was apparently too stubborn to admit she was caught.

Zaida moved in and snapped, sending Raven jumping to the right. She stumbled but righted herself after a step and kept running. Ash stayed on her heels but decided to try to convince her again before doing things the hard way.

“You're caught. Give up before you get hurt.”

He thought he heard a growl, but she didn't have the breath to maintain it. Chuckling under his breath at her audacity, he moved to the side before Zaida made another lunge, directing Raven right where he wanted her.

Raven must have seen the opening between the trees ahead, but she didn't seem to understand he *wanted* her to go there, since she pushed herself harder to reach it. Maybe she thought she could outrun him in the open, but whatever was going through her head, it helped him in the end.

She passed the last tree only three strides ahead of him. Ash's sole focus had been catching the little omega while doing the least amount of harm, so he wasn't prepared for her to slow suddenly, and only Zaida's warning hiss had him jerking his gaze ahead.

The noise of the river would usually have warned him he was getting close, but the season meant the water was low and the edges frozen, muting its roar. The sheet of black ice rushed closer with each step, and even though Raven had started slowing first, neither of them were going to stop in time if he didn't do something drastic.

Clenching his teeth, a growl burst from his throat as he launched himself at the whimpering female, snagging her around the waist before throwing his weight to the side. He rolled midair, wrapping himself around her smaller body to

take the brunt of the fall, but they both let out grunts as he hit the ground. Her head slammed forward, cracking into his nose with a crunch and a hot rush that told him it was broken, but he only had a moment to worry about that as their momentum rolled them closer to the water's edge.

A half-buried stone smashed into his ribs as he flared his elbows to stop their roll, and he dug his heels into the snow and dirt as curses flowed from his lips. The river may not have been the dangerous flow it was during spring melt, but being soaked through in the middle of the forest with no shelter could be just as deadly in winter, especially for the smaller woman in his arms.

They were still sliding almost sidewise down the slight slope toward the ice until a sharp jerk at his side finally stopped them. He peeled his eyes away from the river to see Zaida's teeth clenching the side of his coat, her claws dug into the ground, back arched and entire body braced against the weight of them. If she'd been any smaller she wouldn't have had a chance of stopping them, but her grip finally stopped their slide.

Muscles going limp as he huffed out a breath of relief, his head thumped against the ground as he tried to collect himself. Raven rested on his chest, head tucked beneath his chin, her body quivering, panted breaths making the arm still wrapped around her back rise and fall. A constant low whine reached his ears, and with the danger past, his body responded the way any alpha's would with an omega pressed against him.

Chapter Seven

Raven

With her eyes squeezed shut and her head still spinning, it took longer than it should have to realize they'd stopped moving and she wasn't floating in an icy river. Her entire body tingled from head to toe, but she couldn't decide if that was from trying to escape the alpha, or from the fact that she was held to his chest, the sweet, roasted scent of candied nuts flooding her lungs and making her mouth water for a taste.

It was a struggle to get her breathing under control and take in enough oxygen to feel like she wasn't suffocating, even if the scent of him was threatening to drown her in her own drool.

And once she realized the whine filling her ears came from her, it was even harder to swallow the sound until the chest beneath her began to vibrate.

The alpha's purr turned her tense muscles to jelly, stealing her senses as it surrounded her and chased away the fear that had flooded her system. Floating in a haze of exhaustion, Raven wiggled atop her impromptu bed, something hard wedged beneath her thigh stirring a part of her brain that urged her to focus.

The purr ended abruptly, her bed of alpha muscle moving and depositing her on the ground to blink up at him in confusion as he towered over her.

"The next time you're told to stop, perhaps you should listen and obey."

It took her mind a moment to process the words even though he was speaking her language, not Tayueta. Letting out a huff, she struggled to stand, plopping back onto her bottom and leaning precariously until a large hand wrapped over her shoulder to right her.

"That's all you alphas ever expect an omega to do. *Listen and obey*. You act like we can't think for ourselves and make our own decisions."

Raven swatted his hand away, forcing her shaking legs to support her as she pushed herself upright. She swayed a bit but managed not to stumble, and she placed her hands on her hips to glare at the alpha.

His scent still teased her nose, making her stomach rumble, and her lower belly clenched once she realized what she'd been rubbing against when she was on top of him. Heat filled her cheeks, bringing feeling back to them, but she pushed away her embarrassment.

"I'll have you know I have a mind of my own and I'm perfectly capable of doing things for myself."

One blond brow arched, the dim light beneath the clouds catching in his brown eyes and turning them almost amber. His long hair had come loose from its tie and had bits of leaves and snow stuck in it. His nose was slightly crooked, blood smeared on his lips and soaked into his beard telling her it happened during their tumble, and if the throbbing of her forehead was anything to go by, it was her fault.

Yet he still managed to look as delicious as he smelled.

She wanted to be mad at him. She wanted to take off running again, to say she wasn't giving up, but she knew it was pointless. She was exhausted, her body too worn out, and every instinct was pushing her to get closer to the alpha and let him take care of her, not try to get away. It had been foolish to run, dangerous, and she wasn't blind to the fact that he'd just saved her from a life-threatening mistake.

"So, you *decided* to run into the river? You're *capable* of dragging yourself out of it after you're chilled to the bone, then finding enough wood and starting a fire to keep yourself from freezing to death when everything you have is wet?"

He crossed his arms over his broad chest, staring at her with a bland expression as he waited for an answer. He knew that hadn't been what she'd meant, and she clenched her teeth around a growl.

"I wasn't aware of the river, or I wouldn't have run towards it. Clearly."

“You shouldn’t have been running at all. It’s dangerous. Especially when you don’t know the area.”

While her words were laced with barely restrained anger, his were calm. She couldn’t even claim he was treating her like a child and talking down to her since they were said as a simple statement of fact.

Sucking in a deep breath to calm herself, Raven pulled her gaze away from his, scanning the area around them. She had seen the trees thinning and the grey sky ahead of her, thinking she’d finally found the fields she’d been hoping to reach, and had only noticed the dip in the ground and the expanse of water once she’d broken into the open. The river was sluggish, but it was wide, and looked to be deep in the middle, and the signs on the banks showed it would turn into a raging beast in the spring.

Biting the inside of her cheek, she swallowed hard. The sight of water so close brought her thirst rushing back, her mad dash to escape the alpha only having made it worse. The hunger could be ignored, but she couldn’t go without a drink any longer.

Her fur laid on the ground not far from where she stood, and she reached down to pick it up, shaking off the snow and debris from their roll. Her blanket had somehow remained tied around her waist, and luckily, she hadn’t been carrying anything that could break.

The alpha remained silent as he watched over her until she edged closer to the river.

“What are you doing?”

His face had tensed with suspicion, his arms dropping as he took a step closer to her like he expected her to launch herself into the water. As much as she wanted to get back to Siloah to see if her sisters needed help, she had no desire to die trying to do it, and he was right about her freezing to death if she ended up soaked without a fire.

“I’m thirsty, not trying to die.”

She toed the edge of the ice along the bank, but fingers curled around her upper arm, plucking her away. Mouth opening to yell at the alpha, her voice caught in her throat as he pushed a waterskin into her hand.

“Drink this. I’ll fill it if you need more.”

Raven studied his eyes and the worried crease between his brows. Once again his looks and scent distracted her, as if a blanket had been thrown over her other thoughts and all that mattered was the male in front of her.

He pulled her further from the river before letting her go as she shook herself out of the funk. Bringing the waterskin to her lips, she almost moaned at the first touch of cold liquid on her tongue. It was painful to swallow until the temperature of it numbed her throat, but she drank every drop, finishing it and handing the empty bladder back to the alpha.

With the adrenaline fading from her system and the immediate need for water sated, she began to droop as she watched him kneel on the bank and use the hilt of a knife to break a hole in the ice to refill the waterskin. A knife was something else she’d forgotten, and her stomach twisted around the fluid she’d filled it with, threatening to bring it back up.

She’d failed.

She’d forgotten necessary supplies, and she’d been caught.

The alpha was going to drag her back to Tayueta, where she’d probably face punishment for running, and since she’d already tried, they’d be watching her closer to be sure she didn’t run again.

Tears welled but she choked them back, refusing to give the alpha the satisfaction of seeing her cry. She wouldn’t be that weak. She’d behave and let him take her back, and accept whatever punishment Raider gave her, then she’d wait until they believed she’d given up.

And next time, she’d be better prepared when she ran.

Chapter Eight

Ash

Raven was oddly subdued as they moved away from the river. Ash had expected her to continue fighting him, or try to run again, and her apparent meekness only put him on higher alert. He didn't believe for a moment that she wasn't planning something behind those moss-green eyes.

His ribs ached from where he'd bashed them against the stone during their tumble, and there were dark circles beneath the omega's eyes. He doubted he looked any better, and as much as he wanted to return quickly, with snow falling and the temperature with it, he didn't want to risk pushing her too hard.

It took a while to find a place he thought suitable to stop. The gentle snowfall had picked up, winds whipping through the treetops and threatening a true winter storm. He'd have preferred a cave to hunker down in, but they were too far from the cliffs and mountains, so he had to make do with what nature offered. An ancient tree had cracked at some point and toppled over, bringing others down with it and creating a little corner he could build against.

“Look for firewood. As much as you can find within sight of me, and go stack it against that stump.”

The stump was wider than he and another alpha could circle with their arms, and just barely taller. The rest of the tree laid on its side, the broken end close enough to the stump that debris had built up and filled in the gap. Broken branches littered the ground but there was no sign of leaves, so he assumed the tree had fallen prior to the previous spring.

Raven stared at him for a moment before looking around and reaching for the nearest chunk of wood she could lift. Once he was sure she was following directions, Ash set to work on the smaller trees the behemoth had knocked down in its path to the ground.

Zaida circled their makeshift camp, nose to the ground. She knew her job anytime he stopped, and she'd make sure the area was clear of any critters large enough to bother them. He'd seen her eat everything from slugs to spiders and even a few snakes. Anything smaller than a squirrel was free game for her, and anything larger she'd bring back to share.

Ash kept one eye on Raven as he trimmed branches from broken saplings and dragged the logs over to create a roof and then a bit of a wall. He had enough practice that it wasn't long before a rough shelter took shape. If it had just been him and Zaida he'd have made it half the size and been done much sooner, but he had a feeling the little omega wouldn't want to be squeezed into a small space with him.

He didn't miss the way she wavered on her feet before plopping to the ground when she tried to lift a branch that was too large for her. She'd already made a tidy pile of the smaller pieces, though if the storm got worse, it might not be enough to last through it.

Stomping the base of a log into the ground so it wouldn't roll, he huffed when she refused to give up.

“Leave that and build a fire in front of the opening.”

She blinked at him from where she was bent over, her face slack. He didn't like the way she shivered despite the work she'd been doing. She had a fur and blanket wrapped around her beneath the cloak she wore, but her skin was pale under the rosy chap from exposure to the cold, and she kept sniffing.

Ash focused on her as she straightened and moved closer. He'd assumed her shuffling gait was from tired muscles, and her cracked lips could have been explained by two days in the cold air, especially if she'd been panting as she ran, but her glassy stare sent a tingle of warning down his spine that had him stepping into her path and pulling off his glove.

Reaching for her forehead, he hissed when the back of his fingers met burning flesh. Raven froze at his touch, two heartbeats passing before she jerked back with a frown.

“What are you—”

He cut her off.

“You have a fever.”

Her frown deepened and she sucked in a deep breath before straightening from the slouch she'd fallen into.

“So.”

He growled under his breath, turning to where he'd dropped his pack. Her scent didn't carry any trace of sickness, so he wasn't too worried, but omegas were susceptible to dehydration, and he had a feeling she'd already been on the verge before he found her. The bit of water she'd sucked down next to the river wasn't enough to make up for a day of neglect if she'd been traveling the entire day before without fluids, and the fever would only make it worse.

Grabbing the waterskin, he took a quick mouthful before stomping back to the stubborn female still frowning at him. He thrust the bladder toward her, pointing into the shelter with his other hand.

“Sit and drink.”

Her brows dipped lower, nostrils flaring as she blew out a breath before snatching the water from his hand.

“You don't have to keep ordering me around. I can still help.”

The way she put the tip between her lips and started sucking as soon as she finished speaking told him how desperate she was for the liquid, she was just too damn stubborn to ask for it. And watching her wasn't helping him keep control of the rogue erection that kept distracting him every time he caught the scent of strawberries and spice.

“I'll keep ordering you around if you keep refusing to take care of yourself. And I don't need help, I need you to not fall on your face from dehydration and exhaustion.”

The look she gave him said she still wanted to argue. He was waiting for it when she abruptly dropped her gaze to the ground and turned to duck into their shelter. She might have

done what he'd ordered, but he didn't believe for a moment that she'd actually listened to him.

Sighing, he went back to putting the finishing touches on their shelter. The ground was too hard and dry for him to pack mud over the logs and branches to block the wind better, but there were enough fallen leaves and needles from the surrounding trees to give them *some* insulation, and if the snow kept falling it would help block the wind as well.

Zaida came loping up to him with a pheasant dangling from her jaws when he knelt at the opening of the shelter to build the fire. Praising the Nicaavet as he accepted the bird, he watched Raven lean forward from the corner of his eye, her gaze locked on Zaida.

“Come here, omega.”

Raven stiffened, her lip lifting in a silent snarl that disappeared when he turned his head to face her. She shuffled forward on her knees but stopped beyond his reach, hands clenched around the waterskin in her lap.

“You used my name earlier, so you clearly know it. I'd prefer you use that when addressing me.”

He raised a brow as he continued to stare at her. It wasn't unusual for an omega to be unhappy with their position in life, though most came to accept it, especially once they were bonded and realized how cherished they were. Raven had yet to see her value.

“As you wish. I'd like to introduce you to my Nicaavet.”

He didn't think there would be an issue, but Zaida had never been asked to track a person before, only prey, and he wanted it firmly in her mind that Raven was not prey. They would be sharing a small space together, and the concern wasn't one he wanted to entertain.

Raven's brows rose, her face lighting up with a smile. He had to tamp down the tingle of jealousy that churned through his stomach as he scooted back and waved Raven closer. Reaching out, he wrapped his fingers around her wrist and cupped her hand in his palm, holding it out to Zaida.

“Scent,” he ordered in Tayueta.

Zaida paced forward, dropping her muzzle into Raven’s palm and snuffling before moving up to the pulse point on her wrist. Raven’s giggle had his own lips ticking up, and he shot a glance at her face, but her focus was on the Nicaavet.

“Zaida, Raven. Raven, this is Zaida.”

He released Raven’s hand, but she kept it where it was, letting Zaida sniff her fill. He knew the Nicaavet was reaffirming the scent and name in her mind with the one she’d gotten from the pillow, and any chance Raven ever had of getting away was gone as long as Zaida was around. She’d never forget Raven’s unique blend.

Curling her fingers, the omega scratched her hunter’s chin, unaware she’d sealed her own fate.

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Chapter Nine

Raven

Wriggling her toes further beneath Zaida's body, Raven sighed. Between the heat of the fire and the warmth of the Nicaavet laid out in front of her, she was finally getting feeling back. The stump behind her wasn't the most comfortable backrest, but not aching from cold made it worlds better than the way she'd spent the night, and her eyelids were growing heavier. The only things keeping her from falling asleep were the scent of the cooking bird and the small noises of the alpha moving around the outside of the shelter.

She cracked an eyelid open again only for her breath to catch in her throat. The alpha had knelt next to the fire, and he'd removed his coat and leather shirt. A broad expanse of skin was on display, stretched tight over muscles, and lightly dusted with dark blond hair.

Licking her lips, she sucked in a deep breath, all drowsiness banished at the sight in front of her. Her heart tripped over itself in its rush to hurry blood flow to places Raven had never been touched, and for a moment she wasn't sure if she was worried or excited about the prospect of the alpha crawling into the shelter with her in his half-dressed state. It was too cold to be comfortable like that, even with the fire, and she couldn't come up with an innocent reason for him to have removed his clothing until he twisted to the side and she spotted the dark purple splotch on his ribs he was trying to examine.

"Are you okay?"

Her voice came out huskier than normal, but she blamed it on her throat being dry. She lifted the waterskin to her lips as evidence when his attention turned to her.

"It'll heal."

He pressed on the bruised flesh, working over it before rolling his shoulder and twisting side to side.

"No ribs broken this time."

She wondered how often he'd been injured to have to add *this time* to the end of his statement.

The pink slashes of scars caught her gaze, one set leading down his stomach and disappearing into the top of his pants. She flushed when she realized she was staring at his crotch, the smirk on his lips when she jerked her eyes up showing he knew perfectly well where her attention had been aimed. He had nothing to be embarrassed about, he was an alpha, and the evidence of his interest in her was natural and obvious, but Raven couldn't excuse being so blatant in her regard, even if the alpha was a gorgeous specimen regardless of the bruising across his face and ribs.

She adjusted the fur on her lap to hide the way she squeezed her thighs together to quell the throb between them. While her parents were traditional and had kept a close eye on her to be sure she remained pure for her future alpha, she wasn't ignorant to what happened between a man and woman. Or between a man and man, or even woman and woman sometimes. She knew the differences between the dynamics and what to expect when she went into heat, even if the knowledge had been delivered in the most dry and succinct fashion. She'd seen plenty of men topless while they worked in the summer, and it was normal for her body to respond to the male in front of her since she was nearing her first cycle.

Nodding to herself, Raven tried to ignore the way her top chafed against her sensitive nipples with her movements, and the trickle of fluid seeping from her core.

She watched as the alpha dipped his fingers into a small jar, pulling them out coated with a thick, shiny substance he started rubbing into the discolored area on his ribs. He had to reach to rub it into the whole area, and she bit her lip to keep from offering to do it for him, reminding herself he was bossy and infuriating and no, she *didn't* want to touch him to see if those muscles were as firm as they looked.

It was a struggle, but she buried her finger's in Zaida's fur instead, satisfying herself with petting the Nicaavet. Her fur was an odd blend of plush and wiry, the outer coat long and stiff, but a second layer of velvety softness beneath. Raven

tried to part it to see if her skin was striped like her fur, but it was too dense for her to see more than a tiny sliver of darkness beneath.

Zaida didn't seem used to the attention, her skin twitching each time Raven started petting her while they sat in the shelter. The first few times the Nicaavet raised her head and looked at Raven as if the animal didn't know what she was doing, but eventually she'd submitted to the stroking with a huff. She didn't leave, so Raven took that as a sign that she wasn't bothering her too much.

The alpha was pulling his shirt back on when she looked his way again, and she swallowed the surge of disappointment. He'd straightened his nose with a sickening crunch that had made Raven's stomach lurch before they'd left sight the river, and had washed away most of the blood in his beard, but dark crescents had formed beneath both eyes, and his nose was clearly swollen. Even so, there was something about him that made her want to stare, and she wasn't sure it was his designation.

“What am I supposed to call you?”

The question blurted from her lips before she could stop it. He'd spoken her language each time he'd addressed Raven, though he spoke to Zaida in his language the few times he'd talked to his pet. While his accent had been a bit stiff, he was easy to understand, which was more than Raven could claim about speaking his language. She was curious how he knew it, but he hadn't bothered to introduce himself, and she refused to call him Alpha.

“My chosen name is Ash.”

Her brow scrunched a bit, but she shrugged away the odd wording. It could be a translation difference, or maybe his given name was too hard to say. At least she knew what to call to get his attention.

“How long are we going to stay here? Is anyone else looking for me?”

She had assumed they'd sent out a party of alphas to find her and Ash just happened to be the lucky one, but she didn't want another alpha stumbling into their little camp. Their shelter would get crowded enough when Ash decided to join her inside, and there was no way anyone else would fit.

A traitorous little thrill coursed through her body at the thought of being squished against As again, but she ignored it, too.

It was only biology.

"Zaida and I were the only ones following your trail. We'll wait until you've rested and see how bad the storm gets, then decide if it's safe to return."

Crossing her arms over her chest, she frowned.

Did she mean so little that they only sent one to catch her, or was he that good that they knew they only needed him?

"Are you a tracker then? How did you find me?"

He turned his full attention to her once he had his coat buttoned, a smirk tipping up the corner of his lips. Firelight danced in his eyes, and for a moment she thought she saw things there that sent shivers down her spine. The weight of his regard felt like a physical thing, and he took so long to respond she began to think he wasn't going to.

"I am a hunter. Zaida is the tracker. She never forgets a scent once she has it."

He turned those mesmerizing eyes away, freeing her from their spell as he dug into the pack at his side. She only had a moment to suck in a shaky breath before he faced her again and extended his arm, holding out a pillow.

It was such an odd thing to see him carrying, she frowned at it before freeing her arm from her cloak and accepting the thin pad. He seemed to be the minimalist sort, his small pack barely large enough to have held the pillow, and it wasn't until she brought it closer to her chest and caught her own scent on the fabric that she realized why he would have it.

It was how he'd found her.

Or, more accurately from the way Zaida's orange eyes followed the pillow before staring at her, how the Nicaavet had followed her.

Clenching her teeth, Raven swallowed her growl of irritation. She wasn't mad at Zaida, the animal had only been doing her job, and it was no fault of hers. Raven wasn't even mad at Ash necessarily. He was under orders too, and as far as alphas went, he hadn't done anything out of line.

Yet.

No, she was mad at herself for failing in another way. If she hadn't left something with her scent on it, tracking her would have been a lot harder. It wouldn't have been practical to bring the pillow with her, but she could have washed it, or burned it, or... *something*.

The anger swirled into disappointment. It was hard not to start believing the things her father had always told her.

She was only an omega.

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Chapter Ten

Ash

Once the pheasant was done, Ash pulled it from the fire and scooted into the shelter. He stayed as close to the logs as he could to give the omega as much room as possible, but he was an alpha, and there wasn't a lot of space available. He could have told Zaida to leave the shelter since Nicaavets had been bred for the cold and she would be perfectly fine in the snow, but having her near seemed to make Raven happy, so he let her stay.

It didn't take long for the bird to cool enough for him to rip it apart, putting half on an oilcloth and passing it to Raven. The way she devoured the meat told him she hadn't brought enough food with her, nor been able to find any during her escape attempt.

He ducked his head over his food to keep from shaking it. He had no idea what she'd been thinking, running when she was so clearly unprepared. He didn't carry much with him, but he had years of practice living off the land, and she didn't even have a container for water or a blade, the most basic necessities.

Chewing slowly, he waited until she'd picked the bones clean before offering her the other half of his portion. He had a bit of dried rations if he needed them, but he would be fine with the little he'd eaten. The omega needed the nutrition more than he did.

Green eyes widened, looking from the hand holding out the cooked bird up to his face.

"It's okay, I—"

"Take it, I had enough. And finish the water."

He touched the back of his fingers to her forehead when she leaned forward. She didn't feel as warm as she had earlier, and the glossy look was gone from her eyes, though the dark circles of exhaustion were still there. He hoped the fever had only been due to her needing fluids.

Another thought struck him as she bit into the meat, liquid fat dribbling down to gloss her chin and distract him until he shook the other thoughts away.

“Did you eat anything you found in the forest?”

Her eyes met his again.

They weren't the bright, verdant green of new growth in spring, but the paler shade of moss in summer. Different than any he'd seen before, and uniquely her.

She swallowed what was in her mouth, wiping away the grease with the back of her hand. Different emotions flickered across her face, too fast for Ash to catch what they meant, before her features settled into the stubborn expression that seemed to be her default.

“I was too busy running to look for food.”

He gave a short nod, questioning her again before she could take another bite.

“Did you drink any standing water? From a pond or puddle? Anything smaller than you are tall?”

Brows lowered, her lips pinched as she heaved out an irritated breath through her nose.

“I'm not *that* foolish. I only drank from one stream, somewhere east of the village.”

His own brow furrowed as he thought about the route she'd taken. He'd passed a stream early in the course of following her trail, and unless there had been another he wasn't aware of that he'd passed during the night, she had gone a long way without water.

At least she hadn't eaten anything potentially poisonous, so there was one less thing for him to worry about.

Edging back out of the shelter, he looked around at the quiet forest. The snow had continued to fall as he built the camp and cooked their meal, and while it should have been afternoon, it was dark beneath the trees. A thick layer of white coated every place there was a break in the canopy, and fresh flakes sizzled into the fire.

“What should I do with these?”

He looked down at Raven’s question to see her holding out the bones of the pheasant on the oilcloth. With how fast she’d eaten it he was tempted to send Zaida out to find another meal, but too much after going hungry and exerting herself could be just as bad, so he decided to wait.

“Throw the bones in the fire,” he directed, then held his hand out for the cloth.

While the place he’d chosen to stop had provided shelter, he hadn’t found a source of water, and with the knowledge of how long she’d gone without the day before, he didn’t want to risk not having more once she finished what was in the waterskin. His side ached and he wanted to lie down beside the fire to wait out the snow, but that was going to have to wait.

“Stay in the shelter. Zaida will guard you.”

Her eyes flared, mouth popping open before her gaze darted out past the fire.

“Where are you going?”

He could tell she tried not to let emotion enter her voice, but there was a touch of worry hidden in the words. Considering she’d ran from Tayueta on her own and already spent one night in the forest, he didn’t understand how the thought of him leaving should be a problem. If anything, he was worried she’d try to run again while he was looking for water.

“I’m going to see if there’s a stream nearby. It won’t take long.”

She blinked up at him before nodding and leaning back again. Pulling her fur up to her chin, those green orbs never left him as he turned and strode away.

Not wanting to go too far in case she tried to take the opportunity to get away, Ash made a quick circuit around where he’d built their shelter. There was no sign or sound of water that he could find, and while Zaida was usually able to lead him to a stream, with all the snow she couldn’t distinguish between the scent of it and flowing water.

Resigned to doing things the hard way, he found a drift that was already deep and clean, scraping the top few inches onto the oilcloth after scrubbing the grease off with a handful. He carried that back with him to set nearby as he collected a small pot from his pack. Raven and Zaida were exactly as he'd left him, though Raven was struggling to keep her eyes open, and Zaida appeared to be sleeping. He knew if it had been anything other than him approaching their shelter, though, the Nicaavet would have been on her feet and ready to defend them.

“Any luck?”

Raven's sleepy voice sent a tingle down his spine that tightened his balls, reminding him once again of the rod of flesh he was trying to ignore. He hadn't had a problem controlling his urges around Lyric, but perhaps that was because he'd known his Bruegar had staked a claim on the other omega, even if she hadn't been marked yet. Being alone with an unmated omega was driving his instincts crazy.

“No, but there's plenty of snow to melt for water, so drink as much as you need.”

She frowned as she shifted, holding out the waterskin.

“I already finished it since you told me to.”

He jerked his chin down in a short nod, taking the bladder from her and setting it beside him. His pot was too small to fill it all at once, but it didn't take long to melt snow.

“It's fine. I'll have more for you soon. You should sleep.”

She acted like she wanted to say more but only wriggled onto her side, turning away from him.

He wasn't sure what to make of the omega. He could understand the urge to return home after being taken away from all that she'd known, but while she'd tried to run when he caught up to her, once he'd stopped her, she'd given in without a fight. She had to know her best chance to get away was before they made it back to the village, yet she hadn't made any attempts to run again.

Perhaps she was too tired. Or sick. Or maybe she realized she was too unprepared.

Sighing and shaking his head, Ash turned away and filled the pot, setting it beside the fire to melt. He'd never understand a female's thoughts, he didn't even know why he was trying.

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Chapter Eleven

Raven

Despite thinking she'd not sleep any better than the previous night knowing a strange alpha was nearby, Raven hadn't woken until a wet huff in her face made her recoil. Waving Zaida away, she wiped away the slobber and pushed herself upright to see sunlight peeking between the branches beyond their shelter.

"Sorry. I tried to keep her away, but she gets concerned when people sleep too long. I think she thinks we've died or something."

Huffing a laugh, Raven reached out to reassure the Nicaavet with a quick scratch as her eyes searched for Ash. His voice had come from farther away than she'd expected, and she spotted him striding toward her from between the trees.

She lifted a hand to her hair, unconsciously trying to smooth it and wincing at the tangles that snared her fingers. After all the running and the roll by the river, she hated to picture the state her curls were likely in.

"How late is it?"

Her mouth was tacky, and she had to clear her throat to get the words out, but her head felt clearer than it had the previous day. She hoped that meant her fever was gone and it had been due to nothing more than neglect.

"Midmorning. We should be able to make it back to the village before nightfall if we're quick."

Her stomach sank, the good mood she'd woken in bursting at the news. She'd known circling around in an attempt to hide her trail would add time to her escape, but learning they were still so close to his village was disheartening. An entire grueling day and part of the night of traveling, leaving her hungry, dehydrated, and exhausted, and she'd be facing the consequences in less than half another.

Sucking in a deep breath, she shoved away the emotions swirling through her, reminding herself it hadn't been for nothing. Her next escape would be harder since they'd be watching her closer, but she would be better prepared after this experience. She knew there was a river to the south of the village now, so all she had to do was pay attention to their route back and she could find it when she ran again.

Ash knelt beside the entrance of the shelter, passing her something wrapped in the oilcloth. When she opened it the scent of warm meat hit her nose and her mouth watered, demanding she taste it immediately. She wasn't as hungry as she'd been the day before, but she still finished the entire half of the rabbit he'd given her, warmth filling her cheeks when she realized how much she'd eaten.

Sliding his little pot toward her, he nodded to it as he took the oilcloth back.

“Finish that and we can go.”

Every fiber of her wanted to stall. Wanted to find a reason to stay in the shelter, even if it meant sleeping on the hard ground another night.

But she also knew that even if she convinced him to wait another day, it wasn't going to make a difference. He was going to return her to Tayueta, to Raider, and the longer it took, the worse her punishment was likely to be. It was better to behave and get it over with.

Despite how full she was, she forced herself to finish the whole pot of water. Her belly felt tight, but the approval in Ash's gaze when she handed him the pot sent a flush of warmth through her that felt good even while stirring confusion. She couldn't help that she was biologically designed to want to please an alpha, but the few instances of her father's approval had never given her an answering surge of pleasure.

Shaking it away, she stood and brushed off her cloak before tying the blanket and fur around her once again. While she didn't see any flakes drifting between the trees, it appeared to have snowed well into the night, the ground covered in a layer

of white twice as deep as when she'd fallen asleep, and while it wasn't quite as cold as it had been the day before, once they left the shelter and the fire, she knew she'd need the extra layers.

Ash had already shrugged his pack on and was dousing the fire with a pile of snow by the time she stomped into her boots. Holding back a sigh of resignation, she waited as he checked to be sure it was out before following him away from the shelter.

The bite of the air on her cheeks had her looking back into the dark space he'd built. She'd been too out of it to appreciate what he'd done at the time, but the shelter was impressive considering he hadn't used anything but the few tools he carried in his pack and what he'd found in the forest. She wouldn't be surprised if it was still there the following winter, and even the one after that.

Turning forward, she studied the back of the alpha ahead of her. He walked with a confidence that all alphas seemed to possess, but he was also graceful in a way that said he was comfortable in his body. Despite the snow his steps were near-silent, and he left almost no trail behind, though when she checked, every one of her footprints were clearly visible.

Ash had told her he was a hunter, and it was obvious. Even when he'd had her crushed to his chest after tackling her, she hadn't been afraid of him, but he still carried the air of a predator. His looks alone shouted he was lethal, because nothing benign would be so beautiful.

He glanced back to check on her, the swollen, mottled lump of his nose coming into view, and she had to snort to herself. Maybe calling him beautiful was a stretch at the moment, but every feminine part of her was aware of the alpha in a way that made her blood sing and her nipples tighten with something besides the cold.

Ducking her head, she hurried her steps, not wanting him to think she was dawdling on purpose. Already resigned to returning to the village, she was looking forward to a warm, soft bed to sleep in that night, and she had no reason to make it

take any longer than necessary. If she was lucky, perhaps Raider would be lenient and forgive her the first escape attempt.

And hopefully she wouldn't have to find out what he'd do to her for getting caught a second time.

Eyeing Ash's pack, she couldn't help wondering if she could find a way to simply take it instead of having to collect the supplies she clearly needed. It wasn't very big, something she could carry without issue, and if it contained everything he thought was necessary to survive in the woods, it should be the perfect thing for her.

Raven filed the idea away as something to consider at a later time. She had no idea where in the village he lived, or how she could get away with stealing his pack, but she might be able to figure it out.

Her core clenched as the idea of seducing him to get into his house popped into her head, but she shoved it away. She might not have been quite as traditional as her parents about what an omega's role in life was, but she wasn't sure she was ready to jump in bed with someone as a means to steal from him.

Even if her body was wholly on board with the idea of getting naked with the alpha.

Rolling her eyes, she turned her attention to her surroundings, looking for landmarks she could use when she got the chance to run again. She wouldn't be wasting time and energy trying to throw off her pursuit the next time. She'd be focused on getting as far, as fast as she could.

Catching sight of Zaida zipping between the trees ahead, her lips ticked up despite herself.

And she'd be making sure not to leave anything with her scent on it behind, while her new four-legged friend was busy out hunting something other than her.

Chapter Twelve

Ash

He hadn't expected Raven to keep up with his usual pace and took that into consideration when he predicted their arrival at the village. She had done better than he'd thought she would, but it was still dusk by the time they broke through the trees into the little clearing around Raider's cabin.

The look on her face showed she hadn't realized they were so close. He had taken them around the main part of the village, skirting his home and the few other outlying cabins to go directly to his leader. He didn't know what Raider planned to do with her, and there was no reason to get anyone else involved until the Bruegar was aware they'd returned.

He wasn't sure Raider was home until the cabin door opened as they approached, and the dark figure standing in the doorway was too large to be Lyric. With the interior of the home lit by the fireplace and casting his front in shadow, the alpha looked imposing, and Ash felt a brief flare of sympathy for Raven, but she didn't cower behind him as he might have expected. Stepping forward to stand in front of him with her hands clasped before her body, she bowed her head and waited.

“Go inside.”

Raider stepped out of the doorway with the gruff order, waiting for Raven to walk past him, and Ash had to fight the way his hackles rose as the omega disappeared into the other alpha's cabin. He knew Raider had already chosen Lyric as his omega, and she chose Raider, but it was instinctive to get riled over an unmated omega abandoning him for another alpha.

He uncurled his fists as Raider closed the door behind Raven, cutting off the light that had spilled out to light where they stood. With the sun already behind the mountains, it was quickly growing dark, and with his duty completed, Ash wanted to return home and start trying to forget the little omega.

“How did it go?”

He lifted a shoulder at Raider’s question, letting it drop as he answered.

“It was no trouble following her trail. She came quietly once she realized she was caught, but she was dehydrated and exhausted. I stopped to be sure the storm wouldn’t get too bad and so she could rest before making the return trip.”

The hide hanging over Raider’s front window shifted, sending a lance of light to show the Bruegar’s raised brows.

“How’d that happen?”

Raider gestured to Ash’s face. Hand halfway to his nose, he stopped himself from touching it. The cold kept it from hurting as much as it might have, but the tightness of the flesh across his cheeks told him it was still swollen, and he likely had two black eyes as well.

“She tried to run when we first caught up to her and almost went right into a river. Cracked me with her head when I stopped her, but not on purpose. It’ll be fine.”

Raider’s lips twitched.

“At least I don’t have to worry she fell for your looks while you were with her. You’re not such a pretty-boy right now.”

Ash stopped himself before he grinned, letting out a grunt at the flare of pain across his face. It wasn’t the first time he’d been teased for his looks. It had been terrible before he’d grown a beard.

“Get something for the pain from Amara if you need it.”

Ash waved a hand in dismissal and shook his head. The pain was no worse than his ribs, and he’d broken enough bones to be familiar with the ache.

“It’s not that bad. The cold numbs it well enough.”

Raider nodded and turned toward his door. As Ash was about to leave, Raider looked back.

“The omega training as a healer called for the Agri-ren. I don’t think I’m going to do that with Raven and Willow, but

any alpha interested in them is being put on a rotation to spend time getting to know them so the omegas can make their choice. You sure you're not interested?"

Turning towards the trees, he took a step away from Raider and the omega inside the cabin that had his instincts all stirred up, choosing to ignore the question he couldn't give an honest answer to.

"I'll be heading out tomorrow to hunt reindeer up north toward Killagain Pass. Shouldn't be gone more than a handful of days. If I don't come back, you know what to do."

A huff followed him into the dark between the trees. He'd gotten less than a day at home before spending two bringing Raven back, so he wasn't really in a hurry to go out again, but he didn't have anything tying him to the village either. After being around the little omega for a day he no longer wondered why Raider was complaining of alphas acting out, and he had no desire to stick around and deal with any of them.

Walking into his empty cabin, he looked around a sighed.

He was a hunter. What else was there for him to do but go out and hunt?

Chapter Thirteen

Raven

She twisted her fingers together, glancing around the cabin as she waited for Raider to come inside and deliver his punishment. Lyric had greeted her and asked if she was okay, but when Raven only gave her a strained smile and silent nod, she seemed to understand Raven wasn't ready to talk. Lyric returned upstairs, Willow's quiet voice drifting down and letting Raven know the other omega was up there as well.

The warmth of the cabin felt amazing on her chilled skin, and while she wanted nothing more than to rush to the fire to thaw herself, her churning stomach kept her rooted to the floor in front of the couch. It felt like forever before the door opened again and Raider stepped inside.

Ash was an alpha in all their size and dominance, but he wasn't intimidating the way Raider was. Something about the way the leader of the Tayueta clan looked at her made her feel small, like she was a naughty child being scolded by her father again.

He closed the door but didn't move any further into the room, staring at her in silence. The longer it went on, the more the muscles in her back and shoulders tightened, until she stood hunched with her head hanging, her heartbeat banging inside her skull so hard her teeth throbbed in time with it.

Just as her composure cracked and she opened her mouth to apologize, he let out a gusty sigh.

"I should hand you over to an alpha right now and let you be his problem, but that wouldn't be fair to *them*. Plus, I promised Lyric the three of you would get to choose your mate, and I don't intend to go back on my word."

She raised her head just enough to see Raider's face. While he looked like he'd eaten something sour, he didn't appear as angry as she'd expected him to be.

"I hope you've learned a lesson from this and won't try something so foolish again. You didn't even take enough

supplies to get to the lake,” he said with a huff, gesturing at the blanket and fur she’d removed and set beside her on the table. Both needed a thorough cleaning before they could be used on a bed again.

So did she.

Raven dipped her chin when he seemed to expect an answer but kept her mouth shut. She’d never been good at lying, but he wasn’t really asking a question, and she *had* learned something from the experience.

“I suppose spending two nights in the cold was rough enough, but you owe me for the food you stole. If you can’t find anything better to do, you’re going to work it off in the tavern.”

Again, she nodded. Working wouldn’t hurt her, and if that was the extent of his punishment, it wasn’t as bad as some of the things she’d imagined.

“After your morning lesson, the alphas assigned that day will come here to have lunch with you. When the hour is up, one will walk you to the tavern where you’ll do whatever Brant or Deena tell you until I come get you. Keeping you busy will hopefully keep you out of trouble.”

Her heartrate had slowly been returning to normal until he mentioned alphas.

“Wait, what? What alphas?”

Raider’s eyes narrowed and he crossed his arms over his chest, but her confusion had shocked her out of her fear.

“Maybe if you were here instead of off running through the woods like a fool, you’d know what was going on. Especially since it concerns your future.”

Clenching her teeth, she had to swallow the first things that wanted to spill from her mouth. As lenient as he seemed to be, he was still an alpha, and the Chief of the clan. He wouldn’t let an omega get away with calling him an ass. Maybe Lyric could, Raven had heard them get into a few tiffs, and she’d had to run from the house to keep from hearing the way he handled her mouth when Lyric let it run away, too.

“What do you mean by alphas being assigned a day?”

He made her stew for a moment before answering.

“It’s been decided that each alpha who’s interested in you or Willow will have a chance to spend time with you to help you make a choice. They will be assigned a day to come have lunch with the two of you.”

She focused on her breathing for a moment, pulling in a deep lungful, holding it, then letting it out again so she didn’t lose her composure. Arguing about things wouldn’t help her any, and she’d already known it was going to be harder to get away a second time. She was just going to have to be smarter about it and be prepared as soon as she got a chance.

“Okay.”

Keeping her eyes trained on the fur Raider stood on, she waited as he watched her in silence. Her only hope was to make them believe she’d learned her lesson and wasn’t going to try again, because if she managed to get away and got caught a second time, a third chance would be near impossible.

“Your dinner is on the hearth. Clean up and eat, then get some rest.”

Her breath left her on a relieved sigh, shoulders finally inching down from beside her ears. She hadn’t wanted to show how hungry and exhausted she was, but even though Ash had done his best to be sure she’d drunk enough while they walked back to the village, the little bit he’d given her for lunch had worn off hours ago, and she was ready to fall on her face in the nearest safe spot that wasn’t frozen solid.

“Thank you, Bruegar.”

He still used her language around them since it was easier, but Raven figured calling him by his title would earn her points. She’d have to try twice as hard to learn Tayueta if she was going to be working in the tavern since she doubted all the warriors knew her language well enough to communicate. Plus, it was another thing that would convince them she was making an effort to fit in, not run again.

She turned and slipped out the back door and into the little shed they'd been using to wash themselves. In Siloah, the Chief's house had been the nicest in the village, but Raider lived a much simpler life. As far as she could tell, his cabin was no grander than anyone else's, and while most people would wash inside where it was warmer, with so many crammed in his home, this was their only option if they wanted privacy.

The bucket of water in the corner had steam curling above it, and when she dipped her finger in it was wonderfully warm. Either Lyric or Willow must have kept it inside beside the fireplace until she arrived, and Raven promised herself to do something nice for the other omegas in return. It would have been amazing to have a tub full of warm water to sink into, but since she'd been expecting to wash with half-frozen water, she was grateful.

There was also an extra set of clothing lying on the table beside it with a fresh towel, so she didn't waste any time stripping off the grimy tunic and pants she'd worn for two days. By the time she'd scrubbed off the dirt and sweat and wriggled into the new clothes, she felt a bit more human, and her stomach was gnawing at her backbone.

The house was silent when she slipped back inside. The dirty fur and blanket, along with her extra set of clothing that had been inside it, had disappeared from where she'd left them, but a mug of wine had joined a plate on the table.

Raven's throat tightened at the consideration she was being shown by the other omegas. She could have gotten them in trouble by running. Certainly Lyric's father had been the type to punish them all for the misdeeds of one. Yet even though she was sure she'd worried them, they were going out of their way to be kind to her.

And she was already planning to run again.

She swallowed the lump in her throat and stuffed the first bite into her mouth, washing it down with a drink before eating more. She couldn't focus on the ones she was leaving here, even if she preferred their company to the ones she was

going back to save. Even her own sisters wouldn't have been as kind as to have warm water and a meal waiting for her when she returned, but Raven couldn't shake the worry that plagued her over not knowing how they were.

If she knew for certain her family was alive, and that her mother and sisters weren't huddled in a burnt-out husk, starving, or being abused, she wouldn't be fighting against Raider's orders so much. She might take the chance she'd been given to build a new life.

But not knowing...

It felt selfish to make a better life for herself when they could be suffering. She had no choice but to return.

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Chapter Fourteen

Ash

Ash was exhausted long before he caught the first hint of smoke in the air, but he couldn't complain that the trip had been a waste. It had taken the full number of days he'd told Raider he'd be gone to track down the herd and finally get a good shot at one of the young bucks, but he had gotten lucky when the chance came and managed to bag two of them.

But that had meant he'd had to haul back twice the amount of meat. Despite being young, they each weighed about the same as he did, and while he'd taken the time to dress the carcasses and leave behind the bones, it was still a lot to haul considering the herd had almost made it all the way to the pass before he'd caught up to them.

Now they were somewhere on the far side, but he had no plans to seek them out again. The clawed tracks he'd spotted in the snow at the base of the mountain had been enough to send him trekking through the night after leaving a few choice pieces of the kills as offerings to the monsters. His people lived close enough to a clan of them to know they were real without a doubt, and he didn't want to offend any by trespassing on their territory.

Sighing as he curled his shoulders forward and pressed on. Only the thought of his bed kept him moving. The first night after the kill he'd finally stopped to rest, packing the meat in the snow that had fallen throughout the day to keep it fresh, before falling asleep atop it. He usually didn't sleep long while on a hunt, his senses too alert to let him truly rest, but he hadn't stirred until sunrise which put him behind in making it home by nightfall.

He huffed as he turned his feet to take him around Raider's cabin, firmly keeping his thoughts on getting home and going to sleep. He normally wouldn't think twice about passing close to his Bruegar's house, but he didn't want to take the chance of running into a certain curly-headed omega who insisted on plaguing his thoughts.

A weak growl rattled his chest before petering out. He was too winded to keep it going, nor would he admit to how many times his thoughts had drifted to the female he was trying to forget.

Peppery strawberries was such a strange scent, and Ash wasn't sure he'd ever seen someone with such a wild tangle of hair. He wondered if it was as springy as it looked.

Jerking his thoughts away from her again, he shook his head and whistled to Zaida, giving her the release signal. When they were in the village she was free to do as she wanted, though he expected to find her waiting at his cabin when he made it there since she seemed just as tired as he felt. She'd had to chase the herd three times to get them into an area where he could get a shot off and still be able to get to the animal once it went down. The area around Killagain Pass was not friendly terrain, and it had earned its name many times over the years.

Ash plodded along, skirting the few houses scattered amongst the trees until his finally came into view. As he'd suspected, Zaida was stretched in front of his door, waiting for him to open it and let her in. She didn't even bother to stand until she was at risk of being stepped on if she didn't move.

He pushed the door open and waited for her to dart in, knowing if he didn't, she would only trip him as she forced her way past. She settled into her chair with a huff, the way she eyed him saying enough that she didn't need to be able to speak to tell him what she thought of his lagging.

"Excuse me for being too slow for you. I could have made a sled and had you drag the meat instead of carrying it myself."

Her lip twitched as if she were going to bare her teeth at him before she huffed again and curled up, ignoring him. Rolling his eyes, he passed through the house and forced open the back door. The snow piled against it tried to hold it closed, but he refused to go out and walk around the house to put the meat in the chest for the night.

Making sure the wooden box was locked so he didn't have to worry about scavengers, he followed Zaida's lead and went straight to his bed, peeling out of his coat and clothing as he

went. He didn't even bother lighting a fire, too tired to put off sleep any longer. Falling into his blankets, blackness swallowed him in moments, and he didn't move again until sharp teeth clamped around his foot.

“Hey!”

It was reflex to kick the other leg, thrashing until he could sit upright and glare at the unrepentant orange eyes staring back at him. Sunlight leaked around the hide over his window, but it wasn't so bright he thought it was late in the day.

“What the hell? Why can't you let me sleep?”

She circled once, meeting his eyes again before her back legs bent, the angle of her spine shooting panic through his chest.

That wasn't how she sat.

“Don't you dare!”

He scooted off the bed as her hips jerked up and she paced to the door, looking back to be sure he followed. Growling under his breath, Ash shoved a hand through his hair as he stomped across the house, jerking the door open so the beast could go do her business outside instead of on his floor.

His shoulders and back ached from the strain of carrying the meat so far, and he wanted to crawl back into bed, but he knew if he did, he might not get back out until it was too late to take the meat to the tavern again. With so many alphas hanging around the village because of the omegas, he had no idea what their stores were like, especially since many of them didn't cook for themselves and relied on the tavern for meals.

Images of tangled curls falling over pale green eyes filled his head, followed by thoughts of her spicy strawberry masked under the scent of another alpha, and his chest rumbled with a growl before he forced them away. It didn't matter that he found her differences attractive, he couldn't offer the life an omega wanted, so he needed to stop thinking about her.

Getting the fire going to take the chill out of the air, he cleaned up and got dressed, eating a quick meal before going out back to collect the meat. It was already noon, and the later

he went to the village, the busier the market would be. If he had any luck the tavern would be empty, and he could slip in and out without running into anyone other than Brant or Deena.

Zaida was nowhere to be seen, but that wasn't unusual when they were home. She knew to come if he whistled for her, but otherwise she was free to wander. Half the time he'd spot her with the Nicaavets patrolling around the village since the animals weren't the type to lie around and do nothing, or she'd come home with some critter she'd caught in her boredom.

Grunting as the pack of meat shifted on his shoulder, he adjusted it into a more comfortable position as he headed toward the village. He might have been tempted to go to the healer for a refill of the salve to take the ache away, except Raider had said there was an omega staying there, too. He wasn't sure he wanted to run into another of them when he was having such trouble forgetting the first he'd encountered.

The walk through the trees was quiet, the area close to the village devoid of the animals he usually found in the brush as he hunted. It always felt strange to him, to be surrounded by woods but hear nothing of nature. Even the rustle of leaves was missing since the trees were bare due to the cold. Only the occasional raised voice was heard, making his hackles tighten instead of making him feel settled.

The trunks came to an end and he stepped out into the clearing around the village center, the huddle of buildings before him blanketed in white, though tracks cut through the snow on the ground. From where he stood, he couldn't see the market stalls or their bright awnings, so everything was the same drab brown and white.

He decided to go to the back of the tavern instead of walking around and possibly getting caught in the market crowd. He could hear the murmur echoing between the buildings, and he wasn't in the mood to deal with it with the massive pack on his back. It wouldn't be the first time he'd pounded on Brant's back door.

Plus, it was closer to the chest most of the meat would end up in anyway. They'd only keep what they'd use within the next day inside.

Ash's lip curled as he stomped through the snow. He didn't like winter. It was boring, and cold, and bland. Some of the trees held onto their green needles year-round, but even the animals changed to blend in with their pale surroundings, leaving most everything a muddle of the same few colors.

White, brown, or some dirty mix of the two.

Raising his hand, he pounded on the sturdy wood that led into the tavern's kitchen, wishing it was spring already. He preferred the greens of spring. Of grass, and leaves, and bright new growth.

And Raven's eyes, staring up at him in surprise from the last doorway he'd expected to find her.

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Chapter Fifteen

Raven

Her breath caught in her throat as she stared up at Ash, his delicious nutty scent wafting in with the cold air. She blinked, unable to think of anything to say until a low rumble left his chest and he stepped closer, forcing her to move back or risk him squashing her in the doorway.

She was almost tempted to let him...

“What are you doing here? Where’s Deena?”

His tone had never been so aggressive, even when he had been yelling at her to stop as she ran from him in the forest.

“She-She’s out front, taking orders.”

His gaze swept around the kitchen before settling back on her. A subtle bit of tension in his face eased, though his mouth was still tipped down in a frown.

“And Brant?”

She sucked in a breath, trying to pull herself together, but his scent was stronger inside the kitchen and only made her heart thump harder. Still, she squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. She hadn’t been doing anything wrong, and there was no reason for him to make her feel like she was.

“At the bar.”

She was still trying to get the hang of things at the tavern. Brant handled the alcohol and the alphas who sat at the bar, so she had been helping Deena with the cooking and serving anyone who sat at one of the four small tables in the dining room. There were more tables outside, but no one had been using them with them covered in snow, though she’d noticed more alphas had taken to sitting at the tables instead of the bar since she’d started working.

Ash grunted, slinging a pack off his shoulder and letting it plop to the floor. He opened his mouth like he was going to

say something else but closed it again before turning and heading for the door that went out beside the bar.

“What are you—”

She stumbled after him, reaching for his arm to stop him, but pulling back before her fingers connected. She wasn't sure she should have opened the back door and worried she was going to get in trouble, but Ash ignored her, thrusting the door out of his way and stepped through into the dining room.

Wincing, Raven waited for the crash of dishes that had come when she'd done the same thing on her second day and hit Deena as the older beta had been returning to the kitchen after clearing a table. When the sound didn't come, she eased the door open just enough to peek out and see Ash talking to Brant.

Her stomach churned, anxiety stirring the bread and cheese she'd eaten for lunch into a hard lump that threatened to clog her throat. Dealing with the alphas who showed up to have lunch with her had been as bad as she'd expected it to be, but she'd been surprised by how much she was growing to enjoy her time at the tavern, and she didn't want Brant to demand Raider find a different punishment for her because she'd made another mistake.

When both alphas turned toward the door she was hiding behind she jerked back with a sharp inhale, eyes darting around the kitchen to find something to do. She'd only just arrived when she'd heard the pounding on the door and opened it to Ash, and Deena hadn't given her any directions yet.

Spotting the pile of dishes in the sink, she darted for it just as the door began to creak open, plunging her arms into the tepid water without even pulling up her sleeves. She grabbed the first dish her fingers connected with, her other hand tangling in the rag as she slapped it to the plate and ducked her head as the men entered the kitchen.

“It's a good thing you caught two of 'em. We already used what you brought the last time, an' all anyone else has

snagged are rabbits ‘n’ geese. If the idiots don’t start goin’ out farther, they’re goin’ to hunt the area ‘round the village bare.”

Brant’s voice was his usual grumpy rumble. The old alpha rarely spoke so much, sticking to grunts unless one of the other alphas his age came in or he was speaking to his mate. Deena was the only one who got anything nicer than a grumble from him, and Raven had realized it was just his personality after the first few days worrying he was mad at her for something.

“That’s what I figured. The herd passed through Killagain Pass, but I can go west and see if there are any lone bull elk in the foothills. There are a couple small herds of deer that may be in the area too, I just don’t want to take a doe on accident.”

Raven watched Brant nod as he stopped by the big table in the middle of the kitchen. Ash picked up the pack he’d left by the back door, heaving it onto the tabletop and untying the flap. When he started pulling out bundles wrapped in oilcloth and fur, she realized the bag was full of meat. He’d told her he was a hunter, but she’d had no idea he supplied the tavern.

Light brown eyes swung her way, and she jerked her head down again, scrubbing the plate she held with more vigor than it needed before dipping it into the bucket of clean water and stacking it beside the sink to dry once she was finished. Brant and Ash haggled a little over the price Brant offered, but it seemed like it was more out of custom than any real disagreement.

She finished the last dish just as Brant dug into his leather apron for the stamped clay chips the Tayueta used as a form of payment. One of the bonuses of working at the tavern was that she’d collected a few of her own when she helped with the tables, and she hoped to earn enough to buy the supplies she needed for the next time she ran.

Eyeing Ash, she wondered when he would be leaving the village again. She hadn’t forgotten that Zaida knew her scent, and her best chance to run would be while he was gone. Anything that smelled of her that she couldn’t carry was going

to be destroyed or taken care of on her way out, so hopefully she wouldn't be tracked again.

Or at least not so fast.

“How long do you think this will last?”

Raven held her breath at the question, hands freezing above the towel she'd been reaching for.

Brant grunted as he gathered some of the meat into his arms to carry out to the chest.

“The whelps can't seem to cook fer themselves either, an' word's spread that one of the omegas is workin' here. Dinin' room's crowded every night. If I get a few more geese 'n' such an' dig into the vegetable stores, I can stretch it half a moon. Maybe. Fools can't keep this up.”

She spotted Ash's nod from the corner of her eye as he followed Brant out the back door. They'd left it open, and since the chest was against the wall right beside it, she could still hear their conversation.

“If I can get the arrowheads I need, I'll head back out in the morning. Even if I have to go down past the lake, I should be able to make it back before then with something.”

“You said you jus' got back last night.”

Raven could imagine Ash's sigh and the way he'd roll his shoulder after how many times he'd done it to her during their time together.

“Yeah, but there's nothing to keep me here, and someone has to hunt for the village if the others are too distracted.”

Brant's grunt was loud enough she didn't have to imagine it, and it must have masked the sound of the inner door opening, because she nearly jumped out of her skin when new dishes clattered into the sink beside her.

“Did you forget how to roll up your sleeves? You're dripping all over the floor.”

Heat filling her cheeks and rushing up to burn her ears, Raven looked from her soaked shirtsleeves to the puddle she

was standing in. The last thing she needed was to cause another accident because she was being a fool and someone slipped in her mess.

“I’m sorry, I’ll clean it up.”

A thin grey eyebrow arched before Deena shook her head and muttered something under her breath about the gods saving her from distractions.

“When you’re done with that and the dishes, chop the potatoes and carrots in that bucket and throw them in the pot on the hearth. Brant is going to help me pull in one of the tables from outside so there’s more seating for dinner, so be prepared.”

Swallowing her groan, Raven ignored the surge of disappointment when Brant came in alone and shut the back door, telling herself it was only due to knowing how busy she was going to be for the rest of the day. It had nothing to do with the fading scent of candied nuts.

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Chapter Sixteen

Raven

She was running out of time.

The thought that had plagued her constantly when she'd first returned to the village now only crossed her mind once or twice a day, usually followed by a flush of shame. Her days were so busy between language lessons, lunch with the alphas, and then her duties at the tavern, that she barely had time to worry about what could be happening back in Siloah, but the guilt reminded her she was wasting time whenever she had a moment to rest.

It didn't matter that she was finally getting the hang of speaking Tayueta.

Or that some of the alphas who came to visit weren't so bad.

Or that, while working in the tavern wasn't something she'd want to do for the rest of her life, she was enjoying the interactions and having something to keep her occupied. The work was about as demanding as what she'd done on the farm, but she got to talk to other people, she was indoors, and it was something new.

She sighed as she gripped the handle of the knife she was using to chop turnips. It was too big for her small hand, giving her a cramp, but she couldn't complain since the one that had fit her now rested in the bottom of the pack she had hidden beneath the mattress in Raider's cabin. Stealing it had made her guts twist into a tangled mess after how patient Deena had been with her, but all Raven had to do was think of her sister's huddled in the cold to solidify her resolve. She had used the credits she'd earned to buy what she could, but even the cheapest knife had been too expensive for her, and she knew she needed one to have any chance of making it to Siloah.

Looking out the back door, she chewed on her bottom lip. It was propped open to let out some of the excess heat from the massive fire still raging from where Brant had built it back up to cook dinner. The Nicaavets who patrolled the village had

scared a group of wild pigs searching for food beneath the layer of fresh snow, and Brant was roasting half of one on the spit over the flames. The scent of the cooking meat had her salivating, and with the door open she knew half the village could smell it as well.

She wondered if it would help distract anyone from following her. Should she take the chance and run? Would the trails of the pigs keep the Nicaavets from tracking her?

The creaky door hinges startled her, the unwieldy blade slipping and slicing into the side of her little finger. Deena's brow arched at Raven's hiss, the slight shake of her head enough to make Raven's heart drop. Even if she didn't plan to stay, she couldn't help not wanting to disappoint anyone, and she knew she wouldn't run in the middle of the afternoon when Deena was relying on her help.

But afterward, after she was sure Raider and Lyric were distracted, and Willow was asleep, she'd go. She couldn't keep waiting. It had already been a handful of days since Ash said he was going out to hunt again, and he could return at any time with the one animal who might be able to track her despite the precautions she planned to take.

Her shiver had nothing to do with the cold air coming in the open door.

"Well, a little blood never hurt anyone, or half the village would be dead. Toss those in the pot and dip the finger in flour, then you can clear tables and take orders while I finish the chopping."

Wiping up the little crimson puddle with a rag before squeezing it around her finger, Raven bobbed her head.

"Sorry."

Deena flapped a hand at her once she'd dropped the dirty dishes she carried into the sink.

"I can't tell you how many times I've cut myself because Brant came busting in here for something and scared the daylight out of me. Lost half the feeling in my fingertips by now."

Raven forced a chuckle as Deena smiled at her, taking her place at the counter as Raven scooped a tiny bit of flour from the barrel. Lifting the rag away from the wound, she popped it in her mouth to clean the excess blood away only to have more bead along the slice as soon as she pulled it back out. Holding her breath, she pressed it into the flour as Deena had told her to do, blowing it out at the slight sting, but at least it stopped more from oozing out.

“Now get out there. There’s another table needs cleared, and likely to be people waiting for it.”

It was torture to lay in bed and keep herself awake when her body wanted sleep. Her feet and back ached from the steady flow of people at the tavern that evening. There had been so many they’d finally had to turn them away because they ran out of pork and ale, and Brant refused to open another barrel.

Pinching herself again when she felt herself drifting, Raven shook her head and carefully rolled to her side. The only light in the little room she shared with Willow was what moonlight shone through the lace curtain, so all she could make out of the other omega were small lumps on the cot across from her.

“Willow?”

The word was a bare whisper, and she held her breath as she waited for a response.

Heartbeat thundering in her ears, she eased up onto one elbow when there was none. Swinging her feet off the side of the bed, her eyes never left the other bed as she reached down and slid her toes into her boots and laced them tight. She trembled with nervous energy, all drowsiness evaporating with the thought that it was finally time.

Willow had been helping Lyric clean up from their dinner when Raven came home, so Raven had rushed to their room and stuffed everything into her bag in preparation, hiding it in the chest at the foot of her cot once it was ready. She’d gone to bed in tights and a tunic, and she pulled her thickest gown on overtop them before slipping the pack onto her back.

Tucking the belt and knife she'd left out under her arm, she stripped her bedding from the mattress and snuck from the room with it bundled in her arms. Raider's home was solidly built, not a single squeak or creak betraying her as she went down the stairs and dropped the blankets and pillow before grabbing her cloak from its peg by the front door. Claspng it at her throat, she belted it at her waist as she'd seen others in the village do before slipping the knife under the leather strip at her side. It didn't have a sheath, so she had to hope the cloth she'd wrapped around the blade would protect her cloak and side as she ran.

Once again she raided the kitchen for whatever she could carry. A small stack of flatbread, a sliver of cheese, and a pair of wrinkled apples were tossed into a small sack and tied to the other side of her belt before being tucked into the cloak above it to keep them from bouncing around. She already had a full waterskin in her pack, that lesson one she'd never forget.

A sudden noise made her freeze, head cocked and eyes searching through the dim space as she tried to hear past her startled pulse. It came again, and it took a moment for her to realize what it was, heat flooding her cheeks even as she let out a relieved sigh. That cry meant she wouldn't have to worry about Raider or Lyric for a while at least.

Shaking her head, Raven returned to where she'd dropped everything that held her scent. She'd been careful to touch as little as possible in the house since she'd returned, and while she couldn't help that her scent would linger in her room, it was mixed with Willow's, which would be stronger without any of Raven's things. She'd cracked the window before going to bed, and she had to hope that was enough to make it too hard to distinguish.

Gathering the bedding, she carried it all to the back door, stepping out into the night. Burning it would have been the best way to make sure there was no trace of her scent left behind, but she felt bad enough about stealing the food, she didn't want to destroy perfectly good bedding. Plus, it would have taken longer and been dangerous to leave a fire large enough to burn the pile of blankets and furs.

Bumping open the door to the little shed where they washed, Raven grunted at the black interior. With no windows, it was almost impossible to make out the low tub against the wall where they cleaned their clothing.

She didn't have time to waste, but water wasn't going to mask enough of her scent, and she needed to distract any Nicaavet sent to track her. Dropping the pile in front of the door to hold it open so she'd have a little light, she shuffled forward until her outstretched fingers met the wall, following it to the back corner before crouching and reaching behind a bucket for the jug she'd hidden there when she came back from the tavern. There was one way to be sure the animals followed something other than her.

She moved back to the tub, uncorking the jug of grease that had dripped from the side of pork Brant had roasted for dinner. It was going to be a pain for whoever had to clean it from the bedding and the tub, and that was another drop of guilt added to the bucket of it she already carried.

Emptying the jug into the water already in the tub, she used the paddle to give it a quick stir before grabbing everything and tossing it in. She made sure to push it all beneath the surface, the water and fat soaking into fabric and fur, turning it dark and glossy before the door swung shut and left her in darkness.

It was time to go.

Her scent was already all around the house and along the path to the village, and she'd been keeping her eyes open for the best route to take when she ran. Raider might expect her to try going around the village again, but the path from his house to the market was the most used, and therefore the least likely for her scent to stand out. She'd also been walking around the village when she had a free moment from the tavern, making sure there were traces of her everywhere to hopefully confuse things even more.

It might seem a bit much, but she was trying to do everything right this time.

Raven stayed on the walkways, keeping her attention focused on listening for anyone who might spot her. As far as she knew there were no rules about being out at night, but it would be suspicious for a woman to be walking alone, and that was even without the pack on her back. If anyone got close enough to see it or realize she was an omega, she'd be in trouble.

Skirting the back of the buildings in the village center, Raven turned and headed down the east path to the healers. If she headed straight south it would take her by the Second's home, and she'd heard Bear talking to Brant about raising an orphaned Nicaavet, so she knew he was likely to be awake at random hours, but the path to the healer's didn't pass any other homes beyond the village center.

Sending up silent thanks to the gods for her good luck when she made it to Amara's garden, Raven sucked in a deep breath and turned south at the gate, slipping into the forest.

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Chapter Seventeen

Ash

Ash wasn't the only one exhaustion was starting to weigh on. Even Zaida's boundless energy had been reduced, leaving her pacing at his side instead of ranging ahead as was her usual. When they were close to the village she tended to disappear, showing up again at the cabin once she'd made her rounds and reestablished her territory, and her lack of enthusiasm told him more than anything that they'd been pushing too hard too much.

There was nothing that was going to get him to leave his cabin again for at least a handful of days. The plan was to sleep for the first few, even if he had to leave the door open so Zaida wouldn't wake him, then he'd get around to cleaning and repairing his things.

"Name yourself."

The call brought him up short as his head jerked toward the voice. It took a moment to spot the warrior amidst the brush ahead.

"Ash, hunter of the Tayueta, returning from a hunt near Lake Fratine."

Another Nicaavet came toward them, Zaida putting herself between it and Ash until she'd sniffed the newcomer and brushed cheeks with it in a show of familiarity. By the color, Ash was willing to bet it was one of Bear's stock, just like Zaida, and it was possible they were litter mates since they were of similar size.

The Nicaavet's acceptance seemed to reassure the warrior who finally moved toward Ash, eyeing the bulging packs strapped to his back. The male was vaguely familiar, though much younger than Ash, and he couldn't remember the alpha's name.

"Ash, you're the one Raider wanted. He gave us orders to send you straight to him once you returned."

Eyes narrowing, Ash swept his gaze over the young alpha. There were no signs of wounds or fighting on him, and he wasn't so young that he would have been left out of a war-party if something had happened and Raider needed warriors. That left few reasons why Raider would want Ash.

“Do you know what it's about?”

Brows rose over wide eyes as the warrior twisted his lips to the side and lifted one shoulder, letting it drop.

“Didn't say, but it might be to do with the missing omega.”

Ash's head started throbbing before he even realized he was grinding his teeth. Forcing himself to relax his jaw, he sucked in a deep breath and let it out again.

“One named Raven?”

The other alpha raised a hand to scratch at the scraggly beard he was attempting a grow.

“I think so. Willow and the healer one are both still here so...”

He trailed off but Ash wasn't listening anymore anyway. What other omega would be missing besides the one he'd already had to fetch once?

He growled under his breath, the warrior shooting him a disgruntled look as Ash brushed past him without another word. He'd been gone from his home for most of a moon between hunting and chasing her down once already, and just when he thought he'd get a little break, he was going to have to go find her again.

Shaking his head as he pushed through the undergrowth in a more direct route to the village, he couldn't help the swell of respect for the little omega even as he cursed her persistence. If he was in her position he would continue trying to return to his home as well, but it was distinctly irritating for him to have to go save her again.

Worry began to crowd out the frustration. She hadn't been in a good state when he'd found her the first time, and he had no idea how long she'd been missing. If she had run off

shortly after he left to go hunting, she could already be dead, buried in a snowbank, or frozen in an icy river because she hadn't been careful enough at the edge.

The weariness disappeared from his limbs, his pace increasing. Zaida gave a huff at his hip, confused as to why they were hurrying, but she kept up. He wanted to go straight to Raider, but he needed to drop off the meat he carried. He didn't care about the credits for it, but it slowed him down, and he hated the thought of it going to waste if he just dumped it.

There were two betas eating at one of the tables when he burst into the tavern, their startled gazes flying up to him as Brant let out a growl before swallowing it once he recognized Ash.

“Tryin’ to rip my damn door off?”

Ash ignored his grumble and headed straight for the door to the kitchen, nostrils flaring as he went, searching for hints of strawberries and peppers. It was impossible to distinguish her scent in the dining room, but once he passed into the back, he thought he could still pick up traces of it, which meant she couldn't have been gone for long.

Deena looked up from the dough she was kneading on the table, giving him a tight smile as he began unstrapping the packs from his back. It had been a good trip, and he'd used every bag he had, attaching them to the outside of his main pack to carry all the meat.

Brant came stepped into the kitchen behind him, and Ash didn't wait to show him the meat and haggle over price the way he usually did.

“There's elk, deer, and geese. Raider's waiting for me, so just set the bags aside and I'll collect them when I can.”

Saying the Bruegar was waiting might have been a stretch, but the anxiety rolling beneath his skin didn't leave Ash time to deal with unloading everything and taking the bags back to his cabin. It was already noon. He needed to be on the way so he could cover as much ground as possible before nightfall.

Deena turned away, doing something at another counter as Brant helped him shrug from the straps of the pack holding the elk. When he went to head out the backdoor, Deena cut him off, pressing a rough sack into his hands.

“Take care of her. She’s a good girl.”

The scent of fresh bread rose to tickle his senses and his stomach reminded him he’d eat eaten nothing but meat the past few days. Nodding as she moved aside, his hand was on the door as he heard Brant’s addition.

“An’ spank some damn sense into her while you’re at it. Fool omega, runnin’ off alone in winter.”

His lips stretched in a grin, his groin tightening at the idea of bending Raven over his knee and taking a hand to her backside. He might just do it, though he doubted it would make a difference. He hadn’t spent much time with her, but Raven gave him the feeling she’d be too stubborn for a little spanking to teach her to behave.

Shaking his head, he paced toward Raider’s cabin, hoping to find his chief at home. He had a sinking feeling that short of chaining Raven to a post, chasing her down might become a regular thing.

Chapter Eighteen

Raven

The glow of pride could only get her so far. It might have helped mask the need for food and rest, but eventually the demands of Raven's body grew too loud to ignore. What she'd stolen from Raider had gotten her through the first two days, though her belly complained it wasn't enough, and by the end of the third her stomach was threatening to turn itself inside out if she didn't put something in it. Hunger had kept her awake just as much as the sounds of the night and had slowly taken over her thoughts throughout the day.

Groaning, she wrapped her arms tighter around herself and forced her leg forward. It was growing dark, but she wanted to get as far as she could before stopping for the night. Her body was sore and tired, and the world seemed to sway around her, but she was determined not to fail again.

Fumbling her waterskin from her cloak, she put the spout between her lips. The thought of swallowing more water made her stomach twist and heave, but she'd learned her lesson about dehydration. It didn't matter that she didn't feel thirsty, she'd been forcing herself to drink the entire skin four times a day. There would be no chance she wasn't well-hydrated.

She had to stop and brace herself against a tree. She forced down two swallows, but the third surged back up her throat, splattering the snow under her boots and melting through to the leaves beneath.

Gasping for air as her head throbbed and the forest spun, she pinched her eyes closed and fought back the urge to cry. She was trying, she was trying so hard, but she couldn't deny something was wrong.

When the world settled and she didn't feel like she was about to fall over, Raven blinked her lids open and looked around. She'd done her best to head straight south once she'd left the path to the healer's cabin. The fields surrounding the lake they passed on the way to the Tayueta village had taken

about a day of riding to cross before they'd entered the forest for another day, so after three of walking, Raven felt like she should have reached them. The mountains were still on her right, the peaks her guide since the sun wasn't reliable behind the cloud cover, so she had to be on the right track.

Her stomach churned, burning her from the inside. The water she'd forced down left her bloated but did nothing to calm the hunger pangs. She'd realized far too late that she should have spent part of her time in the village learning what edible plants grew in the forest, so she would have had some chance of feeding herself since she hadn't seen any signs of animal life.

Not that she'd have been likely to catch anything. She'd tripped enough throughout the day to know she was probably scaring away everything with the noise she made, and she certainly wasn't capable of casing something down. Plus, she'd bent the knife she'd taken from the tavern on the first day, making it awkward to wield, its edge blunted and near useless.

Even vegetation was scarce. It hadn't snowed while she walked, and it wasn't as cold as it had been, but there was still a thin layer of flakes on the ground anywhere the wind or creatures hadn't disturbed it, and everywhere else was a pile of withered leaves from the fall. The only spots of green were the trees who grew needles, or the hardy little bushes with the prickly leaves and hard red berries she knew weren't safe to eat.

Giving in to the demands of her stomach, Raven turned toward a clump of pines, hoping a few of the trees would be mature enough to have produced cones, and that not all of them would have been scavenged by animals. The ache in her belly was distracting enough to have her eyeing the tree bark and wondering if it would at least offer her stomach something to work on other than itself.

It was even darker beneath the sagging boughs, the scent of the crushed needles surrounding her as she dropped to her knees and searched. The throbbing in her skull made the ground sway beneath her, so once she'd collected a little pile

of cones, she curled up on her side with her back braced against two trunks that forked from the ground, creating a sheltered pocket.

The first few cones she managed to peel open were rotten, the cores soft and off-smelling. Picking up the next, she broke off the tip and felt inside the upper scales, happy to find a couple nuts still intact. It had grown too dark to see, but the hard little shapes felt solid and firm, so she popped them into her mouth and kept searching for more.

Despite the numbness of her fingers from the cold, they grew sore from the hard, sharp edges of the pinecones. There had been a small handful of the nuts in the third cone Raven worked open, but the fourth only had a few left between the tighter scales where the squirrels hadn't been able to get to them.

Curling around the last three cones, she tucked her hands under her arms and let her mind drift. She couldn't call what she did at night sleeping. Every little noise startled her, jerking her attention this way and that even though she couldn't see beyond the shelter of the heavy branches hanging almost to the ground around her.

When there weren't noises to bother her, it was the cacophony of complaints from her body that kept her awake. Her aching feet and calves, the burning numbness of her nose and cheeks, the constant emptiness in her belly, and the growing pounding pressure behind her eyes. The nuts seemed to help a little, but as she sucked down the rest of the water in her skin, the nausea and dizziness grew.

At some point during the night she crawled away from her little shelter to empty her bladder and fill the tiny pot she had with snow to melt for more water. She wanted to start a fire the way she'd planned, but even with the fire-steel and flint she'd purchased, Raven hadn't been able to get one lit, and it was too dark to search for wood to try again.

Adding the pot to her pile of pinecones, she curled up on her bed of needles again, tucking her cloak over it to hold in her body heat. By the time the first hint of light crept beneath the

trees, she had a pot of water ready to drink. Emptying it into her waterskin, she filled it once more and sat with it in her lap as she pried the last three cones apart. She managed to find a few more nuts, but her stomach let her know it wasn't enough.

“Too bad. Get up and keep going.”

It was strange not hearing another person's voice for so long, so she'd started talking out loud on the second day, though it felt weird to do so.

Dumping the freshly melted snow into the skin with the rest of her water after taking a big swallow she had to force down, Raven stuffed the pot into her pack and crawled from beneath the boughs. She had to bite her lip on a whimper as she stood and the world spun, the morning sunlight dimming before flaring back to life as everything settled into place.

“Definitely need to find more food,” she whispered to herself.

Midwinter was a terrible time to travel. Next time, she'd plan her trip for spring. Or perhaps fall, after the harvest, when there was plenty of food.

Snorting she shook her head before tipping it back. She felt oddly light, and the way the sky kept moving overhead held her gaze until something hit her across her upper back. Looking to the side, Ash's face swam into view, his long blond hair loose around his jaw, brows creased above his amber eyes.

Smiling, she reached out to push his hair behind his ear so she could see them better.

“Did you know your eyes are the color of an ash tree? Is that how you got your name?”

“Are you—”

Darkness swallowed her before he finished his question.

Chapter Nineteen

Ash

Raven's eyes rolled back, smile disappearing as her face went slack. She'd already been limp when he caught her, barely making it before she'd crashed to the ground.

"Raven!"

He shook her small frame, her head rocking side to side, but she didn't respond.

"Damn you, you damn stubborn omega."

He knelt and used the arm not supporting her to reach around and tug her pack off her back so he could lay her down flat. Her breathing was even, though shallow, and when he checked, she didn't feel as if she was feverish. Her pulse seemed fast, but he had no idea what could be wrong with her.

Glancing around, he spotted the scuffs and disturbed needles from where she'd obviously crawled under the pine trees beside them. It was hard to peel himself away from her side, but he had to see if there was anything that might explain her condition.

A quick check showed him nothing more than a pile of discarded pinecone scales. While a few of them showed signs of rot, it didn't look like any of the moldy nuts were missing from them. He couldn't find anything that looked poisonous, and even looking around beyond her hiding place didn't reveal anything she could have eaten by mistake.

Pulling her eyelids back, he was relieved to see the whites of her eyes and the pink membranes inside the lids looked healthy, if a bit pale. Same with her gums and tongue when he squeezed his fingers into her cheeks and forced her mouth open. Beside a bit of chapping on her exposed skin, he couldn't find any sign of injury.

He turned to her pack, dumping the contents. She didn't have much. A pot, a bent kitchen knife, fire-steel and flint, a small coil of rope, an empty sack, and a rolled fur were the

extent of her supplies besides an extra set of clothes. She had a waterskin this time, but no sign of food.

Shaking his head, Ash sat back on his heels, studying the unconscious omega. She had made it further than her previous attempt, though not as far as he could have covered in the same amount of time. According to Raider she'd disappeared five nights prior, and Ash had been on her trail for the past three and a half days.

Unsure what else to do, he looked around for a safe place to build a fire. The bower under the pines worked as a safe enough place to shelter if the weather turned, but he had no idea when Raven had eaten last other than the pine nuts she'd scavenged. His only option was to warm her up and feed her, and hope there was nothing more serious going on than weakness from hunger and strenuous activity.

Whistling, he rose and began to scuff a clear spot in the thin layer of snow and leaf litter. Zaida was at his side by the time he had a circle of bare dirt.

“Zaida, food.”

It had been a little tricky to train her to do the different things he needed while hunting, and he'd had to be clear with what each command meant. *Food* told her to find something small and bring it back for him, while if he told her *hunt*, it meant to find large game for them to take down together, and *eat* meant she could catch something for herself. He'd always expected teaching her to circle prey or drive it would have been harder, but working together came natural to the Nicaavet, and Zaida generally knew what he needed her to do without him even giving a command.

But catching and killing something without eating it had been a hard lesson for her to learn.

Zaida cocked her head, torn ear pricked forward while the other swiveled to catch the sounds of the forest around them. He usually only asked her to get him something in the evenings if he hadn't found anything during the day, and she was still young enough that breaking routine could make her misinterpret his command.

“Zaida. *Food.*”

He gave the order more force, meeting her eyes until she chuffed and turned away, slinking through the trees with her head weaving from side to side. There was no way to know how long it would take her to find something, but it usually wasn't long, so he got to work gathering wood for the fire.

Keeping one eye on Raven, he gathered enough to get it started, small flames licking up from the bark and dried moss he scraped off a tree. Once he was sure it had taken hold of the smaller sticks and was burning steady, he stacked larger ones around the growing fire and went back to gathering wood. They wouldn't be moving on until he was sure Raven was okay to travel, and he'd rather not have to leave her more than necessary.

He had a nice little pile of branches stacked under the edge of the pines by the time Zaida returned with a duck dangling from her jaws. It was unusual to find duck this time of year since they usually went farther south in the winter, and even more surprising that she'd managed to catch it on her own until he noticed the awkward bend of the bird's wing. He might have assumed it was due to the Nicaavet until she dropped it in his lap and he ran his fingers along the bone, noticing the lump over the healed break.

Setting the bird aside, he went check on Raven again. Once the fire had settled he'd cleared a spot beside it and moved her closer, lying her atop the fur she'd had in her pack. She still hadn't awakened, but she twitched and moaned in her sleep, clutching her belly periodically. He still worried she'd eaten something she shouldn't have, but there wasn't much he could do for her so far from the village, especially without knowing what it could have been.

He set to work plucking the bird. Usually he would have saved the feathers to use for fletching or stuffing, but he'd left his sacks with Brant, so he stuffed a few into the little pouch he kept for tinder before tossing the rest at the base of a tree. Squirrels and other animals could use them to keep warm, so there was no reason to destroy them in the fire.

Removing the meat and using small sticks to spit it and lean it over the flames, Ash gave what was left to Zaida as her reward. The Nicaavet was unusually still, lying beside Raven and occasionally pressing her nose to the omega when she moved too much or let out a moan. He wanted to blame it on her being tired, or because she'd been asked to track Raven again, so she was staying with her mark instead of pacing the forest and circling the camp the way she usually would, but the longer it took Raven to wake, the louder the worry buzzing through his veins grew.

By the time Raven raised a hand to her head and finally blinked open those eyes the color of new moss, he'd already started rigging a sling so he could carry her back to the village for help. She weighed a lot less than an elk, and he'd been planning to strap her to his chest. All he could think of was maybe if he ran, he could make it back in time for them to save her.

Moaning, she rolled to her side before pushing herself upright, curls that had escaped the knot she'd pulled her hair into clinging to her cheek until she rubbed her face and focused on him. He'd frozen at the first sign of her waking, breath caught in his throat as relief washed away the worry.

“Wait, you're really here?”

Her head turned to Zaida still resting beside her, the Nicaavet's attention focused on the omega.

“Damn it, no! I've already made it this far, I refuse!”

Leaning forward, she braced her hands on the ground as a chill flowed through him. She struggled to stand, swaying and wincing as she straightened, oblivious as her curls came far too close to the flames.

Features settling into the mulish expression he'd come to expect from her once she was upright, Raven sucked in a deep breath and glared at him from across the fire.

“I'm not going back.”

The first part had been in her language, as if she'd been talking to herself and forgotten he could understand, but the

last was in Tayueta. He understood perfectly.

And fury burned away any lingering traces of worry or relief.

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Chapter Twenty

Raven

The growl that filled the space between them sent a shiver down her spine, her core clenching and releasing slick in the natural response of an omega before an angry alpha.

“Excuse me?”

The two words were deceptively polite. Quiet in a way that made them twice as deadly, and Raven shivered again. When Ash had rescued her from her first attempt to run, he’d always been so civil when he addressed her, and she’d even caught hints of a sense of humor. Somehow, in the secret fantasies about him that had played through her head at night, she’d dismissed the fact that he was an alpha.

“I—I can’t go back to Tayueta. My—My family might need me.”

He dropped the rope he’d been holding and stalked around the fire. She wanted to back away, to keep distance between them, but it felt like her feet were rooted to the spot. All she could do was lean away as he stopped in front of her, so close his candied nut scent overpowered the pine in the air around them.

“What good is one omega who can’t even find her way home? What are you going to do for them besides die like a fool, lost and starving in the woods?”

The throbbing in her head intensified, her stomach churning as a violent tremble worked its way through her body. The growl still vibrated from his chest, underlining his words and helping them cut deeper than her own insecurities.

“I know which way is home. I’m not lost. I won’t fail this time.”

Her voice was a whisper, the conviction missing. There was no question that she wasn’t as woods smart as Ash, or any of the alphas. She wasn’t blind to her ignorance, but it wasn’t her

fault she'd never had the chance to learn something deemed no use to her. She was doing the best with what she had.

Ash straightened, crossing thick arms over his chest as his growl fell silent. She hadn't realized how he'd been hunching over her until there was more space and she felt like she could breathe again, but the air stuttered in her chest as he spoke.

"If you're so sure, omega, then point the way to Siloah. If you're correct, I'll let you go."

Blinking up at him, she went over his words in her head, not sure she'd heard him right.

"If I can point the direction to Siloah, you'll let me go home? You won't take me back to Tayueta?"

Hope fluttered in her chest, knocking against the inside of her ribs. She couldn't outrun Ash, even if she'd been well fed and rested. And she certainly couldn't hide from him and Zaida.

But if he let her go, if he promised not to take her back to his village, she had a chance to actually make it home.

He dipped his chin, eyes locked on hers. They looked darker than they usually were, harder, and heat rose to her cheeks as the memory of what had happened right before she fainted surfaced.

She pushed those thoughts away, focusing on her surroundings. They were still beside the pines she'd spent the night under, and when she tipped her head back and looked beyond the bare treetops beside them, she could see the peaks of the mountains.

Drawing her lip between her teeth, she chewed on it as she debated whether she trusted Ash.

"I have your word you won't stop me from going to Siloah? That no Tayueta will stop me?"

She had to correct herself, worried he might find a way around his promise. He'd been alone the first time he'd found her, and she didn't see signs of anyone else, but that didn't mean there wasn't another warrior nearby.

Ash placed a hand over his heart, giving her a solemn nod, some of the anger leaving his face.

“You have my word neither I, nor any Tayueta or anyone under our command, will stop you from returning to Siloah if you can point in the direction of it right now.”

Sucking in a deep breath to steady herself, Raven glanced up at the mountains again before turning until they stood at her right. She had to squint a little as the sun broke through the clouds and shone in her face. Lifting her arm, she pointed straight ahead as she blew the air out.

“Siloah is that way. South of Tayueta and Lake Fratine. We traveled northeast and crossed a river into the Andtay plains before coming back northwest after leaving Andtay land.”

Her brow furrowed more the longer she pointed. She had no idea how long she'd been unconscious, but no matter what time of day it was, if she was facing south, the sun shouldn't be in front of her.

Bile rose in her throat as her arm drooped until it hung at her side, her chest heaving. She felt Ash's breath against the side of her neck as tears welled, threatening to spill down her cheeks as she realized she'd somehow made a mistake.

“You're absolutely right, Raven. Siloah is south of Tayueta. Past the plains, and Lake Fratine, through a strip of forest on each side of a river that separates our lands. Then you'd just have to walk over a set of rolling hills and cross another river to reach the village at the heart of Siloah.”

He paused, sucking in a noisy breath as his hands came down on her shoulders when she tried to move away.

“So why are you pointing west?”

Her entire body trembled, fighting the truth. She couldn't speak through the clog in her throat, the lump of frustration threatening to choke her. She'd known it shouldn't have taken so long to reach open land, but even when she'd been thrown on horseback to escape Andtay and race to Lake Fratine, the mountains had framed the land. First, ahead of them, backing

the lake, then to the left as they headed up to the Tayueta village.

Keeping them on her right should have taken her south to the lake.

A sob ripped from her throat.

“How?”

Swallowing the urge to cry, she snarled and shook herself, jerking out of Ash’s grip. She had to remind herself he was an alpha, he was the enemy, and she couldn’t let him see her breaking.

He had no reason to answer her.

A low vibration crossed the space she’d put between them, the soothing tone making her shoulders relax and allowing her to draw a full breath. Eyes darting to Ash’s face in surprise, he seemed just as startled by his purr, cutting off the sound with a cough and turning away from her. He leaned over the fire, doing something she couldn’t see, but she couldn’t pull her gaze from him despite the seething ball of confused emotions rolling inside her.

“The mountains frame Tayueta across the northern border and along the west as they turn south, but then they curve away to the west again. That’s why there are no mountains in Siloah. If you kept following them you’d have run into the river that marks the border between the clans, but you’d have been too far west.”

Tears still wet her lashes, but the knowledge helped ease the lump in her chest. Yes, she would have failed again, even without Ash catching her, but it would have been due to something she hadn’t known.

But what was going to happen now?

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Chapter Twenty-One

Ash

She was wiping her cheeks when he turned back to her, holding out one of the branches with a duck breast speared on the tip. Her eyes widened before she swayed and dropped to the ground as if her legs had given out, the rumble of her stomach loud enough he could hear it over the noise of the fire beside them.

Raven blinked up at him for a moment, but she reached out to snatch the branch before he could ask if she was okay.

“Be careful, it’s—”

Her hiss drowned out the rest of his warning as she bit into the sizzling meat, trying to inhale and cool it off while still chewing. It was clear she hadn’t eaten enough, and that could be the explanation for her fainting. If the damn omega kept trying to run without being able to provide for herself, she was going to end up dead and no good to either clan.

Huffing a sigh, he twirled a branch holding one of the legs, letting it cool as he watched Raven from the corner of his eye. He understood she’d been kidnapped from her home and she probably resented being forced to stay in Tayueta, but her drive to return to Siloah despite the danger to her didn’t seem logical.

What she’d said replayed in his head and his gut clenched.

“My family might need me.”

Ash had never liked fighting. He’d been glad when Raider took control of the village as Bruegar, since Raider had no desire to war with the other clans for pointless bounty, but Ash had also understood the need to strike back after Siloah attacked them the previous summer. His cousin, Heiv, was one of the warriors killed in the attack, Heiv’s daughter one of the women they’d gone to rescue. The drive to protect family was strong, and if that was Raven’s reason for running, she wasn’t likely to give up.

“What family do you have in Siloah?”

He kept his focus on the meat he was picking from the bone, letting Raven think he wasn't watching her even though he saw her head jerk up at his question. Her brows furrowed as her chewing slowed, but the look of suspicion told him she didn't want to answer.

Raising his gaze, he gave her a brief glance before reaching for the other duck breast and holding it out to her. She'd almost finished the first, and she needed the meal more than he did.

“You mentioned your family needed you. You're not mated, so I have to assume you also don't have children yet. You're young enough I'd think your parents are still capable of taking care of themselves unless they had you late in life, so I'm assuming you mean siblings?”

The way her pupils flexed told him he'd struck the right answer at the end.

Ash's parents had been betas, and not as prolific as an alpha-omega couple. Their only other child had died as a babe before he was born, so he'd been raised without the bond of siblings. It was likely why he preferred peace and quiet to the bustle of the village, but he still knew how important family was, and how strong the need to protect them could be.

Raven finished chewing, staring at him in silence before finally accepting the other piece of meat. He'd have missed her whisper if he wasn't listening for it.

“Sisters.”

His gut clenched again, a flicker of guilt making him turn his attention back to the leg he was picking at. Her family likely had nothing to do with the attack on Tayueta other than being part of the same clan, yet they'd been swept into the repercussions. It was unfair, but such was life.

“Did you live in the village?”

Raider had been clear on his orders before the attack on Siloah. The chief, his Second, and any alpha warriors they were sure had attacked Tayueta, were to be slain. Anyone

holding their people hostage were to be dealt with however necessary. Anyone simply defending their homes, they were to do their best not to injure, and no women other than unbonded omegas on the cusp of their first heat were to be touched.

But in the heat of battle, in the chaos that came with the screams, and the adrenaline, and the fire running through their veins, sometimes things got carried away.

“No.”

He turned as Raven shook her head and sighed. She didn't look at him, but she kept talking, and he found himself curious about how different her life had been than his.

“No, we had a farm. My sisters and I helped Father, while Mother took care of the house. She tried to teach me to be a better omega, but since I was the oldest, I was always the one to help with things Father didn't trust to my sisters, and when I wasn't enough, he got help from the neighbor's son.”

Ash watched her face close up, his hands instantly curling into fists. There was something there involving the neighbor's son, and he was willing to bet the kid was an alpha, but she continued, distracting him before his imagination carried him away.

“We'd brought a load of winter squash and canning to the village to sell the day your warriors came. Usually Father made us go early in the morning and come straight home, but Fawn had come with us, and he was meeting with Tanner's father to discuss Tanner's offer, so we were still there when...”

She trailed off, but she didn't need to say more. It had been pure chance that she'd been there that day. He assumed Fawn was one of her sisters, and since Raven had said she was the oldest, that would have made her too young to touch, and saved her from what Raven had gone through even if she was an omega as well.

“How many sisters do you have?”

“Three.”

She snorted at his look, a smile playing at the corners of her lips even though sadness still lingered in her eyes.

“Yeah, it was a lot. Father was very disappointed at not having a son to take over the farm, but Mother put her foot down when she lost a babe in the womb after Cherry. She’s the youngest. Came out with flaming red hair and round cheeks to match.”

Her chuckle pulled a smile from him despite his own tangled feelings. It was obvious Raven cared for her sisters, and the guilt in his chest grew.

Her good humor melted away with a sigh as Raven blinked rapidly, biting her bottom lip. He could feel what was coming, knew he should stop her before she said anything else because those green eyes were eating into his soul, but even as he stood and tried to think of an excuse, she spoke again.

“I have to get back to them. I have to be sure they’re okay. The fires, my father, Fawn. I don’t know what happened. They might need me.”

Her lips trembled, tugging at the ingrained need to protect.

“We didn’t set fire to any farms. Didn’t even go near the outlying homes except the one we camped at near the border, and we made sure it was empty. The only homes that were torched were the Chief and Second’s.”

He had to look away as he said it, his own part in what had happened in Siloah playing through his head. It wasn’t something he was proud of, but he’d do it again to rescue his cousin’s daughter. Raven’s people hadn’t been as kind to her as Raider had chosen to be to the omegas from Siloah.

“But Father and Fawn were in the village. We were separated. If he was killed, Mother’s on her own on the farm with Amber and Cherry, and anything could have happened to Fawn.”

Her words were desperate, pulling him further and further from the path he was supposed to take.

Motion drew his attention back to the little omega who’d climbed to her feet. Any other female may have tried to use her wiles to sway him, or sank further into the poor, helpless

façade to stir the protector in him to do her bidding, but Raven was too true to who she was for that.

No, the omega stood, hands balled into fists, glaring at him even as tears sparkled on her cheeks.

“I won’t stop.”

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Chapter Twenty-Two

Raven

Raven clenched her jaw, heaving out another breath. She wouldn't be weak.

"I won't stop trying to run," she repeated. "Every chance I get. You'll never get a moment of peace."

The uncomfortable expression on his face hardened, and a spike of worry tried to say she'd made the wrong move. That she shouldn't have pushed him.

But her feelings were hers, and she didn't want to share them, even if they would have made him pity her enough to let her go.

"You're going to end up dead. You don't have the skills to survive on your own."

She crossed her arms over her chest, shaking her head.

"Doesn't matter. If I die trying, that's better than living knowing I did nothing."

His brows dipped, lips turning into an angry slash, as if her saying she didn't care if she died offended him in some way.

"You can be guarded. Hobbled. There are enough alphas who would gladly keep you company each night to be sure you don't have a chance to run again. We only have to keep you under watch until your heat, and then your own body won't let you run."

Her blood ran cold at the threat. Kidnapping omegas from other clans was nothing new, but giving them a choice in who they would be mated to had been unexpected. Raider had made it clear they were under his protection and not to be touched against their will, Raven knew what Ash said was true. If she became enough trouble, it was the simplest solution to let the alphas have her. Once she went into heat she'd be bonded, and the anchor that formed between her and her mate wouldn't allow her to physically be that far from him for long.

She lifted her lip in a snarl as her arms dropped to her sides.

“I’ll kill them.”

Ash’s snort was a blow even though she knew her threat was flimsy. She was an omega. Small, feminine, and weak. The likelihood of her overpowering an alpha and killing him was slim, even if she managed to take them by surprise.

“I won’t cooperate. I’ll fight and scream. How do you think the other omegas will feel about it, when I’m chained up like an animal? How will it affect *all* the women of the village, to see what their alphas are willing to do to control another?”

He tried to hide the worry that crept into his expression, but Raven saw it. The alphas who’d visited her and Willow had been nice to them, but they were still alphas. Instincts still stirred beneath the surface, and the more she fought them, the stronger the urge to subdue her would become. Even the gentlest ones would struggle to maintain control, and it would carry over to all their interactions. She’d seen it happen in Siloah, when the warriors returned from raiding with women they’d kidnapped. Aggression couldn’t be contained once it built enough pressure.

“Raider won’t let it happen. He’ll figure out what to do with you if you keep trying to run.”

Ash turned away, but something told her she couldn’t let him dismiss her. He was right. If she kept trying to make the trip on her own, she’d end up dead. She couldn’t hunt, she didn’t know how to navigate, and she was wasting precious time. She could already be too late.

Darting across the space between them, she stepped in front of him and made him jerk to a stop.

“Help me get back to them.”

The words were too demanding even to her own ears, and she winced internally as she realized she should have said them differently. Nicer.

Ash’s brows shot up and he let out a huff, head tipping as he stared down at her. She knew what she was asking, and what

he may demand in return slowly dawned on her the longer he didn't respond.

Nerves fluttered in her belly, her core clenching unexpectedly. His nose had healed since their first meeting, the discoloration and swelling leaving behind handsome features that would turn any woman's head. He usually left his long blond hair loose, but he had it pulled back in a knot that showed off his square jaw covered in the shadow of a darker beard her fingers itched to touch.

Tongue slipping out to wet her bottom lip, she decided it wouldn't be hard to give herself to him. If he was willing to take her to Siloah to see her family, she would do whatever he asked of her.

Raven pulled her eyes back up to his, noticing how his had dipped to her mouth as hers wandered his face. It was a heady feeling to think he was as attracted to her as she was to him, and once again she wondered what it would be like if she could just give in and start a new life like she was being asked to.

She thought of Amber, only fourteen summers old, trying to hitch the plow to the ox come planting season. The animal she couldn't even reach over the back of.

Or little Cherry, turning the crank on the well to drag up the bucket over, and over, until her arms shook with exhaustion to get enough water to fill the troughs and tubs for the animals to drink and Mama to do the wash.

If only she knew.

"Please, Ash."

Even though Ash assured her their home still stood, she couldn't live with not knowing what had happened.

Did Father make it home with Fawn, or was he slain in the raid?

She could accept the guilt of not feeling properly sorry about the thought that her father might have died, but nothing could lift the burden of thinking she'd left Fawn to the mercy of whoever found her.

Or imagining someone showing up on their doorstep and demanding her mother and sisters leave since there was no one to plant the fields in the spring. Mama and the girls couldn't do it alone.

Or maybe they'd let her family stay in exchange for one of her little sisters. Even if Fawn had made it home, she had only seen seventeen winters, and Amber had three summers less than that. They were too young to be mated yet, and betas besides.

They were valued less, but had more freedom because of it.

Sucking in a deep breath, Raven shoved her own wants aside. Her father may have been wrong about a lot of things, but he had been right that family came first. Even if it meant giving up her chance at a different life, she wouldn't abandon her sisters to the unknown. Either Ash would help her, or she'd keep trying until she made it, or died trying like she'd threatened.

There were no other options where she'd be able to live with herself.

His gaze finally dragged back up to meet hers, a spark of hope taking hold as he let out a sigh. Shaking his head, he closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, muttering something under his breath before letting his arm drop.

“Fine.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Ash

He wasn't prepared for her squeal or the way she launched at him, arms wrapping around him before he could react. The scent of strawberries surrounded him, the spicy burn in the back of his throat the perfect description for the omega who had become his personal headache.

She didn't know what she was asking of him.

He didn't even know what he was offering.

Raven let go and stepped back just as his body started to respond, the press of her breasts against him something that couldn't be ignored, especially with her pheromones in his nose. He knelt and reached for his pack to hide the bulge in his pants, trying to get his brain to function enough to figure out what the best plan was.

"I'm ready to go when you are. Just point the way, I won't slow you down. I'll do whatever you say—"

"Sit."

His order cut her off, and he watched some of the excitement fade from her expression from the corner of his eye. He knew she was anxious to go, but they needed a plan, and she still seemed a bit unsteady on her feet, shuffling and swaying when she moved back to the fur beside the fire.

"I—"

"Hush."

Her jaws shut with a snap, his lips tipping up as she glared, but she remained quiet as he dug for his waterskin. She'd pulled her own out of her cloak while she was eating, but he wasn't going to take her water, and it gave him a little more time to think before he had to commit to anything.

The trip from the Tayueta village to Siloah was long on foot. Usually he would insist on getting horses, but they were already halfway to the border, and while the speed of the

horses would make up for the time it took to go back and get them, he'd have to answer to Raider to do it.

Raven claimed she needed to know her family was okay, but he had a feeling it wasn't going to be as easy as showing up and saying hi to her sisters, then turning around and going back to Tayueta. If she tried to stay he wasn't sure what he would do, so he preferred not having anyone else aware of their plans.

He knew what he *should* do in that situation, what others of his clan would do if she tried to refuse to return, but another glance at her sent tingles through his chest that told him he might choose the right thing for *her* over the right thing for his clan, and that was a decision he wanted to make without outside pressure.

Ash closed his eyes, shaking his head at himself again. There was no reason for him to do what Raven was asking, other than he couldn't tell her no after what she'd told him about her family. His Bruegar had sent him to find the omega and bring her back, "*On a leash if necessary.*" That he was considering leading her to Siloah instead was a direct violation of his orders.

And he had to admit there were other options.

Technically Siloah belonged to the Andtay as part of their agreement for helping with the raid, so Raider could send a message to them asking for information about Raven's family. It would take a while to get an answer, if one came at all, and Ash doubted that would be good enough for Raven. And in the meantime, she'd continue trying to run.

He had no doubt she was serious about that. Just as she'd been serious that she'd rather die trying than give up. Omegas were known for that kind of dedication. It was admirable, and he couldn't sit by and watch her keep hurting herself through ignorance, nor watch what he'd threatened her with in return. The women of the village wouldn't be the only ones to rebel if Raider tried to subdue Raven that way.

She was still staring at him, ignoring the rest of the duck that Zaida was eyeing with too much interest.

“Leave it,” he ordered as Zaida leaned closer, the Nicaavet puffing out her cheeks and turning away in a show of innocence he didn’t believe for a second. Glancing at Raven, he gave his own huff. “Just relax and finish your food. We won’t be moving on today.”

Raven’s mouth opened to argue and he raised his brows, waiting for it, but she held her tongue. Looking like she’d rather take a bite out of him, her teeth cut into what was left of the second breast, juices dribbling down her chin as he watched, distracting him once again.

This was all a terrible idea.

He kept his growl quiet enough Raven wouldn’t hear, though Zaida’s head tilted at him. Ignoring the animal, he pushed away all the reasons why he shouldn’t, and made up his mind.

Meeting Raven’s glare, he told her exactly how it was going to be.

“I’ll show you the way to Siloah, and I’ll teach you to survive on your own, but it’s going to be up to you to get there.”

Her brow furrowed, confusion filling her eyes as she swallowed the last bite of the duck and licked the grease from her fingers. He couldn’t help imagining her tongue put to other uses, his erection twitching and reminding him in still hadn’t abated.

Such a terrible idea.

“What do you mean?”

Clearing his throat, he poked a stick into the fire, adjusting the log so the flames died down.

“It’s clear you can’t hunt or navigate. The first time I found you, dehydration was less than a day from killing you. This time I’m betting it’s a combination of overcompensating for that, and not eating enough, but if I hadn’t found you when I did, you would have ended up dead again. For someone who insists on running away, you don’t know how to prepare.”

Her mulish expression returned, lips pinching in a sullen pout. He couldn't play nice, or she wouldn't take him seriously.

"You know Siloah is south of Tayueta, yet I find you heading to the west because you think you can follow the mountains all the way there, despite knowing there aren't any mountains in your clan's territory. You have to be more aware to travel and survive, especially in winter when it's harder to scavenge for food and a storm can sweep down from the mountains at any moment."

Raven pulled her knees up to her chest, wrapping her arms around them. He didn't enjoy rubbing her failures in, but she had to know how serious the situation was.

"I'll teach you to hunt. Finding food is hard in winter, and carrying enough to last a trip that long will weigh you down too much, so it's the only option you have. I'll show you how to make sure you're staying on the right track, but you still have to know where you're going to begin with. And once I show you how, I'll leave you to get to Siloah on your own.

"Or not."

The look she gave him cut deep. She acted as if he was betraying her instead of offering her the knowledge she needed for her freedom. She might not believe it at the moment, but he was sure she could learn to be as capable as him in the woods, and if she set her mind to it, there was no reason why she couldn't make it to Siloah.

He wouldn't tell her he wasn't sure if he really *would* leave her on her own. She had no chance of evading him, especially with Zaida on his side.

But he'd let her think she'd only have herself to rely on, and he'd see what happened from there. After all, an omega who couldn't take care of herself wouldn't survive long with him, and he was starting to think he wouldn't survive seeing her if she wasn't. It might be better for them both to leave her in Siloah.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Raven

A tremor rolled through her limbs. She was excited to learn to hunt and navigate, but to know she'd only make it home on her skills alone...

It was daunting.

Would Ash really leave her on her own?

Raven eyed him as he stood and dusted his hands. He tried to put up an unconcerned front, but she had a feeling he wasn't as uncaring as he tried to seem. He wouldn't leave her on her own if he believed she'd be in any danger from it, that, she was sure of.

But would he let her go?

She hadn't thought beyond getting back to Siloah and being sure her family was safe, and maybe making sure the rest of the village didn't need help. It was automatic to assume that if her father was still alive and well, then things would fall back into the way they'd been.

Her father would still expect her to mate Branch to assure he had the neighbor's help when he needed it. She'd have to behave and give up everything her father deemed inappropriate for an omega. It wouldn't matter that her return would prove she was capable of doing the things he had claimed were beyond her, her place was on the farm, helping him until it was time for her heat, after which she'd move into her mate's home.

And it wasn't as if Branch would give her more freedom after they were bonded. His views were just as narrow as her father's. It was one of the reasons Father had offered her in return for help with the things he couldn't manage without another strong body.

If Ash let her go, he had to know she wasn't coming back. He'd be returning to Tayueta without her.

Would he be punished?

Raider was a kinder leader than Lyric's father had been, but Raven doubted Ash could get away with letting an omega go. Would he claim he hadn't found her, or that it was too late when he did?

Some of her elation died, new guilt bubbling up with a groan that drew Ash's gaze. She jerked her face the opposite direction, lifting her waterskin to her lips. It was hard not to feel responsible, but she had to accept that he could deal with the consequences, because she couldn't carry the burden of more blame.

“Stop.”

Choking on a mouthful of water, her throat instantly closed at Ash's order. Cough spraying it down her chin and over the hand she put up to catch it, she turned wide eyes to the alpha who'd suddenly barked at her for no reason.

“Too much water can be just as deadly as not enough. You've drained that skin since you woke despite not being active. If your body's not telling you to drink, don't. You're only going to make yourself sick.”

It took a moment for the words to process, her mind playing over the way she'd been forcing herself to consume water even when she'd felt bloated and had to relieve herself constantly. She'd thought the dizziness and lethargy had been due to not eating, and perhaps some of it had been, but she'd likely been making it worse.

Her shoulders drooped as she curled into herself, letting the skin slip from her fingers. It seemed like everything she did was wrong. Even when she tried to learn from the mistakes of the first attempt, she just managed to mess things up in new ways.

Ash shifted, his nutty scent carrying to her over the smell of the fire.

“It's a natural mistake to make, especially after facing dehydration. One of the most important things to learn, *especially* if you're going to be on your own, is to listen to your body. It'll always tell you what it needs. It takes time to

learn what you can ignore and what needs to be addressed immediately, but first, you have to listen to what it's telling you."

Her eyes slid up from the ground to meet his. There was no sign that he thought she was as stupid as she felt, only a steady confidence that he knew what he was talking about and believed she could learn it too. If he was going to teach her what she needed to know to get home, she had to trust he was right to believe she was capable.

He'd proven he wouldn't let her die from her own ignorance, at least.

Blowing out a breath, she straightened herself and nodded. She *would* learn. She would prove she could do more than what her father believed an omega was capable of. If Ash thought she could, there was no reason to think he was wrong.

Pushing to her feet, she grabbed her fur and shook it out before folding it to cram back in her pack.

"We still have half a day. I feel good enough to walk now that I've eaten."

She didn't feel great, she was still sore and tired from days of traveling, but she was doing what he said and listening to her body. Nothing was demanding enough to prevent them from moving on while they had daylight.

But Ash shook his head as he stood.

"You need to give yourself time to recover. Pushing too soon will only make things worse. We'll stay here, rest and eat more where there's shelter, and move on in the morning."

She had to clench her teeth around the arguments bubbling up her throat. Ash could change his mind about taking her back to Tayueta, so she couldn't risk irritating him, but she didn't want to waste more time. It had already been almost two moons since she'd been taken, and somehow, being delayed when she was on the way back was more frustrating than all the waiting prior.

Ash's lips twitched as if he could read her thoughts. She'd never been great at hiding her emotions, so she had no doubt

her annoyance was written across her face.

She forced her hands to uncurl from their fierce grip on the fur to finish rolling it anyway.

“Zaida caught the duck you ate. She left and returned in the time it took me to build the fire. I never left sight of you. Tell me what you can guess from that information.”

Her head tipped as she studied the alpha who was banking the fire. There was plenty of wood, and it was still cold enough to make the fire welcome, so a little fission of excitement skated down her spine at the thought that maybe he was going to start his lessons now.

She thought over what he'd said, knowing there had to be something obvious.

“Ducks usually go south for the winter. If it was still here, it either escaped from a farmer who'd clipped its wings, or it was injured.”

Ash nodded, but he clearly thought she should be able to figure out more as he turned and crossed his arms, brows raised.

“Ducks... Live near water. If it survived this long without being able to fly, and she found it that fast, there has to be water nearby that's not frozen.”

His small smile lit warmth in her chest, an answering grin spreading on her face.

“Good job. The duck had a broken wing that healed wrong. The water is likely in a hollow or depression, or somewhere protected from the weather, otherwise he'd have died of exposure. If you were on your own, you could climb a tree to try to spot a low point in the land, and anytime you're in desperate need for water, that's what you should do. Just be aware that in other seasons, vegetation can mask the terrain beneath it.”

She nodded, trying to absorb everything he was telling her. If she'd stopped to think about it, logic said water ran downhill, so it would be easiest to find in the lower areas. And while she'd climbed trees as a child before her father decreed

it inappropriate, she wasn't sure about climbing one now, but if it meant her survival, it might be worth the risk.

She eyed the pines before looking at the closest tree that didn't look like it would skewer her within a handspan if she tried to climb it. Ash closed the distance between them as she was lost in thought, his fingers gripping her chin and bringing her focus back to him.

“Never. Take. Unnecessary. Risks.”

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Chapter Twenty-Five

Ash

He could see it all written across her face. The flash of worry as she glanced toward a tree, and then her trying to swallow the fear as she nodded to herself. He'd meant it as a suggestion if it was something she was comfortable doing, not if she was scared or didn't feel able.

Ash also didn't miss the way her pupils expanded at his touch, her scent growing sweeter despite the fact he was admonishing her. He couldn't be sure she'd actually heard what he was saying with the way she was looking at him, and his own body responded to the pheromones she was pumping into the air.

The omega was going to get him killed.

His first encounter with her should have shown him that, but for some reason he couldn't seem to do what he was supposed to and save himself. All he had to do was take her back to Raider and disappear on another hunt. Stay away until late spring, when she'd be safely mated to another and not smelling so good she made his mouth water.

Using his hold on her chin, he gave her head a little shake to make her focus before he lost his.

"If you're alone and you get hurt, you're dead. If you can't do something, don't risk it. Be smart. Be safe."

Her tongue slipped out, drawing his attention down to her parted lips. Cock jerking, he had to rip himself away from her before he did something foolish. He wasn't trying to woo the omega. He couldn't offer her a plush life in the village with all the attention she would need. He was the next thing to a hermit, gone part of the year, and isolated at his cabin half the time he was home.

Plus, she wanted to return to Siloah. He knew she wasn't likely to come back to Tayueta willingly, and he doubted he'd have the heart to rip her away from her family again.

Clearing his throat, he turned away from those wide green orbs and pointed into the trees.

“Zaida returned from that direction, so we should be able to find the water without needing to do that. Bring your skin and we’ll fill it, then I’ll show you how to set some simple snares. Animals need water too, so putting some where they have access to it can usually get you a meal if you have the time to wait.”

Raven seemed to shake herself out of a daze, nodding before leaning down to collect her waterskin. He would have told her to bring a knife too, but the pitiful excuse she had for one wouldn’t do much good with its blunt edge.

He led the way through the trees, trying to convince his body to calm down. It was hard to ignore his instincts when they were so close to the surface, but he tried to think he wasn’t the barbarian some alphas were. It was natural for her to respond to his presence and commands, her biology demanded it, but he wouldn’t assume she shared his interest just because her scent changed when he’d provoked her.

Zaida paced along beside him since he hadn’t given her directions, ears flicking in every direction. When he reached out to scratch her, she turned and snapped at his fingertips before running off behind a bush.

Huffing, Ash shook his head.

“I told him females were too much trouble. Not even in heat yet and nothing but problems,” he muttered under his breath, glancing over his shoulder to be sure Raven wasn’t close enough to hear. His longer legs meant she had to hustle to keep up, but he wasn’t going to take it easy on her so soon. She needed to build her endurance.

The smell of the water hit him before he saw it, his lip curling as he slowed. Raven caught up and stopped beside him, making a disgusted noise in the back of her throat.

“What is that?”

Moving forward, he sniffed, peering through the brush ahead of them until he caught the shine on the surface of the

water.

“That is a warning not to drink here. If the water has a smell, there’s something wrong.”

He parted the branches blocking him from getting closer, wedging himself between them to get a better look. The little pond was frozen all around the edges, only a small portion in the middle still liquid, the ice so dark green it looked black. The water had been brackish to begin with, but the dead buck stuck in the ice revealed the source of the sour scent in the air.

“Oh no.”

He barely felt Raven’s small hand on his back as she braced against him to lean forward, staring toward where he’d been looking. Her other hand covered her lips, the devastation on her face making him want to wrap his arms around her and assure her everything was okay, but it clearly wasn’t.

“He must have been too heavy for the ice, and he couldn’t get back out again when it gave under him. The duck wouldn’t have lasted much longer if this was his only source of water.”

Raven had said she grew up on a farm, so she understood the way of things, but it was still disheartening to see an animal who’d suffered before the end.

She met his eyes for a moment, blinking up at him before removing her hand and backing out of the divot he’d created in the branches. He had to pull his coat free of a few that tried to clutch at him, but he managed to work his way back out after her.

“Luckily we have snow for water, and we can still set snares. The smell of him will scare off most prey animals, but it might draw in any desperate predators. You don’t want to catch a wolf on accident because it’ll be too dangerous unless you can kill it from a distance, so you have to be sure to make it small enough it’ll catch nothing bigger than a fox.”

Ash could tell she was still bothered by the buck, but she had to be able to move past things like that. If it had still been alive, they could have tried to help it, or at least ended its misery, but they were too late, and it was too risky to chance

the ice to remove it from the pond when they couldn't use the spoiled meat. The only thing they could do was make use of the opportunity they had.

Her fingers twisted around each other, but her chin dipped, acknowledging what he'd said. Their chances of catching anything were slim, but traps were going to be her best option for food since she hadn't mentioned being able to use a bow, so she needed to learn how to make them.

He showed her how to find good spots to set the snares, then used supplies from his pack to make two of them. The third he handed to her, standing back to see if she could do it on her own. They weren't complicated, and after a bit of fumbling she managed to set it without his help, though he thought it was a bit too loose. Even so, he gave her a smile.

“Good job.”

She lit up like it was the greatest praise she'd ever received, and a part of him wondered at what her life had been like before the raid. She was curiously ignorant of things he'd have assumed most people would know, but she was omega, and she wasn't from Tayueta. He had no idea how her dynamic was treated in Siloah, and the way she'd spoken about her father meeting with someone regarding her sister had him thinking they were the type that kept them firmly in hand.

Swallowing his feelings about it, he waited for her to dust herself off and move away from the snare. She looked at him expectantly, but he only raised his brows, keeping his arms crossed.

“Okay Raven, lead us back to camp.”

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Chapter Twenty-Six

Raven

If she'd somehow thought learning to fend for herself was going to be fun, she had been mistaken. There were moments when she had felt invincible, ready to charge straight home and show her father she could do all those things he'd said she couldn't.

Then, there were times when she was frustrated, and embarrassed, and ready to break down in tears and beg Ash for mercy, sure every degrading word ever said to her had been correct.

She was young, she was a girl, she was an omega...

None of the excuses she tried swayed Ash, the limits of his patience seemingly boundless. Raised brows, shrugs, and huffs were his only responses when she claimed she wasn't capable. He didn't coddle her, or say it was easy, or that she'd get it right next time. He'd let her throw her tantrum, let her know when he'd had enough, then explain what she'd done wrong.

And then made her do it again.

And again.

And again.

They'd been traveling for four days. Four days since she'd led him in circles through the trees, unable to get them from the foul pond back to their camp so close by. He'd given her directions, told her the clues to look for, but none of it had made sense, and he'd followed her around until darkness fell and she'd collapsed to the ground, sobbing.

She'd been tired and hungry and cold, and he'd told her to remember those things the next time she left her camp. She had made three critical mistakes, and they were ones she hadn't forgotten since.

Never leave camp without your pack.

Always pay attention to where you're going.

Never trust your safety to someone else.

She was sure they were close to the border of Siloah. They probably would have been there already if Ash had been leading, but he'd been true to his word that he was letting her make it or not on her own. He'd taught her different ways of telling direction, and each morning he would let her know which way she needed to go and if there was anything she needed to watch for.

Raven wasn't sure if she was ready. She was almost certain she wasn't, might never be, but what option did she have? The longer it took her to get home, the less there might be to return to.

The thought made her stomach clench even as she lifted her gaze and looked at the alpha tending the fire beside her. Despite what he'd put her through, she'd grown to enjoy his company during their time together. He had a quiet sense of humor that snuck out at unexpected times, making her laugh when she needed it, and the way he treated Zaida was adorable. If Ash ever settled down and had children, he would be an amazing father.

Her jaw clenched, teeth grinding as she swallowed a growl. The knife in her hand slipped, tip luckily digging into the ground instead of her. The rip in the fox's fur didn't really matter, but she'd wanted that smile he gave her when she did things right, so the sight of it had her blinking away moisture as she breathed through the urge to cry.

"I'm glad you always hold the animals properly when you dress them. I know alphas who got too cocky and ended up stabbing themselves with blades covered in gore. One lost half his hand to the infection that came from it."

Ash's rumbled praise had warmth budding in her belly even though she'd made a mistake. He reminded her constantly that no one was perfect, but she still tried to be. It was hard not to after being held to that standard for so long.

"Father always took care of the bigger animals when we slaughtered one, but Momma made sure we knew how to dress birds and rabbits. Once you've plucked a hundred chicken,

you can pluck anything with feathers, and foxes aren't much bigger than rabbits, just bushier tails.”

“It's the same for deer and elk. The size and weight of them is the only difference if you're just looking at the body. Elk and bear have thicker fur that you have to get through, and bear have a layer of fat if you catch them before winter, but otherwise it's all the same once you've done it enough.”

Raven tried to imagine having to skin a bear and let out a huff. There was no world where she'd ever need to worry about that.

“We should make it to the river tomorrow. As long as you remember which way is south this time.”

She mock-glared at the alpha leaning back on his hands, a smile tugging up one side of his lips. She'd gotten turned around enough times the first two days that she constantly double checked her direction, and while she'd been a little off the previous day, she'd managed to keep them on track since they had started out that morning. Ash kept telling her confidence would come with time, but she doubted a day would make a difference, and once again worry began to seep beneath his gentle teasing.

Blowing out a breath, she ducked her head back to her work, feeding Zaida the bits they didn't need as she watched Ash straighten from the corner of her eye.

“Couldn't you go a little further with me? It's only been four and a half days since you started teaching me, and—”

“No, Raven.”

His voice was quiet when he cut her off, but there was no give in it.

“That's Andtay land now. If I cross over, it could mean problems for Raider.”

Her chest squeezed and she heaved out another breath. Ash was already risking himself by letting her return to Siloah, she couldn't ask him to risk his people. Tayueta and Andtay may have banded together in the raid, but truces between the clans

were fragile things, and she had no idea how volatile the leader of the Andtay was.

She thought back to their brief meeting, when she'd been pulled from the wagon and forced to stand naked before the gathered men. A chill ran down her spine as she remembered the hard look in his eyes as he'd assessed each of them, passing her over for two of the other omegas who'd been kidnapped.

But that had been further northeast, in what had always been Andtay lands near the ocean. Ash had drawn pictures in the dirt when they stopped at night, teaching her where major landmarks were, and the areas each clan claimed. Tayueta and Andtay were the furthest north she'd known, but there were more beyond the mountains. Below Siloah on the east was Licodie, and west was Elmaro, but if she'd continued to follow the mountains from Tayueta she'd have ended up in a desert too empty for any clan to claim.

And probably dead.

It was scary to think about. She had known what she was risking when she'd run, but to realize she would have been in a place devoid of plants or water or anything she was familiar with, too vast to cross...

Her mind couldn't wrap around it.

She knew Ash had saved her life. When he'd found her the first time she'd run and was dehydrated, the second time when she was half-starved and water-sick and lost without knowing it, and then he was giving her freedom.

She had no idea what she'd be going home to.

Everything could be normal. Her father and Fawn could have made it home, and all would be the way it had always been. She'd be expected to work until she went into heat and was given to Branch, whether she wanted him or not.

Or her father could be dead. She could secretly hope Branch was dead, but her father would only find another like him.

Fawn could be missing or taken.

Her mother and other sisters could be scraping by on the farm, or someone could have taken it from them and turned them out in the cold.

Or they could be slaves, working what had once been their land for someone else, being starved and abused.

The Andtay could have come back without Raider to temper them and decided to slaughter them all.

Or Mother could be forced into mating another alpha if Father had died, and he could try to make Mother carry a child for him despite the risk, and he would be in charge of what happened to her sisters.

She grew dizzy with the possibilities, her stomach twisting on itself. Dropping the knife, she pulled her knees up and rested her head against them, clenching her eyes shut and trying to quiet her mind so she didn't spew bile on their dinner.

Shuffling reached her ears, then a soft touch against her curls.

“Hey, it'll be fine. We're lined up right above the village, the weather looks like it'll stay clear, and all you have to do is go straight south. The rivers both have safe places to cross, and you know how to start a fire now to dry out afterward. If you miss a little, you just follow the second river toward the sun like we talked about.”

Ash's voice was soothing even though he didn't realize what she was really panicking about. Turning into his chest, she sucked in his scent, trying to drive the worries away, if only of a little while.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Ash

His breath caught in his throat when she pressed her face into his chest before stuttering out again as a purr. It was weak at first, just as hesitant as his stroke to her hair had been, but grew steadier as she leaned into him.

Was she really that scared to go on her own?

It didn't make sense considering she'd run from the village on her own twice with no skills, and once without supplies. It was almost as if she was scared of what she was returning to, but if that was the case, then why would she be trying so hard to get back?

The memory of the worry that had been in her voice when she talked about not knowing what had happened to her family hit him as he wrapped his arms around her, pressing her ear tighter to his chest as he kept purring. He knew that fear. It was the same thing he'd felt when his cousin's daughter had been taken by the warriors from Siloah.

She trembled in his arms, her hands clenching in front of her knees like she wanted to cling to him but was fighting the need. He didn't care about the little bit of blood smearing the hand that had held the knife if that was what was stopping her.

Adjusting the way he sat, Ash loosened one arm and slipped it under her knees, pulling her all the way onto his lap. She squeaked and darted a glance up at him, but he shushed her, pressing his lips to her forehead as he squeezed her close again.

"Everything will be fine. Fawn had your father and the boy he was meeting with to protecting her. You know we didn't take her, and your own people wouldn't turn on her. Your mother had the neighbor that always helped your father if he didn't return. People have a way of pulling together in times of need."

Her eyes seemed to grow wider, the darkness of the forest around them hiding their true color. Her pupils were blown,

but he didn't know if it was from the setting sun or his purr, and it was hard not to imagine she was looking at him with desire instead of a need for comfort.

Lips parted, her breath warmed his cheeks, the trembling easing as she relaxed into his hold. It was impossible not to react, his cock twitching to life at her nearness, her scent, and the way her eyes dipped to his lips before her tongue slipped out to wet hers.

“Ash.”

He groaned at the way she whispered his name, telling himself he only imagined the want in her voice. It had been a struggle to keep his distance as they traveled together, her peppery strawberry scent making his mouth water and leaving him with a raging erection that wouldn't abate no matter how many times he snuck away to deal with it. Every time she looked to him with that hopeful expression on her face, waiting to see if she'd done something right, she'd stolen a little more of his control, a little more of his sanity, and holding her had him on the verge of losing the last bit.

“Don't say my name like that Raven. I've been trying to be good. I can't give you what an omega needs, and you want to go home anyway. I can't go there with you.”

She wriggled in his lap, forcing him to loosen his hold until she could turn enough to straddle him. His purr dipped into a growl at the way she rubbed against his straining shaft, the clothing separating them not enough to block the sensation but keeping them too far apart at the same time. His hands had dropped to her hips, and when she rocked again, he clenched his fingers around her until she couldn't move.

“Raven.”

Her name was a warning, his control hanging by a thread. All the fear and panic had evaporated from her expression, leaving behind nothing but a vulnerability that pulled on his instincts.

“Please, Ash. I know it can't be anything more, but... I want this. I want *you*. Before I go back to a life where I have

no choice, *I want you.*”

His fingers bit deeper into her flesh, the urge to tear away her clothing almost overwhelming him. Clenching his eyes closed against her pleading gaze, he tried to take a deep breath to clear his head, but it only flooded him with the scent of her slick, thick and sweet in the air.

“Omega.”

He groaned the word between clenched teeth, trying to force his hands to release their hold on her.

“You’re asking me to rut you on the forest floor. To have your first time with no nest, no bed. Nothing but a couple furs in the cold. You’ll regret it when you choose an alpha to bond.”

She pressed her hands to his cheeks, forcing him to open his eyes and look at her. There was nothing hesitant or unsure, just pure determination written there.

“The only thing I’ll regret is losing the chance to have my first time with an alpha that *I* choose. One that I respect. That’s saved me, and helped me, and given me freedom when others wouldn’t.”

His teeth ground together. This little omega kept putting him in situations where the *right* thing wasn’t always the right thing. It might be tradition for an omega to remain pure until she’d chosen her alpha, there was nothing that forced them to wait, nor anything that said he had to deny her when he’d already made it clear he couldn’t offer more. She was the one making the choice to leave even if he’d wanted to win her.

Would he have offered to help her get back to Siloah if he’d thought he had a chance of keeping her for himself?

He shoved the question aside as she licked her lips again. She was breathing hard, each inhale squishing her breasts against him, the little pebble of her nipples begging for attention where they were trapped between them. The throbbing of his cock was insistent, demanding he do as the omega wanted, and when she leaned forward to gently brush her lips over his, he gave in with a rattling growl.

Hand tangling in the curls at the base of her skull, he tipped her head back and thrust his tongue into her mouth as he rolled forward, pinning her under him. Her gasp gave him all the access he needed to plunder the warm cavern behind her teeth. His movement had shocked her into stillness, but she melted under the onslaught, moaning as she clutched him closer.

Her taste was everything her scent had promised and more. Sweet with the hint of spice. Seductive, and sneakily addictive, just like Raven.

He'd promised to let her go, but for the moment he was going to pretend she was his and take everything she was willing to give.

He'd face the consequences in the morning.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

Raven

Ash's kisses stole her breath, the feel of him over her lighting a fire inside the likes of which she'd never imagined. She never would have been bold enough to say what she had if it wasn't for him, and she'd meant every word. If her father was alive and she was going home only to be stuck back in the life she'd always wanted to escape, she wanted the memory of what could have been to carry with her.

She wanted her first time to be her choice, with the alpha who'd never treated her as nothing but an omega.

A whine escaped as she rubbed her hands down his chest, the leather of his shirt keeping her from feeling his skin. They were both still fully dressed against the chill of the weather, but she didn't want anything between them.

Reaching up to her throat, she untied her cloak before slipping her hands under the edges of his coat, trying to push it off his shoulders. His lips left hers to trail along her jaw as he released his hold on her to help her remove it. He had to sit up to pull his shirt over his head, and when he did, she couldn't do anything but stare.

The fading sunlight shining between the bare trunks turned his pale skin a burnish orange, catching in the dips and valleys between the muscles across his chest and abdomen. Short hair, darker than the blond locks on his head, littered the expanse of flesh, making her fingers itch to reach out and feel it. There was the pink shine of scars here and there, hinting at stories she'd yet to hear about his life, and she wanted to kiss each one and thank the gods none had taken him before she'd gotten to have this moment with him.

Her breath caught as he reached for her, calloused hand sliding against the back of her neck before pulling her upright. He claimed her lips again while his hands went to the dress rucked up around her waist, tugging it higher until they had to break apart so he could pull it over her head. She no longer

wore the shirt she'd had under it when she left Raider's cabin, but her breasts were bound with a length of cloth, and her legs were still clad in a pair of pants.

A low grumble ground from his chest, bringing a smile to her lips as his fingers fumbled at the cloth binding her. She'd felt his arousal both when she was in his lap and when he'd pressed himself atop her, and it was invigorating to know she had that effect on him. There had been more than once when she'd thought she caught the scent of arousal from Ash, but he'd hidden it so well she hadn't been sure.

Feeling in the center of her chest, she found where she'd tucked the end of the fabric and tugged it free, letting him take it from there. He practically ripped it from her and pushed her onto her back again, diving down to take her left nipple between his lips. He sucked and her back bowed at the sensation, pressing her breast harder into his mouth, as if she could force the whole thing between his teeth.

Ash's other hand cupped the right one, fingers pinching and plucking the tip, sending zings that made her gasp and whimper as her hands tangled in the cloak beneath her. Her hips rocked, desperately seeking friction, but he'd moved too far down for her to feel the ridge of his erection, and his flat stomach didn't offer the same pressure.

"Please, Ash, I need..."

She trailed off as her head thrashed side to side. She didn't know what she needed, only that it was something *more*.

Teeth scraped her nipple, sending chills across her flesh as he raised his head to look up at her.

"And I'll give it to you, Raven. Just let me help you enjoy it."

His mouth took the place of his fingers, the nipple that he'd already suckled abandoned to the cold air as his other hand moved down to her pants. She tried to help once she figured out what he was doing, but it was still difficult to wiggle out of them with him crouching over her using one hand and refusing to release her right breast.

The fabric had barely slipped from her ankle when his fingers were at the juncture of her thighs, her chest tightening at the sudden touch. Forcing away the tension that had leapt into her muscles, she let him push her legs apart, his palm branding her with its heat.

She had never imagined what it would be like to be touched by an alpha. She'd known since before she'd had any interest in boys that she would be bonded to Branch, but she'd had no interest in him, and therefore, no interest in what would happen between them.

She hadn't known it could be anything like what she felt when Ash brushed his fingers along her outer folds and then slid between them. While there wasn't as much slick as there would be once she was in heat, there was enough for him to glide from her entrance up to a little bundle of nerves that made her breath catch and her hips twitch.

Ash pulled off her nipple with a lewd pop that drew her attention, his eyes flashing in the firelight as he grinned up at her.

"Now remember, we're outside, and loud cries can draw predators. I want to hear you, but you can't be too noisy."

Brow furrowed, she stared down at him as he shifted lower, until his head hovered over her core. A flush warmed her cheeks at how close he was to her center, but the look on his face kept her from stopping him.

His finger moved, circling the little pearl he'd found, making her hips buck again and a gasp ripped from her throat. Eyes clenching shut, she threw her head back, but his finger immediately stopped.

"Look at me, Raven. I want you to see what I'm doing to you. You want me? You're going to remember my face every time you feel this."

It took every bit of effort she had to peel her eyes open and lift her head, but she'd do anything to have the feeling he'd created back. It was intense, and breathtaking, and left her needing more.

“Good girl.”

The praise was almost as heady as the way he touched her.

His finger moved again, tension coiling throughout her body at the sensations he caused. She couldn't draw a full breath, air stuttering through her parted lips as she watched his smile spread wider, his eyes taking on a wicked gleam that threatened to stop her heart.

“You smell so sweet, Raven, producing slick for me, but we're going to need you wetter to make things comfortable. Do you trust me?”

It was hard to focus on his words, the meaning trying to float away on the building tide between her thighs, but she forced herself to answer when his swirling slowed. She did trust Ash, more than any alpha she'd ever met.

Even her father.

“Y-yes.”

It was a struggle to push that one word past her lips, but the purr that throbbed between them made it worth the effort.

Ash's head dropped lower, her breath catching in her throat as she was torn between trying to figure out what he was doing and the feel of his finger as he started to widen his circles to brush around her opening. He kept his eyes on hers, lust darkening them even more than the fading daylight, and her lungs froze completely when his mouth connected with the skin of her inner thigh, just above her knee.

That gleam in his eye wasn't wicked, it was predatory, and her belly quivered as he opened wider, taking her flesh into his mouth to scrape his teeth along places that had never before been touched.

Heart sputtering, mouth gaping, all she could do was watch and feel as he moved higher and higher, sure she would die if he did what she was imagining.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Ash

He ground his cock into the ground, needing the pressure to hold his own release back as he watched Raven's eyes grow wider the higher he climbed up her thigh. He hadn't realized she was so innocent, so sheltered, and just the thought that she'd chosen him to be her first had him ready to come in his own pants.

Maybe he should. He could satisfy her with his fingers and tongue and keep his cock to himself so her future alpha could still be her first...

But he was selfish. He wanted her. Wanted to be her first.

Wanted to be her only, but he wouldn't let his mind dwell there. He was doing the right thing for her by letting her go home.

Even if she'd made him reconsider his stance on not taking a mate.

The scent of her slick called to him. Urged him to drive his tongue straight into her core and taste her. But their time together was limited, and he wanted to make sure it was good for her.

He licked along the crease of her thigh, from her buttock all the way up to the top of her mound. He had to pause to steady his control so close to where he wanted to be, but after a few panted breaths he pressed a kiss to her dark curls before sliding back down to begin again on the other leg.

Her whine was mixed with the edge of a growl, and he grinned against her pale flesh, giving her a nip that made her gasp and jerk. He knew she was balanced on the edge, her channel clenching each time he circled it with his finger before going back up to swirl around her nub, but he wasn't ready to let her fall.

Raven's hips rocked in an instinctive rhythm, chasing her orgasm, trying to get that last little bit to push her over. He

held her tighter with his other hand, slowing both of their movements. Her eyes narrowed and her teeth flashed, but she obeyed his command and didn't look away from his face.

“What do you need, Raven?”

He murmured the question into her thigh. The skin was pink where he'd scraped his teeth against it, and he licked over the spot to soothe the flesh. She tried to wriggle her hips and push against his finger, but he pulled it away as his mouth moved higher, his face so close to her pussy he could feel the heat of it against his cheek.

“Please.”

Her pupils were blown, her chest rising and falling on short breaths as she stared down at him with lips parted. Her brow was creased as if she was in pain, her hands fisted into the cloak beneath her, but he needed to hear her say what she wanted from him.

“Please what?”

He placed kisses along the crease where her thigh met her body, flicking his tongue out to taste the slick coating her. It wasn't the flood it would be when she went into heat, but it would be enough to ease his way.

He pulled his gaze from hers to look down at where she was spread wide and glistening for him. He traced the pink opening with the very tip of his finger, waiting, but when she still didn't respond, he met her eyes again.

Tears balanced on the edge of her lashes, her jaw working as if she wanted to speak but didn't have the words, and it was then he realized she may have been so innocent she didn't know how to say what she wanted.

“Do you want me to make you come?”

A breath gusted from her as her chin dipped, her brow lifting as she nodded repeatedly.

“Yes. Please.”

He smiled, strengthening the purr that wouldn't stop pouring from him.

“I’m glad, because I want to see you come for me.”

He pressed his finger into her channel, her mouth falling open as her eyes widened. Pulling back, he added a second, and when he had them buried inside her he used his thumb to brush over her clit.

She’d been so close, one touch was enough.

Raven shattered, her entire body going stiff as her orgasm washed through her. Back bowing, she threw her head back, eyes clenched shut as she cried out and drenched the hand at her core.

Her channel rippled around his fingers, squeezing and clutching, trying to milk them for what they were unable to give. His cock twitched, throbbing against his pants, dribbling in response despite not being inside her.

He groaned as he leaned forward to pull a tight nipple between his lips. Raven gasped, core spasming again as she started to relax beneath him until he rolled his thumb over her clit.

Releasing her nipple he went to the other, sucking it deep and flicking the tip with his tongue as he rocked his fingers and gently rubbed his thumb around her little nub until she started to move with his hand again.

Sitting back, he looked up at her flushed face, her curls wild around her head. She still trembled from her release, her breathing deep and hard, but her eyes were hungry.

“Do you want more?”

She looked startled, and his smile grew into a grin.

“That’s—I can have more?”

Chuckle rumbling from his chest, he leaned forward to capture her lips with his, thrusting his tongue into her mouth. She moaned, squirming between his kiss and his hand, rubbing herself against his chest. She probably didn’t realize she was doing it, but she was marking him with her scent, telling any other omega that *this* alpha was taken.

His chuckle rolled into a growl he couldn't stop, and he added a third finger to the ones working inside her. Ripping her lips from his, she sucked in a hissing breath before her muscles melted under the sound.

“I want more. I want you, Ash.”

The quiet words filled his chest with something he couldn't name. Something that made his eyes drop to the corner of her neck, where her honey-colored curls spilled over her shoulder, his mouth watering.

If she'd been any closer to her heat he wouldn't have been able to resist the urge to sink his teeth into that place and damn letting her go back to her people. He'd keep her forever.

“Good, because I'm going to give you more.”

His voice was gruff as he forced himself to slide down her body again, kissing a trail between her breasts and over her soft belly. The scent of her had the pitch of his growl dropping until it was almost inaudible. Just a vibration in the air between them. A declaration of his intent.

The sight of her pink folds stretched around his fingers, slicked with her arousal, had him thrusting against the ground again. He throbbed with the need to sink into her, to stuff her with something thicker that would answer her body's demands as it sucked at him, but he still needed to show her one more thing.

Taste her in one more place.

Give her one more first, so every memory she had would be of him.

Chapter Thirty

Raven

Ash did the unthinkable.

Raven watched as his tongue extended, tip pointed. Flashing eyes met hers just as that hot, wet muscle met the bundle of nerves that did things she'd never imagined.

Every nerve in her body jolted, her heart stopping as he licked overtop the hard nub before twirling his tongue around it in a tight circle. Her legs twitched around his shoulders, her heels digging into his back without her command as her hands curled tighter in the fabric beneath her.

Every prayer she'd ever prayed to every god she knew flew through her head, offering *anything* to keep Ash *right there*.

A high-pitched whine rose in the back of her throat, her core trying to crush the fingers still working in and out of her, but none of it mattered. Nothing but what he was doing to her with his tongue.

Until he twisted his fingers inside her and curled them upwards as he wrapped his lips around the wonderful little nub and *sucked*.

Her legs slammed shut around his head as she screamed, writhing in a bid to escape the sensation that was *too much* and *perfect* all at once. The bubble of tension that had recoiled inside her exploded with a wave of heat followed by the flow of ice through her veins, her fingers and toes curling so tight they lost all feeling.

Raven's voice sputtered out long before the fist around her lungs released, her cry going silent with a lack of air she couldn't find the will to miss as waves of pleasure battered her. Moisture leaked from her eyes but she refused to call them tears when she was filled with nothing but bliss as her core clenched around his stilled fingers and tried to pull him deeper.

How would she ever survive knowing there was pleasure like this to be had?

Just as she started to relax and she was able to suck in a desperate gasp, Ash flicked his tongue, thrusting her back into the depths of sensation. It felt as if the ground shook beneath her and the only thing holding her steady was his grip on her hip and the fingers poised inside her channel.

But as much as her core grasped and pulled, there was the feeling of something missing. Of something incomplete.

And as her thighs fell away from Ash's head and her spine met the ground again, there was still a need that hadn't been quenched.

Gasping, she blinked as Ash sat up, her juices sparkling in his beard. Embarrassment tried to flare in her cheeks but she shoved the feeling aside, knowing he wouldn't have done it if he had any qualms about what would happen. It may have been new to her, but he'd *known*.

A spark of jealousy bit at her guts, but there was nothing she could do about it, and part of her was grateful that he was experienced enough to guide the way for her. She doubted her first time would have been as good with someone untutored, but one glance at the bulge between his thighs showed he still wasn't finished teaching her.

Uncurling her fingers from her cloak, she lifted a hand toward him.

"Ash."

His name was a gasp on her lips, but she needed him to show her everything. To finish what they'd begun and take the one thing she was able to give while she had the chance.

Sucking in a deep breath, she searched through her memory for the right words. They hadn't gone into town often, but alphas were randy beasts, and she'd seen warriors disappear into dark corners with beta women often enough.

"Fuck me."

The groan he released had more slick coating her folds. He pulled his fingers out of her, making her shiver, but she was distracted from her emptiness when he put the digits in his mouth to suck her arousal off them.

“Those are naughty words, Raven. Are you sure you’re ready?”

She’d never been more sure of anything in her life, and she nodded, spreading her heels further apart to entice him.

Ash rose to his feet, hands going to the laces of his pants. It didn’t take him long to untie the knots, the flap falling open as his hands moved to the fabric clinging to his hips.

“There’s no going back after this,” he warned.

She knew he was giving her one last chance to change her mind. To do the right thing and save herself for her future mate.

She had always done what was asked of her, even when it wasn’t what she wanted, and she was tired of it. Being kidnapped had given her a chance at freedom, at having a choice, and if she was going to give it up, she was going to take something for herself first.

“Fuck me, Ash.”

It wasn’t soft or hesitant. It was a demand. A challenge.

Ash’s eyes flashed and he grinned as he pushed his pants off his hips. She couldn’t help looking as his cock bobbed free, her breath once again catching in her throat.

His shaft was long and thick, the weight angling it away from his body despite it being erect. His flared head was ruddy, the skin darkening as it descended toward the heavy sac nestled beneath, and the tip glistened with his own excitement.

Her core pulsed in response, her tongue slipping out to wet her lips as the scent of the seed that had leaked from him as he teased her reached her nose. It was briny and intense, not as sweet as his normal candied nut smell, and it made her mouth water.

The thought of tasting him the way he had her almost distracted her from the need to have him inside her, but he didn’t give her the chance to do more than consider if it would be possible to fit him in her mouth before he was kneeling between her knees again.

His gaze caught hers, mesmerizing her as he leaned closer. The firelight played in his irises, giving them orange flecks amidst the darkened brown.

Fingers curled under her thigh, hitching it higher on his side as something blunt and hot pressed against her opening. She trembled, her flesh alight with the feel of him over her.

“You’re mine, Raven. Right now, tonight, you’re mine.”

Her heart stuttered and she caught her bottom lip between her teeth, blinking away a sudden surge of tears. Sliding her hands up his arms to tangle in his hair, she pulled his head down to hers to hide her emotions in a kiss.

Pressing forward, he breached her opening as he slipped his tongue between her lips, taking his time as he filled her. A purr tangled with a growl in his chest, vibrating into her where her breasts pressed against the hard planes of muscle covering his ribs.

It was wonderful, and terrible, and everything she’d never thought she wanted. It was sweet, too sweet, and he was going to break her heart if he kept drowning it in what it couldn’t keep.

She broke their kiss, ducking to press her forehead to his collarbone as he pulled back before pushing further into her. He kept going and going, past where his fingers had reached, all the way to the ends of her depths where she thought there couldn’t possibly be any more of him to take, then he gave her more.

Groaning when his hips finally pressed against the back of her thighs, she breathed through the stretch, letting her lips drift over the rough hair on Ash’s chest as he waited. When the muscles of her core finally loosened she let her head thump back against the ground, blinking up at Ash as she gave an experimental rock of her hips.

“Well?”

Chapter Thirty-One

Ash

A snarl slipped out when her pussy contracted around him, strangling his cock. Her heat enveloped him, threatening to have him spill himself too soon, his knot already bulging at the base of his shaft.

“You’ll be the death of me,” he murmured into her hair, exhaling before bracing himself and dragging his length out.

They both hissed before moaning as he sank home again.

Home, because that was where he belonged. Where he wanted to stay for the rest of his life, buried deep inside her.

He pulled out again, moving slow so he wouldn’t hurt her, but it was torture. He wanted to snap his hips forward, slam himself into her, rearrange her insides until they were made to fit only him. He wanted to lock his knot in her cunt and fill her with his seed until her belly was swollen from the burden of it, and keep her that way until it swelled even more with his babe.

Shaking his head, he pushed himself up until he could look between them and watch as his flesh disappeared between her pink folds. He groaned at the sight, glancing up when Raven gasped to see her following his lead and watching his invasion.

Her curls were a tangled halo around her head, her cheeks flushed pink from their activities, her eyes glazed from the orgasms he’d already given her. The weight of responsibility and worry she always seemed to carry had melted away, and she glowed with her need.

She’d always been pretty, but looking like that, she was a siren who could call men to their death, and they’d gladly go without hesitation.

Her stranglehold on his shaft loosened, her body growing accustomed to the stretch, the flow of slick easing his way. He increased his pace as her grip on his arms tightened, her gasps and sighs getting closer together as she watched him impale her over and over.

“Come for me, Raven. Let me feel you come on my cock.”

Her eyes flashed up to his moments before her muscles locked tight and she followed his command, her pussy fluttering around him as he fucked her through the orgasm. He was so close to his own release he had to bite his tongue to keep from following her, but he'd wanted one more just for her. One where he could watch as she came apart on him before he indulged his own need.

Her eyelids drooped as she went limp, exhaustion starting to catch up with her. He was tempted to pull out and finish by coating her with his seed, marking her with his scent, but the rivers would be too cold for her to bathe, and returning to her home like that would cause problems for her.

Knot bulging as he drew closer to the edge, he was still tempted to pull out until she moved her hands to his chest, scratching her nails over his nipples.

He growled as his gaze darted back to her face, having been distracted by her breasts as she'd heaved for air.

“Knot me.”

A smile played around her lips, challenging him, and he shook his head as he sat all the way back on his knees.

“Have it your way.”

Pulling free of her cunt, he smirked as her eyes widened and her mouth popped open. Before she had the chance to protest, he grabbed her hips, flipping her onto her belly. Delivering a sharp smack to her rounded backside, he pushed her legs wide.

“Ass up. Present, so I can fuck you until I knot your needy pussy.”

Her cheeks were bright red when she looked over her shoulder at him, but she scrambled to obey. Pulling her knees under her, she kept them spread wide as she tilted her hips, keeping her chest against the cloak as she stared back at him with her lips parted.

A pink handprint glowed on one side of her upturned bottom, tempting him to make the other side match, but the

slick dripping from her opening called to him far more. Wrapping his hands around her upper thighs, he leaned down for a taste, swirling his tongue around her clit before dipping it into her opening to scoop up a mouthful.

He groaned and swallowed, flattening his tongue to give her another lick from clit to entrance before straightening to line himself up and thrust deep. Raven moaned into the cloak, feet curling around his calves as he adjusted his grip.

“Such an obedient little omega when you want something. I’ll remember that next time you decide to be difficult.”

He shoved aside the little voice reminding him that wouldn’t happen because she would be gone after the next day. She was his for the moment, and that was all he could focus on.

Holding her hips in place, he gave in to the urge to fuck her harder, driving himself as deep as he could go, his growing knot pulling on her folds each time he forced it in and then dragged it back out.

“Next time you want to be demanding, remember this. Remember what giving orders to an alpha gets you.”

She mumbled something he couldn’t understand, but the tone of it had him slowing, reaching forward to tangle his fingers in her hair to pull her up until her back arched and she cried out at the new angle.

Running his lips along the side of her neck, he parted his mouth and let her ear slip between his teeth, teasing the edge of it.

“What was that?”

It was barely a whisper, but he knew she heard. She shivered beneath him, trying to rock on his cock as he held himself still inside her but kept his knot just outside her clutching core.

“I won’t move until you tell me,” he taunted as he nibbled on her lobe before working his way down her neck.

Raven whined, her channel pulsing around his shaft, and he let his other hand slip forward to tease her lower lips without going near her clit. She hissed and whimpered, trying harder to impale herself deeper and take his knot, but he pressed his chest tighter to her back and kept her in place.

Snarling, she yanked her head to the side, and he let her turn enough to glare back at him with one eye.

“I said if it gets me fucked and knotted, I’ll give you orders more often!”

Laughing, he released her hair and leaned back, hands taking their place on her hips once again.

“That’s just because I’ve been nice.”

Using his hold on her as leverage, he showed her how punishing a fuck could be.

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Chapter Thirty-Two

Raven

The space between her legs throbbed, her insides complaining of abuse, no matter how delicious it had been. It took every bit of her will to hold in a groan as she staggered to her feet and forced herself upright.

Stealing a glance back at Ash, her heart dropped, but she swallowed and forced herself to keep moving.

She'd gotten exactly what she'd asked him for. There was no way she'd ever forget what they'd done together, and she'd cherish the memories for the rest of her life if things turned out the way she expected them to.

Her core cramped as she bent to grab her pack, and she hissed a breath between clenched teeth. Being knotted had been excruciating and exquisite, the orgasm stronger than any before it, but she'd probably have been smarter to let him skip that part when it had seemed like he was thinking of not forcing that bulging flesh inside her. She'd certainly have felt better, but there was no way she'd wanted to miss having that first with him as well.

She spared another glance to where Ash laid on her fur next to the coals of the fire, trying to swallow the lump in her throat. The sex had been amazing, and being knotted had been mind-blowing, but more than anything, it was the way he'd held her afterward that had threatened to destroy her.

She had to go. She couldn't wait even another night. Another moment like that, and she'd forget all about her duty to her family. Another kiss, another touch, another *look*, and it would be too much for her to give up. She'd be selfish and choose her own happiness.

She'd choose Ash.

Choking down the tears, she belted her cloak in place and looked for the landmark she'd chosen when they'd stopped for the night. It was a trick he'd taught her in case the weather turned during the night, or if she had to travel before the sun

came up. Find landmarks in the direction you need to go while you're still sure which way you're going.

It was much harder to see the split trunk in the dark, the scorch-marks hidden by the night, but moonlight helped guide her. She picked her steps with care so she didn't make any noise that would wake Ash. If he caught her sneaking away, she wasn't sure what he would do.

Would he let her go, or would he try to make her stay?

She had made it to the trunk and was far enough from where they'd camped that she wasn't scared the sound of her breathing might wake Ash when something bumped her thigh. Knowing she was still close enough that a scream would bring the alpha running with weapons out, she bit her tongue as she leapt to the side, whirling to face...

Zaida.

"By the gods, you horrible animal! My heart almost stopped!"

Zaida cocked her head as Raven pressed a hand to her chest, drawing in a shaky breath as she tried to force her heart to slow to something near a normal beat. Her tongue stung where she'd bitten it, but that was forgotten as sore muscles began to complain about her sudden movement since her life wasn't at risk after all.

Huffing out a breath, Raven stared walking again, knowing she didn't have the time to waste if she wanted to put as much distance between herself and Ash as possible before sunrise. He usually woke as soon as there was light, and while he'd repeated enough times that he'd have to leave her at the river, she had a feeling he wouldn't be happy about her choosing to go off on her own before then, and he may decide to follow her. She had to cross out of Tayueta territory before nightfall.

Zaida paced at her side and she was tempted to order the Nicaavet back to Ash, but she also worried if she did, Zaida might wake him while she was still far too close. The animal was a good enough tracker Ash let her roam free, so Raven figured there wouldn't be any harm in letting her follow for a

while before sending her back to her master once she thought she was far enough away.

Another little pang bit into her at the thought of not seeing the Nicaavet again. As terrifying as the creature had seemed when Raven had first seen her, Zaida had grown on her as they traveled together, often lying by her side when they camped. Stroking her soft fur was soothing, though she was careful to avoid the torn ear since Zaida had snapped at her the one time her fingers had wandered too close.

Tamping down the bubbling feelings of regret, she focused on putting one foot in front of the other, picturing her sisters instead. Imagining Amber and Cherry struggling on the farm, attempting to complete all the chores she used to do, wondering what had happened to her and Fawn, was the only thing that drove her on.

Fawn was only a couple summers younger than Raven, and she had to believe Fawn was smart enough to have found a way to survive no matter what had happened to her, but Amber was at the age where she was starting to catch male attention, without being old enough to be prepared for it, and Cherry was far too young to be forced out of her carefree childhood yet. She was the baby, doted on by all but their father, and the thought of her exuberance for life and her mischievous pranks snuffed out under the yolk of responsibility left Raven depressed. She'd carried the burden so they could enjoy the things she'd missed.

She just had to hope she could find a way to survive despite giving up a life she wanted with every fiber of her being.

Tears blurring her vision, she broke into a jog, too tempted to turn back to allow herself the chance to think. Half her heart had been left behind when she had been kidnapped, her worry for her sisters overriding everything, ever her disgust at the life she'd be forced into if her father or betrothed survived.

But as she returned to mend that piece, she was ripping the other half from her chest and leaving it with the alpha who'd won it unexpectedly, doing nothing more than treating her as a person and giving her the chance to be *her*.

Zaida led the way, weaving between tree trunks and around downed branches Raven couldn't see. Thankful she was forced to focus on her footing, Raven raced behind her, keeping the sun on her left as it rose from its slumber and climbed into the sky.

Maybe if she ran fast enough, she could leave the feelings behind with her heart too.

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Chapter Thirty-Three

Ash

It was unusual for him to sleep until light flooded the sky, but the night's activities had been unusual as well.

A grin crossed his face as he stretched, cock stirring as images flashed through his mind. Raven had taken everything he'd given her, clamping around his knot and coming so hard he'd thought she might crush it.

It had been instinct to care for her afterward, keeping her warm and comfortable until his knot deflated and he could pull free, then ripping a scrap of cloth from the bandages he carried for emergencies to wet with his waterskin and clean her. As much as he'd enjoyed staring at her body laid out on the fur by the fire, he'd had to insist she dress while he cooked their food so she wouldn't catch a chill.

They'd fallen asleep together after eating, talking quietly until they dozed off, but when he rolled to his back, he realized she wasn't beside him.

Sitting up, he looked around their little camp.

The coals had almost died out during the night, his exhaustion so complete he hadn't woken to keep the fire fed, but Raven knew how to tend the fire and she would have stirred it up herself if there was something for them to cook for breakfast.

The extra wood he'd found when they made camp the night before was still within reach, with his pack and waterskin nearby, but Raven's was missing from where he'd seen it last.

Standing, Ash turned his gaze further out. There could be many explanations for why he was alone, but a cold pit in his stomach told him none of them were right.

There were no signs of life other than the gentle sway of the branches and birdsong in the distance. No little female who'd shown him he might be wrong about what omegas wanted.

Not even a Nicaavet who should have been patrolling to be sure no predators approached while he slept.

The birds quieted at his whistle before busting into song again, as if trying to prove theirs was the better performance. He waited a handful of breaths, but when there was no sign of Zaida, he whistled again, turning a circle as he looked for any motion in the distance.

“Zaida!”

He ached to call another name, but he refused to let it free, and when he still got no response, he was left staring toward the south, frozen in place.

She’d run again. Run off without him, and his Nicaavet had abandoned him too.

Fingers curling into his palm, the ice in his chest thawed.

“Gods damned, stubborn, bull-headed—”

He ran out of painfully true things to call her.

“Omega!”

His shout echoed around him, the following growl finally scaring the birds into silence.

They were supposed to make their way to the river that separated the territories, but she’d clearly left without him. He had no way of knowing how long ago it had been, but if she had a good enough lead, she could cross the river before he reached it.

He hadn’t lied when he’d said if he crossed the river it could cause an issue between Tayueta and Andtay. Technically they’d forfeit any right to the clan they’d conquered and left it to the Andtay as part of their payment for the loan of warriors. Raider didn’t want the land or the hassle of integrating people who would hold a grudge. It was too much area for them to patrol and they had no need for it, but Andtay did.

Andtay’s land was rocky, following the shoreline of a rough and sometimes unforgiving ocean. They had fish and goods from the sea, but as their clan grew, they needed more space and food. Ash had no idea what Verik’s plans for the people of

Siloah were, but he'd been clear that Siloah land became theirs if Raider wanted help, so if Ash crossed the river without permission and was caught, it could cause problems.

He hadn't planned to let it stop him.

Raven was a female, and an omega. On top of that, she was from Siloah, and he was sure anyone from her village would be able to vouch for her if needed. If she was caught on her way home, the worst that would happen would be what would happen to any omega her age, but that was exactly why he'd been planning to follow her.

He'd taught her the basics of survival, the rest needed to be learned with experience. She was supposed to travel on her own, relying on herself so she would see that she *could*, while he followed behind to be sure nothing happened to her.

He hadn't expected her to run off on her own without anyone to be sure she wasn't taken by some Andtay warrior before she made it back to check on her family.

Snatching his pack from the ground, he kicked dirt over the coals, stomping on them to be sure they were out before lifting her fur from the ground. The scent that hit his senses was an almost physical blow and he was tempted to leave it behind. Strawberries, slick, peppers, and musk, all swirled together to make his cock throb and his chest tighten as he wadded it up and crammed it in the top of his bag.

"I swear, if she manages to get herself caught or hurt before I catch her, I'm going to show her what a *punishment* really is."

No one was there to hear his snarls, but it didn't matter.

He had thought he'd be able to watch her return to her family, be sure she was safe, then turn and leave.

He'd thought he could accept that this was what she wanted, what was best for her, and what she needed.

But clearly Raven wasn't the type that could be set free and trusted to do the smart thing. She needed someone to watch over her. Someone to teach her.

And someone to spank her hard-headed, disobedient, pert little ass when she got foolish ideas in her head.

And that was going to be him, because he wasn't going to let anyone else lay a hand on her, no matter what kind of incident it caused.

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Chapter Thirty-Four

Raven

She had never been so exhausted in her life.

Not after spring planting, nor fall harvest. Not when she'd run the first time, or even the second before Ash had found her when she hadn't slept in days.

And every bit of her ached. From her dirty scalp all the way to her bleeding, blistered feet.

She'd run as much as she could, walking when her legs trembled and threatened to give out, before running again the moment she'd caught her breath. She'd stumbled through the ford in the river separating Siloah and Tayueta midafternoon, pushing on despite her damp boots until night fell, before finally giving in to the need stop.

It had been a struggle to force herself to gather wood, then build a screen for the fire before lighting it so she didn't lead anyone right to her.

Even then Raven couldn't let herself rest.

She'd stopped near a trickle of a stream that she'd followed from the river, and didn't allow herself to stop moving until she'd set three snares along the opposite side. She hadn't eaten since the fox the night before, and her only hope to have the energy to keep going was if she caught something overnight.

By the time she peeled off her boots and socks, her toes were wrinkled from being wet for so long, but she couldn't feel any discomfort. They were nothing more than numb blobs at the end of her legs, but she didn't have the energy to add another worry to her burden.

Zaida had disappeared when Raven crossed the river, but Raven woke sandwiched between the warmth of her fire and the Nicaavet's body lying along her back. For a moment she thought she'd caught the scent of candied nuts, and joy had filled her before she bolted upright to find nothing more than an orange gaze staring at her in question.

She couldn't even say why she kept running.

There had been a rabbit in one of her snares, so after cleaning and cooking it, she'd thankfully pulled dry socks back onto toes she could feel again before stomping into her boots and taking off at a frantic pace. There was no sign that she was being pursued, but her instincts insisted there was no time to waste.

That if she stopped, she'd be in trouble.

She had tried to send Zaida away multiple times, but the animal acted like she didn't understand no matter how many times Raven told her to go to Ash. She paced along at Raven's side, seeming to enjoy their frolic through the fields they'd broken out onto, and why would she leave?

Raven had appreciated her warmth even more the following nights when she'd been forced to camp in small stands of trees where it wasn't safe to build a big fire. Asking Zaida to hunt for her meant she was able to travel longer each day, and while she could have managed with her snares like she had the first night, trying to sleep without the Nicaavet's warmth would have been harder.

As the sounds of rushing water filled Raven's ears, she slowed, looking down at her companion before staring ahead at the trees hiding the river from view. The village of Siloah was on the other side, though if Raven had aimed right, she was a little to the west of it.

She'd debated going through the village but had decided it would be best to avoid it and go straight to the farm instead. If Siloah now belonged to the Andtay she had no idea what state the village might be in, and even if no one had come to take over yet, she didn't want to get tangled up with someone recognizing her and trying to find out how she had gotten back.

Dropping to one knee, she reached out and dug her fingers into Zaida's fur. No matter how attached she was to the animal, there was no way she'd convince anyone the Nicaavet was safe. She'd never even heard of them before being kidnapped, and the animal was obviously a predator. Zaida

would be in danger if someone saw her, and farm life wouldn't be good for her anyway.

"You're such a good girl, Zaida, and you've been the best companion. Ash doesn't realize how lucky he is to have you."

Orange eyes focused on hers, ears tipped forward to catch her quiet words.

"I'm not sure I could have made it without your help these past few days, but it's time for you to go now."

Her voice caught, tears building along her lashes as Zaida's head cocked. The Nicaavet let out a huff, pushing into Raven's fingers when they slowed, bringing a wavery smile to Raven's lips.

"I know. I'm going to miss you, but you have to go back to Ash. I'm going to be safe on a boring farm, with animals you won't be allowed to hunt. Animals aren't allowed in the fields, and I won't be able to leave, and you would hate it there, even if I could keep you."

She sucked in a shaking breath, dropping her hand. It would have been better for both of them if she'd forced Zaida to go back when they were still at the border, but it was too late for regrets. She could only hope Zaida was smart enough to make it back and find Ash on her own, and that nothing would happen to her along the way.

Pulling in another breath, she tried to remember the different commands Ash had used with the Nicaavet. She couldn't copy any of his whistles, but he'd used words too, and she had to make her understand.

"Zaida, find Ash."

Her head tipped the other way, tail curling, but Zaida didn't move.

"Ash, Zaida. Ash. Go to Ash."

She huffed twice, finally turning back the way they'd come as tears wet Raven's cheeks. She was so close. So close to her home and being sure her sisters were safe. So why was it so

hard not to do as she was ordering Zaida and follow the animal the other way?

Orange eyes turned back again, as if to see if Raven was coming.

“I can’t,” she whispered, voice breaking. “I can’t, Zaida. They might need me. But Ash needs you, and you can’t stay. Go to Ash.”

Zaida blinked before slinking away, her striped coat blending in and helping her disappear even as Raven tried to keep her in sight. Eyes stinging, she swallowed the lump in her throat and sucked in a deep breath, forcing herself to move toward the river instead of following the Nicaavet.

Zaida was returning to where she belonged, and so was Raven.

The river she faced was deeper than the first had been, no ford or bridge in sight. She knew there *was* one, there were a few actually, but the only one she knew the location of was on the other side of the village, and she didn’t want to waste the time heading away from the direction she needed to go.

She walked a little way along the edge, hoping to spot a better place to cross, but with the sun already sinking toward the horizon, she didn’t have the time to go farther unless she was going to spend another night camped in the cold.

This time, on her own.

Chewing her bottom lip, she debated what to do.

Their ox walked slower than she did, especially pulling the wagon, so she figured she could cross the distance to her home in half the time, but it was still going to be after dark before she made it home. Her poor feet had already seen enough abuse, and she knew walking in wet pants and boots would be more than a little uncomfortable, but she didn’t want to stop to dry them out when she was so close.

She stared at the dark water, releasing her lip as she heaved a sigh. The flow was too fast for it to have frozen, but that didn’t mean the water wasn’t freezing cold. She’d found a bend where the water wasn’t as deep, and someone the size of

Ash wouldn't balk at the depth since it would only hit him mid-calf, but it would be up to her knees at the midpoint, and then she'd be slogging home in freezing wet clothing.

There was only one option, and she grimaced as she leaned down to grip the heel of her boot. At least she could use her blanket as a towel and not have to worry about needing it to sleep with since she should be in her own bed again by then, and there was no one around to see her pale legs flashing in the dying sunlight.

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Chapter Thirty-Five

Ash

He didn't know how Raven had managed to stay ahead of him, but it was irritating.

A little kernel of pride in her glowed in his chest, but he buried it beneath his frustration, refusing to acknowledge it until he'd set eyes on Raven himself and was sure she was okay.

Zaida had come back to him the first evening, making him believe he was close to catching Raven. Instead of packing up and following her right then, he'd decided to wait, Zaida's wet coat telling him Raven had already made it to the other side of the river.

So, he'd been safe and chose to wait for morning to cross the ford, thinking he'd have Zaida to pick up Raven's scent and lead the way faster, only to find the animal gone again at first light.

He'd decided females were infuriating, no matter the species.

The sun had already sunk beneath the horizon, the last of the light fading from the sky as he pushed on, trying to reach the stand of trees ahead of him. He was close enough to Siloah to know he wouldn't catch Raven before she made it home, and there was some comfort in knowing she'd made it so far without encountering any issues. He may not have been able to follow her trail as easily as Zaida could, but he was still an alpha with the scent of an omega in his nose, and he'd tracked her well enough.

Movement in the shadows caught his attention, and he slowed his steps as he approached the tree line. The failing sunlight made it hard to see anything between the pines and the few trunks who'd dropped their leaves, but it wasn't long before the lithe form of a Nicaavet materialized from the brush.

"Zaida!"

Ears pricked forward, she cocked her head, eyes locked on his as she stopped and stood in front of him. He dropped to his knees, running his hands along her body to check for injuries as she tried to dance out of his grasp.

“Be still. Where have you been? Where’s Raven?”

Her ears twitched, tail flicking before she looked back the way she’d come. When his hands dropped, she took a few steps away before looking back at him as if questioning if he was going to follow.

He peered out at the failing light and heaved a sigh.

He wanted to. He’d been worried about how he’d find Raven since she had told him she didn’t live in the village, and he wasn’t sure where she was going to cross the river since her path wasn’t heading for the bridge that crossed to the east of it. There was a chance he would lose her scent on the other side if she went through the water, he wouldn’t even think about what could happen if she slipped, but Zaida’s nose was better than his, and he could trust her to show him the way.

But it was still too dangerous to do in the dark.

There would be patrols around Siloah to watch for predators of both the two and four legged kind, and he couldn’t risk running into one. He also couldn’t cross the river that ran beside Siloah in the dark, not familiar enough with it to know where the shallow areas were. Even if Zaida took him to where Raven had crossed, he wouldn’t risk her since she would have a harder time than him, and he might not be able to find enough wood in the dark to get a good fire going to dry them out.

No, he had to be responsible and wait for morning.

But he wasn’t going to let Zaida run off on him again.

“Zaida, here.”

He looked around, choosing a clear spot between two pines that would offer shelter from the wind. Dropping his pack, he dug inside for what he needed, a hint of guilt creeping in as Zaida came and stood beside him.

Finding the thin rope, he tied one end around a sturdy branch and then looped the other around Zaida's neck, making sure it wasn't too tight and wouldn't strangle her if she pulled. She didn't move as he tied the knot, murmuring apologies.

"I wouldn't have to do this if I could trust you not to run off again, but I can't tell where your loyalty is anymore, and I'm going to need your help to find Raven. I can't risk you running back to her while I sleep."

She blinked, cocking her head and letting out a huff. When he moved back over to his pack to pull out the fur to sleep with, she tried to follow, but was stopped short by the leash. Looking over her shoulder at it then back to him, he could have sworn she was giving him the same glare Raven did when she was irritated but trying to keep her mouth shut.

"I know, and I'm sorry, but you're the one who's given me reason not to trust you. So, now I have to treat you like a pup again."

Her lip twitched as she pulled on the leash again. Taking his things closer to her, he shook out the fur that still carried the scent of him and Raven. It made him ache every time he rolled up in it, but he couldn't stop himself from using it each night.

Lying it over a layer of needles, he sat down and pulled out the oilcloth holding what was left of the goose he'd shot the night before. Having to hunt for his own meals was another thing that had slowed him down, and he'd realized how much he'd come to rely on Zaida to either catch something for him, or flush game for him to shoot.

He tore off a bit of meat before taking a bite himself, holding it out to the Nicaavet. The beast was a bottomless pit when it came to food, and she wasn't picky over which bit it was, or if it was cooked or not, but she turned up her nose and moved as far from him as she could get before flopping to the ground with a grunt.

Sighing, Ash popped it in his own mouth.

"This is exactly why I wanted to keep my distance. You're enough work, how am I supposed to keep an omega happy?"

Zaida ignored him, not even flicking an ear his way. Sighing again, he wrestled with his conflicting emotions.

The alpha in him was furious Raven had left him. She'd chosen him, given herself to him, made him think perhaps she was different than other omegas and would be happy traveling with him. That maybe he had a chance of convincing her to come back with him once she was sure her sisters were safe.

But the civilized part kept saying her choice was clear. She'd left him, chosen to return to the life she'd had before, and the best thing for him to do would be to let her go and move on.

He tossed and turned all night, the conflicting options giving him no rest. As the quiet sounds of the night animals disappeared in the prequel to dawn, he sat up with a growl and pulled out a small bit of tinder he carried, lighting it so he could see between the trunks surrounding him.

He jerked back when orange eyes flashed across from him, Zaida's form still hidden by her natural camouflage and the shadows set dancing by the small flame. Leaning down, she ripped off another hunk of something she'd caught, tossing it back and giving him a view of the rope he'd tied around her neck, dangling.

When he looked, the rest of it laid where she'd been when he'd last seen her. Somehow she'd chewed through it and snuck off without him hearing her, catching her breakfast and bringing it back, likely just to taunt him.

“Okay, fine, I shouldn't have tied you up, but I need to get to Raven without getting caught, and I need your help to do it quickly.”

Head tipped, one ear pricked toward him, Zaida let out a soft call, turning to pace away between the trees before stopping. Switching her tail, she blinked back at him and called again, taking two more steps.

“Okay, okay. I'm coming.”

He still wasn't sure what he was going to do, but he wanted to know Raven had made it home safe, no matter what came

after.

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Chapter Thirty-Six

Raven

She wanted to blame how long it took her to reach the farm on misremembering the distance, but she knew it had more to do with the state she was in. Removing her boots and pants and rucking her skirt up around her hips had seemed like the best option to cross the river, and perhaps it had been, but even after drying off with her blanket and getting dressed again, she couldn't seem to get warm.

Her steps had been slow and stiff, and she'd fallen enough times to have had to dig rocks out of her palms. Both were torn and bloody, but she couldn't feel them. Or her feet.

Each step was a jarring thud, her brain unable to process the distance to the ground when she was numb from the knees down and stiff up to her ribs. Her bones ached with the cold, and even though she'd known the smart thing to do would have been to stop and build a fire, the danger it would have brought her kept her moving through the night instead.

The moonlight had been enough to guide her across the open fields until she reached the little track her family had followed from their farm to the village. There was a flicker of worry that walking along the path would leave her too exposed, but the fields offered no better cover, and at least the track wasn't furrowed from the fall and winter harvests.

The sky was already beginning to blush when she finally stepped onto the porch surrounding the house she'd grown up in. The whole time she'd trudged down the path to the door she kept thinking it only looked so small because she was still far from it, but even standing before the door didn't make the house seem any larger. It still appeared to be the same dirty, rickety shack it had looked like when it first came into view.

She trembled as she raised her hand, but she couldn't say if it was from cold or nerves. Her belly was roiling inside her, bile burning the back of her throat at what news may await her on the other side of the door. She almost couldn't bring herself

to knock until she thought she heard a girl's voice inside, and suddenly she had to know, *right then*, whose it was.

Everything was silent in the heartbeats after the echoes of her knock faded away. She'd never realized how flimsy their door felt, but even her weak blows had made it rattle, and she wondered if it had always been that way.

It still looked the same...

Heavy footsteps thudded behind the thin wood, and she held her breath as they grew closer, backing out of reach of the opening. Her father was the only one in her family who would make that much noise, and if it wasn't him on the other side, Raven wasn't sure she was capable of running.

Her foolish decisions descended on her with a vengeance, making her cringe as the door swept in, the sunlight creeping over the hills not advanced enough to reveal who stood inside. She peered into the darkness, the dark frame in the doorway silent, unable to breathe until a head of curly red hair poked around the edge.

"Raven!"

Cherry squealed and squeezed past their father as he stepped onto the porch, launching herself at Raven's legs. She could knock Raven over on a normal day with her enthusiasm, and if the railing hadn't been behind Raven to keep her from tumbling back, they both would have been in a heap on the ground.

Raven wrapped her arms around Cherry as much as she could without being able to bend over because of how tight her sister was squeezing, fighting back tears even as a laugh broke free. When green eyes brighter than hers looked up and spilled over, she couldn't hold back anymore.

She peeled Cherry off long enough to thump down to her knees, the pain that shot into her hips lost under the happiness of having her littlest sister in her arms. Cherry tried to hide her sobs with her face buried in Raven's shoulder, but Raven felt them, her own tears scalding her cheeks as they rolled down to drip from her chin.

Her father still hadn't said a word, his gaze going past her to look around as if he expected to see someone else. Instead of the pride she had thought she'd feel at the idea of telling him she'd made it home on her own, the only thing that bubbled up when she looked at him was resentment.

She was glad he was alive and had obviously made it home safe, but if she had known that, she may have made other choices.

Shoving her traitorous thoughts away, she squeezed Cherry tighter before releasing her littlest sister, pushing her out to arm's length so she could look her over. Raven knew she hadn't been gone that long, but it seemed as if her sister had sprouted like a weed in that time.

"I think you've gotten bigger."

Cherry's giggle helped ease the tension coiled around Raven's heart, and she curled her fingers around the little hand that slipped into hers as she stood again. Her father's gaze finally came back to her, as if he hadn't been able to look while there were emotions on display. When he still didn't say anything, she sucked in a breath and took the first step.

"I didn't know if you and Fawn made it home after what happened. I came back to be sure everyone was okay."

His eyes dipped to her neck, but it was hidden by her cloak and hair. It was late winter but still far too early for her cycle to have come, so she wasn't sure what he was looking for since a bite outside her heat wouldn't form a bond.

He probably just wanted to be sure there was no visible proof that anything improper had happened.

Annoyance warmed her insides, though it did nothing to help her trembling limbs. Cherry's head tipped back as a particularly strong shiver stole through her, a frown marring her freckled face.

"Your fingers are cold, and you're shivering."

Raven tried to reassure her with a smile but found it hard to force her lips to cooperate.

“That’s because I’ve been walking all night after crossing through the river to get here.”

Cherry’s frown deepened.

“You didn’t cross the bridge by the village?”

Raven shook her head, trying to come up with a way to explain why that a child would understand, but her father cut her off.

“Good. Get inside before someone sees you.”

She wasn’t sure why the gruff words stole the breath from her chest, but when he turned his back and disappeared into the house, Raven fought down the surge of tears that tried to follow. Her father had never been the affectionate type, but he’d never seemed so callous either, and his attitude was a blow after what she’d gone through to return home.

Cherry tugged on her hand, and with no other option but to follow, Raven stepped into the place that no longer felt like home, a hole splitting open in her chest.

She’d wanted to learn to shoot a bow as a child, but her father had told her omegas couldn’t do that, and she’d listened.

She’d wanted to climb trees and run through the fields, but he’d told her it wasn’t proper, so she’d stopped.

She’d wanted to learn something new, leave the farm, make a life of her own, but he’d said she couldn’t do those things, and she’d let him take all her dreams away.

But then she’d been given another chance. Found an alpha who didn’t look down on her because of her dynamic. A man who encouraged her curiosity, answered her questions, and taught her to fend for herself.

And she’d given him up to come back, only to be snubbed in the doorway. Treated as if she was something to be ashamed of before he’d even bothered to ask what had happened to her.

Heart crumbling, she shuffled behind Cherry, the heat of the fire doing nothing to warm the ice spreading through her veins.

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Chapter Thirty-Seven

Ash

He had been farther from the river than he'd thought he was, but it meant he had plenty of light to see when it was time to cross.

And Ash cursed the omega in his head as he pictured her sloshing through the icy liquid instead of finding a different spot.

What if she'd slipped and been swept away in the current?

What if she hadn't been able to find enough wood to get a fire lit on the other side to dry off?

How much farther was it to her farm?

Did she keep going, or did she stop and warm up like she should have?

He was afraid he knew the answers to most of the questions circling in his head, and by the time he slogged out of the water on the other side but couldn't find any signs of a fire, he knew the most important one.

Stubborn, foolish omega.

He wouldn't have the luxury of a home to warm up in, no matter how close her family's farm was, so Ash didn't have a choice about building a fire. Even Zaida shivered beside him, waiting impatiently as he collected wood and lit tinder to get it going. He couldn't make it too big or it might draw attention, but he needed to get them both dry and warm as quick as possible so they could move on.

It drove him crazy to sit and wait, and in the end he decided to sacrifice the wet pants to save time. He'd taken his boots off to cross the river because he'd known they'd never dry out fast enough, so he peeled off the wet pants and slipped into the extra set he kept in his bag. They weren't as thick and had numerous repaired tears in the legs from years of use, but they were good enough.

Using the upper part of the pair he'd taken off, he gave Zaida a brisk rub to soak up some of the water in her fur, the Nicaavet turning and snapping at his hands even though she refused to move away from the fire.

Rolling up the sodden leather, he wrapped his oil cloth around them to try to keep his pack dry when he stuffed them inside. If he didn't take care of them and dry them out they'd be ruined, but he couldn't find it in him to care. Raven's scent on the riverbank had assured him she'd made it across, but not stopping to get warm was a dangerous move, and his skin crawled with the need to see her.

He *really* wanted to take her over his knee and give her the spanking Brant had told him to deliver, but he didn't think he'd get that chance.

Once Zaida stopped shivering and started roaming away from the fire he decided he was warm enough not to be at risk of losing anything, so he snuffed the flames and set out after her. He caught the occasional whiff of strawberries and spice, but it was muted, and if it hadn't been for Zaida, he would have been forced to move a lot slower to be sure he stayed on Raven's tracks.

He had to be more cautious as they broke into open fields, the bare ground offering no cover if someone else came along. All he could hope was that if he did run into someone, he'd be able to tell what clan they were from a pretend to be the other. If they realized he was Tayueta, things could get complicated.

Zaida led him across field after field, narrow strips of trees and brush separating some of them. When they approached another row of trees, he thought it was the same until he realized there was a narrow track hidden behind them.

Every instinct said he was getting close but also warned walking along the track was dangerous. He was torn, because using it would allow him to pick up his pace, and the day was already growing late. He was impatient to see Raven again, but he'd also need time to find a safe place to camp since he would be near her home and had no idea of the situation there.

He knew she'd had neighbors with an alpha son, but he didn't know how close they were, nor which side they were on.

Clenching his jaw, he tamped down the urge to ignore caution in favor of getting to her faster. Getting caught would get in the way of that.

The only option he had was to walk along the edge of the field on the other side of the trees. It wasn't much cover, but it was better than nothing, and he was grateful for it when the sound of hooves clapping along the packed earth reached him. With a soft whistle to Zaida giving her the command to drop and wait, Ash wedged himself under a leaning pine with boughs that reached almost to the ground.

A pair of men rode into view, following the path in the same direction Ash was heading. From a distance he assumed they were father and son, but as they got closer, he noticed differences that made him think the assumption was wrong. While both were alphas, their colorations were different, from their skin to their hair, and the younger male had a stockier build that made Ash think of a pile of boulders.

He was waiting for them to pass and get far enough ahead that he could leave his hiding place when their conversation reached him and stole his attention.

"I'm glad you came to let me know she's returned. It was a disappointment to hear you'd been in town when the raid came and Raven had been taken."

"I wasn't sure you'd still be interested, but figured you should know the option was there."

"Well, like Father said, even if she's been sullied, there aren't many other options for omegas. Damn raiders took every one that was ready to be claimed, and with the Andtay taking over it's not like any of us will have a chance at the younger ones. They'll be paired off to Verik's warriors before we can even get a sniff. You should be glad only two of your four ended up omega."

Ash's fingers curled into the needles under his hands as he fought the urge to snarl. He was willing to bet the men were

Raven's father and the neighbor she'd spoken of.

"That's true."

"I hope you won't be making the same mistake again. We can't let anyone find out there's a ripe omega at your farm, or she'll just be taken again."

"Don't worry about that. Raven will be kept where no one will see her until it's time for you to claim her."

Head throbbing from how hard his jaw was clenched, Ash pressed his forehead to the ground and sucked in a breath of fragrant pine. It wasn't as alluring as strawberries and peppers, but it was a scent that helped him relax enough not to draw his bow and drop the alphas right where they were.

"I don't see why she can't come with me now, especially if she's already compromised. No reason to risk another coming along and trying to take her. You don't have anyone else to help defend her."

The growl that reached Ash's ears coiled the tension inside him tighter, but the noise wasn't directed at him, and it faded the farther the horses plodded down the trail.

"It isn't proper. She'll stay at home until she's claimed and bound, then she'll be yours to deal with."

The pair kept talking but their voices grew too indistinct for Ash to make out the words. Blowing out steady breaths, he waited until all sounds of their horses had faded, then watched Zaida until her ears and tail relaxed, even her acute hearing unable to pick them up.

Rising to his feet, he stared down the path, the last words he'd heard replaying in his head.

"...she'll be yours to deal with."

"Over my dead body. That's *my* stubborn omega."

He took off, whistling for Zaida to stay close. He had an omega to re-kidnap.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Raven

Even if she hadn't already been exhausted when she'd arrived, the fuss her mother and sisters made would have worn her out. She tried to reassure them once the others realized she was there, telling a slightly edited version of how she'd gotten home, but eventually she tuned them out when they kept repeating the same things over and over.

How horrible it had been without her to help when they went to the village after the raid.

How terrible it had been for Father to do the chores on his own.

How upset Branch had been that she'd been taken.

How wrong it was that the clan had accepted Verik as their Chief despite his warriors having helped in the raid.

The one good thing she'd learned was that Iris, one of the omegas who'd been traded to the Andtay, had come back with Verik after convincing him to help rebuild. She'd publicly accepted him as her mate to help cement the ties between their clans, and people were now free to move between the two villages.

Raven huffed under her breath, pretending to blow on the mug of tea her mother had given her when she'd come out of her room. It had taken forever to get them to leave her alone and let her rest after she'd warmed herself by the fire, and she still felt as if she could sleep the whole night through, and maybe the next day as well.

It had been another blow to learn her room had been turned into storage, her nest dismantled, her clothes and bedding split between her sisters. Her throat had tightened with emotions she refused to let loose to realize her life had been swept away so easily. She couldn't fault them for believing she wasn't going to return, but it was hard to swallow that they'd erased her so soon.

“Since Raven is back, does that mean she can do the chores tonight?”

Clenching the mug in her hands, Raven forced herself not to turn around, knowing her face would reveal exactly how she felt. Fawn had been forced to step up and help with feeding the animals and the other tasks Raven had performed before her kidnapping, and while Raven expected to take over again, she'd hoped to get a full day's break before being asked to work.

“Fawn, your sister has been traveling for quite some time. She deserves a chance to recover.”

She closed her eyes at her mother's voice, letting out the breath she'd held. While Fawn and Amber had gone on about how much worse things had been for them with Raven gone, with her father adding in his barbs here and there until he'd announced he was leaving, her mother had remained mostly silent. She'd wrapped Raven in a hug, asked if she was okay, then went about her usual tasks, but every time Raven looked, her mother was watching with sad eyes that seemed to see right through her.

Suddenly the cozy little home she'd always shared with her family seemed far too small. She needed to get out, needed air not laced with the heavy scents of her beta sisters, nor the delicate sweetness of her mother and Cherry, or her father's bitter musk.

Surging to her feet, she let the blanket she'd had around her shoulders fall away as she set the mug aside.

“No, it's fine, I can handle the evening feed. It'll be good for me to stretch a little, so my muscles don't get stiff since I'm used to being more active now.”

Her mother's frown deepened but Fawn smiled and twirled to run back to her room. Raven had napped on her bed through what had been left of the morning and into the afternoon, and Fawn had complained she needed to clean it of Raven's scent or she wouldn't be able to sleep, so she'd hidden in there since Raven had emerged.

“Are you sure? Your feet...”

Her mother had come in to give her a clean set of clothing before her nap. Raven had already removed her boots, so her mother had seen the state of her blistered toes and heels.

“They’re fine. Can’t feel a thing.”

Raven forced a smile despite the worry that truth left behind. The arches of her feet ached from all the walking, but she truly couldn’t feel the damage to her toes.

Her legs were still sore, but she forced herself to walk as normal as possible over to where she’d left her cloak hanging by the door. Her mother had found one of her old dresses and stockings amongst Fawn’s things and given them to her to change into, and while she would have liked another layer against the cold, it was no different than what she would usually have worn to perform the task.

“Raven.”

She turned back to look at her mother. The dark tumble of curls that explained where her mess came from were pulled back in a knot at the base of her skull, the silver streaked through it catching the colors of the sunset coming through the windows. Soft wrinkles Raven had never noticed before lined eyes a shade of green so pale it was almost yellow, gazing at her as if she was headed for the worst fate her mother could imagine.

“It’s okay. I— The fresh air will do me some good.”

Cherry had disappeared at the mention of chores, and Amber was outside hanging the wash. It was the first time she’d been alone with her mother, and she wasn’t sure she was prepared for any kind of deep conversations, but her mother seemed determined to push while she had the chance.

“Raven, it’s okay not to be okay. You’ve been through a lot.”

Snorting a short laugh through her nose, Raven shook her head even as she raised a hand to the door to escape.

“Mother, really, it wasn’t that bad. It was scary when they first took us, but once we got to their village we were treated as part of the clan. Lyric was chosen by their Chief, and he’s completely obsessed with her. Rune is training with their healer and there are alphas going through some kind of traditional competition to be chosen by her. Willow convinced the Chief to do what ours always refused, and she’s got her choice of alphas panting at her heels too. I know it could have been worse, but Raider is a good alpha and Chief. We were protected.”

She had to swallow twice to get the growing lump in her throat to go away as she turned her back on her mother. Talking about it only made her realize how nice it had actually been. Things in their village had always seemed tense, the warrior’s aggression setting the whole population on edge, but Tayueta had been nothing like that.

The soft hand landing on her shoulder startled her, her head jerking up to see her mother standing beside her. Despite what she’d said, her mother still looked sad, and Raven couldn’t understand why.

“Were you happy there?”

The question caught her off guard, her mouth opening and closing before she could figure out how to reply.

“I could have been.”

The whispered confession left her lips trembling, her breath shaky as she sucked in a desperate gulp of air. Her mother pulling her close and wrapping her in a hug didn’t help her control, and she was left blinking back tear as she sniffled into the shoulder she’d cried on enough times for her mother to know the truth of how she’d felt about her life on the farm.

“Then why did you come back?”

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Ash

The track kept going past the path Zaida had turned to follow. He had to assume the two alphas had gone the same way, and it would have been smarter to hang back and wait for nightfall before going any farther, but he couldn't bring himself to stop.

One side of the new path was an open field, empty and waiting for spring, but trees marched along the other as they had the wider track, though there were no bushes and tangled brush growing between them to offer better cover. Still, he used what he had and darted from trunk to trunk.

Zaida seemed to understand the need for stealth, slinking low to the ground through the ditch than ran between the path and the line of trees. As tall as she was, she managed to keep herself hidden in the little dip, staying ahead of Ash as they made their way closer to their destination.

Ash topped a low rise as the sun was sinking below the horizon, a squat house coming into view. Another building roughly the same size sat a little way behind it, the fence and lack of windows telling him it had to be a barn.

The trees he followed led up to the front corner of the fence beside the house, a patch of berry bushes behind them offering a hiding place if he could make it that far. The fence went all the way back to what appeared to be woods on the far side of the house, which would be a smarter place to hide, but they weren't close enough for the possessive feelings coursing through him.

He froze in place when he noticed the alphas who'd passed him dismounting in front of the house, and once again he was tempted to draw his bow, but he knew it was too far of a shot even if it wouldn't cause problems if he killed them. He gave a low whistle for Zaida to wait, not wanting to risk one of them looking down the path and spotting motion.

The alphas entered the house and Ash was about to move on when the barn door swung open and drew his attention. He

knew it was Raven the moment she stepped out into the fading sunlight, a bucket swinging from each hand, and he had to reach out to grip the tree to stop himself from barreling down the hill to get to her.

The sunset gilded her blonde locks with a red tint, the mass of curls still wild around her shoulders. The dress she wore beneath the cloak was a different color than the one he'd peeled off her, and while everything looked fine, his instincts blared.

She'd managed to stay ahead of him since she'd run after their night together, but he knew there hadn't been that much distance between them. At most she'd only been home for a day, yet she was already out working instead of resting, and the longer he watched her, the more obvious it became that she wasn't as fine as she was trying to act.

Her steps were short and jerky. He was willing to bet her legs were sore and stiff, but it seemed to be more than that. She rocked as if her balance was off, like she was carrying a heavier load than could possibly be in the buckets, and he sucked in a hissing breath as he thought about what it could mean.

She'd been foolish and not stopped to warm herself after crossing the river. Even if she'd been smart enough to remove her boots so they wouldn't be wet, he hadn't seen any signs of a camp, which meant she'd pushed herself to get home. There hadn't been any snowfall since the start of their trip, and the weather was turning warmer, but it still dipped below freezing at night, and if she'd already been cold from the water, even walking wouldn't have been enough to get her temperature back up.

“Stubborn damn omega.”

She should be resting beside a fire, feet elevated, and staying warm. Not toddling about in the cold again.

Heaving out a breath, he shook his head, reminding himself he couldn't just march down there and spank her. And as much as he wanted to, he probably shouldn't kidnap her again. Even

if she'd been willing to give him a chance, that might change her mind just as much as killing her father.

Watching her stumble and nearly fall as she poured the bucket into a trough, he growled and started working his way down the hill.

He could always beg for forgiveness afterward.

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Chapter Forty

Raven

She wasn't sure why it was so hard for her to believe her father had disappeared to go tell Branch she was back, but the moment she'd heard his voice she'd almost gone back to the barn. Huddling in the straw was preferable to seeing the alpha she'd been promised to, especially when the only alpha she could think of she'd had to leave behind.

Thoughts of where Ash might be distracted her as she stood outside the door of her home.

Had he followed her to the border?

Had he waited beside the river to see if Zaida would return to him, or had he turned back, trusting her to find her way?

She'd feel terrible if she found out anything had happened to the Nicaavet, and Raven made a promise to herself to ask around the village to see if anyone had spotted Zaida.

The wind shifted, and for a moment she thought she caught the scent of candied nuts, her head whipping to look down the track she'd walked that morning. The sun had set while she fed the animals and made sure their water wasn't frozen, so she couldn't see past the first couple trees that lined the path, but her heart thudded behind her ribs as she search for a sign that she wasn't imagining things.

Sucking in another breath, she found nothing but the smell of smoke and the usual scents of the farm. She didn't know why her heart had suddenly fluttered with hope since he'd been clear that crossing the river could cause problems between the clans.

Footsteps from inside the house told her she was out of time, and rather than have them open the door to find her lurking, Raven decided to get the awkwardness over with.

Pushing inside, she kept her head down as she untied her cloak and hung it back on its peg. When she looked up, she found her sisters conspicuously missing, her mother serving

tea to Branch and her father as they sat in the chairs by the fireplace.

“Here she is.”

It felt like there were unspoken words lingering in the air as both alphas focused on her, her father’s usual stony expression giving nothing away. Despite being promised to Branch she hadn’t spent much time with him, and it was rare for him to come to her home unless her father needed help with something. He’d never been there so late, and an odd feeling of dread crawled down her spine.

“And how is my future mate?”

Raven had to bite the inside of her lip to keep it from curling in disgust. Just hearing Branch call her that curdled her stomach. She wanted to deny his claim, state she hadn’t chosen him, but it wouldn’t do her any good. Her choice didn’t matter.

“Then why did you come back?”

Her eyes darted to her mother as the words played through her head, but Raven knew her mother wasn’t in a position to help her. Especially if she couldn’t even stand up for herself. Raven had put herself right back in the position she’d wanted to leave her entire life, and she was the only one who could do anything about it.

“I had to know you were safe. That Fawn had made it home, and the warriors hadn’t come here.”

“I’m recovering, but I’ll be fine.”

Her father snorted but she ignored him. She hadn’t wanted Ash to get in trouble if word got back to Tayueta, so she’d told her family a beta had felt sorry for her and taught her how to make snares and how to get back home, but he hadn’t believed her. An omega wasn’t capable of that.

“That’s good. I was disappointed when I heard you’d been taken. I’m glad you’ve returned.”

He’d been *disappointed*.

Not worried. Not even upset, or angry.

Disappointed.

For himself, since he'd thought he wasn't going to be able to claim an omega. It wasn't as if he actually cared for *her*.

Fingers curling into her palms, she reminded herself she'd known what she would be returning to if her father and Branch were still alive. She was expected to be the good little omega, do as she was told, help on the farm, and pop out babies for her alpha.

Preferably male, unlike her mother's failure of producing only daughters.

Raven glanced at her mother again, hoping to find the serenity she needed to display, only to see the same fury blazing behind the alphas' backs.

She'd never thought about it before, but it suddenly stuck her that her parents weren't affectionate. Not the way she'd seen couples in Tayueta be, and certainly not the way Lyric and Raider were. They were perfectly civil and showed no outward signs of conflict, but she didn't think her mother would have been any more bothered by her father's demise than Raven had felt when thinking about it. Their bonding had been arranged by their parents as well, and there was no love there.

Was that how she wanted to live her life? Quietly seething, resenting her mate, and having to keep it all buried inside?

Pulling her shoulders back, she raised her chin, meeting Branch's gaze as her shoulder's relaxed.

"Not for long. I'll be leaving again soon."

Brows furrowing, Branch's attention turned to her father as he rose from his seat and took a step toward her. Raven had to fight the urge to duck her head or glance at her mother again. It was instinct to yield to the dominant male, but after having a taste of freedom, she couldn't stand the thought of losing it.

"What?"

The question was laced with a growl, her father not bothering to hide his irritation, but she tamped down her

wavering nerves and kept her head up.

“I came back to be sure Mother and the girls were safe, but I can’t stay. The Tayueta Chief is expecting my return.”

Branch joined her father on his feet, the pressure of the two alphas facing her threatening to buckle her knees, but realizing what she was giving up gave her the strength to stand against them. She loved her family, but she had to do what was right for her, and that wasn’t tying herself to Branch and a life she’d hate.

“The Tayueta have no say here. You’re not going anywhere.”

Praying she wouldn’t have to find out if her claim was true, she tried the only thing she thought might convince her father to let her go.

“Verik knows I belong to Tayueta. He won’t risk a fight for me to stay here.”

Her father was shaking his head as he stepped closer, Raven backing away until she bumped into the door.

“Verik won’t even know you’re here. You’ll stay in the house until your heat comes, and once Branch claims you, there won’t be anything they can do.”

Her chest froze, eyes widening. She may not have thought she could change her father’s mind about giving her to Branch, but she hadn’t thought he’d go so far as to lock her away from the entire clan to be sure she didn’t have a choice.

“Wes, you can’t—”

He whirled on her mother when she tried to speak up for Raven, and as hard as it was, she knew she was making the right decision.

“Stay out of it, woman. I’m the alpha in this house, and I’ll decide what’s best. Her duty is here, to her family, and I’ll do whatever has to be done to see that she fulfills it.”

Fingers groping behind her, Raven met her mother’s gaze. The small nod was all she needed to loosen the tightness in her

chest. Her mother understood, and this was the only chance Raven was going to get.

Ripping the door open, she turned and lurched out into the night, praying to any god that would listen to help her escape.

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Chapter Forty-One

Ash

He was in the middle of berating himself for not snatching Raven while she'd been outside alone when the door of the house suddenly burst open, and she came sprinting out. Whether it was fate or chance, he didn't know, but she was heading straight for where he hid amidst the berry bushes.

Growls followed her before two bulky bodies blocked the light spilling from the doorway. Ash jumped to his feet, all thoughts of stealth forgotten.

“Raven!”

Her face jerked toward him, but it was too dark for him to see her expression. He vaulted the fence to land on the path, and Raven skidded to a stop beside him, already panting, a low whimper escaping with each exhale.

“Zaida, guard.”

The Nicaavet had been waiting in the bushes with him and had followed him through the fence, but at his order she jumped between them and the charging alphas, fur rising as her lips peeled back with her growl.

Both men stopped, curses flowing from the younger of the two as he stared at Zaida, stepping back when her tail lashed and she turned her focus to him.

“What the hell *is* that thing?”

“Raven, get over here.”

With Zaida keeping the two alphas away, Ash ignored them and turned to Raven, putting his hands on her shoulders. The moon hadn't risen yet, but the light shining from the door fell on half of her face as she tipped it up to him.

“Are you okay?”

She was still trying to catch her breath, but the whimpers had stopped. He needed the reassurance to keep himself from pulling his bow.

“Uh, mostly.”

He quirked a brow as she let out a huff and glanced over at the men.

“Guess I should introduce you to my father and the alpha he wants me to mate.”

Ash couldn't stop the low growl that rolled from his chest at her words, her shoulders shaking with a shiver since she didn't have her cloak. Slipping out of his coat, he wrapped it around her as the older male tried to move closer.

“Raven, get back inside!”

Zaida's head dropped at the man's tone, teeth snapping in his direction and making him stumble back. Ash wasn't sure how much she'd take before she decided guarding meant dealing with the threat, but he preferred things not get that far.

He opened his mouth to tell the men to back off, but Raven beat him to it, turning to face her father with a steadiness that surprised him after the way she'd trembled in his grip.

“No. I'm not going back inside. I'm not staying here and letting you force me into a life and a bond I don't want. I was worried you'd been killed in the attack and didn't know if Fawn had made it home, or what had happened to Mother, and Amber, and Cherry, so I came back to be sure everyone was safe, but I won't bow down and let you control my life anymore.”

Fury radiated from the man she spoke to. The little bit of light that reached them showed the other had an expression of disgust on his face as he stared at Raven, making Ash's lips twitch with the need to snarl at him in return.

“You are *my* daughter. You will do as you're told.”

Raven huffed again as she shook her head, her shoulders sagging.

“I've always wanted to get away from the farm, and you knew that, but didn't care. I wanted to learn something new, do something different, but you always said I couldn't.”

“Because you're an omega! Your place is with your alpha.”

Another woman came through the door, lighting the lantern on the porch with the candle she carried, and the sight of her seemed to give Raven the strength to straighten again.

“And Branch is not my alpha.”

A smug sense of pride grew in his chest as Raven stood up for herself, denying the other alpha. Part of him wanted to move closer and wrap his arms around her, making a visible claim on the tempting omega in front of the other two men, but he remained where he was.

It didn't stop her father from looking over at him with a sneer.

“Oh, and this one is? Branch is clan. He has land, and a brother to help him work it. Mating him is what's best for you.”

Raven's laugh was nothing like the ones Ash had gotten from her, lacking any humor.

“Having me mate him is what's best for *you*. So you have someone to help whenever you need it. How is it you don't see he only agreed so he can take your land, otherwise he'd have to split his with his brother? How much help do you think he will be once he's claimed me?”

The one they called Branch stiffened at her accusation, his eyes darting between her and her father. It was obvious Raven was right, but her father only grew angrier, hands fisting as he took another step closer to Zaida.

“I wouldn't,” Ash warned as Zaida's posture changed, the Nicaavet lowering her head and bending her front legs in anticipation of lunging at the man.

“Call off your animal and get off my land. You don't belong here, and my daughter won't be leaving with you.”

Ash glared at the older man, doing his best to keep hold of his temper.

“It's too late to call her off. I'm pretty sure she likes Raven better than me, and she sees you as a threat.”

Zaida's growl punctuated his words, the stillness of her body showing she was coiled and ready to attack.

"And as far as Raven leaving, that's up to her. I'll go get Verik myself if I have to. Daughter or not, you can't hold her captive."

"Wes, stop this," the woman on the porch called.

The older alpha tipped his head but didn't look back at her. Shaking his head, Branch took another step away, edging toward the two horses tied to the railing at the front of the house.

"You know what, this isn't worth it. I'm not interested anymore."

Head whipping to face the other alpha, Raven's father let out a growl before choking it off.

"What? This isn't over yet."

Branch laughed, shaking his head as he reached to untie the horses.

"Yes, it is. Being saddled with a properly trained omega is one thing, but dealing with that," he waved toward Raven and Zaida, letting out another laugh as he swung into the saddle. Wrapping the other's reins around the ring on the back, he tapped his heels, nudging his mount well around where the rest of them stood.

"Your land isn't worth the hassle. Plus, you're a surly bastard, and I was glad to be rid of any obligation to you. My brother's talking about heading out to the Andtay village anyway, so I'm done. Deal with your own shit, and don't come begging for help anymore."

With a sharp kick, he sent the horses galloping down the path.

"Some alpha you were promised to," Ash muttered, just loud enough for Raven to hear.

With Branch's departure and the end of the arrangement he'd made for her, Raven's father seemed to deflate, arms

hanging limp as he stared after the departing male. As irritated as Ash was with the man, a twinge of pity twisted with it.

“Father—”

The man whirled around with a snarl, fixing Raven with a stare that had Ash moving closer as his instincts screamed for him to protect his omega. Zaida lunged, snapping finger-long canines that only missed because her father managed to jerk back before they connected.

“Go. Go, and don’t come back. You’re no longer my daughter.”

Spinning on his heel, he stomped to the porch, footsteps echoing over the wood as he disappeared into the house, the crack of it slamming behind him making Raven flinch.

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Chapter Forty-Two

Raven

Her breath rasped in and out of her throat, noisy in the sudden silence after her father's proclamation. Struggling to keep the trembling under control, she blinked to clear her eyes, licking lips gone dry from breathing through her mouth.

"I'm sorry."

Ash's soft whisper helped loosen the fist around her heart, but her father's words still stung.

"There wasn't going to be a good ending to me defying him, and I knew that before I did it. I'll... I'll be okay."

She knew she was right, but her chest ached worse than any pain she'd felt before.

Ash's hand curled over her shoulder, his heat soaking through the coat he'd put around her.

"I know you will be, you're stronger than you think, but he shouldn't do this to you."

She heaved a sigh, releasing tension with the breath as she turned toward Ash, but the sight of her mother walking over made her pause.

Eyeing Zaida who had stopped growling and laid on the ground beside Raven, her mother offered a wavering smile as she held out Raven's cloak.

"If you give me a few minutes, I'll gather your things. I doubt he's going to come back out tonight, so you can bed down in the barn, just make sure you're gone before morning feeding."

Swallowing, Raven stepped forward and took her cloak, the tears dancing in her mother's eyes hurting far more than her father's words had.

"I'm sorry."

Things hadn't turned out the way she'd wanted them to, but at least she'd had the chance to make sure her mother and sisters were okay.

Closing the gap between them, her mother cupped her cheek.

"Don't be sorry for doing what's right for you. I want you to be happy, and we both know you wouldn't have been if you stayed."

Her eyes turned to Ash for a moment before meeting Raven's again, her smile genuine as she leaned closer.

"If he's what makes you happy, go, and don't ever look back. Your sisters and I will be fine, and your father may come to see his error one day."

Sniffing as her mother wrapped her in a hug, Raven sucked in a lungful of her soft floral scent, knowing it might be the last time she got the chance.

They were slow to pull away, but both knew that the longer they lingered, the more likely her father would take it in his head to come back out and make things worse. Mother had just finished dinner, and everyone would be waiting to eat.

"I'll be right back."

Her mother turned and slipped back into the house, the door closing softly behind her. The lantern on the porch flickered as Raven looked up at Ash, throwing shadows across his face, and it finally struck her that he was at her home.

"I believe you're on the wrong side of the river."

He scoffed as she slipped out of his coat, handing it back to him. He took it only to drop it at their feet, pulling her cloak from her hands and twirling it around to settle on her shoulders.

Tying it at her throat, he seemed to search for words before he finally spoke.

"Well, you see, my Nicaavet ran away, following a devious omega who seduced me before sneaking off into the night. She was heading through dangerous territory, to a farm where

she'd be caged and miserable, so I didn't have a choice about following her to be sure she stayed safe."

Raven couldn't help smiling as she shook her head.

"You weren't mad she abandoned you?"

His head tipped back, shoulders rising and falling as he sighed.

"I was, at first. I called her stubborn, and foolish, and all kinds of things that are perfectly true. But those things are what make her who she is, and somehow, even though I knew better, I still got attached to her. I didn't think I could offer her the things she needed, I'm still not sure I can, but I also don't know if I can let her go."

Raven couldn't feel the cold of the night, but it wasn't because she was numb. Warmth had bloomed in her chest, spreading with his words until it filled her, reassuring her she'd made the right choice.

"I don't think she was running away, I think she just needed to figure some things out on her own. She's attached to you, too, and I think you're all she really needs. I think she's chosen you."

Ash seemed to hesitate, but there was no doubt in Raven's mind about what she wanted. The alpha before her had saved her, treated her like a person, taught her things she'd never thought she'd get the chance to learn, and opened up a whole new world of possibilities.

He'd given her freedom, and the confidence to make her own choices.

And she wanted him.

Reaching up, she thrust her fingers into the hair at the base of his skull, pulling him down until her lips could reach his. He seemed surprised, but it only took a moment for his hands to slide around her waist, tugging her against him as he took over the kiss. Tongue slipping into her mouth, it tangled with hers, stealing her breath and erasing her worries.

"Eww, what are you doing?"

Cherry's voice right beside them made Raven jerk back, heat flooding her cheeks as she flushed. Ash's hands still held her against him, his excitement digging into her belly even as she searched for something to say to her littlest sister.

The bags Cherry carried provided the perfect distraction.

“What are those?”

It was hard to tell with the little light they had, but one looked like her pack. She'd left it under her cloak by the front door since she'd no longer had a room to take it to.

Ash reluctantly released her when she pushed on his chest, and she turned to kneel in front of Cherry.

“I don't know, I was just told to bring them to you, and hurry up or I'll miss dinner.”

The one bag was Raven's, and when she opened the other, she found the clothes she'd been wearing when she'd arrived, still damp from their wash, a loaf of bread, a wedge of cheese, and what looked like her mother's entire basket of fruits and vegetables that had been on the counter.

“Are you leaving again?”

Raven pulled her attention away from the supplies, taking in her sister's slumped shoulders and wide eyes. Fawn may have been her closest in age, but Cherry was her closest in spirit, and Raven hated the answer she had to give.

Pulling Cherry into a hug, she gave her a squeeze before blowing a raspberry on her cheek to make her giggle. Pushing her back to arm's length, she forced away the urge to cry again and pasted on a smile.

“I do have to leave. I came back to be sure everyone was safe, but I have a new home now.”

Cherry raised a brow and looked over at Ash, her assessing expression making Raven want to laugh.

“Is this the alpha who took you away?”

Her serious tone made Raven sober, and before she could deny it, Ash knelt and rested an arm on his raised knee.

“I did. I came with the Tayueta warriors to rescue my cousin who was being held in the village. We don’t have many omegas, so we took the ones here, but it wasn’t a nice thing to do.”

Raven’s heart squeezed at the way he addressed her sister and told her the truth as if she was more than a child.

“He’s also the one who helped me get back here to see you again,” she added.

Cherry turned back to her.

“Do you like him? Is he your alpha? Is that why you can’t stay?”

The heat that had faded from her cheeks returned in a rush, spreading so far her ears burned as she gave a nervous laugh, shooting a glance at Ash.

“I can’t stay because it’s time for me to move on and have my own life. It’s not his fault.”

Cherry’s brows rose and her lips puckered.

“Since you didn’t answer my first question, I’m taking that as a yes. He’s big, and he’s got pretty hair. He’s better than Branch.”

Ash’s chuckle vibrated the air around her as Raven tried not to drown in embarrassment. Clearing her throat, she pulled Cherry in for another hug before rising to her feet. She didn’t want her father coming outlooking for Cherry if she was missing for too long.

“I think so too, but you better get back inside if you want to eat. You know Father won’t let you if you’re late.”

Eyes going wide again, her littlest sister stared up at her, clutching her hands in her skirt.

“Will you be gone forever?”

The question was an arrow to the heart, sorrow ripping through her as a sob threatened to block her airway.

Ash wrapped an arm around her, rumbling a low purr as she struggled to gain control and answer, but he beat her to it.

“We will visit Siloah as often as we can, and when you’re bigger, maybe you can come to Tayueta and see the mountains.”

Cherry’s smile lit her whole face, a squeal slipping out as she bounced in place.

“Really?”

Ash nodded.

“As long as your mother says it’s okay, but I don’t think you should mention it to your father.”

Cherry calmed, returning Ash’s nod.

“You’re right. He thinks omegas can’t do anything. He’d make me stay here.”

Leaning down to take hold of Cherry’s shoulders, Raven looked her in the eyes.

“Omegas can do anything we want to. Don’t ever forget it.”

Throwing her arms around Raven’s neck, Cherry gave her a quick hug before turning and hurrying to the house. Ash pulled her against his chest again, fingers taking her chin and tipping her head up to look at him.

“I’m glad you finally know that.”

Smiling, she threaded her fingers into his hair again.

“My teacher said I’m stubborn and foolish, so it took a little while for it to sink in.”

Chapter Forty-Three

Raven

Once they'd left what used to be Siloah land they took their time traveling back to Tayueta. Ash hadn't let her get away with simply following him, insisting the only way she'd be confident in her skills was if she relied on them. He forced her to lead them once again.

She got better at setting snares, usually managing to catch something for their morning meal while Zaida provided the meat when they camped in the evening, and Ash began teaching her to use a bow. They lingered by Lake Fratine for a couple days while Ash stalked a herd of muskox, but with the weather warming and no snow to keep the meat fresh, they had to head home once he made his kill.

The returning animals and budding plants had sent a thrill through her, knowing it meant spring was coming, and with it, her first heat. The first thing she'd done upon returning to the village had been to tell Raider that she chose Ash and wouldn't accept any other alpha.

"Good, you can be his worry from now on," he'd said, then slammed his door in her face.

She'd stood staring at the door in shock until Ash's laughter made her turn around. She wanted to be irritated by Raider's dismissal, but he wasn't stopping her, and that was all she cared about.

They'd been back for a little over half a moon when she heard the news that Rune had gone into heat and was on her way to Lake Fratine, where they held the Agri-ren. It was only another handful of days when Lyric succumbed to the season, and nerves jittered under Raven's skin as she waited.

Impatiently.

Ash had begun planning an addition on his cabin when they'd returned, and he kept busy finding and felling trees, then dragging them back to stack in the clearing around their home. Raven had gone with him a few times, but she found it

boring, so she spent her days either helping at the tavern or doing small chores around the cabin.

When the other omegas in the village started going into heat, she decided it best to stay home, just in case, but the longer she waited with no sign of her cycle beginning, the more impatient she grew. Even Zaida had gone into heat and run off, and Raven was irritated by all of it.

Ripping the bedding from their mattress, she lugged it all out into the sunshine, dropping it beside the hollowed log Ash had fashioned for washing. A storm had threatened the previous afternoon, so she'd emptied it and let nature do the work of refilling it for her. She'd had to add a few buckets of water, but not nearly as much as if it hadn't rained for most of the night.

Grabbing the soap she'd purchased from the market the last time she'd been in the village, she dipped it in the cold water, lathering the block and dipping it again until there was a nice layer of bubbles floating on the surface. Rubbing more directly onto the blankets and furs where their fluids had crusted, a low growl steadily rolled from her as a litany of curses ran through her head.

By the time she'd scrubbed the bedding and hung it to dry, the day was sweltering, the shirt and pants she'd put on that morning soaked through. Skin itching with sweat, she pulled them off and threw them into the tub before climbing in with them.

The water did little to cool her flesh, but it removed the grime. It crossed her mind as she climbed out to add her clothing to the drying line that it was good Ash's cabin was so far from others since she was strutting around naked, but the thought of putting anything on had her shaking her head and growling again.

Returning to the house, she pried open windows stiff from not moving all winter, then brought out the cushions and blankets that she'd added to the living area. Even the rug was dragged out to be hung and beaten.

She had to bathe again to wash away the dirt that clung to her sweaty body before doing everything in reverse. She carried in the rug and cushions, rearranging them until she was happy with their new places.

Then she went back for the bedding, the blankets dry, but the furs still damp despite the sunny day. Grumbling under her breath, she tossed the blankets on the bed and went to the chest that held extras, pulling everything out to add to her pile before climbing onto the mattress to begin arranging it.

She folded and fluffed, layered and padded, until the bed was covered from wall to wall, the edges softened by rolls of extra furs. The wind coming in the window beside her had kept ruffling her work, so she'd closed it, and suddenly she had to go close them all.

Rushing through the cabin, she sealed each one, making sure they were covered. The sight of the furs still hanging outside had the hair on her body rising, and she peeked out the back door to look around at the empty clearing before dashing across to rip them down and rush back inside.

The sun was slipping behind the mountains, the space between the trees already growing dark, and her skin crawled with some unknown sensation that had her heart racing as she closed and barred the door behind her. Breathing hard, she carried the bedding to the mattress and climbed atop it, sitting with the pile held tight in her arms until her pulse slowed and she could draw a full breath.

Sucking in another lungful, she looked around, anxiety replaced by a wave of sorrow. Her nest smelled of honeysuckle and rose. A hint of pine and fresh grass rose from it as she turned, but there was no trace of candied nuts. No musk of alpha seed, nor her sweet slick combined with it to mark the space as hers.

Tears welling along her lashes, she whimpered as her belly clenched. The pain made her want to burrow under the blankets, but they didn't smell right, and warmth still burned through her veins.

A bang at the back of the house pulled a gasp from her as she whirled around to face the doorway of the bedroom, heart fluttering in her throat. A rattle reached her ears before silence took over, leaving her trembling as she knelt on the bed, clutching the furs to her chest.

She barely dared breathe as she waited, the sudden scuff of the front door swinging open loud between the thudding beats of her heart. She whimpered again as footsteps approached, another cramp seizing her belly and forcing slick to wet her folds.

Ash stepped through the opening, gaze landing on her. She watched the dark of his pupils expand, pushing away the pretty brown that reminded her so much of the tree he'd claimed his name from, her lips parting as his scent reached her and soothed the worry that she was alone.

“Raven.”

Her name on his lips spurred her into action. She didn't need the bedding she clutched, what she needed was his scent in her nest, his seed on her tongue, and his knot locked within her.

Shoving the furs aside, she turned around, pulling her knees beneath her hips and dropping her chest to the bed. Looking over her shoulder, she met her alpha's hungry gaze.

“Fuck me.”

Chapter Forty-four

Ash

“Fuck me.”

Raven was finally in heat, and those words were the only encouragement he needed.

Stripping out of his clothes, he was bent over her in moments, open mouth trailing down her neck as his hands wrapped around to tweak her nipples the way she liked. His cock had surged to attention as soon as he came into the room, and it throbbed where it was trapped against her ass, already leaking.

“Finally, you’re going to be mine.”

She moaned and pushed back against him, trying to wriggle him into place.

“I’m already yours, just bite me.”

He chuckled, trailing kisses over her shoulder and down her back as one hand slipped down to cup her sex. She was already dripping with slick, her belly tensing against his arm as it cramped. Only his seed would soothe the ache and calm her womb, but there were so many things he wanted to do to her, it felt wrong to rush.

Dipping his fingers into her opening, he pushed two inside, spreading them before adding a third. She was already so wet he had no problem sliding them in and out, Raven rocking back against the invasion with another moan.

His other fingers squeezed her breast where it was squished against the blankets, rolling her nipple between his knuckles before relieving the pressure for a moment and pinching again. He raked his teeth over the place where he gripped her when he took her from behind, Raven hissing and twitching away before pushing into the pressure.

They’d been waiting for her heat since they’d returned from Siloah, and he wanted nothing more than to sink into her and mark her as his, but he had to be sure she was ready.

Twisting his fingers inside her, he spread them again, the wet squelch lost beneath her cries as she started to tremble. She was already close, her body more sensitive with the rush of hormones flooding through her. The pheromones she was pumping into the air had him on edge as well, ready to fill her with his seed after his knot swelled to lock it in place, assuring the omega couldn't escape to be claimed by another.

The thought had a rumble leaving his chest, his cock twitching as he dropped lower to taste her. He needed to be inside her, but he wanted her flavor on his tongue first.

“Ash, please!”

Dragging his tongue over her clit, he gave it a quick flick before sucking it into his mouth, his fingers pumping in and out of her. Her back arched, core clamping down as she shook with her orgasm.

A fresh wave of slick drenched his hand and beard, and he released her clit to lap it up, Raven twitching with each lick. He loved the taste of her, loved having her come apart on his tongue, but he could already feel her impatience growing.

Straightening, he withdrew his fingers, raising them to his mouth to suck them clean as she watched him over her shoulder. Her lips were parted as she panted into the bedding, her cheeks flushed and eyes glazed with her need despite the orgasm she'd just had, her curls laying wild around her head.

His omega was just as wild and tangled as her hair usually was, and he loved how she'd blossomed with confidence over the past moon. She was quick, and smart, and stronger than she'd ever know.

And she was all his.

Taking her hips in both hands, he pressed the head of his cock to her entrance, holding her gaze.

“Mine.”

He growled the word before burrowing into her, her slick folds parting around his length as he forced every bit of it into her channel. They'd had each other every night since their

reunion, but he still couldn't get enough of her. He never would.

"Mine," he growled again as he pulled out before thrusting back in, hips slapping her ass as she cried out.

She pushed up onto her hands, allowing him to move her along his cock as he thrust, slamming them together as tension coiled in his balls. He couldn't stop his snarls of pleasure as she fluttered around him, her cries mingling with the sound into something he could listen to for the rest of his life.

"My omega."

She shook in his grip, whines escaping between the moans as his knot started swelling and pulling on her lower lips. Reaching forward, he tangled his fingers in her curls and pulled her head back, arching her spine as he rammed into her.

Nuzzling ear, he licked a path down to the base of her neck as his knot caught at her entrance, refusing to leave her sheath. Dipping his other hand between her legs, he rolled his fingers over her clit as he surged forward, forcing it into place behind her pubic bone as her core tried to strangle his cock.

"My mate," he whispered, spreading his teeth over the top of her shoulder.

He bit down as her channel sucked the first spurt of cum for him, piercing her flesh as the tension in his balls burst and poured through his tip. He flooded her with his seed as he held her trapped between his knot and his teeth, marking her as his.

A flutter of sensation in his chest made him blink, bringing back enough sense to withdraw his teeth and lick over the wound as the bond tied their souls together. Neither of them would ever be alone again, carrying a part of the other inside them.

He released her hair, pulling her back flush against his, his cock still kicking inside her as her orgasm continued. Twisting in his arms, she sank her teeth into his bicep, bursting the bond wide open between them.

The lingering doubt about being able to give her what she needed was washed away under the onslaught of feelings

rushing through the bond. They couldn't speak through it with words, but words weren't needed to tell him she had everything she wanted with his mark on her neck.

It wasn't just the hormones and heat feeding him the satisfaction of a sated omega, he could tell how she felt accepted by him. Wanted, desired, trusted. His own chest tightened knowing he made her feel that way.

Settling them on their sides as the aftershocks of their releases flooded through them, he wrapped Raven in his arms, swearing to make sure she always felt that way with him. Before her, he'd only had Zaida to keep away the loneliness that seemed to follow his every step, but he hadn't known what he needed to stop it.

Because it had been her.

He'd been foolish to resist the draw to her, but his curiosity had bloomed into more despite the way he'd tried to stifle it.

And now she was his everything, the life they were building together what drove him every day. No one would ever take her from him, and he'd spend his life using the bond as his guide to teach him how to keep her happy.

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Thanks

I hope you enjoyed Raven and Ash! It's been a while since I wrote in this world, and I'd forgotten how fun it was. I enjoy my aliens, but this series is where I really cut my writing teeth, and it'll forever hold a special place.

We still have one more omega to see mated! Poor Willow was the youngest of the females kidnapped by Raider, and it's going to take a special alpha to handle her shy nature. The readers in my group voted to make him a little older than the others instead of having him closer to her age, and they're on the list to be written, though it'll likely be next year.

If you're not signed up for my newsletter, it's the best place to keep up with what book is coming next and to grab ARCs when I have them available. You can also claim a couple short stories for signing up, just go to <https://leannryans.com>

If you enjoy this world and were intrigued by the mention of Monsters in the Mountains, I have a series just for them as well! They're mostly short and heavier on the smut, with heroes who are monstrous in appearance, though not in actions.

Interested? Read on for a sample of Monster's Find.

[OceanofPDF.com](https://leannryans.com)

Monster's Find

Chapter One

I was alone in the darkness.

Or I thought I was.

The small noises that reached me could be explained away. A rat scurrying down the tunnel beyond. The wind whipping through openings in the caves.

I'd chosen what I thought was the most secure cavern to create my nest. It wasn't the deepest, I hadn't been able to reach an end to the cave system, but it was off a side tunnel where I thought I wouldn't be found.

Not that it seemed like there was anyone to find me. I knew my home village wasn't the only one in these mountains, but I hadn't seen a single person since the night I'd ran away.

My father's death had left me with no protection. On the cusp of my first heat, I was being fought over by the alphas before his body had even cooled.

And I wouldn't let myself be claimed by the ones who seemed likely to win.

Murderous slobs. Little better than filthy animals. Even the monsters they told stories of would be a better choice than any of them.

But that left me going into heat alone in the mountains.

Stumbling across the cave had seemed to be a blessing, and finding the system beyond the shallow hollow was more than I could have hoped for. Despite not encountering anyone during my trek, I hadn't wanted to be exposed while I was vulnerable. The cave system would keep my scent from spreading on the wind and drawing in any alpha close enough to be affected by my pheromones.

I tossed restlessly on my meager pile of rushes. The cramps were already ripping at my middle when I found my hiding

place, so I hadn't had much time to prepare. The armful of sweet grass I hadn't been able to resist as I made my way through the woods wasn't enough to cushion the hard stone below me. Even adding my cloak ovetop it didn't make the unforgiving surface any more pleasant.

A whine escaped as I thought of my bed. The piles of pillows and blankets I'd hoarded over the years in preparation. They would have been added to the bedding provided by the alpha my father chose for me, yet even he hadn't found anyone in our village worthy of an omega bride. He'd planned to take us to a new village with better prospects, but when the others found out, they'd killed him.

Tears built, spilling over and running down my grubby cheeks, but my mind couldn't focus on grief with lava burning through my veins. My middle tightened, lungs locking as another wave of pain spread from my core.

Fresh slick spilled over my thighs, but I was beyond the point of caring about my sorry state. I'd been stumbling through the forest for too many days to remember. My dress was torn, the soles of my soft boots almost worn through, and dirt caked every inch that had been exposed. I'd kept myself fed since I was familiar with the plants of the forest, but I was no woodsman.

A soft sob left me as the cramp passed, eyes blinking open in a vain effort to find distraction. Eyes opened or closed, there was no difference in what I could see. Perhaps that was why the small sounds I heard kept catching my attention. There was nothing else for me to focus on besides my growing need.

The sound of a scuff on stone pulled my head to the left. I'd turned too many times to know which direction I faced or where the tunnel entrance was, but instincts said the sound came from beyond my little cave.

Ears straining to catch any more noises, I held my breath as I waited. My heart was racing in my chest, fluttering as fissions of fear streaked through me.

Had I been found?

I'd done my best to cover my tracks as I left the village. I'd stuck to the hard path until I reached the stream, then waded through it until my feet were so numb I could no longer feel them. Even when I left the water, I was careful to climb out over a fall of rocks so I wouldn't leave any traces.

I'd camped without a fire since I couldn't make one, eating the food I'd stuffed in the one bag I'd brought with me in addition to whatever I scrounged as I walked. I'd huddled beneath my cloak, night after night and was further from my village than anyone I knew had ever gone, yet visions of the alphas from home bursting into the cave filled my head.

My core clenched again, and I had to swallow back a cry of pain. Lips pinched together, I trembled through the building pressure until another gush of fluid escaped between my legs.

The fabric beneath me was soaked, the sweet smell of slick overpowering the aroma released by the grass. My body went limp when the cramp passed, leaving me panting as I tried to prepare for the next. From what I had heard, they would continue until my heat was over, or I was knotted by an alpha. Without their potent seed to soothe the burning demand of my womb, it was going to be a rough few days until my cycle had passed.

My head lolled and my breathing eased as I let my mind drift again. I already felt weak from days of non-stop travel coupled with the loss of fluid, but I couldn't search for water in my state. I had a little left in my waterskin, but I had to be careful of draining it too soon. If I didn't leave myself enough I wouldn't have the strength to leave the cave once I was able.

Another scrape sounded beyond my little bubble, but I was too tired to lift my head and look for the source. It was all in vain anyway when I was enveloped in darkness. I couldn't even see the hand at the end of my arm, much less look for something creeping nearer.

Turning to try to get comfortable, another whine slipped through my control, the soft sound seeming loud as it echoed around me. I had no idea what else could be living in the cave system I'd found, I could only hope whatever it was would be

scared away from the scent of human. I had little chance of taking on a predator when I was rested and focused, and it wouldn't be long before I was in no state to even think about defending myself.

As I fell deeper into the daze of my encroaching cycle, the sounds outside my tiny cave became more frequent. The steady scraping had a rhythmic pattern, one I knew I should recognize, but my brain refused to focus on anything outside the demands of my own body. The heat building beneath my skin, the irritation of the restrictive dress twisting around me with each change of position, the building pressure in my womb, and the pulsing throb of need between my thighs.

Rolling over again, the abrasive brush of my homespun dress across my tightened nipples became too much. I rose to my knees, tugging it off with a growl and tossing it somewhere beyond the bounds of my nest. It didn't matter that I'd struggle to find it once my cycle passed, only that the offending material was beyond my current reach.

Cool air brushed across my sensitive flesh, bringing a sigh to my lips as I let myself sit back on my heels. There was a new scent on the breeze that played through my cave, something musky and rich and mouthwatering, but I didn't know where it came from. It teased my senses, prickling the hairs on the back of my neck, and bringing a fresh surge of slick from my core.

I couldn't resist the need for release any longer.

My hand slipped between my thighs even as shame filled my cheeks. I knew it was natural for omegas to desire sex during their cycle, but I'd never touched myself before, and the thought of filling myself with my own fingers seemed somehow naughtier than submitting to a male.

My fingertips slipped through the fluids coating my folds, seeking something to ease the ache. A gasp ripped from my lips as they passed over a small bump at the top of my opening, sensations spiking through my middle and making me freeze.

A new throb began in the little bundle I'd found, demanding I touch it again. I moved to my back as I switched between circling the little nub and brushing over the top of it, tension building in my belly but refusing to release. I tossed my head from side to side, tears leaving burning tracks on my face as I begged my body for the relief it refused to find.

I didn't realize I was crying out loud until a sudden noise froze the sounds in my throat. My body went on alert, stilling as my ears strained to find the source of whatever startled me. The scent I'd noticed earlier had grown stronger, coating my tongue in the heady aroma that made me think of nothing more than *male*.

"Don't let me interrupt you, little omega. I was enjoying the show."

The gruff voice echoed through the darkness, ripping a gasp from me as I scrambled away from the sound. My entire body throbbed with denied need as I crouched and searched desperately for the source. A small part of my brain recognized I was in danger, but my body only responded by releasing more slick to roll down my thighs, like that would save me.

The next cramp threatened to tear my body in half, the muscles in my middle rippling and forcing me into a ball of misery at the edge of my nest. Whoever was in the cave with me hadn't been a voice I recognized, and I was beyond the point of being able to run.

"Please..."

It was the only word I could force past trembling lips, and even I didn't know what I was asking for. Part of me demanded I send the male away, while another part wanted me to roll over and present. The deepness of the voice and the scent surrounding me left no question the speaker was an alpha, and it didn't matter that he was a stranger. I *needed*.

"Please what, little one? Are you in distress?"

A whimper was my only response. With the pheromones of the male taking effect in my brain, the cramps had become

non-stop, one rolling in on the heels of the last, leaving me breathless and crying into the thin grass covering the stone. My core clenched over and over, demanding to be filled with thick alpha cock.

I heard the same scraping sound as before coming closer, stopping at the edge of the little depression I'd claimed for my heat. A low growl left my throat before I could think, but it was met with a chuckle from the hulking male I could sense just outside my space.

“Temper, temper. I'm only offering to give you what you need.”

There was a strange accent to the words the male spoke, but they were clear enough to understand. Despite the delicious scent rolling off him and the demands of my body, it was instinct to protect my nest, even as pitiful as it was, until the alpha proved himself.

There still wasn't any light in the cave, but the male's presence was enough for my eyes to lock on to where I assumed he stood. The sense of motion caused me to flinch further away, but there were no more scraping footsteps, and nothing touched me.

Another harsh cramp pulled my focus back to myself, the desire between my thighs growing more desperate with each breath of the male's musk. My hand slipped to my core without conscious thought, two fingers dipping into my entrance to try to ease the pain but only succeeding in making me more miserable.

I wasn't going to make it through days of this. It was torture. I was going to die in misery.

I pushed another finger into my opening, ignoring the alpha's presence and thrusting in and out with desperation. Something had to give, and I was scared it would be me giving into the male lurking so close.

A soft moan escaped my throat as my knuckles stretched my entrance, but it wasn't enough. I needed more.

“Poor omega. I have what your body craves, if only you’d let me into your nest.”

I snarled towards the male, turning so my back was to where the voice originated. It came from lower than it had before and I could picture him crouching on the edge of my nest, watching as I tried to ease the ache. Waiting for the inevitable.

His scent was divine. There was a saltiness to it now that spoke of virility. That called to the animal parts of me and told me this was a male in his prime. A male worth submitting to.

I panted as my fingers worked. Free hand braced against the stone edge of my wallow, I tried to ride my thrusting digits, but it couldn’t provide the stretch or the friction my nature demanded. Even adding my little finger to the other three did nothing.

I needed more.

Time had no meaning in the desperate daze I’d fallen into. It could have been hours, or days, or mere seconds that passed in my search for relief before I finally collapsed with a sob.

I’d almost forgotten about the male perched at the side of my nest until he spoke again.

“Give in little one. Let me soothe your pain.”

“I will submit to no man.”

My snarled words echoed back to me even as a chuckle rumbled through the cave.

“Well, I am no *man*.”

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