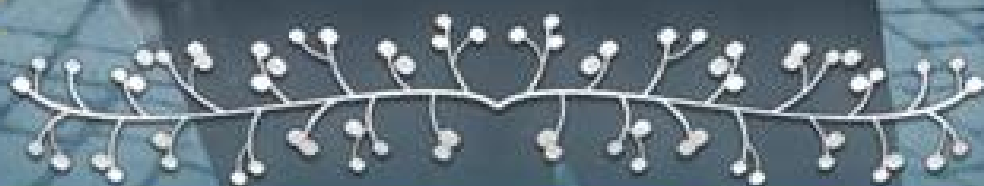


A Winter
COURTSHIP



GIGI RIVERS

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A huge thanks to the author community who have been so welcoming, provide so much support, and who are so open and willing to share their knowledge.

A lonesome village blacksmith.

A nymph determined to court him.

An MM fantasy winter holiday novella.

Blacksmith Ulrich struggles to connect with those in his mountain village. But at least he has his pet reindeer to keep him company through the long winter. Then one day, a nymph approaches him and declares he is courting Ulrich. He calls Ulrich “pretty.” Ulrich can’t comprehend what is happening. How can anyone call him, the uncouth, hulking blacksmith, pretty? And why does Ulrich like it?

Lutoth is part wind nymph, part mountain nymph. He has spent his whole life travelling. Now he yearns for a place to call home. He sees the blacksmith and immediately recognises him as the boy he knew years ago. His first crush. In that moment, Lutoth decides he will court Ulrich and make the man his.

However, Lutoth has never stayed still. In fact, some believe his wind nymph blood makes him incapable of it. Can Lutoth give up his wandering ways so they can be together?

Content notes: sexual content, family conflict, and swearing.

CHAPTER
ONE

“**W**hat have you got there, Ethel?” Ulrich patted Ethel’s white coat as she nosed at the spindly pale-green, almost white plants growing in tufts around the base of a tree. “Did you find some reindeer lichen?”

Unsurprisingly, his reindeer didn’t answer; instead, she continued chewing whilst searching for more to eat.

The two stood in the forest just beyond the village of Ores. Not a single cloud floated in the sky above. The weak winter sun bathed the snow-filled forests in a bright, soft light. Around them, the forest lay still and silent. No sound but Ethel’s chewing.

“We should head back soon. I need to work in the smithy.” Ulrich’s breaths rose in puffs before his face.

Ethel kept eating.

“Fine.” Ulrich patted her back. “A couple more minutes, then.” Ulrich rubbed his gloved hands together. “But then we have to go back to the smithy. Can’t spend the whole day out here. Even if we might like to.”

Ulrich liked being in the forest. Out here he could just be himself, completely at ease. No one out here to judge him. No one here to think him odd for keeping a pet reindeer. Out here he didn’t struggle to awkwardly chit-chat with others. Out here he wasn’t reminded of how little he connected to those in Ores. In the wintry wilds, it was just Ulrich and Ethel and the serenity and peace the forest gave.

He rested his hand on Ethel's velvet antler. "Your antlers are much bigger this year." He marvelled at their size. "Wonder how big they'll be next year?" Every year in late spring, her antlers dropped. Then they grew back, larger than the year before.

After a few more minutes of grazing, they began down the trail leading to the village.

Ulrich brushed away snowflakes around Ethel's snout, which had attached when she'd been nosing for lichen.

"Pretty today in the forest."

Trees stood mostly bare at this time of year. A slight breeze began to blow, causing the treetops to sway and creak.

"It's nice to be out on such a lovely winter's day, isn't it?" Ulrich said to Ethel.

"It is," a lilting voice answered on the other side of Ulrich.

Ulrich startled, almost falling into the snow. A firm hand on his elbow steadied him. He turned towards the voice.

A mountain nymph strolled beside him on the path. The hand on his elbow prompted Ulrich to keep walking. Long white hair stirred around the nymph's slender shoulders, contrasting with his dark-grey skin. Eyes of almost white, circled by thin lines of black, stared at Ulrich.

The nymph wore nothing but a pair of dark breeches. His lithe torso and feet remained completely bare, not at all troubled by the winter chill. After a moment, he dropped his hand from Ulrich's elbow.

"What?" Ulrich hadn't even heard the mountain nymph approach. Ulrich knew oreads moved silently and could camouflage with the mountains and forests, but this seemed extreme.

"I agreed with you," the oread said casually as if he hadn't just appeared like magic. "It is a lovely winter's day." He gestured with a graceful wave of his hand at the scenery around them. "A perfect day in the mountains." His gaze

focused on Ulrich. “And what lovely company to share it with.”

Ulrich frowned. Why would the oread refer to him as lovely company? Was the oread mocking him? He pulled in his shoulders beneath the bulky overcoat.

Ethel honked, a deep, throaty sound. Ulrich placed a hand on her fur.

“Interesting choice of pet,” the oread said. “I’ve never known a human to keep a reindeer before.” He laughed, a light, breathy sound.

“Ethel,” Ulrich said. “Her name is Ethel.”

“And why did you decide to keep Ethel as a pet?” the oread asked.

“It was winter, and... And... She was half-starved,” Ulrich stammered defensively. “I had to take her in.” He wasn’t great at speaking with people at the best of times. But talking to someone he didn’t know, who’d appeared out of nowhere, asking him strange questions, left him flustered and unnerved.

“She came into the village, searching for food.” Ulrich remembered the sight of Ethel, walking around on wobbly, too-thin legs. Skin and fur had clung to her ribs. She’d stared up at him with big brown eyes. Of course Ulrich had taken her in. “She would have died.” He’d brought Ethel into his house, moving the furniture to make space for her by the stove.

“Don’t humans eat reindeer?” the mountain nymph asked, a hint of amusement in his melodic voice.

“She was just a calf,” Ulrich said.

“And how many years ago did she stumble into Ores?” the nymph asked.

“Four.”

“She couldn’t return to the forest in the spring?” the oread asked, strikingly pale eyes boring into him.

“I took her out into the forest,” Ulrich said.

At the time, Ulrich's heart had been heavy. It had been nice to have a companion. She was someone he felt at ease with, someone he could share the long, lonely nights with. He could talk to her and she wouldn't judge him. He hadn't wanted to imagine a life after Ethel. He didn't want to be completely alone again.

"I brought her to a herd of reindeer. I tried to leave her with them, but she followed me back."

"How sweet," the oread said.

Ulrich's face burned, but when he looked at the oread, he didn't think he was being teased. He smiled softly and kindly at Ulrich.

Ulrich didn't know what was happening. Ulrich rubbed Ethel's shoulder, feeling the muscles and shoulder blade moving beneath skin and fur. She bumped her big body into his, rubbing against Ulrich's side as if sensing he needed her sturdy comfort.

"It's the beginning of the Winter Solstice season today," the oread said. "It is exactly four weeks until the Solstice." The nymph stopped walking and faced Ulrich.

Ulrich stopped as well, not sure what else to do. "Well, yes. It is," Ulrich said, trying to follow the abrupt topic change.

"It is custom in your village to give Solstice gifts throughout the season."

Ulrich nodded.

"That is why I am here today. To give my gift to you." He held out a single blue flower with a thin red bow wrapped around the stem. "It's a wrin flower."

Ulrich stared at the flower. He looked into the nymph's serious face. Why would the nymph give him a Solstice gift? He never got Solstice gifts.

"Will you take it?" the oread asked, stepping closer. The top of the nymph's head only just reached Ulrich's mouth.

Despite his uncertainty, Ulrich took the lovely flower, so small in his gloved hand. Could this sweet, dainty gift really be for him? His throat tightened. He glanced at the oread's face. He didn't seem like he was joking.

"In oread culture, we give wrin flowers to those we admire." The oread stepped closer to him and wrapped his hand around Ulrich's wrist. His calloused fingers sought Ulrich's skin beneath the sleeve of his coat.

Ulrich stopped breathing as the oread stroked the sensitive part of his body. It had been years since he'd last been touched.

"The name of the flower comes from a human named Wrin. He was one of the travellers to the Norend Mountains. One of the original settlers of Ores," the nymph said. "An oread gave him the flower because he admired him. They fell in love and lived happily together."

Ulrich's mouth moved, but no sound came out.

"The flower's pretty," the oread said. "Like you."

"Pretty?" Ulrich choked.

The nymph smiled. "Yes. Pretty."

Ulrich was not pretty. He was gruff and big and brooding and hairy. Definitely not pretty.

No, this strange, perplexing mountain nymph was pretty with his delicate features; small, short frame; and soft-looking white hair.

The oread stepped away, dropping Ulrich's wrist. "I'll see you again soon, Ulrich. I very much look forward to it." Then he glided away, disappearing into the forest.

It took Ulrich several moments to collect himself. He looked to Ethel, who stood beside him, staring after the nymph. "What just happened?"

CHAPTER
TWO

Ulrich no longer paid any attention to the forest around him as he and Ethel walked back to the village.

“How did he know my name?” Ulrich tried to think, but he was certain he’d never met the oread before. He was sure he’d remember someone so stunning. And peculiar.

Several oreads, or those with oread heritage, lived in Ores. And sometimes oreads who lived in the valley came to visit the village. But Ulrich had no memory of ever meeting this particular mountain nymph. As a child, he’d played in the valley, but that was twenty years ago. And in recent years, he’d had little to do with the oreads who didn’t live or frequent the village.

“A wrin flower. That’s what he called it.” Ulrich stared at the flower. Its pale-blue petals contrasted with the dark brown of his glove. So delicate and lovely.

No one had ever given Ulrich something like this before. He could put it in his cabin. He’d need to get a vase, since he didn’t own one, but a cup might suffice. It would be the most beautiful thing in his home. His heart fluttered at the idea of the flower sitting on his table in his cabin, brightening the room.

“But why would he give this to me?” He glanced at Ethel. “Do you think this is a joke? Do you think he could be mocking me? Maybe he thinks it’s funny to give a big, brutish human such a nice gift.” He gave a bitter laugh.

An uncouth, hulking man like him didn't receive pretty flowers.

Still... What if it wasn't a joke? The nymph hadn't seemed to be joking or mocking. What if this truly was a proper Solstice gift?

Ulrich's throat tightened. "What did he say about oreads giving this flower to people they admire? Do you think that means he admires me? No!" He shook his head. "That idea is absurd! Don't you think?"

Ethel looked up at him with her big brown eyes. She blinked.

"Exactly. He couldn't admire me. Not rough, awkward me." He swallowed. "We don't even know each other! Then why give me this flower?"

The flower's pretty. Like you. The oread's voice echoed in his ears.

His face heated, and the tips of his ears burned. "And what was he on about me being pretty?" He barked a laugh. "I'm not pretty. Why would he call me that?"

Ethel's snout pressed against his coat. He patted her, his rattled nerves calming.

"And he said he'd see me again soon. Could he mean it? When? And why?"

He had too many questions and no answers. And the unease and uncertainty slithered through his veins.

The trees thinned. The wooden cabins of Ores became visible amongst the snow. Spires of grey rose from the chimneys. The smell of the wood-fired smoke drifted through the frosty air. Forests encircled the village. The mountains rose behind them, white peaks piercing the pale sky.

Edwin, a botanist, and Sinoe, an oread healer, headed towards Ulrich on their way to the forest. Ulrich braced himself to talk with them. The two were nice enough. But that didn't make him better at talking.

“Morning, Ulrich,” Edwin said. “Morning, Ethel.” Edwin reached forward to pat her head. She lifted her snout, seeking treats in his gloved hand but, finding none, settled for head scratches instead.

“Morning,” Ulrich said. “Happy Solstice.”

“Happy Solstice,” Sinoe said.

“We’re going into the forest to sketch rare fungi I’ve never seen before!” Edwin said, excitement lacing his voice. “Sinoe told me all about them.”

“It only grows in caves.” Sinoe held up a lantern. “We brought a lantern so Edwin can see.”

“Well, enjoy.” Ulrich was about to say goodbye and carry on, when his gaze snagged on the flower, wrapped in red ribbon, pinned to Edwin’s coat. A wrin flower. Exactly like the one he had just received.

“And you’ve been for a morning walk with Ethel?” Sinoe asked.

“Yes.” Had Sinoe given Edwin the flower as a Solstice gift?

“Did you meet anyone interesting?” Sinoe asked, voice soft.

Ulrich frowned, puzzled at the unusual question.

“What?” Then Ulrich realised Sinoe stared at the wrin flower in Ulrich’s hand.

“You know, wrin flowers are very rare.” Sinoe tilted his head. Long hair slid against his shoulders at the movement. “They bloom only in winter and are not easy to acquire.” He smiled gently. “It is a special gift. One that oreads only give to those we greatly admire.”

Ulrich tucked the hand behind him. He cleared his throat, staring at his feet. “I need to go. Ethel needs to be fed and watered.”

“Oh. Of course.” Sinoe paused. “I’m sorry, Ulrich. I shouldn’t have pried.”

“No. No. It’s fine.” He smiled tightly. “Just got to get back.”

Head down, he walked briskly away.

Ulrich didn’t know how to explain the odd encounter he’d had that morning. And he didn’t know what to think about the wrin flower being rare, difficult to acquire, and given by oreads to someone they *greatly* admired.

None of it made any sense.

CHAPTER
THREE

“Happy Solstice, Ulrich,” Odara called out as Ulrich walked past.

The older woman sat in a chair outside her cabin, head tilted to the sun as if soaking in the winter day. Even though she was wearing a woollen dress, she wiggled her bare toes amongst the powdery white, giving away her oread heritage.

Ulrich suppressed a shiver. “Happy Solstice.” He paused, even though he desperately wanted to retreat to the safety of his smithy, away from all the peculiarity of the morning. But he didn’t want to appear rude.

“A truly wonderful time of year.” She sighed contentedly. “A time to celebrate when the oreads rescued the human travellers who’d gotten lost in these mountains all those years ago. My favourite time of year.”

He nodded.

“And have you noticed more oreads in the village of late?”

“I have,” he said. In the past year, a couple of oreads, including Sinoe, had moved to Ores. And more oreads seemed to be visiting regularly.

Odara smiled. “It is a rekindling of the old relationship between oreads and humans. A return to the old ways.”

“That would be nice.” Ulrich wondered if the oread he’d met had ever been in the village. Maybe he’d seen Ulrich and asked his name.

“I was thinking of stopping by the smithy later,” Odara said. “I wanted to ask if you could make me some metal hoops for the grandchildren to play with. A stack of them that can be thrown over a small metal pole. I got some for the younglings last year, but they were made out of wood. The younglings left them out in winter, and they got lost in the snow.” She chuckled. “By the spring, they were rotten and ruined.”

“I know the type of toy you mean. Come by and we can work something out. I should get going now,” Ulrich said and continued.

“Be well, Ulrich,” Odara called out.

He passed other villagers and nodded at them, wishing them a happy Solstice. Thankfully no one stopped to speak to him.

He didn’t know why he always struggled to connect with others in the village. Perhaps it was because he seemed strange. The big blacksmith who had a pet reindeer. Or perhaps his large stature intimidated others. Or it could just be his incompetence at conversing.

No matter the reason, the result was simple enough. He had no one in the village he was close to. No one to share a meal with. No one to invite to his cabin for an afternoon. No one to talk with during the long winter nights.

At least he had Ethel.

Up ahead he spotted his father, shuffling slowly through the village, leaning on his cane, no doubt on the way to the village store.

Ulrich’s shoulders tensed as they approached each other. He kept his hand with the flower tucked out of view. He braced himself. “Morning, Father. Happy Solstice.”

“Morning,” his father grumbled.

“I... I could have picked up some things from the store for you. Save you a trip through the snow.”

His father’s lip curled. “I can handle a little snow, boy. I’m not soft.” His father spat the words. “I can take care of

myself.”

“Of course.” Ulrich stared at the snow by his father’s feet. “Sorry.” He didn’t know why he’d suggested it. He knew how his father would respond.

“Still haven’t decided to eat the reindeer, then.” His father chuckled.

Ulrich swallowed. He’d heard the joke before. Many times.

“Well, maybe she’ll make a nice addition for the Solstice Eve feast,” his father said. “We can butcher her up and eat her then.” He laughed.

Bile rose in Ulrich’s throat. He pressed his hand to Ethel’s fur, glad she couldn’t understand his father’s words.

“I wonder if your brother will visit us this year for the Solstice. Or perhaps he’ll stay in Bordertown like last year. Ungrateful brat. Too soft for the mountains, that boy.” He spat on the ground. “Always has been. He is much better suited to Bordertown and all their city ways. Better off with your mother’s family.”

“He had to work last year,” Ulrich said.

“That’s what he told us.” His father shook his head. “After all I’ve done for him, I still can’t believe he’d abandon me. It was hard work looking after two young boys after your mother died. But I did it, and how does he repay me? By leaving. Too much like his mother.”

Ulrich’s hand tightened in Ethel’s fur.

“I should never have married that woman. Too pretty. Too dainty. Too weak to survive these mountains. But I was caught up in her beauty,” he said. “If I had been thinking clearly, I wouldn’t have married her. Then I wouldn’t have been left with two boys to look after on my own.”

She didn’t choose to leave us. She died.

“I should have married someone from Ores,” his father went on. “Not some small-boned, part-nymph chit from Bordertown. Only the tough survive here. Mark my words:

don't get caught up in some pretty creature's spell. That's my warning to you, Ulrich." His father stared at Ulrich as if waiting for Ulrich to respond.

Ulrich said nothing.

"Well, you best be off," his father said. "Already a bit late to be starting work, isn't it?" His father glanced at the sun. "Wouldn't want anyone stopping at the smithy and not finding you there."

Ulrich nodded. "I'll go now," he said, and Ulrich and Ethel walked off.

Ulrich knew no one would be waiting at the smithy, and even if someone had turned up, they could wait a few minutes or just come back later. It wouldn't be a big deal.

Still, he couldn't help but feel that he'd failed his father. Again. It was like every time he stood before the man, Ulrich felt ten years old and two inches tall. Like he was a little boy, desperate for a word of approval. Approval that never came.

CHAPTER
FOUR

It was finally happening! After a year of planning, Lutoth was finally courting Ulrich!

The wind danced along his skin as Lutoth strolled through the forest. A giddy smile danced on his lips. A mixture of nerves and excitement had flowed through his blood as he approached the man.

But it had all gone well! He'd spoken to Ulrich. He'd heard the man's deep, rumbly voice that warmed Lutoth's insides until he thought he'd melt like a puddle into the snow. Ulrich's dark-brown eyes had stared at Lutoth. And Ulrich had taken Lutoth's Solstice gift.

It had been everything he'd hoped for. Although, perhaps not everything.

The man had seemed confused and unnerved, not exactly pleased with Lutoth's approach. But he'd no doubt just been surprised and taken aback. Perhaps he'd be happy to see Lutoth tomorrow. He hoped Ulrich would be happy to see him.

Lutoth practically vibrated at the thought of seeing Ulrich again and presenting him with the second Solstice gift.

Eleven months he'd waited. Eleven months since he'd first laid eyes on Ulrich. Although, that wasn't true. It had been the first time he'd laid eyes on Ulrich in about twenty years.

Eleven months ago, he'd been at the Solstice festivities in Ores, looking around whilst standing by a firepit. He'd been with Sinoe, Yael, and Yurem, oreads from the valley, as well as Sinoe's new companion, Edwin.

The others spoke about some potter and Ori, another oread from the valley. But Lutoth barely paid the conversation any attention. Instead, he fixated on one person. On the big, hulking man standing with a reindeer.

At first, Lutoth couldn't explain why he was so captivated. The man seemed withdrawn from the others in the village, his expression sullen and shoulders hunched. Like he couldn't wait to leave. Lutoth felt drawn to him. But he didn't know why.

Then the man looked at the reindeer. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of oats to feed her. The man's demeanour relaxed, eyes softening. He smiled.

Lutoth's chest tightened almost painfully.

He knew that smile.

It had been about twenty years, but he would never forget that smile. He'd been but a youngling of fourteen. Back then, the boy would smile at Lutoth just like he smiled at the reindeer. A sweet smile. Lutoth remembered that smile and how it had awakened feelings and yearnings inside him.

His first crush.

The burly man looked nothing like the boy he'd played with when he was fourteen. Back then, the man had been on the small side. But since then he'd grown and grown, amassing muscle and facial hair. But Lutoth knew it was him.

He knew it was Ulrich.

Still, Lutoth had to be sure. "Edwin, why is that big man feeding that reindeer?" Lutoth asked.

"That's Ulrich, the blacksmith, with his reindeer, Ethel," Edwin said.

"Ethel?" Lutoth asked.

"Ulrich saved her when she was a calf," Edwin said. "She was starving. He looked after her, and then she wouldn't leave him."

“Interesting.” Lutoth watched Ulrich feed Ethel more oats from his coat pocket, continuing to smile at her.

Lutoth wanted that smile. Wanted it to be his again, just like that one summer so many years ago.

In the years since, he’d thought fondly of the human. Had Ulrich ever thought of Lutoth? Had he even remembered him?

Sometimes, Lutoth wondered if something more could have come from his crush if he’d remained in the valley. But he couldn’t change the past.

Throughout the rest of that day in Ores, he’d watched Ulrich. By the time Lutoth had left the Solstice festivities, he’d made a decision. He wanted to make Ulrich his.

Lutoth longed to touch the dark-brown beard and rub his face against it. He wanted to stroke his muscled arms and curl his hand around Ulrich’s thick neck, gripping it as he pressed their lips together. But he didn’t want just one night or a quick tumble.

He’d had enough of that. He wanted more. He wanted a man who lived and breathed these mountains and forests. A man who stayed in one place his entire life. A man with whom he could make a home. And he was sure that man was Ulrich. He knew it deep in his gut.

CHAPTER
FIVE

Lutoth continued walking towards the valley. He reached the cliff's edge and climbed down, his textured hands gripping the rough grey stone. Lutoth's muscles flexed as he climbed, the wind supporting him.

After seeing Ulrich at the Solstice festivities eleven months ago, he'd returned to the valley where his father lived.

"I saw a human in the village," Lutoth said, trying to suppress the excitement bursting through his veins. "I met him years ago when I was visiting you." They sat together on a woven mat on the cave floor, eating dried fish by a fire. "I think I want to approach him."

"Hmmm." His father smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes.

Lutoth stopped eating. "Is that a problem?" Why would his father not want him with a human?

"No! Not a problem." His father hesitated. "Just make sure you are certain. Okay?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's just, you wouldn't want him to fall in love with you, only to have you leave with the wind. Wouldn't want to leave the poor man heartbroken." He gave Lutoth a sad smile and bit into the fish, chewing slowly, eyes full of shadows.

Lutoth sat there speechless. Was that what his father thought of him? That he would woo this man only to leave him?

But that was exactly what his mother had done to his father.

Lutoth reached the valley floor and walked through the trees towards his father's cave.

Over the years, he'd heard fragments of what had passed between his mother and father before his birth.

"I'd scaled a mountain and stood on the peak, gazing out over the mountains and valleys before me," his father had told him. "I stood alone. Then a gust of wind blew.

"I turned, and there she was. A sylph, a spirit of the air and wind. Your mother. I'd never seen anyone as beautiful." He'd smiled at the memory. "I'd never met a sylph before. The air seemed alive around her. Her hair and dress floated on the breeze. It was as if she was at one with the wind. She smiled at me, and I was lost."

His father and mother had fallen for each other. But everyone warned his father: "She is a sylph. You cannot keep her. Sylphs travel with the wind. They do not stay in one place." Then his mother had gotten pregnant. And one day, when she was six months along, she'd left. No word. No goodbye to his father. Just left.

"Your father was so heartbroken," his auntie Mila had told him. "He loved her so much."

As he'd grown, Lutoth and his mother had moved from place to place. One day when he was nine, they'd come back. He'd walked through the valley, keeping close to his mother, his hand in hers.

They passed oreads, who watched them and whispered. Then an oread came toward them, looking between his mother and Lutoth. Finally, his gaze fixed on Lutoth, tears brimming in his eyes.

"Is this my son?" the strange oread choked.

"It is," his mother said, voice strained, hand tightening on Lutoth's.

The man knelt and pulled Lutoth into a hug.

Lutoth hadn't known what to do. It had been a strange and awkward experience for Lutoth, meeting the oread who was his father. It took a while before he warmed up.

Over the years, he and his father had bits and pieces of time together. During one of their visits, his father asked his mother for Lutoth to stay with him.

"Lutoth is a sylph!" Lutoth heard his mother saying. "He is not capable of staying with his feet firmly in one place."

And so Lutoth continued to travel with her, and when he was old enough, he travelled alone. But after so many years, he found himself growing weary of always moving. He found himself yearning for a home, somewhere to rest his feet. Somewhere secure and safe amongst the mountains and rocks. And he wanted someone to share a home with.

He'd been feeling that way when he visited Ores eleven months ago. He saw Ulrich, and all the pieces slotted into place. Like fate. And he decided he wanted a home in Ores with Ulrich.

Still, after his father's words, he doubted himself. So he didn't approach Ulrich.

He needed to prove to his father, to the others, and to himself that he wouldn't leave. That he was not fickle and could remain constant. So he remained in the valley for the past eleven months, planning his courtship without visiting Ores or seeing Ulrich.

Instead, he'd used that time to plan a proper Solstice courtship. And today he'd finally put it into action.

He spotted Auntie Mila, his cousin, Sero, and Sero's partner, Aryn, speaking with Lutoth's father at the entrance of his father's cave.

"How did it go?" Auntie Mila asked as he approached.

"Well," Lutoth said. "I think." He laughed, giving a nervous smile. "Ulrich seemed surprised, but he took the wrin flower."

Auntie Mila clapped her hands together as an excited noise escaped her.

“That’s good, son,” his father said, beaming. “Very good.”

“He did seem a little shocked and taken aback.” Lutoth hoped that was all right. He’d never been serious about anyone before. He’d had lovers. Many. But only temporary. He didn’t want Ulrich to be temporary.

“It isn’t surprising that he was shocked,” Sero said. “He keeps to himself a lot, and being courted no doubt startled him.”

“I’m sure it went well.” Lutoth’s father squeezed Lutoth’s arm.

“Of course it did! Why wouldn’t Ulrich want someone as beautiful as Lutoth?” Auntie Mila said.

“Was meeting him different from how you imagined? Twenty years is a long time,” Sero asked.

Lutoth thought of the big man’s shyness, how easily he’d blushed, and how sweet he’d been to his reindeer. Still so gentle.

“He was just as I remembered,” Lutoth said softly. “Although much bigger, obviously.” He paused. “But maybe I’d thought, or hoped, he’d recognise me.” Maybe smile at Lutoth like he once had. “But I’m in no rush. I can be patient. I’m determined to win his heart.”

“I’ve never spoken to him much. To be honest, he’s always seemed a little intimidating to me,” Aryn said. “So big and brooding. Whenever I walk past the smithy, he’s always pounding away and grunting.”

Lutoth hadn’t seen Ulrich at the smithy, but he suddenly felt a desire to drop in and watch the man at work.

“He gets sweaty when he works,” Sero said, a twinkle in his eyes as if he knew exactly where Lutoth’s mind had gone. “And sometimes when he finishes, he takes off his shirt and wipes it across his chest.”

“He may look intimidating, but he’s just shy,” Auntie Mila said. “He’s just a big bear who needs some love.”

“And Lutoth is more than happy to give him some love,” Sero said with a laugh.

“And he understood everything you said?” his father asked.

“He did. Thank you all for the lessons,” Lutoth said to Aryn, Sero, and Auntie Mila.

Last year, his skill at speaking the human tongue hadn’t been great. He hadn’t grown up in the valley near Ores, where nymph younglings often learned the human tongue from playing with humans.

Or they had years ago. No human children played in the valley anymore.

But over the years, he’d learned a little of the human tongue. He’d picked up some from that summer with Ulrich. Then he’d travelled. He’d met humans and visited villages. Sometimes he even stayed a while near human settlements.

But even last year, he’d had to think carefully, putting together the words to make a sentence in his head before speaking. But he had wanted to converse and speak fluently with Ulrich. So he’d practised constantly for the past eleven months.

“You did very well learning,” his father said. “Shows resolve and dedication.”

Pride bloomed in Lutoth’s chest.

For the first few months, his father had seemed to expect Lutoth to leave at any moment, no matter what Lutoth said. He’d seemed surprised every day when he saw his son. That had stung. Now his father seemed to believe Lutoth was here to stay.

It had been the longest Lutoth had ever stayed in one place. Although, over the last eleven months, sometimes he’d heard the call of the wind. Then he would take off, climbing mountains and running along the flats, the wind guiding and

lifting his feet. But only for a few days. He'd always returned to the valley.

But that was behind him now. He'd weaned himself off it. Three days ago he'd flown with the wind one last time. Now he needed to focus on Ulrich and remain in the valley and Ores. He needed to prove to everyone that even though he was part-sylph, he could be constant and true. And he would do it. For Ulrich.

CHAPTER
SIX

“Good morning.”

Once again, Ulrich startled when the oread appeared beside him and Ethel during their morning walk.

This time, he recovered quicker. “Morning.” Ulrich hadn’t been certain he’d ever see the oread again. The day before had been such a strange and otherworldly experience.

Ulrich wondered if he’d somehow imagined it all. That seemed more probable than a nymph appearing and giving him a Solstice gift. He just couldn’t wrap his head around the idea that this beautiful oread had sought him out, spoken to him, and given him a Solstice gift.

Yet here the nymph was again.

Unlike the previous day, the oread wore his hair in a plait, with dried reeds and berries woven elaborately throughout. Snowflakes drifted down, catching in the nymph’s white hair. Others landed on his pale skin, melting into drops of water that glistened. But if they troubled the oread, he didn’t show it.

Stunning. Absolutely stunning. And he is here for me. He sought me out. He wants to talk to me.

Ulrich’s chest lightened.

“Here is your Solstice gift.” The nymph held out three large, dried fish dangling from a rope. “These fish can only be caught in the summer months in certain lakes in the

mountains. I caught them and smoked them especially for you.”

“For me?” Ulrich asked, needing to confirm it. Because why would he catch these fish for Ulrich?

“Food as a Solstice gift shows a desire to provide and nurture the other.” He paused, voice dropping low. “I want to nurture and provide for you, Ulrich.”

Provide and nurture? Ulrich stopped in his tracks. “Who are you?” Ulrich asked. “How do you know my name? And what is going on?”

“My name is Lutoth.” He smiled. “And I’m courting you, Ulrich.”

“Courting?”

Lutoth nodded. “Every day between now and Winter Solstice, I will give you a Solstice gift. To court you. Someone as pretty as you deserves to be properly courted,” Lutoth said.

Ulrich’s mouth dropped open. “But I’m not pretty!” he said. “I’m twice your size. I’m gruff and hulking and uncouth. I’m tough and... And...odd...and awkward and...”

“Pretty.”

“Have you seen me?” Ulrich gestured to his body.

Lutoth froze. A slow smile spread across his face. His gaze travelled up and down Ulrich. “I see you, Ulrich,” Lutoth said, voice husky.

Heat pooled in Ulrich’s gut at the desire in Lutoth’s white gaze.

Oh. That’s what you want.

His heart sank.

Suddenly everything made sense. The nymph desired him. And Ulrich understood desire.

He supposed it shouldn’t surprise him that Lutoth wanted a quick fuck with the coarse, brutish human. *Maybe this is what*

the Solstice gifts mean. Maybe courting is just a convoluted way to get me into bed.

He shouldn't feel disappointed to realise that all Lutoth wanted was a quick tumble. What else could he want Ulrich for? Someone like Lutoth would never actually admire or want him for anything else.

“But I'd like to see even more of you. Every lovely inch of you.” Lutoth enunciated each word, gaze hot and full of hunger.

And despite his disappointment, Ulrich's dick took notice, perking up. Because he couldn't deny Lutoth was attractive. And it'd been a while since he'd had sex.

Lutoth stepped closer until they stood only a breath apart. “I see you perfectly, Ulrich. And I'm going to court you thoroughly.”

Ulrich inhaled sharply, and the scent of Lutoth, like a brisk wind on a winter's day, filled his nose.

“I'm not some fancy lady who needs to be courted,” Ulrich protested weakly.

If Lutoth just wanted a quick fuck, all he needed to do was suggest it. Ulrich would be more than willing to take Lutoth to his bed, or the nearest cave. It had been a long time since Ulrich had experienced the touch of a man.

Then they'd continue with their lives. Separately. And Lutoth wouldn't want to see him ever again. Or who knew, maybe he'd want another fuck with Ulrich from time to time. But only ever that.

“But I am getting ahead of myself.” Lutoth stepped back with a slight shake of his head. “It is only the second day. I am going to court you, and I am going to do it properly, my sweet, gentle giant. I will show you how much I care for you and show you my affections are true. I wish to win your heart.”

Ulrich didn't speak for several seconds. “Win my heart?”

“Yes,” Lutoth said softly. “I want to win your heart.” Lutoth held up the fish. “Will you accept my gift?”

Shocked, Ulrich reached out and took the fish. “Thank you.”

Lutoth’s smile blinded him. “Until tomorrow, then.”

“Until tomorrow,” Ulrich said.

“Goodbye, Ulrich.” Lutoth reached out and patted Ethel. “Goodbye, Ethel.”

Then he was gone, disappearing almost instantly amongst the trees. He’d never seen an oread move so swiftly and silently.

After several moments, Ulrich spoke, “What?”

Ethel lifted her head and gazed at him.

“I don’t understand.” Ulrich stroked Ethel’s cheek, slightly damp from the snow. “Why would he want to win my heart? Do you think he means it?”

He couldn’t wrap his head around it.

“And he keeps saying I’m pretty. Perhaps he doesn’t properly understand what that means in the human tongue.” Although, Lutoth spoke it well enough.

Everyone who knew Ulrich thought of him as the coarse blacksmith. Ulrich with his rough, calloused hands. He was always covered in sweat, soot, and smoke. Not to mention he lived with a reindeer.

No one wanted him for anything more than a quick tugging.

When he’d visited his brother in Bordertown a couple of years ago, he’d gone to this particular pub. Ulrich had been there several times before when he visited Bordertown. His brother had told him he could find company there. He’d sat at an empty table, nervous like he always was at this pub. He’d looked around at all the city folk, feeling too big and too coarse compared to everyone else in their meticulous, fancy clothes.

He didn’t know what he’d hoped for that night. But if he was being completely honest with himself, he’d wanted more

than sex. He'd wanted a little human connection.

It would have been nice to strike up a conversation with someone, feel comfortable talking to them, feel at ease for once. They could pass a few hours in each other's company and have a pleasant night together. Perhaps even a few nights before he returned to Ores.

A well-dressed man had approached him.

"What's a big, strong, blacksmith from the mountains doing in Bordertown?" the man had marvelled, gazing upon Ulrich and running his hand up Ulrich's thigh.

Like all the others Ulrich had bedded before, the man hadn't seemed too keen on conversation or getting to know Ulrich. Still, if all Ulrich could get was a fuck, he'd take it.

The man had taken Ulrich back to a room he'd rented for the occasion. Ulrich wished he hadn't. They'd fucked. And the man had called Ulrich all sorts of names whilst Ulrich had fucked him.

A brute. A dirty beast. An ogre.

Afterwards, he'd looked at Ulrich with so much disdain and disgust. He'd wiped his hands on a fancy-looking handkerchief, as if trying to wipe away the grime of Ulrich. Ulrich had dressed and left, head down, sick and ashamed of himself.

That had been his worst experience in Bordertown. Although, it had one similarity with all the other times. People wanted to fuck Ulrich. He was good enough for that. But afterwards, his bed partner wanted nothing to do with him. They wanted him out of their sight.

And it wasn't like he'd expected to meet the love of his life in the pub. But some sort of closeness or intimacy would have been nice. A few smiles between gentle kisses. A little affection and gentleness. Even if just for a moment.

That was the last time he'd sought out a companion. And perhaps that was why he was less keen to visit his brother in Bordertown again.

But Lutoth didn't seem like those men. He clearly desired Ulrich. But he hadn't made Ulrich feel like all he was good for was a fuck. In fact, he'd given him gifts, talked to him kindly, and called him sweet, pretty, and gentle. He'd said he wanted to win Ulrich's heart and show how much he cared for him.

Could it possibly be true? But what did Ulrich have to offer the beautiful nymph? How had he managed to catch Lutoth's eye?

"If he comes back tomorrow, I'll talk to him properly. It's just hard to keep a clear head when he's around. He's quite domineering and forceful for one so small." Ulrich felt drawn to that. It called to him and made him yearn to follow him. And it felt vaguely familiar somehow.

Ethel's body bumped into him.

"I'll try my best, Ethel, but it's hard. You know I'm not good at talking to others."

Ethel bumped into him again.

"Everyone except you. You're easy to talk to." He stroked her ear. "You're a great listener."

His mind kept spinning, going over the interaction again and again.

For the first time in a long time, he began to hope he might find some connection with someone. He hoped for gentleness and affection. Perhaps even some sweet kisses.

And despite all his uncertainty, he was looking forward to tomorrow. He smiled.

CHAPTER
SEVEN

Up ahead, Lutoth spotted Ulrich and Ethel walking on the snow-covered path. They moved slowly, taking their time as they strolled amongst the evergreens.

“You’ve already eaten all the reindeer lichen here,” Ulrich said, voice deep and rumbling.

Lutoth fell into step with Ulrich.

“You’ll need to look in other places. Or maybe we have to take different trails if you want to find more,” Ulrich said. “Perhaps you’ve eaten them all along here.”

Lutoth smiled. He noticed that when Ulrich spoke to Ethel, he did so with ease, completely comfortable with his reindeer. Lutoth hoped Ulrich would be as comfortable with him one day. “Morning, Ulrich and Ethel.”

Ulrich turned. Brown eyes beneath bushy brows widened. Lutoth wanted to laugh and kiss the man’s surprised face. He’d so wanted to kiss him yesterday. But he’d needed to control himself. He wanted to court Ulrich properly. But being so close to Ulrich made it difficult.

“Happy Solstice! Today your Solstice gift is something for Ethel.” Lutoth held up a large paper bag. “My auntie ordered it from Bordertown. It’s a special feed. A mix of specially grown flowers for prized horses, but it can also be given to reindeer.”

“Prized horses?” Ulrich asked, taking the bag.

“They are horses lords or ladies own. It’s important that the horses are healthy, beautiful, and strong, as they are

entered in competitions. I thought it was the perfect gift for Ethel. Since she deserves the best and needs to be kept healthy, beautiful, and strong.”

It had been Aryn who had told Lutoth about prized horses when helping Lutoth come up with gift ideas for Ulrich. Aryn had said some people in Bordertown spent lots of money on feed, stabling, equipment, and decorations for their horses.

“I know how much you care about Ethel. I wanted to show you that I care for what you care for,” Lutoth said.

Ulrich’s eyes softened as he glanced at Ethel.

“Maybe you could feed her some now,” Lutoth suggested.

“All right.” The paper crinkled as Ulrich reached into the bag. He took out a handful and held it out to Ethel. Her eyes perked up, and she honked as she moved towards the outstretched hand, gobbling up the food.

Ulrich smiled.

Lutoth’s heart melted. “That’s the smile I remember.”

“Remember?” Ulrich asked.

“It’s how I knew it was you after all these years,” Lutoth said. “Your smile.”

“When did we meet?” Ulrich asked.

“We met as younglings. About twenty years ago. We played together for one summer. Or a little longer than one summer. I was the only oread who didn’t speak the human tongue, since I hadn’t grown up in the valley.” Lutoth stepped towards him. “Do you remember?” he asked, heart in his throat.

“That was you? Of course I remember. You talked constantly, and I never understood a word,” Ulrich said, awe in his voice. “But I followed you. You’d point somewhere and lead the way, and I’d follow.”

“Yes.” Lutoth laughed. “I’ve always been a bit bossy.” He’d worried that whilst the memory of Ulrich had burned

itself into Lutoth's mind, Ulrich may have simply forgotten him in the flow of time.

But Ulrich remembered him.

"You kept calling out 'hello' to me," Ulrich said.

"It was the only human word I knew." Lutoth burst out laughing. "I'd forgotten about that."

"I usually got left out when the other kids played. But then one day you were there. You sought me out." Ulrich studied Lutoth's face. "I didn't recognise you at all."

"Many years have gone by," Lutoth said.

"And you've grown."

"I think we both have. Although, not everything has changed. You still care for wounded animals." Lutoth gestured to Ethel. "I remember the day you found that bird with a broken wing. You stared at her with tears in your eyes. We built a nest, using leaves, in a small nook in a tree. We placed her inside and came back every day to feed her worms whilst she healed."

"Until she was well enough to fly away," Ulrich said.

Lutoth nodded.

They gazed at each other silently for several moments, Ulrich's warm brown eyes studying him.

Ulrich frowned. "What happened?"

"What do you mean?" Lutoth asked.

"For months, we played together." Ulrich fiddled with one of the buttons on his coat. "Every day. I looked forward to it."

"Me too."

"Then one day, you just weren't there. I looked for you for days and days, but you didn't come back. I kept looking." Ulrich raised his gaze to Lutoth's. "You just left."

"I had to leave." Lutoth's skin prickled, his heartbeat rising swiftly. "My mother said it was time to move on. I didn't have any say."

Shame and worry rushed through Lutoth. He and his mother had hurt so many by just leaving without explaining. He'd hurt his father. He'd hurt Ulrich.

What if Ulrich thought Lutoth was like that? Flighty. Unreliable. Just like his mother.

But Lutoth wasn't his mother. He'd stayed in the valley for almost a year. He wasn't fickle like her. He wasn't! He could ignore the call of the wind. He could fight it and stay still if he was just given a chance.

He just needed to be given a chance!

"I didn't want to just leave like that," Lutoth said, voice strained. "But my mother is a sylph, a spirit of the wind. She said it was time to move on. She said that sylphs don't stay still. She said it was time to go, and I was too young to have a choice."

Lutoth stumbled over his words. He didn't want to talk about these parts of his history. He wanted to talk about staying here and building a home. He wanted to focus on proving to Ulrich that he could be trusted. He wanted to win Ulrich's heart.

"But I've spent the whole year in the valley, and I haven't moved on!" Lutoth said. "I mean, I left for a few days every now and then. But I always came back! Every single time. And now I've decided to just stay still."

Ulrich nodded slowly, as if uncertain what to make of Lutoth's outburst.

Lutoth took a deep breath, trying to control his pulse. "But Ethel looks like she enjoys the flowers," Lutoth said. "May I feed her?"

Ulrich held out the bag. "Of course."

Lutoth reached in and pulled out a handful of dried flower petals and green leaves. "Here you are, Ethel."

Ethel nuzzled at his hand and ate. He laughed at the ticklish sensation, trying to ignore any remaining panic flowing through him.

“I think she likes it,” Lutoth said.

“She does,” Ulrich said. “So you are a sylph? I thought you were an oread.”

“I’m half-sylph and half-oread,” Lutoth said but didn’t elaborate further.

“I don’t know much about sylphs,” Ulrich said.

“Hmmm.” Lutoth didn’t want to talk about this. He wanted to give Ulrich his Solstice gift and show how they could be perfect together.

Ethel finished eating, and Lutoth patted her. Ethel stepped towards him and nudged Lutoth with her nose. The force of the nudge took him by surprise, and Lutoth stumbled backwards.

Ulrich reached out and steadied him with his strong arms. “Sorry! She doesn’t know her own strength. But it means she likes you.”

“No harm done,” Lutoth said and laughed.

Ulrich gave Lutoth a shy, almost nervous smile, and Lutoth’s heart flip-flopped. They stood toe to toe. Ulrich didn’t release him as he gazed down into Lutoth’s eyes.

Ulrich smelled of smoke and metal. He smelled of the warmth of the hearth and the cosiness of a cabin on a long winter’s night. Lutoth wanted to bury down with Ulrich, cover him in kisses, and stay with him through the long winter and beyond.

He stared at Ulrich’s lips, lips he’d dreamed of kissing for twenty years. Unable to resist a second longer, he leaned in, standing on his toes, brushing their lips together.

When Ulrich didn’t pull away. Lutoth wrapped an arm around Ulrich’s shoulders, pulling their bodies flush together. Ulrich’s arms wrapped around him as the kiss deepened. The paper bag crinkled as it pressed against Lutoth’s back. Their tongues danced together, and Lutoth lost himself in slow kisses.

After a few more delicious moments, Lutoth reluctantly pulled back, dropping kisses along Ulrich's beard. Lutoth wanted to take this slow. He wanted to prove to Ulrich that he truly cared for him and it wasn't some passing infatuation. But how was he meant to resist Ulrich when he kissed like this?

The man seemed desperate for kisses.

Lutoth's cock had thickened in his pants. He wondered how big Ulrich's cock was. It was hard to tell beneath all the layers of winter clothing Ulrich wore. But he could definitely feel a large bulge. He stroked his fingers along Ulrich's thick beard as he nipped at Ulrich's lower lip. Ulrich shivered.

Lutoth wanted to climb Ulrich like a tree. Or undo Ulrich's breeches, pull out Ulrich's cock, and stroke him off right here. Then he wanted to take Ulrich back to his cabin and fuck Ulrich until his eyes rolled back into his head and he came so hard he couldn't see straight for a week.

But Lutoth needed to properly court Ulrich.

Reluctantly, he stepped back. He stroked Ulrich's cheek and smiled at him. Ulrich smiled back, one of those smiles he'd given Lutoth years ago. Lutoth kissed him again. And again. And for several more minutes. Finally, he pulled away.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Lutoth said, voice slightly breathy and dick throbbing in his pants. "Maybe I'll visit you in your village."

"Really?" Ulrich cleared his throat. "I work in the smithy."

"I know. I'll see you there." Then Lutoth turned and walked away before he could change his mind, proud of his self-control.

Although, he doubted he'd be able to resist Ulrich much longer.

CHAPTER
EIGHT

Ulrich pumped the bellows with one hand, feeding the flames in the forge. Within the blazing coals lay a lump of glowing iron.

“You should get inside, Ethel,” Ulrich called out, glancing back at the reindeer standing in the doorway to the smithy. “It’s dark and getting a bit nippy.”

When Ulrich worked, Ethel either stayed in the doorway to the smithy—preferring not to be in there whilst he worked—grazed nearby, or went into the cabin.

She didn’t move. But Ulrich knew she’d head into the cabin soon. She never stayed out long after sunset.

With a pair of tongs, Ulrich reached into the coals and pulled out the iron. He placed it against the anvil, holding it there with the tongs, and began hammering it into shape.

Ulrich still couldn’t believe he was being courted by the nymph he’d played with as a youngling. As soon as Lutoth had told him, Ulrich had remembered.

Back then, he’d often play with his brother and the oreads and humans in the valley. But he’d always seemed to get left behind. One summer day a nymph had turned up. He hadn’t seemed to mind Ulrich’s shyness or how withdrawn he was. He’d just decided they’d play together.

Lutoth hadn’t spoken the human tongue back then. Ulrich hadn’t spoken Nymphish. Ulrich was certain he’d asked for Lutoth’s name. But if Lutoth had told him, Ulrich had never been able to identify it amongst the Nymphish words.

Still, that hadn't mattered. They'd been friends. Ulrich had been captivated by the nymph and drawn to his strength and confidence. Ulrich had liked to hear Lutoth speak, even if he hadn't understood the lyrical words.

Sometimes they'd climb together. Not that Ulrich could climb like Lutoth, but they'd climb rocks, and Lutoth would reach back and hold out his hand to help him.

In his youth, Ulrich had fixated on those moments, on the feel of Lutoth's oread-rough hands, perfect for climbing, in his. Sometimes he'd lie in bed at night, remembering the feel of those hands. And sometimes he'd wondered what it would be like to kiss Lutoth.

He took the now-cooled metal off the anvil and placed it back into the forge to reheat, pumping the bellows.

Then Lutoth had disappeared. He remembered the day he'd dashed through the forest, keen and eager to see Lutoth, as he always had been. He'd gone to the boulder where they'd met each day. He'd stood on top of it, waiting, gaze searching the trees.

But Lutoth hadn't appeared.

Nor had he come the next day when Ulrich had gone to their spot.

Or the next.

For weeks and months, every time he was in the forest, he'd search for Lutoth. But he'd never seen him again. He'd been despondent and taken to sitting around his father's cabin most of the time.

"Why are you lazing about?" his father had demanded.

Ulrich had hunched his shoulders, avoiding his father's gaze.

"I won't have you sitting around all day. Come. You're working in the smithy."

And that was how Ulrich had started his apprenticeship.

And now Lutoth was back in Ulrich's life. Courting him.

They'd kissed. It had been a kiss he'd wished for twenty years ago.

And the kisses had been filled with so much affection, sweetness, and gentleness. And smiles. He'd never had that before. They hadn't been the rough, rushed kisses before a fuck that he'd gotten used to.

He hoped there would be more kisses. He hoped there would be more of everything. He thought sex with Lutoth would be different. He didn't think it would leave him feeling sick and ashamed of himself. His cock filled at the thought of what sex might be like with Lutoth. He wanted to find out what it was like.

Footsteps sounded in the smithy behind him. His heart leapt.

"I was beginning to think you wouldn't show," Ulrich said as he turned. His heart sank like iron.

"You were expecting me?" his father said, brows lifted.

CHAPTER
NINE

His father stared at Ulrich, waiting for an answer.

“Ah. No.” Ulrich cleared his throat. “Rhorton was going to come by. I ordered some equipment from Castle Evermore.” Why would he think the heavy footsteps were Lutoth’s? He knew Lutoth made no sound when he walked.

“Hmmm.” His father eyed him. “I got a letter from your brother today.”

“Yeah?” Ulrich prodded the coals with the tongs.

“Seems he’ll be back for the Solstice this year.”

“It’ll be good to see him,” Ulrich said, pumping the bellows. Ulrich hadn’t seen his brother, Elias, since Ulrich last visited him in Bordertown.

“We’ll see if he makes it here. Wouldn’t be surprised if Elias turned around halfway to Ores when he remembered how cold it got up here. Ran back to his mother’s family where they can wrap him in blankets and spoon-feed him fancy broth like a sick, pathetic child.”

Ulrich’s jaw ticked. He pulled the glowing iron out of the fire and placed it on the anvil.

“I still can’t believe he left,” his father said. “You know, your mother’s family offered to take you both in after your mother passed. Said it was too much for one man to raise two boys and be working all day in the smithy. But I did what needed to be done and raised you both. Raised you properly in

these mountains. I wasn't going to let you boys be raised in Bordertown. Didn't want you growing up weak and soft. And then Elias just takes off anyway."

His father hobbled closer to the anvil. "What you making?"

"Shovels for Wareth," Ulrich replied as he hammered. "To dig up clay."

"You didn't heat it through enough," his father scolded.

Ulrich's hand tightened on the tongs.

"Your brother better not complain about the food we serve here. We're not fancy like your mother's people. We eat honest, decent food." He laughed. "Though, I'm sure throwing in your reindeer would definitely add to the Solstice Eve feast. It's definitely fatter than any reindeer you'd hunt."

Ulrich's teeth clenched.

"I saw that botanist, Edwin, on my way here," his father said. "His family never belonged in the Norend Mountains. All too soft. I was surprised when Edwin returned to Ores without his family. Too dainty and small, that one. Clearly unsuited to these mountains. Like that nymph he's bedding."

Ulrich kept his eyes fixed on his work, trying not to listen to his father. Sinoe and the oreads were perfectly suited to the mountains, despite being pretty. They didn't feel the cold. They had textured hands and feet so they could climb vertical cliff faces.

An image of Lutoth helping him climb as a youth filled his mind. Ulrich could never climb like an oread. Or a half-oread, half-sylph.

And the oreads had saved the villagers' ancestors. The oreads had given them shelter and food. He wanted to tell his father that without the oreads, their ancestors would have perished in the Norend Mountains as they tried and failed to reach Castle Evermore. They would have starved and frozen to death, and Ores would never have existed.

But his father didn't care. That his mother might have been part-nymph was enough to create disdain towards all nymphs. His entire life, his father had despised those who didn't appear tough and strong. Too much of a reminder of Ulrich's mother, whose only guilt was that she had died in these mountains, leaving him with two boys.

Words caught in his throat. But as always, Ulrich kept his mouth shut. Too much a coward to speak his mind to his father. Ulrich placed the metal back into the forge and pumped the bellows, leaving it in longer.

His father watched him. "Anyway, I better get going. It's getting late."

Ulrich grunted goodbye. He stared into the fire as his father left. He couldn't tell if his face burned from the flames or from the guilt of staying quiet.

Why did his father have to be so cruel? Why did he have to say those things about his brother, about Edwin, about the oreads? He took the metal from the flames and placed it back on the anvil. He smashed the hammer into the iron, and the loud clanging rang through the smithy as he pounded it.

But then, his father had always been tough.

As a boy, Ulrich had found a dead rat, and he'd cried over its little broken body, cradling it in his arms.

His father had found him.

"Harpy's tits, boy! It's a fucking rat! Now get up, wipe your face and snotty nose." He'd grabbed the rat from Ulrich's arms and flung it outside. "The world is tough. These mountains are tough. You need to be tough. So no useless tears over a bloody rat! I won't see a son of mine behaving so pathetically."

Ulrich's muscles strained as he hammered.

Still, he was Ulrich's father. He'd raised Ulrich, and Ulrich had no memory of his mother. His father was the only person, other than his brother, who had ever shown he'd cared about Ulrich. And his brother had left for Bordertown.

Now it was just him and his father.

But Lutoth saw Ulrich's softness. *My sweet, gentle giant.* That was what Lutoth called him. He saw Ulrich's care for Ethel, his need to care for a bird with an injured wing. He didn't look down on Ulrich with disdain for his softness.

He called Ulrich pretty.

Him! Ulrich!

He called him pretty and wanted to court him. Like he was someone special. Someone deserving of such attention.

Lutoth didn't care if Ulrich wasn't some tough man. He didn't care if Ulrich wanted to look after animals. And maybe it was all right for Ulrich to be called pretty and be courted by Lutoth and be treated like he was something precious.

His father wouldn't think so. His chest twisted at the thought. His father would sneer and be disgusted by his weakness. "I didn't raise you to be some weakling, boy," his father would say. "I raised you to be tough."

Tough like those men in Bordertown thought he was.

Sweat soaked the front of his shirt. He lifted the metal with the tongs and shoved it into the large bucket of water. It sizzled as the water quenched the metal. He panted as he wiped at his sweaty brows.

A voice cleared.

Ulrich looked up. Lutoth leaned against the door frame.

He looked like he wanted to devour Ulrich.

"Well, isn't that a beautiful sight?"

CHAPTER
TEN

“I brought you today’s Solstice gift,” Lutoth said.

Ulrich’s face shone with exertion. His sweaty shirt clung to his thick chest and powerful shoulders.

Lutoth’s cock hardened at the sight. Lutoth stepped into the smithy, moving towards Ulrich.

“What is it?” Ulrich placed whatever he’d been forging on a table with his tools, his entire focus now on Lutoth.

“A necklace,” Lutoth said, holding it up.

“Like what women wear?” Ulrich asked, voice hard to read.

Lutoth raised an eyebrow. “This is what oreads wear, regardless of gender. I made it myself, especially for you. I thought it’d look nice on you.”

Ulrich swallowed.

“Can I put it on you?” Lutoth asked.

Ulrich nodded.

“You’ll need to take off your shirt,” Lutoth said.

Ulrich hesitated, but then his fingers reached for the hem. Lutoth’s fingers itched to help him undress, but he behaved himself and instead watched as Ulrich drew the shirt over his head, revealing his hairy chest, damp with sweat. His gaze flicked to Lutoth’s, as if he was nervous of what Lutoth thought.

Ulrich had nothing to worry about. Lutoth almost moaned at the sight. He desperately longed to reach out and touch Ulrich. To run fingers down his chest, twine them in the dark tufts of hair trailing below his belly button, and tug before shoving his hand down into Ulrich's trousers and exploring the bulge there.

Lutoth had planned to go slow. But with Ulrich standing shirtless in front of him, Lutoth found his resolve crumbling.

Ulrich used the shirt to wipe the sweat on his chest, revealing his dark, hairy armpits. Lutoth swallowed the urge to step forward, bury his nose in his pits, and inhale. Ulrich held the shirt self-consciously in front of him for a second before taking a breath and placing it on the table behind him.

Lutoth stepped closer. "Turn around," he whispered.

Ulrich turned. Lutoth's gaze travelled down his broad back, resting on Ulrich's firm, rounded arse. It would be so easy to reach out and squeeze the delicious mounds.

Instead, Lutoth reached around and laid the necklace on Ulrich's chest. He straightened the strands and clasped the necklace at the back, fingers grazing Ulrich's sweat-damp skin. Lutoth inhaled deeply, letting the heady scent of Ulrich fill his nose. A musky, smoky, delicious smell.

"There," Lutoth said.

Ulrich turned, but Lutoth didn't step back. Their chests almost pressed together. He gazed up into Ulrich's dark-brown eyes, the pupils dilated.

"I think it suits you perfectly." Lutoth touched the strands of the necklace, gliding his fingers along them.

Ulrich shivered.

The necklace had been constructed of woven reeds and vines, which plunged to just above Ulrich's flat brown nipples. More vines and reeds had been attached, draping downwards almost to Ulrich's waist. Dried red berries, as well as white, black, and brown wooden beads, which Lutoth had carved himself, decorated the strands.

“You look beautiful,” Lutoth said. “Lovely.”

“Really?” Ulrich asked, eyes surprisingly vulnerable.

“Really.” Lutoth pressed his hand to Ulrich’s warm stomach, feeling it rise and fall. He’d never wanted someone so much as he did in that moment. “I can’t take my eyes off you.”

Lutoth rose and kissed him, and Ulrich eagerly returned the kiss. Ulrich’s fingers tangled in his hair as Ulrich clutched at him.

“Do you want your next Solstice gift?” Lutoth asked, breaking the kiss.

“Already?” Ulrich asked.

Lutoth nodded.

“Shouldn’t that be for tomorrow?”

“This gift is spontaneous,” Lutoth said. “I just came up with it.”

“What is it?” Ulrich asked.

“Sucking your cock,” Lutoth said.

Ulrich inhaled sharply.

Lutoth slid his hand downwards, fingering the edge of Ulrich’s trousers. Then he cupped Ulrich’s crotch, massaging the sizeable bulge.

“So do you want your Solstice gift now?” Lutoth asked, voice husky. “Or do you want to wait until tomorrow?”

Ulrich’s eyes fluttered shut as he thrust against Lutoth’s hand. He moaned. “Now.”

Without waiting a beat, Lutoth dropped to his knees, fingers unbuttoning Ulrich’s trousers and sliding them to his thighs. He groaned at the size of Ulrich’s cock. He wrapped his hand around the wide base of Ulrich’s dick and stroked upwards.

Ulrich’s cock would be the biggest and thickest he’d ever sucked. It would also be the biggest and thickest that had ever

fucked him. But that was for another time.

Right now he had another task in hand.

Lutoth continued stroking in smooth motions, watching the pearly liquid form on the tip of Ulrich's member. Lutoth leaned forward and tongued at the slit, savouring Ulrich's seed. He ran his tongue around the head before swirling around the shaft, head bobbing as he slid his tongue along the veins of Ulrich's member. Ulrich groaned, hands gripping Lutoth's shoulders and squeezing.

Lutoth dug his fingers into the tufts of fur on Ulrich's belly. How was Lutoth meant to stick to his plans to take it slow when Ulrich looked all sexy and pretty in the necklace?

He would just have to prove to Ulrich throughout the Solstice season how serious Lutoth was about the man.

Because right now, he needed to suck Ulrich's massive dick.

Lutoth opened his mouth and guided the flared head past his lips, one hand gripping Ulrich's meaty thigh. Ulrich's cock might be the largest he'd ever sucked, but luckily Lutoth had practised a lot in the past. He groaned as the thick dick filled his mouth, stretching his lips. He made slurping noises as he bobbed up and down, taking the head and only half the length into his mouth. Ulrich's hand tightened on Lutoth's shoulder.

Then he drew Ulrich's member deep, swallowing Ulrich. His throat tightened, his gag reflex kicking in, but he relaxed, determined to take every magnificent, thick inch of Ulrich. He withdrew, and each time he took Ulrich back into his mouth, he took more of Ulrich's shaft.

"Oh, Lutoth. You can't—" Ulrich broke off the sentence, lost in a cry of pleasure as Lutoth swallowed him whole, right to the root.

Lutoth buried his nose in Ulrich's pubic hair, throat massaging Ulrich's cock.

Eyes wide, Ulrich stared down at him. His mouth fell open on a soundless gasp.

After a moment, Lutoth pulled back, drawing breath through his nose and into his lungs. Gasps and cries of pleasure escaped Ulrich's mouth as Lutoth took him into his throat again and again. Ulrich's fingers dug into Lutoth's shoulders as if Ulrich forced himself to hold still.

Placing a hand on Ulrich's hip, Lutoth urged the man to thrust.

Lutoth could take it. Lutoth wanted to take it. He wanted to take everything Ulrich could give him. Because although he hadn't planned this gift, he wanted to show Ulrich that he could give him pleasure like he'd never known.

Tentative at first, Ulrich thrust. But when Lutoth didn't choke or pull away, he thrust again, and again, until he fucked Lutoth's throat.

"Lutoth," Ulrich moaned, his hips jerking. "Lutoth, I'm not going to last!"

Neither was Lutoth. His eyes watered. He reached down and freed his own aching erection and stroked it.

"Oh. Oh. Lutoth!" Ulrich threw back his head as his thrusts stuttered, his hot seed spilling into Lutoth's throat.

Lutoth kept working himself, so close to his own peak.

Fumbling, Ulrich withdrew his cock from Lutoth's mouth and dropped heavily to his knees. He winced. His large, trembling hand wrapped around Lutoth's, both jerking him.

Lutoth's body tensed, and his balls pulled up. He cried out as the pleasure burst inside him. His spend spurted between them.

He collapsed against Ulrich as the aftershocks of his orgasm passed through him, gasping for air.

Finally, his breathing returned to normal. They stayed pressed together.

Lutoth didn't want to leave Ulrich. Not yet.

"Can I..." Lutoth trailed off. Perhaps he was moving too fast. Perhaps he needed to slow down. This wasn't his plan.

“Can you what?” Ulrich asked.

Lutoth took a breath. “Can I stay with you tonight? In your bed?”

“You’d want to?” Ulrich asked, sounding surprised. “I mean, of course you can! If you’d like.” He said the last part as if he couldn’t quite believe Lutoth would want to.

Lutoth smiled. “Then I’ll stay with you tonight.”

Ulrich’s smile blinded him.

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

Ulrich gazed at Lutoth's bare shoulder. He wanted to touch his skin and run his hands along his slender back. But he wasn't sure it would be welcomed. This situation was new to him. He'd never spent the night with anyone before. When he'd had sex in Bordertown, he'd never stayed longer than the time it took to dress.

He didn't know if he was still allowed to touch Lutoth in the morning light. And he didn't want to risk Lutoth pulling away from him. That would hurt too much.

The previous evening, they'd tumbled into bed after a supper of bread and cheese. There they sucked and stroked each other before falling asleep. Throughout the night, they'd woken several times to repeat. And Lutoth had smiled and laughed as he kissed him.

Ulrich still couldn't believe all this had happened. Or how recklessly he'd behaved yesterday. Anyone could have walked into the smithy last night whilst Lutoth sucked him. Still, he could not regret it. It had been incredible.

He stared at Lutoth, fingers itching to touch him.

Lutoth mumbled something in his sleep and rolled towards Ulrich. His arm stretched out, fingers seeking. Finding Ulrich, Lutoth snuggled against Ulrich's chest.

Heart close to bursting, Ulrich wrapped his arms around Lutoth and kissed his forehead.

Ulrich struggled to comprehend why Lutoth wanted him. Sure, they'd been friends all those years ago, but it had only

been for one summer, and friendship was different from what this was. He didn't understand what Lutoth saw in him.

His gaze caught on the necklace Lutoth had gifted him, which he'd draped over a chair. Ulrich had carefully placed it there the night before so it wouldn't tangle.

Ulrich had inspected it carefully as he placed it down. This wasn't some quickly made gift. The strands had been intricately plaited. The beads carved into different shapes and forms. It had taken time. And Lutoth had made it for him.

His arms tightened around Lutoth.

He'd given up hope of finding a lover and partner. He'd hoped for it once. Hoped to find someone to share his life with, someone to love and build a relationship that could last.

But he was thirty-four now. He knew everyone who lived in the village. And those in Bordertown didn't want a dirty blacksmith.

But now a beautiful nymph courted him. He didn't know what he'd done to deserve this or how he'd managed to catch Lutoth's eyes. But he'd do his best to keep Lutoth's interest for as long as he could. And maybe Lutoth would want to be his lover and partner. Maybe he'd want to build a relationship that lasted with Ulrich.

Heavy, clomping footsteps sounded on the wooden floor. Ethel stood at the end of the bed, watching them. Ulrich glanced outside the window. He'd normally be up by now and have taken Ethel for her walk.

Ethel leaned down and grabbed a corner of the blanket in her teeth. She tugged.

"None of that now!" Ulrich whispered, pulling the blanket back. "You'll wake Lutoth."

She tugged again. And again.

"Fine," he whispered. "I'll get up."

He looked down at Lutoth, snuggled against his chest. He was reluctant to wake him. He was reluctant to leave the warmth of the bed and this nymph. Carefully, Ulrich

disentangled himself from Lutoth and rose. He'd just take Ethel out for a short walk, maybe go to the store. There he could get some food for Lutoth's breakfast.

But what if he returned and Lutoth wasn't there? What if Lutoth woke and didn't know where Ulrich was and decided to leave?

I'll just be quick. Let Ethel out, briefly go to the shops, and be back before Lutoth wakes.

CHAPTER
TWELVE

Ulrich quickly dressed, and a few moments later, he opened the door, specially enlarged for Ethel. As she ducked her head to exit, Ulrich wondered if he'd need to enlarge the door again next year when her antlers grew bigger.

She wandered out before breaking into a run. She ran in circles as the snow fell.

“Feeling a bit cooped up, were you?”

She galloped, circling him, tossing her head before coming to a trot beside him, nudging his side. He stroked her flank.

Today the snow fell thick and heavy as they walked to the village store. A gusty wind cut through his clothes. When they got to the store, Ethel waited outside. Ulrich pushed open the door to find not only Rhorton and Mila, the store owners, but Sero and Aryn in the crowded shop.

This wasn't unusual, as Sero and Aryn supplied the baked goods to the store. They currently unpacked a variety of loaves, rolls, and cookies onto shelves behind the counter.

“Morning,” Ulrich said as he entered.

“Happy Solstice, Ulrich,” Rhorton called out in his big, booming voice. “Lots of snow last night.” He glanced at the window. “And looks like there'll be lots today. Hope you're keeping yourself warm.”

Mila smiled at Ulrich, clasping her hands together and leaning towards him. “Need anything in particular, Ulrich?”

She'd seemed strangely fixated on Ulrich the last few times when he'd come into the store.

"Just here to get some bread," Ulrich said.

"Your usual loaf?" Aryn asked, already grabbing one.

"Yeah. But also grab me one of your Solstice loaves. Actually, make it two. And maybe a few seed rolls."

Aryn packaged up his order.

"That's a lot more than you usually buy, isn't it?" Mila asked.

He nodded as he walked around the overly stacked shelves. He grabbed some sausage, a block of hard white cheese, and various dried berries, meats, and fish, not certain what Lutoth would prefer.

"You must be very hungry to get so much food, Ulrich," Mila said.

He gave her a tight smile. Why was she behaving strangely? *It's like she somehow knows Lutoth is in my bed. But how could she possibly know that?*

He glanced out the window, mindful of wanting to get back to Lutoth quickly. He placed his items on the counter.

"Is that everything?" Aryn asked. He stacked the items on top of one another, wrapped them in brown paper, and tied them together with string.

Ulrich noticed the Solstice berries pinned to Aryn's shirt. A gift, no doubt, from Sero.

"What do you have that could be a nice Solstice gift?" Ulrich asked. After all, Lutoth had given him several, and he hadn't given any in return.

All eyes turned to Ulrich.

"Who are you giving a Solstice gift to?" Mila asked, voice tight.

"Ummm." Ulrich hadn't thought this through. Everyone in the village knew everyone's business. And Ulrich definitely

wasn't ready for everyone in Ores to know about Lutoth.

But before he could think of what to say, Mila yelled, "I knew it!" Mila came towards him. She stretched out her arms, and the small oread pulled him down into a hug. "It's for Lutoth, isn't it?"

"What? How—"

"He's my nephew," she said as if that explained how she knew. She pulled back and stared up at him, eyes twinkling. "So if you two are together, that makes us family."

Ulrich's mouth dropped open.

"Mother." Sero came towards them. "We talked about this. We weren't going to get involved and ask Ulrich questions."

"But Ulrich brought it up!"

"I don't think Ulrich did, my darling." Rhorton chuckled. "Sorry, Ulrich."

"I didn't know you were related," Ulrich sputtered.

"Oh yes. I'm his auntie," Mila said. "And he is such a good, beautiful boy. You will be so happy together!"

Ulrich's cheeks flushed as he tried to think of something, anything to say. But it was hard with everyone staring.

"Um... If you're related, does that make you part-sylph too?" Ulrich blurted. "I know so little about sylphs."

"I am definitely not a sylph!" Mila said.

Ulrich frowned, taken aback by her vehement response.

"What she means is that my mother is Lutoth's father's sister," Sero said. "It is Lutoth's mother who is a sylph."

"My brother was so heartbroken when she left." Mila sighed, eyes sad. "Everyone tried to warn him. Sylphs fly with the wind. She will not stay still. Sylphs cannot remain in one place for long. But he was so in love.

"Then she got pregnant with Lutoth. Still, that was not enough for her. So one day, she just left. My poor brother was devastated, losing not only the sylph he loved but his son too."

Mila wiped at the tears leaking from her eyes. “She came back, bringing Lutoth from time to time, but they only stayed briefly. It’s been so hard for my brother.”

Worry stirred in Ulrich’s belly.

He’d hoped Lutoth courting him meant he wanted something more from Ulrich. But if Lutoth was part-sylph, maybe Lutoth wasn’t capable of wanting something like that from him. Perhaps this really was some temporary thing before Lutoth...flew with the wind?

But of course, he’d expected that. Why would Lutoth want to stay with him? No doubt Ulrich was just a passing infatuation for Lutoth. A fuck or two with the big mountain blacksmith before moving on.

At least Lutoth had been kind.

“But there is no reason to think Lutoth would do the same,” Sero said, side-eyeing his mother. “He has stayed in the valley for almost a year.”

“Oh no! I didn’t mean...” Mila’s eyes widened. “Lutoth isn’t like that!” She reached out and gripped Ulrich’s hands in hers, small hands squeezing hard. “He cares for you very deeply. He wouldn’t leave like his mother did.” She stared up at him as if pleading for him to believe her.

He nodded.

“He likes anything sweet.” Aryn broke the tension. “This is the first batch of Solstice cookies we’ve made.” He held up a small parcel. “They are filled with Solstice berry jam and dipped in chocolate.”

“Aryn made them,” Sero said, pride in his voice.

“I had help,” Aryn said, smiling at Sero.

Sero stepped forward, leaned over the counter, and kissed Aryn on the cheek. Then he picked up the parcels. “I’ll walk you out, Ulrich.”

Ulrich said his goodbyes to the others before following Sero out the door. Unsurprisingly, Ethel waited patiently outside and trotted towards Ulrich when she spotted him.

“Sorry about that,” Sero said. “Mother still remembers Lutoth’s mother leaving and how horrible it was for my uncle.”

“Do you think Lutoth’s not capable of—”

“No,” Sero said. “He’s lived in the valley for a year. Many thought he wouldn’t be able to, but he did. But if you are worried, talk to him.” He clapped Ulrich on the arm. “Anyway, I should go back in and help.” He looked at the door and let out a heavy sigh.

“Everything all right?” Ulrich asked.

“Jarne, Aryn’s brother from Bordertown, is visiting. He’s staying with my parents.” Sero crossed his arms. “They don’t get along.”

“Oh,” Ulrich said, not sure what else to say. “Ah... Sorry.”

Sero sighed. “Anyway, give Lutoth my greetings,” Sero said and entered the store.

Ulrich set off back towards his home. Questions swirled inside Ulrich’s head. He should probably talk to Lutoth. But he worried he would make their tentative relationship, or whatever this was, uncomfortable if he asked Lutoth his questions.

It would be easier to remain silent and just let it be. But Ulrich needed to know. He needed to know what Lutoth wanted from him. He just hoped he had the courage to ask.

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

The bed dipped beside Lutoth.

“Mm.” Whilst still keeping his eyes closed, Lutoth managed to roll towards Ulrich, wrap his arms around the man, and pull him down beside him. He tugged the blanket over them, creating a perfect warm cocoon. “I was wondering where you went.”

It was only a few days into the Solstice season, and already he woke in Ulrich’s bed. It was more than he’d planned. More than he’d hoped to achieve so soon.

“I needed to take Ethel out for a walk and go to the store to get some food for you. I didn’t want to wake you.” Ulrich’s breath tickled Lutoth’s cheek.

Lutoth kissed Ulrich, hands stroking naked, furry, delicious flesh. Lutoth could get used to waking up to a big, warm, sexy man who brought him food.

“I didn’t know what you wanted to eat, so I bought a few different things. If you tell me what food you like, I can buy it for you next time.”

Lutoth smiled, nuzzling Ulrich’s beard.

Next time.

That meant Ulrich wanted there to be a next time. And he wanted to feed Lutoth. Provide for him and nourish him. Lutoth squirmed, trying to get closer to Ulrich even though that wasn’t really possible. The man was just too perfect.

“That is... If you want there to be a next time,” Ulrich said, uncertainty in his voice.

Lutoth cracked open his eyes.

“Is there...” Ulrich licked his lips. “Is there going to be a next time?” The skin between Ulrich’s eyebrows creased.

Lutoth reached up and smoothed it. He didn’t want Ulrich to be anything but relaxed and happy, enjoying the morning cosiness with Lutoth. “I’d like there to be a next time. Many next times if you’d like that.”

“I’d like that.” Ulrich smiled. “Very much.”

Lutoth kissed him, and they got lost in lazy kisses for several minutes. No rush, no escalation, just slow kisses and gentle caresses.

“And I got you a Solstice gift,” Ulrich murmured against his lips.

“A Solstice gift!” Lutoth pulled back. “You got *me* a Solstice gift?”

“Did you not think I would?”

“I... I’d never thought about it.” In all the plans he’d made, he’d focused on what he could do for Ulrich. He hadn’t put much thought into Ulrich reciprocating. “You got me a Solstice gift,” Lutoth said, voice soft and amazed.

Ulrich climbed from the bed and grabbed something from the table. “Sero sends his greetings. I was told you were related.” Ulrich sat on the bed beside Lutoth. “Also...everyone in the store knew about what was going on between us.”

“Sorry.” Lutoth propped himself up. “I probably should have mentioned it before you went there. How was Auntie Mila?”

“She watched me intensely when I arrived.” Ulrich rubbed his arm. “Guessed you were here. Then she welcomed me into the family.”

“She didn’t!” Lutoth said. “Actually, that sounds exactly like her. Did it bother you that they knew?”

“It took me by surprise.” Ulrich fidgeted with the blanket. “How did she guess you were here?”

Lutoth placed his hand over Ulrich’s, stroking it with his thumb. “I kind of told them I wanted to court you.”

“Really?” Ulrich’s eyes widened. “How long have you been planning this?”

“A year.” Lutoth stared at their hands.

“A year?” Ulrich said, shock clear in his voice.

“Well, eleven months to be precise.” Lutoth gave a nervous chuckle. “Is that a problem?”

“Well... No... I just don’t understand.”

“Well, you see, last year I came to the Solstice festivities, and I saw you. You and Ethel. I knew it was you the moment I saw you.” Lutoth met Ulrich’s gaze. “Those feelings I had all those years ago came rushing back. But I wasn’t a fourteen-year-old youngling with a crush. I knew I wanted to be with you.”

“You had a crush on me back then?”

Lutoth nodded.

“But then... If you knew you wanted to be with me... Why wait a year to court me?” Ulrich asked.

Lutoth took a breath. “I told you I’m half-sylph.”

“On your mother’s side.” Ulrich paused. “Mila said some things about that.”

“What things?”

Ulrich pressed his lips together.

“I know what others say,” Lutoth said. “I promise nothing you say will surprise me.”

Ulrich scratched at his beard. “She said sylphs fly with the wind. They don’t stay still. That your mother left your father because she is a sylph.”

Lutoth swallowed, battling against the nerves flailing around in his chest. “And did that scare you? Are you worried

I'll leave?" Was he about to lose Ulrich? Would he be scared off before even giving Lutoth a chance?

"I just want to know what you want," Ulrich said. "I don't know anything about sylphs. And I don't know if you want what I do."

"What do you want, Ulrich?"

Ulrich stared at his hands, as if too nervous to say what was on his mind.

"You can tell me," Lutoth said.

Ulrich didn't answer straightaway. He just continued to stare at his hands. Finally, he spoke, not meeting Lutoth's gaze. "I want a lover. A partner. And I want it to last," Ulrich said softly. "I want to share my life with someone and not be alone."

"I want that too." Lutoth's hand tightened on Ulrich's. "And I am capable of that. That's why I waited a year to approach you. I wanted to prove that I could stay constant. That I wasn't fickle. That I wouldn't leave. I needed to prove that to everyone." *And to myself.*

"Will you give me, will you give us a chance?" Lutoth asked, trying to keep the desperation from his voice. Hoping that after a year of waiting, he wasn't about to lose Ulrich. "That's all I'm asking for. A chance to see if we fit together. A chance to see if we could make a life together."

"Of course. I would have given you a chance last year." He stroked Lutoth's cheek. "You weren't the only one with a crush twenty years ago. I remember how I felt about you then. I wanted to kiss you so much, and now I get to."

He kissed Lutoth then. And Lutoth smiled into the kiss.

"Happy Solstice," Ulrich said. "Here is your first Solstice gift from me." Ulrich handed Lutoth a small parcel. "Expect more."

Lutoth untied the string. "Cookies!"

"Solstice cookies. Aryn told me you have a sweet tooth," Ulrich said.

Lutoth bit into one and moaned. He closed his eyes and chewed, savouring the sweet, jammy, chocolatey taste bursting on his tongue and swirling around his mouth. “Mmmmm.”

He opened his eyes.

Ulrich stared at his mouth, desire burning in his gaze.

Lutoth’s gaze moved downwards to Ulrich’s engorged dick. He swallowed the cookie and placed the parcel beside him, reaching for Ulrich.

“I suddenly want something a bit more savoury. Perhaps something a bit salty.”

Ulrich laughed as Lutoth pounced on him.

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

CLOUDS of grey smoke billowed out of Ulrich's door, floating up into the sky. Ethel stood outside Ulrich's cabin, staring through the open doorway.

A fire.

Ulrich froze, panic tearing through his veins.

Where was Lutoth?

Ulrich bolted, covering his mouth and nose as best he could as he entered the cabin. Still, the acrid taste hit him in the back of his throat and nostrils. He waved at the smoke. His eyes stung. He could barely see anything but smoky shadows.

But he could hear coughing. Lutoth was coughing!

"Lutoth? Are you all right?" he yelled.

"Yes," Lutoth called and coughed. "I burnt something on the stove."

Ulrich dashed around, flinging open windows before rushing to the stove. Lutoth stood over a pot, waving at the smoke but not actually doing anything to fix the problem.

The remains of...something had turned into a black charred mess in the pot. Pulling the sleeve of his jacket over his hand, Ulrich grabbed the pot by its handle and sprinted outside, dumping it in the snow. The snow sizzled and melted as the pot sank amongst it.

Lutoth stepped up beside him. "Happy Solstice, Ulrich. Here is today's gift." He gestured to the burnt pot before

coughing.

“Are you all right?” Ulrich asked.

“I’m fine. Just a little shaken. It all happened so fast,” Lutoth said. “I’m glad you turned up when you did. Burning your cabin down would have been a pretty terrible Solstice gift.”

“And you are sure you’re all right?”

Lutoth nodded.

Ulrich stared at Lutoth for a few more moments until he became convinced Lutoth was indeed fine. “What was it meant to be?”

“Dinner. A stew specifically,” Lutoth said. “Mila said it wasn’t difficult, and she told me what to do. But I suppose I need supervision until I get a proper handle on cooking.”

“That might be a good idea,” Ulrich said.

The past few days, Lutoth had been spending his evenings and nights with Ulrich. And each day, he felt more comfortable with Lutoth in his life. They re-entered the cabin. A brisk breeze blew through the windows, taking the smoke with it.

“I’m so sorry, Ulrich,” Lutoth said. “I almost burnt your house down! And now we don’t have any dinner.”

“I’m just glad you’re not hurt.” Ulrich checked over the wood-fired stove. But other than the pot outside, there was no damage. “We could go to the store and get some bread and fixings for dinner.”

“Or we could eat at the store.”

“Eat there?” Ulrich asked, straightening.

“Yes. Why not? Auntie Mila and Uncle Rhorton keep telling me to come around, since they always serve dinner at the store,” Lutoth said. “So now is the perfect opportunity to check it out.”

“I suppose we could do that,” Ulrich said.

They kept the windows open, letting the cabin properly air out. Ethel, deciding the cabin was smoke-free enough, entered and took her place on the floor, apparently tired after all the commotion. It didn't look like she'd be keen to move anytime soon.

Lutoth and Ulrich set off through the snow towards the village store. They walked past wooden cabins. Warm light from fires and candles glowed through the windows.

"You don't eat at the store often?" Lutoth asked.

"Not really," Ulrich said.

"Why not?"

Ulrich stared at the store ahead of them. "Well... Honestly there's... There's often people there, asking me questions and looking at me. Sometimes they make jokes about Ethel like I'm odd for keeping her." His cheeks flushed. A human might not notice it in the dark, but Ulrich knew Lutoth would see with his superior nymph's vision.

"I'm sure they're just jokes. Everyone's friendly, and they don't mean any harm." Ulrich shrugged and tried to laugh. "But I'm just not so good at that whole thing. Talking and joking. It's easier to be in my cabin with Ethel. I can relax and be at ease there. I can be myself."

"Do you feel at ease with me?" Lutoth stopped walking, facing Ulrich.

Ulrich stopped too. "Well... The first couple of times, you intimidated me. But..."

"But?" Lutoth reached out and touched Ulrich's chin, lifting it until their gazes met. A snowflake caught on Lutoth's nose, then his cheek, then his eyelash.

"I like talking to you. More than I do anyone else. You put me at ease," Ulrich said. "And the past few days, I feel that I can be more myself around you and... And... I don't think you see me as some big, dirty brute." He gave a pained laugh. "You don't make me feel ashamed of myself."

Lutoth cupped Ulrich's face, expression earnest. "Did someone make you feel like that?"

Ulrich shrugged. "Just some men I bedded. In Bordertown."

Lutoth's gaze took on a flinty, hard look. His jaw clenched. "If I could get my hands on these men—" He snapped his mouth shut. He shook his head. He took a deep breath as if trying to calm himself. "Don't believe those morons in Bordertown. They didn't deserve you. Not an inch of you. And I would blow them away if I ever met them.

"Ulrich, listen to me." He gazed up at Ulrich. "You are wonderful. You are beautiful and precious and lovely, and you have nothing to be ashamed of. Nothing!" His hands clutched at Ulrich's face. "The more time I spend with you, the more I like you and adore you, just as you are."

Just as you are.

The words spread inside Ulrich.

Just as you are.

"And I hope you know you can always be yourself around me."

Ulrich held himself still. He couldn't speak. There were too many emotions wound too tightly inside his chest.

Lutoth pressed his soft lips against Ulrich's and stroked his fingers along Ulrich's beard.

"And I'm glad you're finding it easier to talk to me. Because I like talking with you." Lutoth slid from Ulrich's arms and took his hand, tugging him onwards towards the store. "Now come on. Let's get dinner."

He opened the door.

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

As they entered the store, the heat hit Ulrich like a wall. The space remained the same cluttered mess of shelves and merchandise as ever, but branches of evergreen and ribbon haphazardly decorated the space, making it even more cluttered than usual.

About fifteen people from the village sat on mismatched, worn chairs placed near the fireplace, eating whatever Mila and Rhorton had made that day.

Ulrich removed his coat, scarf, and gloves and hung them on one of the hooks by the door.

“Ulrich! Lutoth!” Rhorton called out over the chatter when he spotted them.

“Hello, Rhorton!” Lutoth called back. “We’re here to get some food.”

“I’ll get you boys a couple of bowls of grub. And how about some ale?”

“Sounds good,” Lutoth said.

Rhorton ducked out of the room, into the kitchen.

Lutoth and Ulrich wove through the shelves. Lutoth seemed completely at ease, greeting those he knew and introducing himself to those he didn’t. Ulrich nodded and mumbled “Happy Solstice” as he passed. Ulrich had lived in Ores his whole life, and already Lutoth was on friendlier terms with the villagers than Ulrich was.

They took two free chairs, sinking into the worn cushions, one a faded grey, the other a dark red. The fire bathed the room in a flickering golden light. He could just make out the snow falling outside. But in here, the cold couldn't reach them.

"Doesn't it ever get lonely?" Lutoth asked, leaning towards Ulrich so he could be heard over the boisterous voices and laughter. "You don't spend so much time with other people."

Ulrich stared at his hands. He rubbed at an old burn scar on the back of his thumb. "It isn't so bad." He shrugged. "And sometimes it's better to keep to yourself than to feel alone and be surrounded by others. And Ethel is good company."

Lutoth reached out and took Ulrich's hand, squeezing. "She is a very good companion."

"I've just never found it easy." Ulrich gave a half-smile. "Not to say that people are unfriendly here. Everyone is nice. And I used to have my brother. But he left. It's just I'm not so good at making friends."

"I know the feeling."

Ulrich raised an eyebrow. How could confident, easy-going Lutoth know the feeling?

"Truly." Lutoth laughed. "I'm great at meeting people, learning names, and being friendly. That all comes easily. But when you move around as frequently as I do, you learn quickly how to get to know people."

Lutoth smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "But if you never stay still, you never make true friends or get to know anyone properly. You meet them. You move on. You rarely see them again. It's lonely. And when you do come back, they've often moved on or don't remember you."

"I remember you," Ulrich said.

Lutoth smiled. "It's been nice being in the valley this past year and getting to know everyone here." He looked around at the other patrons. "And it's been nice getting to know people here in Ores." He leaned closer until their faces were only a breath apart. "Especially considering I might be staying."

Ulrich's chest squeezed at the words. He wanted that. He wanted Lutoth to stay here in Ores. With him. "I hope you feel like you belong here, then. Because I like having you here."

Lutoth kissed him on the cheek.

Ulrich froze, and his gaze flicked around. No one seemed to be paying them any attention.

"Was that all right?" Lutoth asked.

"Yes!" Ulrich cleared his throat, cheeks burning. "I'm just not used to others seeing me do anything affectionate."

"Does it bother you?"

Ulrich reached out and took Lutoth's hand, trying to calm his racing heart. "It's just something new."

Lutoth rewarded him with a smile.

"Lutoth!" A voice called in greeting.

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

An oread Ulrich didn't recognise walked towards them. A human, whom Ulrich also didn't recognise, appeared behind the oread. "Glad to see you again," the oread said.

"Greetings, Ketho," Lutoth said.

Although Ulrich didn't know the oread, he immediately remembered the name as that of Sero's ex-lover.

"Ketho, this is Ulrich. Ulrich, this is Ketho," Lutoth introduced, placing a hand on Ulrich's arm.

"And this is Jarne. He's from Bordertown." Ketho wrapped an arm around Jarne's shoulders. "Mind if we join you in this cosy little corner?"

Jarne. This was Aryn's brother. Ulrich could see some similarities. They had the same hair and eye colour. But Jarne stood rigid, thin lips pressed together. Very different from Aryn's manner. And whilst Jarne wore clothes clearly well-made and that fit him perfectly, they seemed rather plain compared to Aryn's more extravagant and what Ulrich's father called "frivolous" wardrobe.

"Of course," Lutoth said.

Ulrich didn't particularly want Ketho and Jarne to join them. He preferred just eating with Lutoth, but he couldn't really say anything without appearing rude. Ketho pulled a couple of chairs over just as Rhorton returned with their bowls of soup, some bread, and two mugs of ale.

“The same for us please, Rhorton,” Ketho said.

“Of course,” Rhorton said and went to get their order.

“What are you doing here in Ores, Jarne?” Lutoth asked.

“Visiting my brother.” Jarne crossed his legs and folded his hands on his knees, back straight.

“That must be nice,” Lutoth said.

Jarne smiled tightly but didn’t elaborate.

“And you are Lutoth’s blacksmith.” Ketho leaned towards Ulrich, entirely too close for Ulrich’s comfort. “I’ve heard all about you.”

“What Ketho means is that he must have heard that I planned to court you,” Lutoth said. “From Mila, I assume.”

“Yes. And I can see why,” Ketho drawled, gesturing to him. “You’re quite scrumptious-looking.”

Ulrich’s cheeks flushed.

Ketho leaned back and out of Ulrich’s space. “Tell me, what is it like to be a blacksmith?”

“Well...um... I just make things from metal,” he said. He could feel all three sets of eyes on him.

“And you stand around, getting all hot and sweaty? I imagine that’s quite a sight.” Ketho gave Lutoth a wink.

“Ketho,” Lutoth said, a slight tone of warning in his voice.

“Sorry.” Ketho laughed. “But it appears the courtship is going well.”

“It is.” Lutoth smiled, glancing at Ulrich, eyes warm and filled with affection.

The firelight’s reflection danced in his eyes. Beautiful. Lutoth was beautiful. Beyond beautiful. And he wanted Ulrich.

Ulrich relaxed, returning the smile.

“Yes, it looks like it is going very well,” Ketho mused, eyes twinkling as he looked between the two.

The conversation continued as they ate. Ulrich felt himself becoming more at ease with Jarne and Ketho's presence. Although, Jarne still seemed uptight and not keen to engage in conversation.

"And I meant to make dinner tonight for Ulrich's Solstice gift, but I burnt it." Lutoth laughed. "Thankfully, Ulrich was there to save the day." He reached out and squeezed Ulrich's arm.

"I just opened the windows and put the pot outside," Ulrich said.

"You saved us!" Lutoth said. "Without him, his cabin would have burnt down completely. And then poor Ulrich and Ethel, that's his sweet pet reindeer, would have nowhere to live, and it would all be my fault."

Ketho laughed, and Jarne even cracked a smile.

Lutoth carried the conversation easily, but he constantly included Ulrich, without requiring Ulrich to speak much. He wondered if Lutoth included him intentionally.

"Well, we should return to our cabin," Lutoth said, rising. "Ethel must be wondering where Ulrich is."

They said their goodbyes. But as they were walking to the door, Ulrich noticed one person staring at him and Lutoth. Whilst his father wasn't on friendly terms with most in the village, he tolerated this man, Helor. They spoke sometimes, although not often.

Ulrich had felt comfortable here because his father never ate at the store. He only ever came to buy supplies in the morning. But he should have considered word could get back to his father.

The calm soured in Ulrich's stomach.

Of course, Ulrich knew eventually his father would find out about him and Lutoth. But just the thought sent his nerves into a frenzied panic. What would his father say when he saw Lutoth, so beautiful, or as his father would say, so pretty, dainty, and weak? Not to mention his father's ridiculous prejudice against nymphs.

“You’re being a fool.” His father would sneer. “You’re making the same mistake I did. Getting befuddled by beauty. Just look at him.”

Even though Lutoth was a nymph and built for these mountains, his father wouldn’t care. That wouldn’t matter to him. All he would see was how slender and pretty Lutoth was. Like Ulrich’s mother. That would blind his father to everything else.

But his father really did keep to himself mostly, and even if he was on reasonable terms with Helor, Ulrich knew they didn’t talk much. Ulrich hoped Helor and his father wouldn’t talk anytime soon. He just needed a little more time. Then he could rally his courage and face his father.

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN

Using his tongs, Ulrich held the metal against the anvil. He hammered both sides, the metal growing thinner and longer. This would be one of the hoops for Odara's grandchildren.

He smiled as he worked, his morning playing through his mind.

"I have to get up," Ulrich had said. "I have to go to the smithy."

"No," Lutoth protested. "Just stay a few more minutes." Lutoth's arms and legs, like vines, wrapped around Ulrich, pulling him down onto the mattress. "You're so warm and good to snuggle with." He yanked the blanket back into place over them, refusing to let Ulrich leave.

Relenting, Ulrich relaxed, and Lutoth let out a happy sigh. Ulrich only planned to remain in bed a minute or two, but instead, he fell asleep. Before Lutoth, he had never slept in. He had never had a reason to. Finally, he scrambled from bed. Lutoth laughed as they got ready and left the cabin.

Thankfully Ethel had gotten used to the late risings and could wait longer for her morning walks.

It had been two weeks since he and Lutoth had become a pair. Two weeks of bliss and happiness. He didn't think he had ever smiled as he worked. He didn't think he'd ever smiled so much in his entire life. His life was just better. Fuller. Happier.

"What have you got to be smiling about, boy?"

Ulrich's smile dropped at the sound of his father's voice. Tension rose in his body. He spared his father a glance. Ulrich placed the metal in the forge, pumping the bellows to reheat it.

Had Helor spoken to his father?

It had been days since Lutoth and he had been in the store to eat. Since that night, his father hadn't turned up berating him, so he'd hoped he was in the clear.

But what if Ulrich wasn't? What if his father had been dwelling on it, preparing the exact words he wanted to spit out at Ulrich?

Ulrich's hand tightened on the wooden handle, pumping faster.

"What you making?" His father shuffled towards him, cane stamping on the floor. He peered into the flames.

Did that mean his father didn't know? Did that mean Ulrich had more time?

"Hoops for Odara's grandchildren," Ulrich said when he could finally speak. "They're to be Solstice presents for the younglings."

"She spoils those kids," his father said. "Always giving them toys and cookies. Coddles them. Makes them soft. A waste of your time, making toys when you could be making something useful. I didn't give you any fancy toys, and you turned out fine."

Ulrich removed the glowing metal from the forge and held it to the anvil horn. Ulrich loved seeing the children smiling on Solstice. Particularly if they smiled because they were playing with the toys he'd made.

But of course, Ulrich didn't say that. Too timid and too cowardly to speak his mind.

"Got some bread from the bakery this morning," his father said. "Think that city boy baked it. Not as good as it used to be. Sometimes it feels like our town is being invaded by city folk!"

He tried to ignore his father's words.

“And nymphs.”

Ulrich hammered the metal, curving it.

“They seem to be everywhere in the village these days.”

Nymphs helped build Ores! Why do you choose to forget that? There would be no Ores without the oreads!”

But the words died in Ulrich’s throat. Just the idea of confronting his father made his palms sweat and his stomach turn until he thought he might vomit.

His father shook his head. “Such a pity that so few of the old families remain.”

Ulrich wanted to laugh at his father’s absurdity. He couldn’t count the number of times his father had called someone from one of the old families soft. Then said they’d probably be better off leaving for Bordertown.

“Well, I better get going. It’s getting late.”

Ulrich knew he should confront his father. Tell him about Lutoth. Tell him how much he cared for Lutoth and how happy he was with him. But he couldn’t bring himself to speak.

His father walked towards the door and left.

I should have said something! Why didn’t I say anything?

But he knew why. Despite everything, the man was still his father. He’d raised Ulrich and cared for him after his mother died. And even as his father aged and became less strong and more frail, the man still loomed over Ulrich in his mind.

Growing up, his older brother had always been the one to argue with their father. One reason he’d admired Elias and wished he’d stayed in Ores.

At least his father preferred to keep to himself these days. He probably wouldn’t come to the smithy for a week or two now.

Guilt ate at Ulrich. It felt worse now not standing up to his father. Because every time he didn’t speak, he felt like he was letting Lutoth down. Because he knew he’d need to tell his

father about them. He needed to defend their relationship. And Lutoth.

Ulrich looked out the window. Soon it'd be dark. He wondered when Lutoth would return. Sometimes Lutoth sat with him in the smithy whilst Ulrich worked. But most of the time, Lutoth visited his father in the valley during the days. Or prepared Ulrich's Solstice gifts.

Finished with the hoops, he cleaned up the smithy. He stretched his neck from side to side, joints cracking. Weariness tugged at him. Grabbing his coat and gloves, he left his workspace.

By the tree line, Ethel dug at the snow with her hoofs, searching for the vegetation hiding beneath. A youngling, perhaps one of Odara's grandchildren, squatted a short distance from her, watching Ethel graze.

Some of the tension inside him eased.

"You can go closer to her," he said, trying to keep his voice gentle. He knew his size scared some children. "Her name is Ethel."

The child peered up at Ulrich, pale eyes wide.

"She's friendly." Like with him, sometimes children were initially scared of Ethel, even if she fascinated them. "You can pat her." Ulrich stepped beside Ethel and ran his hand over her fur.

The child rose and came closer. She lifted her hand and clumsily patted the white fur on Ethel's head. Ethel kept munching away.

"Do the ears hurt?" she asked, pointing at the antlers.

"The antlers only hurt if she bangs them into something." Ulrich stroked one of the velvet antlers to show her that it didn't hurt. "Want to sit on her back? I can lift you."

"Will she mind?"

"No." He smiled.

Nodding, she stepped towards him. Ulrich lifted her and placed her on Ethel's back. She held her body rigid and tense as she sat there unmoving, an excited smile stretching across her little face. "I'm on the reindeer!" she whispered.

He chuckled. "You can pat her."

She leaned forward and patted Ethel, still beaming. Ethel remained unbothered by the girl as she continued chomping away. After a while, Ulrich placed the girl back on the ground. "Better get home. It's dark now."

"Goodbye, Ethel," she said and ran off.

"Good work, Ethel," Ulrich said. "I think you made that little girl's day."

Then Ulrich noticed Lutoth standing a short distance away, watching him. Lutoth strolled towards him, a smile on his face. "You like children."

Ulrich shrugged. "I like to see them happy."

"You can't fool me. I know you're the sweetest man in the village. Sweet with animals. Sweet with children. My sweet, gentle giant." Lutoth kissed him. "Happy Solstice." He handed Ulrich a parcel.

Ulrich unwrapped the gift, revealing two strangely lumpy-shaped cakes.

"They're Solstice cakes. I made them myself." Lutoth laughed. "They're meant to be shaped like crescent moons."

"Oh." Ulrich tilted his head. "I can kind of see it."

Lutoth gave him a playful shove. "At least I didn't burn these." He chuckled. "But I was supervised the entire time."

Smiling, Ulrich took a bite from one, and the taste of dried fruit, butter, and sugar filled his mouth. "Mmmm. They look a little odd, but they taste delicious. And definitely not burnt. Thank you."

"Sero said I can come by anytime if I want to bake more. And I can use the oven in the bakery. Because you don't have an oven."

“You’re only noticing this now?” Ulrich asked.

“All your human houses look the same to me. Except yours, which has a reindeer in it.”

Ulrich laughed. “My house just has the wood-fired stove to cook on. Only a couple of cabins in the village have ovens. But Sero will let anyone use his.”

They walked back to the cabin. Lutoth had entered his life two weeks ago. Everything was tentative and new, but Ulrich was happier than he’d ever been.

Now he just needed to face his father. He didn’t want to. He didn’t want his father’s disapproval to taint this relationship. Because his father would definitely disapprove.

But he and his father lived in the same village, and even if he found his father difficult, he was still Ulrich’s father. So he would need to tell him about Lutoth. And he would do it. He would do it for Lutoth. But he was glad he hadn’t had to do it today.

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN

“People can ride reindeer, can’t they?” Lutoth asked.

The three walked through the forest. Snow had fallen the night before, and it lay pristine and undisturbed before them, except for a pair of fox prints that wound through the trees and disappeared beneath a shrub.

“You want to ride Ethel?” Ulrich asked, raising a bushy brow. “Your legs tired?” Ulrich tapped Lutoth playfully on the butt. “I’ll remind you that you were the one who suggested this walk to the valley today.”

“My legs are just fine.” Lutoth smiled. He remembered how nervous the man had been on the first day they’d met. Now here Ulrich was, comfortably teasing him. “I walk a lot more than you. And I climb too. You should see me when the wind’s behind me.”

“Then why do you want to ride Ethel?”

“I don’t. I’ve just seen people on the trail to Castle Evermore ride reindeer. I’ve never seen anyone ride Ethel. No one except the children.” The sight of Ulrich helping children onto Ethel’s back glowed inside Lutoth’s chest. The man was too sweet!

Ethel stopped to graze. Lutoth and Ulrich paused.

“I’ve never tried to ride her.” Ulrich stroked her back. “I know people ride reindeer, but I always think I’m too big for her.”

“Maybe. But some of the people on the trail are big, and they usually have packs with them,” Lutoth said.

Ulrich scratched his beard, gazing at Ethel. “Honestly, I don’t want to ride her. I’d feel mean when my legs work fine.”

“You’re such a big softie.” Lutoth kissed Ulrich’s wind-chilled lips.

Ethel finished eating and lifted her head. Ulrich brushed away the snow that stuck to her snout.

Such a big softie.

The snow crunched beneath Ulrich’s boots and Ethel’s hoofs as they continued. They approached a ridge overlooking the valley. A pair of birds flew high above, black dots circling against a grey sky. Many trees grew below. Snow clung to branches and leaves.

“Here we are at the valley,” Lutoth said. “Twenty years ago we played here as younglings.”

Ulrich reached out and took Lutoth’s hand. “I’m glad you came back.”

“Me too,” he said. “There is a path down into the valley over there.” Lutoth pointed. “We’ll go that way, since you and Ethel wouldn’t be able to get down how I normally do.”

“How do you get down?”

“Here.” Lutoth gestured to the cliff’s edge.

Ulrich leaned slightly towards the edge. He jerked back, face a little grey. “But not today, right? You’ll come down the path with us. I don’t think I could stomach seeing you climb that.”

“I’m half-oread and half-sylph,” Lutoth said. “I think it is practically impossible for me to fall.”

“I know. Still, I don’t think I could stomach seeing you climb.”

Lutoth laughed. “Lucky for you—”

A gust of wind whirled around Lutoth, caressing his skin as it encased him.

Lutoth's hair whipped around his shoulders. Lutoth closed his eyes and sucked in a breath. The crisp, fresh air filled his lungs. His skin pebbled, not with the cold but with the feeling of the wind brushing along his body. His blood flowed, alive and buzzing in his veins. He rose onto his toes as the wind urged him onwards. He stepped towards the edge of the cliff.

Lutoth, the wind whispered. *Lutoth*.

He wanted to run. He wanted to climb. He wanted to move as fast and far as he could through the mountains and peaks, at one with the wind.

The wind died down. He opened his eyes.

Ulrich watched him, brows furrowed.

“Sorry,” Lutoth said. “Did you say something?”

“I said your name.” Ulrich smiled tightly. “Twice.”

“Sorry.” Lutoth swallowed. “I didn't hear you.”

Ulrich nodded, but his brows remained furrowed.

Lutoth stroked his hair back into place, pushing away the remaining urge to take off with the wind. He rolled his shoulders, which suddenly ached. “The path is this way.” He strode off.

No one spoke as Lutoth led the way down into the valley. Ulrich and Ethel followed.

He had ignored the wind's voice. He had ever since the Solstice season started. No matter how much he wanted to answer its call, he'd remained in Ores and the valley.

Still, he wished Ulrich hadn't seen that. Was Ulrich worried now that Lutoth would leave? He glanced at the still-frowning man. What could Lutoth say to reassure him? His mind jerked around, trying to seek the right words to say.

“It's been nice living in the valley the past year,” Lutoth said. “It's the longest I've ever spent in one place. And I've really liked it!” He could hear the edge in his own voice, the

desperation to prove to Ulrich that he could be trusted to remain still. “It’s been nice spending more time with my father and getting to know him.”

“When was the last time you saw your mother?”

“Over a year ago.” Lutoth didn’t know why Ulrich wanted to know that, and he didn’t know what Ulrich wanted to hear.

“Do you miss her?” Ulrich asked.

“Sometimes,” Lutoth said. “She never thought I could stay still. But I did.” He turned and faced Ulrich. “And I’m not planning to leave anytime soon!”

“I’m glad,” Ulrich said, giving him a half-smile. “You said growing up, you travelled from place to place. What does that mean exactly?”

“Well,” Lutoth began. “My mother would travel all over the Norend Mountains. And I went with her. I had no choice,” he added.

“And did you enjoy it?”

Lutoth hesitated. “I enjoyed climbing the mountains and running through the valleys. I liked travelling and meeting new nymphs. And humans too.” He shrugged. “But I like it here. I like the mountains and the rocks and staying with my feet firmly in one place.”

Everything between Ulrich and Lutoth was perfect. Lutoth could see a future with him. But he needed Ulrich to trust him and believe Lutoth wouldn’t just take off and leave him.

They continued downwards. Still, no one spoke. Lutoth wished he knew what Ulrich was thinking. He didn’t know what else he could say to put him at ease. He needed to change the subject.

“Should we collect branches and rope them together to create a shelter?” Lutoth asked.

Lutoth watched Ulrich and Ethel make their way slowly down the uneven, rocky path.

“Like we used to?” Ulrich kept his gaze on the path in front of him, making it impossible for Lutoth to read his expression.

Ethel moved particularly slowly, but she didn't seem perturbed by the decline. Then again, many reindeer used these paths to travel into the valley.

“Or we could explore some caves if you'd prefer,” Lutoth said.

Ulrich burst out laughing. The tension in Lutoth's body dissipated at the sound.

“I was so scared,” Ulrich said. “I tried to tell you that I couldn't see in a dark cave like an oread, but you didn't understand!”

“I worked it out pretty quickly when you kept stumbling over rocks and walking into walls.”

“I thought I was going to get lost or fall in a hole or die in there.” Ulrich shook his head.

“But you still followed me anyway.” Lutoth took Ulrich's hand, giving him something to hold on to as he descended.

Ulrich smiled. “I'd have followed you anywhere.”

Lutoth's chest felt light as if he could float away on Ulrich's words.

“Come on, not much further to go,” Lutoth said, leading the way into the valley.

CHAPTER
NINETEEN

The wind howled down the valley, chasing Lutoth, beckoning him. The trees around them swayed as they danced in the breeze, creaking and calling to him. But Lutoth smothered his instincts. His feet and hands tingled. But he didn't react. He just kept walking, footsteps calm and measured.

He didn't want to scare Ulrich again.

"Look, Ethel," Lutoth said. "Reindeer! Like you."

Ethel stopped and stared at them. The herd moved through the trees, digging at the snow with their hoofs and eating what they found beneath.

She watched them for a few moments, then turned away and continued.

Lutoth chuckled. "She doesn't seem so interested in other reindeer."

"Sometimes I think she doesn't realise she is one," Ulrich said. "I think she thinks she's human."

"You don't want to play with the reindeer, Ethel?" Lutoth asked, stroking her fur. "Run with them for a bit?"

She kept walking.

"Fair enough," Lutoth said.

They passed several oreads as they walked through the valley. They passed Yurem and Yael, twins who sat by a fire roasting fish. Suroth, Yelan, and Lela, an older throuple, sat by

their cave, weaving as they talked. Everyone they passed called out greetings to Lutoth and Ulrich.

Lutoth's throat tightened. This had been his home for the past year. He'd never had a home before. And even though he spent more time in Ores these days, he still felt like he had a place in the valley. In fact, it felt like he had two homes, one in the valley and one in Ores.

"They know who I am," Ulrich said.

"Of course," Lutoth said. "Everyone here knows I'm courting you. They also know it is going well. My father and Auntie Mila update everyone constantly." He smiled at Ulrich.

Music drifted through the valley. Lutoth and Ulrich turned towards the source. An oread sat on a rock, playing his flute.

"Who's that?" Ulrich asked.

"Yashi," Lutoth said. "He's not from here and doesn't talk much. To anyone. But he comes here sometimes and plays his flute."

They walked past Yashi, and although Yashi's eyes flicked to them, he didn't stop playing his music to greet them.

"My father's cave is up ahead," Lutoth said. "He's looking forward to meeting you."

"I'm looking forward to meeting him," Ulrich said, but Lutoth noted the tension in his shoulders and the tightness of his jaw.

When Lutoth's father spotted them, he broke into a bright smile and came towards them, practically running with excitement. Ulrich really had nothing to worry about. After all, Lutoth's father was Auntie Mila's brother and was just as keen to welcome Ulrich into the family as she was.

"Ulrich, what an honour to meet you." His father took both Ulrich's hands in his, clasping them tightly as he gazed up at the man. "I'm Fifior, and I've wanted to meet you for so long. You must be something very special."

"I don't know about that." Ulrich's cheeks flushed.

Fifior leaned towards Ulrich. "I know you are. My son is half-sylph, and it is difficult for him to stay still, but he has done so because of you." Tears glistened in his eyes. "It is because of you I have gotten to spend so much time getting to know him."

Not for the first time, Lutoth felt a stab of guilt in his chest. Even if it had been his mother's decision to move him from place to place, he still felt responsible for what his father had lost. Not just the sylph he loved but a son too.

And honestly, in the years since he had travelled without his mother, he could have spent more time in the valley with his father. But Lutoth couldn't change the past. All he could do now was move forward.

"Come in! Come in! I've prepared food for us," his father said, leading the way into the cave. "And I've also got food for Ethel too. Lutoth told me all about her. She will feel right at home."

"Thank you," Ulrich said following him in.

"It is much simpler than a human home, but it provides us with what we need."

A fire burned in the centre of the cave. Smoke rose into the crevices and crannies of the cave ceiling before being guided out into the open air.

"Please take a seat," Lutoth's father said, gesturing to the woven mat.

Ulrich and Lutoth did, although Ethel stood in the entryway, seemingly uncertain if she wanted to come in or not.

Lutoth's father brought them many dishes of food, different types of dried and smoked fish, nuts, and dried berries and fruit. He brought out some dried greenery for Ethel. Seeing it, Ethel decided she did want to enter the cave. She stepped inside and began to eat.

"What is that?" Ulrich asked.

Lutoth tensed. Ulrich pointed to part of the cave wall. Whites, silvers, and blues swirled and mixed against the dark

rock wall.

“It’s beautiful,” Ulrich said. “Did you paint that?”

Fifior shook his head. “My Aulea painted it.” He cleared his throat, looking embarrassed. “Aulea painted it. Lutoth’s mother. Years ago.”

“I’m sorry.” Ulrich sounded embarrassed.

Lutoth’s father sighed. “Aulea would go out every day and collect ingredients to make the paint. Then she’d mix them here, and she’d paint for hours and hours.” He smiled at the memory. “I could watch her paint all day. And every day, her belly grew bigger and bigger with Lutoth. Happy times.” He looked away from the painting. “And then she was gone. No warning. No goodbye. She just left.”

Ulrich stared at Fifior.

“She just left?” Ulrich asked.

His father nodded. “Surprised me completely. We were so in love.” His father’s hurt hung palpably in the smoky cave air.

Lutoth’s stomach sank deeper and deeper into his body.

I shouldn’t have brought Ulrich here.

Not to this place where his father’s heartbreak was literally painted on the cave wall.

He should have brought his father to the village. To Ulrich’s house or Auntie Mila’s. His father could have met Ulrich there. Then Ulrich would not have seen this, and they wouldn’t have spoken of his mother’s abrupt departure.

He stared at Ulrich, trying to decipher what he was thinking, terrified that Ulrich might decide trusting Lutoth had been a mistake.

CHAPTER
TWENTY

Ulrich woke from his afternoon nap to a strange sensation. A tickling of his chin and cheeks. He opened his eyes. Darkness lay outside the windows, but several candles cast a dim golden light in the cabin.

Lutoth leaned over him, gaze on his beard.

“What are you doing?” Ulrich asked.

“Shhh. Keep sleeping,” Lutoth whispered. “I’m almost finished.” Lutoth picked up a small white flower and then placed it in Ulrich’s beard. It was hard to tell from this angle exactly what Lutoth was doing.

Lutoth’s brows furrowed in concentration. His tongue stuck out from the corner of his dark-grey lips.

“But what are you doing?” Ulrich asked. “It’s ticklish.”

“Shhh. Stop asking questions. I’m busy,” Lutoth said. “And stop moving.”

“I’m not moving.”

“You keep speaking. It makes your beard move around.”

Ulrich chuckled. “Sorry.” He wrapped an arm around Lutoth’s bare waist and contented himself with gazing at Lutoth’s face in the candlelight as Lutoth did whatever it was he was doing.

“Oreads don’t have beards.” Lutoth picked up some more flowers. “So let me enjoy this.”

Ulrich closed his eyes, letting himself doze.

Lutoth sat back after several minutes. “All done.” He reached for a hand mirror, a Solstice gift for Ulrich. *So you can see how beautiful you are.* That was what Lutoth had said.

Lutoth straddled Ulrich’s waist and held up the mirror in front of Ulrich.

Ulrich swallowed. Small white flowers decorated his dark, bushy beard.

“I look...” He trailed off.

“Pretty,” Lutoth said, voice soft. “You look pretty, Ulrich.”

Ulrich nodded. He did look pretty.

Lutoth stroked a hand down Ulrich’s furred belly. “Now hold this. You need one more thing.” Ulrich took the mirror. He moved it from side to side so he could get a better view of the flowers in his beard.

No one had ever made Ulrich feel like this before, made Ulrich feel beautiful and cherished. Adored.

Lutoth made Ulrich feel like he didn’t need to be tough. Like he didn’t need to be who his father always said he should be. Lutoth made Ulrich feel like he could just be himself. And that he was worthy of being cared for.

“Sit up,” Lutoth said, holding Ulrich’s necklace in his hands. Ulrich did, and Lutoth put the necklace on Ulrich, clasping it at the back. He smoothed the strands, ensuring they lay flat against Ulrich’s chest.

Ulrich ran his hand down the lengths of reeds and vines, caressing the dried berries and beads. He held the mirror further away so he could see the necklace and flowers at the same time.

“You look so beautiful, Ulrich.” Desire burned in Lutoth’s gaze. He wore nothing, and the evidence of his want hung heavy between Lutoth’s thighs.

Blood flooded Ulrich’s groin and his cock, already half-hard from all Lutoth’s gentle ministrations. Lutoth ran his hands up Ulrich’s hairy thighs. One hand squeezed. The other curled around Ulrich’s cock, gripping tightly.

Lutoth stroked. Ulrich groaned, and his hips flexed, thrusting into Lutoth's textured hand. Ulrich lay back, dropping the mirror beside him on the bed.

"So lovely." Lutoth pressed Ulrich's left thigh back, opening Ulrich up to his gaze. All the while, Lutoth continued to stroke Ulrich with his other hand.

Ulrich marvelled at the want on Lutoth's face.

That look is for me. Lutoth wants me. Desires me. He thinks I'm beautiful. He thinks I'm pretty.

Liquid gathered at the tip of Ulrich's cock. Lutoth leaned forward, tonguing the slit, and then ran his wet tongue around the flared head as he continued to jerk Ulrich's member. Ulrich's hips bucked. He cried out, throwing his head back.

"I want to fuck you now," Lutoth said, voice husky.

Ulrich nodded. He wanted that too.

Lutoth released his grip on Ulrich's member. Ulrich held himself open, spreading his legs wide, waiting for Lutoth. He wanted to be filled and fucked.

Adorned like this, all laid out and waiting, Ulrich felt like some sort of nymph sacrifice that he'd read about in books. The stories went that years ago, willing humans would be presented to forest nymphs in the early spring. The nymphs would approach the human sacrifices and have their way with them in exchange for a good harvest.

Ulrich would willingly be a sacrifice for Lutoth.

Lutoth grabbed a bottle and poured its contents over his slender fingers. The scent of the citrus oil filled Ulrich's nostrils. Ulrich caressed his inner thighs, desperate to feel Lutoth's cock sliding inside him. He pressed his finger against his own hole, groaning as he teased the tight ring of muscle.

Lutoth licked his lips at the sight whilst slicking his hard cock with oil. After placing the bottle by the bed, Lutoth moved between Ulrich's spread thighs. Lutoth's slippery fingers pressed against him. Ulrich rocked against them, urging them on.

He moaned as they slid inside him, stretching him and preparing him with quick, sure movements.

“You’re so stunning, Ulrich. I can’t wait to feel your tight, hot body wrapped around my cock.”

Lutoth’s fingers pressed deep, sliding in and out of him. They nudged the bundle of nerves deep inside him. Ulrich groaned. Talented fingers worked him, and he rocked on the digits moving inside him. His cock dribbled copiously onto his belly.

Lutoth twisted and stretched his fingers, rubbing repeatedly over that special spot. Then he tugged them free, and Ulrich made a noise at the loss. But immediately, Lutoth was between his legs, guiding his cock to Ulrich’s hole, teasing him with the tip.

Ulrich pushed against him. “Please,” he whispered. “Please, Lutoth.”

Lutoth stroked Ulrich’s beard, tugging the tufts of hair.

“Please,” Ulrich whispered again. “I want you inside me.”

Lutoth pressed a kiss to Ulrich’s mouth. He placed his hands on Ulrich’s hips. “Anything for you, my sweet, gentle giant.”

Then he thrust, filling Ulrich in one smooth movement.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE

Ulrich groaned as he was stretched wide and filled with Lutoth's throbbing dick.

Lutoth held still for a moment, fingers digging into Ulrich's skin. He panted. Then he withdrew slowly before surging forward. He started a slow rhythm, moving in and out of Ulrich.

"You feel so perfect around me." Lutoth groaned. "I could fuck you forever."

Ulrich loved when Lutoth fucked him. Loved the feel of their bodies locked together, moving in sync, finding their pleasure. The head of Lutoth's cock hit that spot inside him. Ulrich groaned, clutching at Lutoth's biceps.

Lutoth's white hair flowed around him as he shoved his cock into Ulrich.

"Faster! Please, Lutoth. Faster." Ulrich wrapped his legs around Lutoth's. Pleasure churned inside him.

Lutoth's thrusts increased. He shoved inside Ulrich. Leaning forward, Lutoth kissed Ulrich, trailing his rough, calloused fingers over Ulrich's ribs.

Breaking the kiss, Lutoth leaned back. He gripped the backs of Ulrich's thighs and pushed, bending Ulrich in half and opening him up completely. He pounded into Ulrich. Over and over.

"Ah," Ulrich cried out each time Lutoth nailed that spot inside him. "Oh!" His feet tingled as pleasure singed his

nerves.

Lutoth's eyes roved Ulrich's body. "Stroke yourself."

Ulrich wrapped his hand around his thick cock, stroking himself in time with Lutoth. Pre-cum slid down the sides of his cock, coating his fingers.

"So pretty." Lutoth thrust, jolting Ulrich. "Beautiful." He thrust again. "Stunning." Each word, a chant. "Mine."

Ulrich's eyes fluttered closed, his hand tightening. He stroked himself faster. His mouth fell open. His spine arched. His balls tingled and pulled tight against his body as his orgasm tore through him in waves of pleasure. His spend splattered across his chest and stomach.

Lutoth's thrusts grew erratic. His hands squeezed Ulrich's thighs. He cried out, and his warm seed spilled inside Ulrich.

For several moments, they stayed locked together. Their breathing slowly returned to normal.

Lutoth chuckled.

"What?" Ulrich asked.

"I think I'll need to clean this necklace," he said, smiling at the sight of Ulrich's cum splattered across it. Lutoth reached out and wiped at a bit. "Although, I have to say, I like how it looks. I think it adds the perfect finishing touch." Lutoth licked at the drop of fluid on his finger.

If Ulrich hadn't just orgasmed, his cock would definitely be perking up.

"We'll have to do this again sometime," Lutoth said. "I like dressing you up and fucking you."

Ulrich's cock gave a weak jerk. Lutoth laughed.

Lutoth grabbed the rag by the bed and did a quick clean before collapsing on the bed beside Ulrich. Ulrich pulled Lutoth against his chest and tugged the blanket over them. After a couple of moments, Lutoth's breathing deepened as sleep dragged him under.

Ulrich smiled, listening to Lutoth's light snores.

He closed his eyes and tried to sleep. But he couldn't. Worry crept inside his mind. A worry that had bothered him every night since visiting the valley. Ulrich hadn't been able to forget what had happened there.

One moment, Lutoth had been talking.

Then the wind blew.

Lutoth stopped speaking mid-sentence. His whole demeanour changed in an instant. It was like the wind called to him, and from where Ulrich stood, Lutoth looked like he wanted to answer its call.

Whatever Lutoth had felt was powerful.

Could Ulrich compete with that?

Originally, Ulrich had believed Lutoth when he said he would stay. After all, Lutoth said he would stay, so why would Ulrich doubt him? But after seeing what he had, it was harder to ignore the doubts that stirred inside him.

He'd hoped to put himself at ease by getting Lutoth to open up about his mother, his upbringing, and the feelings he had when the wind blew. Perhaps if Ulrich understood it better, it would unnerve him less. But every time Ulrich tried to find out more, Lutoth became agitated and defensive, stumbling over his words. His normal composure and confidence disappeared. So Ulrich had stopped asking questions.

And then there was Fifior. It had shocked Ulrich to see Lutoth's father in his heartbroken state. Ulrich hadn't considered the oread might still be in love with Lutoth's mother after all these years. He'd assumed the oread would have moved on.

And from what Fifior had said, Aulea and Fifior had once been very much in love.

But that hadn't stopped her from leaving.

That alone turned Ulrich's blood to ice.

Was that Ulrich's future? Would he suffer the same fate as Fifior? In years to come, would Ulrich stare at the Solstice

gifts Lutoth had lovingly bestowed on Ulrich, unable to throw away the only reminder of the love he had experienced years ago?

His arms tightened around Lutoth. Ulrich cared for Lutoth. He was falling in love with him. Just the idea of losing him sent sharp, stabbing pains through his chest. But what if the howl of the wind proved too strong for Lutoth to resist?

He closed his eyes, trying to calm the doubts spiralling and multiplying inside him.

Lutoth said he'd stay, and I trust Lutoth.

Lutoth said he'd stay, and I trust Lutoth.

Lutoth said he'd stay, and I trust Lutoth.

But no matter how many times he repeated the words to himself, he still couldn't stop the fear that he would end up just like Fifi, heartbroken and alone, surrounded by memories of a past love.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO

Ulrich pulled on his breeches as they prepared to leave the cabin. Ethel stood staring at the door, waiting for it to open.

“Shouldn’t we have decorated the cabin?” Lutoth asked. “It’s less than one week to the Solstice.”

“Do you want to?” Ulrich asked.

“I thought it an Ores tradition for everyone to make their cabin all festive.” Lutoth opened the door, and Ethel trotted out.

“I don’t usually decorate since, it’s just me and Ethel,” Ulrich said, buttoning up his coat as he exited the cabin. He watched Ethel prancing through the snow, tossing her head with joy. “But it might be nice. We can collect some greenery as we walk.”

Maybe he could even make some mulled wine. He’d been told it was simple enough.

“Don’t forget your Solstice gift,” Lutoth said.

That morning, Lutoth had given Ulrich Solstice berries and white flowers, wrapped in red ribbon. Small quartz stones had been sewn into the ribbon. A pin attached to the back allowed Ulrich to wear it.

“Almost forgot.” Ulrich picked it up off the table and pinned it to his coat. He smiled at the gift.

What would my father think of such a gift?

His throat tightened at the unpleasant thought. He could see the sneer on his father's face. "Why would you wear something like that?" He could hear the disgust dripping from his voice. "Too pretty. Too dainty." His gaze would rise from the gift and focus on Ulrich. "Completely useless. Like you."

But his father didn't leave his cabin often in winter. He dropped by the smithy every week or two. And he'd already been by a couple of days ago. Other than that, he normally only went to the store. Which he visited in the morning. They wouldn't run into his father if they were just going for a walk in the forest.

Lutoth smiled at him as they left the cabin. "We need to go to the store first." Lutoth's eyes twinkled. "I have something I need to do there."

Bile rose in Ulrich's throat. "Maybe we could go later in the day?"

"I'll just be quick. Promise," Lutoth said.

Ulrich remained silent. He couldn't bring himself to say he didn't want to go to the store in case they ran into his father. As they walked, Ulrich remained on alert, casting his gaze in the direction of his father's house.

"Morning," Rhorton boomed as they entered the store.

"Morning," Lutoth and Ulrich said.

"Oh! The berries and flowers look so beautiful, Ulrich. Were they a gift from Lutoth?" Mila came forward, reached out, and touched the gift.

"They were," Ulrich said.

She clasped her hands together. "You make such a wonderful couple. Don't they, Rhorton?"

"They do," Rhorton said. "We got some smoked sausage from Castle Evermore yesterday. You should grab some before it sells out. Mila cut a couple up and put them into a lentil stew last night, and it was delicious!"

"We'll take a few," Ulrich said and then began to pick up some other food items, constantly glancing at the door.

Lutoth whispered to Mila. No doubt something to do with his Solstice gifts.

The door opened. Ulrich's spine straightened. He let out a breath.

An oread entered. Ulrich had seen him a couple of times in the village but hadn't spoken to the newcomer. The man saw Ulrich and Lutoth and smiled.

"Morning, Orteo," Rhorton said.

"Lutoth, Ulrich, have you met Orteo?" Mila said. "He is helping look after Gael, a lord from Castle Evermore. The man sprained his ankle and is resting in Sariah's cabin."

Ulrich had heard something about that.

"Happy Solstice," Lutoth greeted. "I'm Lutoth, and that is Ulrich."

Ulrich nodded. "Morning."

"How is Gael doing today?" Mila asked Orteo.

"He's well and continuing to recover." Orteo picked up some cheese and a jar of jam. "And can I take a loaf of bread and some Solstice cookies? Do you have any more of that sausage you had yesterday? Gael liked that."

"We do," Mila said.

With his package of food, Orteo said goodbye with a smile and left the store.

"And what are you two doing for Solstice Eve?" Mila asked. "Oh! You should eat here. I'm putting on a big meal. Everyone is welcome." She clapped her hands together.

"Sounds lovely," Lutoth said.

"I can't," Ulrich said. "I'll be at my father's."

Ulrich and his father didn't spend much time together. Normally, he only saw his father when he dropped in at the smithy or when they passed each other in the village. But for as long as he could remember, he, his father, and Elias always

ate together on Solstice Eve. Like their one attempt to be a close family.

And even after Elias had left Bordertown, his father and Ulrich continued the tradition.

“Oh. Oh, of course,” Mila said, deflating.

“But you should come here,” Ulrich said to Lutoth. “Mila knows how to cook a good Solstice Eve feast.”

Lutoth’s brow furrowed slightly as if he wondered whether they should be spending Solstice Eve together. It was common for couples to do so. But Ulrich couldn’t bear the idea of Lutoth being at his father’s table. His father would stare at Lutoth. Look down on him. Make cruel remarks about nymphs.

“But after, you can come back to my place,” Ulrich said. “And we can spend the whole Winter Solstice celebrating together.”

Lutoth’s face relaxed. “That would be nice.”

“Well, we should get going,” Ulrich said, keen to leave the store in case his father appeared. “We’re going to decorate my cabin.”

“You haven’t done it yet?” Mila cried.

“That’s what I said.” Lutoth laughed. “Apparently he doesn’t usually do it.”

Her mouth dropped open in horror. “Well, go! Go!” She shoed them. “Go decorate!”

They left the store, Rhorton’s laughter and Mila’s cries of dismay following them out.

Ethel spotted them and galloped over, and they walked in the direction of the forest.

Ulrich’s footsteps faltered. He spotted his father, bent over and walking towards the store through the snow. If they kept walking, they’d cross paths. Then his father would see the Solstice gift. And Lutoth.

“Actually, let’s go this way.” Blood pounding, Ulrich abruptly began walking in a different direction, towards the forest. His breathing came in short puffs.

“Everything all right, Ulrich?” Lutoth asked.

“Of course!” He forced a cheery smile as they entered the forest. But shame rose in his throat, choking him with his cowardice.

He just wasn’t ready to confront his father. Furthermore, he didn’t want his father to ruin the Solstice season. Everything was so perfect, and really, Winter Solstice was only a few days away.

Perhaps it would be better to wait until after the Solstice to deal with his father. Perhaps he could go the day after the Solstice and tell his father then. It would be difficult, but at least it wouldn’t ruin Winter Solstice.

He’d practise what he was going to say beforehand. Maybe he could even ask his brother for tips, when he visited, on how to stand his ground. That would be the wise thing to do.

Then he would face his father.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE

“Why are you eating our Solstice decorations, Ethel?” Lutoth laughed. “We’ve only just finished decorating.”

Completely unperturbed by the reprimand, Ethel grabbed another pine cone from the windowsill and crunched into it. She then turned towards the boughs of evergreen decorating the table. She nosed around amongst the green pine branches, searching for more pine cones.

Ulrich wrapped an arm around Lutoth. “Should I stop her?”

Branches toppled to the floor. They sat together before the wood-fired stove. It crackled and popped as it heated the cabin. They leaned back against an armchair, curled up on the floor beneath a woollen blanket that bore several holes thanks to Ethel’s habit of chewing everything.

Outside, darkness had descended. Lutoth saw snowflakes falling fast and heavy in a blur beyond the window. But they remained snug within the cabin.

“No.” Lutoth relaxed against Ulrich. “Let her.”

Ethel shoved her snout amongst the evergreen on the floor, perhaps searching for more cones. Or perhaps just curious as to why the forest seemed to have entered their cabin.

“Maybe she’s just trying to help us decorate,” Lutoth said. “Maybe she thinks we need more branches scattered haphazardly on the floor.”

Ulrich chuckled.

“We can collect more pine cones tomorrow if need be. It’s easy enough,” Lutoth said. “We can collect lots and put a bowl out for her.”

A thud sounded. Ethel walked towards them. Boughs of greenery that they’d placed around the window had slid downwards, joining the others on the ground.

Ethel dropped down next to them. Lutoth and Ulrich shuffled to make room for her large body, which crowded against Lutoth. She tucked her legs under her chest. Then she lowered her antlered head and closed her eyes.

“All tired now after decorating?” Lutoth rubbed her muscled flank. “What a good girl you are!”

“It’s nice that you care about her,” Ulrich said.

“It’s easy when she’s so sweet.” Lutoth yawned as he leaned into Ulrich.

“Not everyone feels the same as you.” Ulrich smiled. “Want some more dinner?”

Lutoth touched his extended stomach. “I don’t think I could eat any more.”

They’d supped on a rich lentil stew, which Lutoth had prepared under Ulrich’s supervision, along with fresh rolls from the bakery. After that, they’d devoured a Solstice loaf.

“But I could have some more mulled wine,” Lutoth said.

The mulled wine stewed in a pot on the stove. The smell of the wine, infused with orange peel, cinnamon, star anise, and cloves, hung heavy in the air, mixing with the scent of pine.

Ulrich rose, grabbed a mug, and ladled the red liquid into the cup. He handed it to Lutoth and then ladled some for himself.

Lutoth held the warm mug in both hands, watching the steam rise. He inhaled the fragrant brew. “And maybe I’ll have some cinnamon star cookies.”

Ulrich's eyebrow rose. "I thought you said you couldn't eat any more."

"It's just a little cookie." Lutoth sipped the mulled wine. The heated liquid slid down his throat and into his belly. He moaned.

"Not if you eat twenty of them," Ulrich said, laughing. He grabbed a parcel of cookies. He dropped them in Lutoth's lap and sat beside him, pulling the blanket over their legs.

Lutoth unwrapped the parcel and picked up one of the star-shaped cookies with white icing on the top. He popped it into his mouth. The cookie melted, and the taste of cinnamon, sugar, and butter exploded on his tongue.

"Mmmm." Lutoth chewed, already reaching for another.

Ulrich chuckled. "I can't believe how much you eat. You eat the same amount as me, and I'm twice the size of you." He patted his rounded belly.

"It's because I'm half-oread, half-sylph. I climb and move so fast and far. It takes a lot of energy to keep me going." He bit into a second cookie.

Ulrich rubbed Lutoth's leg beneath the blanket, a strange expression flitting across his face. Then it was gone.

Lutoth ate his cookies, studying Ulrich's face. Lutoth thought about the day they'd visited the valley. Lutoth had seen how Ulrich had looked at him when the wind howled. And since then, he'd noticed that strange expression several times on Ulrich's face. Was he worried Lutoth would leave? Was that what that expression meant?

Lutoth wanted to reassure Ulrich that he wouldn't leave him. But all he had were words to try to convince him. And he didn't know if words would be enough. He swallowed the cookie in his mouth and reached for another.

Maybe all he could do was show Ulrich that he could be constant and that he wouldn't leave him. And maybe Ulrich just needed time to fully believe and trust him to stay.

And Lutoth could give him time. And he would stay. He'd been disciplined, ignoring the call of the wind these past few weeks. And although the pull of the wind was strong, so was Lutoth. He'd fought against the temptation. Even though it had cost him.

He rolled his shoulders. Since he'd begun ignoring the wind, he'd noticed a tension building inside his muscles and bones. But he could work through it. He had to for Ulrich. He wouldn't leave. He wouldn't go anywhere. He wouldn't let Ulrich down.

He'd stay here in Ores and the valley. Never far from Ulrich. Then Ulrich would trust him and the strange expression would stop appearing on Ulrich's face. Then they'd just have wonderful days like this.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FOUR

Sweat dripped down Ulrich's face and neck. The roaring of the fire and the hammering of metal against metal resounded in the smithy. Using his tongs, Ulrich lifted the metal and placed it into the forge, burying it amongst the glowing coals.

And as Ulrich worked, Lutoth's heated gaze burned his skin.

"You sure you're not bored watching?" Ulrich pumped the bellows, exaggerating the movement so Lutoth could see the muscles in his arms working.

The red-and-gold flames rose.

"Definitely not." Lutoth leaned back against a table, openly ogling Ulrich. "But it's so hot in here," he said, voice smooth. "Surely you would be more comfortable if you worked without your shirt."

Ulrich laughed. "Sorry to disappoint. But if I do that, I might end up with more burn scars than I already have."

"Wouldn't want that. But maybe you could do a demonstration later when the forge isn't going," Lutoth suggested.

"You'd like to see that?" Ulrich took the metal out of the coals and placed it on the anvil.

Lutoth bit his lip. "Then I'd get to properly see all your bulging muscles as you hammered. You could even be naked."

"Shirtless isn't enough for you?"

“It would be better if you were naked.”

Ulrich chuckled.

Beside Lutoth lay a bunch of small white flowers, which he'd collected in the forest. He'd waved them around when he entered, like an unspoken promise that he planned to thread the flowers into Ulrich's beard, put his necklace on him, and fuck him.

Ulrich's cock hardened.

But he had to stay focused. He didn't have much more work to do, and soon he'd be finished for the day.

Then Lutoth could pretty him up and fuck him.

“There. Done.” Ulrich placed the axe head on the table and wiped his brow. He'd make the handle later. He removed his gloves, looked into Lutoth's face, and paused. “What are you planning?”

“What makes you think I'm planning anything?” Lutoth asked.

“I know that smirk.”

Lutoth slid from the table and sashayed to Ulrich, pulling something from his pocket. Something white and long. He twirled it around his fingers.

“What's that?”

“Your Solstice gift.”

Ulrich squinted. “What is it?”

“I saw it in the store and thought it would suit you perfectly. It is from Castle Evermore. It is crocheted lace ribbon. I thought it would bring out your delicate, sweet side.”

Lutoth stood directly in front of Ulrich. He lifted the strand between his fingers, showing the delicate, thin white lace. The pattern looked like a string of flowers. “I thought it beautiful and pretty. Just like you.” He hooked the lace around the back of Ulrich's neck, letting it slide down the sides of his neck, ending on his chest.

Ulrich touched it. “And what will you do with it?”

“Well, I’d planned to plait a couple into your hair.” He caressed Ulrich’s brown hair.

“You’ve got more than one?” Ulrich asked.

“A few, actually.” Lutoth’s finger travelled from Ulrich’s hair to the tip of the lace, across Ulrich’s chest, down his arm, and ending at his wrist. “Maybe I’ll use it to tie you up. Although, I’m not sure it would be tough enough. It might break.” He wrapped his hand around Ulrich’s wrist. “Especially if I’m riding your cock and you’re thrashing about. You’d have to be very good and hold yourself very still.”

Ulrich’s cock throbbed, fully hard now. “I can be good,” he said, voice husky.

“What is going on here?” A croaky voice sounded from the entryway. A voice dripping with condescension and disgust.

Ulrich’s father.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FIVE

Every muscle in Ulrich's body constricted. Dread sank like lead in his belly at the sound of his father's voice.

Ulrich yanked from Lutoth's touch.

Lutoth sucked in a breath.

The lace slid from Ulrich's neck, crumpling to the ground.

"Father!" Ulrich said. "What are you doing here?"

His father stood in the doorway, glowering at them. It hadn't been that long since his father last visited the smithy. Why was he here? Why couldn't his father have stayed away until after the Solstice? It was just two more days, and then Ulrich had planned to go see him.

He wasn't prepared to face his father yet. Not here and not now. And definitely not with Lutoth watching.

Suddenly, his plan seemed so foolish. Why hadn't he been prepared for the chance they might run into his father beforehand? He'd just blindly hoped that they wouldn't.

And now here his father was.

"Just thought I'd stop in and see the *hard work* my son was doing. I hadn't realised you'd have company." His flinty gaze landed on Lutoth. His thin upper lip curled.

Ulrich didn't look at Lutoth. "I'd... I'd just finished up." Ulrich gestured to the axe head he'd made.

"I see." His father stepped forward, cane thumping on the wooden floor.

Ulrich dropped his head, shoulders pulling in. And just like that, he was a little boy again, standing before his father, whom Ulrich had let down.

“And is this your *customer*? Does he need an axe?” his father mocked.

“This is Lutoth,” Ulrich said. “He is...” *He is courting me, and he makes me feel special, desired, and cared for. He cherished me and cares for me and doesn't make me feel like a hulking, dirty brute. I am happier with him than I ever have been. He is the love of my life. He is mine, and I am his.*

But his tongue seized, unable to form the words. His courage failed him. “He is a... A... A friend,” Ulrich stuttered.

Lutoth gasped.

Ulrich squeezed his eyes shut. “I mean, he is—”

“A friend, is he?” his father interrupted. “Well, don't let your *friend* distract you from your work. A blacksmith needs to be focused. Needs to be disciplined. Can't be distracted by *pretty things*.” He glared at Lutoth. Then his harsh gaze travelled to Ulrich.

Ulrich wished he could disappear, throw himself into the forge, and burst into flames and smoke.

“Hopefully next time I come by, you'll be doing some work,” his father said. And with that, his father shuffled to the door and walked out, not even saying goodbye.

Silence reigned in the smithy.

Ulrich couldn't speak. The taste of shame seared his throat shut.

A friend. That was how he'd introduced Lutoth to his father.

He couldn't look at Lutoth. Couldn't move.

Ulrich knew he'd done wrong. He'd betrayed Lutoth. He was too weak. Too cowardly.

“Are you ashamed of me?” Lutoth asked.

“No!” Ulrich blurted. “Of course not. Never!” Ulrich forced himself to look into Lutoth’s face.

Tears glistened in Lutoth’s eyes. Tears Ulrich had caused.

Lutoth chuckled, a mirthless laugh. “Could have fooled me.” Ulrich could hear the pain in Lutoth’s voice.

“How could you hide me from your father? I’ve spent the last four weeks courting you, sleeping in your bed, fucking you, completely in love—” Lutoth cut himself off.

Ulrich flinched. Lutoth and Ulrich hadn’t said they loved each other, but it was there. In every kiss, every glance, every moment they’d spent together. And now Ulrich had ruined it.

“You hurt me, Ulrich.”

The word pierced Ulrich to the marrow. “I know.”

“I thought you cared about me. But you introduced me to your father as a *friend*.” His voice choked. “You dropped my Solstice gift into the soot and dirt like it was trash.” Lutoth’s white hair stirred around his shoulders. “Do you want me to discard these too?”

Lutoth strode to the table and picked up the white flowers. He walked to the forge and threw them on the coals. They burst into flame before crumbling into ash and nothingness.

“Lutoth,” Ulrich said, reaching out for him. “Don’t... Please...”

“Please what?” Lutoth cried out.

The wind blew outside, rattling the windows.

“How could you say I’m a friend?” Lutoth asked. “Is that what you truly see me as?”

The wind banged open the door, rushing through the smithy, whipping around him, and stealing the air from Ulrich’s lungs. The strands of Lutoth’s hair floated around him. Tools rattled against the wall. The table shook, and the axe head clattered to the floor.

“Are you doing this?” Ulrich asked, gaze flicking around the smithy.

Lutoth's hair snapped in the air.

"I'm sorry," Ulrich said, but the wind drowned out his words. "I didn't mean it." But it was like Lutoth couldn't hear him. "I was just—"

The wind howled. Ulrich's clothes flapped. The flames danced wildly in the forge.

Was this it? Was Lutoth going to leave him?

No! Ulrich needed to plead and beg for another chance. For forgiveness. It couldn't end like this. Lutoth couldn't disappear from his life. Even if it was Ulrich's fault. Even if Ulrich had done wrong, he needed to fix it. He loved Lutoth too much to lose him.

Lutoth closed his eyes like he had on the mountain.

Ulrich's chest squeezed. Lutoth was going to follow in his mother's footsteps. Ulrich had to stop him.

He could still see the sadness in Lutoth's father's eyes as he stared at the painting that forever reminded him of the sylph who had left him. Ulrich couldn't bear to suffer the same fate.

"No!" Ulrich cried out.

They couldn't end like this!

"I'm sorry. Please." In desperation, Ulrich grabbed Lutoth's wrists.

Lutoth's eyes flew open.

"Don't fly away with the wind!" he yelled. "Not like your mother."

Lutoth heard that.

The wind died abruptly. His hair stopped moving.

Lutoth stared at Ulrich. "After all I've done to prove myself to you, you still think I'm like her. I promised I wouldn't leave. But it doesn't matter what I do." He laughed, a soft, bitter, broken laugh. "You don't trust me. Is that why you denied me to your father? Because you don't trust me? Because you thought I'd leave?"

“No. I didn’t mean it like—”

“You’re the one who betrayed me.” Lutoth yanked his wrists from Ulrich’s grasp. “I did everything I could to prove that you could trust me. Everything. But you are the one who let me down.” His voice cracked.

“I know—”

But before Ulrich could finish the sentence, Lutoth was out the door.

Ulrich ran after him. “I didn’t mean it like that.” But when he reached the door, Lutoth was gone.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SIX

Lutoth didn't pause. Didn't draw breath. He just fled from the smithy. His bare feet flew across the snow, barely touching the ground. The wind rose, lifting to meet him, to carry him, propelling him onwards.

The pain of Ulrich's denial urged Lutoth on.

The cold whipped across his face. The snow stung his cheeks. The trees flew past him as he dodged them, putting as much distance as possible between him and the smithy.

Away from Ulrich.

He is a friend.

Lutoth thought Ulrich cared about him. He thought they were building a life together. He thought Ulrich might even love him. But Ulrich had never even told his father about Lutoth. He could still see the shock and horror on Ulrich's father's face.

A friend.

Ulrich, it seemed, wanted to keep Lutoth secret. He'd felt Ulrich jerking away from him as if he couldn't stand to have his father see him so close to Lutoth.

What had Lutoth done to deserve that? Why was Ulrich ashamed of him?

He could see the lace, sliding from around Ulrich's neck, falling amongst the ash, dirt, and slivers of metal on the smithy floor.

Lutoth let out a choked noise.

A friend.

Lutoth reached the base of a cliff and flung himself at it, his hands and feet clinging to the rock as he scampered upwards. He moved faster than any oread. A gift from his sylph heritage.

But Lutoth had oread heritage too. And it was because of that that he'd wanted to live in Ores. That was why he'd wanted to build a home. To stay put amongst the rocks and mountains that surrounded the village. He wanted to make a life there. To have a place to belong. With Ulrich.

But that was not to be.

He kept climbing, muscles straining as he climbed higher than the trees. The snow fell and fell and fell.

A fucking friend!

The higher Lutoth climbed, the stronger the wind blew. Even an oread would struggle to climb in this gale blowing through the mountains. He pulled himself onto the top of the cliff, gazing out over the mountains and the trees tossing in the stormy, gusting wind. The snow swirled around him in a flurry of white.

Don't fly away with the wind! Not like your mother.

He tilted his head towards the sky, squeezing his eyes closed.

Why couldn't he escape her? What could he do to prove he wasn't her? It was she who'd left his father. Not him.

Yet it felt like he was always paying for her decisions. Even Ulrich couldn't let it go and Lutoth had never betrayed him. Ulrich had never even met Lutoth's mother! Still, she cast a shadow over Lutoth's life. He couldn't escape her. No matter how he tried.

Maybe Ulrich had never told his father about Lutoth because he assumed Lutoth wouldn't be around long enough. Perhaps he thought Lutoth would just leave one day.

Like your mother.

Lutoth had done everything he could to prove he wasn't her. He'd stayed still for a year! And for the past four weeks, he'd ignored the call of the wind until his body ached with longing. Until the tension ate away at him.

Ulrich had said he'd give Lutoth a chance. But he hadn't. He'd still expected Lutoth to leave. The moment Lutoth had gotten upset, Ulrich had thrown it in his face.

He lifted his arms. The gale wrapped around him. Embracing him. Caressing him.

He gazed towards Ores.

There was no home there for Lutoth with Ulrich.

Lutoth. The wind sang his name. *Lutoth.*

Lutoth had no reason to deny the wind's call.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SEVEN

The wind gusted outside. Ulrich kept staring out the entryway into the darkness, hoping for Lutoth to reappear. Ulrich needed to apologise and promise to do better.

But why would Lutoth believe him? Ulrich had had a perfect opportunity to tell his father who Lutoth was, but he hadn't.

The fight with Lutoth swirled round and round his head until he felt sick and light-headed. He paced back and forth through the smithy. Then froze. There amongst the ash and dust lay the Solstice gift from Lutoth. He leaned down and picked it up.

Only a few minutes ago, Lutoth had been with Ulrich, happy and ready to spend the night together. He'd given Ulrich this lace. Promised to fuck him. Then Ulrich had hurt him.

Soot and dirt marred the gift that had been pristine white. He tried to wipe it clean but only managed to make it worse, spreading the sooty stains with his dirty fingers. He grabbed a bowl and ducked outside, filling it with snow.

It melted quickly by the forge. He washed the lace, trying to bring it back to its original state. But no matter how much he rubbed, he couldn't do it. The black marks lessened, but now the lace seemed a beige-brown colour.

He'd ruined it.

Just like he'd ruined his relationship with Lutoth.

Ethel entered the smithy, hooves clomping on the floor. She clearly wondered what Ulrich was still doing in here.

“I made a mistake, Ethel.” Ulrich stood and stepped closer to her, burying his fingers in her fur, trying to seek some comfort from her warm, solid body. “I hurt him, and now he’s gone. I betrayed him. I let him down.” His eyes stung with unshed tears.

Ethel nudged him with her nose. Then she turned, walked to the door, and waited. Ulrich packed up the smithy and followed her out. She led him to the cabin. Ulrich glanced outside once more before closing the door behind them.

The house felt empty. Cold. Any cosiness and warmth gone. The greenery and gifts around the room just reminded him of what he’d lost.

Ulrich fed Ethel and filled her water bucket. He started a fire in the stove, but it didn’t chase away the chill. At some point, he went to bed. Or lay in it, at least.

He reached out, touching the cold sheets where Lutoth should be sleeping. The expression of pain on Lutoth’s face seared into his brain. Squeezing his eyes shut, he tried to force the image from his mind.

Why couldn’t he have stood up to his father when it mattered the most? Why hadn’t he been prepared? He’d just hoped he could put it off a little longer. Hoped he could have a perfect Solstice with Lutoth. And look where that had gotten him.

Why couldn’t he be brave? Be strong? Why was he such a coward?

He squeezed his eyes shut. Each shaky breath hurt.

And why had he told Lutoth not to fly away like his mother? Ulrich knew that was a sore spot for Lutoth. Ulrich had just panicked.

He dozed fitfully, regret and guilt churning through his body. He tossed and turned for hours, unable to stay still, berating and hating himself for his weakness.

Ethel's heavy, clomping steps approached the bed. Her gaze lingered on the spot where Lutoth slept. She nuzzled at the sheets as if she might find Lutoth hiding amongst them.

“He's not here, Ethel.”

She stared at Ulrich and nuzzled the sheets again. Then she walked to the door and stared at it as if that might make Lutoth appear.

“I made a mistake. I fucked up. So he left.” He rubbed at sore eyes.

She didn't budge. After a moment, Ethel pressed her nose against the door, indicating she wanted to go out.

Ulrich sat up, throwing the blankets back. There was no point in going out. Lutoth wouldn't be there. Still, Ulrich lit a lantern, dressed, opened the door, and gazed out into the darkness.

Ethel stepped out. She walked in an arch around the cabin, turning her head from side to side as she searched. If Lutoth wanted to see Ulrich, then he knew where to find Ulrich. No amount of searching would make Lutoth appear. Still, Ulrich scanned the space around the cabin, heart hoping to see the nymph.

Ethel walked to the smithy, peering in through the windows. She approached the smithy door, and Ulrich opened it. She stepped in, still searching. He spotted the lace on the table beside the bowl of dirty water. He placed the lantern down and picked up the dark lace, fingering it.

“He got me this,” Ulrich said. “This might be the last Solstice gift he ever gives me.” He clutched the lace, collapsed onto a stool, and dropped his head into his hands.

Tears fell, landing amongst the ash on the floor.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-EIGHT

After some time, Ulrich got up, unable to just stay sitting a moment longer. He strode around the smithy. He needed to do something. Anything. He paused and stared at the forge, an idea growing in his mind.

After a moment, he lit it. It wasn't like he'd be getting any sleep tonight. Ulrich poured his love and regret and pain into the items he forged. And when he was finished, he wiped them clean. He hoped he'd have a chance to give his gift to the nymph he'd wronged.

Outside, the clouds parted, and the sun lit the village in a golden light. He squinted against the brightness, his eyes gritty after a sleepless night.

Ores lay so still and peaceful at this time of morning, so completely at odds with the raw pain and loss that had taken root inside Ulrich.

“Come, Ethel.” Ulrich set off.

The clouds drifted on the breeze and blocked out the sun. They walked through the village, passing others in the midst of their Solstice preparations. Small huts that would be used to sell food and beverages had started to be decorated for Winter Solstice that would take place tomorrow. But Ulrich kept walking, deliberately avoiding eye contact as he trudged towards the forest.

Ulrich's boots sank into the snow with each heavy step. Snowflakes fell. He shoved his hands into his pocket. He'd forgotten his gloves.

Ethel's steps sped up as she walked, as if she knew exactly where they were going.

Please let Lutoth be in the valley.

They walked down the path. Several oroads glanced his way, but just like in the village, he avoided meeting their gazes. He approached the cave where Lutoth's father lived. Fifior sat outside.

His face broke into a wide smile. Then it dropped as he gazed at Ulrich. He jumped to his feet, head turning from side to side, searching for Lutoth.

A lump rose in Ulrich's throat. So Lutoth wasn't here either. He'd expected as much, but still, he'd hoped otherwise.

"Where is Lutoth?" Fifior asked, his voice sad as if he already knew what Ulrich would say.

"I was hoping he might be here."

Fifior leaned a hand against the cave entrance. He closed his eyes and let out a breath. "He just left, then?"

"No," Ulrich blurted. "Well, yes. But he had every right to leave me. It was my fault. I did things. Said things. He left me because I deserved it." He swallowed. "But I'm sure he'll come back to you. It's me who hurt him, not you."

Fifior nodded, although it wasn't clear if he believed Ulrich. Did he really think Lutoth would just leave his father with no word?

"I wanted to apologise to him for how I acted and what I said. Tell him that he deserves better and I don't want to lose him," Ulrich said. "And that if he comes back to me, I'll do better. Can you please tell him when you see him?"

"I'll tell him," Fifior said, voice resigned. "If he comes back."

"He'll come back to you," Ulrich said fiercely. "I know he will."

Lutoth's father looked sceptical, which made Ulrich feel sick. No wonder Lutoth had acted like he had when Ulrich had

told him not to fly away like his mother. Even his own father believed Lutoth would just take off and leave.

Ulrich needed to see Lutoth. He needed to apologise. He needed to make it right.

He just hoped he had that chance.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-NINE

Lutoth raced and climbed through the night. At first, he just flowed with the wind, becoming one with it as he drifted any way and anywhere, letting the wind guide him.

But as he travelled, his mind conjured up someone. Someone he hadn't seen in over a year. Someone who, no matter what he did, still influenced his life. Someone he could not escape.

His mother.

He closed his eyes as he moved, bringing her image to his mind. He didn't know how it worked. He didn't know how he knew exactly where to go in order to reach her, but he did. He flew through valleys, scaling up and down mountains, along and over streams.

Then he sensed her.

Lutoth slowed on the cliff top and then came to a complete stop, staring at the woman in front of him. She sat on the edge, legs swinging, wearing a gauzy white dress. Long white hair floated in waves around her.

She turned as he approached. "Lutoth!" she said, voice breathy and soft. She jumped to her feet and ran towards him. She opened her arms and hugged him close. "I'm so happy to see you!"

But he remained firm in her arms.

This was the woman who had raised him. Loved him. Cared for him. And just being in her arms and smelling her familiar scent comforted him in a way nothing could.

Still, she had hurt him. Even if she'd never meant to.

"I'm not you!" he choked. "But no matter how hard I try to show everyone, I can't escape it."

"What?" His mother pulled back. She cupped his cheeks, eyes widened in alarm. "What are you talking about?"

He pulled from her embrace. She made a pained noise, but he didn't relent. He'd never told her how he truly felt. It just seemed easier not to, to just let everything lie. But he couldn't anymore.

"Why did you have to leave him?" he said. "You hurt Father so much. Why couldn't you have at least told him you were leaving? He wasn't even there when I was born!"

Her lips trembled. "It's who we are, my love," she said, voice small. "We're sylphs. No one believes a sylph stays still."

"But I didn't even know him. I should have had at least a chance to get to know my own father!" he shouted. "You denied me that. Growing up, I only had fragments of time with him."

"I'm sorry..." She clutched a hand to her chest. "I thought..."

He turned his back on her and walked to the edge. He didn't know why he'd come here. He didn't know what he thought he'd achieve by seeing his mother, by confronting her after all these years.

"I'm not you," he said.

She didn't speak for several moments. "I know, Lutoth."

He laughed. "You're the only one. I feel like I am always trying to make up for what you did and show everyone that I'm not you. Because I'm not." He swallowed and kept his gaze on the grey sky above.

Snowflakes drifted down.

“I’m not you. I’m not.” Tears stung his eyes. “But if I’m honest, sometimes I think... Sometimes I fear I am exactly like you. And if that’s true... That means I will never be able to have the life I want.”

“What do you mean? What life do you want?” she asked.

“I want a home! I want someone to love and who loves me in return. And I thought that someone was Ulrich—” He snapped his mouth shut. “I want a place where I can get to know those who live there. I want to know the mountains and rocks that surround me. I want a place where I belong. And I want to share that with someone.”

He turned to his mother and found her watching him steadily.

“But then I hear the wind call to me, and it’s so hard to resist.” He squeezed his eyes shut, taking deep breaths, scared to speak the next words, the words he’d tried to block from his mind. “And deep down, I always feared I would leave Ulrich. That’s why I ignored the wind. I was terrified I’d end up abandoning him without a word like you did to Father.”

And perhaps that was why Ulrich’s words cut so deep. Because he worried Ulrich saw the truth. That deep down Lutoth really was fickle. Unreliable. Flighty. Exactly like his mother. That one day he would leave, abandoning those he loved.

“Sometimes I wonder if you felt about Father exactly the same way I do about Ulrich. And maybe you couldn’t resist the temptation of the wind anymore.” Lutoth stared at the fragments of rocks by his feet.

“And that thought destroys me,” Lutoth said. “It destroys me to think I’ll do the same. Because that means I’m not capable of the life I want to have. It means I’ll just be flowing with the wind. Alone and without a home, without love for the rest of my life.”

“Oh, Lutoth.” She walked towards him. Reaching out, she touched his shoulder, just barely, as if uncertain if he would

welcome her touch. But when he didn't pull away, she wrapped her arms around him and pulled him into an embrace. "I'm so sorry."

He let out a breath and relaxed into his mother's arms, allowing himself to be comforted.

CHAPTER
THIRTY

“I forget sometimes,” his mother whispered.
“Forget what?”

“That you aren’t only a sylph. I forget that you are an oread too.” She pulled back, brushing locks of white hair from his face. “But my love, you do not need to worry. You are not me.”

“How do you know?” Lutoth asked.

“Because the words you speak, they sound nothing like how I have ever felt.” She smiled sadly at him. “You say you worry about flowing with the wind and being alone for the rest of your life. But darling, that is all I’ve ever wanted. To flow and fly with the wind. Because I belong to it and it belongs to me. I am never alone when I am with the wind.”

Lutoth frowned. “But you loved father. You said you did.” It was almost an accusation.

“I did,” she said carefully. “But we wanted such different things. You talk of a home. Of a place to belong. Of rocks and mountains.” Her nose wrinkled. “Your father did the same, even though I’d told him I never wanted those things.”

She stepped away, looking out at the white mountain tops in the distance. “Everyone warned him. I warned him. I told him I belonged to the wind and nothing could hold me back. I told him I could never live in a cave surrounded and crushed down by walls of rock.”

She tilted her head back, and the wind caressed her cheeks like a lover's touch. "I need to move. Some sylphs can stay still for long periods of time. A few only leave their home from time to time. But not me. My home is the wind. And I was honest with your father. At first, anyway. And I thought he understood that one day I would leave."

Lutoth couldn't speak.

She turned towards him, reached out, and touched his face. "But then I got pregnant. You were not planned. I'd taken herbal precautions. But..." She laughed and smiled. "Here you are, my beautiful son.

"We both got so caught up in the idea of a youngling. Of you." She dropped her hand. "And perhaps he thought my mind had changed. I should have confronted him and told him the truth. I should have told him how different it can be for us sylphs when we have younglings." She sighed.

"Sylphs don't raise our younglings contained in tiny, cramped caves. We move, carrying our little ones on our bodies until they can flow with the wind themselves. But your father kept talking about our home in the valley. In that cave." She said the last bit like it was a bad taste in her mouth. "And he had so many dreams of raising you there. But they were never my dreams."

Her eyes pleaded with him to understand. "I tried. I tried to stay. But every day, I felt trapped. Like I was suffocating. I started painting the wind and sky in that cave as if trying to make living there more bearable." She licked her lips.

"And I was young and scared. The idea of forever being in one place terrified me. Never moving. Never running. Never flying. Never being at one with the wind. Staying still for so long. I got claustrophobic. I felt stagnant. Like I was being buried alive by those mountains and rocks. I panicked." Her hands trembled as if even the thought was too much to bear.

"I should have told him. I did try. But every time, he just didn't understand. He loved me so much. And in the end, it seemed easier to just leave. I was a coward. And I hurt him. And you. I'm so sorry." She grasped a strand of her hair and

twisted it around and around her finger. “And after that, it just hurt too much to see him. That’s why we didn’t go back to the valley for years. And even when we did, it was so rare. He looked at me with so much pain and hope. I couldn’t bear it.”

“He wanted you to leave me with him.” Lutoth remembered overhearing the conversation.

“I know, but...I thought he wouldn’t understand you. I thought he would deny your sylph nature like he did with me and keep you confined in that cave.” She smiled at him. Tears slid down her cheeks. “But I did the same to you. I denied your oread nature.”

Lutoth sank down onto the cliff’s edge, unable to stay on his feet. His mind reeled with all this new information. He’d never known. All he’d been told growing up was his mother had heard the wind call and she had to fly with it.

“But you are not me, Lutoth. That is clear to me now. You sounded so much like your father just then. I’m sorry for never recognising it in you.” She sat beside him, pressing a hand to his back.

He stared into her eyes, and for the first time, he saw his mother not as some infallible parent but as someone who years ago had been young, scared, and unsure what to do. Someone who made mistakes.

“I am sorry, my love,” she said.

He placed his hand over hers. “I understand.” And Lutoth did. All the pain and anger inside him, which he’d held on to for so long, drifted away. He let out a breath. “And I forgive you.” And he realised he did. Or maybe he just didn’t have any energy left to stay angry.

“Thank you.” She leaned against him, and for a moment, they just stared out over the mountains, mother and son together. “But who is this Ulrich you speak of? You love him?”

If she had asked a day ago, he’d have said yes. But now... “I’m not sure. I met his father.” His hands tightened against the ledge he sat on. Jagged rocks dug into his palms. “Ulrich

pulled away from me so his father wouldn't see us together." He let out a breath, trying to control the pain that rose sharply in his chest. "Then he told his father that I was just a friend." The words sliced his throat. "Like he was ashamed of me."

"Oh...oh, Lutoth. My dear Lutoth. I'm so sorry. You deserve better than that."

He nodded. His heart cracked at the thought that maybe Ulrich wasn't the one for him. He'd pinned so many of his hopes and dreams on the man. But maybe Ulrich wasn't who Lutoth thought he was.

"You deserve a home. You deserve everything your heart yearns for, but you must find someone worthy of you," she said. "Someone kind and caring. Someone who will not be ashamed to call you theirs. You deserve someone who will proclaim their love for you across the skies."

He swallowed. "Thank you."

Still, his heart clung to Ulrich, unable to let go even if he knew it might be for the best.

"And I will visit you in your home when you meet someone who loves you properly," his mother said.

Lutoth stared out at the horizon, at the trees and mountains in the distance. "But I'm not sure I am capable of having a home. Because although I am half-oread, I am also half-sylph. And I hear the wind call me by name, and I want to lose myself in it. I want to run for days and nights without stopping, going where the breeze takes me."

"And you can't do that if you have a home with someone?" she asked.

"I don't know. I've tried to ignore the call of the wind, but the tension just builds and builds inside me. My body starts to ache. I don't know how long I can resist it."

"Why do you have to?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you have lived in the valley for a year, haven't you?" She leaned forward, staring past her dangling legs,

down to the sea of snow-covered trees below. “That is a long time for a sylph to stay still. Have you been ignoring the wind the whole year?”

“How do you know I’ve been in the valley for a year?”

She smiled, eyes twinkling. “I heard it on the wind, my love. I always know where you are.”

He smiled. “I haven’t denied it the whole year. Just the last month.”

“And before that?” his mother asked.

“I would run for a few days and return.”

“Maybe that’s what you need to do. Rather than deny yourself, maybe you just need to let loose for a little while and then return to your home. Perhaps you need to embrace being both sylph and oread.”

He nodded. “Maybe you’re right.”

They sat side by side. Lutoth felt more at peace with his own nature than he had in a long time. If only his heart felt the same peace.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-ONE

Ulrich sat at his father's table, staring at his plate. A candle flickered on the centre of the table, providing the only light in the cramped room. Cobwebs crowded the cabin's crevices and corners. Dust balls lingered on the floor.

He'd offered to clean years ago. But his father had snapped, "I can look after myself, boy."

Ulrich had never offered again.

Ulrich reached into his pocket, touching the metal of the items he'd forged. The whole day, he'd waited for Lutoth to appear, hoping more than expecting. But eventually, he'd had to leave his cabin and go to his father's for Solstice Eve dinner.

He'd considered not going. He wasn't in the mood to eat with his father after yesterday. But his brother would be there, and Ulrich hadn't seen him in a long time.

So far, his father hadn't mentioned what had happened in the smithy yesterday.

"I hope tonight's meal meets your standards," his father said to his brother, mouth twisted in a grimace. "It's nothing fancy like you city folks no doubt expect." His father gestured to the fat sausages, bowl of lentils, smoked fish, and bread. "It's simple, honest Ores food from the village store."

"I always enjoy Mila's and Rhorton's cooking." Elias smiled and took a sip of his wine. "Give them my compliments next time you see them."

Ulrich didn't know how Elias did it. How he smiled and allowed the insults to roll off him whilst pushing back at his father with ease and grace.

Why couldn't I be more like Elias? He never would have betrayed Lutoth as I did.

"Hmmm," his father said and began to serve himself food. He cut into a sausage. "What are you wearing on your jacket?"

"Do you like it?" Elias asked.

Their father's lip curled. He clearly did not.

"It's a brooch." Elias twisted it from side to side, the jewels reflecting in the candlelight. "They're in fashion in Bordertown."

"For men?" their father asked.

"Men and women. I think it's fetching." It was shaped like a bird, with tiny blue and white gemstones inlaid throughout. "They do all sorts of animals where I got this. I saw a reindeer one. It made me think of you, Ulrich."

Their father snorted. "Ulrich isn't some fancy, pretty boy from the city." He gulped his wine. His face scrunched. Clearly, he didn't like the wine Elias had brought from Bordertown either. "Ulrich is a real man of Ores. He is a blacksmith and does not need something so frivolous." His eyes slid to Ulrich as if challenging him.

But what if Ulrich did want something frivolous? Why was that a big deal? And what if he did want to be a fancy, pretty boy? Or at least...a pretty boy. What was so wrong with that?

His mind went to Lutoth and all the times he'd called him pretty. Of all the frivolous gifts he'd given Ulrich to accentuate that. Of the flowers, the necklace, and the lace... The lace Ulrich had let slip to the floor.

He blinked rapidly. He shoved a piece of sausage in his mouth.

"Everyone has some need for frivolity." Elias sipped from his glass, leaning back in his chair, gaze firm on their father.

“Hmph,” their father said.

They continued eating, barely speaking. Ulrich’s shoulders remained tense. Cutlery scraped against plates. Ulrich didn’t know why Elias came back for the Solstice. If it was Ulrich, he’d stay far away.

“I came by the smithy today,” Elias said. “I was keen to see Ethel. And you, of course, Ulrich.” He laughed. “I arrived in Ores shortly before midday and stopped by. But you weren’t there.”

“Were you off with that nymph?” His father pointed his fork at him. “He distracting you from your work again, boy?”

Why couldn’t his father just leave Ulrich alone? He reached into his pocket, touching the smooth metal. The gift he’d made for Lutoth.

His father shook his head. “Your *friend*, as you called him, I’ve noticed him around before.” His father chewed loudly. “Often near that reindeer or hanging around the smithy. He’s got his eye set on you. Don’t you let him fog your brain with his prettiness.”

Ulrich’s jaw clenched.

“You should find a better *friend* than that nymph.”

Blizzard’s teeth! Why couldn’t his father just shut the fuck up!

“He might lead you to ruin. Like your mother did me.”

Ulrich had enough. “You don’t know what you are talking about! Everything you say is total nonsense!” His voice trembled—with rage or terror, Ulrich couldn’t tell.

His father’s mouth fell open. His brother’s eyes widened. Ulrich had never talked back to his father. He’d never talked back to anyone. Or raised his voice. But he wasn’t going to stop now.

“Lutoth is part-oread and part-sylph. He is part of these mountains. All the nymphs are. And if it hadn’t been for the dainty, pretty nymphs, our people would have died that first Solstice. We weren’t made for these mountains. They were.”

Elias lifted his glass. “Hear, hear!” He knocked on the table.

“And you know what, Lutoth wasn’t just a friend. He was my lover, and I wanted to build a life with him. But because I wasn’t strong enough to tell you, I hurt him, and I lost him. Because I was too much of a coward.” Ulrich took a deep breath.

“And yes, he is dainty and pretty, but I love him. Love him in a way I didn’t know was possible. He makes me happy in a way I’d stopped hoping for. And I could never find someone better than him, because there is no one better than him.” Ulrich pressed his hands to the wood of the table.

“And you shouldn’t talk about Mother like that. She didn’t choose to leave us. She died!” he yelled. “It doesn’t matter if she was delicate, or pretty, or part-nymph, she was your wife, and she died. You should have some respect.”

His father stared at him for several long moments. He put his fork down. Slowly, he rose, chair dragging against the wooden floor.

Ulrich could feel himself sweating. He braced himself.

“I suddenly don’t have much appetite. I’m going to bed.” His father shuffled from the room.

As the door clicked shut behind him, Ulrich sagged, dropping into his chair.

Was that it?

“Good work, little brother. I didn’t know you had it in you.” Elias patted him on the back and pushed Ulrich’s untouched glass of wine towards him.

Ulrich took the wine and gulped it down.

Elias refilled the glass. “Want to explain to your big brother what that was all about?”

Ulrich told him all that had passed when their father came into the smithy and saw Lutoth.

“I don’t know why I said he was a friend. I just panicked,” Ulrich said.

“Understandable. You’ve always had trouble talking back to Father. I worried for you when I left. In fact, I was going to suggest you come live with me in Bordertown.” He sniffed. “I don’t like the idea of you here with only Father.”

“Really? What would I do in Bordertown?”

Elias chuckled. “You don’t think Bordertown needs blacksmiths? And there are lots of eligible men who’d love a big, tough mountain man.”

But Ulrich didn’t want someone from Bordertown, looking for some big, tough mountain man. Never again. Ulrich wanted Lutoth. Lutoth, who called him pretty and wove flowers into his hair before fucking him. Lutoth, who’d wanted to wrap him in lace.

“I’d be more than happy to have you stay with me in Bordertown whilst you set up.” Elias sipped his wine. “Many in the family would help you get your feet under you too. Like they did with me.”

“I couldn’t. I have Ethel.” He paused. “And... Maybe I might still have a chance with Lutoth.” Ulrich couldn’t give up hope. Not yet.

Elias raised his glass. “Well, I hope it works out between you two.”

“Thanks.”

They finished up the meal and cleaned up after themselves. Their father hadn’t reappeared, but the light from a candle could be seen under the door.

They left their father’s home. Ethel spotted Ulrich and stood.

“She waits for you out here in the snow?” Elias asked.

Ulrich stroked her white fur. “Sometimes she’ll stay at home. But mostly she likes to know where I am.”

“By the way, you know Mother wasn’t part-nymph,” Elias said. “It’s just a saying in Bordertown when a woman, or man, is very beautiful. ‘They could be part-nymph.’ You and I have no nymph heritage. Mother was just very beautiful.”

“Huh,” Ulrich said. It didn’t really surprise him to realise that all his father’s prejudices against nymphs were based on nothing. It was so absurd that he almost laughed. Almost.

“Father must have heard someone saying it about Mother and misunderstood,” Elias said. “No doubt he didn’t bother asking Mother about it. He always treated her terribly. You don’t remember, but I do.” He grimaced. “I’m glad you stood up for her. She deserved that.”

Ulrich nodded. He had no memory of his mother, but it didn’t surprise him to hear their father had never been kind. After all, he’d never been kind to her memory or her children. “Are you staying with Damur whilst you are in Ores?” Ulrich assumed Elias would stay with his old friend.

“Yes. But I’ll see you tomorrow at the festivities. And I do hope it works out with Lutoth. I’m keen to meet the nymph who gave you the courage to finally stand up to Father.”

“I hope it works out too,” Ulrich said, hand wrapping around Lutoth’s gift in his pocket.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-TWO

“Lutoth!” Lutoth’s father stood outside the cave, eyes wide. Most of the other oreads had retired to the cave for the night, but not his father. “You came back!” His face broke into a smile, and he ran towards Lutoth.

It would be a lovely way to be greeted if his father weren’t so overjoyed because he’d obviously thought Lutoth wouldn’t return.

“Did you think I wouldn’t?” Lutoth asked, not hiding the hurt from his voice. “I’ve barely been gone a day!”

His father froze, his smile dropping. “I just thought...”

“You just thought I wouldn’t come back,” Lutoth finished the sentence for him. “That I’d abandon you without saying a word.”

“I’m sorry, Lutoth,” his father said, face crumpling.

Lutoth took a breath, trying to calm himself. “I know Mother hurt you when she left you, but I am not her. I never chose to leave. Don’t punish me for her actions,” Lutoth said. “I can’t promise I’ll live here forever. But I’m not going to just leave and not come back. I promise I’ll always say goodbye and tell you where I’m going. And I’ll always come back.”

Lutoth reached out and placed his hands on his father’s arms, squeezing. “You’re my father, and I love you. I regret that I didn’t spend much time with you growing up. I’m not going to waste the chance now.”

“I’m so sorry, Lutoth. And I love you too, son.” His father smiled, tears glistening in his eyes. “I’ve been so happy having you here this past year. I’m just so scared of losing you again.” His father hugged him.

“You won’t,” Lutoth said. “Promise.”

After several moments, his father pulled back from the hug. “I need to tell you something.”

“What?” Lutoth had barely stopped moving since he’d left Ulrich’s the previous day. His body felt heavy with exhaustion, not just of the body but of the heart as well. He just wanted to crawl into his father’s cave, lie down, and wallow over his wounded soul.

“Ulrich was here,” his father said.

Lutoth’s heart squeezed at the sound of the man’s name. “What did he want?”

“To apologise.” His father led him into his cave by the elbow, nudging him to sit on the mat. “Said that he was sorry for how he acted and for what he said. Said you deserved better and that he doesn’t want to lose you.”

Lutoth took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

“What happened?” his father asked and sat opposite him.

“His father came to the smithy yesterday. Ulrich...yanked away from my touch.” Lutoth’s voice shook, the wound still fresh. “He told his father I was just a friend. And then told me not to fly with the wind...like Mother.”

“I’m sorry. You didn’t deserve that,” his father said. “From him or me.”

“I don’t know what to do now.” Lutoth’s heart still beat for Ulrich, but after what had happened...

His father hesitated. “He sounded angry with me, if that helps.”

“Why was he angry with you?” Lutoth asked. “And why would that help?”

“When I suggested you just left, he told me you’d left him because of what he’d done. Said it was his fault. Made it very clear it wasn’t yours. And he seemed certain you’d come back to me. Far more certain than I was,” he said, shame creeping into his voice.

“You’re defending him,” Lutoth said.

“Just telling you what happened. You deserve to know what happened.” His father smiled. “And I’ve seen the two of you together. I’ve seen how happy you are. He made a mistake. But everyone does. Obviously, I did.”

Lutoth opened his mouth, but his father jumped in. “And you have every right to be angry with him. I’m not saying you should forgive him. Only you can decide that. But maybe at least listen to him. Then you can decide what you want to do.”

“Maybe.” But Lutoth already knew he would go to Ulrich. He wanted to hear what the man had to say.

Then he’d decide if he believed there was any chance for them.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-THREE

Ulrich trudged back to his cabin. Whilst he didn't enjoy being in his father's home, the idea of being back in his cabin had no appeal either. The absence of Lutoth's presence. The empty bed. The smell of Lutoth on his sheets.

Despite his exhaustion, he doubted he'd sleep tonight.

"Happy Solstice Eve, Ethel," he said. "I guess it's just you and me tomorrow."

Ethel bumped into his side. Ulrich reached out and held one of her antlers, finger stroking the soft velvet, trying to soak up as much comfort as his broken heart could.

"I wonder if I'll ever see Lutoth again," Ulrich said.

"I can promise you'll see him at least once more."

Ulrich jerked. He tried to turn, but his feet slipped in the powdery snow. Releasing Ethel's antler, he tumbled backwards, landing heavily.

He looked up, and his heart sang at the sight of Lutoth standing above him.

"You came back," he said in awe.

Lutoth huffed. "Why does everyone act like it's amazing I came back? I'm not my mother!"

"I know." Ulrich fought and kicked against the snow, stumbling to his feet. "I know you're not. I should have never

said that. I know you aren't her, but after how I behaved, you had every right not to return."

"That's true," Lutoth said. Then he let out an exhausted sigh. Bags hung beneath his eyes. Had Lutoth's night been as sleepless as Ulrich's?

Ethel honked excitedly, pressing her body against Lutoth's, jostling him. Lutoth's expression softened, and he smiled at her. He stroked her fur. "I missed you too, Ethel."

The sight of Lutoth's smile made Ulrich's blood thrum with yearning. Ulrich would give anything to have Lutoth look at him like that. To smile at him. Just once more.

But when Lutoth turned his gaze back to Ulrich, his expression turned to ice. "Father said you wanted to apologise."

Right, that was why Lutoth had returned. Not because he wanted Ulrich. Or forgave him. He wanted an apology.

"I needed to tell you how sorry I am," Ulrich said. "For everything. For pulling away. For saying you were a friend. For making you feel like I'm ashamed of you, because I'm not. I've always been too weak to stand up to my father."

The words had been going round and round Ulrich's head since the moment Lutoth had left. Now they tripped clumsily from his tongue. But at least he had a chance to say the words he needed to. "And that stuff about you flying away, I just panicked. I knew I'd wronged you, and I didn't want you to leave me."

Lutoth wrapped his arms around himself. "You hurt me," Lutoth said, voice small.

"I know. I'm so sorry." Ulrich stared at Lutoth, trying to memorise every lovely feature of the nymph's face. "I told Father about you at dinner tonight."

"You did?" Lutoth asked. "What did you say?"

"I told him how wonderful you are. How you are my lover and how I want to build a life with you. I told him I hurt you and lost you because I was a coward." Ulrich gazed into

Lutoth's eyes, trying to read him, but Lutoth gave nothing away.

"It was terrifying telling my father," Ulrich said. "He is always so disapproving of me. He's not a nice man. I don't think he likes anyone. But it felt good to finally stand up to him. I wanted him to know the truth about us. Even if I've ruined everything. Even if I lost my chance with you."

Lutoth studied Ulrich's face, arms still tightly wrapped around his body as if holding himself together.

"And I have something for you." Ulrich fumbled in his pocket and pulled out a pendant hanging from a thin leather strap. He held the necklace out to Lutoth. He held his breath, worried Lutoth wouldn't accept the gift.

After a moment's hesitation, Lutoth reached out his hand. Ulrich dropped it onto his palm.

"It's a necklace," Ulrich said. "Sorry. It's a little rustic."

Now that he stared at it, he felt it was a pretty pitiful gift.

Not good enough for Lutoth. Just like Ulrich.

"This sort of dainty thing isn't what I usually make," Ulrich said. "It's a leaf."

"I can see that." Lutoth held the necklace up in front of his face. The pendant spun. It hung from a thin black leather strap. "You made this for me?"

Ulrich nodded. His heart fluttered like a panicked bird in his chest banging against his rib cage. He could see all the imperfections in the wrought iron. How did he think this would make up for his failings?

"What else is in your pocket?" Lutoth asked.

"What?" Ulrich asked.

"You're fiddling with something else in your pocket. What is it?"

"I was hoping..." Ulrich reached into his pocket. "If you forgave me...and gave me a second chance, I'd hoped to wear this."

He pulled out the second leaf pendant. This one was hung from the lace Lutoth had gifted him.

“You kept the lace,” Lutoth said.

“Yes. I tried cleaning it as best I could after I ruined it. After I ruined everything. And I attached this pendant.” Ulrich held it up. “The pendants match. And I was thinking... I was hoping you could wear your necklace. And if you wanted... you could plait the lace through my hair, like you said.”

Ulrich ran thick fingers along the beige-brown lace. “And the pendant would hang from it. Then everyone would know we were together. Because they match.” Ulrich swallowed. “And I told my father something else.” Ulrich wished his voice would stop trembling. “I told him I love you.”

Lutoth’s gaze turned from the pendant to Ulrich’s eyes.

“I love you, Lutoth. I don’t want to lose you.” Tears stung Ulrich’s eyes. “Please tell me I haven’t lost you. Or tell me what I need to do to make you forgive me. I’ll do anything.” If this was his last chance, he wanted to put everything on the line. He would do anything so he didn’t lose Lutoth.

“You are beautiful and strong,” Ulrich continued. “You make me happier than I’ve ever been. You don’t make me feel uncouth or brutish. You’re the first person I’ve ever been able to truly be myself around. It’s like you see me. All of me, and you can accept me. You make me feel safe. You make me feel like I can be exactly who I am.” His voice broke.

“And I know I’m not good enough for you,” Ulrich said. “You could do much better. But you make me feel loved in a way I didn’t know possible. It would destroy me to lose you. Please tell me I haven’t lost you.”

Lutoth made a choked noise. He stepped forward and pulled Ulrich down for a bruising, messy kiss, fingers clutching at Ulrich’s face.

Ulrich’s chest soared as hope grew inside him. He wrapped his arms around Lutoth, holding him tightly, never wanting to let him go. “Does this mean you forgive me?” he asked when the kiss finally broke.

“Yes. Yes, Ulrich. I forgive you. I don’t know how I could stay angry with you after that apology.” He kissed Ulrich again. “And I love you too.”

“Really?” For the first time since Lutoth had left, Ulrich felt like he could breathe.

“Yes. Really.” Lutoth reached between them, taking the pendant from Ulrich’s hand. He lifted it to Ulrich’s brow, then with swift fingers, he wove the lace through his hair, the pendant hanging amongst the brown strands. “And you are more than good enough for me. You just made a mistake. But I forgive you. Now, will you put this on me?” Lutoth asked.

Lutoth didn’t need help. The leather strap was long enough that he could easily put it on himself. But Ulrich took it and slid it over Lutoth’s head. He brushed Lutoth’s white hair out of the way so the necklace settled against his skin.

Lutoth touched the leaf pendant. “I didn’t realise it was so bad with your father.”

Ulrich shrugged. “He’s my father. He’s always been tough on me.”

Lutoth pressed his lips together like he was thinking. “You didn’t tell him because you were scared of him.”

Ulrich nodded.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Ulrich ducked his head. “I didn’t want you to see how weak I was.”

“Oh, Ulrich. You’re not weak.” Lutoth stroked his cheek. “If I’d known how tough it was for you with your father, I would have understood. I know relationships with parents are...complicated. And if I’d known, I would have tried to support you and lend you my strength. I thought you were ashamed of me.”

“No. Never,” Ulrich said fiercely. “Never of you.”

Lutoth rested his head against Ulrich’s chest.

Ulrich stroked his hair, inhaling the scent of Lutoth's hair, just revelling in the feeling of Lutoth in his arms. "I thought I'd lost you."

"But you didn't." Lutoth took Ulrich's hand and smiled. "Now let's go home."

CHAPTER
THIRTY-FOUR

Hands entwined, they returned to Ulrich's cabin. Both were on the edge of exhaustion, and neither spoke as they prepared for bed. Ulrich quickly fed Ethel and undressed. But the entire time, Ulrich kept glancing at Lutoth, watching his lithe form moving through his home, still in disbelief that Lutoth had forgiven him and returned.

Lutoth lifted the covers and slid into the bed. Ulrich followed.

Facing Lutoth, Ulrich ran his finger along the curve of Lutoth's graceful neck. "I'm so happy you are here." He pushed a strand of white hair behind Lutoth's ear. "Will you put flowers in my beard and hair tomorrow? I thought I'd wear them out at the Solstice festivities."

Ulrich had never worn something like that in front of others, but tomorrow he wanted to be pretty with Lutoth by his side.

"Of course," Lutoth whispered, snuggling close and placing kisses along Ulrich's beard and jaw.

Ulrich wrapped his arm around Lutoth and exhaled, all the remaining tension releasing from his body as he drifted into sleep. Everything felt right in the world.

Around dawn, he woke to a sensation he'd felt before, Lutoth threading flowers through his beard. A smile tugged at Ulrich's lips.

"Morning," he croaked, throat dry from sleep.

Lutoth looked glorious in the soft dawn light streaming through the windows.

“Morning, now hold still,” Lutoth said. “I need to put these flowers in your beard and hair.” He smiled. “They match the leaf pendant and lace.”

Ulrich stared up at Lutoth in wonder. Lutoth had forgiven him. Lutoth loved him.

“Stop that,” Lutoth said.

“Stop what?” Ulrich’s body felt light and loose.

“Stop looking at me like that.” Lutoth’s fingers continued placing flowers in his hair. “It’s distracting.”

“How am I looking at you?” Ulrich asked.

“You know how you look at me.”

Ulrich’s lips curled into a smile. “Like you are the most beautiful sight I’ve ever seen?” He raised his hand and let it slide down Lutoth’s arm and shoulder. “Like you are glorious and wonderful? Like I want to spend the rest of my life here in this bed with you, telling you how much I love you and want to make love to you?”

Lutoth’s eyes twinkled. “Yes. Exactly like that.”

Ulrich’s hand sought out Lutoth’s bare thigh as Lutoth worked. His fingers trailed back and forth along the soft skin. Ulrich wanted to reverently trail kisses along every inch of Lutoth, his cheeks and forehead, his neck and chest, his belly and thighs. He wanted to nuzzle Lutoth’s groin and suck his cock, his quickly hardening cock that pressed against Ulrich’s belly.

“Surely you must be done soon,” Ulrich said.

“Shhh. You’re distracting me,” Lutoth said, voice filled with mirth.

“Hmmm.” Ulrich’s hands slid to Lutoth’s arse, exploring the rounded, plump cheeks.

“Ulrich,” Lutoth said. “I’m trying to do something here.” But Ulrich noticed his pupils were almost swallowed by his

irises.

“I’m trying to do something too.” He pulled Lutoth against him, rubbing his stomach against Lutoth’s dick.

Lutoth groaned. His teeth bit into his plump lower lip. “Ulrich! Stop that. Or do I have to tie you up?”

Ulrich’s hands tightened and froze on Lutoth’s arse.

Lutoth chuckled. “Did that get your attention?”

Suddenly Lutoth’s delicious weight disappeared from on top of him. Ulrich propped himself up.

Lutoth walked to the shelf and grabbed something tucked away behind a pot. He turned, holding more of the white lace. “I told you I bought more.” Lutoth returned and straddled Ulrich’s stomach. “Now do you want me to tie you up?”

Ulrich nodded, throat tight, cock aching with arousal.

Lutoth reached for Ulrich’s wrists. He lifted them over his head. He first tied Ulrich’s left wrist to the bed-post. Then the right. “But you can’t fight against them. I’m not sure how strong they’ll be compared to”—Lutoth slid his hand down Ulrich’s arm, squeezing his bicep—“all this muscle. So you need to control yourself and hold still. You wouldn’t want to break the pretty lace.”

Ulrich shook his head.

“Will you behave, Ulrich?” Lutoth sat back, looking pretty pleased with himself. “Will you be my pretty, good boy?”

Ulrich’s cock jerked. “Yes.”

“Good.” Then, completely ignoring Ulrich’s arousal, he returned to putting flowers into Ulrich’s beard.

“Lutoth,” Ulrich pleaded. His cock throbbed.

“Shhh. Be patient, my love,” Lutoth said.

Ulrich closed his eyes. He tried to ignore the feel of Lutoth’s fingers moving through his beard, the pressure of Lutoth’s balls and spread thighs on his belly, the head of Lutoth’s cock kissing his lower sternum.

He thrust his hips a fraction, seeking relief. But only air moved around his heated cock.

“Shhhh,” Lutoth said soothingly.

Ulrich swallowed a plea.

“Now you just need one more thing.” Lutoth got up, and Ulrich made a noise of protest.

Lutoth’s firm arse jiggled as he walked to the other side of the room and picked up Ulrich’s necklace. Lutoth’s erect cock bobbed between his legs with each step as he returned. Once again he straddled Ulrich’s belly. Then, reaching behind Ulrich’s neck, he clasped the necklace in place.

“There.” His rough fingers glided along Ulrich’s neck and chest, caressing the strands of the necklace. “You are beautiful, Ulrich.” Lutoth leaned forward and took Ulrich’s mouth in a kiss.

“Now just lie back and relax,” Lutoth said as he slid backwards to Ulrich’s thigh, somehow managing to avoid giving Ulrich’s cock any much-needed contact. “I’m going to ride your huge cock.”

Ulrich’s cock pulsed at Lutoth’s words. Whilst Lutoth had fucked Ulrich many times, this would be the first time Ulrich fucked Lutoth.

“And then, once you’ve spilt your seed in me, I’m going to turn you over and fuck you harder than you’ve ever been fucked before,” Lutoth said.

Feeling slightly light-headed, Ulrich nodded. Words were far beyond him. Lutoth leaned to the side and grabbed the bottle of oil by the bed.

He poured the liquid into his palm before leaning forward and taking Ulrich’s cock in his hand. He stroked Ulrich’s cock from base to tip, slicking it in fluid movements.

Ulrich groaned, thrusting into the calloused grip.

I’m going to fuck Lutoth.

Lutoth released Ulrich's length and reached behind himself. His eyes fluttered shut, mouth falling open as he prepared himself.

My cock will be where Lutoth's fingers are.

Lutoth's eyes opened, pulling the digits from his own hole.
"Ready?"

Ulrich nodded.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-FIVE

Lutoth went up onto his knees, wrapping his hand around Ulrich's cock as he positioned himself above it. The tip of Ulrich's cock kissed Lutoth's hole. Lutoth pressed down slightly, not enough to enter, just to feel the sensation of the flared head nudging against him, teasing his hole.

Lutoth wanted this. Desperately. He wanted to be filled by Ulrich's massive cock.

Beneath him, Ulrich gazed up at him, face flushed, sweat glistening on his brow. The white crocheted lace wrapped around his wrists contrasted with his tanned skin. The beige-brown lace wove through his hair, the pendant dangling at the end. Flowers decorating his hair and beard. Together it all brought out a soft side, a side of Ulrich Lutoth didn't think anyone had ever seen before. A side Lutoth relished.

"So pretty," Lutoth whispered, touching the beard reverently.

Ulrich's chest rose and fell, cheeks flushing.

"I love you," Lutoth said. Then he slowly bore down.

Ulrich groaned. The flared head penetrated Lutoth, and he gasped.

For a moment, Lutoth held completely still, just the tip inside him. He took a deep breath and then lowered himself, inch by thick inch, onto a cock wider than any he'd taken before. It burned and stretched him almost to the point of pain. He took deep, shaky breaths, trying to relax his body.

He kept going, kept lowering himself, kept being filled by Ulrich. He knew how big Ulrich was, but knowing it and feeling it opening him up were two completely different things. He paused midway, allowing himself to adjust.

“Lutoth,” Ulrich whispered his name like a prayer. “You’re so tight.”

Lutoth leaned forward, fingers threading with the necklace strands and tufts of Ulrich’s chest hair as he kept breathing, willing his body to accept Ulrich. Lutoth continued lowering himself until he thought he’d be split in two. Until finally, finally, Ulrich’s giant cock filled him completely.

“Lutoth,” Ulrich moaned.

Lutoth undulated his hips from side to side. Then back and forward. The sensation shifted to that point where pleasure and pain mixed. He groaned as Ulrich’s cock rubbed deliciously inside his channel.

“You feel incredible,” Ulrich said, voice strained.

“It’s about to feel a lot better,” Lutoth said, voice husky.

At first, he rose and fell only in tiny increments. Then he increased his movements. Ulrich’s cock slid in and out of him. Lutoth revelled in the feel of Ulrich’s cock moving within him.

Ulrich gasped and groaned, eyes wide.

Lutoth changed the angle, and Ulrich’s cock nudged against the magic bundle of nerves inside him. Lutoth groaned. “Oh, Ulrich! Oh! You feel so good.”

Lutoth placed his hands on his own thighs. He rode Ulrich’s dick, hitting that spot inside him perfectly each time.

Ulrich’s fingers twined with the lace around his wrist, his body taut as he held himself still, watching Lutoth fuck himself on Ulrich’s cock.

Lutoth’s pace increased. He threw his head back, hands going to Ulrich’s thighs behind him. His own cock slapped against Ulrich’s stomach with each of his bounces. Explosions and waves of pleasure gushed inside him.

Lutoth's thighs trembled.

Ulrich thrust his hips up, as much as he could with his wrists tied. Lutoth cried out.

Changing positions again, Lutoth leaned forward, pressing his hands to Ulrich's chest, his rhythm chaotic.

"Lutoth! Lutoth!" Ulrich cried out. "I'm close!"

Lutoth leaned forward. He kissed Ulrich, tongue plunging into his mouth as he drank Ulrich's moans and cries.

Lutoth gripped Ulrich's dark hair, continuing to take Ulrich's cock. "Come, beloved," Lutoth whispered. "Come for me. Fill me with your seed."

Ulrich cried out, eyes squeezing shut as he pumped his hips. Lutoth kept moving as Ulrich's warm spend spilled inside him.

Breathing hard, Ulrich collapsed back against the bed.

Lutoth rose. Ulrich's still-hard cock slid from his body. With quivering hands, Lutoth reached up and untied the lace from one of Ulrich's wrists. He rolled Ulrich onto his face. Ulrich grunted but went willingly.

Lutoth grabbed the oil and upended it over Ulrich's hole. Ulrich gasped.

Desperately, he shoved his fingers into Ulrich. All finesse and gentleness had escaped him. He needed to sink his cock into Ulrich's hole. Ulrich groaned, pushing back as Lutoth plunged his fingers inside his channel.

Lutoth yanked his digits free, pulled Ulrich to his knees, lined up his cock, and thrust. Deep.

Ulrich's body engulfed him, welcoming Lutoth into its tight heat.

Ulrich groaned, and Lutoth cried out.

Close. He was so fucking close. He thrust once. Twice. And then he pounded repeatedly as ecstasy spread through him. Ulrich's body gripped his dick so deliciously. Lutoth's

fingers dug into Ulrich's hip and shoulder, holding him in place as he took his pleasure.

"I'm going to fill your tight arse," Lutoth said.

Ulrich whimpered.

"I'm going to come so hard inside you. My big, beautiful, sweet, gentle giant." He gasped. "Ulrich. You're mine. And I'm going to spill inside you over and over again for the rest of our lives. Do you want that, Ulrich?"

"Yes!" he cried. "I want that. I want you. Forever."

The sensations rose to a peak inside Lutoth. He thrust once more, burying himself deep into Ulrich. Bliss burst forth inside him. His mouth dropped open. He spent in a soundless scream.

After a moment, he slumped forward over Ulrich's back. He rained open-mouthed kisses over Ulrich's shoulders.

After a moment, Lutoth withdrew and rolled heavily to the side, flopping next to Ulrich.

"Happy Solstice," Ulrich murmured, voice muffled by pillows.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-SIX

Lutoth laughed. “Happy Solstice, Ulrich.”

Lutoth untied Ulrich’s other wrist and then reached for the blanket, yanking it over them as he snuggled towards Ulrich, who rolled to meet him.

Neither spoke for several minutes. Lutoth may have dozed, soothed by the cosy, snug joy of being in bed with Ulrich on Winter Solstice.

The blankets were yanked down to their torsos.

“Ethel, stop it,” Ulrich groaned, reaching down and fumbling blindly for the blanket that was being pulled further and further down their bodies.

She stared at them, one end of the blanket firmly in her mouth, the other on the floor. She started to chew.

“Happy Solstice, Ethel,” Lutoth said.

Neither Lutoth nor Ulrich spoke for several moments. They just lay curled together, exposed to the cold air.

“Guess it’s time for us to get up,” Lutoth said finally.

Ulrich sighed. “Guess so.”

A short while later, they headed out. Lutoth had redone the flowers in Ulrich’s hair and replaited the lace. Both had gotten messy during their morning activities. Lutoth touched the necklace Ulrich had made him, hand wrapping around the leaf pendant that rested against his bare chest.

Ethel ran ahead, curious about the festivities taking place. She slowed and then paused on the outskirts and glanced back at them, waiting. Ulrich took Lutoth's hand, and they walked onwards.

The smell of mulled wine, hot chocolate, and honey-roasted nuts wafted through the air. Lutoth's mouth watered. Fire crackled in pits, and people and nymphs gathered around them. Flute music floated in the air.

All around, villagers wandered amongst the wooden huts decorated with evergreen branches, candles, and bunches of pine cones.

"A lot more oreads than usual," Ulrich said.

"There are." Lutoth noticed most of the oreads from the valley had come to Ores this year. Last year, there had only been a handful. He even noticed a couple of oreads running stalls.

Lutoth paused. His father stood at Mila and Rhorton's baked goods and mulled wine stall. But what startled him was that standing with his father was his mother.

He tugged Ulrich towards them.

"Hello, Father," Lutoth said. "Hello, Mother. What are you doing here?"

She smiled. "I wanted to visit this Ores place," she said, speaking Nymphish. She'd never learned the human tongue. Her gaze lingered on Ulrich. "And I wondered how everything went."

"Mother, this is Ulrich," he said. Then he switched to the human tongue, "Ulrich, this is my mother, Aulea."

"It's nice to meet you," Ulrich said, and Lutoth translated.

She stared at Ulrich.

"He apologised." Lutoth linked his arm with Ulrich. "He's promised to do better, and I am very happy with him."

"Oh, I am so glad." Lutoth's father beamed. He reached out and grabbed their hands. "I knew you could work it out! I

knew it! You are so happy together.”

Lutoth’s mother smiled stiffly. “He better keep you happy.”

“He will,” Lutoth said. “You’ll see.”

She sipped from her mulled wine, looking less convinced.

“We should go get some mulled wine for ourselves,” Lutoth said.

After saying their goodbyes, they got in line at one of the stalls.

“Happy Solstice,” Lutoth said when they reached the front of the line. “Two mugs of mulled wine, please.”

“Happy Solstice!” Ori said, a smile lighting up his face. Ori was an oread who lived in the village with Wareth, the potter. “Do you like the Solstice mugs we made?” Ori gestured to several stacked in a pyramid shape. They’d been glazed a light blue and speckled with dark blue. Words had been written on the mug, and around the words were stars and snowflakes.

Behind Ori, Wareth ladled wine into two mugs.

“They look lovely,” Ulrich said.

Wareth handed them the mugs. “Ori did all the decorating,” he said, voice gruff. “He even made some of the mugs too.”

“They’re beautiful,” Lutoth said. “Thank you.”

Taking their mugs, they moved on, making space for the next patrons waiting in line.

They sipped the warm liquid as they walked, Ethel keeping close to them. They passed the snow sculpture. It was too early in the day to tell what it would be. They watched children screaming and laughing as they sledged down the hill. Finally, they just stood by one of the firepits, drinking their wine.

“The Solstice festivities really are lovely,” Lutoth said.

“Even nicer when I have someone to share them with,” Ulrich said and smiled.

The words seeped into Lutoth, and he beamed.

Suddenly, Ulrich's smile dropped. His shoulders tensed. Lutoth followed Ulrich's gaze. Ulrich's father stood a short distance away, watching them.

"He doesn't normally come to the festivities," Ulrich said. "Why is he here today?"

"We can ignore him if you want." Lutoth reached out and took Ulrich's hand. Lutoth didn't want a repeat of the other day, and he didn't want to push Ulrich to confront his father. Not if he wasn't ready.

"No, I want you to meet him," Ulrich said.

"Whatever you want to do, I'm right here by your side." Lutoth squeezed Ulrich's hand.

Ulrich took a deep breath. He lifted his chest as they walked towards Ulrich's father. Ulrich appeared calm and confident, but Lutoth could feel the tension radiating off his big body.

"Hello, Father," Ulrich said. "I want you to properly meet Lutoth. He is very special to me, and I love him."

Pride burned hot inside Lutoth.

Lutoth's father didn't speak. He looked between the two, gaze lingering on their joined hands.

"Hello, Lutoth," Ulrich's father mumbled.

"Pleasure to meet you," Lutoth said, pretending they hadn't met previously.

Silence followed, stretching between them. The three stood awkwardly together whilst around them, laughter and joyous voices resounded through the air. Lutoth tried to think of something to say.

"I'm going to get food," Ulrich's father finally said and left without saying goodbye.

They watched him go.

After a moment, Ulrich spoke. “Well, that definitely could have gone worse.”

Lutoth turned and faced Ulrich, wrapping his arms around Ulrich’s waist. “I’m proud of you.”

Ulrich pressed his lips to Lutoth’s hair. “Thank you.”

“How are you feeling now?”

“Good. I think I feel good,” Ulrich said. “I think I feel happy.”

“Me too.”

They smiled like fools into each other’s eyes, with no care for anyone who might see them.

“Ulrich!” a man called out.

Tall and thin, the man walked with a slight sway of his hips. A carefree, confident smile graced his mouth. Two others followed him. Lutoth was pretty sure he’d seen the other two around the village before.

“You must be Lutoth,” the man said. “I’m Elias, Ulrich’s older brother. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” He smiled at Ulrich. “And it’s nice to see you two blissful lovebirds fawning over each other. Makes me almost believe true love exists.”

“Almost?” Ulrich asked.

Elias laughed. “And Lutoth, let me introduce my closest friend, Damur, and his little brother, Gideon.”

“I’m twenty-nine, hardly little,” Gideon protested.

“To us, you’ll always be the little boy following us around,” Damur said, ruffling Gideon’s hair.

He and Elias laughed.

Gideon smoothed back his hair. He looked like he wanted to pout.

“Gideon will be visiting me in Bordertown in the summer,” Elias said, patting Gideon on the back. “But I’m assuming you won’t be joining me there, Ulrich.”

“No.” Ulrich smiled, shaking his head. “I’ll be staying here.” He wrapped his arm firmly around Lutoth’s shoulders and squeezed.

Ethel stood a little distance. Several human and nymph younglings, including the little girl who had previously ridden her, gathered around Ethel.

“It looks like those children are interested in your reindeer,” Elias said.

“The younglings probably want to ride her,” Lutoth said. “Ulrich is so good with the younglings.”

“Is he now?” Elias asked, raising his brows.

Ulrich flushed.

Ulrich and Lutoth approached Ethel and the younglings around her.

“Who would like to ride her?” Ulrich asked, voice deep and soft.

The younglings cried out, sticking their hands up.

Ulrich chuckled. “Form a line, then. You’ll each get a turn.”

Lutoth stood slightly to the side, watching Ulrich help the kids one after the other sit on Ethel’s back. Ulrich smiled at the children, talking softly to them. Lutoth’s heart swelled. Elias, Damur, and Gideon wandered off at some point.

After about an hour, Ulrich stood the last child on the ground. He turned towards Lutoth.

“What are you thinking?” Ulrich asked. He slid his arms around Lutoth and tugged him into a loose embrace. “You have a look on your face.”

“I was just thinking how exactly one year ago today, I saw you standing right there with Ethel.” Lutoth pointed to a spot closer to the forest. “I stood over there.” He pointed to one of the firepits. “It was there that I decided I would win your heart.”

“And you have,” Ulrich said.

“And just then, watching you with the younglings and Ethel, I thought, ‘Ulrich would be an incredible father.’”

Ulrich’s arms tightened around him. “You think so?”

“I do. Caring, loving, gentle. A wonderful father. Is that something you’d want?”

“With you?”

“Who else?” Lutoth laughed.

Ulrich swallowed, Adam’s apple bobbing. “I think I might.” He smiled nervously.

“Maybe it can be next year’s Solstice gift,” Lutoth said and leaned up to kiss Ulrich, his gentle giant.



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EXCERPT FROM A
WINTER REDEMPTION

A NYMPH SOLSTICE ROMANCE- NOVELLA 5

“I haven’t seen you around before,” a smooth voice said.

Jarne blinked at the stranger who’d sat down at the table across from him. Jarne surveyed the inn. Many seats remained unoccupied at the wooden tables cluttered around the room.

So why had this stranger chosen to impose himself on Jarne?

It seemed forward, completely unnecessary, and entirely annoying.

Jarne studied the man. The only light in the room came from the fireplace and several candles. The stranger’s white hair reflected the orange-and-red glow. Silver eyes fixed on Jarne. He didn’t appear human. Perhaps a mountain nymph?

Jarne knew that mountain nymphs—or oreads, as they were called—lived in the Norend Mountains. He’d met nymphs, or half-nymphs, before. He even worked with a half-dryad. And although he’d seen oreads in Bordertown, the city from which he’d come, he didn’t think he’d ever spoken to one.

The maybe-oread wore a light winter coat, frayed and covered in patches of bright red, yellow, and green that contrasted dramatically with the plain grey fabric. Furthermore, random buttons, pockets, and frilly lace embellished the coat. An absurd item of clothing!

The coat hung open, revealing a bare grey torso, slender but toned. A nice chest. Jarne’s eyes snapped up. He should not be ogling.

“What’s your name?” The stranger placed his arms on the table and leaned forward.

Jarne inhaled. He smelled of the smoke of the hearth and the trees of the mountain forest. Pine? Wormwood? Fir? And something earthy too. And metallic. He sniffed, trying to put his finger on it. Altogether a very pleasant smell. Invigorating and entirely captivating. He felt the urge to fill his lungs with that tantalising aroma.

With a sudden realisation, Jarne noticed he’d leaned closer to smell the nymph. That definitely was too forward. He sat back, hoping the stranger hadn’t noticed. He cleared his throat. “My name is Jarne.”

“I’m Ketho. A pleasure to meet you.” Then Ketho continued to stare at him, eyes tracing his features.

Unnerved by Ketho’s appraisal, Jarne turned his attention to his food, hoping that would make Ketho go away. Or at least stop him from speaking to Jarne any more. He spooned the rather unpleasant-smelling stew into his mouth. His nose scrunched. It didn’t taste much better than it smelled. He dipped the stale bread into the brown liquid and took a bite.

As he ate, he tried to ignore the nymph opposite him, but Ketho seemed entirely undeterred by Jarne’s attempt to dismiss him, instead watching Jarne as he ate.

Jarne raised his gaze. He glared. “Is there something I can help you with?” he said brusquely, not attempting to hide his annoyance. And why should he attempt politeness when this man clearly had no desire to uphold basic manners?

But the stranger didn’t take offence. Instead, he smiled as if that were an invitation and began to speak. “I was wondering what brought you from Bordertown to these mountains.”

“How do you know I’m from Bordertown?” Jarne narrowed his eyes.

“I can tell.” He gestured at the few others in the room.

Jarne frowned. He hated standing out. He had no interest in being the centre of attention. His goal in how he presented

himself was to dress in a manner that blended in with others and not be noticed. So although his clothes were well tailored and made of good-quality fabric, he preferred plain greys and blacks. After all, he was a perfume alchemist. Not some lord or lady.

His work should be noticed. Not him.

But as he surveyed the few in the inn, he could see what the stranger meant. Those from the mountains clearly dressed in more rural clothing, with faded fabrics and tears that had been roughly sewn back together. Whilst those from Bordertown, or perhaps Castle Evermore, wore finer clothing.

“So what are you doing here?” Ketho asked.

Jarne bit back a sigh. He didn’t enjoy small talk. A waste of time. And he definitely didn’t wish to speak to this bothersome nymph.

“I’m visiting someone,” Jarne said and took another bite of the stale bread, hoping Ketho would finally allow him to eat in peace. He should have requested a bowl be brought to his room. Or he could have carried the food to his room himself. Or he could have starved.

It all seemed preferable to this inane chit-chat.

“Let me guess,” Ketho said, drumming his fingers on the table.

Jarne sighed loudly. Apparently, Ketho was determined to converse with him. He shoved more of the soup in his mouth and chewed on some tough bit of unidentifiable meat. Jarne had left the city to get a little peace and perspective. But apparently mountain manners involved accosting strangers and asking them invasive questions and not leaving him alone!

“You’re visiting a parent? A friend? A cousin? A lover?” Ketho waggled his eyebrows. “An ex-lover? Someone who has wronged you and your kin, and you are here to exact terrible revenge?”

“What? What nonsense are you babbling about?” Jarne snapped.

Ketho didn't respond, just stared at Jarne, waiting for a response.

“Well, what are you doing here?” Jarne deflected. Perhaps if he could turn the conversation on Ketho, he'd stop asking Jarne questions. Jarne took a deep gulp of his wine, which unlike the food, was passable.

“I'm wandering. Drifting. Looking for something to do. Or someone...” The corner of his lip quirked up.

Was that interest? Was that why Ketho had approached him?

He glanced at the other patrons. He supposed out of those here, he was a decent choice of bed partner. His gaze turned back to Ketho, who watched him with amusement.

And perhaps something more.

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A sweet and steamy MM fantasy romance.

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Shai has learned the hard way that humans are to be feared. But when a human saves him, it upends everything he thought he knew about them. He knows he should stay away from the fisherman. They are from two different worlds. They have nothing in common. They don't even speak the same language. And although the man rescued him, Shai knows humans can't be trusted.

But Shai can't stay away. Nor can he ignore the desire he feels for this big man with his broad shoulders and hairy chest. But is there a chance for love between a human and a naiad? Or are their differences too great to overcome?

Content notes: sexual content, swearing, and captivity and abuse of nymphs.

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A naiad who despises him.

An MM fantasy romance.

Raiya despises humans. They abducted him from his home, kept him in captivity, and forced him to fight other nymphs. But when a pirate ship crewed by both naiads and humans rescues him, he is confused at seeing them working and living together. What's more baffling is his attraction to the ship's captain, with his calm confidence, broad shoulders, and steely grey eyes. Even so, Raiya will never give in to his desire for a human.

Silas is the pirate captain of the *Naiad's Revenge*. His mission is to lead the crew in their fight against the Order. But when Raiya comes aboard, Silas can't deny his attraction to the scowling naiad stalking around his ship. However, Raiya clearly loathes Silas, so there is no point wishing for something more.

As they fight alongside each other, Raiya realises that Silas is different from the humans he's dealt with before. Still, after everything humans have done to Raiya, could he ever love one?

Content notes: sexual content, swearing, and captivity and abuse of nymphs.

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ABOUT GIGI RIVERS

Gigi spent her childhood daydreaming and living inside the imaginary worlds in her mind. As an author, she now shares these worlds with her readers.

Born and raised in Australia, she now resides in Berlin, Germany. She is mixed race, being half-Filipino and part Welsh. She is a traveller, potter, gym enthusiast, nature and animal lover, an avid consumer of stories, and now, a writer of MM fantasy romance.

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