



WORLDS  
OF PROTHEKA



THE  
REALM  
REAPER'S PREY

NIGHT CRAWLER BRIDES, BOOK ONE



CELESTE KING

# **THE REALM REAPER'S PREY**

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CELESTE KING

PROTHEKA PUBLISHING

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## **DEDICATION**

This book is dedicated to Kaylee, Emily, Taylor, Jordon, Melanie, Jamie, Jennifer, Hannah, Donna and the whole “Project Protheka” family. Thanks for believing in the world.

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# THE WORLD OF PROTHEKA





## ASRA

Sweat beads on my brow, chilling immediately in the brisk air. Some of the leaves on the trees have finally started to change, turning to vibrant oranges and reds and signaling the coming autumn.

The goal is to have the wall around our village complete before winter sweeps in so that we can have more permanent structures for all of the families in our makeshift village. The thought of happily smoking chimneys and families bundled together in their homes gives me a second wind, and I sink my shovel into the earth at my feet again.

“Asra’s got the right idea!” I hear Grim shout from above my head, the sound of his cane thunking against the ground as he walks toward me. I smile as I pitch the dirt out of the trench, going for another scoop.

Many of the other humans working alongside me, most of them men, have begun to tire as the day draws to a close. Especially as a child, I was always self-conscious of my taller build and the unladylike strength that resides in my muscles. It wasn’t until after Clay and I lost our parents and that strength saved us more times than I can count that I truly began to be grateful for it.

My thoughts turn unbidden to my parents, to the day we lost them in Orthani. I’d grown up happy, by human standards. I was 8 when Clay was born in the small shack we called home on the edge of the Mirsiths’ property.

My father worked as an animal tamer and groundskeeper, and my mother was the gardener. I'm not entirely sure why, but we were allowed to live as a family in relative privacy, something that I learned was exceedingly rare when I recounted Clay and I's story to Cecilia and Grim for the first time.

I was about 13 when Master Mirsith caught me playing outside with Clay. It wasn't unusual for us to do this, so I never really understood the danger of being in plain sight. I learned that lesson quickly, however, when he took a liking to me, claiming I was his property to use as he saw fit.

Everything after that is a bit of a blur. I remember his hand in my hair as he dragged me away from my crying baby brother, 5 at the time. I remember screaming for my parents, trying to fight against him uselessly.

And then I remember my father- his rugged face twisted in rage as he came barreling out of the gardens, tackling Master Mirsith to the ground, my mother hot on his heels. My mother dragged me away from Mirsith as he and my father fought, gathering Clay up and pushing us into the woods, telling us to run as fast as we could.

No amount of running could have driven the sounds of my father's death from my ears, or the way Mirsith laughed and promised he'd find us no matter where we ran to.

My mother managed to keep us hidden for a few days, and now in hindsight, I realize she was trying to get us to the docks, probably to flee the continent and get somewhere new, somewhere safer. The guards found us hiding out in a warehouse, and that was where I made my final promise to my mother- a promise to keep Clay safe, and to find a life worth living.

Then I ran, with Clay in my arms, while my mother tried to hold off the guards. Clay and I were nearly caught, and I had my jaw split open by one of the guards as I slipped through their hold, but we got away.

After everything that's happened, we deserve a place to call home. And I'm happy to build one for us.

The sun begins sinking through the tops of the dense trees, the temperature dropping and the light growing sparser by the second before Grim finally calls it a day.

“Bah, go home,” the grizzled older man says dismissively, the men around me quickly beginning to clamber out of the trench we’ve dug. I pull myself out after them, wiping the dirt off of my hands and onto my pants as Grim offers me a water skin.

“You put those men to shame, I’ll tell you that much,” Grim grumbles, though he gives me a wink. I grin back at him, downing the contents of the skin as I survey the work we’ve managed to complete so far.

Wide, heavy wooden posts line the completed half of the trench, branches and other forest debris woven onto them to help disguise the gates. We chose to settle at the base of Kirrane Peak, living in the shadow of the massive mountain at our backs to help keep us safe from the dark elves.

The entirety of our village is little more than a group of escaped humans trying to carve out a place for themselves in Protheka. Every person here has a horror story, some way they escaped from one of the surrounding dark elf cities, and we all managed to stumble on one another.

Between the strength in our numbers and our decision to settle in the shadows of Casadurna Peak, where no dark elves ever dare to go for fear of the King of Orthani and his monsters, we finally decided to stop roving the continent and create a home of our own.

I couldn’t be more excited to finally have a more permanent settlement, to be able to offer my brother some sort of stability and normalcy, but plenty of the other members of our camp disagree. I can’t say that I blame them.

“Grim!” A familiar voice chides from over my shoulder. I’m grinning before I even turn around, already knowing what’s about to happen as Grim rolls his eyes dramatically.

“It’s far too late for the two of you to be out here like this, you’re going to work poor Asra to death!” Cecilia cries as she

hurries toward us, her round cheeks already rosy from the nip in the air.

“Asra’s fine,” he gripes back, moving toward his wife and brushing a kiss to her cheek. Cecilia’s brows pull together as she swats at his arm, the bunched coats in her arms swaying at the sudden motion.

“Don’t you try to butter me up, old man,” she retorts, although the twinkle in her eyes gives her away. “Come on you two, inside before you catch your deaths!”

Cecilia throws a jacket over my shoulders before I can protest, giving me a soft shove back toward the gates. She and Grim fall into their usual banter, lobbing light ribs at one another as we walk through the village.

Between Grim’s injury and he and Cecilia’s age, their house was one of the first more permanent structures we erected within the village walls. A couple other houses dot the space in various forms of construction, while makeshift structures line the base of the mountain to help keep out the elements while families huddle there and wait for their homes to be completed.

People of all ages rove about, fulfilling various tasks and speaking happily with one another. Our village square has never stopped amazing me, even after being with our band of humans for nearly 10 years.

Before finding them, I’d never seen so many humans in one place, free to chat and do what they please. Hope blooms in my chest as I watch them work. We deserve this village, a home, free of dark elves and all the miseries they bring.

I’m so lost in thought that I nearly miss Clay trying to slip by me with a group of hunters, his shaggy brown hair hanging slightly in his face.

“And where do you think you’re going?” I demand as I step in front of him, halting him in his path. Clay huffs and rolls his eyes as he looks at me, and I’m suddenly reminded of just how much he’s grown. Clay has become tall and lanky in

his teenage years, a hint of stubble gracing his chin as he looks down at me.

“Asra, relax! I’m just going on a hunting expedition with some of the other men,” he says, puffing up his chest slightly.

“But it’s already nearly dark out! How are you going to catch anything when you can’t see two feet in front of you?” I protest, propping my hands on my hips.

“Anserinae are nocturnal,” Cain, a handsome hunter I’ve spent more than just a little time with, chips in from over Clay’s shoulder. I level a scathing look at him, and he recoils, giving Clay an apologetic look.

“I’m going to be fine, Asra. I’m not a baby anymore, I’m a man. Besides, the village needs all the help it can get if we’re going to get everything done before winter,” Clay retorts, knowing full well what bringing up the wellbeing of the village will do to me.

I sigh, crossing my arms across my chest as I look at him. I know there’s some truth to what he’s saying, but I can’t help but feel protective over him. It’s not as if I think Clay is incapable of taking care of himself, but he’s the only family I have left.

My promise to my mother rings in my ears as I look him over, and I realize Cecilia and Grim have stopped short, watching the exchange between Clay and I. Not wanting to embarrass him in front of the rest of the human men or in front of our newfound family, I relent.

“Okay, just be careful please. There’s a reason even the dark elves don’t come out this far.”

Clay gives me a lopsided grin, pulling me into a crushing hug before quickly releasing me to catch up with the rest of the hunters.

“I won’t be gone long, but don’t wait up! Love you!” he calls over his shoulder as he breaks into a jog toward the gates. A small smile plays on my lips as I watch him go. I know our parents would be so proud of who he is. I wonder if they’re



still keeping an eye on us from the great beyond- if they'd be proud of me, too.



## MAEL

The morning cold barely registers with me. All I can feel is the hunger burning deep in my gut. It dominates my other senses until all I can think is about the need to kill, to feed.

Just in front of me are crimson spatters, stirring my bloodlust into a frenzy. My mouth waters as I lean in, burying my face in the dying grass to inhale the scent. Adrenaline pulses through me as I snap up, my hunger holding me by the throat – just like it always does.

It's all I can think about, now and always. Even after I feed, it doesn't diminish, and I keep hoping for something that will quell this desperate urge I have.

I cock my head as I hear something, my whole body pulsing with the urge to charge forward and devour. I'm wiser than my baser needs – just barely – and I know that I need to wait to find where my prey is before I go after it.

A soft rustle gives it away, and before I can make the conscious decision, I'm flying forward. My eyesight is better than most of my kind, and I spot the animal, a four legged beast with green and brown splotched fur that would fool a lesser predator.

But I am designed to be unescapable.

“I've been looking for you,” I breathe.

The little thing's head snaps up as I close in. Its three horns, much like the ones adorning my own skull, should

provide protection, but with a snap of my wrist, they're gone. No longer able to puncture me, not that it would stop my bloodlust if they did.

It mewls, crying out, but I can barely hear it over the pounding in my ears. Its heart rate is increasing, only stirring me into a deeper frenzy. Gripping its skull, I jerk its head to the side and inhale deeply.

The blood sings a sweet song to me, and I can't stop myself as my jaws clamp around its neck, snapping straight through. I rip back, a chunk of warm meat sliding down my throat. Blood dribbles down my chin, and the second the coppery taste floods my senses I'm gone.

My teeth and claws shred through skin, flesh, and bone like they are water. My vision blurs, my scent and touch taking over. My whole body burns with the desperation to consume, feast. No matter how much blood coats my tongue, it's never enough.

I'm gasping, huffing as I rip apart the last of the little animal, and I realize that it's not enough. It never is, but now that I've had one taste, I am dying for me.

I've dropped to all fours, hunched forward to run on my hands and feet like an animal. It's only after I eat that this happens, when my baser needs and my prey take over my body. I'm too easily influenced by what I feed on, if my head is any indication. My skull marks the first thing I ever preyed on, a feline creature that put up quite a fight.

Conscious thought does little for my instincts as I catch the scent of another animal. Something is lurking closer, something drawn by the scent of my fresh kill. I cock my head, excitement flooding my scenter as I hear the pads of a heavy beast fall.

This is going to be fun.

"Let's see who wins," I mutter.

I let out a vicious roar. I'm no longer in the mood to eat. I want to run, to chase, to *hunt*. And if this predator knows what's good for them, they will lead me on a good one.

The soft ground does little to hide its footsteps as it takes off, and my body hums with the thrill of the chase. Nothing sets me off like my prey running. I'm eager to taste the fear tainted blood, and I take off.

My body moves without thought, so well created to kill that I don't have to register the trees to go around them. And soon I'm landing on top of another feline beast, its roars doing nothing but driving me further into madness.

Its claws snag at my skin, and I laugh as it shreds through me. It will find that no pain or fear is within me. Only hunger. Only the need to kill.

I rip its head from its shoulders, swallowing it down before its body even crumbles, and just like with the thin little creature before, I pull it apart swiftly, devouring it all.

Sometimes I choose not to eat the fur. I don't like the way it coats my tongue and it can provide some protection from the cold, but in this moment, I'm too eager to consume it all. I tear through the thick exterior, the tough meat, and hard bone all the same.

With each tear I make into the beast, I find I lose myself a little more. The scent of its blood coats me, and I clamp my jaws around the torn body, lapping at the warm liquid as it spurts.

My body wars with what it wants most – to eat or drink – and soon my need to destroy kicks in. I scarf down the second half of the beast in record time, its blood so strong that I lick the forest floor to claim the last drops.

This beast is more aware than my prey before, and it eases my bloodlust a little. I manage to stand, to think clearly for only a second. And the only thought that crosses my mind is that I am so, painfully bored.

The only thing that even brings me joy anymore is hunting. It gets out the anxious energy in my body, the very energy that, if pent up too long, leads to infighting among my group. None of us care for each other, and while I've stayed with those of

my kind out of convenience and protection, I've grown tired of them, too.

"But not of you," I whisper as my eyes catch on a copper colored creature in flight.

Softly, I pad after it, watching in wonderment as its wings beat. It sees me, calling out, but even its panicked song is beautiful.

"I would never hurt you," I call to it, trying to keep my voice soothing. But I am not designed for such calm nature and it beats its wings faster, trying to get away from me.

I keep some distance between the bird and I, but I never take my eyes off of it. I've always been fascinated by things that can fly, and I often wonder at the freedom that it provides. Maybe I wouldn't be so eternally bored if I could take the skies like that.

But I already learned that eating the winged creatures won't give me those abilities. I've tried it before, and all that it did was turn my skin sensitive to the sun, which greatly annoys me.

It's in the blood of my people. I am an apex predator, and I do not expect anything to restrain me from doing as I please. My body has little limitations and nothing can stand up to me. To have a prey pass on such a defect sent me into a rage when I first discovered it.

My eyes are still on the copper feathered bird, my feet following it. The soft fluttering of the wings don't entice me the same way as my prey running, and I'm able to keep my instincts at bay.

Until I hear the whistle.

My whole body goes stiff as I turn my head slowly in the direction I heard it. I tip my skull back, inhaling deeply as the whistling continues. On the air is the thick scent of a new prey, one that makes my mouth water. I've encountered so few of this kind and they don't seem to realize that they are calling us straight to them with that sharp sound that is so easy to locate.

I take off toward the sound, dropping to all fours to move faster. The soft whispering of footsteps crowds me, and I know others are headed in the same direction. But I want the first pick.

As I crest the hill, I spot the group still whistling. It's a small pack of fleshy creatures that walk on two legs. Man, I think I've heard them called. They're easy to overpower.

They are not like the other animals I normally prey on. They seem to have more conscious thought, the ability to plan and coordinate. They don't think we do, but what they do not know is that the more of them I eat, the more like them I become.

Maybe if I eat enough, the sun won't burn me anymore.

I creep slowly down the side of the forested hill, the slope going to where the treeline stops. They think they are safe in these woods. They do not even look around as I descend, and I spot one, toward the back, that calls to me.

Bloodlust claws at my throat, and I want to rush forward, to throw myself at the creature, but I wait. This group will scatter, and though the chase will be fun, they stand to be more capable of outrunning me.

But with each step I take, I'm eager to sink my teeth into the one I've picked. My jaw works, eager to clamp it around him, and as I start to get close to their level, I see other shadows moving around me.

Not everyone around me can see them. In fact, most can't. But they do lift their faces to the air, inhaling the scent, and I see the moment that the tension breaks just before it does. The lesser of my race is unable to withstand their baser needs.

Not wanting to lose my prey, I charge forward just as his head whips toward me with wide, bright eyes. His mouth opens on a scream, and the sound is like music to my ears as I launch my body forward, closing the distance between us before he can muster the courage to turn and flee.





## ASRA

I pace anxiously in front of Cecilia and Grim's cabin, the night deepening with every passing minute. He should have been back by now- they all should have.

The rest of the village square is filled with people and families just like me, holding up lanterns and torches in front of their homes and with their neighbors, squinting anxiously into the surrounding dark, looking for any sign of their loved ones.

Nervous tittering crests and falls in rhythmic turns among the onlookers, the tension in the air growing thicker with each second. Some of the more flighty members of our encampment have begun whispering about whether we should all pack up and flee, citing the lateness of the hunting group as a bad omen.

I try to shove that thought from my mind, refusing to give in to the dread pooling heavily in my stomach. Did they get lost out in the mountains? Is someone hurt? Did they run into one of the King or Orthani's monsters, or some other manner of terrible beast?

Worse, have they been found? If they were found by a group of dark elves, I doubt any of our people are alive anymore, unless they kept someone alive to lead the elves back to our village.

*No, I tell myself firmly, sucking in a deep breath. No, they're fine. Clay is fine. I'm sure they're just too caught up in the hunt to realize how long they've been gone.*

Cries from the villagers around me begin to grow louder, panic seeping in. Some are even gathering up their belongings, their eyes darting about wildly as if they're ready to make a break for it at any second.

While I can't say that I blame them, that I don't share their apprehension and growing fear of what this could mean, I know I won't be among them if they flee. I'm not leaving here without Clay, no matter what.

I do my best to help soothe the nervous crowd, offering comforting words to families and scathing looks to those who might stoke the flames of their worst fears. Everyone here has been through too much already to have that trauma played upon by any doom-spouting, fear-mongering jackass.

There's a part of me that wants to begin rallying people for a search party, a part that grows larger by the second, but I try to keep telling myself that it's premature. It won't come to that- they'll all be galavanting through the gates in a few short minutes, and then I can chew Clay out for scaring me like this.

No sooner has the thought crossed my mind do I hear shouting from near the gates. The crowd of people surges forward, and heady relief rushes through me as I realize they're signaling the return of the hunting party.

That relief crumbles quickly, however, when I see the hunting party begin making their way into the village square.

When they left, they were a dozen strong, all clean and armed to the teeth. Now, I only spot four hunters, carrying between them the unresponsive body of a man.

Panic once again grips my heart with a painful squeeze, and I begin shoving through the throng of people, trying to catch sight of Clay among the returning party. The men look significantly worse than when they left, all of them bleeding in some respect, their clothes torn and disheveled, their weapons almost entirely missing.

I see Cain before I see Clay, and I break through the crowd, running toward him.

“Clay?” I ask in lieu of a greeting, but I’m already looking past him, into the faces of the few men who accompany him, none of whom are my brother.

The blood in my veins turns to ice, my stomach leadening, as I force my eyes to Cain’s face. His dark eyes shine with unshed tears as he shakes his head, his face paler than I’ve ever seen it.

“I’m sorry Asra,” he starts. My world starts to spin, the earth seeming to slip from beneath my feet as I look at him.

“Sorry? Sorry for what? What happened?” I demand, my voice distant and shrill.

“I- I don’t know where Clay is,” Cain says, releasing the leg of the man he’s been helping to carry as the others drag him toward the infirmary cabin.

Fury whips through me faster than I can deal with it, swallowing my panic and grief, leaving no room for anything other than anger.

“YOU LEFT HIM OUT THERE?” I shriek, shoving against Cain’s chest. His eyes widen in shock as he stumbles back from the force of my blow, his expression a mix of emotions I can’t quite name.

“I’m sorry Asra! I don’t know what happened! He was there one second, and then-”

“And then what, Cain? You just decided to come home without him?”

“No! We were attacked! I- I don’t know what happened, it was all too fast! We couldn’t see, and then we got separated, and the screaming started, and we just ran!” He yells back at me.

“Attacked by what? Dark elves?” I press, my anger beginning to subside as fear sweeps back in. Cain merely shakes his head, his face growing paler as he thinks about what happened.

“Not dark elves... I don’t know what attacked us. It was too dark to see. I did my best Asra, I really did, I never would

have left Clay if I had another choice.”

A sob shakes my body as the fight drains out of me. They were attacked- something attacked them, and now Clay is gone. He’s alone in the woods with whatever managed to take out 7 men without being seen.

Not knowing what else to say, or how to even look at him right now, I turn away from Cain, hugging myself as all of my worst fears come true. I failed. I failed Clay, failed my parents who gave their lives for us. He’s gone, and I don’t know how to get him back. If he’s even alive anymore.

Cecilia and Grim stand nearby, tears tracking down Cecilia’s pale face. She leans heavily on Grim, looking as if she might faint, which tells me everything I need to know about how much they heard of Cain and I’s conversation.

The village all of a sudden seems too small, suffocating even. I’m about ready to run out of the village gates and never look back when Cain’s hand wraps gently around my elbow, stopping me.

I whirl on him, still blaming him for Clay’s disappearance. Deep down, I know that it isn’t Cain’s fault, but I’d trusted him with Clay’s safety. And now Clay is gone.

“Who did you bring back? Who were you carrying?” I demand. I know I must look deranged to Cain right now, but I can’t find it in me to care. All that matters is bringing Clay home safe.

“David. He was walking with Clay and a couple others at the front of the group,” he responds slowly. Cain opens his mouth to continue, but I stop him before he can.

“I want to talk to him.”

“Asra, I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Cain warns gently. “Whatever happened, David’s not in his right mind. He’s injured, and talking nonsense-”

“I don’t care. He was with Clay when it happened, right?”

Cain nods reluctantly.

“So he might know something you don’t. Either take me to talk to him, or I’ll barge in there myself.”

Cain sighs, but relents, inclining his head to motion for me to follow him as we walk to the infirmary. My heart pounds wildly, my palms slick with sweat.

I try to calm myself, try to find some reasonable and rational part of my brain to channel to help get me through this conversation, but even trying to push past the storm of emotions whirling inside me, I know I’m inches away from shattering completely. If David tells me Clay is dead, I don’t know what I’ll do.

*At least you’ll know*, I tell myself as Cain and I cross the threshold into the infirmary. David lays on a cot, staring with unseeing eyes at the ceiling. He’s as pale as death, his skin nearly gray, and streaks of white dot through his hair that I could have sworn weren’t there when they departed earlier this evening.

“Hey, David,” Cain says soothingly as he approaches the cot. “Asra wants to talk to you. Are you feeling up for a chat?”

David says nothing, staring at the ceiling as if he were dead. I walk past Cain, forcing myself into David’s line of vision as I lean over his cot.

“You know Clay, right David? Clay is my brother, he was with you when you were attacked,” I say, trying hard to mimic Cain’s soft, soothing voice, but coming up short.

David’s eyes flit to mine briefly as if in acknowledgement before returning back to the ceiling.

“I need to know what happened, David. I need you to tell me what you saw,” I continue.

David jerks up suddenly, making me nearly fall backward in surprise. In his sitting position, I can see more clearly the toll this latest hunting trip has taken on him. His face seems to sag with age, despite being only a few years older than Cain and I.

Deep gashes cut through his left arm, and much smaller, almost micro-tears cover his face, the small seams of blood

catching the dim light of the infirmary eerily.

“The shadows,” he rasps, his eyes focused on me as he heaves heavy breaths. It’s as if every word is an effort, a knife in his throat, as he begins to spew disjointed, nonsensical thoughts.

“Whistles bounce in the woods, they’re awake, hungry shadows in every tree, they like the music, they like the screams, they’re all so hungry, the whistling makes them hungrier, sweet squishy flesh whistles as it’s crushed,” he rambles on, beginning to rock back and forth on his cot.

Fear begins to pulse in my veins as I watch him, and my eyes dart to Cain’s, who seems just as alarmed by David’s sudden bout.

“I don’t understand,” I manage to say, my voice quaking.

“The shadows!” David repeats more animatedly. “Hungry, hungry shadows!”

Unsure of how much more of this I can take, I step away from David, wanting nothing more than to rid my mind of the disconcerting images he’s creating. I turn to Cain, shaking my head.

“This isn’t helping. I’m going to get a search party together, I can’t leave Clay, we have to go back out there-”

The rest of my words die in my throat as David leaps off of the cot, moving faster than I would’ve thought possible as his face twists into a toothy snarl.

“No! NO!” David screams, lunging at me, spit flying from his mouth as he screams.

I’m too slow to get out of his grasp, and I hit the ground hard as he reaches me, tackling me to the floor.



## ASRA

**S**tars dance in my vision as the back of my head collides with the hard ground of the infirmary floor. David's weight pins me to the ground, and I shove uselessly against him as his voice rings in my ears, spittle landing on my face as he screams.

“MANAHA! MANAHA! MANAHA!” He shrieks above me, his eyes wide and deranged, his mouth open wider than should be possible. A terrified scream wells in my throat as I flail beneath him, trying to get him off of me and defend myself against his imminent attack.

David's weight suddenly disappears off of me, and I scuttle backward, my chest rising and falling dramatically as I suck in panicked breaths.

Cain wrestles David to the ground, bellowing out for help as he struggles to hold him back. Several other men rush into the infirmary at the commotion, throwing themselves at David, who is bucking off men with an inhuman strength.

David's eyes never leave mine, his screams echoing through the small space as more men pile on top of him. Eventually, his screams are cut short as one of the men's elbows collides sharply with his skull, knocking him unconscious.

The men drag David back to his cot, binding him with rope to the frame of the bed in case he wakes up again. Cain rushes to me, helping me to my feet as his eyes skim over me worriedly.



“Are you okay? Did he hurt you?” he asks as his eyes find mine. I shake my head, not sure I trust myself with words, my eyes darting back to where David lays unconscious.

“He didn’t hurt me,” I say finally, my voice trembling slightly. “What was that word he was saying? Manaha?”

Cain goes rigid, shifting uncomfortably on his feet.

“It’s an old dialect, one we don’t hear often anymore,” he says, brushing dirt off of my shoulder and avoiding my gaze.

“But what does it mean?” I press, forcing him to look at me.

“I... it means man-eater,” Cain supplies reluctantly, finally meeting my gaze. The blood drains from my face as I stare at him, a chill racing down my spine.

“Man-eater?” I repeat, my words hardly above a whisper. Cain only nods, giving my shoulders a reassuring squeeze.

“I told you, he’s out of his mind. He’s in shock, his brain is just trying to make sense of what happened by repeating old ghost stories. I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about,” he says, although his tone is less than convincing. I take a shaky breath, pulling out of Cain’s hold.

“Ghost stories or not, I have to go back out there,” I tell him as I turn away, trying to smooth my hair out and steel myself.

I’d be a liar if I said David’s outbursts haven’t scared me shitless, but the thought of Clay out there alone, with whatever was able to do *that* to David, is unacceptable. He needs me.

“Asra-”

“Don’t, Cain. I’m not leaving him out there, not for another minute.” With that, I push open the door to the infirmary, fully intending on going back to Cecilia and Grim’s cabin to gather supplies, when I come up short.

Nearly the entire village encircles the infirmary, their eyes wide and expressions unsteady as they stare back at me. The commotion must have drawn everyone in- which means we’ve had an audience.

I school my features into something neutral, something steady, despite the fear bubbling in my belly. No matter how I feel about everything that's just happened, I can't let them see me scared. I need to be the confident leader they need right now if I'm going to get anyone to come with me.

"We're organizing a search party," I say in my steadiest voice to the gathered villagers, looking out into the crowd. "We can't leave our men out in the woods. I need volunteers."

Thick silence lays across the crowd as they stare back at me. I catch sight of Grim and Cecilia, Grim's lips pressed tightly into a thin line and Cecilia's cheeks stained with tears.

"I'll go with you," Cain says from over my shoulder, stepping forward to stand beside me. I shoot him a grateful smile, glad to at least know that he'll be with me.

"I'll go too," another voice rings from the crowd as an older man steps forward. Only three others decide to join us, a man whose brother was among those who didn't return and his wife, along with one of the hunters from the original party. I nod, scanning the crowd for a final time to see if anyone else will step forward.

No one does, and after a moment of silence, the crowd begins to disperse, some of the villagers stopping and wishing us luck before hurrying back to their cabins.

"I'm coming with you," Grim says, pushing his way to the front of the crowd as people move past him. Cecilia's face contorts in fear as she steps forward to stop him, but I beat her to it.

"No, Grim, I can't let you follow us out there," I tell him quickly. The older man's face hardens with the rejection, but I continue, not letting him get a word in.

"The woods will be too hard on your leg, and we need you here to run the village. Cecilia needs you here," I say.

"Clay needs me too," Grim retorts, and my heart swells to a painful point at the grief on his face from mentioning my brother. I throw my arms around him, giving him a crushing hug.

“Of course he does, but that’s why you have to stay here. To have everything ready for us when we come home,” I say, my voice trembling with emotion. White-hot tears prick my eyes as Grim squeezes me back firmly, pulling away after a long moment with a reluctant nod.

“I won’t come back without him, I promise,” I say thickly. Cecilia rushes to me, folding me into her chest tightly before pressing a kiss to my brow.

“You come home no matter what,” she orders through her tears. I nod against her shoulder, and she releases me, linking arms with Grim. Cain appears at my side, offering me a thick cloak followed by a bow and a quiver of arrows.

And, with a final glance over my shoulder at Grim and Cecilia, we set off.

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The forest is treacherous even in the light of day, but at night, with nothing but sparse starlight to guide us, the woods become a death trap.

I pick over the rocky terrain carefully, keeping my gaze on the woods around us. Our movements are muffled by the thick trees and decaying leaves covering the forest floor, but in the permeating silence in the woods, every sound feels deafening.

“Clay!” I yell, my voice bouncing off of the trees around us. Just like every other time I’ve called out for him, I’m met with nothing but silence. Cain and the other hunter lead our troupe deeper into the woods, retracing their steps from their earlier mission. There’s no sign of anything living at this hour—no birdsong, no sleepy rustle of creatures.

The forest feels like a graveyard.

Cold sweat clings to my neck as we press deeper into the forest, my companions calling out the names of their lost loved ones intermittently. The further we go into the woods, the more convinced I become that we’re being watched.

Phantom eyes press heavily against my back, and I cast furtive glances over my shoulder. I think I catch movement out of the corners of my eyes, but every time I turn toward it, I find nothing but trees and shrubs.

*Shadows. It's only shadows,* I tell myself as my heart beats wildly in my chest. The dim, flickering light of the lanterns and torches we carry seems to make the trees around us breathe, swaying in time with the motion of our steps.

The hunter beside Cain whistles, high and short, the shrill sound making my skin crawl. The sound of whistling in these woods feels wrong, feels like it's beckoning to something we can't quite see.

The hunter whistles again, longer this time, and a chill settles into my bones. He shouldn't be doing that, not here, not now. David's words come rushing back to me, spoken with a thousand different voices, echoing through my mind like a warning from the ghosts haunting these woods.

*Whistles bounce in the woods... the whistling makes them hungrier.*

My muscles lock up as fear courses through me, and the hunter whistles for a third time, long and low, as if calling to someone, or something.

"Stop that," I hiss as I hurry to catch up with them. Cain and the hunter turn toward me, confused expressions on their faces.

"How else are we supposed to find our people?" The hunter rumbles at me, his face hard. My reasoning falters in the face of his logic, and I struggle to put what I'm feeling into words, suddenly feeling extremely stupid for snapping at them.

"I... David said the whistling makes them hungrier," I offer lamely. The hunter simply scoffs and turns away from me, continuing deeper into the woods. Cain places a hand on my shoulder, his face the picture of worry as he looks at me, the lantern light playing on his features eerily.

“David is out of his mind, Asra,” he says gently, as if coddling a toddler. “There’s nothing to worry about. If we want to find Clay, and anybody else still alive out here, we have to make some sort of noise.”

I shrug his hand off with a huff, bristling at his tone. I don’t know how to explain it, but the whistling is wrong. It’s not safe.

Rather than try to convince them, and risk making myself look even less capable than I already have, I push forward. Once I find Clay, we’re never coming back into the woods again. I don’t care if he needs to prove how much of a man he is- he can take up carpentry or chop wood or something. But we’re never coming back out here again after tonight.

I don’t know if he’d even want to after all this.

Two small glints of red in the bushes nearby catch my eyes, and I whirl toward it, my heart leaping into my throat. Nothing’s there. No red, nothing other than the wilting leaves of the bushes.

My heart hammers louder in my chest, the sense of being watched only doubling as we move deeper.

“We’re almost there,” Cain calls from up ahead. Those glints of red looked like eyes, they *were* eyes, I know they were. I’m about to open my mouth to warn the group, to say something, when a massive shadow drops from the branches of a nearby tree.

My body shuts down as the shadow, the *thing*, draws itself up to its full height, towering over all of us. The bushes around us begin to move, more shadowy figures emerging, and the sound of clattering rocks draws my eyes to the mountainside, where scores of shadows race toward us.

My throat constricts, my blood stills in my veins, and my muscles turn to stone. I can’t scream, can’t move, can’t breathe, as I realize the terrible truth.

Whatever the manaha are, they’re real. And we’ve wandered into a nest of them.



## MAEL

“I’ve told you—”

“Not my fault.” Nechtan shakes his head and a deep growl rumbles through my cave. His thoughts are so scattered, his prey too primitive to understand really what I’m saying.

I huff out a deep, disappointed sigh and point to the floor. I’ve forgotten that I have to keep my words simple and use mostly actions with him. I’m one of the only ones who can really think. Sometimes it’s hard to remember how far I’ve come from my original state.

And then I talk to the others and I can’t believe I was ever like them.

Keeping my motion dramatic, I sweep my arms around the cave. “Your fault,” I insist. “No touch.”

“Hunting.” It’s his only explanation. As if his bloodlust will ever excuse his behavior. We are all controlled by it, enslaved to it. But I don’t wander into others’ caves. I manage to control myself, and whether or not he still has a primitive mind, I do not allow others into mine.

Just because I’ve evolved doesn’t mean I am not territorial. I’ve worked hard for what I have here, and I want that to go untouched.

I gnash my jaws. “My cave.” I stomp my foot to further prove my point. “Mine. Not yours.”

He huffs, looking around, and then lowers his head in a form of submission. “Yours.”

“Yes.” I prowl forward. “Mine.”

I’ve had enough of Nechtan coming into my cave and stealing resources. I won’t stand for it anymore, and it’s time he learns that. I may be more patient with him than others but that is only because I understand that he can’t comprehend more than basic necessity.

But perhaps I’ve let him push that too far with me. I am still a predator, a bloodthirsty hunter like him, and I don’t take kindly to another coming into my territory. There’s only one way to get through to him.

I grab his shoulders, shoving him back hard enough that he hits the wall. “Stay out.”

The second Nechtan hits the wall, he drops into a crouch, snarling. “Need.”

Fighting is the only way to get through to a predator. Once I defeat him, it may get through his thick skull – both figuratively and literally – that I am superior to him. He should not risk coming in here unless he wants to leave injured.

I push back into a crouch, baring my teeth as I challenge him to launch. “Hunt your own.”

He doesn’t move, but I don’t wait long enough to give him an edge. It’s time for him to learn. I leap through the air, landing on him, and sending us both sprawling across the floor. Nechtan barely catches himself before my claws slash across his exposed chest, and he howls. He grabs for my sides, piercing through the skin there, but the pain isn’t enough for me to let him go.

“Your. Own,” I reiterate.

Nechtan gnashes his teeth, growling as he fights to shove me off. His jabs are mindless and I easily avoid his blows, grabbing his wrists and slamming them back. My bloodlust thrums through my body, and I heave as the need to hunt sets in. My vision starts to blur as my other senses fight to take over and I lean forward, eager to rip at his throat.

I could end him. He would be easy prey for me, but he is not something I want to eat. Still, the need to destroy, to take



until my never-ending void is filled, is there.

A sharp sound pierces the air and my head snaps up, listening. Again the faint sound floats through the air, and I rock back on my heels as Nechtan starts to climb to his feet.

It's the sound of whistling, which means there's another hunting party. Another chance to feed, another human to take. It takes my attention off Nechtan for a moment, a real prey in my sights.

He's already darting forward, crawling toward the mouth of the cave at such a rapid speed that I barely see him before he leaps down the mountain side. I'm already forgotten as Nechtan is driven toward the noise.

I stalk after the sound, the whistling so loud that it's like they are trying to attract us to them. I'm shocked, really, that such intelligent prey are so negligent. They should be quiet, still, and hiding, and yet, even if their whistling didn't give them away, their stomping through the forest would have alerted us just as easily.

As I emerge, I spot others of my kind swiftly descending the mountain side. We all have homes in the cavernous spaces, and though they are spaced out, it often causes fighting. My kind is too territorial to tolerate even the slightest transgression, such as what Nechtan has done to me.

As I hit the base of the mountain where the woods meet the rock, my bloodlust starts to cloud my mind. The conscious thought I've been rapidly expanding, the intelligence I've been working to grow, is muddled by my baser needs.

The scent of humans – of fresh flesh and blood and sweat – tinges the air, and the wind wafts it toward me. It fills my senses until the only thing I can think about is how hungry I am. My throat burns, my stomach hurts, and my limbs stiffen with the need to attack.

The others clamber into the forest, attacking the prey without a thought, but I manage to wrangle my needs enough – just barely – to stalk my prey. I want to find one that is intelligent, to fight being as animalistic as Nechtan.

I launch myself into the branches above the group of humans to watch as they are attacked. My whole body is vibrating with the need to attack, to take, to hunt, but I suppress it. My self-control is waning, though, especially as the first of us hits the forest floor and is spotted. The humans quickly take off running, and I'm desperate to follow and stake a claim.

After warring with my instincts, though, I keep my body balanced on the tree limb. My eyes roam over all the humans dashing about like they could escape us. Most of the others may be blind, but their senses are tuned perfectly for hunting the frantic prey.

I watch as their darting movements help catch the attention of the less advanced of us, their blindness overcome with their precise hearing. They don't need to see where the humans are headed to hear the crunch of the leaves and location of their screams.

But they don't seem to notice that.

I creep further out from the tree, losing the grip I have on my baser needs. I am going to leap from this limb soon and I need a target if I don't want to have to fight for my food.

The bloodlust fogs my brain, pumping adrenaline through my body, and I nearly throw myself to the forest floor in a frenzy. But then one human catches my eye, and I sit back, staring down at her.

She's unlike anything I've ever seen with hair as dark as a moonless night that looks like it's been shaped by the wind itself. Her skin is tinted, not too dark but not pale, and even from here I can see her striking eyes.

They dart around assessing, and they are so bright I can see them shining. They're gorgeous, like the setting sun, and I feel something stir in me that I thought had been long forgotten. For so long all I've thought about is the need to feed, but right now I'm met with a different need.

Especially as I watch her stand still, her eyes assessing the running humans being snatched up.

She's smart. She's determined they can't see her if she doesn't move and that makes a weird feeling pang through my chest.

I normally spend a while stalking and determining my prey, but I've never sat back just to study it once it's easily in my sights. Now, though, I find myself wanting to watch her.

She takes a few steps forward, and I wonder if I have misjudged her. As she moves, my primal side stirs, ready to leap down and devour her. She's still much smarter than the others, and I am sure there is a lot to gain from eating her.

But then she stills as soon as another predator looks her way. Her whole body immobilizes, and only her eyes dart to the side to see if she has been spotted.

A spark of possessiveness flares in me, but as I watch, she is forgotten in favor of the fleeing prey. The humans that are still running and screaming draw the attention away from her, and once she is no longer being watched she dares a few small, slow steps forward.

She's even more intelligent than I gave her credit for. I've never met a creature that isn't afraid of us, and I know the humans are, too. She is mastering that, not letting it control her, as she finds a clever way out of her situation.

It draws me further out onto the branch, and now my body is trembling with the effort to hold back once again. I want to leap down there, to see what she would do if I landed right next to her. I can see her whether or not she is moving, but she doesn't know that.

I'm too intrigued by this one, though, so I stay rooted to the spot, watching as she tries to make it out of the clearing. Where will she go if she does get out? Does she really think she'll be safe?

Because now that I have her in my sights...

There is no escaping me.



## ASRA

**M**y heart is caught in my throat, fluttering like it's trying to get away. Panic grips me in a way I've never felt before, and I keep wondering over and over if this is how my brother felt. Just the thought of Clay having to experience this keeps me routed to the spot.

Around me, everyone else either took off or tried to fight the second these monsters descended from the trees. I'm the only one still standing in the center of the clearing. I should be an easy target for them.

I don't understand how I am still alive.

Someone runs past me screaming, my brain too scrambled to recognize who it was, and the monster closest to us stops its pursuit of another hunter to attack the man just to my right. My lungs cease working as I eye how close I am to the thing. Yet, it doesn't look in my direction.

In fact, it scrambles off in another direction when it finishes with its meal, never noticing the easy prey right in front of it. That slowly pulls me out of my mind, my eyes tracking after another monster not too far away.

Its head is tipped back as it sniffs the air, and I realize that it's not looking around. Its skull is lacking eyes, and even though there is a glow deep in the empty sockets of the animal skull, they don't seem to be useful – at least not how my eyes are.

But then a woman tears out from between the trees, only to realize she's come back to one of the very creatures she was

trying to avoid, and screams. The sound makes its head whip to the side, and it launches at her.

“No!” she shrieks, but it’s quickly drowned out by the creature’s thick jaws snapping through flesh and bone like cooked vegetables. I would cringe if I had any mobility over my body.

Slowly, I piece it together. They are triggered by noise and movement, relying on other senses to find their prey. As terrifying monsters, it’s a useful tactic because anyone within their right mind would take off running and screaming.

Luckily, I’ve been out of mine since I lost Clay.

It does give me an escape, though. If I move only when they aren’t looking, I just may be able to get out of this clearing. It will be difficult, but with short, slow movements, they should never see me.

Another monster dashes in front of me, snapping me out of my dazed state, and my surroundings come rushing in. I hadn’t quite noticed the carnage raging around me as I watched the creatures’ movements.

But now it descends on me. The harsh snap of bone and wet slaps of limbs being ripped apart and tossed around fills the air. It almost blocks out the sounds of the others screaming – almost.

My eyes track across the clearing slowly, searching for the monsters without moving my head, and just to my left, I spot a familiar face. It’s now contorted in a horrific scream as his head rolls, decapitated across the clearing, and it sends a shudder down my spine that I fight to suppress.

And yet his expression doesn’t look all that different from the one he wore when he was buried inside of me. But I will unpack those conflicting emotions later. If I survive this.

They all seem distracted, so I start my agonizingly slow path toward the edge of the trees. I’m confident if I can make it there, I can make it out of this. There is enough cover to dart between trees and get out of here.

Each footstep feels ten times too heavy, and every time my shoe comes down I fear the crunch and snap of dying grass and sticks will alert the others to where I am. But they continue to munch on, only caring about the bones of their slain prey.

I've covered half the distance I need to when I make my mistake. My foot lands on a rock, and I roll my ankle as I step forward, causing me to stumble. The sudden movement catches the attention of a creature just finishing its meal, and its head snaps in my direction.

Inhumanly fast, it leaps forward toward me, and I press a hand to my mouth to muffle any sound. I want to scream, I do, but I keep it all in as the monster comes to an abrupt stop a few feet from me. It's where I first stumbled, but it wasn't able to process where I had frozen.

It tips its head up, hot air huffing out of its empty nostrils. The glow in the pits of its eyes seem to swivel around in confusion, pulsing as they grow slightly larger. I'm not sure what to make of it since I know they can't see but I don't dare move.

It takes one haunting step forward and I almost squeal. I swallow it, holding my breath now, as it looms closer. It's determined to find me, and it huffs the air, trying to locate me.

Hot breath coats my skin as it shifts farther forward. I fight a tremble threatening to take over my body, but there is nothing I can do about my hammering heart as its skull just barely misses my face.

Its jaws part, and my skin prickles. The exposed fangs could pierce me easily, and even the wrong shift will put my head between those powerful jaws.

Another huff and shift leaves only an inch between us, the metallic smell of blood clinging inside my nose. It's all that I can breathe in with my head practically inside the mouth of this monster, and it feels eerily like blood dripping down my face.

Maybe I want my heart to stop all together, but I let my eyes roam down from the animalistic skull that is this creature's head. As if the fierce horns, skinless bone, and sharp fangs weren't terrifying enough.

But its body isn't much better. It's tall, thin, and has sharp claws. Its body is a weird mix of shredded skin, fur, and exposed bone. I can see straight through its ribs to a glowing center, and I don't understand the deep crimson red pulsing back at me.

It looks like it's made for speed, but I know first hand that its primary purpose is to kill. Truly, it's a figment of nightmares, crafted by the worst of the gods themselves.

Its long tongue lolls out, licking away pieces of flesh wedged between its teeth, and bile teases the back of my throat. I don't know how much longer I can stand this, waiting to be eaten as I'm coating in its disgusting breath and staring at the razor sharp teeth that will soon shred me.

But I don't have to wait long to find out.

As the creatures finish their meals, it seems another human not yet caught decides now is the perfect time to flee. She dashes past me, seeming to think that the monster beside me is too preoccupied with me to care.

I catch my head from turning just in time.

It takes seconds for the monster to take note of her, dashing after her even faster than it had for me. Its target is clear this time, and I let out a soft sigh of relief as it slams into her back, her screams covering my own words.

"Thank you, Mother," I breathe to the goddess.

Feeling more confident and eager now, I resume my path out of the clearing. I have no intention of getting so close to another one of those things.

I'm nearly to the treeline, my eyes set on the thick trunk I want to make it behind before I start sprinting, when another beast drops down from above. I had no idea that there were more lying in wait and I freeze.



The way this one moves strikes me as more fluid. I don't understand how to explain it, but it approaches me with more thoughtfulness than the others. Its skull stays facing me, and it stays on two legs, marching forward.

I'm certain it will go right past me. It hasn't lifted its head back to smell the air or cocked its head to listen. It's charging forward without stopping to pick up any kind of trail, and I'm starting to think it hadn't even seen me to begin with.

Until it stops directly in front of me.

It's taller than any of the others on its two legs, drawn up to an enormous height. Its likar-like skull disappears out of my field of vision as I keep my head still, but not before I note the three horns on top of its head. This one looks even more created to kill.

Suddenly, it shifts back, and my breath catches in my throat. I fight to keep still as it drops to a crouch, the deep pits of its eyes right in front of mine. Unlike the other, it stares directly into mine, huffing softly but not intently. It's not trying to find me.

Instead, when its jaws part, it's with intention. It doesn't lean forward, doesn't seek me out. Instead, there's just enough space between us that I can still breathe while its proximity also makes me feel like I'm going to pass out.

And I'm almost certain I'm going to when words come out of its mouth instead of a low growl that I had been hearing.

"I'm not like the others, little human," he rumbles, its voice sparking fear deep in my gut. It cocks its head, the gaze feeling oddly piercing. And then I learn why. "I can see you."



## MAEL

**H**er face twists in confusion, puckering her otherwise interesting features into something ugly. Fear leaks from her, stinging the air with the pungent bitter smell that tastes sharp in my mouth.

I watch in interest as her lips part, the whites in her eyes widening and her chest expanding to suck in a deep breath. Realizing what's about to happen, my hand darts out to cover her mouth, the pressure of air leaving her body pushes against my palm in a silenced scream.

If humans have one thing going for them, it's their lack of self-preservation.

Lifting my head to look over hers, I scan the treeline for any signs of the others. The distant growls and crunching of bones is still far enough away that I relax a bit. None of them have noticed her sneaking off.

Though, as preoccupied as my kind can get with consuming fresh prey, the high of the chase will always win.

Keeping her quiet and subdued remains a top priority.

Her cheeks bulge around my hand as I pull her towards me. "Be quiet."

Even through the thick cloud of fear surrounding her, the scent of freshly spilled blood hangs in the air, triggering my bloodlust. It's hard to focus on this human woman and my intrigue for her when all my body craves is to sink my teeth into her soft flesh.

Taking my hand off her face, I scoop her up against my body and heft her over my shoulder. She's malleable and easy to hold and from here, her scent is even more intoxicating. I breathe her in, noting the way her body shivers as my chest expands.

Moving through the forest silently, I take us back toward my cave, seated deep through the trees and away from any encampment of others.

“W-Where are you taking me?” She whispers quietly.

I have to commend her for following orders so obediently. She'll make for a nice part of my decor as long as she remains docile enough not to trigger my preternatural instincts to hunt her down and tear her into bloody pieces.

I don't typically keep things from the humans I consume but this one is different— *she's* different.

A nail maybe? A lock of her dark hair? Maybe she is wearing a pretty set of beads that will sit nicely on my mantel next to the display of colored stones I've collected near the creek that runs parallel to my cave.

The possibilities are certainly endless and who am I to deny myself taking a piece of her beauty to preserve for forever?

As I've grown older, I've come to find myself drawn to beautiful things. The nature in me to hoard and possess has somehow translated into collecting pieces of the creatures that inhabit Protheke.

It started with simple trinkets like colorful wildflowers or rocks, continuing to graduate towards the feathers of winged beasts and the bones of those I've eaten. I sometimes carve them into small figurines, a pastime that I've begun to enjoy to break up the monotony of existing.

It isn't something that I've shared with anyone, actually.

For a small moment, it has me pausing. What will this human think once she sees my collection?

The thought touches something within me that I haven't felt before. A weakened part of my consciousness that cares for some reason. Why I've decided to attach myself to her is beyond me, but perhaps once I get her back to my cave, it will all become clearer.

For now, I have no plans on eating her. She doesn't smell like food, though the blood racing through her veins does entice me. Keeping it as a trinket is a possibility. Painting the inside walls of my cave with it would be a nice touch.

But will it still retain the same scent?

I'll have to test it.

The path up to my cave is steep but well-worn. This cave has been in my possession for a long time, my discovery of it dating back to shortly after I'd come through the portal to this world.

I don't remember much of my time back then, my higher consciousness not having developed yet. But what I do remember is the small pang of joy that had raced through me when I'd climbed this incline hunting down a likar and discovering their den nestled into the cliffside.

The human thrashes in my hold. Her hands pat along my tunic, grappling for purchase of the fabric when I shift her back further onto my shoulder. With one hand, I start climbing up, finding the familiar holds in the rocky surface that fit my grip perfectly.

She grunts softly with each bump of my shoulder, her body stiff. The cave isn't very high off the ground, but enough to keep ground creatures from wandering in without warning. It keeps them from hassling me when I want to be left alone.

The only pest I have a problem with currently is Nechtan.

Clearing the last hold, I hop up onto the ledge before straightening to full height. The mouth of my cave is dark with just enough moonlight from overhead lighting the ledge I'm standing on.

Swinging her down from my arms, I set her onto the ground.

“We’re here.”

She trembles next to me, her arms coming up to wrap around her body while she stares into the darkness before us.

“Come,” I tell her, waving my hand forward.

Stepping through the entrance, my eyes set on the skinned fur of a dae I have hanging on one of my walls. I suppose it will do to keep her warm while she stays in my cave with me. Humans can be so fragile from experience that even the barest change in temperature can kill them.

How they’ve managed to live this long is truly a wonder. However, if I want to keep her around to study her longer, I’ll need to ensure that she stays alive. I’m not above eating carcasses, but I prefer not to.

I’ve only had to resort to that a few times in my younger years when I’d been starving and had only just crossed over through the portal a short while beforehand. Nothing but simple survival is gained from eating things that have long since passed on.

Reaching for the fur, I pull at the tacks that hold it up, collecting them into my hand and setting them onto the mantle that rests at my waist. The fur comes down easily, folding over my shoulder when I turn to look for a space on the floor to set it down.

I choose a space deeper into the cave, away from the soft glow of the moonlight and next to where I typically sleep. Squatting, I place it carefully, mindful to make sure that the corners are untucked and flush against the floor.

“This will be where you lay.” I tell her, pulling myself back up to my full height once again.

She doesn’t answer me, choosing to remain silent. Sighing in annoyance, I turn on my heel to scold her for ignoring me when only the empty mouth of my cave greets me.

My entire body freezes in place, eyes darting around to find her. Where has she...?

The distant sound of a rapidly thrumming heart rattles loudly in my ears, growing further and further away from me.

A snarl leaves me, bloodlust kicking up again as I race out of my cave. My footing catches on the edge of the ledge, my body crouching down far enough to look over it and see the brush at the base of the incline part quickly. I track it with my eyes, following it as my human races through the forest away from me.

A deeper part of me, the uncontrolled apex predator, comes roaring to life.

*Hunt her down.*

The thought runs on a loop as I leap off of the ledge, propelling myself forward and landing hard on my feet in a crouch. Dust kicks up around me, just shy of clouding the air in front of my face.

I move quickly through the forest, latching onto her scent and following in through the thicket. She's easy to track. Her haggard breathing, along with her clumsy stumbling would be enough if I were blind like the other waira, but it's that fear that drives me.

Fuels me, even.

The need ignites inside of my chest, making my heart pulsate with want, as I gain on her. She's close enough that I can practically lick the sweat from her brow if I want to.

I spring forward, tackling her into the ground with my hands gripping her shoulders. She's smart enough not to scream as her body hits, and quick enough to roll over and lash out with a fist to my jaw. It snaps my head back with the sudden force, not hurting at all.

She's so weak.

She struggles under me, trying to get free from my hold on her shoulders. I push her harder against the ground, arousal drowning out all noise around me. I've had prey under me, desperate to try and get free, but none that have turned me on before.

How strange.

She's a beautiful creature with her long hair splayed out and tangled in the weeds, her face red from running so hard, while she struggles to gather enough air into her lungs. She's furious that she's been caught, that much is obvious.

I want her. To eat? To fuck? I can't tell. My mind is scrambling to understand what can't be named. The emotions inside of me from all of the beasts that I've consumed before her have no answers to tell me. It's jumbled into a mess that rings loudly in my ears, only to be washed away with the quiet panting of my human under me.

"Don't." I growl.

She freezes immediately, staring up at me with wide eyes.

"Are... are you going to.. eat me?"

I can't help it. I chuckle. "Would you like to run again and find out?"

Slowly, she shakes her head.

Good. Smart. She's learning.

"I suggest you don't do that again. Unless you think you can outrun me."

We both know she can't. That much is obvious just by the state of her having a head start and still failing. I could track her in my sleep, that's how attuned I am to her right now.

Her eyes run along my visible teeth, all of them sharp enough to easily slice through her clothes and skin to get right down to her bones. The mental image of it makes my jaw ache with the need to gnaw on what lies beneath her soft flesh. Fighting it is even harder to do, especially since it goes against my very nature.

"I-I'll behave." she finally says.

I let out a short huff of air to show my satisfaction at her answer.

"Good."





## ASRA

I stay as still as I can, my eyes fixated on those glowing orbs inside of the dae skull.

The canopy overhead is parted slightly, letting in a few dull rays of moonlight. It's barely enough to see in, but with him this close to me, I can make out his shape much better than before.

The glowing heart under his tunic pulsates in a rhythmic fashion. When he'd first tackled me, it was moving frantically, in time with my own breathing punching out of my lungs. But now it's at a steady beat that is almost hypnotizing in a way.

I tear my eyes away from it to look back at his row of teeth. I know if he wanted to, I'd be dead by now. But I can't seem to wrap my head about why he hasn't picked me off like the rest of the search party.

A fan of playing with his food? Maybe. It's the only explanation I can think of that would make sense. He's tracked me down too easily, meaning if I want to escape again, I need to be much more careful.

My belly clenches when he stands, pulling me up with him. Once again, I'm hefted over his shoulder and carried back through the forest. The trees are quiet in an unnerving way. Nothing, aside from us, moves out here. Whatever kind of predator he is, everything else is scared of him.

*Manaha.* That's what David had called him.

What do I do?

My body bounces uselessly against his back, the trek back to his cave is surprisingly short. In a way, I'm embarrassed that I didn't get very far. I thought when he'd been messing around inside of his cave away from me, it gave me the perfect opportunity to sneak away.

I'd been quiet, holding my breath the entire way down the ledge. Even going so far as to sneak into the forest without breaking any branches.

His roar had been furious, scaring me into running away like an animal caught in a trap. I'd given up on trying to be stealthy at that point, obviously having been found out, and had run as fast as my legs could possibly carry me.

His sense of smell, along with his eyesight, would be disadvantages for me. I'd need to plan around them. Figure out how to mask myself from those traits stacked against me. It'd be the only way I'd get out alive—if I can even make it back to the makeshift village before he got bored and gnawed off my legs.

The terrain under us is rocky and hard to manage, but somehow he's able to keep us both from toppling over as he canvases back up the incline to his cave.

His grip on my back is painfully where he digs his nails into me, either from not wanting me to slip off of his shoulder or to keep me pressed against him so I don't get any funny ideas. Regardless of his reasonings, they're sharp enough to send small pings of pain down my spine each time I'm jostled against him.

It's hard to imagine that any of this is happening right now. I'd known that monsters lived in these forests but I could never have imagined something like *this* has been wandering around without any of us in the village knowing.

It seems impossible for us to be that ignorant. We've gone out hunting before and no one has run into anything like this.

When he reaches the top of the ledge, he throws me up onto it before crawling up himself. I groan, the wind knocking out of me for a long few seconds. I'm going to be pissed if he

did that on purpose in retaliation for me running away. It's enough to scare the shit out of me by chasing me down and threatening to eat me. I don't need to be beat up too.

I don't have time to roll over and get up myself before his hand is fisting around the front of my shirt and hauling me up off the ground. He carries me, dangling like a ragdoll, into the mouth of his cave.

I try to blink through the sudden darkness that swallows me up. All I can see is the faint glowing from his chest and eyes, but it's not enough to cast any sort of light around my surroundings.

He surprises me by setting me down on something soft, letting me go and moving away from me to the other side of the cave. Rolling onto my stomach slowly, my hands spread through the soft fur.

A bed, maybe?

He rummages around for something in the dark, clinking things together that almost sound like glass but not quite.

It's strange that he wants to keep me as a pet, or whatever he's planning on. Of course, I've been through this before—being kept for someone's entertainment. The dark elves were known for subjecting humans to things like that, anyway.

I'm sure my old Master who'd tried to kidnap me would've wanted the same thing if my father hadn't stopped him.

Is that what this manaha wants?

Repositioning myself, I sit back against the wall and pet the fur under me. It comforts me as I clear my throat.

“What's your name?”

He pauses, his large body going completely still. If he didn't slightly glow, I'd lose him completely. The thought terrifies me. Maybe we really have almost encountered these creatures before, but they're able to hide themselves so well that we've never noticed.

Is it possible that they've always been watching us? Biding their time while we built our village in order for the perfect opportunity to strike us came?

We've been so ignorant to think that our worst enemy out here were the dark elves.

"Maeleachlainn."

I blink. "What?"

His head turns to look at me over his shoulder. That glowing orb inside of his head glares into me. The shadows of his antlers spike out along the cave wall, making him seem taller and more fearsome.

A huff leaves him. "*Maeleachlainn.*"

It's so foreign sounding that I have to open my mouth to test the word on my tongue.

"Mala... May-la...?" No, that's not how he said it. "Malek... Lane?"

He huffs again. "Mael. Since your human tongue is incapable."

I glower at his back when he turns back around to fiddle with his things again.

Asshole.

"Asra. If you're going to be like that, you should at least know *my* name."

"Why would I need to know your name? You are to be eaten."

Something in me feels bold enough to say, "Yet, here I am. Not being eaten."

That has him pausing again. When he turns around, he stalks over to me slowly. It's absolutely to intimidate me, and yet I'm still pressing myself flush against the wall in order to make myself smaller.

He crouches in front of me, his hands dangling in the space between his long legs. "Do you think it's wise to antagonize

me? Might I remind you how easy it was for me to bring you back here.”

His words piss me off, but only because he’s right. I’m no match for him physically. The only way I’m getting out of this is by using my intelligence and outwitting him. But even if I’m successful, where do I go? I can’t lead him back to the village, he’ll end up killing them all.

Turning my head away from him, I feign submission. If complying with him is the only way to get him to leave me alone, then I’ll do whatever I need to do.

The glow from his chest highlights a patch of something next to me, touching the edge of the fur under me. Reaching out, I run my fingers along it. Whatever it is, it’s wet to the touch. I bring my hand up to my face to see better, when my stomach drops.

Blood.

Oh gods.

Immediately I push myself away from the wall and skitter back from where Mael’s trapped me. I get to my feet quickly, backing away from the puddle of blood that I can now see clearer as my eyes adjust.

Clay.

Is it his? Was he dragged up here like me and feasted on by the same beast who traps me now? Is that what this is? Playing with his food before he finally caves in and eats me?

Mael eyes lock onto me, freezing me in place before I can turn around and run again. His entire body tenses, his hands dropping down slowly to the ground while he shifts subtly into a position that readies him to pounce on me and take me down.

Fuck, he’d just warned me about this.

I put my hands out, trying to calm myself down. “I’m... there’s blood over there.”

“...Yes.”

The ‘and?’ is silent but heavily implied.

“My brother,” I swallow thickly. “He’s missing.”

The silence is so deafening that it has me toggling between screaming and bursting into tears. Clay can’t be dead. I know he has to be out in the woods hiding somewhere. My brother is the toughest kid I know.

Mael rises to his feet. Even from over there, he seems to tower over me. I clench my hands together, pulling my arms tight to my chest. Fighting him is useless and is only going to further piss him off.

But do I care?

What if he ate Clay?

So many thoughts bounce around inside of my head that I don’t have time to notice something else climbing up onto the ledge right outside of the cave. It’s only when a low growl reverberates from Mael that alerts me that something is wrong.

His eyes are no longer focused on me and instead, on something beyond my shoulder. I spin on my heel, only catching the sight of another tall monster before I’m shoved onto the ground.

I scream as claws dig into me and pin me down onto the ground.

“Nechtán!” Mael snaps.





## MAEL

**I**nstinct takes over. I rush at Nechtan, immediately forcing him against a tree, then I shove him, pushing him to the ground before grabbing the human from his arms. I toss her into the cave behind me, only focused on fighting the threat. All I care about is facing off against Nechtan.

He must not touch what is mine. He must be destroyed.

Nechtan roars, grabbing huge hunks of land in his hand as he gets to his feet, growling and snarling at me. We're like two beasts locked in combat.

"You will not touch what is mine!" I thunder, putting one foot in front of the other in a frenzied pace as I dive at Nechtan once again. "She is mine!"

My essence pulses as red as the blood from the beasts I eat, sending out a warning to Nechtan. He is little more than a dumb beast though, and cannot properly understand that I am warning him to back off.

He stumbles when I smash into him once more. Our horns lock and we grapple, fighting for dominance. The woods around us echo with the sound of our fight, the clashing of horns, gnashing of razor sharp teeth, the crunch of dead leaves underfoot...I don't care that our fighting might attract attention. All I want is to rip Nechtan's head off!

"You don't belong here!" I tell him. He's in my territory. He has no right to step foot here.

“Want hu-man,” Nechtan growls, drool dripping from his jowls. “Hu-man special. Want hu-man.”

“You can’t have her!” I feel a new emotion taking me over. My essence glows black. What am I feeling? I crave his skull between my hands. But there is something that I have never felt before.

Something inside me supplies the term I search for. *Dread*. I dread the thought of him taking the human. Of eating her. I can’t let him eat what is mine!

The dread pushes me harder than any other emotion has pushed me. The lust for his head grows stronger and I force him back, slamming him against a tree again, piercing through the thin layer of skin over his protruding ribs. Blood seeps from the spot.

He looks down and roars. Shoving himself off the branch, he lunges for me, jaw snapping shut around my arm. He rips flesh from bone, trying to bite through. I raise my hand and violently shake him off.

We rush at each other once again, our bodies creating an enormous bang upon impact. It’s as loud as thunder and I glance about, hoping the noise hasn’t attracted others to this area. If they want to keep their lives, they should understand to stay away.

Nechtan screams and pins me to the forest floor, jaws aiming for my throat. He wants to rip my head off just as much as I want to do the same.

“Mael want hu-man for self. Nechtan will eat hu-man first!” he hisses, gobs of drool dripping down around me, his eye sockets glowing.

“No!” I tell him. “You will not eat her!” I grab him by the shoulders and throw him off of me. He flies back and hits a small tree, which snaps on impact.

Nechtan makes a hissing noise, some cross between a laugh and a growl in warning. “Nechtan take!” he yells, picking up a rock and throwing it at me.

I dodge the rock and reach out, trying to grab him. I miss and he ducks and gets behind me. He wraps his arms around my neck and squeezes, lifting me from the ground.

I find myself even more angry than before. He can't come into my territory and take what I found, what is rightfully mine! I rush backwards, slamming him into another tree, repeating the motion until he's dazed and then throw him off of me.

Whirling around, I notice that he's making for the cave, changing tactics. He's intent on snatching the human for himself. I rush forward, grabbing him and throwing him into a large rock. His head snaps back on impact.

He's not dead but he's badly injured. It will take longer than usual to heal from the wounds I inflicted upon him.

"If you ever step foot on my territory again!" I scream. "I will rip your head from your body, leaving you stumbling blindly. Then I will build a great fire and burn your body first, while your head is forced to watch! Finally, I will burn your head!"

Nechtán seems subdued by my threat and he staggers to his feet once more, taking off deep into the woods.

I watch carefully to ensure he's really gone, then, as soon as he's out of sight, I turn back to my cave.

The human is lying unconscious inside, body limp. I rush to her side and kneel next to her. Her head is bleeding. "Heal," I order her. "You must heal."

Do humans not heal like we waira do? I feel the same creeping dread. Have I made her injuries worse by throwing her? I stare at her, prodding the human. "Wake up," I tell her. She doesn't respond. "You must wake now."

Still, nothing.

Anger burns my bones as I realize I have no idea how to tend to a human. They don't live long after I capture them. I usually eat them before they do much talking.

“Bastan!” I yell, throwing a rock at a nearby tree. It splinters the wood but doesn’t break it, further angering me. I scream, dragging up chunks of earth with my claws. Frustration is seeping into me as I gaze on the human.

Why is she so intriguing? I cannot help myself from wanting to know more about her. But without her being awake, I cannot help her. I cannot ask her questions.

“Wake up, right now and tell me how to fix you!” I growl at her unconscious form.

When she doesn’t wake up, I stalk off, wandering between the trees. I reach out and grab a limb, pulling it off the tree with ease and snap it in half. It separates into two pieces and I repeat again with each half, making the pieces smaller and smaller.

Gathering up the broken bits of limb, I drag them back over to my cave and pile them together, using a bit of dark elven magic to spark a fire. She might be cold and it would help to warm her up I think.

Once the fire is going, I watch her sleeping form. Now that I have a moment to look, I take her appearance in. She’s taller than other human women I’ve eaten. She’s got black hair, as black as the midnight sky.

Her thick, dark lashes lay against her deep, bronze skin. Her chest rises and falls with each breath she takes. There is so much plump skin on her bones. Part of me wants to rip into it, taste the juicy flesh.

Instead of giving into my instincts, I continue taking in her features. Little dots of dirt are sprinkled across her face but when I try to wipe it away, it stubbornly stays.

Interesting! They are dotted all across her face and down her arms. There is also a long, thin white scar across her jaw. I reach out and touch it gently.

She doesn’t stir and I start to wonder if she is ever going to wake up. Waira heal quickly from our wounds. It’s as if I ate a dumb beast recently, with how useful my mind is in coming up with some idea of how to help her.

I wish that I had eaten more humans...or at least a greater amount of conscious beings. I would be able to better understand how to tend to her wound and to heal her injuries if I had.

“Bastan!” I curse again, kicking a rock. The rock cracks and I force myself to move away, lest I damage my collection of wings that I so carefully hung.

The human still hasn't moved. I stare at her, wondering if she will die without help. Or will she simply wake up? I have nothing to compare her to, since I've never kept a human or dark elf around long enough to heal from their injuries.

Perhaps she needs water. All waira need water to survive. We can go for weeks or months without food but we must have water to live.

I can go fetch her some water. That will also give me a chance to hunt along the way so I can bring this human back some food to eat. Even if waira only eat as often as they want, humans probably have to eat more since they have more flesh on their bodies.

I decide to move the human's body further into my cave and tuck her under some furs to protect her from the cold air outside, and from any wandering waira who might venture by.

If they smell her scent, they will descend on her, so I better cover her in my own scent and the scent of wild beasts in order to keep them away.

I rub a palm over her face and neck, covering her scent with mine. My hand is larger than her entire head and I have to be careful not to crush her with it.

Once I'm done, I leave her alone to head back out of my cave. Glancing around for other waira, I sniff the air.

None seem to be around, other than the lingering scent of Nechtan. I take careful, measured steps away from my cave.

That same feeling of dread is back again. It's so strange and foreign to me. I have never experienced much outside of hunger, anger, sleepiness and bloodlust before. Nothing exists that I am afraid of.

This human is the only thing that has ever made me feel something more. The thought excites me. Would being around her bring out more emotions to experience?

The woods are quiet now that Nechtan is gone. I sniff once more for good measure and start stalking through the undergrowth, searching for prey that might be useful to the human.



## ASRA

**M**y brain feels as though I've been struck by an axe. I press a hand to my head as I sit up, the world around me spinning. Nausea rises in my belly and I nearly retch as I try to make sense of where I am.

With a start I realize I'm back in the cave. Shit!

I need to get away. I can't stay here with the manaha. He might have refrained from eating me once but there is no telling when his hunger will overtake him and make me his next meal.

I'm also still on the hunt to find out just what happened to Clay. I won't rest until I've found out the truth.

Glancing around, I don't see the manaha anywhere nearby. I slowly stand up, wincing as pain erupts from everywhere on my body at once. A warm trickle of blood runs down my cheek and I reach up, touching my forehead to feel the cut there. It's small, thank the gods.

When the manaha doesn't immediately appear to push me back inside, I gingerly step over his piles of fur and broken objects, picking my way to the cave opening.

We're deep in the forest here. I have a feeling I'm a long way from home. Taking a deep breath, I step out of the cave, half expecting him or the other manaha to snatch me up.

It's cold here. We must be higher up the mountain. I shiver, debating whether or not to go back and wrap myself in one of the many furs inside his cave.



I decide that the fur could offer me a good amount of protection from the manaha as well as ward me against the chilly air and so I slip back inside and fetch a large one and wrap it around me.

Instantly the chill disappears from my body and I feel more ready to trek through the forest. I head back out of the cave and look around. It's quiet here. Quieter than I would expect.

I listen intently for a moment and it hits me. I don't hear the usual sounds of a forest. No skittering rodents, no squawking forest birds, no rustle of leaves as the prey species steal through the trees...it's as though this entire area is devoid of life.

With a grimace, I realize that it's probably because of him and the other manaha. They've eaten enough prey out here for the animals to get a sense that this area is dangerous. No animals live here.

Should I take the risk in leaving then? There is no way I can possibly stay here and become his victim or any other manaha but at the same time, I make myself a target if I leave.

I also have no supplies. I'm alone, far from home, with no supplies and no idea where I am. Leaving could be more dangerous than staying. Maybe he can be reasoned with. He seems smarter than the average manaha.

My stomach rumbles, letting me know that I haven't eaten in a good long while. If I stay here, I risk getting eaten. If I leave, I risk getting eaten.

Either way I'm taking a risk. And it seems like I was able to escape most of the manaha before. The only reason I got caught is because I attracted the attention of the wrong one. That one was smarter than the others. If I stick to the trees, hiding myself away in the shadows, I might be able to find my way home.

More determined to leave than ever, I head back into the cave and dig through the piles of bloody clothing, holding my breath and praying I don't find Clay's clothes in here.

I don't find his clothes but I do find a rucksack. I start filling it with anything that I think might be useful in the cave.

Heading back out, I creep along the trees, waiting with bated breath at each one before fleeing to the next. The trees are denser here and I'm certain I'm much further up the mountain than I was before.

I try to walk as silently as I can. It's hard to be completely silent in my too-big boots. They were handed down from Cecilia when Grim traded a villager for new ones last year and even though I stuff the toes, they're still a bit too big.

Every step feels louder than a roar in these quiet woods. I may not know where I'm going but I do know that I have to get out of here, so I keep pushing forward.

The chilly air makes my cheeks hurt and my lips feel dry and chapped. I need water but there was none in the water skin I found.

The air blows hard around me, cold enough to see every breath I puff out as I make my way as silently as possible through the trees. For every few steps I take, I pause, conscious of the lack of noise around me.

It's slow going. I worry I'm going to be caught here overnight. I also worry I won't make it back to the encampment but I can't focus on that right now.

I still need to find out what happened to Clay. The ache in my heart grows worse the longer I'm out here. Something bad has happened to him and I don't know if he's dead or alive.

My body is in pain but the only thing that matters is getting back to the encampment. I'll gather more men—competent men—and we'll form a search party. We'll go back out during the day, every day if we have to. I'm not going to rest until I find out the truth.

Clay deserves that, at least. He's just an innocent boy. The pain that grips my heart feels smothering and I have to clap a hand over my mouth to keep from crying out. I miss my brother with every breath.

I should never have let him go with the other men. He's too young. Clay took the loss of our parents hard. He feels as though he needs to grow up too fast, so he can protect me. I wish he would let me protect him, as I've done most of our lives.

*What happened to you, Clay?*

Wet tears sting my eyes as the wind whips around me. I can't cry right now. I can't let myself be distracted any longer. Using the sleeve of my dress, I wipe the tears away and continue going tree to tree as I make my way downhill. At least I think I'm going downhill.

Everything looks the same though, and I don't know if I'm going in circles. Maybe I ought to mark the next tree I see, just in case.

The next tree I find, I pull out my little knife and mark a big X on it, big enough to see from a distance if I come across it again.

Putting it away, I glance down and spot something that gives me pause. They look like tracks but not like animal tracks.

*Manaha.*

I study them for a moment, wondering if I'm about to stumble upon the one that brought me to his cave—Mael I think. I bend down, brushing a few scattered leaves away to examine it closer. The rich, dank smell of earth hits me just as I realize that these tracks aren't like Mael's at all.

These tracks look almost like talons. I freeze, ice flooding my veins. That other manaha, the one that tried to eat me, he looked part bird, like a bird of prey.

Shit. He's even more dangerous than Mael. That other one, he couldn't be reasoned with. He's pure animal.

I scramble backwards immediately, trying to see which direction the tracks have been coming from.

Wherever they are, I have to go the opposite way. I follow them a little longer and determine that the tracks seem to be

coming from the east, if my orientation isn't completely off.

Glancing left and right, I take off in a hurry, trying to put as much distance between us as possible.

I'm maybe a few dozen steps from the tree I marked when I hear loud crashing noises. The manaha's large figure looms through the trees, stalking towards me.

"Smell hu-man," he hisses, drool dripping from his jaws. "Smell the hu-man!"

I freeze, trying to make myself invisible but he seems able to track me without sight. It's that bird-like quality he's got. Dammit!

I need to run, to find a spot to hide that he can't access. "Want the hu-man. Hu-man is special to Maeleachlainn," he says, as though talking to himself. "Eat human first. Make special, like Maeleachlainn."

I back up slowly, trying to make no noise. He's a few dozen feet away, we're in a semi-circular clearing and I need to get to the treeline to hide.

He seems to follow my movements anyway and continues to stalk forward, sniffing the air. "Hu-man here," he says, a predatory grin on his skull-like face.

Keeping one eye on him, I continue backing up, hoping that I'll find somewhere to hide once I've hit the tree line.

The manaha slows, glancing left and right, as though searching for me. I hold my breath and cover myself in the cloak, trying my best to douse my scent.

"Hu-man," he growls and turns his head slowly, his empty sockets landing directly on me.

I scream as he starts running towards me at top speed. I start running, knowing it's futile. He'll catch up to me soon and devour me.

I'm done for.

As I run, I trip over my too-large boots and go sprawling onto the forest floor, the breath knocked out of me.

The manaha stands directly over me, his hot, rancid breath on my face. Just as he rears back, I remember out of nowhere that whistling attracts more of these creatures.

I inhale sharply and let out an ear-piercing whistle.



## MAEL

**G**runting in thought, I stalk through the trees on my way to find supplies. I'm distracted by strange thoughts. The human's blood doesn't affect me as much as others do. Very odd. Not usual at all. When I'm around living creatures, I simply want to eat them. Eating feeds my hunger.

And I'm always hungry.

But not the human.

Asra. Her name is Asra.

I still can't control myself around her, I am still waira. But I do not want to hurt her. I want her to feel safe with me. Her blood calls to me, a tempting song that draws me in but not to eat her. Something in her bloodsong is different. It gives me strength to hold back.

I hear noises and I stop, pulling my large frame behind a tree to see what is happening. I observe two dark elves, hunting in my woods. Slowly smiling, I stalk forward. Perfect. I can use them.

The dark elves are unaware of my presence, of me lurking behind them in the shadows. They sit silently, waiting to capture unsuspecting prey, not knowing that the hunters have now become the hunted.

With a fearsome roar, I descend upon the hunters. Startled, they jump up, facing me with weapons drawn. I growl low, warning them that they aren't going to win this fight.

"Flesh eater," I hear one whisper to the other.

“The legends are true,” the other says, staring at me in shock. They both give off a pungent aroma of fear. I sense it the way animals sense danger.

They grab for their feeble weapons, drawing crossbows with lightning-fast speed. But I am faster and I snatch up the bow and break it with ease in my hand, watching the pieces scatter like leaves on the forest floor.

The trio of us stare at each other for a lingering moment, red and purple eyes trained on my empty sockets. No one moves or does anything.

Then, as though in unison, the two dark elves let out twin shrieks of fear and I let out a roar, warning them that the end is coming and it won't be kind.

They scramble along the forest, trying to run for their lives but I am fast, much faster and I sprint ahead, ricocheting off a large tree trunk so I'm directly in front of the silver-haired one.

He feints left, moves right and dodges my outstretched arms, ducking under to double back. It's like a game for me. Little more than chasing tiny woodland creatures.

With another loud growl, I turn and speed up so I cut the elf off as he tries to dart into the treeline.

“Gotcha,” I rumble, watching with a sense of fondness as the dark elf screams just before I wrench his arms from his body.

He falls backwards, blood spurting from both open wounds. Using his legs to propel himself backwards, he keeps watch on me with wide eyes which wildly dart around as though hoping his companion might still save him. His screams echo around the forest.

Dark elves don't tend to help their brethren.

I descend upon him and latch my teeth on his neck, ripping a chunk of flesh away. His throat should be severed now. His head hangs limply on his neck and I rip the rest off, tossing his head into the air and gobbling it down.



I'm halfway through stuffing myself full of the dark elf when I recall his friend. I can't let him get away. Leaping to my feet, I take off through the underbrush, scenting the air to find my prey.

He's running in a zigzag pattern to throw me off his trail but I can still sense him. I smell the fear pouring off of him in waves, the delicious scent of fear that permeates the woods.

The blood drips from my maw as I crouch down to all fours to run faster. I spot him just ahead, dashing through the trees as though he stands a chance against me.

Leaping over him, I land on all fours in front of him and he hardly has time to scramble backwards before I'm reaching out and grabbing him by the throat, slamming him against a tree.

He's dead before he even hits the ground.

I make short work of him, tearing flesh from bone and gobbling it up ravenously. Once he's nothing but a pile of bones, I straighten up to sniff around. Where did I leave that other elf?

As soon as I loop back around to find the first elf, the hunger pangs subside enough that the realization of what I've just done hits me full force.

I've acted as wild and savage as every other waira that Asra has encountered.

I wanted to show her I was different, that I was more than a ravenous, snarling beast. But here I am, covered in the blood of two dark elves after ripping them apart like a monster.

Why is it that I even care? Perhaps I'm gaining intelligence, and I can now see that mindless bloodlust is no way to live. Or maybe it's merely the lingering emotions of the dark elves that settle in my belly that bring me this newfound sense of...of guilt weighing inside.

I sit down, looking at my predatory hands. They're large, like animal paws with razor sharp claws. Hands used to take down prey.

They're also covered in blood and guts. I've gained enough wisdom to know that I am merely looking for an out, an excuse to justify the guilt that hangs over my head.

I know the truth. Asra is a human. She would never understand. She would be terrified and disgusted with me if she saw me right now.

Growling lowly, I resolve to set aside my pitiful thoughts and head back to find her. She must be hungry, or she *will* get hungry soon. I should bring her some food at least.

Grabbing the dark elf, I examine it. She probably needs something with no bones. I don't think her small teeth can handle them. Selecting a hunk of torso flesh, I rip it off and bundle it in a small hide, tucking it into my satchel.

I take off, heading back for my cave when I feel more blood drip down my face. It might upset Asra if I show up looking like a wild beast. I should bathe and clean myself off first.

Lumbering along, I head for a nearby creek and throw my satchel onto the shore and discard my clothes before lowering myself into the icy cold water.

As I begin to scrub away the remnants of my feast, I'm drawn back to thoughts of the little human who found herself caught up in the depths of the forest. Asra is definitely out of her element here in these woods. She has no idea how lucky she is that I'm the one who found her.

I duck my head under the stream, water rolling off my thick fur in great droplets as I rise once again.

Now that I'm clean, I feel the pangs of this new guilt once again. Being around Asra has evoked many new feelings inside but I'm curious by nature and want to continue to explore our connection.

I'm about to put my satchel back on when I hear a loud, shrill whistle.

That same feeling from before—that dread—comes rolling back in an instant. My skin feels colder than the icy waters of the creek.

It has to be Asra. She is in danger.

Getting down to the ground on all fours again, I take off at a dead sprint, determined to get to her before whatever has her manages to harm her.

My skin gets even colder when I see Nechtan standing over her, ready to devour her in one bite. Fury hammering inside my chest, I throw myself at him, shoving him to the side, as far away from Asra as possible.

She looks up at me, wide-eyed. “Mael!”

Before I can chide her for leaving my cave, I hear the echo of footsteps, the crack of leaves, the rustle of branches being pushed aside in every direction around us.

It seems her whistle attracted more than just my attention.

Waira start circling the area, the more savage of them snarling and snapping towards us with no sense of self-preservation.

I must get her out of here. She is most safe in my cave. I have to get her back so she can heal from her injuries and I can protect her.

Scooping her up, I carry her in my arms, racing to get back to my cave before the other waira can get close enough to harm her

I dodge them as they fly at my heels, zigzagging left and right to avoid their long arms and their snapping jaws. Asra clings to me tightly, as though worried I might drop her.

We reach the cave and I set her down, shoving her inside. “Get back!” I growl, holding one hand out in front of me.

It takes little effort to cast a quick protection spell around the cave and I watch as the blue light flickers and settles into place around us. The less intelligent waira continue their assault, screaming in fury as they merely bounce off the ward.

Keeping an eye on them, I watch as they fall back after a time, clearly understanding that they aren't going to get past my spell anytime soon.

Once I'm satisfied that the waira around us are no longer a threat, I round on Asra, who has scrambled to the back of the cave.

“What were you thinking?” I demand, advancing on her. “What were you doing? Why did you escape?”

She seems to have no words as she looks up at me, the fear evident in her eyes. But the dread that I felt before is back, stronger than ever. Even though we are safe in my cave, it won't leave me.

“Answer me!” I demand, drawing myself up to my full height. “Why did you run away?”



## ASRA

I wait, my entire body shaking as the manaha gets closer. My eyes squeeze shut of their own accord. I don't want to see my death coming. *Please*, I beg silently. *Please save me*.

Just before his hot breath touches my skin, I feel a sudden whoosh of air and my eyes fly open. The manaha has been shoved violently aside.

“Mael?” I stare up, eyes huge. He heard me? Has he come to save me?

Before he can utter a word, the forest suddenly fills with sound. I hear low growls echoing through the trees and the sound of slow, predatory footsteps advancing across the forest floor.

Mael moves instantly, grabbing me and pulling me into his arms before taking off at a sprint. The wind whistles around us as he travels at lightning speed, in the opposite direction.

I hear them before I see them.

More manaha jump out of the trees at us as we fly past, nipping at our heels. They gnash their teeth at us and reach out long, sharp claws.

Mael manages to dodge every single one and before I know it, we're right back at his cave. He drops me inside before casting some kind of spell around the entrance that the manaha simply bounce right off. Snarling at them, he waits for them to give up before turning and advancing on me.

I'm still shaking and sweating from nearly dying at the hands of the other manaha a second time so I don't even register at first when Mael gets into my face and starts yelling at me.

"Why did you do that?" he shouts. "Why would you leave?" I wrap my arms around myself, trembling. The words are locked in my throat, refusing to escape. I can only stare up at him dumbly. Why is he so angry?

"Why?" he says, his deep voice holding a tinge of what sounds like hurt. "You were hurt. You could have been killed! Never, ever do that again!"

I open my mouth to respond but then snap it shut again when I realize that the space inside his chest where his heart sits, which I've only ever seen sheathed in a dark red light, is bathed in a greenish-black glow.

"Why is your heart a different color?" I ask, swallowing what I intended to say. My hand reaches out towards him without realizing. Mael moves back, as though startled, and looks down.

As he examines himself, the color shifts again, this time to a glowing pink. Does it change with his moods? Does pink mean confusion? What does the greenish-black mean then?

It's fascinating. "What is that?" I ask. He looks back up at me.

"My heart," he answers simply. I furrow my brow.

"I know that," I say, pointing at him. "I mean, what is the color thing?"

"It's me," he says, shifting backwards the closer I come.

My guess is that Mael doesn't know much about himself or his people. Or maybe he's not been self-aware for very long and he's unaccustomed to thinking deeper about himself.

"So the color shows who you are," I say, biting my lip. That doesn't seem right. It seems to change based on his moods. I shake my head.

“What would happen to you if you lost a fight to another of your kind who was stronger than you?” I ask, focusing my attention on it.

“I do not lose fights,” Mael shrugs. “I am strong and smart.”

“But what if you did?” I ask, pressing for more. “Would you be upset?”

“No,” he cocks his head, staring at me with those unsettling empty sockets. “I don’t understand. What does that word mean?” he asks.

“Upset? Like, disappointed, angry? Bitter?”

“Oh,” he says.

My nose scrunches as I try to think of something else to ask.

“What if you got hurt by another manaha?”

“What is that word?”

“Manaha? That’s what humans call your kind.”

“We call ourselves waira,” he says.

“Oh, is that what you want me to call you?” I ask.

He shrugs. “If you wish.”

“So what if you got hurt by another waira?” I ask, pushing the issue. “Badly hurt. How would you feel?”

“We heal quickly,” he settles next to me. “Why are you asking so many questions?”

“I’m very curious,” I tell him, fudging the truth a little. “I want to know more about you. Can you help me out?”

“I can try,” he says, nodding his large skull-like head. I scoot closer unconsciously, our knees almost touching.

“Thanks,” I say, still staring at the light around his heart. Is it my imagination or does the color flicker briefly towards yellow? I try to press onward.



“What would you feel like if you knew you were about to die?” I try.

Mael looks at me, expression blank. “I would be dead. It would not matter.”

I sigh, closing my eyes. “Right, but can you try to imagine how you might feel?”

He continues to stare at me, fingers settling on his thighs. “What does it mean to imagine?”

“You know, like, to close your eyes and picture what something would look like, feel like, be like?” I offer.

“I don’t think I imagine much,” he admits.

Now it’s my turn to stare. I can’t even fathom what it would be like to never daydream or imagine things. “Well, um. Try to imagine for me. Imagine that you’re close to death and you don’t know if you’re going to live or die. Would you be upset? At peace? Angry?”

Mael seems to try to obey. Though he has no eyes to shut, he seems to allow himself to space out. “I don’t know,” he says after a moment. “I cannot imagine.”

“Okay, let’s try something different,” I offer. “Maybe you can’t imagine death because you’ve never had to worry about it. What if I said something mean to you, like...your empty eye sockets are frightening?”

“Are they?” he asks, continuing to stare at me.

“Uh...maybe a little. But what if I said that to you? Would you be upset by it?”

“I’m sorry if they frighten you,” he says instead. “You have nothing to fear with me. I will protect you.”

I want to roll my eyes. It’s very nice that he’s not going to eat me, and truthfully I’m relieved, but I want to see if I can get his heart to change color again.

“Well. What if I said I don’t like antlers?”

“How are these questions supposed to help you know more about me?” he asks. I panic for a moment. I don’t want him to

know what I'm doing. What if he's angry about it? I think for a moment before switching tack.

"Did you collect all the wings in here yourself?" I ask.

"Yes," he says simply. That's it. Just one word. I stare at his heart. It doesn't even so much as flicker this time. Why can't I get more out of him? Watching his heart change before was amazing. I want to see it again. I want to know how it works.

"Have you ever eaten anything and regretted it before?"

"No," he shakes his head. Again, nothing happens.

"Where are you from?"

"Somewhere distant and far away," he says. "I can't remember."

"Did you have a family?"

"No," he says. "I don't think I did."

Still nothing. "Maybe you did have one," I say, trying to push him a little. "Maybe you traveled far away from them. Maybe they miss you terribly and you don't even remember them. How would that make you feel, knowing that they're out there pining for you and you're here, far away and don't even remember them?"

"I don't understand why you ask me these questions!" Mael says, sounding angry. His heart flickers again but the red just seems to get darker.

"Because I just want to know what there is to know about you," I tell him.

"I don't understand you asking me how I feel. I don't feel. I am," He says flatly. "I am me. I am Maeleachlainn. I hunt, eat, sleep, bathe...there is nothing more to me than that. I have lived here for a long time. I have no family. No one comes onto my territory unless they want to die by my hand. There is nothing more."

I feel his frustration but I've *seen* more from him. I wish he would show it to me. "But maybe there is," I say. "Maybe

you're just not giving yourself enough credit.”

“You ask me to do the impossible!” he says. His voice is so low that it almost sounds like roaring instead of yelling.

“Well, think about it,” I say, feeling my own annoyance rising. Maybe he's right and maybe I'm on a fruitless quest. I'm pushing him needlessly because I want him to show himself to me and maybe there's nothing more to show.

“What if I died? Would you just go on then? Just continue to be you and nothing else?”

“No,” he says so suddenly that I whip my head around to face him. “I wouldn't like that.” He seems to go very still.

I've made him sad. “I'm sorry,” I say, reaching out to squeeze his hand. “I shouldn't have pushed you. I was rude.”

There's something about him, something that draws me in and makes me want to know more. I've never met anyone like him before—man or waira.

It's strange and entirely new for me. I've spent my entire life wrapped up in protecting my brother. I've never had time or patience for the advances of men. I've never wanted or needed a man around, and I've pushed away those who have tried.

But Mael? He's so different. He's got this kindness that is entirely unique to him. The rest of his race are monstrous in appearance and live their lives as stark-raving beasts.

Mael though, he's thoughtful and intelligent—he strives to know more. I glance down, almost forgetting what we were doing and I let out a gasp. His heart is now glowing a bright, vivid blue.



## MAEL

**H**er small gasp has me stiffening.

I've said something wrong—offended her in some way? Expressing feelings is a completely foreign language to me, and even more so with my tripping over the delicate human sensibilities that she possesses.

Her hands reach out to brush against my chest, splaying wide over my heart.

“Beautiful,” she murmurs.

Looking down, I see that under her hand is the glow from my heart. Yet instead of pulsating with the usual red, it's shifted into a deep blue. It's strange to look at, and even stranger to feel a tugging weight settling heavy in my gut.

“I think,” She smiles slightly. “That your heart reflects your emotions.”

Her words stun me. How in the world is that possible? Waira don't have emotions, we have... wants. Needs, even. Instincts that we follow that lead us in the direction to fulfill our desires to gorge ourselves for all of eternity on the prey that walks these lands.

Being plagued by emotions is a ridiculous theory. What would having them do for me anyway? They certainly haven't protected Asra, only my instincts have—my need to keep her safe.

“Mael?”

“I...” My thoughts are jumbled.

Tilting my head back up slightly, I fixated on her again. She stares at me curiously, expecting me to finish my sentence. The only problem is that I have no idea what to say to her. The only feeling I’ve ever had—or rather, could recognize—is my insatiable hunger.

“Why don’t we try something?”

She takes my hand and leads me deeper into the cave, over to one of the carved shelves. The sun reflects bright on the ledge outside, giving her a rather wide view around. She stops us in front of the display of feathers that I have, all pulled from winged beasts during my travels.

Still holding my hand, she takes her other one and plucks a blue reflective feather off of the cloth they rest on. She holds it up, twirling it in front of her eyes to take in the brilliant colors. It’s harder to see the magnificents of how deeply toned it gets, but stepping outside to show her is completely off-limits. I’m not letting her be subjected to other waira coming after her again.

“What do you think of this?”

Tilting my head, I glance over at the feather. “It’s beautiful. Why?”

“You think so?” She continues to twirl it at the stem, turning toward me as she does so.

“All of the things I collect are.”

Pride swells in me. I may be strange for having all of these things hoarded inside of my cave, but they bring me a sense of accomplishment whenever I look at them. My treasures, never to be duplicated by any other being on Protheke. They’re special to me, even if they separate me from my own kind.

“Look.” Her finger pokes my chest. “Your heart’s changed again.”

I follow her finger to where she presses it against me. It indeed has changed, from a dark and unsettling blue, to a pale yellow.

“What were you thinking about?”

“My collection.”

She smiles. “You must be happy that you’ve collected all of this. I’m sure it’s taken a long time.”

It has, actually. Nearly a century.

She takes her hand away from my chest to set the feather back onto the cloth, making sure that it’s placed exactly as she’d picked it up. The effort warms me. The care she takes in making sure that my things are kept the way I like them is touching, almost as if they’re her things too.

Asra squeezes my hand.

“Show me which one’s your favorite?”

That is... a very tough choice.

Moving my head around, I scan along the hundreds of things in my possession. Choosing just one makes me edgy for some reason. As if she’s forcing me to decide between what kind of creatures I get to consume—humans or magic wielders.

No. That’s not right.

It’s...

It feels more like she’s making me choose between her and my trinkets.

“Oh,” Her hand comes to rest on my chest again, a soft blue radiating between her fingers. “I’m sorry, Mael. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“Upset?” I tilt my head.

“Yeah, the blue? I’m pretty sure that’s what that means. You got that way when I talked about me dying too.”

Ah. Yes, I really don’t like her thinking that way. No matter what kind of danger she seems to get herself into—or rather attract her way—I will stop at nothing in order to protect her. I will tear through waira and other Protheke

creatures alike. Absolutely no one is going to stand between me and Asra.

She's *mine*.

A small laugh escapes her, pulling me out of my heavy thoughts.

“What were you just thinking about?”

I don't bother sugar coating it. “You. And that I will do anything to keep you safe and out of harm's way.”

Her smile widens. “I think I like this color on you the most.”

A deep violet, with a slight tinge of red to it, beats solidly. It is pretty. It reminds me of a sunset fading into the deep purples and blues of the midnight sky, right before the light of the sun is swallowed up by the mountains that hide it away until morning comes.

It's also similar to the color of the wildflowers that grow in the meadow about an hour's walk from here. The petals of which smell sweet after a fresh rain fall. Those are one of my favorite's to press.

Should I take Asra there? Show her the ones that resemble the gold flecks in her eyes?

With my other hand, I place it over the one that rests on my chest. “Tell me why you like it.”

I'm not sure why I want to know suddenly, but curiosity nags at me.

“I like when you think about me, Mael.”

“I think about you all the time.”

She grins. “You do?”

Have I not made it obvious? “Yes, of course.”

She turns her head away from me quickly, her teeth gnawing at her bottom lip while a smile tries to take over. Asra's mannerisms always fascinate me. The way she carries



herself and the flood of expressions that morph and pinch her face together while she speaks.

I can't help but want to study them. She's so very human. It calls to me—a deeper part of me that I've yet to explore before meeting her. But she makes me want to. That nagging feeling hiding away in my chest longs for her attention and her presence near me.

It would confuse me more if my head wasn't so waterlogged with wanting to figure her out.

“Mael, can I ask you something?”

“Anything,” is my immediate response.

I hold her hand to my chest, not wanting to break contact with her. If I could grab her and hold her against my body, I would. My hands itch to do just that, scoop her up and fold my arms tight around her so she has nowhere else to go but to lean into me.

The desire races through my veins, an impulse that feels impossible to fight. Thankfully, she distracts me by speaking again.

“Why do you live in a cave? Does your kind not like houses?”

“Houses?” I've never heard of such a thing. “What is that?”

“Uh, structures? A building made out of wood that has four sides.”

Four sides? How will they get out of it if it has four sides?

She laughs slightly for some reason. “Obviously it has a door.”

“What's a door?”

She nods past me, towards the entrance to my cave. “Kind of like that, but it's built with wood. Have you been close to the village I'm from? Have you seen those structures that we've been building?”

Oh, is that what she's talking about? I did think of them as strange looking when I'd happened upon other human tribes in the area before Asra's had arrived. I've been in them a few times in order to hunt my prey down.

She's right in a way, they are like caves. Except they seem way less structurally sound than rock walls. What happens if a storm rolls through and knocks it down? Are they left to wander homeless?

"Why are you asking?"

She shrugs. "I was only wondering. I've never met someone like you, and I didn't know if you all lived like this or just you."

The way she says that amuses me. Clearly by now, she's realized that I am quite a strange breed. If not for my massive collection of oddities, then it would most certainly be for me not eating her on the several occasions I've had the chance.

In fact, I've purposefully gone *out* of my way to keep her safe so *other* waira don't eat her.

It's a rather funny situation, honestly.

What has this human woman turned me into? All this time I thought that I'd been the one completely in control, but it's starting to look like that may not be the case anymore.

"Yes, all waira do. It's safer than living out in the open or trying to survive hanging onto some tree branch while we rest."

Her laugh warms me. I end up squeezing her hand without meaning to, feeling a pleasant tug inside of my chest when she squeezes mine back.

"Do you not like my cave, Asra?"

"No, no." She shakes her head. "I didn't mean it like that. I'm just not used to living in a place like this. You've made it very homey, though."

I don't know about that, but I have made this space my own, that's for sure.

Though, it does worry me now that she's brought it up. The longevity of her staying with me, is it beneficial to keep her here in my cave? Do humans need regular sunlight and fresh air? I've never stopped to think of such things before eating them. And whatever I gain from them being consumed by me has never given me an indication either way.

I don't want Asra to feel uncomfortable staying with me. I'd prefer if she were happy and not scared of being attacked whenever she stepped outside to get some sun on her skin.

Building some kind of structure—a house? Is that what she called it?—could make her happier than staying in this cave. While I do prefer my living space currently, I'm sure I could figure out how to build one that benefits both of us.

“If you show me how to make one,” I tell her. “A house. I will build one for you.”

Her eyes widen. “You will?”

“Yes. As long as I get to pick out where it's built, though.”

I'm getting us away from this part of the forest. Too many waira wander past these parts for my liking. If I'm to keep Asra safe, it's going to be in a place where she isn't forced to be hidden away like she has been for the past few days.

She grins at me. “Deal.”



## ASRA

**I**t isn't until the next morning that Mael takes me out of the cave to go scavenging.

I'd only just begun to help build the houses in the village, but I remembered enough from Grim's grumblings over the past few months on what not to do.

He'd told me time and time again that with building anything, you need a plan and an order of execution. Because if you didn't have either of those things, your project would end up collapsing on some poor son of a bitch without warning and kill them.

Besides, I'm sure between Mael and I working together, we can figure it out.

Even if we fail a few times, we still have the cave to go back to in the meantime.

As we walk through the woods, he keeps me close to his side. I can tell that he's anxious by not only the way that large head of his bobs around to survey the trees around us for any sign of activity, but by the dark glow coming from his chest.

I'd woken up with it as a dusty blue, pretty and calming to look at while he slept next to me on the dae skin rug. However, ever since we'd left the cave, it's turned a dark black color that has small specks of green peeking through it every so often.

It's been hard to figure out his emotions before I'd noticed the colors changing. His tone of voice hardly fluctuates at all

in general, and aside from the occasional gestures that he's picked up on from his victims, he has no other facial expressions to see.

But being more intune with the subtle differences of his heart is helping me understand him a lot better.

Despite Mael's turbulent attitude when he'd first taken me, he's done everything he can to keep me safe from the dangers that lurk out here.

At first, I chalked it up to him being territorial over his food, but now that he's practically taken Nachtan out twice already, along with the others... I'm starting to believe that his motives are far from simply pegging him to be the insatiable creature he claims to be.

"This way." Mael's hand curves down to place on my lower back, guiding me through a bushel of shrubs.

He parts it for me with his free hand, letting me slip between the branches before I'm met with a small clearing in the middle of a break in the treeline. Overhead, the canopy opens up to reveal the beautiful morning sky, a few specklings of clouds hovering just shy of the sun.

In the clearing, there sits plenty of space to build a small cabin of sorts.

The grass is littered with beautiful wildflowers, all varying in color and remind me of the ones Mael has dry-pressed in his cave. I bend to pluck the head of one off of its stem and twirl in between my fingers. It's a light shade of blue, the same color that Mael's heart had been this morning.

"Do you like it?"

Turning, I glance up at him. "The flowers? Yes, they're very pretty."

He nods, his heart bleeding into a bold yellow. I smile at the change. He's proud of himself.

"We'll build here." he says, tone firm.

I nod and stand back up, keeping the flower in my hand. Looking around, there are plenty of trees that we can take

down and use to build with, the only problem is that we have no tools to do so.

Making them would be hard, especially without a firepit to forge them in and other tools to bend them to shape.

Mael's hand grazes against my back again. "You're worried."

"Huh? Oh." I shake my head. "I was thinking about how we're going to cut down the trees. We don't have any tools and I have no idea how to make them."

"I have some I've taken back in my cave. Whatever else we need to use, I'll take from travelers passing through."

Narrowing my eyes at him, I ask, "Take... as in?"

I suspect it won't be as easy as him simply dropping down from the trees and scaring a few bands of travelers into them giving him their wares before letting them run off into the forest unharmed.

"Well." is all he says back, not answering me.

By now, I'm a little less squeamish about him hunting and eating things. I don't know what that says about me, but I'm sure it has something to do with witnessing the horrors of what other predators that stalk these woods are capable of.

I don't exactly want him eating more humans. We've already been subjected to enough cruelty at the hands of those stronger than us. The oppressors that look down on us as nothing more than dirt beneath their shoes. I'd hate to contribute to us being picked off, even if it's for my own gain.

"Why don't we see what you have first."

He nods once. "Sounds fair."

It's kind of funny to me that he's been so agreeable. When we first met, he'd been anything but. It's as if, through the inexplicable events that had happened, we'd bonded.

Me, bonded to a waira. A man eater.

Honestly, Clay would be—

Sadness suddenly strikes me. Clay.

I'd almost forgotten. I'd been so distracted with trying to not get eaten myself, that I've let the thoughts of my baby brother slip through my fingers.

Shaking my head, I toss the flower from my hand and I pull myself together. One thing at a time. I need to focus on this first before anything else. If I'm going to survive out here while trying to find my brother, I need a shelter that's going to be able to be accessed easily while still remaining hidden from those who don't know about it.

And who knows? Maybe once it's been built, Clay will wander this way and see it.

Taking Mael's hand in mine, I tug him towards the trees again.

"For the structure, we'll need logs that are dense. They're called support beams and are used to hold the majority of the weight of the house while the rest of the structure around it keeps it together."

I stop in front of a thick trunk, knocking my knuckles against it.

"Something like this would work. Basically, we need to make it tough enough to withstand weather changes throughout the year. I know that's kind of simplified but that's how we made them back in the village."

"I remember seeing them."

My eyes widen. "You've been to our village?"

"Not yours, no."

"How many other humans have you encountered out here?"

"Besides travelers passing through or hunting, not many. Your kind doesn't typically venture this far into the forest to live."

I smile a little. "Do you blame them?"



He huffs softly, his chest lightening to a paler shade of yellow. Humor.

“No.”

I nudge him in the ribs with my elbow. “How about this, we go back to the cave and see what you have, and then we can come back here and plan on what we can start on. I think as long as we are able to cut down a few big trees, we can start mapping out how big of a base we’ll be able to make.”

Mael nods, despite his heart bleeding into a soft pink. I’m absolutely speaking a foreign language to him at this point, but at least he’s humoring me.

I’m about to poke fun at him for it when I’m interrupted by my stomach growling. Looking down, I place a hand over my belly in surprise. When’s the last time I ate anything? I can’t remember, honestly. Over the past few days, so much has happened that I’ve barely had time to even sleep.

“You’re hungry.” Mael’s grip on my hand tightens.

“Yeah...”

He steps back from me, dropping his hold on my fingers. “I’ll hunt for you.”

My eyes widen again. “No!”

I grab onto his tunic, halting him before he can take another step away from me.

The thought of him tracking down some poor unfortunate soul and slaughtering them for me to eat kicks up the bile in my stomach. He means well, but he has no idea what it’ll do to me if he comes back with a dead body thrown over his shoulder.

Fuck, knowing my luck, he’d go out there and track Clay down.

That turns my stomach even more.

“We can forage, Mael.”

He shakes his head at me. “That’s a waste of time. It will take me less than an hour to hunt something down and bring it

back to you.”

Oh, gods...

“Mael. I appreciate that. But I’d rather forage.”

Maybe it’s stupid of me to try and put my foot down when dealing with an apex predator that can easily pluck out my eyeballs and snack on them for lunch if he wanted to. He could pin me down to the ground without warning and sit on me until my lungs caved in.

The possibilities really are endless.

I wait for him to snap at me—or, at the very least, argue with me—but he doesn’t. Instead, he exhales slowly before turning back to look at the forest.

“Forage... what? Sticks? Twigs? What do you eat?”

The unexpected question makes me laugh. “What? No. Berries and fruit. I can also eat other kinds of plants as long as they aren’t poisonous.”

“How can you even tell that?”

I grin and take his hand once more, tugging him forward.

“Watch and find out.”



## MAEL

The moment we step out of the clearing, my senses pick up on something moving through the brush a few hundred feet away. My arm comes around to clap Asra back against me, holding her in a tight grip.

Both of us still—something that I'll have to remember to commend her for without stopping to question me first—as we listen to the sounds around us.

It's quiet, which isn't abnormal. Typically, creatures try to make themselves as invisible as possible while I'm out here hunting.

Off in the distance, I can pick up the subtle sounds of something big moving. Branches snap loudly, along with the soft dragging of a large body through shrubs and the tangles of brush along the forest floor.

Whatever it is, it isn't being quiet, leading me to believe it either is too stupid to care or not much is able to threaten it.

I tug Asra along with me, moving back in the opposite direction and towards my cave. She's going to have to deal with what food I have for now. I'm not letting her into those woods when there are things that can kill her before I have a chance to react.

She doesn't protest and lets me lead her back across the clearing and down the path I'd taken us to get here. My spine slowly unwinds from the tense position I'd graduated into while I'd been on high alert, giving me more room to relax as we walk with each other.

Being out this way while we build the house isn't going to be easy. I picked the clearing because I knew she'd like the surrounding area with the flowers and the creek being not too far from there. It'd give her access to fresh water whenever she wanted it.

However, until then, it's going to be a challenge depending on how long this process takes and how loud it is.

Looking down at her, I watch as she swings our arms while we walk, her fingers laced in mine comfortably. As strange as it seems, I want her to be happy. Being in the cave—somewhere that I've found shelter and peace—isn't the same as being out where she's always known.

I don't know much about her village or the people in it, but seeing her out here and enjoying nature only serves to solidify my decision on making her something she can live in and call her own. I've already taken her away from the other humans, this is the least I can do.

Arguably, I could return her, but I won't. She's mine and she's staying that way.

When we reach the bottom of the incline, I scoop her up onto my shoulder and head up. She wraps her arms around my neck, her soft breath tickling my shoulder. A smart part of me wants to roll them in order to catch her lips against my skin, but I quickly temper it down before my impulses are able to take over.

First priority is to feed her, then I can focus on other things.

I sit her up onto the ledge before clearing it myself. She holds her hand up to me, grasping mine when I offer it. Standing her up, she smiles.

“Thanks.”

A warmth settles into my chest. It sits uncomfortably heavy for some reason.

Ignoring it, I head into the cave and over to the satchel I've been keeping as food storage for days my hunts go less than

planned. It doesn't happen often, but since I've chosen to become a picky eater, I've needed to adapt.

There are times when more advanced beings don't travel as often, and for those days, I need a stockpile.

"What, uh..." I hear Asra wander over to me. "What do you have?"

"I keep emergency rations." Pulling out a hunk of meat, I show it to her. "It's fresh. Only about a day old."

She surprises me by slapping a hand over her mouth. "T-That's raw?"

I huff. "Yes?"

Obviously. How else would I eat it?

"I." She backs away from me, causing me to lower it away from her. "Mael, I can't eat it *raw*."

"...Why not?"

"Because it'll kill me!"

Are humans really this delicate?

I lift it slightly, rolling my wrist to examine the thick piece. If I remember correctly, it's the part of the thigh that has the most tender meat. One of my favorite parts, actually, since it tended to store some fat deposits that lightened the flavor from being not so bitter.

Sighing, I stand again and nod. "I'll build you a fire and cook it."

She drops her hand from her face and smiles at me. "Really?"

Of course I will, as long as she keeps looking at me like that.

It's a sentence I want to say to her but keep to myself at the last second. Verbalizing these strange feelings I've been having over the past few days feels too vulnerable for me. I've done everything but crack my own chest open and lace her fingers around my beating heart at this point.

Instead, I grab her wrist and turn her hand around before slapping the meat into her palm. She gasps and lets out a choked sound in response. I drop my hand from hers and step away from her before she has a chance at giving it back to me. I'm in a surprisingly rare mood that has me wanting to tease her.

Whatever creature I ate last is certainly rubbing off on me. It's the only explanation I have for these sudden tender actions.

I leave Asra in the cave and head back out into the forest. It takes me less than ten minutes to find enough wood to stoke a proper fire. I've never cooked my food before, but I've watched plenty of dark elves do so before eating them myself. She'll need to instruct me on how long to cook it for, though.

Getting back up onto the ledge, I drop the bundle of twigs, stray branches and longer pieces of bark that I'd stripped from the trees. Asra hovers at the entrance to the cave, her arm stuck out away from her awkwardly as she holds the meat from her face.

"Uh... don't you think building that there is going to smoke up the cave, Mael?"

I shake my head and crouch down onto my haunches, grabbing a few thicker twigs to tent them.

"Wind is coming from the East." I point to the left of me. "It'll blow it right past us."

"Oh..." She doesn't sound too happy about that, but I suspect it has more to do with me not letting her forage for food and less with me building a fire.

Humans are so strange. Why eat the same diet as the creatures with less than half the intelligence? I'll never understand it.

Then again, I'll never understand most things other species besides my own do.

"Mael..."

"Asra."

“This smells funny...”

I pause in shoving the pieces of bark into the center of the tent and look over to where she is. Even from here, I can tell her face has paled.

“What does?”

Her hand jostles the slab of meat. “This. It smells sour. Are you sure it’s fresh?”

Brushing off my hands onto my pants, I stand and move around the fire.

“I wouldn’t feed you something rotten, Asra.”

“I know.” Her voice is tight, strained. “I’m not accusing you of that. I-I just...”

Worry is the only thing I can think of to accurately describe what she’s displaying. Even if she isn’t outrightly accusing me of feeding something rotten to her, there is that fear underneath her poised exterior that doesn’t exactly believe that. Even if it’s by accident.

Do I blame her? No, not at all. For all she knows, on my end it could be accidental as well. That wouldn’t make up for the fact that she could potentially get sick out of my ignorance, though. And for that, I wouldn’t forgive myself.

Harming in any way, even unintentional, would rip me to shreds.

I take her arm and bring it up to my face, taking in a deep whiff of the meat that rests in her hand. It does have a smell to it, but not from spoiling. More that the meat’s been changed somehow—possibly from other factors like sickness or some other health condition.

Pulling my face away, I lower her arm. “I see what you mean, but it isn’t rotten. It smells like they were sick. I’m sure once I cook it, it’ll be fine.”

“Sick?” Her voice is slightly alarmed. “*They?*”

I nod. “Yes, the dark elf. It isn’t uncommon for them to get sick, actually. They’re quite prone to it.”



Her mouth drops open. “T-This is... a-a dark elf’s...?”

I tilt my head. “What?”

She jerks her arm from my grip, flinging the meat away from her. It lands in a solid, wet heap a few feet away, the dust and dirt from the ledge coating it immediately.

I sigh slowly. Seriously?

“Oh gods.” Asra slaps her clean hand to her mouth, gagging.

Annoyance bleeds into me. “What?”

She turns away, hobbling over to the side of the cave where she leans her body against it. Sagging, she tips her upper half over and gags again. It’s a horrible sound that has me following her over to where she is.

“Asra.”

She groans at me.

“What is the matter with you?”

She shakes her head, dry heaving again. “Dark elf...”

I sigh again. “Yes. As I said, once I cook it, it should be fine. I doubt you’ll even taste whatever was wrong with her.”

Asra snaps her head up to look at me. Her eyes are watery and bloodshot, clearly from trying to hold herself back from throwing up. Though, I doubt she has anything left in her to actually come up. As horrible as it is, I’ve barely fed her this entire time.

“Her? You killed... oh gods. You killed someone.”

“... Yes, I tend to do that.”

“I know.” She takes a few deep breaths, moving back around to press herself against the side of the cave with her hand still over her mouth. “I know you do.”

I wait for her to say more, but she doesn’t. It only serves to confuse me further. What is happening?

“Asra.”

Her eyes close. “I know, Mael.”

“Then explain it to me.”

Her hand comes away from her mouth, crossing over her chest to rest right over her stomach. Her cheeks have lost all color, making her look half dead. It concerns me greatly and I have to fight with myself not to reach out and touch her. If I do, she’ll more than likely retreat from me more than she already has.

“I can’t eat...” Asra opens her eyes. “If I eat that, it’s cannibalism.”

Oh. Is that what this is about?

I huff. “You aren’t a dark elf.”

“That’s not the point, Mael!”

“Then what *is* that point? Food is food.”

“Not to a human!” She argues. “Not to someone that isn’t a waira! We aren’t like you. We can’t just—”

She cuts herself off, clamping her mouth shut.

Anger feeds into me, suddenly. I crowd into her space, trapping her against the rock behind her.

“Can’t what?”

She shakes her head at me.

“Go on, Asra. Finish your sentence.”



## ASRA

**M**y heart hammers inside of my chest.

Mael glares down at me with those fiery colored orbs of his, his chest darkening into a blood red that reminds me of the color of the dark elf's meat I'd been holding. I shake slightly under his intimidating presence. It overwhelms me, holding me in a state of fright.

My baseline instinct is to flee from the predator that's trapped me. His hand comes up to rest on the cave right near my head, keeping about an arm's width of distance between our chests. I'm sure if I shoved at him, he wouldn't move a single centimeter.

"I-I'm not... judging you."

"You are." Comes his clipped tone.

I flinch. "Okay... I'm not *trying* to."

"You're well aware of what I am. What I need to do to survive. Why it surprises you now is beyond me."

His pointed words stab me. It's true, I've seen it firsthand how vicious wairas can be, especially when it comes to their food. From a distance, I could rationalize and compartmentalize it because the only time I'd been in the direct path of it was when I'd been almost eaten myself.

And each time, Mael had saved me.

I hate that this part of him scares me. Because every other piece of him doesn't.

In fact, I'm fascinated by how his mind works, and what he's like deep down underneath his rough exterior. I've seen glimpses of it over the past few days and yesterday I'd finally started to *truly* understand him.

He's a monster, that much is fairly obvious. But he's so much more than that.

His chest changes color again, darkening down to a maroon color that kicks up my adrenaline. I knew I'd pissed him off, but apparently I'd also hit a nerve. It's odd that my opinion of him means that much, though I suppose my reaction had been less than polite.

He'd willingly given me a part of his stockpile without even having asked him, yet I'd been stupid enough to toss it away like rotten garbage. If I were in his position, I'd be pissed too.

"I'm sorry," I whisper to him.

His entire body is stiff and hardly moving at all save for the small movements of his chest rising and falling. I glance to the side, taking in how much room I have to slide to the other side away from him. Maybe if I give him space to cool down

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"*Don't.*" He growls.

That has me freezing in place.

Next to my head, his nails drag against the rock, the sound of it grating in my ear and making the hair on the back of my neck stand on her. He curls his hand into a fist, the air in his lungs punching in and out of him quickly.

Shit, did I trigger him?

"Mael."

His only response is to growl at me.

It sends a shiver down my spine. Despite the fear making my hands shake, I reach forward and put one over his chest. It's warm to the touch, his heart a raging fire inside of his body.

“You’re not going to eat me, right?”

Mael places his other hand next to my head, completely trapping me from going anywhere. Even if I wanted to duck under one of his sides, he’d snap his arms around me and catch me instantly. Plus, there is no telling what he’d do to me in this state of his.

I’d be lucky if I got away with only losing a limb.

“Mael.” Those glowing orbs bore into me. “You’re not going to eat me.”

It’s more of a statement, than a question. Almost as if reminding him of it. Which, I guess I am. Deep down, I don’t believe he wants to. He’s had plenty of chances when I’d been vulnerable and unsuspecting and he hadn’t so much as taken a nibble out of me.

Not to mention both times Nechtan had tried to eat me himself and Mael had saved me from that too.

“Right?” My tone is firm.

If I’m wrong about this... well, I’ve had a good life. If Mael really does lose it, he’ll make quick work of me. He’s held himself off for this long that I’d be shocked if he decided that now he’s going to take his time to savor eating me.

Hopefully, wherever Clay’s ended up, he’ll join me in the afterlife some day. I’d like to see him again, even if it takes him a while to find me.

If he’s even still out there.

“Asra...”

I don’t know what takes over me, but the tone of his voice saddens me. Whatever impulses he’s fighting are enough to look painful. While I don’t claim to know what it feels like to be a waira, I can see very clearly that it’s a constant struggle. Battling your inner thoughts, the all-consuming lust that seems practically insatiable, must take a toll after a while.

I rub my hand over his chest gently. I’m happy he’s held off for this long. “What, Mael?”

He wavers slightly. "...Hungry."

It breaks my heart with how defeated he sounds. Like fighting this is ultimately pointless. And maybe deep down, it really is. Maybe in the grand scheme of things I'm being foolish in trying to change a bloodthirsty monster from his very nature. Maybe eventually he'll let himself give in and tear me to pieces in order to gnaw on my bones.

But until that day comes, I'm not letting him give up on himself like this. I'm not letting those twisted thoughts that I know are merely impulses control him and force him to do something he clearly doesn't want to do.

"Mael, listen to me." I put my other hand on his chest. "You aren't going to eat me. I know you aren't."

He doesn't say anything for a long moment. I keep my hands over his chest, running them over his heart gently.

Finally, he lets out a strangled, "How?"

"You would've by now. Right?"

He gives me a single nod.

It makes me smile a little. "Right. If you're really that hungry we can go find you food. I'm sorry I threw what you gave me. I feel bad about that."

"... You do?"

"Yeah. It kind of shocked me that what I was holding used to be someone that could walk and talk, you know? For a human, anyway."

Between my fingers, I can see his heart shifting from that blood-red to a deep shade of blue.

"I don't want to hurt you, Asra."

I shake my head. "You don't have to. We're okay."

He takes in a deep, shuddering breath. "Are we?"

"Of course we are."

He lets it out slowly, sagging into me completely while he relaxes. He rests his skull against the side of the cave while

pressing his body flush into mine. Bringing my hands around, I wrap them around him in order to stroke his back.

He's too tall to rest my chin on his shoulder, so I press my cheek to his chest instead. The steady thrum of his heart is nice to listen to, soothing me while I run my hand along the tattered pieces of his tunic.

I really need to make him something that doesn't have holes in it.

"Asra," he mumbles.

"Hm?"

"If it's too difficult for you out here..." He shifts to turn his head away from me. "I'll take you back to your village."

He's so sweet. After almost eating me, his first thought is to bring me back to a place that comforts me. Too bad it's changed to be him instead. As selfish as it is to leave the people who cared and raised me behind, this feels right too.

I'd never thought of myself as wanting to live my life out in the forest up in a cave surrounded by deadly beasts, by being here with Mael is making it feel worth it. I don't want to leave him, and going back to the village is doing just that.

Even if I was forced to, I'd spend the rest of my days thinking about him obsessively.

I'd wonder where he is and what he's up to. I'd want to go find him and make sure he was doing okay, which would only lead me to get myself into more trouble than I already have.

As touching as it is for him to want to bring me back there, I don't want that. Not anymore.

"Do you *want* me to go back there?"

He huffs. "No."

Smiling, I say, "Then I don't want to go back."

He shifts again, turning his head back so he can look at me. "Really?"

I nod. "I want to stay with you."



Mael watches me for a long moment, taking in whatever expression I have on my face in a very serious way. I can't tell if he's trying to gauge if I'm lying or not, or it's something else, but whatever he sees makes him relax.

When he pulls back from me slightly, he cups my face with his hand. "I'm sorry for trying to eat you."

It sounds so ridiculous coming out of his mouth so plainly that it makes me laugh. "It's okay."

His thumb strokes along my jaw. "You're right. I don't want to eat you."

"I know. I can tell."

"How?"

I pat his chest. "You're very transparent."

I'm sure if he had eyeballs, he'd be rolling them. He only goes to further my theory by saying in a drawled tone, "Of course that's what you notice..."

"It was either that or actually being stupid and trying to run away from you."

"You have learned quite quickly what not to do around a waira."

I wink at him. "Call me a waira expert."

A soft chuckle escapes him. "Soon, I will."



## MAEL

**A**sra's stomach interrupts us by growling again.  
"I suppose I should feed you."

She grins up at me. "I wouldn't hate that idea."

Placing my hand over hers to keep it resting on my chest, I turn to look over my shoulder at the forest below. It's gotten a little darker, which is usually when prey tends to come out from their hiding spots to forage before it gets dark.

Other natural predators wouldn't be coming out for another hour or two to hunt anyway, so as long as we're quick, we should be alright. I'll simply have to keep an ear out for anything bold enough to stalk through the trees uncaringly.

Turning back to Asra, I slip her hand off of my chest and bend to scoop her into my arms. She wraps her arms around my neck easily, resting her head on my shoulder while her long dark hair cascades over it.

It endears me how much she trusts me.

I'd been one movement away from sinking my teeth into her neck, and despite that, she'd brought me down from it. She'd taken the time to break through those hammering voices inside of my head, clamoring for me to give in to my instincts and kill her.

She'd hadn't let them. I'd nearly let them take over me, but she'd stopped them right in their tracks.

What an incredible human I've stumbled upon.

I take her back down the incline and set her down once we reach the bottom. She takes my hand in hers, tugging me forward.

“We’ll have to make some kind of pouch to use to collect everything.”

I pat my left leg. “I have one.”

She follows the strap around my leg and up to my hip where the pouch hangs. It’s half tucked under the side of my tunic, only visible near the seam split. She shakes her head at me, making a clicking sound with her tongue.

“I need to sew you new clothes, Mael.”

“Why?”

She tugs at my sleeve. “These are in tatters.”

“So?”

“So?” She mimics. “Don’t you want something that isn’t falling apart at the seams?”

I shrug at her. I have half a mind to tell her that the reason my clothes are this way—and why I have so few—is because I steal them off the corpses I eat. Judging by how viscerally she reacted to me handing her dark elf meat, I’m going to save this piece of information to myself.

“I won’t say no if that’s something you want to do.” is what I eventually say.

She smiles at me and swings our arms while we walk.

It isn’t long before she’s squatting down to pull some shrubs back to reveal colorful berries hanging from the branches. She collects a few handfuls, carefully putting them in my pouch before tugging me along.

We find all sorts of things out here that I never knew humans could eat. From berries to certain herbs and fungi. She’d even collected small leaves that she’d said she could soak in hot water and it’d make the water flavorful.

It’s an interesting look into how vast a human’s diet can really be.

She tucks the last of her findings into my pouch with pride shimmering in her eyes. It isn't much, but it will last her long enough for me to find her a more permanent food source that I can readily prepare for her.

We'd have to explore meat again. Maybe offering her dark elf at first had been a bad choice. I could try again and offer her something a little more gamy like gallus or thistle. She can't be a complete plant-eater, right?

"Ohhh," she grabs something off the ground, pulling it from some moss that had collected around the trunk of a tree. "Look."

Holding it up, I notice that she has a feather held in her fingers. It's a dark black that shifts to a deep purple when moved in the light. I pluck it from her hand to examine it more closely. I'd seen these winged creatures before in passing, but had never gotten a good glimpse of them before.

Which is too bad, I'd love to add their wings to my collection.

"Do you have anything like that back at your cave?"

I shake my head, rolling in between my fingers. "It is beautiful, though."

"You like songstras?"

"Is that what they're called?"

"Yes, you didn't know?"

She stands, plucking the feather out of my hand.

"I hardly know what the proper term for anything is. I don't typically talk to people."

"Oh, that's true."

She tucks the feather behind her ear. It practically blends in with her hair, reflecting the purple sheen whenever she moves her head. It suits her quite well, actually.

I must be obvious with my staring because she tilts the side of her head toward me. "Like what you see?"

“I do, yes.”

Whether from my bluntness or my words in general, Asra’s cheeks color. It’s a pretty dusty pink that compliments her freckled skin tone well that I itch to run my fingers over. I’ve been wanting to do that a lot lately, touch her in any way that I can.

It’s... confusing.

“Why do you collect them?”

Her question pulls me out of my thoughts. “The wings?”

“Yeah. It seems to have the widest variety.”

I suppose I’d think the same thing if I were looking at my collection too. For an on-looker, I seem to have no standards whatsoever, picking whatever bird I can snatch out of the sky and ripping their wings off in order to display inside of my cave to no one but myself.

Though, it’s far from the truth and much more revealing than I care to admit.

“How come?” Asra prompts when I continue to remain in silence.

Explaining it to myself is hard, let alone to someone else that isn’t inside my head. I don’t want her to judge me, even if she doesn’t mean to do so. It’s a part of myself that I’ve never shared with anyone.

“I... started out collecting feathers because I thought they were beautiful.”

She nods, listening intently.

I fold my arms across my chest, feeling far less vulnerable that way. “It wasn’t until I happened upon a winged bloodsucker and saw that it had wings too, like the birds in the trees. After I killed it and ate it, all that was left were the wings.”

“So you... took them?”

Hesitating again, I shift away from her slightly to look elsewhere. “I thought that by keeping them, I’d also grow

wings. Back then, I wasn't as... highly developed as I am now. Waira only learn intelligence through consuming those with it. My thought was that I'd be able to grow wings and fly like I'd seen the birds do."

Out of the corner of my eye, Asra smiles. "That's really cute, Mael."

I huff at her. "Yes, well, imagine my surprise when weeks passed and I *didn't* grow wings."

She laughs. "I'm sorry. That must've been disappointing."

I shrug. "Ever since then, I've been collecting the wings of birds that I find pretty to look at. Though I can't have them myself, I still sometimes like to..."

"Dream?" she offers.

"Yes," I say softly.

Her hand finds my arm, squeezing it gently. "I think it's nice to dream. Gives you something to look forward to among all the chaos in this world."

"Is that how that works?"

She laughs again. "Of course."

I wish I could give her this kind of ease all the time. She looks free and happy standing here with me while we forage for food and talk about my trinkets. It's a simple and carefree kind of life that has me wanting more of it.

Untucking my arm from my other one, I reach out to grab the hand resting on me when the sound of a twig snapping close by has me on high alert. Snatching Asra by the arm, I drag her behind me and press her to the trunk of the tree.

As the wind drifts by, I catch the scent of dark elves close by.

Fuck.

"Well, well. What do we have here?" an unfamiliar voice cuts through the silence.

Dark elves descend upon us from the treeline, four of them it seems. I kick myself internally at being so distractedly enamored with Asra, that I'd completely ignored keeping a watchful eye on our surroundings.

"You're a disgusting looking thing, aren't you?" the dark elf in front of me sneers.

I growl back. "Leave."

He laughs, a small spike of magic drifting up from his hand. He lifts it near his face, casting a yellow glow onto his dark skin.

"No, I don't think I will. I see you have a human with you. Why don't you give her to me and we'll be on our way."

"Hey, look." One of the others points. "That thing in its chest is changing color."

There's a hushed murmur between them all. It has me tensing and folding my arms back behind me to shield Asra completely from their view.

"We should take it back to study."

"We can crack it open and see what's glowing inside."

"Oh, that's a good idea."

I growl again. "Leave before I tear you all apart."

The first dark elf grins at me, the magic flickering in his hand. "I'd like to see you try, beast."

Rolling my shoulders back, I can feel Asra's body vibrating against mine. I hate that she's scared. I'd do anything to shield her from seeing this but getting her out alive is more of a priority to me than sparing her the image of me tearing these dark elves into pieces.

If these bastards want to play with fire, then they have another thing coming.

"Asra."

"What," she whispers back to me.

"Close your eyes."





## ASRA

**T**hose three words make me shiver.

Without another word, I clap my hands over my eyes and let my body hunch over when I feel the air change.

“What are you—?” one of the dark elves says right before there’s the sickening sound of blood splattering everywhere.

It follows with the sound of a body dropping into the dirt.

Mael lets out a nasty laugh. One that I’ve never heard before that makes my skin crawl. It’s the same feeling I’d felt that first night we’d met and he’d told me he wasn’t like the other waira and could see me.

A pit of dread forms in my stomach as a scream is cut off suddenly.

“What the fuck!” someone else screams.

Oh gods.

I can’t help but want to look, to see what kind of destruction he’s wrought to the fools who’d been too stupid to heed his warning. I’d wanted to feel bad for them at first for stumbling upon us, but after Mael’s first warning growl, they should’ve known.

Peering between my fingers, I feel my eyes widen. Mael is hunched over with an arm dangling out of his mouth. His jaw is clamped down into it hard enough to squeeze blood out of the stump. It pours down his pants, covering the dark material.

His heart glows a fiery red, fueled by the carnage in front of him.

At his feet is the body of one of the dark elves, staring slack jawed up to the tree canopy with unseeing eyes. Mael's jaw works slowly on the arm, the bones crunching loudly as he chews on it.

One of the other dark elves slices at him with a thick-bladed sword, nearly catching him in the arm with it. Mael easily snatches it out of his hand and tosses it across the way before punching a hole into the dark elves chest and concaving it.

He rips it back out, hand clutched around the still beating heart. It pumps for a few seconds in his hand, blood pooling down his arm, before going limp.

The dark elf drops to the ground a second later.

Holy shit.

I kind of wished I'd kept my hands over my eyes, but seeing how easily Mael can tear through people is giving me an entirely new perspective into how close I'd come to death myself with him. He has incredible restraint with me if this is all it takes to kill someone.

My eyes tear up slightly. I'm so proud of him for listening to me earlier. For fighting himself to keep me alive.

A hand on my arm jolts me out of my thoughts and has me stumbling away from the tree. A hand comes down to clamp over my mouth, keeping me from screaming as I'm dragged away from the carnage.

I reach out with one of my hands towards Mael, desperately grabbing at the air in front of me before he disappears from view behind a large shrub blocking me. I claw at the hands on me, biting hard at the fingers trapping my mouth shut.

He curses behind me. "Stop it, you little cunt. I'm taking you back to my manor before your monster can find you. You'll be paying for what's been done to my family."

Panic races through me, flashbacks of living in Orthani and almost being taken by my Master hits me immediately.

I don't want to go back to a situation like that, strapped to the bed of some noble elf away from Mael and tortured until my lungs gave out from screaming, forced to birth some half breed monstrosity that would ultimately result in me slitting my own wrist the moment I get the chance to.

The hand around my mouth tightens when the dark elf stumbles on a loose log hiding among the leaves on the ground. I take the second of opportunity to jam my elbow back into his ribs. His breath huffs out of him, long enough for me to break away from his hold.

I don't get very far unfortunately. His hand comes out to wrap around my hair and yank me backwards.

Stumbling, I fall to my knees with his hand pulling my head back in a painful twist. A gasp leaves my lips at the shock that rolls up my spine. The dark elf slaps me hard, throwing me to the ground at his feet.

“Do that again and I'll break your neck right here.”

Blood coats the inside of my mouth, spilling down my lips and onto the grass beneath me.

“Mael...” I mumble, my breath hitching. Where is he?

“What did you say to me?”

There's a sharp kick to my ribs. I choke and roll over onto my side, clutching my body and shielding my head from the boot raising over me to kick me again.

“Answer me when I'm talking to you.” he snarls.

I spit out the blood in my mouth and take a deep breath.  
“MAEL!!”

The dark elf kicks my ribs again. “You bitch. Shut up before I make you shut up.”

The roar that answers me is so loud that it shakes the trees. It's ear-piercing in the most heinous way, a bone chilling

sound that if I'd heard it in the dead of night, I'd assume death's door had come knocking.

A shiver rolls through me when I hear the sound of trees breaking in the distance.

I'm hauled up off the ground by the dark elf and dragged through another few feet of foliage. I can't tell where we are or how far away I am from Mael or the cave. Everything around me looks the same. It feels like it's only been a few seconds, while at the same time it's as if hours have passed.

Where's Mael?

Right on cue, the trees part in front of me. My waira crashes through them, looking like something told from a horror story around a campfire to warn children against the things that roam in the woods at night.

He looks absolutely terrifying.

I'm thrown down onto the ground while the dark elf who'd kidnapped me tries to get away. He doesn't get very far before Mael tackles him to the ground, cutting off his scream of terror. A bolt of magic is summoned in the dark elf's hand, cracking with ferocity.

Mael's jaw unhinged, clamping down around the arm outstretched towards him and ripping it clean off the dark elf's body.

My jaw drops in horror, wincing at the high-pitched scream.

He surprises me by spitting the arm out and putting his entire hand over the dark elf's face, crushing it into the dirt. The muscles in his arm strain with the amount of pressure he applies. There's a soft crack and then the dark elf's entire head explodes.

I slap a hand over my mouth, bile rising up my throat at the sight. Under him, the dark elf's body goes completely limp.

A dark laugh leaves his mouth, satisfied sounding.

Blood coats almost everywhere on him, some of it dried but most of it fresh. His heart glows a steady red, familiar in a way than the blue I've gotten used to over the past day or so. He lifts a hand to his face, his jaw unhinging to lick at the carnage caked between his fingers.

It's like watching him lick up the juice of a piece of fruit that's run down his hand by accident. Not the insides of some dark elf's head.

My stomach rolls. I groan and stumble to my feet. I'm going to be sick.

I know it's not his fault. It's in his nature. But gods is it something else to watch versus hearing about in passing.

I move away a few feet to get the fresh air moving in my lungs again, calming myself down enough to keep my stomach from heaving what little I've eaten. I'd had only a few handfuls of berries and fungi, so most of it would be bile anyway.

Removing my hand, I blow out a few breaths before turning back to face Mael.

My body stiffens when I see that he's no longer sucking the blood off of his fingers but is instead very intensely focusing on me. My hands fist at my sides as I fight the impulse to turn around and run in the opposite direction.

"Mael..."

He's so still that he looks like a statue. The only thing that pulls him apart from one is his glowing chest beating rapidly.

I put my hand out. "Don't."

He rises slowly, uncurling himself from the hunched over position he'd twisted himself into. My hand shakes when he takes a step toward me, the familiar look in his eyes completely gone and replaced with a predator that only sees me as his next meal.

I swallow back the bile again. "Mael. Don't."

He advances on me the same way a likar would an unsuspecting dae.

Without meaning to, I take a single step back.

His eyes flare.

Shit.

“Mael!”

He tackles me onto the ground without warning. He pins me to the ground with his hands on my shoulders, holding me in a vice-like grip that is painful enough to spark tears in my eyes. I kick and fight his hold on me, knowing in the back of my mind that I’m making this ten times worse.

But fear is taking over my rational thinking, hammering into my head that I’m going to be eaten if I don’t get away *now*.

Mael’s chuckle quickly turns into a growl. His jaw unhinges in a horrible way and comes down to clamp around my arm.

I hold back a scream, sealing my lips shut as I go still. He doesn’t break the skin at all or crush my arm between his teeth, and surprises me by simply gnawing on it like some kind of chew toy.

My heart is beating so loud in my ears that it’s hard to focus on anything else.

“M-Mael...”

He growls back at me, tightening the pressure on my arm.

I stare up at the trees past his shoulder as tears flow down my cheeks. It can’t end like this. After all that we’ve gone through together, it can’t end with him actually eating me because of some stupid dark elves and their stupid egos thinking that they could out-fight a damn waira.

I hate dark elves. I really, really do.

“Mael.” I swallow. “Please. Please don’t do this.”

I wince when he breaks the skin, licking up my blood greedily with his long tongue.

“Mael. I know that you’re in there somewhere. It’s Asra, remember?”

He clamps down on my arm again, drawing more blood.

*Fuck.*

“Maeleachlainn. Listen to me. Do. Not. Eat me.”





## MAEL

I ignore the begging and continue to chew on the arm pinned under me.

Foolish. Every human begs me not to eat it. And do I ever listen to them? No. Because wairas don't listen to their food. We *eat* our food. Why bother entertaining it with false promises when we both know where this story ends.

At least this human has stopped struggling and has given in to the inevitable.

*So hungry...*

*Eat.*

My bloodlust claws at me, already having tasted the sweet nectar that lay just below the surface of skin blocking my way. I drag my tongue up the wound, getting every last drop until the skin is fresh and clean again.

I'm going to enjoy this kill. I can already sense it.

"Maeleachlainne."

I pause.

*Maeleachlainne.* My name.

How does this human know my name? I've never told anyone before.

Have I?

"Do. Not. Eat me."

Lifting my head, I turn to see the human's face. It's.. familiar to me.

Why?

Dark eyes dart over to me, a honey brown that stares deep into my own, fixing me in place. I can't move, not while I'm under such a scrutinizing gaze.

“Asra. Remember? You saved me from those dark elves.”

Dark elves?

My mind is scrambled with thoughts, all of them yelling loudly to ignore this brainless human and consume the flesh that's begging for me to tear it apart with my teeth. I want to so badly that it physically hurts. The burning in my stomach is all-consuming.

“They called you names. They told you that they wanted to take me away from you.”

A snarl leaves me. No one is going to get in the way of my prey. I caught it with my own hands, therefore it's *mine*.

My human.

“Right. See? So, you killed them because you didn't want that to happen. You want me all to yourself.”

Yes. Mine. All to myself. As it should be.

Those words delight me.

My teeth ache to sink into soft flesh that gives way to tough bone. My jaw drops, unhinging to give me enough room to tear the arm completely out of the socket. It's better that way. Easier to chew and swallow if I eat the body in pieces.

More blood to lick up and more meat to savor.

*Hungry...*

“Mael.”

I snap my jaw, snarling again.

“I know you're mad. I know. I'm so sorry that those dark elves triggered you.”

I've had enough of this.

Shifting back slightly, I grab both of the human's arms and pin them up out of the way. Leaning over, I glare down at those honey brown eyes.

"Enough."

They don't waver at all, despite my tone. "No. I'm not letting you do this."

I bark out a laugh. As if this human has a choice in the matter.

*Eat. Hungry.*

The desperation in the human's tone is palpable. "I'm not letting you do this, Maeleachlainne. I *know* you don't want to."

My growl comes deep from my gut, boiling out of me. My curiosity is winning over me. "My name. How do you know it."

"You told me. When we first met."

Talking to a human, let alone long enough to tell them my name is ridiculous and short sighted. What good would it do for me for my food to know my name other than to distract me with using it. How did this human know? Where on the wind had it been told from?

Nechtan?

No. He wouldn't talk to his food either. He knows better.

Crashing around in my head are the voices of every single piece of my shattered soul, shouting in a cacophony that is hardly able to be understood, even as I try to focus on it.

"Mael..."

That voice.

It sings in my head, through all of the chaos and the noise. Where is it coming from?

"Mael, is Asra. Remember?"

The human from the woods... the one that I stole and took back to my cave.

I remember...

“It’s okay. Let me go. We’re fine, right?”

I’m not fine. I’m so hungry that it feels as if I’m starving. I’m going to shrivel up into the skeletal remains of something that once was. I don’t want to disappear from this world. Not when I still have so much to show Asra. I still need to build her house and take care of her like I promised I would.

“It’s okay,” Something tugs at my hands, slipping from my tight grip. “We’re going to be okay.”

I sink my fingers into the dark soil, dragging them until my hands are in fists. The human under me—Asra—wiggles slightly against me until her arms come around to wrap themselves around my body, pulling me down against her.

Oh gods. Asra.

I almost...

I wanted to...

My entire body shudders in horror. What have I done? I’ve irreparably ripped through the delicate bond we created and shattered it into the same tiny pieces like my own soul. How could I try to harm her when she’s done nothing but take care of me and keep me from devolving into the creature that I’ve shown her I am over and over again.

No... no no no...

Her hand glides over my back in a gentle motion, rubbing circles along my spine in a way that comforts a deep dark part of me. The sides that I’d forgotten I still hold, despite the monster that’s corrupted and twisted every other part of my very being.

Human. That’s what I was at one time. Before I’d let myself do the unthinkable and consume the very nature in which I’d been born into.

The memories are so distant that it's hard to focus on them. My despair over nearly harming Asra—I have, I bit her—controlling my turbulent emotions. It rocks me to my core, beating down on me harder than I've ever felt anything before.

Eating my own sibling, becoming this monster, it's nothing in comparison to harming the woman I care about. The one who's come to hold my beating heart delicately in the palm of her hands, treating it with such kindness that I absolutely don't deserve.

How? Why me?

Asra presses her lips against the side of my skull. It's such a sweet gesture that it has my body aching from it. I wish I could do the same to her, give her the same kind of affection that she so easily gives to me.

Carefully, I press my skull against the soft skin of her throat and nuzzle there into the warmth she radiates. Her arms come around me tighter, readjusting us both so that I'm wrapped in her as much as I can be.

“Hurt you...” I mumble.

“It's okay. Honestly, you licked up all the blood and sealed the wound so I don't think I'll be getting any kind of infection.”

Her words hardly scratch the surface at making me feel better. I'm horrible. I should bring her back to her village and leave her there where she belongs. She has no place trying to survive this world with a waira who has no control. If I can hardly recognize her through my chaotic bloodlust, who's to say I really won't stop next time?

“Mael, listen to me.” Her voice is soft in my ear. “You didn't hurt me. I'm okay. You stopped yourself, that's all that matters.”

My body shudders again, as if it wants to cry.

That old and ancient part of me, before I'd crossed over into Protheka, it remembers the feeling of such despair that crying had been the only way to relieve such feelings. But now that I'm a waira, I have no way to purge myself like that. All

of these twisted feelings are stuck banging around inside of my heart, dragging me into a misery I never thought were possible.

“Hey,” She shifts under me again. “I know you’re sad, but I’m really okay.”

How does she know that?

Her hand sneaks in between our bodies to rest on my chest, over my heart. Oh, I forgot about that. My transparent heart, always telling on me.

Lifting my head up slightly, I run my eyes over her. She’s dirty and covered in sweat and tears. Impulsively, I lean over and unhinge my jaw, licking at her face to get rid of the salty track marks.

She laughs, turning her head away from me. “Really?”

I follow after her, running my tongue all the way up from her jaw. I bump the other side of her face with the back of my hand, moving it over towards me once more and licking up her dried tears on that side too.

I wish I could kiss her. The desire to burns inside of my chest.

“Oh,” Her fingers splay over my heart. “What are you thinking about?”

“You.”

Her long lashes fan over her cheeks a few times, surprise coloring her face.

“What about me?”

“That I wish I could kiss you.” The words fall out of me before I have a chance to reel them back and think for a second.

I feel so raw that I barely have a filter. This human, this incredible woman has saved me from doing the unthinkable. She’s right. I would’ve tortured myself after I’d come to my senses if I’d actually listened to those dark whispers.

I would've wandered these lands for the rest of time disparaging over the fact that I'd killed someone I cared about. The *only* person I cared about.

Asra rests a hand against the side of my skull, a small smile playing on his lips.

"I like you thinking of me like that."

That stuns me.

"You... do?"

She nods, hooking her hand up around one of my horns and dragged me down closer to her. Her lips press along my brow, trailing all the way over to my temple. I dig my fingers back down into the dirt, desperately wanting to touch her or... something. To reciprocate in some way.

I've never felt like this before. It's the same kind of need that I always feel, yet it's different. I don't want to consume her and tear her apart, I want to touch every part of her, make her gasp for breath but not out of panic.

What is happening to me?

"Mael, I..." She trails off.

"Tell me." I demand. I need to know what she's thinking.

Are we the same? Or have I fallen off the deep end and into insanity?

"Your heart." She finally said.

I shift back far enough to look down. It's a deep dark purple with hints of blood red in it. It's a color I've never seen before.

"What does it mean?" She asks, though her eyes tell me that she has a very good suspicion.

I wish she'd tell me, because I have no idea. I didn't even know our hearts could change color in the first place, let alone what it means.

"Asra..."



“Tell me.” Her hand tightens over my tunic, bunching up the fabric. “Tell me that you want me like I want you.”

My head snaps up to look at her fully. Want me? As in...

I freeze completely, taking her in. Her breathing had calmed down after our struggle earlier, but now it's picked up again. We haven't done anything besides lay here, so why...?

It hits me hard. She wants me. She desires me.

How can she after all I've done?

“No, don't.” Her tone turns sharp. “Don't think like that. Come back to me.”

I pull in a deep breath. “But—”

Asra shakes her head again. “Don't, Mael. I don't care about it. I *want* you. That's all that matters to me. Do you?”

Fuck. This woman. She does things to me that I'd never expected. I could never dream of happening, actually. If I'm honest with her, would it scare her away? If she knew how deeply these feelings went and how much I craved her, would it send her running for the hills back to her village? Back to where she belongs.

It's selfish of me to want to keep her here, trap her in this life with me that is so cruel to her kind—so unforgiving. Yet, here I still am, begging her to stay with me at every chance I get. I would do anything to keep her within my grasp and would tear through anything that thought to stand between us.

That much had been apparent the second those damn dark elves had thought coming around and harassing us had been a smart idea.

If I had enough self control, I'd go back in time and savor killing them. I'd torture them for even suggesting taking Asra away from me and making her some house whore to bear their bastards.

She's *mine*.

I pull my hand from the dirt, not bothering to wipe it off on anything before I'm cupping her face. Her cheek dirties from

my fingers, but neither of us seem to care. She looks at me with those honey colored eyes, staring deep into the pits of me where no one else has gone before.

“Yes.” I whisper, running my thumb over her jaw. “I do, Asra.”

A slow smile breaks across her face.

“Show me.”



## ASRA

**T**here's a fine line between bravery and stupidity. I'm not sure which side I'm on right now, but I don't care.

The feeling of Mael's rough tongue licking up my skin, warming the sensitive spots that made me want to arch into him, has sent a heat between my legs that only he can soothe.

And I desperately want him to.

He stares down at me, assessing, but his chest glows, revealing his true intentions. I don't want to force him, but I can't stand his hesitation. He wants me, but he's afraid to give in, and I want to prove he doesn't have to be.

I pull on him, arching up until my lips brush along the skull where his cheek would be. His breath catches as I plant soft kisses there, showing him how much I want his touch.

"Asra..." My name is a deep, husky rumble, and it only makes the heat between my thighs throb more. He didn't sound like he wanted me to stop. It was more of a quiet demand.

"Mael," I breathe as I guide down his neck, nipping at the fur, and he stiffens.

I pull back to look at him with pinched brows, wondering if I had triggered him. But as soon as there is enough space between us, he slips beneath my jaw, mimicking the same light bites I just gave him.

His teeth carefully graze along my skin, his body tense as he tries not to draw blood. My breath catches, and my back

arches up off the floor as pinpricks of pleasure skitters through my body.

“Oh, Mael,” I gasp.

“Good?” he whispers, his voice tight.

I tighten my hold on him, wrapping a leg around his body so I can pull him closer. “Oh, fuck, yes.”

A dark chuckle tells me that he’s relaxing as he moves lower, finding the juncture where my neck and shoulder meet and the scream that he elicits from me there only encourages him further.

“Oh, right there,” I whimper as he licks the side of my neck, and he growls, dropping himself lower over me.

Mael is pressed fully against me, and yet, I feel like he’s not close enough. I roll my body against him, eager to feel him, and he growls again, louder this time.

“Asra,” he snaps. “Be still.”

I roll my hips against him firmly. “Why?”

He fists the front of my tunic, looming closer as he grinds out, “Because I am about to lose control.”

He pulls the fabric off my body roughly, but luckily, it stays in one piece. The cold barely registers as Mael lifts up to take in my body. My skin flushes as he licks his lips, and I don’t piece together the right words before he runs a finger down chest, tracing toward my belly button. The motion is so light and tantalizing that I start to tremble.

“I can’t get enough of you.” He leans closer, inhaling my scent as he roams over my chest. “I need more. I will always need more..”

I claw at my bra, ripping it away to expose myself to him. “Take your fill,” I beg him.

His chest glows brighter, shifting into a dark shade but not changing colors, but I don’t have time to consider what that means before his tongue runs up one of my breasts, taking all my attention.

Mael doesn't have a human tongue. It's long, thinner, and very rough. And it elicits the most embarrassing moans from me as he runs it over my already erect nipples. He applies a harsh enough pressure that I'm arching up off the floor and gasping, begging him for more.

A deep rumble echoes through the air as he moves to my other nipple, and I realize he's laughing at me, at making me his willing prey.

I know my underwear is soaked through at this point from his ministrations, especially as my nipples throb painfully from the lashing, and the scent must reach him. Mael's head snaps downward as he inhales deeply, and my face flushes as he moves down my torso, looking for the source.

"That smell..." He lands between my thighs, breathing deeply as he buries his face between my legs. "Is mouthwatering." His voice is such a deep grumble that it sounds nothing like him...and it only makes me wetter.

"Take off my pants," I pant, and he looks up at me with a feral expression. A shiver wracks my body and I wonder – for a brief second – what I am even doing right now.

But then Mael's fingers hook around my waistband and all conscious thought leaves my mind. I lift my hips, helping him glide the pants and underwear off my body, and he settles between my legs now that his barriers are out of the way.

I don't expect him to take his time. Mael has proven he is impatient when he wants something, but he moves slowly up my thighs, inhaling and licking the arousal that has spilled down my legs.

I shudder at each soft touch, and when I start to squirm too much, he wraps his arms around my thighs, pinning them so that I can't move and I'm spread open for him.

"I want a taste," he tells me, but there's an almost tentativeness to his voice. *He's afraid to hurt me.*

"Please," I breathe. "Do whatever you want to me, Mael."

He watches for a second more, my hands tugging at my strands as the pressure builds in my core. I'm desperate for a

release, and I wonder if he can tell that.

After a moment, he lowers his mouth to my dripping slit, and his long tongue presses between my folds, moving slowly up to my clit.

“Oh, fuck.” A violent shudder shakes my body, and my body gushes with arousal.

Mael seems to understand that my reaction is good, and he leans in closer, running his tongue up my slit again, slower this time.

“Mael!” I shriek.

His tongue hits my clit and my words turn into indiscernible sounds. I’m a writhing mess, and he flicks over the sensitive pearl, lashing against it until I’m vibrating.

Losing my control, I grab his antlers and start to grind against his tongue. He groans against me, loosening his hold on my hips so that I can ride until I’ve had enough.

I would have thought that a skull would have not been pleasant to grind against, but as it turns out, it provides a better surface to apply enough pressure to chase an orgasm.

“Oh, Mael,” I cry as I feel my climax building. “Oh, fuck. Oh, I’m going to come.”

He swirls his tongue around my clit as I keep riding his face and I scream, his movements sending me over the edge. I swear my soul leaves my body as my orgasm rocks through my body. It’s so intense, especially as Mael keeps lapping at my clit until I’m scrambling away from him.

He blinks, still on his stomach on the floor as I pull away. “Did I do something wrong?”

I shake my head, still trying to catch my breath. I’m embarrassingly gasping for air as I crawl toward him, pushing him over onto his back. He obliges, watching me closely as I straddle him.

“You did everything very, very right.”

His chest shifts colors again, and I realize that he's proud of himself. "You felt good."

I huff out a laugh. "Mael, no one has ever made me feel *that* good."

He reaches up to cup my face. "Then let me do it again."

As tempting as that is, I want to explore his body, too. Instead, I go to his neck, where I was previously interrupted, and kiss down his fur. He rumbles when my teeth scrape against him harshly, enough so that he will feel it, and when I hit the collar of his tunic, I rock off of him.

"Take your clothes off."

He looks between the tunic and me. "But you made them for me."

I smirk. "And now I want them off of you."

Mael sits up, pulling the tunic off of his torso. He lays back down, looking at me expectantly, and I motion to his pants. "Those, too."

He reaches for them slowly, licking his lips. "These?" I nod. "You're sure?"

Grinning, I raise my eyebrows. "Don't tell me you're feeling shy?"

He looks down at his bare torso. "You've seen me without a shirt before, but never without pants."

I crawl closer. "Has anyone seen you without pants?"

Mael chews that over. "No one has seen me the way you do, Asra," he finally says, and warmth spreads through my chest. Despite his brutal exterior, Mael keeps proving how kind and concerned he is underneath.

I lean forward, brushing my lips along his cheek again. I move to where his ear would be, if he had one. "I want to see all of you, Mael. Every inch." A shiver shudders through his frame. "Please. Remove the pants."

His breathing has turned uneven as I pull back, but he does as I ask, sliding off the rest of his clothing. His chest flutters



between a number of colors, and some I recognize – lust, excitement – while there are others I don't. He must be nervous, though, and I intend to show him that he has nothing to fear with me.

I want all of him – monster or not – and I plan to show him that there isn't an inch of him that scares me.



## MAEL

I've never really thought about my clothes. I wore them out of necessity before I ever was capable of thought. It takes a lot of consciousness to realize modesty, but now that someone – especially someone like Asra – is asking me to undress, I think about my clothes differently.

And now that I am bare before her, I find equal parts of me hungry and fearful. I've never felt anything like this before, much like the way that I've never felt so sated before. Drinking Asra filled me in a way I've never been able to. She quenches my bloodlust, and I can't get enough of her as a result.

My eyes track her as she climbs back on top of me, kissing my fur as she descends my body. The light touches make my body shudder, pleasure following each press of her lips, and it isn't until she reaches the base of my torso that I realize it's done something else to me.

Asra doesn't seem surprised by my throbbing erection as she climbs between my legs, though. I ache with a need I don't understand how to fill, my cock leaking as she settles between my thighs and carefully kisses between my legs.

“Asra,” I rasp.

“Let me take care of you,” she coos, and then she fists the base of my shaft.

My head tilts back as skitters of pleasure fill my body. It's unlike anything I've had before, and it takes immense self

control not to grab her as she runs her thumb along the sensitive underside.

But when her soft tongue follows the path, I do jolt upward. Asra giggles, pressing a palm to my stomach and pushing me back until I'm reclined on my elbows. Her eyes hold mine as she lowers her mouth back to the tip, her tongue peeking out and swiping across the slit.

I groan, my whole body tensing, and she smirks before parting her lips to slide around my cock. Her warmth envelopes me, and I realize in that instant that I will never have to worry about my bloodlust again because this – this feeling, this burning need to feel her wrapped around me – is so much more intense. It's the only thing I'm ever going to want.

Asra swallows back half of my length, bobbing her head, and I nearly collapse backward from the sensation. A tight heat curls at my base, and my muscles tense. Involuntarily, I reach out and grab her head, but she doesn't protest as she continues to work me.

My eyes flutter closed as the sensation builds until it's unbearable and with a roar, a release finds me. Heat floods through my body along with a sense of euphoria I've nearly forgotten, and my whole body shakes with the violent claim it has on me.

Asra doesn't let go of me until I've regained control of my body, and only then does she slide off my length, licking me clean.

"Oh, Asra," I groan as I sit up, gripping her waist and pulling her up on top of me. "You are too perfect."

"You liked it?" she asks with a wide grin.

I trail a finger along her swollen lips. "It was incredible."

"Good." She wraps her arms around my neck, settling on my lap as I hold her to me. "I'm not done with you, yet."

"No?"

She shakes her head. “I want to feel you in me...if that’s okay.”

I look around, realizing that anyone could stumble upon us. I nod. “In the cave,” I manage to get out, the need to have more of her already claiming me.

I stand, holding her against my chest with her legs wrapped around me. Her hot center is pressed against me, distracting me as I race back to our cave. The burning need for her pulsates through me and once I make it inside, I press her against the cave wall and bury my face against her neck.

“I want you,” I answer her previous question, licking up her sensitive skin.

“On...on your back,” she gasps, and I do as she says.

I lay back on the pile of furs. Asra’s knees struggle to reach either side of my waist, but she shifts so that her feet are beneath her as she hovers over my body.

I grip her hips, heat lancing through me as she reaches for my cock. I’m stiff for her still and she smirks as she grips me, rubbing me along her. Her wetness drips down my length, and I growl, torn between needing to taste her and feel her.

“Patience,” she whispers, pressing me against her.

I gasp when I feel the tip push inside of her, and Asra tips her head back with a groan. “Oh, fuck, Mael. You’re massive.”

“We...” I can barely think straight as she wiggles against me, a little more sliding inside of her. “We don’t have—”

“No,” she cuts me off. Asra rocks forward onto her knees again, sinking lower. “I want you. You feel fantastic.”

I nod, no longer capable of words as I see that half of my cock has managed to fit inside of her. I can feel her body stretching around me, fitting to take me, and a small part of me wants to slam deep into her. It’s a basal desire, a need to take what I’m hungry for, and now, that is her.

I dig my fingers harder into Asra’s hips, letting her keep going. I will claim her soon enough, but right now, the small

moans coming from her as she slides down my length is enough for me.

“Oh, fuck,” she groans, pressing a hand to her stomach as she takes the last bit, and she squeezes around me violently.

I’m panting as I try to hold onto my restraint, and I have to rip my hands away from her skin before I seriously hurt her. Asra rolls her hips, and I grip the furs, ripping through them as I keep still.

“Mael,” she pants. “Oh, gods.”

She plants her hands against my chest, rising up and slamming down on top of me. My body is shaking, and I let my hips rise to meet hers, her deep groans only working me deeper into a frenzy.

“Oh, shit. I’m going to come.” She looks up at me with a feral glaze over her eyes. “Mael, I’m going to come.”

I slam my hips up faster until she is bouncing on top of me, my fingers searching for something harder to grip to keep myself still. Asra throws her head back with a sharp scream, her body tightening around me, and my fingers find the cave floors, digging through the stone.

She shudders on top of me, and I keep rolling up into her until she leans forward to look at me. “Mael, I want you to take me.”

My palm grinds through the stone beneath me as I search for the last shreds of self restraint. “I’ll hurt you.”

Asra shakes her head. “No, you won’t. I trust you.” She climbs off of me, rolling onto her back and tugging at me. “Come here. Show me what I do to you.”

Trembling, I climb over her. I bury my face into her neck, inhaling her deeply as she wraps her legs around my body. Her slick heat rocks against me, and I bury my hands into the shredded furs under her until I find the stone floor again. I need something to grab onto.

“Put me inside you,” I growl out, my voice turning animalistic as I fight for control.

Asra's fingers glide down my length until she grips the bottom. Slowly, she eases me back inside of her with a sigh. I keep still while she circles her hips, but I know it won't last long.

"Mael," she whimpers, and I'm surprised I don't break then. "Please. I trust you."

I'm about to argue when she shoves my head to the side and bites my neck. I groan deeply, and then, I feel my resolve snap.

One of my hands still digging through the stone floor, the other comes down to grip the underside of her thigh. I shove her leg up, giving me better access as I pull back and drive hard into her.

She screams, and it sends me over the edge. I need to hear her do that again, and I start to slam into her, deep and hard. Her whole body shudders around me, squeezing me tightly, and it's even more incredible than her mouth.

I sit back on my knees, gripping both of her thighs and spreading her open. I watch as I disappear inside of her, heat swarming through me as I drive into her faster.

"Mael!" she screams, and I find I never want to hear another word on her lips. "Oh, fuck, Mael!"

"You are mine," I growl, pulling her harder against me. I slam deep into her, surprised she can take it. "You will always be mine."

She nods, her eyes screwed closed. "Yes!" I thrust harder into her and she yelps. "Yours!"

"That's right, Asra." The pressure is building inside of me again and I can barely see. I'm blinded with the need for her, savoring her gasps and screams. "Mine. All mine. Only mine."

I push all the way inside of her as she cries out louder than before, her body spasming around me as she thrashes. She tightens around me, breaking through the pressure that had been mounting, and my release fills her.

I grunt as I empty out, loving the way her body takes all that I have and when I pull out, I lean down and inhale. Her sweet aroma mixed with my musky scent. There's no denying it now.

She's all mine.





## ASRA

All through the winter, Mael and I gathered the supplies we'd need for our house, talking animatedly and dreaming up everything we could possibly want for our new home. At first, Mael was more standoffish, conceding to me in every design choice, every decision on the layout, every choice of materials, etc.

But somewhere along the lines, he began to get excited too, asking for a large wall with plenty of shelving to display all of his treasured trinkets and wings, a bed big enough for the both of us to lay in comfortably, and a worktable inside so he can have a dedicated space for all of his projects.

It's sweet, watching him become so enraptured with the idea of our house, of the home we're going to build together. He returned home after a hunting trip a few weeks ago, trudging through the knee-high snow winter had dusted across the mountain, with plenty of paper and ink for me to draw up plans.

Winter made it difficult to gather supplies, but naturally, my waira didn't let it stop him. While the world iced over around us, Mael learned to heat stones in a fire to place inside the cave, keeping our shelter above freezing and leaving me wrapped in dae skin upon dae skin while he gathered lumber and food for us.

Planning for our house has taken up the majority of my time, the two of us spending long evenings wrapped around each other, pouring over our plans and debating the merits of

different window placements and the number of rooms we should have. When my mind gets too tired to look at the black lines we've drawn across the paper, I've started stitching together new clothes for Mael.

He's a good sport about it, letting me take his measurements and fuss over piecing together fabrics, trying on what I ask him to, and holding still when I add pins to pieces I'm working on. I smile to myself as I pull the needle and thread through the dark fabric pooling in my hands, adding another stitch to the dark tunic I'm working on for him.

The snow melted about two weeks ago now, and the sharpness of frost in the air gave way to the gentle, sweet smell of new grass shoots and blooming life. The bite in the air has yet to subside, but the soil has warmed enough for me to begin planting seeds in the clearing we've chosen for our house. Come summer, we'll have a blooming garden I can feed myself from- at least, that's what I hope.

A shadow falls across the cave, obscuring my vision and drawing my attention up to the mouth of the cave. Mael drops the heavy logs he hauled up the face of the cliff with a loud thud, straightening up to his full height as he turns to look at me.

The new trousers and tunic I made for him fit perfectly. The tailored, dark fabric hugs closely to the rippling muscles beneath them, the cuffs of his shirt rolled up above his elbows and the hem of the trousers brushing against his ankles.

He looks like an angel of death, huge and imposing and impossibly beautiful. A blush creeps up my neck as I realize I've been staring at him, and I look down at the fabric in my hands, suddenly feeling uncharacteristically shy.

"Now all that's left are the tools," Mael rumbles in lieu of a greeting as he comes into the cave, leaning down to nuzzle the tip of his snout into the crook of my neck, his tongue sliding from between his teeth to glide gently along the bare skin of my collarbone.

A delicious shudder rolls through me at the contact, and I lean into his touch before he pulls away. Mael huffs as he

sniffs at the air, the glowing light around his heart turning to a deep violet as he catches wind of my changing scent.

“The tools can wait,” he says throatily as he leans back down into me. I laugh as his tongue slides across my neck again, his arms hooking around my waist and beneath my knees to pick me up and carry me to our bed.

“Just because my scent gives me away doesn’t mean you always need to *do* something about it, you know,” I tease gently as Mael sets me down on top of the dae skin.

“And what if I want to do something about it?” he growls as looms above me, his fingers edging toward the waistband of my pants. I swat his hands away playfully with a giggle, putting on my best snooty face.

“Then you’ll have to wait,” I rib, earning another growl from Mael.

“Denying me is a dangerous game, little human,” he rumbles, but specks of pale yellow dot through the violet light shining through his tunic, giving away the humor he finds in our game.

“Good thing I like danger,” I retort, pushing off of the bed.

“I think I’m beginning to understand that,” Mael replies with another huff of laughter. I shoot him a grin as I pick up the tunic I’ve been working on, holding it up for him to see.

“What do you think?” I ask. I know I’m fishing for a compliment, but that’s the nice thing about Mael- he’s always quick with a compliment, and he is always willing to give me what I want so long as he knows what it is I need.

“I like it,” he replies, taking the fabric in his hands and feeling across it. “You don’t have to keep stitching together scraps, if you don’t want to. I can get you bolts of it from the village when I retrieve the tools we need.”

I shrug, setting aside the tunic and retrieving the list of supplies we still need and can’t make for ourselves.

“Bolts of fabric won’t be easy to find, you’d have to go into somebody’s home to find those, and I don’t think we’ve

practiced enough for you to manage that just yet without hurting somebody,” I reply gently. He’s been working so hard at controlling his bloodlust, and while I’m confident that he’s reached a point where he’d never hurt me, I can’t say the same for other people.

As excited as I am to finally begin working on our house, I don’t think anyone needs to die so we can have the chance to complete it.

“And if I need to go into a house to find the tools we need?” Mael replies, the violet pulsing around his heart deepening into black.

“You won’t,” I reassure him, reaching up to caress the side of his skull gently. “I know you won’t hurt anyone. All of the tools we need will be kept in a barn or a shed, and if you time it correctly, you won’t even see anyone.”

I hate that he feels so worried about this trip, but I also can’t help but feel a swell of pride. He’s come so far from the monster I met that day in the woods. Sure, he’s still the same in many ways, and I wouldn’t change that for the world, but in these past few months I’ve come to see a much more tender, gentler side to him.

Mael truly doesn’t want to hurt anyone, not without reason. I’m suddenly overtaken with my feelings for him, and I throw my arms around him, nuzzling my head into his chest.

Despite all of Mael’s terrifying strength and speed, despite his more primal nature, I think I’m beginning to fall in love with him. I can’t imagine being without him, being anywhere other than by his side.

I’ve never been in love before, and the thought terrifies me. Sure, Cain and I had seen each other for a while, but I never felt anything for him that’s remotely comparable to the way I feel with Mael. Mael understands pieces of me that even I can’t wrap my head around, he sees me and protects me in ways I’ve never known.

What if I truly am in love with him? Does he feel the same way?

I know he cares for me and keeps me safe, but is he even capable of love?

*Of course, he is,* I chide myself immediately after the thought crosses my mind. But still, the doubt lingers. Mael's large hand skates gently down my spine as he returns my embrace, falling to cup my backside and making me jump as I pull away.

Mael's heart is a pale shade of yellow as he huffs a laugh, and I roll my eyes at him, trying and failing to suppress my own smile. Waira or not, men are all the same.

"Here's the list of tools you're going to need," I tell him in a teasingly demanding tone. "Go on before it's too dark to see, I want to make sure you're home before tomorrow night."

"It's never too dark for me to see," he responds confidently, earning another laugh from me. Despite his prideful words, however, he accepts the list, lapping his tongue briefly against the side of my jaw.

"I'll be back soon, little human," Mael promises as he disappears out of the mouth of the cave and over the cliffside. I smile after him, unable to shake the joy radiating in my chest even long after he's disappeared.

I know that it's strange, and probably goes against every law that nature has, but I've never felt safer than I do with Mael. He's a predator, a monster that parents warn their children about before bed, and yet...

Yet I know that I'm safe and cared for here, with him. I sigh, shaking my head and smiling, suddenly feeling extremely silly. I never would have imagined that this is what my life would turn into, but I couldn't be happier.

Sure, I miss my little village sometimes, but I know if I were to leave and go back there, I'd never truly be happy without Mael, not after everything we've been through together.

The urge to give him some token of my affection is suddenly overwhelming. He's given me more than I know how to tell him, he's even building a house for me just because I

mentioned it'd be more comfortable. The least I could do is make something for him, too.

Ideas whirl through my head as I move about the cave, gathering supplies. Mael loves beautiful things, and has a large collection of beads he's made from animal bones. Maybe I'll make him a new tunic, with beads along the cuffs and necklines just for fun.

My smile grows as I think about the way he'd look in something so nice, and I start rifling through the piles of old, torn clothes in the corner of the cave. I pull them out to inspect them, looking for the right colors and sizes, when I spot something that makes my heart stop in my chest.

I grab the scrap of fabric, dragging it closer to the light to get a better look, and my stomach flips.

It's the tunic Clay was wearing the day he disappeared.

And it has massive, blood-stained claw marks running right down the chest.





## MAEL

I've always liked spring.

The way the snow smells as it melts, the way the world seems to wake up from a long slumber, little creatures rustling about in their homes and venturing out into the reborn world. I used to enjoy spring because it was the best time to hunt- all those little younglings straying too far from their parents, the forest becoming rife with prey for the picking.

As I grew older, wiser, I began to appreciate spring in different ways. The birds would return to the woods, leaving feathers trailing behind them. Flowers would bloom, calling in all manner of beautiful, winged creatures to observe.

Each year in spring, my collection would grow, something new and interesting never failing to present itself while I hunted or wandered. Just last year, I was able to complete the pair of anserinae wings that now sit on a rocky ledge in my cave, the silky white feathers outstretched exactly as they are in flight.

This spring, however, feels different than all of the springs past. Better.

This spring, as the earth becomes new and comes alive again, I feel that I am becoming new with it. Asra has breathed a life into me I didn't know could exist among my kind. The only thing I felt before her was a gnawing, insatiable hunger.

I would occasionally get a reprieve from my starvation in the form of anger, or a sudden loneliness that I never knew how to name, but I never knew peace. Not even for a second.

And then came my little human, so full of life and laughter. She nurtured the wonder that had taken root in me so many years ago, showed me the depth that comes with trying to name and place different emotions, and even elicited emotions I never knew I could experience.

Humans, along with other beings of higher consciousness, always held a special interest for me. Eating them seemed to make things grow inside me, thoughts and feelings and desires springing from the places their bodies sated my hunger. I had assumed, when I found Asra, that devouring her would hold a similar kind of appeal.

Even from the jump, however, Asra was different. It wasn't just the way that she seemed to learn faster than any human I'd ever encountered, or even in how quickly her fear of me subsided. While the tenacity of her spirit and her sharp wit were alluring, it was her scent that truly set her apart.

Humans, dark elves, orcs, all of the creatures I've consumed have had varying scents. The scent of each species is vastly different to that of others, and even smaller idiosyncrasies made themselves known, the scent changing slightly between each individual member of the species.

But Asra's scent has always been unlike anything else. No matter how differently a being smelled from others, there was always an underlying scent that drove me over the edge: they always smelled like food.

I've tried for months to riddle out why Asra's scent was so different, why it was at least marginally easier to keep myself from hurting and consuming her, and it wasn't until she said something on a wintery night in my cave that things finally fell into place.

Asra doesn't smell like food- she smells like *medicine*. I have less desire to gorge myself on her because there is something about her scent that indicates she is not to be eaten, she is meant to heal. To repair.

Needless to say, this year I feel no draw to collect anything new or beautiful to my burgeoning collection. Not when I already have Asra; she is the most beautiful, interesting thing I

could possibly hope to keep in my home. Nothing could top her.

My hand wanders up to my chest, trying to touch the strange emotion I feel stirring there as I think about my little human. White light plays from beneath my fingertips as they rest on my chest.

Strange. I've never seen that color before.

I wish that Asra were here to help me riddle out what this newest color means. The feeling it's attached to is unlike anything I've ever felt before- both feather-light and impossibly heavy, sitting and swirling in my chest in such a way that my fingers itch with the desire to feel Asra's smooth skin beneath them.

No amount of closeness to her seems to be enough, no amount of laughing and kissing and licking seems to feel completely sating. I'm familiar with hunger, with longing, and this emotion feels both similar and quite the opposite all at the same time.

I hunger for more of her, yet in many other ways, her mere presence completely satisfies me. I feel... at home.

A sudden flash of color catches my eye, pulling me from my thoughts about Asra. I sniff at the air in the direction of the bright yellow, memories of the dark elves that tried to take her from me playing in my mind.

Is it a trap? A trick? Would more of the dark elves come back to hunt us down, to steal her away from me?

I ease soundlessly through the forest growths, zeroing in on the yellow peeking from between the trees. I don't smell anything out of place. The animals of the woods don't alert me to any danger, either.

As I reach the edge of the clearing, the speck of yellow comes into full view, and the wound muscles in my body relax. Tiny yellow wildflowers spring up from the ground, the entire field covered in them. The grass and flowers are tall, nearly reaching my waist as I wade through them.

A part of me wants to delay my trip into the village, if only to see what winged creatures might happen by this meadow, but I resist the urge and turn back toward my path. The tools come first- Asra has already had to endure a mountainous winter without a proper human house, and I don't want to make her wait any longer to be comfortable.

Twigs snap beneath my feet as I walk, the growing woods sounding more and more alive with every step I take. There was a time when the creatures inhabiting these woods would fall silent any time I was near, recognizing me as the predator I am, but now they seem to go about their daily activities as if I'm not here at all.

Perhaps they can also sense the difference Asra has made in me. Perhaps they don't feel they have to live in fear any longer.

It doesn't take me long traversing the craggy mountain ridge to spot the village Asra and I have discussed. It's on the other side of the mountain from where her humans have set up their encampment, surrounded by rolling fields of crops and shorn forest.

The dark elves that live there seem to be an exceptionally quiet bunch, only keeping a few humans to do the worst of the hard labor. I settle onto my haunches, pressing my back against the mountainside as I perch on a partially hidden rock, watching the village go about its daily routine.

Just as Asra had predicted, it seems that the tools the dark elves keep for building their village or tending their land are stowed away in larger, more open structures, similar to a house but seeming far less comfortable. Barns, she called them.

The sun begins its descent toward the horizon, shadows growing longer around me as I watch the townsfolk go about their business. A few of the dark elves crack whips at or on the humans, the humans' shrill cries ringing out in the dying light.

I suppress a snarl as I watch, thinking about Asra each time I see a human face screwed up and contorted in agony. Is this the fate she would have befallen had I not taken her? I know enough of these lands to know that a band of humans is

exceedingly rare, even more so when there is no dark elf presiding over them.

Would those dark elves in the woods have done this to her? Or done worse?

Rage sweeps through me, violent bloodlust swelling rapidly in my stomach. The feeling nearly propels me down the side of the mountain and into the town, intent on destroying those who may threaten or harm my little human, but I stifle it, tamping down the violent emotion.

Asra knew there would be dark elves here, we had discussed as much, and still she asked me not to harm them. It is difficult to fathom why she would find these creatures fit for mercy of any kind, but I promised her I would control myself.

We've practiced, and I won't let her hard work, *our* hard work, go to waste.

As night begins to fall steadily, my thoughts turn back to Asra, as they always seem to. Waira are not social or tribal creatures, like all of the others on this planet seem to be. We do not crave community or closeness. In fact, it seems that any kind of close proximity between members of my kind only ends in bloodshed.

Even with this in mind, however, I've never heard of a phenomenon among the waira that is remotely similar to what has developed between Asra and I. Humans, just like any other beings, are seen only as food.

Waira have no females, or at least not any that I've come across. I'm not entirely sure why, but at the very least I'm certain that it must be related to our lack of a need to reproduce. I, like all other waira, was not born of a similar creature, but was made on the day I consumed my brother.

Perhaps we have no need of females for that simple fact, or maybe the cosmos simply levels this life out as punishment against those who would consume life rather than create it. I don't know, but I do know that what has come of Asra and I's relationship is unlike anything that has ever existed before.

I crave Asra constantly, despite feeling more whole with her than I ever have before. I can no longer imagine a world without my little human in it, guiding me, touching me. I want her to stay, which is the only reason I have shown enough restraint to try and procure these tools for us without harming others, or procure these tools at all.

As twilight falls, and the village and its denizens seem to go to sleep, I creep down the cliffside, one single, chilling thought echoing hollowly in my head the whole way.

I want her to stay- but does she want to stay, too?



## ASRA

**M**y hands shake violently as I hold what remains of my brother's tunic. I stare at the scrap of fabric, my vision blurring as tears well in my eyes and slip down my cheeks in searing trails.

Try as I might to come up with some explanation, any explanation to excuse this finding, I come up with nothing.

My brother was here, in this cave. He *died* in this cave.

Mael killed him.

Brown, aged blood flakes around the deep gouges in the fabric, a gruesome reminder of the end my sweet baby brother must have met. Bile crawls up my throat as I release the fabric, Clay's tunic fluttering to the ground as I rush to the mouth of the cave, throwing up over the edge of the cliff.

I heave for what feels like hours, the tears never slowing, my body shaking violently as it switches between shuddering expulsions and wracking sobs. I slept in the cave my brother died in. I slept with the monster that killed him, that ate him.

I was falling in love with my brother's murderer.

The thought makes me heave again, but nothing comes out, my stomach thoroughly emptied of its meager contents. I bring a shaky hand to my mouth, wiping the sour bile and pooling saliva from my lips as I take a shuddering breath.

I can't stay here.



I'd told Mael about my brother, about my village, and he never said anything. He let me suffer, let me believe that Clay might still be out there, all the while knowing that he'd killed him. Mael let me start to fall for him, care for him; he'd taken me to his bed, all while knowing that he'd killed the only family I had left.

Is that why he didn't kill me? Why he wanted to keep me?

I thought maybe he cared about me, was beginning to love me, and that's why he tried so hard to keep me safe and happy. Is it possible that the only reason he felt a draw to me was because he'd eaten Clay, and by some warped twist of fate, inherited his affection for me?

A sudden burst of anger sweeps through me, drowning the heartache and despair that was pulsing through me mere seconds ago. It doesn't matter why he tried to keep me safe, or if he cared about me or not. He killed my brother. Mael could never have really cared about me at all, if he was capable of hiding such a thing from me.

I succumb to the dark emotion, finding the fury easier to stomach than the grief. Fuck him. He's a murderer, a monster. I could never love Clay's killer- I won't let myself. I'll sooner die.

My resolve hardens with every passing second, and I push myself to my feet, rushing back into the cave and trying to avoid looking at Clay's shredded tunic. I need to leave, to go home.

It was stupid of me to let myself think that this could ever be my home, that I could ever be happy living in some dingy cave with a terrifying monster. I hate Mael, I hate him. I abandoned Cecilia and Grim, the only people left on this stupid planet that ever cared about me, because I was tricked into thinking I could be happy here.

My hands tremble with rage as I shove the last of the dried fruits and meats into a satchel, throwing it over my shoulder. I never belonged here. I was never meant to fall for Mael, I was only ever supposed to be his next meal.

Only someone as lonely and sad as me could forget that.

I peer down the edge of the cliff face, trying to soothe my racing mind as I'm confronted with this next challenge. The cliff is steep, steeper than any human would usually dare try to climb, but I don't have a choice. I can't be here when Mael gets back, can't look him in the eyes after knowing how many different ways he's hurt me.

Bits of rock and other debris rain down around me as I fumble down the cliffside, moving far slower than Mael ever had while he was carrying me. My fingers ache from the strain of holding me up, but I feel about for my next handhold, refusing to let my body give out on me.

I have to get away, I have to be gone before he gets back.

My tired muscles scream against the strain as I slowly make my way down the cliff, but the aching of my heart quickly drowns out the pain in my body. Fresh tears begin to well in my eyes as I reach the ground, craning my neck up to take one last look at the cave I've lived in with Mael for months now.

*It was never your home*, I remind myself quietly. *There's no use in being sad about leaving*. I suck in a deep breath, steeling myself as I turn away from the cliff, and break into a sprint, pushing through the forest in the direction of my village.

The entire way to the village, my heart is in my throat. I scan the ground furiously for any sign of tracks that aren't normal for these woods, any sign that I might run into Mael or Nechtan or any of the other waira during my escape, but I find none.

It makes sense, of course- Mael shouldn't even be on his way home at this point, so I shouldn't be so worried about being caught red-handed fleeing from him, but I'm worried about it nonetheless.

*Not home*, I scold myself mentally. *That cave was not your home. It was his den*.

After what feels like an eternity, I catch a glimpse of smoke through the dense treetops, the dark gray marks scarring the blue sky. I must have gotten off course, somehow, so I veer further west, pushing myself to move faster as I approach my village.

“STOP!” A gruff, too-close voice shouts. I nearly fall trying to obey the command, realizing as I skid to a halt that I’m only a couple dozen yards from the gates.

*I guess the camouflage is serving its purpose*, I think to myself as I begin to recognize the strong, wide pillars of wood through the different leaves and twigs sewn around them.

The pride I feel only lasts a second, however, before it’s replaced with fear. The men posted along the tops of the gate are armed with crossbows, and they’re all pointed directly at me.

“It’s me!” I cry out, throwing my hands in the air. Panic begins to grip me as I realize that my words have had no effect on the men, their crossbows still set squarely on me. Maybe I’ve been gone for too long, maybe they don’t recognize me. Is it possible that no one would know me anymore, even if I’ve only been away for a few months?

“Asra! My name is Asra! I came back!” I shout again, trying and failing to keep my voice steady. How ironic, for me to flee Mael thinking I would be safer at the village, only to be shot down before I ever make it inside.

“Hold your fire!” A familiar voice shouts. The top of a man’s balding head pushes through the throng of armed guards, Grim’s face appearing over the side of the wall. My heart squeezes painfully as our eyes lock. I didn’t realize how much I missed him until he was standing in front of me.

“OPEN THE GATES!” Grim roars, and the men around him spring into action as he disappears. My hands fall back to my sides as the massive door to the gates yawn open in front of me, Cecilia darting out from behind them, wet tracks already marking her rosy cheeks.

I barely have time to brace myself before the plump older woman is on me, wrapping me into a bone crushing hug as she sobs.

“You came back,” Cecilia chokes out as I wrap my arms around her, returning her hug with the same level of ferocity and burying my face into her shoulder. Grim’s cane thunks wildly against the ground as he moves as quickly as he can toward the two of us, pulling us both tightly against his chest.

“You’re alive,” he breathes into the top of my head. Wrapped in the embrace of the two people I’ve always felt safe with, I come apart at the seams, the tears coming hard and fast as I let out a shuddering sob.

We stand like that for a while, the two of them holding me as I cry. I’m sure that, to them, I look like the picture of a relieved, rescued woman who has battled her way home, and is lamenting for all of the time I’ve lost in the village.

In some ways, I am, but the longer I cry, the more I realize that my tears aren’t from joy or relief to finally be safe again. No, I’m crying because I know what this means. I’ve returned back to the village, turned my back on Mael. I’ll have to explain what’s happened to my brother, where I’ve been.

The finality of my choice sits heavily in my chest, spurring forward more tears. When I left that cave on the cliffside, I’d felt so sure. I thought I hated Mael, that I could never even look at him again.

But now, all I can think about is the fact that he’ll be returning to an empty cave, unsure of where I’ve gone or what’s happened to me. I’ll never see the gentle, ever-changing glow of his heart again, never feel the smooth bone of his skull nuzzle into my neck again, never feel his massive hands wrap around my waist protectively.

I left him, and he may never even realize why.

My tears begin to subside, whether from shock or my body simply having nothing left to give. Cecilia and Grim usher me inside the walls, the gates thudding shut behind us with an added sense of finality that echoes between my ears.

It's like I'm moving underwater, or looking through a hazy eyeglass. Everything seems far away, unrecognizable and yet familiar all at once. Before I know it, a crowd has gathered. I spot Cain's face, among others that I recognize, but they're all surrounded by new ones, hesitant ones.

Our numbers have grown substantially in my time away. It should make me happy, to see all of the properly built houses and functioning pieces of our little safe haven, but I only feel empty. I'm not sure any of this can mean anything, knowing what's become of Clay and what I've done to my waira by leaving. Grim begins firing off questions the moment we're within the gates, either unaware of the storm raging inside me or too concerned to notice.

"Did you find Clay? What happened out there? Were you captured?"

"Clay's dead," I respond flatly, my voice sounding hollow even to my own ears. Cecilia whimpers at my blunt response, squeezing my arm tighter. I'm vaguely aware of the swarm of villagers trailing behind us eavesdropping, but I can't find it in me to care.

"Dead?" Grim echoes, the grief evident in his voice. We all suspected, even assumed, that my little brother would never return home, but being faced with that reality is still a blow.

"The wai- manaha, killed him" I force out, refusing to look either of them in the face.

"Heavens," Cecilia whispers. "They're... the manaha are real?"

I simply nod, not trusting myself with words. This feels like a betrayal of the deepest kind, somehow. It's the truth, that Clay was killed and eaten by a waira, *my* waira, but nonetheless, it feels as if I'm sentencing Mael to death, revealing some horrible tidbit that will seal his fate.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Grim wave away the procession of people that has formed behind us, but it's too late. They've heard more than enough, and the whispers have

already begun. At this rate, the entire settlement will know of the manaha and my brother's fate before sunset.

Cecilia ushers me inside the home that was built for her and Grim, shutting the door tightly behind the three of us and leading me to a chair beside the fire. She busies herself immediately with making stew, while Grim settles quietly in the chair beside me, offering me nothing but companionable silence.

I know I should be happy to be home, I should feel safe and seen and protected, but I don't. Looking around at Cecilia and Grim's cozy home, what was once *my* home, all I can think about is the home Mael and I were going to build with each other.

I modeled the plans for our fireplace after the very one I'm staring into now. My chest tightens as I stare at the dancing flames, images of Mael returning to an empty cave playing over and over in my mind, torturing me.

I've betrayed him. He may have betrayed me first, but he didn't know any better, he couldn't have possibly realized that the man he ate was my brother, especially before he even knew me. I can't escape the sinking feeling that I've made a terrible mistake by not at least saying goodbye.

In some sick way, I want him to be sad that I'm gone, to worry about what's happened to me. A part of me believes he will, but another part of me wonders if that's the truth. He's still so new to emotions, to feeling things. I don't even know if it's possible for him to miss me the way that I miss him.

Stew is shoved in front of me, Cecilia and Grim speaking distantly as I respond by pure muscle memory, shoveling food into my mouth. It's tasteless, all of my focus zeroing in on the questions I can't seem to escape.

Where is Mael? What is he doing right now?

Will he even miss me?



## MAEL

The tools clunk together noisily in the burlap sack as I scale back up the cliffside, the bag bumping against my back with my every movement. I had expected to run into more trouble or resistance when taking the tools from the small village barn, but just like Asra had predicted, everything went seamlessly.

And now I can return home to my little human.

Thoughts of Asra's delight, the admiration that will shine on her face when I tell her I didn't harm a single soul during my endeavor, pushes me faster up the face of the cliff. When I finally descended into the village after sunset, the overwhelming scent of the tortured humans' blood and the reek of nearby life nearly overwhelmed me.

Thinking back to Asra, the countless nights we spent preparing and practicing together using dae blood, was the only thing that kept me in control of my urges. Pride swells in my chest as I reach the top of the cliff and break into a jog, weaving between the trees.

I did it. I didn't kill anyone.

Asra has truly changed me.

I'm tempted to try and cut my route short, scaling mountainous terrain and cliffs to arrive home even just a few minutes faster to share the news with Asra, but I decide against it. For all my little human has given me, shown me about the world and myself, I want to bring back something for her as well.



Due to my brisk pace, I reach the clearing faster than I expect, the tall stalks of the wildflowers swaying gently in the moonlight. I take my time finding the most beautiful of the vibrant yellow buds, plucking my favorites to bring back for Asra.

I've grown fond of beautiful things, but I never imagined how gratifying it would be to have someone to share them with.

Luminescent pillas float through the air on dainty, gently glowing green wings, the delicate yellow veining that webs through them glimmering in the moonlight as they flit from flower to flower. Lumiolas dance at the edge of the clearing, their blinking lights looking almost otherworldly as they bob between the dark forest's trees.

A pilla flies just in front of my face on its journey to another wildflower, and for a moment, I'm tempted to snatch it out of the air. I can imagine myself ripping off its wings and adding it to my collection, or offering it to Asra as another gift, but I stop myself.

At one time, I might not have had the same restraint that I do now, but with Asra at my side, I've found I no longer take pleasure in killing things. I used to go out of my way to kill things I found beautiful, things that I wanted to own and keep forever, but now I want the beautiful things to live, to be free.

Perhaps I see Asra in all of the beautiful things I would have once slaughtered, or maybe she's just changed me even more thoroughly than I realized. Either way, it doesn't really matter. Despite my monstrous nature and the hunger that still slithers between my bones, I am better than I once was. Happier.

Clutching the bouquet of wildflowers, I take a deep breath, sparing one last, long look at the meadow before turning back to the path that will lead me home. I'm going to bring Asra back here, so she may also revel in this small slice of paradise that the forest has to offer.

The rest of the trip passes easily, my strides growing longer and my steps getting faster as I draw closer to the cave.

Excitement grips me as the cliffside comes into view in the distance, snatches of the familiar, jagged rock peeking from between the trees. Asra is there, waiting for me.

I've only been gone for two days, and yet I already miss her terribly. How strange, to miss something so thoroughly in such a short absence.

Breaking through the treeline, I readjust the bag on my back, readying to begin my climb, when my stomach turns. Something is wrong. Something smells... different.

As soon as I realize what my senses are telling me, fear begins to pulse through me, the dimly glowing light of my heart turning to a tumultuous black.

Asra's scent is stale.

I leap up onto the side of the cliff, scaling the craggy rock wall faster than I ever have before. I know what my senses are telling me, and I've never been wrong, but I still can't bring myself to believe it. It can't be true, she must be here!

I throw myself over the ledge of the top of the cliff, landing in a crouch before bringing myself up to my full height and inhaling deeply as I look into the cave. Her scent is fading by the minute, the whipping mountain winds chipping away at her lingering scent with every gust.

She's not here.

An enraged roar slips through my lips, shaking the surrounding mountains and sending flocks of birds rocketing into the sky. I tear into the cave, looking for any sign of my little human, any clue to where she would have gone.

Did Nechtan take her? Did another waira? She couldn't have possibly made it down the cliff by herself in such windy conditions!

I inhale again, the black of my heart turning to a deep crimson as fury takes root further. I'll kill Nechtan. I'll kill them all if Asra befall absolutely any harm.

Finding only the lingering traces of my scent and Asra's, I rule out any interference from other waira. The red begins to

take on black edges as I scramble to try and make sense of this. If Asra was not taken by Nechtan or another waira, why isn't she here?

Her quickly fading scent indicates that she hasn't been in the cave for at least several hours, probably longer. Why would she have left? There's no trace of any other scent besides ours, no humans or dark elves to speak of.

I turn in useless circles as I look around at the cave, grappling with the evidence laid out before me. She wouldn't just leave, I know she wouldn't. She said she wanted to stay.

Even as the thoughts cross my mind, I realize that there's more that's wrong, different, with my cave since I last left, even besides Asra's disappearance and her stale scent.

Everything seems out of place, as though someone ripped through our belongings. Sacks that we kept food in are upended and empty, thrown haphazardly across the stone floor. One of the daggers I kept from a more recent kill is missing, and the piles of clothing that Asra had shoved against the cave walls are scattered about.

I allow my eyes to wander across the cave, trying to make sense of what else could be missing or out of place, when I stop short. Only one space on the floor is clear of the debris, a nearly perfect circle of bare cave floor, save for a rumpled tunic in its center.

Something in the back of my mind begins to itch as I stare at the tunic, and I cross to it, picking it up and inspecting the scrap of fabric. It seems peculiar that this would be set aside from everything else.

I sniff at the fabric cautiously, detecting Asra's scent mingled with another, vaguely similar scent, although this one is much older. As I try to make sense of why their scents seem so intertwined, something clicks in my mind, and my stomach flips as dread begins to creep in.

The upended bags of food, the missing dagger, Asra's disappearance. It all makes sense now.

This was the tunic of the man I'd taken shortly before finding Asra. He'd been tromping along with a small group of noisy, clumsy humans.

Memories of the long winter nights I spent with Asra come rushing back as I stare at the tunic. The stories of her village, of her family, of her younger brother all play at once, her voice overlapping on itself as the realization hits me so hard it nearly brings me to my knees.

Asra was out in the woods looking for her brother Clay the night that I found her, who had disappeared earlier that same day- the same day that I brought this man back to my cave.

I took Clay.

Asra's beloved younger brother was my latest victim, the one I had brought to my cave just before I met Asra.

I let out a string of curses under my breath, too many emotions warring within me for me to try and make sense of them. I drop the tunic as I turn back toward the mouth of the cave, letting out a howl.

She left. Asra left after she found Clay's tunic among my belongings. Perhaps I am the monster this world thinks of me as. Asra is the most precious thing in the world to me, and I've hurt her in ways that could never be forgiven.

I took her last surviving family member from her, stole him away in the night. I was too stupid to realize or understand that when she was telling me about her brother, about her grief, that *I* was the cause of her misery.

And then she found his tunic here, among my belongings, in my cave, after everything that she's told me, everything that we've been through together.

Without thinking, I launch myself over the cliff beyond the mouth of my cave, digging my claws into the rock face to slow my descent only enough that I won't kill or grievously injure myself. The second my feet hit the ground, I take off running, my heart and mind thundering wildly in time with my footfalls.

After learning of this unintentional betrayal, there's only one place Asra would go- so that's where I'm going, too.



**ASRA**

RAGE AND HORROR. THAT'S ALL I REMEMBER AS I'M  
SHAKEN FROM MY NIGHTMARES.

The remnants of Clay, screaming out to me as a clawed hand slices through the delicate skin at his neck, chills me to the bone. Blood had poured down his body, rivers of it that had been lapped up by a long, skilled tongue. An evil grin splitting over a familiar face as a dark laugh rumbles.

It isn't real. That's what I have to tell myself. It's only a nightmare.

But gods, does it feel like a memory.

Tears leak down my cheeks as I run my hand over the soft blanket curled around my body. The chill still clings to my bones, even though it's warm in the room. It feels like it's only been three seconds since I'd last seen Mael, waiting for him to come back to the cave so we could head back over to the homestead.

I'd been so happy and then devastation had hit me harder. The betrayal tastes bitter in my mouth, vile as my stomach clenches with anxiety and distress.

How.

How could I fall in love with my brother's killer?

How could I do that to Clay?

Sobs creep up my throat, threatening to split me in half. I wrap my arms around my body, holding myself tight enough to hurt.



It isn't his fault, Mael's, but the blame is still on him. He still destroyed my life, even if he hadn't meant to. The pain... the absolute anguish that I feel... it's all because of him.

Why? Out of everyone in that party, why did Mael choose my brother?

Shouts from outside startle me into sitting up. From out the window, I can see others rushing past Grim and Cecilia's house with torches and weapons brandished in their hands. Hardly any of them are properly dressed, all clear signs that someone had alerted our village of a threat.

Scrambling out of bed, I grab my coat and shove my feet quickly into shoes before heading right out the door. It isn't far ahead of me that I can see a crowd gathering, forming around something as they angrily shout.

What's happening?

My first thought is dark elves. Having seen them wandering around the forest, it wouldn't surprise me if a couple of them had been bold enough to see our village and think of it as an opportune moment to act on.

How wrong they'd be to stumble onto our village, if that were the case.

What I'm not expecting as I approach, is to see a pair of familiar horns towering over the heads of even the tallest men.

My heart lurches.

*Mael.*

"Get back, beast!" Someone shouts.

"Skewer it up! We'll use it to show the others not to come near our village again!" Someone else commands.

There's a rounding set of cheers that scatter throughout the crowd. Torches are held high, anger reverberating throughout the many mouths openly hurling insults at the waira. Fear shouts through me, seeing those weapons raised up and pointed forward.

No...

I push my way through them. I have no idea what could possibly kill a waira, but I'm not about to let any of us find out.

"Wait," Mael's familiar voice says. "I'm not here to harm any of you. I'm looking for—"

"Shut up, you disgusting beast!"

*Shit.*

Elbowing through to the front of the circle formed around him, I see Mael standing with his arms raised in defense. There are cuts along his forearms, some of them bleeding, some of them already starting to heal.

He surveys the crowd around him cautiously, his chest a deep blue color that has my heart hurting just seeing it. I've never seen him this upset before.

"Wait," he says again.

Someone jabs at him with a crowbar, nearly catching him in the wrist with it. Stumbling forward, I hold out my hands.

"Stop!"

"Asra?" A hand tries to grab me—Grim. "Get back here!"

I shake my head at him and back myself up to Mael. "Stop, he hasn't done anything."

"That thing killed half our search party!"

"It ate innocent people!"

"You're really going to protect a manaha?"

I try to pick out the voices in the crowd shouting at me, but all of their faces are blurring together under the torch light.

What I do hear is Mael's soft, "Asra,"

I force myself not to turn around. I can't. Not yet.

"Listen to me." I focus back on the crowd. "He isn't a manaha. He's called a waira. Yes, I know, they do eat people. But that's not all they eat. They eat many things that don't include any of us. They can't help it."

“Are you listening to yourself?” Someone pushes through the crowd, coming to the front—David, now that I can see his face more clearly up close. “I saw those things eat our entire party! I saw it with my own two eyes!”

“I know,” I swallow back the bile in the back of my throat. Clay’s bloody shirt flashing through my mind. “And I’m sorry you had to see that. But, they can’t help it. They’re compelled —”

“All the more reason to kill them.” David scowls over my shoulder, glaring at Mael. “Or it’ll kill more of us.”

Behind me, Mael sighs. “I haven’t killed any of you.”

Whipping around, I turn to face him. I’m sure the disbelief is evident in my face because he looks down at me with those glowing orbs and that thrumming blue in his chest.

“I haven’t.”

My lips part to accuse me of lying but he causes me to stumble my words when his hands pull open the pouch on his leg and carefully unfold a familiar shirt from inside of it. My eyes burn when he offers it to me.

“I did take him, Asra.” He shakes his head. “But I didn’t harm him.”

I swallow thickly, tongue-tied on what to say. My brother’s shirt is folded neatly in Mael’s outstretched hand. From this angle, I can’t see any of the blood that I know stains the fibers. It’s been tucked in a way that hides it all from view.

I don’t know if that makes it better or worse.

“I’m sorry, Asra.” His tone is sorrowful, more than I’ve ever heard it before since meeting him. If he had the cognition for self-hatred, I’m sure that’s exactly what he’d be feeling right now. “I truly, truly am.”

Carefully, I take it from him, clutching the fabric against my chest. It’s the only piece I have left of Clay, despite the horrible circumstances.

Glancing back up to Mael, I take him in again. He’s staring at me, watching me in that way he does when he isn’t sure

what I'm feeling. In all honesty, I don't even know how to feel.

I'd gone from being completely in love with him, ready to tell him my feelings to then feeling completely shattered by a betrayal that apparently hadn't even occurred.

There's a sneaking suspicion within me that knows how was the one to commit the act if it hadn't been Mael himself. Nechtan's obsessive nature with stealing from Mael would make sense in this situation, even if the thought makes me sick.

"Thank you," I tell him quietly, squeezing the shirt.

He nods once to me.

"You can't be serious?" David scoffs behind me. "Are you actually *talking* to it?"

I glare at him over my shoulder. "His *name* is *Mael*."

"Who cares!" He points. "That thing is going to kill us all!"

Behind me, Mael's surprisingly quiet. Usually, he wouldn't be one to stand there and take the insult, but I'm sure this is a completely overwhelming experience for him. Coupled with the fact that he'd come all this way just to see me.

It warms my heart a little, even if I'm still in shock.

"Look," I address not only David, but the entire crowd. "I understand that this is scary. It is for me too. But please try to understand that their nature is bloodthirsty. One wrong move and it'll make him spiral. I need you all to back up and give us space."

There is a horrified murmur that spatters throughout the crowd. An unsettling restlessness has everyone moving in a sea of weapons, torches and fear. An arm hooks around my waist, pulling me back into a strong chest. It seems he's just as worried about this situation as I am.

Like a breath of fresh air, Cecilia pushes her way to the front of the crowd and waves everyone down.

“You heard her! Back up, people!”

A wide arch forms around us, villagers away with their weapons still held tight in their hands. A few of them hurl a couple more insults, Mael’s arm tightening around me in the process.

“It can’t stay here,” David turns to Cecilia. “It’s going to kill us all.”

“No one’s disagreeing with you, boy.” Grim frowns at him, the only other person in the crowd to have stayed in their spot as the rest disperse.

I suck in a few lungfuls of air, grateful that everyone’s slowly headed back to their accommodations. I know most of them will go back to bed with a weapon tucked under their pillow. And to that, I can’t blame them for. If I were in their situation, I’d feel the same way.

David turns back to me, looking me up and down while shaking his head.

“It can’t stay here, Asra. It’s not some kind of pet you can just keep.”

Unconsciously, my hand finds the arm still tucked around me. I run my fingers over Mael’s warm skin.

“I know.”

David looks at me with disgust, spinning on his heel to blow past Cecilia in the process. He storms back the way the rest of the village had gone, disappearing quick enough in the dark until all that could be seen is the small flame from his torch.

“Asra,” Grim’s voice has me snapping my head over to him. He leans heavy on his cane. “He can’t stay.”

My shoulders drop. I know this, of course. Even if the village accepted Mael, it’s too dangerous to risk. The second he got a whiff of anyone’s blood, it’d turn him into a rabid beast that wouldn’t be able to control himself.

I can’t put him in that kind of situation—it’s too cruel. It wouldn’t be fair.

“I know,” I frown.

Cecilia moves closer to us, a pensive look on her face. “It’s... nice to meet you. I’m Cecilia. This is my husband, Grim. We’re uh... well. We adopted Asra and her brother when they were young. Took them in and fattened them right up.”

Shifting away from Mael slightly, I watch him nod to her in greeting.

“Thank you for taking care of them.”

She smiles at him. “Well, what’s an old empty-nester to do, hm?”

I laugh softly when she reaches over and pinches my cheek, patting Mael’s arm when it tenses around me. As flattering as it is for him to be protective over me, I don’t need him slaughtering Cecilia because he’s perceived her teasing as a threat.

“You’ll come visit us, won’t you, Asra?” Grim slowly canters over to us.

I nod. “Of course I will. I won’t be far. Just... away from here.”

Cecilia’s smile turns sad. “You really want to go?”

I do, but not from them. I wish they could come with me, but it’s too dangerous. They are getting older and need their community around them to help. It would be selfish of me to beg them to leave all that they’d built behind them because I didn’t want to grow up.

Not to mention, Grim would go absolutely stir crazy with no one to harp on in his charming way.

I’d miss them both terribly, but I’d come back often.

Nodding to her, I slowly pull Mael’s arm from around me so that I could fold myself into her outstretched arms. She hugs me tight, kissing me on the top of the head.

“We’ll miss you, Asra.”

My tears streak down my cheeks. The unspoken ‘both of you’ isn’t lost on me. We’d all hoped Clay would walk out of those woods unharmed and full of that bright energy he had been so infamous for. None of us wanted this reality to be true, even though it’d been the more likely scenario in the end.

In the back of my head, I think I always knew. I just never wanted to admit it to myself. It was too painful for me to come to terms with, so instead, I hoped and I wished.

Cecilia rubs my back a few times, breaking away so that I could sniffle back my tears and fold Grim into a hug too. He holds me just as tight and fiercely, mumbling in my ear that I better make good on my promise by coming back often.

It has me laughing as I pull away. I’m going to miss them both terribly, but I’ll be okay.

We all will be.

“Good luck, Asra.” Cecilia kisses my cheek one more time. “We’ll be here when you get back.”

Wiping my cheeks, I hold Clay’s shirt tight to my chest. Feeling him even, even if he wasn’t.

“I love you guys.”

“We love you too, sweetheart.”





## MAEL

When Asra turns to me, tears still glossing her eyes, my automatic reaction is to gently swipe a finger under them, collecting them before they have a chance to fall down her face.

She smiles at me softly, closing her eyes while I clean her face for her. It's a touching gesture, one that has the warmth in my chest spreading and cracking the coldness that had come over me when I'd realized she'd gone.

Looking over her shoulder, I watch the unease that passes between her guardians. I know exactly what they see in front of them—a strange monster come to take their only remaining child away from them and whisk her off to some desolate part of the forest.

If I were in their shoes, I'd be worried too.

“Thank you,” I tell them both, meaning it.

It isn't my place to reassure them. In fact, it may even look more nefarious if I tried. All I can really do is keep Asra safe and happy and let that be a testament to my treatment of her. While it may take a while, I hope that in the future, they can learn to trust my care of her.

When they both give Asra a final nod, I curl my arm around her and lead her back to the forest. She leans heavily into me and even from here, I can tell how exhausted she is. I don't want to assume, but I'm sure her time apart from me hasn't been pleasant just like me.

Never in my wildest dreams did I think a human could affect me so fiercely to the point where I'd willingly put myself in the middle of an angry mob, hoping that she'd somehow appear in the midst of it.

And she had, surprising me most of all.

As we clear the forest and get onto the footpath, I bend and scoop her up into my arms, drawing a soft laugh out of her.

“What’s this?”

Turning to rest my jaw against her head, I huff at her. “I can tell you’re tired.”

“Mm,” Her breath tickles my neck as she moves her head down to nuzzle there. “Bad dreams.”

“I’m sorry.”

I can feel her smile against my skin. “They weren’t about you, don’t worry.”

“Then?”

She’s quiet for a long while. “Clay. None of it was real, of course. But... it felt like it.”

Asra clutches the shirt in her arms tightly, in a comforting way. I readjust her slightly, pressing her more firm into my chest while I walk. If I could, I would chase all of the nightmares away from her mind and put her at ease.

It won’t change anything, especially now that she knows what actually happened to her brother. But it doesn’t stop me from wanting to help in some way. Seeing her sad, even if there is nothing I can do about it, eats me up inside.

“Hey,” she pokes my chest. “Stop that.”

Gruffly, I reply, “You worry me.”

She breathes out another laugh. “I’m okay. I’m really happy you came.”

That has me stopping. “You... are?”

Asra lifts her head, minding my jaw as she does so. “Of course I am.”

“You thought I killed your brother.”

Inwardly, I wince at the choice in words. I don't mean to be so direct, but her confession has thrown me off more than it should.

“Yes, but that doesn't magically make my feelings for you go away, Mael.”

Feelings?

She wiggles in my arms, coaxing me to set her down gently. As she rights herself, she puts a hand over my chest and looks up at me, clutching her brother's shirt to her own.

“Do you understand what I mean?”

I shake my head, completely lost.

“Mael...” her eyes search mine. “I have feelings for you.”

I tilt my head at her. It seems important, this... whatever it is that she's trying to tell me. Her words are chosen carefully, her eyes wide and hopeful. Rubbing my hands together at my sides, I try to piece together what she's referring to exactly.

All of this is new to me and the way she words it is confusing.

“Do you understand what I mean?”

I shake my head at her again.

There's amusement in her words. “It means I'm in love with you, Mael.”

“In love?” I repeat.

A vague memory, back in the deep recesses of my mind, echoes softly. Back when I'd been human and I'd lived a life on a completely different plain of existence. It's of someone screaming at me, voice distant and hard to understand through the torrential downpour of my other thoughts.

But there is the unmistakable ‘love you’ rippling at the surface. Barely there but loud enough for me to recognize the shape of the words before they fade back into oblivion.

What does it mean?

“You’re confused.” Asra tells me. “Do you want me to describe it to you? What I feel?”

I nod silently.

She comes close to me, pressing her body against mine while trailing her hand over to my heart. It beats steadily against her hand, a warm red that reflects back against her olive-y skin.

“It means that I’d do anything for you. Protect you from anything that tries to harm you. I want to take care of you and be with you all the time. Our time apart nearly shattered me. I never want to feel like that again. I want to spend the rest of my days with you, however long that is.”

I cup her face, pulling her gaze away from my chest so that I can see her eyes.

She continues, “No matter what happens, Mael. I want to be with you. Go where you go. I don’t care what you are, or how you need to survive. I love you for who you are and how you make me feel. There’s nothing in this world that is going to stop me from being by your side.”

My hand tightens around her jaw, shaking slightly. “I...”

Asra turns her head in my hold, kissing the palm of my hand. “Do you feel the same,

“Yes.” The word comes out instantly, without any sort of hesitation.

All this time, I thought she would change her mind eventually. That she’d want to go back to her village and forget all about me and her time spent in my cave and in the woods. I never wanted to admit it to myself, but I’d been preparing for that day to come.

Yes, here she is, telling me the exact opposite. How is it that such an incredible woman has come into my life without warning? My entire heart has been walking around this world unguarded and I, foolishly, have been wandering for so long trying to find her without even knowing.

I'm so lucky to have found her when I did, snatching her up before anyone else could harm her. She'd brought me to my senses countless times, pulling me out of that all consuming darkness that lay in my heart.

It's indescribable how much she's changed me.

"I love you too, Asra." The words are foreign, but feel right to say.

Her eyes shimmer again. "You do?"

"Yes. Of course I do."

She buries her face in my chest, wrapping her arm around me tight.

Her entire body sags into me, whether from relief or exhaustion, I'm not sure. I scoop her back up into my arms and carry her the rest of the way to the cave, taking the incline slowly when I get to it.

I don't set her down until I'm kneeling on the dae fur, and gently pulling her from over my shoulder. She smiles at me as I lay her down slowly, taking her in while I peel off her layers and undress her until she's bare.

My hands find every sensitive part of her, caressing her until she's shaking under me and desire is so openly shown on her face that I practically collapse onto her.

With deft fingers, she pulls my tunic off of me and unlaces the knot at my hips, eager to get my undressed. I lift myself up, helping her kick off my pants until we're both running our hands over each other with soft touches.

Her legs part for me easily, allowing me to slide into her with no effort. A breathy sigh escapes her lips, her head tilting back while her ankles hook behind my lower back. I rock into her with long strokes, pulling more of the delicious moans out of her that has fire running through my veins.

"Asra." I lean over her, putting a hand next to her head. "Be mine."

Her eyes open slowly, a hand coming to rest on my chest, right over my white heart. "Ofcourse I will."

“Forever?”

She smiles at me. “As long as you’ll have me.”

Putting a hand over hers, I squeeze my fingers around hers.  
“Always.”

She comes for me, beautifully and with my name on her lips. It pulls me into my own wave of pleasure, riding it through with her with her hand pressed over the piece of me that she’ll always have for as long as she lives.

If this is what love is, I never want to live without it again.



## ASRA

**A**fter our conversation in the field of wildflowers, Mael and I agree that we would like to make our mating official quickly.

Neither of us are entirely sure how we want the mating ceremony to go. Mael has no family and waira are loners. There is no structure to their species, no sense of society or community. There are also no female waira to speak of, so mating is something unheard of among his kind.

As for me, we briefly discuss human tradition but since my family is only Grim and Cecilia now, I don't want to go all out. I would rather it be quiet, and private.

The house is nearly finished by the time we figure out what we want to do. The structure is complete and it's been weatherproofed, though it's not quite cozy inside yet.

The only human thing that Mael requested was that I get a pretty dress to wear. So I spend every day with Cecelia, modifying a hand-me-down dress she gives me. It takes the better part of a month but I finally finish.

Cecelia and I have to take the dress in, she's much rounder in figure than I. I also need to lengthen it, she's shorter by half a head. But I add channels to the hem and add in handmade lace inserts that Cecelia creates for me.

It's delicate work but the result is nothing short of ethereal. For the bodice, I add corded channels around the neckline and boning in the torso, making it more structured and rigid.



The dress itself is creamy white, the color of fresh taura milk. When Mael looks at me, his heart often glows bright white, the color of his love for me. I want my dress to reflect that love.

Finally, using the most verdant purple and yellow flowers from the meadow, I carefully press them against the white fabric of the bodice and simmer the dress in a boiling hot pot. The end result is that the flowers leave behind a perfect imprint.

The dress is gorgeous and Cecelia stands behind me now, helping lace me into the bodice while Grim sits on a pile of rugs by the fire, warming his leg.

“So, are you certain you’re prepared for tonight?” Cecelia asks, grinning at our reflections in the looking glass.

“Tonight?” I tilt my head to the side.

“If the legends are true that a man’s foot size can indicate...endowment, you might be a little nervous,” she giggles.

“Cecelia!” I blush beet red. Not that she needs to know but I am *well* acquainted with his size. “Shush!”

“I’m just saying,” she whispers, glancing over to see if Grim is listening in. He’s lightly dozing and not paying any attention. “He’s a *large* man with a huge...*heart*.”

“Cecelia!” I scold her. She’s going to be the death of me with her innuendos. Once the bodice is laced up, I sit so she can brush out my hair.

While she’s working, Grim awakens and wanders over to us. “Are you absolutely certain about this?” He asks, looking down at where I’m seated. “You don’t have to join with the manaha. The waira. You don’t have to mate with him.”

“Yes, dear Grim,” I smile, shaking my head. “I want to be with Mael. He treats me well, he cares deeply for me. He’s protective and kind and wants to make me happy.” We want the same things and we’ve both been lonely for so long that finding each other felt natural.

“As long as you’re happy,” He says, bending down to plant a kiss on my head. “You mean the world to us, Asra.”

“Thank you. I love you, both of you. I promise I’ll visit all the time.”

“There,” Cecelia says, finishing up. “You’re all done.” I glance in the looking glass and see that she’s brushed out my wavy black hair so it looks soft and shiny in the candlelight glow. She’s placed a crown of flowers upon my head that compliment the dress’ design. I look radiant and delicate, like a doll.

“You look lovely,” Grim says, voice choked up. “We never had children but if we did, I’d want them to be as lovely and kind as you.”

I’m too stunned at his words to reply. Tears gather along my lashes and I squeeze his hand. “Thank you.”

“He’s right, you look beautiful, sweetheart,” Cecelia adds.

Mael knocks on the door, signaling that he’s ready for us. He insisted that all I needed to provide was the dress and that he would take care of all the rest. I’m curious about what he’s done but he wanted it to be a surprise.

Grim and Cecelia lead me out, draping a thick, warm fur cloak over my shoulders. It’s chilly but I’ll take my cloak off for the ceremony.

Mael leads us through the garden, which is already blooming, and past the trees, down the mountain and to the east of the village.

The place he leads us turns out to be a clearing in the forest, a meadow full of wildflowers, just like the meadow he proposed in, but smaller in size.

Tears pool in my eyes once more as I look around and take everything in. Mael has carefully decorated the entire field with candles, creating a warm, soft light that makes it feel utterly magical.

Little magic orbs bob gently around the wildflowers and strands of wings and feathers hang from the trees. The

multicolored pillas wings and feathers make the place feel like a secret magical world for just us.

I can't stop staring. Mael has outdone himself. His chest is glowing different colors, like a rainbow.

Leading us to the center of the field, we stand together next to a small pot of burning incense, made from the petals of the wildflowers and the herbs nearby. It smells fragrant and adds to the atmosphere.

He hands a beautifully braided yellow and white length of rope to Grim, who accepts it with a raised eyebrow.

“Handfasting?” Grim asks. Mael nods. Grim nods back, as though some secret communication is exchanged between the two and then he turns to me.

Mael takes my hands in his and Grim stands before us, playing the part of the priest. We didn't want anyone else involved, especially because there was a fear that the priest might not agree to join us.

“Asra, please join hands with Mael,” Grim says gently. Mael holds his hands out and we link them.

“With your joined hands, you join your lives together. Mael, cannot possess her, for Asra belongs to herself. Asra, you cannot possess Mael, for he belongs to himself. But as you both wish it, you give over to each other that which is yours to give.”

He slowly wraps the rope around both our hands, tying it in intricate knots. “Mael, do you vow to honor Asra above all others, to protect and care for her as your mate?”

“Yes,” Mael nods.

“And Asra, do you vow to honor Mael above all others, to care and nurture him as your mate?”

“Yes,” I add, looking into his glowing orbs. That which I saw as empty before now holds the universe in their depths.

“Then this is a marriage of equals. What you have joined, no one can break.”

With that, we are mated. Mael hugs me tightly and rests his head on mine for a moment before we break apart and Cecelia and Grim clap for us.

Cecelia has brought a surprise as well, and showers us in a handful of grain. “For prosperity,” she says. “May you always have enough.”

“Thank you,” I say, openly crying now. Mael holds me close to him as best he can with our hands joined. We slowly start to make our way down the mountainside, to bring Cecelia and Grim back to the safety of the village walls.

Once they’re home, Mael and I walk back to our cottage, taking our time. “This was a perfect way to mark the start of our lives,” I tell him, leaning into his warmth. “I’m sad that Clay couldn’t be here. But I’m glad that you included Grim and Cecelia.”

“Your family is my family,” Mael tells me. “No matter what happens, I will do my best to protect them as well. I wish I could have better protected your brother but I will not let harm come to anyone who you care about ever again.”

“I know,” I say as we arrive home. “I trust you. For the rest of our lives.”

We head inside, to the large pile of furs, arranged in a nest-like structure in the upstairs loft which will be our bedroom. Mael slowly works our hands out of the rope, making sure not to untie the knots before hanging it up over our door.

“Touch me,” I tell him, already feeling my desire stir before we’d even left the village. He smiles in that way he does and moves to obey my order, turning me around to gently unlace the ribbon of my bodice.

Before long, I’m naked and impaled on his enormous cock as he slowly, almost painfully so, takes his time making love to me. “I love you,” I tell him, staring up with wet eyes. “I love how gentle you are. You could hurt me but you’re so careful.”

“It’s because you matter to me,” Mael says, brushing a strand of hair from my face. “I feel possessive of you. I feel

love, like you described. I want to make you feel just as good as you make me feel.”

He does. His body is warm and he smells good, earthy and woodsy and warm. He feels like home and safety and happiness.

I gasp as he thrusts deeper and feel myself clenching around him as my orgasm is drawn from me like a dagger from a sheath. “I love you Mael!” I call out. His body stiffens and he releases inside of me as well.

“I can’t wait to spend the rest of our lives together,” he says, leaning his head on my shoulder.

Reaching out, I press a kiss to his skull and stroke my fingers over his delicately. This, right here is all I ever wanted—to feel just as at home as I do in Mael’s arms.



**MAEL**

A FEW MONTHS LATER...

**S**plitting the lump of wood in half with the axe in my hand, I sink it down hard into the stump at my feet. The pile next to the house has grown into almost a leaning tower since I've been out here early this morning once the sun had risen.

Typically, I would've stayed in bed with Asra and enjoyed the peaceful company as she slept against me, but the weather had shifted to a bitter frost last night signaling snow was imminent on the horizon.

Getting us a stockpile of firewood to carry us over the harsh nights unfortunately was more important than staying in bed with her at the moment.

Tossing the last few logs onto the top of the pile, I bend to gather the splintered pieces and set them down onto the mat next to the door. They aren't big enough to forge a fire with, but they are good for kindling to use whenever Asra wants to cook.

My hand finds the door to the cabin, sturdy in my hand as I pull it open—something that prides me since I carved the entire thing by hand. Warm air rushes to greet me, washing the chill from my body as I step inside.

Asra's head pops up from the couch near the fire when I shut the door behind me. There is a bundle of linen in her hands as well as a needle pressed between her fingers following a thread pulling up from a corner of the fabric.

“What are you making?”



She smiles. “A new shirt for you. You need something with sleeves.”

Looking down at me bare arms, it charms me that she thinks that. I barely feel the cold, used to it from wandering for so long without anything to keep me warm during the colder months. Plus, living in a cave for over a century got me used to living minimally.

Though, even with all of that, she still cares enough to make me something without me asking her to.

“Thank you,” I say as I walk over to her.

She has a blanket draped around her shoulders, tucking her into the couch that Grim had helped me put together some weeks ago. It’s amazing how much that man knows about creating things out of simple wood.

His wife had been the one to teach me about stretching fabric over the seat of it to create a cushion.

Both of them had been integral in helping Asra and I put this place together. Between the four of us, the construction had been quick and efficient. We’d gotten it done right before the frost hit last week.

“How’d the chopping go?”

I settle myself down next to her, folding my hand behind her shoulder to tuck her further into the couch. I like seeing her this relaxed and cozy with the hearth blazing, keeping her warm from the chill outside.

“We have enough to last us a month or so.”

Her eyes widen slightly. “Mael, that’s a lot.”

I shrug.

I don’t mind the work. Since my mind has finally settled after our mating, it gives me something to do. Now that my thoughts are no longer swimming with the constant raging bloodlust of wanting to kill and eat everything in sight, I had to occupy my time somehow.

It was either that, or I was never going to let Asra get out of bed.

“If you want to draw those hot baths, we have plenty of wood to heat up water for you.”

She groans. “That sounds wonderful.”

“I thought you might like that idea.”

Outside the window behind her head, I see small flakes starting to descend from the grey sky above.

“You should join me,” Asra nudges my thigh.

“As if I would ever say no to you.”

Leaning forward, she stabs her needle down into the pillow resting on her lap and moves to kiss my jaw. Her lips are warm and gentle, causing me to tangle a hand in the ends of her hair.

She allows me to play with it while she moves back into her spot, patting the half-made shirt in front of her.

“I figured by the time the snow hits, I’ll have this done.”

I nod, not having the heart to tell her to look out the window just yet.

It’s funny to me the way she blocks out her time, almost like she centers them around events instead of actual time-frames. I’d noticed it when we’d first started working on this place and the thought had stuck in the back of my mind ever since.

“Don’t stress yourself over it,” I tug gently at the ends of her hair. “I’ve been with far less in the past.”

“Yeah, but this time, you have a handy sewer on your side.”

Taking the needle out of the pillow, she flashes it at me with a wink. It’s so charming that I have to laugh. Never would I have thought that this would be how my life turned completely upside down.

I’d gone from wondering why I’d been left to wander this world as the creature that I am, to sitting in a home,

comfortable and settled with my mate and ready to spend the rest of my life with her.

How strange and wonderful.

“I saw Nechtan earlier today.”

Her words have me stiffening. “Where?”

“Out front.” She nods around the couch to where the hallway to the front door leads. “He wasn’t doing anything. Just lingering like usual.”

Dropping my hand from her hand, I rest it on her thigh and squeeze it gently. While I don’t particularly like others invading our territory, Nechtan hasn’t actually done anything to warrant me finding him and taking it head off.

I’ve chased him off a few times, but apparently, to no avail. He simply keeps coming back like a starved animal waiting for a bowl of food to be left out.

It’s strange, the way he’s taken to Asra. I suspect it has something to do with her brother and how his essence may still reside within the other waira. But getting close enough to Nechtan to confront him about it without me wanting to ring his neck first hasn’t exactly been successful so far.

Still, if it makes Asra uncomfortable, I have no problem getting rid of him.

“I’ll kill him if you’d like. It may take me a day to corner him, but once I do that, taking him down won’t be hard.”

He is squirmy though, so I’ll have to make sure to nurse my wounds before coming back to Asra. I don’t want her to worry.

“No!” She slaps a hand over mine, gripping it tight. “No, no. I don’t want that.”

I tilt my head. “I don’t like him bothering you.”

“He isn’t.” She hesitates. “Not exactly, at least.”

Confused, I stay silent, my chest visibly bleeding from white into a light pink.

“What I mean to say, is that I don’t want you getting rid of him. In a way... I don’t know, it seems kind of stupid but... it a way, it kind of makes me feel like Clay is still around.”

Ah, I see.

I suppose at a baseline, Nechtan consuming Asra’s brother would mean that a part of Clay has stayed with him. And in a sense, he has. Every creature, every person that I’ve ever eaten, has become a piece of the puzzle that’s made me who I am as a waira. There are some parts that I’ve forgotten over the years, but there still linger somewhere in the depths of my soul.

I can understand Asra’s attachment to the other waira, even if a part of her hates him for what he did to her brother.

I’d never blame her for her feelings. After all, it had almost been me in Nechtan’s position before he’d gotten a leg over me and eaten Clay before I could.

“If he does end up bothering you—”

She squeezes my hand. “I know.”

With that, Asra leans over and presses her lips against my jaw again. It’s comforting to me, these small gestures. I’m still not sure how she does it—calm me down so easily—but I’m always amazed when it happens.

“Thank you for protecting me, Mael.”

My chest warms at the words. “I always will.”

She smiles again. “I know you will.”

Slowly sliding her hand off of mine, I stand. “May I show you something?”

At her nod, I turn and head for the chest that sides tucked into the corner of the room under the window. It had been heavier than I’d expected when I’d carried it from the edge of the woods where Grim and Cecilia had dropped it off for us to come get.

How they managed to drag it from their house, I still wondered.

They'd been kind enough to gift us with the chest full of handmade blankets and covers for our bed—something that Asra had been ecstatic over.

Opening it, I pick up the small box I'd carved that I'd nestled into the top layer and close the chest once more. Inside of it, something rattles.

Asra sits up at hearing it, putting my shirt and her pillow with the needle sticking out of it off to the side.

“What is that?”

“A gift.” I tell her, shaking the box open.

Inside is a small beaded necklace that I've been whittling during my downtime when she's been sleeping. It's made from the stone fragments of my collection that I hadn't had room here to store properly. I thought instead of throwing them all away or leaving them to be destroyed by nature, that I'd make them into something new.

Taking it out of the box, I gently place it in her outstretched hands.

“I may have to resize it. I measured your neck with my hands while you were sleeping.”

A laugh bursts out of her. “Mael.”

My chest tightens with slight embarrassment. “What?”

She snickers at me, rolling the beads between her fingers. “This is beautiful. Are these beads made from stone?”

“Yes, from my collection.”

Her eyes snap up to mine, shimmering slightly. “Really?”

I nod. “I wanted you to have something to wear to think of me.”

“You are so sweet.”

Quickly hopping to her feet, she hands it back to me before turning around and lifting her hair up off of her neck. I toss the box onto the couch, deftly pulling the small clasp apart before draping it around her neck and fastening it again.

Surprisingly, it fits perfectly.

Her hand immediately reaches up to touch it as she turns around again. “Wow.”

“Do you like it?”

“Mael, I love it. How does it look?”

I can't help running my eyes over her figure, taking her all in the way I do every night before I slowly peel those layers off her and lay her down on our bed. My body stirs with the memory, wanting to do exactly that.

“It looks nice. Though, I think I'd like it better if it were the only thing you were wearing.”

She grins, batting her hands against my chest. “Weren't you saying something about warming up a bath for me?”

I love that she speaks my language.

Scooping her up into my arms, I hold her tight to my chest.

“Since you asked so nicely.”

She litters my face with gentle pecks the entire way to the bathroom, her arms coming around my neck to hold herself against my body.

“I love you, Mael.”

I stop just as I reach the doorway, pulling her back slightly to look into her eyes.

“And I love you more, Asra.”



## NECHTAN

The sounds of Asra's laughter leech from between the logs of the cabin and out into the black, cold night. Flakes of snow fall around me as I linger in the treeline, watching as Mael scoops his mate into his arms and carries her out of view.

I walk parallel to their path through the house, hoping to catch another glimpse of them through the frost-shrouded windows, but they're nowhere to be seen anymore, although I can still make out their voices. I turn away from Mael and Asra's happy little cabin with a dark snarl, my fingers curling into fists so tightly that my claws slice at the flesh of my palms.

I thought eating more humans, more conscious beings, would make the hunger less. I thought it would make me faster, stronger, smarter, more satisfied. In some ways, it has.

I can see better now, no longer relying on scent to track my prey. It's made me faster, both physically and mentally, allowing me to not only catch my prey but lure them, too. To trap them, and be particular about the ones that I eat.

I've even been able to recognize when my prey is sick, preventing me from becoming ill as well. While all of this is certainly an improvement, it's not what I truly wanted.

I'd thought eating more humans and elves would decrease the gnawing, constant hunger, but it hasn't. I had thought it would help me be better than the others.

I thought it would make me more like Mael.



My teeth grind together as I stare into the inky black forest, the warm, flickering light of the cabin behind me fading with every step I take.

Mael gets everything he wants, he always has. He thinks he's so smart, so much better than the rest of us. I ate and ate so that I could be smart, too. The smarter the prey was, the smarter I got. I thought it would make me better than him eventually- he's always seemed so smug and confident.

I never would have guessed that there'd be side effects to my chosen prey.

Strange things keep stirring inside me, pockets of sensations I have no name for that settle into the yawning, hungry gaps between my bones. My mind at one time was an empty, simple place. Only pictures and hunger, my body driving me forward without any resistance from my mind or anything else.

Now, however, there is a never-ending war that rages beneath my skin at every waking moment. It's going to drive me mad, I know it is.

Is this what Mael feels like? Is this the price for strength, for being better?

I don't feel better.

Another snarl slips through my lips and I slash aimlessly at a tree, trying to vent some of the swirling storm inside my head. Deep gouges scar the bark as I pull my hand back, soothing some of the turmoil inside me for a brief second before it returns.

Is that the answer? Do I need to destroy to soothe myself?

I've always destroyed, always eaten, but it never makes anything go away for long. Maybe I need to destroy *more*, eat more. But what if eating makes all of this worse? None of this was ever a problem before I started eating like Mael does.

Mael doesn't destroy anymore, not now that he has his human. Maybe I need a human, too. I find myself circling back toward the cabin, unable to bring myself to be away from it for too long.

I don't know why it always pulls me back in. I've felt a strange draw to Asra since I've known her. At first, I mistook it for hunger. Then, I thought it was because Mael had her. Mael always gets the best of everything, gets everything he wants and more.

It's not fair that he always gets to be better than the rest of us.

Mael doesn't even seem hungry anymore. He spends all of his time with the human, only leaving occasionally to hunt or bring back things for her. And despite the fact that she's always there, always so close to him, he never eats her.

Mael isn't red anymore, either. Not like the rest of us. He's changed so much that even his light isn't the same, glowing a strange white rather than red.

Is it because of his human? Has Asra changed his color? Is that why he isn't hungry anymore?

Could she change mine, too?

I don't want to come back to the cabin. It makes the feelings beneath my skin worse, louder, more violent- but I can't seem to help myself. Asra is here, and wherever she is, I find myself lingering there too.

I know that she knows I'm here, and so does Mael, at least most of the time. He chases me away, tells me not to come back, but he doesn't know that I don't have a choice.

I don't want to come back here either. I hate it here. I hate both of them for being happy, for being better than me. The wooden slats of the cabin are barely visible through the trees, and that strange piece of me shoves me toward it, trying to force me closer.

I drown that strange part of me, turning away from the cabin again. I've never felt these things before, never wanted anything other than to eat or be more like Mael, but now I want stupid things. Terrible things.

I want a human. I want a house. I want to understand things. I want to see Asra, to watch her, to be near her, and

make sure she is alive and alright because of the thing living in my skin.

It's too many wants and desires for me to contain.

With a frustrated huff, I take off into the woods, sprinting between trees and over rocky clusters to where my cave is nestled into the mountain at the edge of Mael's territory. I found a cave after I saw Mael's, trying to gather the supplies I saw him carrying.

I thought perhaps the cave would make me better too, but of course, it did not. Perhaps I should give up, learn to live with the fact that I will never be as good as him. That I'll only ever be an animal while he gets to be something different, something better.

My cave smells dank and forgotten, a patchy, crude dae skin rumped in the corner and fallen leaves crowding the mouth of the space. I settle onto the dae skin, realizing just how cold and hard the ground is beneath it as I lay there.

Maybe this is all that is meant for me. This dissatisfaction, this strangeness, this hollow hunger. Perhaps it is all I'll ever be allowed to have.

A flash of blue catches my eye, and I leap to my feet, startled and wondering what could have made its way into my cave without being detected. As soon as I'm on my feet, the blue disappears.

I pace for a few minutes, sniffing and inspecting my bare cave, finding nothing out of place. It isn't until I settle back onto my dae skin that I realize the blue came from exactly where my red light usually shines.

Am I... Am I changing color too?

I focus on the blue in my mind, trying to force it to come back, but the red in my chest only pulses in response. I strain, trying to recreate the position I was laying in, trying to remember the exact shade of blue so I can replicate it, but nothing happens.

My light only turns a darker red the longer I try.

I squeeze my eyes shut, the storm beneath my skin growing louder as I realize I'm not changing anything at all. I'm tired, so tired, and always so hungry. I don't want to be like this anymore.

Mael and Asra are together, comfortable in their house. They aren't alone, aren't hungry, and aren't destroying and killing things. And I'm alone, in a wet cave. I'm hungry. I kill and I destroy.

I can't make sense of the strange, hollow feeling in my stomach and chest when I think about the differences between me and them. It's almost like hunger, but it's not. It still makes me want to hurt, to destroy, but it also makes me... something else.

With my eyes shut tightly, sleep begins to creep in, my too-sharp, uncomfortable mind growing hazier once again, my tightly wound body beginning to relax and ease into the worn dae skin beneath me.

Perhaps I should try to build a house, too. The house seemed to make Asra and Mael better. I want to be better. I want to be like them.

I don't know how to build a house, but I'm sure I could do it. Maybe the house will help ease this new, strange hunger lingering in my belly. The strange hunger is worse when I look at Mael and Asra, when I linger around their cabin, but maybe my cabin will help to ease it.

It's only as I'm on the brink of slumber, slipping into unconsciousness, that I realize something critical about the newfound hunger I feel. It's not like my hunger to eat, to kill, to destroy- it's very different.

I hunger to be more, to have more.

To not be so alone.

The End

To read more of what happens in the future with Mael and Asra join my newsletter here <https://www.subscribepage.com/>

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## **PREVIEW OF THE NAGA'S MATE**

The Worlds of Protheke is a vast and growing world. Check out the standalone series starter, The Naga's Mate

The Naga's Mate

By Celeste King

Available on [Amazon!](#)



## JEMMA

I run through the woods, trying desperately to find anything that might give us any advantage as the orcs chase us down. But there are no sufficiently sharpened sticks, no properly club-like branches, or conveniently dropped swords just lying around. So, I keep running, hoping something will change because we can't outrun these orcs forever.

But some of us are going to falter sooner than others. The old or the young. They'll be the first to be captured again. We were all kept in a pen together, about twenty of us who were all snatched up when the orcs raided the low towns of the dark elf city of Liiandor. Well, twenty at the start, but that number dropped daily whenever the orcs got hungry.

Then one of the guards got drunk and passed out. We managed to reach his keys and unlock the cage. I told everyone to just run. But Ryan, one of the young men with us who'd always argued with me about everything, said we deserved revenge. I understand the impulse.

The orcs made us watch as they ate the others or butchered them to turn them into jerky. The lucky ones were dead before the orcs started. There were very few lucky ones.

I'd have loved to see these orcs choke on their own blood, but my priority was to get everyone out safely. Ryan wanted to stab someone. So, he took the guard's dagger and tried to cut his throat. But it didn't work.

Orc hide can only be pierced with weapons made of mithril. The guard was only watching over humans, so it must



have been regular iron or something because all it did was wake the guard up. To his credit, Ryan did his best to slow the orc down. Paying with his life to buy the eight of us a few seconds was the best he could do for costing us the minutes we could have had otherwise.

I've been a survivor all my life, but I've also never been good at watching others suffer. I turn and see Sasha, only thirteen years old, lagging.

I turn to Mary and Joshua. They're twenty. Adults. Capable. They might make it fine on their own, but the others I worry about. I could keep running, let the others falter, and the orcs stop to gather them. I could be free. But I couldn't live with myself knowing I didn't at least try to save the others.

"Everyone, scatter. Make them divide up or pick a target," I say, hopefully, loud enough for everyone to hear but not loud enough for the orcs to find out what I'm doing.

Though this is part of my plan, I keep to myself. I slow down and fall in beside Sasha. Mary and Joshua look back at me. I wave them off. "Just go!"

Then I turn to the girl and point left. "Go that way. Hide if you can. Live."

I hope she makes it, but I can't waste any more time, not if I'm going to try to save the others. I turn and run. Not right for the orcs, but veering off to the right and back, putting me much closer to them than any of the others.

And then I scream. I'm terrified. Anyone with a lick of sense would be. But I lay it on thick. I need them to follow me. When I turn to look behind me, I think it worked. I don't know if they all are coming for me, but from the crashing sounds and roared curses hurled in my general direction, I'm sure I have at least a handful after me.

Next step: don't die.

I've been pretty good about sticking to that plan my whole life. I've survived thirty-one years, always trying to stay just one step ahead of death. I lost my parents young, growing up on the streets. And I did my best to keep the other street kids

alive and out of the clutches of the dark elves who would use them for their twisted pleasures.

Sometimes I was more successful than others. I remembered each of the ones I failed. I keep it as a list in my head. Our three weeks in captivity made the list so much longer. And that's why I'm doing this. If I can save the rest of them, it'll be worth it.

But as noble as self-sacrifice may be, I'm not looking to become orc food. I want to survive, too. So even as I scream my lungs out, I run.

The sounds of breaking branches and stomping feet are getting closer. I turn just in time to see a machete coming at me. I dodge. Then there's another one to my right, and I manage to duck under that strike as well. I think I count five. That must mean most of them came for me.

I hope the others make it.

If I had a proper weapon, I might be able to take on one orc, but even that would be a challenge. Most of my fighting has been against other humans on the street, trying to harass other suffering humans.

But I don't have a weapon, and there are five of them, all trying to cut me in two. I fling a handful of dirt into an orc's face and make a scrambling run. There's a small ridge. If I can get to the top of that, I'd have a better vantage point to pick out where to run next.

My lungs are already burning, and my legs feel like they're on fire, but I push past the pain and run. I skid to a halt when I see that on the other side of the ridge is about twenty feet of empty sky, followed by treetops.

I don't know how far it is to the ground. The canopy is too thick. But I'm sure it's more than enough to kill me.

I turn, and the orcs have cut off my chance of escape. They know they have me cornered, and they advance slowly. Not out of caution. No, they like the taste of fear in their meat. But I don't plan on giving them the satisfaction.

But my options here are limited. I can't fight them. I can't outrun them. But I can jump.

I had a good run. There were a lot of things I never got to do. Like, learn to read. Fall in love. Get drunk. Have kids. Raise a family. But maybe me dying here means Sasha can live to go to do those things for me. Maybe it means Mary and Joshua can figure out they're crazy for each other. Maybe it means all the others get to be free.

I feel the tears on my cheeks. At first, I hate myself for crying, for being weak, but then I realize I'm not sad. I'm happy. It's a good death.

The orcs advance towards me. The leader, an orc who's half a head taller than the rest with a big scar on his nose, says, "There's nowhere left to run, little girl. Why don't you come here before you fall? You gave a good chase. But it's over."

"Fuck. You."

As far as final words go, they are not the most eloquent, but I never learned to read, so I haven't had the chance to study up on famous last words. Oh, well.

I fling myself off the cliff, hoping that the impact is enough to kill me instantly. I deserve that, at least—a quick, painless death.

When I smash into the first branch, I realize that's not going to be what I'll get. The impact knocks the wind out of me, and I crash into more and more branches. I think for a second, I don't have to die, but I can't get a hold on anything able to support my weight and continue to fall.

The last ten feet is an unobstructed path straight to the ground. Every part of my body hurts. I'm sure I'm dead. It'll just be slow and painful. Darkness starts to creep in at the edges of my vision, and just before everything goes black, I hear a subtle hiss.



## UZHA

“They befoul the land with their presences and must be destroyed,” Kazhir shouts, full of fury. He’s an excellent general, though the display isn’t needed. I already agree with him. I don’t like the way the orcs have harried our borders. While they haven’t killed any naga in their most recent attacks, it’s only a matter of time before they do.

Where Kazhir and I disagree is on the strategy of how to eliminate them.

“Yes,” I say, gliding around my desk towards him. “They’re pushing more into our territory every day and threatening our people. But if you attack from the east, you’ll approach them from a disadvantage. It’s quite literally an uphill battle.”

“Then what would you suggest we do?” he asks with an exasperated hiss.

He and I have rarely seen eye-to-eye on strategy, but I find the ways we disagree have often been helpful in shaping my battle plans. While our discussions can sometimes appear rather antagonistic, I value his efforts in tearing my plans to pieces. He sees flaws and holes in my strategies I never considered.

Every leader needs a Kazhir at their side. I just happen to be lucky to have the only one.

“We attack them from the north,” I say.

I do love getting him to pause like this as he tries to figure out my strategy and already pokes holes in it.

“But we need our troops in the east to defend the border, or they will sweep in and take prime grazing territory for our animals.”

“Oh, I wasn’t planning to leave the east completely unguarded. We position troops to the east as though we are preparing to attack, but we’ll have sent an advance army across the river,” I say, pointing to the map.

He looks at the map and shakes his head.

“That spreads our numbers too thin.”

“No thinner than if we send all our troops charging up that hill. Just because we don’t fear them, nor fear death to protect our honor or our homeland, doesn’t mean we need to throw troops away needlessly.”

“Either plan is a risk, but I’ll carry out whatever strategy you believe is best.”

“And I can trust you to carry it out in exacting detail as always.”

That is one of my general’s many admirable qualities. He and I might butt heads when strategizing, but once I choose a course of action, he is very good at following orders.

“You’ve yet to steer us wrong. It’s why the borderlands troops support you so loyally.”

“I don’t ask them to do anything I wouldn’t do myself.”

“I think the men appreciate someone of noble blood who has seen real war like they have,” he says.

My people are proud warriors, but not everyone has the same dedication to it. I’ve been a fighter all my life. I’ve always been ready to put my life on the line for my people. It’s what I have been trained to do since I was a child.

There hasn’t been time for much else. Even my family and I are distant. I’ve spent more time training with the generals

they sent me off to than with them. While I'm loyal to them, it's because it's my duty to be.

I will defend my family, my people, and my homeland with everything I have.

My duty is to my people, so I've never taken the time to find a mate.

Though it's never felt like much of a sacrifice.

"Uzha?" Kazhir raises an eyebrow at me.

"Yes," I say, snapping back to the present and noticing another naga, one of the soldiers, has entered and is now looking concerned.

"Never mind. I think you need some sleep."

I rub my eyes.

The lack of sleep has been a sacrifice. Even the strongest can only battle against unconsciousness for so long. It's been days since I've slept properly.

"I'll sleep when I'm dead. What is it?"

The soldier bows his head and says, "We found something while out on patrol, at the bottom of the cliffs."

"What is it?"

"I'm not sure. That's the problem." I can't tell if the soldier's concern is about the thing he just found or how I didn't even notice he came in because I'm so tired.

"Show me," I say, following him out the door.

Soldiers' tents are scattered around the central building, and he leads me to one with the flap drawn open. There are perhaps two dozen naga gathered around, trying to peer inside.

"Soldiers!" I shout, and they all snap to attention. "I'm sure you all have duties you should be attending to. If not, I can find you something to do that is more productive than standing around."

The bow and slink away. The first soldier motions for me to enter the tent, and I see several more naga gathered around a

bed.

“Is your presence here required?” I ask.

They all turn to look at me before leaving the tent.

When I see what is lying there, I understand the commotion. It’s a human woman. Humans are a rarity in Nagaland. Very few have seen them. I’ve only seen a handful when other nobles have decided they wanted to keep one as a pet. I have to admit, they do look fascinating, and she’s the most fascinating example I’ve seen.

Humans share some similarities to naga but are also very different.

Her arms are more delicate but the same basic shape. No scales, though. Just tan-colored skin. But I’ve seen humans with different colors of skin. They may even have as much variation as we nagas do for our scale color.

No proud hood, but they have hair like dark elves and orcs. Hers is long and black, and it feels soft when I run my fingers through it. While I’ve seen humans, I’ve never had the chance to touch one or examine them up close. I pry an eye open, and she stares blankly into space. Round irises. So different from the gold of mine with the vertical slit.

But perhaps the most fascinating things are her legs. Hers are long and lean and flawless, noticeably lacking scales and a tail. I carefully reach out and touch them. Her skin is smooth and warm. And soft, but I can feel the harder muscle underneath. She must be strong.

She may be a human, but she’s far more beautiful than the ones I’ve seen. The other humans were forgettable, never speaking or looking at me. I have the sudden urge to wake her as I realize I’ve never heard a human. I want to talk to her and hear what she sounds like.

My blood thrums violently as I survey her, and it hits me all at once. I felt it the moment I laid eyes on her, but I’m only now beginning to understand this feeling she’s awakened in me.



Yes, there's curiosity, but I want her. I feel like she should be mine. Yes. I will keep her. I'm sure I can find other uses for her than just staring at her, though that alone is something I feel I could do for a long time.

She really is beautiful. A treasure.

"Is that..." I hear Kazhir's voice behind me as he enters the tent.

"Yes, general. A human."

He draws closer, but I hold my arm out, stopping his advance.

She's mine. He doesn't know it yet, so I'll forgive the impertinence.

"I don't want curiosity to become a distraction. Let our people know that we've found a human. I'll be taking care of it. If she was found at the bottom of the cliffs, perhaps she has seen the orcs near there and might have useful information."

"Yes, sir."

Talking to her seems like a reasonable place to start, but my mind is already at work thinking of what else I might do with her. There are so many possibilities for such a fascinating and alluring creature such as this.



## JEMMA

I startle awake, and the sudden movement makes me wince. I feel everywhere that I hit a branch on the way to the ground. I'm stiff and sore, but I appear whole as I look over my body. And I've been given some form of treatment for my wounds.

There are some bandages on my arm. I lift the edge to peek under them and see they're holding some sort of salve or something against a rough series of scrapes, but it appears to be healing.

I'm guessing if I'm injured, I haven't moved onto some form of afterlife. Perhaps in some sort of torment maybe, but the wound doesn't hurt at all. Maybe whatever has been put on them has some sort of numbing quality.

But this bed I'm lying in, that might be some form of heavenly reward. I've spent years sleeping on the streets, but even when I've been able to beg, borrow, or steal a bed, nothing has ever felt this good.

The linens are smooth, maybe silk. But that's only a word I've heard. I've heard things described as smooth as silk, but I've never actually touched the material. So, it could be something else entirely. And the mattress is firm but pliant and not a lumpy mess. I don't know what it is stuffed with, but there aren't uncomfortable bits of straw poking out, making me itch.

I could lay here forever and just enjoy the sensation of this bed. Maybe this is my reward for a life well-lived. But my

insistent need to know is getting in the way of my ability to just enjoy laying here. There's the nagging sense that I could also still be in danger.

Just because something feels good doesn't mean it is good. Dark elves are painfully beautiful creatures, and every single one of them is an evil, manipulative bastard that would skin you alive just because they felt like it. So, even though I'm more comfortable now than I have ever been, I need to get up and find out where I am.

I finally sit up and take a good look around the room. The room is simple and sparse but still elegant. There are large glass windows overlooking a balcony. Perhaps a peek outside will help me figure out where this place is. I slide to the edge of the bed, enjoying how the material feels against my skin. It's almost enough to make me want to discard my rags just to feel what this is like against my bare flesh.

But getting completely naked in a strange environment seems like a poor choice.

When I try to stand up from the bed, a sharp pain in my left ankle makes me stumble back, landing on the soft mattress. Okay, if I fell from a cliff and the worst I have is a sprained ankle, I'll count myself lucky.

It must have taken a miracle for me to survive. As I was falling, hitting all those branches didn't feel good, but it must have been enough to slow my fall. The temporary pain is worth not going splat at the bottom.

Being a bit more careful this time, I use the wall, so I don't put too much weight on my left foot. I make my way to the balcony, each step making it so I need the wall less and less.

When I get to the edge of the balcony, I stumble back again. This time it has nothing to do with my ankle, but instead, with the sudden dizziness I felt looking over another cliff. Before it felt like the world was tilting sideways, the trees had looked similar as well. The air doesn't taste any different here, either. So, I couldn't have gone far.

I hobble back into the room. There's one more door that must lead out into the rest of whatever building I'm in. I start to limp towards it. I've figured out I haven't gone far, but I'm obviously no longer in orc territory, and the architecture here doesn't carry with it the opulence most dark elf buildings have.

That leaves some options, but I can't help but feel a secret hope that this could be some kind of human settlement. There are stories of free humans living and thriving on Protheke, but it's always "somewhere," and it's never certain how many.

As I near the door, though, I get a cold sense of dread when I hear hissing and the sound of something large gliding against the stone floor. I look back to the balcony. There's no way I'd be able to climb out of it to see if there's anywhere else to go. Not with my ankle, all messed up.

And I don't want to test my luck by hurling myself over a cliff edge again.

I think I'm limited to one miracle per way to die.

I ball my hands into fists, holding them at my side, ready to start swinging if anything hostile comes through that door. Had I woken up in chains or something that looked closer to a cage, I might have had my fist raised.

But you wouldn't bandage up someone and set them up on a cushy bed just so you could feed them to your giant pet snake, right?

When the door opens, I realize it's not a pet snake I was hearing, but some kind of snake man. Then my mind summons a word I'd started to think was just a myth. Naga. I'd heard of them in stories others had told in hushed tones about the snake people of Nagaland.

A cold weight settles into the pit of my stomach. In all the stories I heard of the naga, they were described as cold-blooded people whose cruelty rivaled that of the dark elves. Even surpassed it, depending on the storyteller. More than once, I'd heard that they feasted on human flesh. It was like

taking the worst aspects of dark elves and orcs and pouring them into one serpentine container.

But if that's the case, why heal me? Why put me here and not in a cage with the other humans they bred for food? Maybe they enjoy playing with their food a bit first.

A chill runs down my spine, but I suppress the shiver. I set my jaw and keep my stare hardened. Just because I'm scared out of my wits doesn't mean I have to let him see my fear.

At least I think it's a him. I don't know what would differentiate a naga man or a naga woman. I'm pretty sure it's a him. He just feels masculine.

The naga stares at me, and at first, I feel very uncomfortable. I've had men undress me with their eyes before, and some are capable of making me feel like I need a shower after. Whatever this guy is looking for feels like that but more intense. And I can't tell if it's better or worse. It doesn't feel like he's stripping away my clothes but my secrets.

I want to turn away. To run and hide. But I'm locked in his gaze, staring right back into his golden eyes. And the longer we look at each other, even though it feels more invasive, I find myself minding it less and less.

And then he speaks.

"I'm the Duke of this territory. You may call me Uzha."

His voice moves through me, igniting passions I didn't know I had. Is it really possible to get this turned on just by hearing someone talk? It's never happened to me before. Perhaps it's some strange ability his people have. Maybe that was what his gazing into my eyes was about. Some kind of spell.

Because this can't be happening. I can't feel weak in the knees over the half-snake man.



## UZHA

The woman's eyes are round and her breaths short. She's a prey animal in distress, to be eaten or discarded at will. Any other naga would throw her in the ocean to drown or feed her to the beasts, like one would discard any other vermin. Few would request to keep her as a pet to do even worse to her.

I'm not sure why, then, I desire so strongly to nudge her cheek with mine. I don't only want to claim her, but to *comfort* her, and the idea of it alone should be as repulsive as cuddling a *maqhat*, the spindly insect that builds its home out of dung and multiplies by the thousands.

Nagaland is organized into strict castes, and the strong rule the weak, which is as it should be. Humans are the lowest of the low. They have no magic, and no strength to make up for it. They are useless at fighting anyone except each other, and they cannot survive on their own.

They don't understand how to survive on only themselves, like the proud Naga. We don't interact with any others, finding no need to leave our homes except to defend it. Unlike the Minotaurs, we do not engage in trade with others, treating them as our equals. That's because there are no equals to us.

Especially not humans.

The fact they exist at all is some sort of joke.

So why do I feel inclined to give her anything she could ever want or need when she should be less than the stone beneath me?



“What are you called?”

Her face does a curious thing as she stares at me. I can smell her fear, but her face smooths to reveal none of it. I had thought a human would grovel at my feet, but she holds herself together with a brittle, patched-together pride. Her chin trembles, but she holds it as high as any queen.

She does not answer. If she were anyone else, this is where my patience would end. And yet my fangs remain at bay, unwilling to harm her.

There is something monstrously wrong with me. It is as though I’ve been bewitched, and all of my sense and judgment has been taken from me.

“Do you have magic?” I ask. I’ve never heard of humans with the gift, but there must be some explanation for this strange compulsion to protect her. She looks at me with eyes so wide her pupils look like tiny dots.

“Magic?” She shakes her head. “Do you think I would be sitting here if I had *magic*?”

She’s right, it’s impossible. Still. Perhaps she had an understanding with an elf, or some other creature. “Have you been charmed?”

“Charmed.” Her lips twitch at this. “No. No, I can’t say that I’ve had a charmed day in my entire life.”

Her voice is like music.

Icy horror spreads in my stomach. I’ve heard tales of this. I’ve seen this, haven’t I, when a friend loses his head over a female? As soon as I saw her, it was as though I’d found a part of *myself*. It was as though my entire world had recentered around her.

*Is it even possible to have a human mate?*

I recoil at the thought. Nagas mate within our tribes. To think of mating with any outsider, much less a *human*, is impossible.

There must be something else at work here. She might have been charmed without her knowledge, and sent like some

sort of sweet trap. I will keep her close until I discover what's happening to me. If there is any charm at work here, it will reveal itself in time.

“And your name?”

Names have power for those with magic, but she hands hers to me freely. “Jemma.”

“Jemma.” I like how it tastes on my lips. My forked tongue flicks across my mouth, and she startles back. I want to soothe her, to stroke her hair, but I keep my hands fisted at my sides instead. “Why are you here?”

“Orcs.” Her teeth nibble on the nail of her pinky, and her knees fold against her chest.

“Isn't it always?” That earns me a faint smile, and I chastise myself for the pleasure I take in it. She's a *human*. If I can't discard her, then I should at least treat her as the inferior creature she is. I clear my throat and force my voice to remain stern. “I tire of this conversation. Why are you *here*, specifically?”

“I don't even know where this is.” She continues to bite her nails. It should disgust me. I can't stop staring at her lips. “The orcs kidnapped my friends and I from Liiandor. We tried to escape. We failed.”

“You aren't captured by orcs any longer. I wouldn't call that a failure.”

Her laugh holds no humor. “Everyone I was in charge of died. I jumped off a cliff because I thought that was better than being eaten alive by angry orcs.” She looks at me as though I am more terrifying than any orc could ever be, and I look away. “Where are we? I've only heard of your kind in old stories.”

“Kario.”

“Right.” She tucks her chin over her knee. She must have injured her left ankle, because she rubs it with a wince. “Kario.”

Our conversation dies down. I have no more in common with a human than I would the meat I eat, and so I observe her instead, trying to puzzle out my strong reaction to her existence.

She's beautiful, and not just for a human, although that might be my addled wits talking. Her hair is as dark as the night sky, and it serves to enhance the intensity of her blue eyes. She should look strange with such soft, tan skin and hair instead of scales, but she looks enticing, instead. My fingertips itch to discover just how soft her skin might be beneath the rags she wears.

A loud growl interrupts my wild thoughts. Her stomach growls again, and her cheeks redden.

I'm grateful for the interruption.

"Guards!" A guard posted outside stands at attention. "The prisoner will eat now."

"As you desire, sir." The guard keeps his head down, submissive, but hesitates. "Ah, what, exactly, does the prisoner eat?"

What *do* humans eat? I could ask her, but it would diminish my standing to take requests from any prisoner, much less a human. I think of all I know about humans, which isn't much. I know they scavenge for food in the forests whenever they are found in the wild. Elves surely feed them, but my visits with elves and other creatures are thankfully rare.

"Meat. Cooked."

The guard's shoulders freeze at the last order. Most naga eat raw meat. Food touched by fire is a delicacy only allowed to royals such as myself.

My own shoulders stiffen in turn, and my tail slithers a warning. My orders are not to be questioned.

"And bring clothes. Her rags disgust me." I shut the door. "You will have food soon."

"Thank you." Her fingers twist against the bed. "You said I'm in Kario. Are we in elvish territory, then?"

“Elvish.” My tongue lashes the word out of my mouth like a bad taste. “Never. This is Nagaland. It is not for the feet of any other creature to defile.”

She lifts her head and looks at me in the eyes. I force myself to keep her gaze. “Does that mean you’ll let me go?”

“Let you go? You invaded my land.”

“I didn’t even know this place existed until now! Invaded? I fell down a cliff!” Her flash of temper should enrage me. Instead, I find myself enraptured by her passionate glare. My heartbeat kicks up a notch, and I must consciously slow my breathing.

“Onto my land.” The thought of her leaving makes something claw desperately at my throat. “You will not leave it.”

It is better that she knows her place now, but I still don’t like how her eyes dim at my announcement. Even when the food arrives, she pokes at it with her finger and then stares at the wall.

“Would you rather be eaten by orcs, then?” My voice is sharp. It is bad enough this woman has beguiled my senses somehow. I will not suffer her ungratefulness. “Or rot at the bottom of a cliff? You are here, and you are alive, and you will eat.”

To be continued. To read more click [here!](#)