



CALLIE RHODES

BEYOND THE  
SHATTERED  
VEIL

THE BROTHERHOOD OF RUIN

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# BEYOND THE SHATTERED VEIL

**In this world, he is power...**

Thrust into the role of chieftain, Tyr will do anything bring the bear clan back to their former glory. But battling insurgents is only part of the problem. What he needs is a mate to cement his place and bring hope to his people... and he refuses to wait any longer.

**She's determined to get back home...**

Meredith never wanted to follow her eccentric family around the country as they hunt Bigfoot for their popular video channel. She doesn't even believe in cryptids. But sometimes life doesn't go to plan—a fact that becomes painfully clear when a giant, hulking beast crashes into their camp, abducting Meredith, and disappearing into the woods. Now Meredith finds herself in an alien world, one where her survival depends on becoming the mate of a barbarian beast.

CHAPTER  
**ONE**

TYR

“So, tell me more about these *dates*.”

Tyr Harker had barely been able to wait until the door of the Council House closed behind him before the words came tumbling out of his mouth.

It had been a difficult few days—not only witnessing the trial that sentenced his father and uncle to prison for their role in trying to keep the curse from being broken but also moving his grieving mother into her new position as a lady-in-waiting for Blythe Sterne, the new leader of the Council of Nine.

With all that settled, Tyr should have been able to take a breath, but the truth was the hard part was just beginning.

Now, he was headed back to Wynterhowe, the settlement his people migrated to in the colder months, to take up the mantle of chieftain of the bear clan.

The weight of the new title weighed heavily on Tyr’s shoulders. Even though he’d known his whole life that he would, in all likelihood, succeed his father’s rule—training for the responsibility not only in the classroom but on the battlefield—he still didn’t feel ready for the task.

And it wasn’t just because of the circumstances of his ascension. Sure, his father’s treachery had left the whole bear clan wary of another Harker leading them, but Tyr was well known by his people. They understood he wasn’t a cheat or a tyrant. He’d worked the sea and the fields with them. He’d fought by their side. He’d even been instrumental in bringing down his father’s evil schemes.

The bear clan knew Tyr was trustworthy.

But now, he needed to prove that he was worthy in other ways as well.

For five decades, the world of Evergreen had suffered under a curse that prevented any daughters from being born—a curse that only recently had been broken.

Now Tyr’s friend—nay, *brother*—from the wolf clan, Ryce, and his human mate Kayla were expecting the first girl child in half a century.

But one daughter would not save their world...and a wolf could not save the bear clan.

More daughters needed to be born in all three clans—the bears, the wolves, and the ravens—if Evergreen was to be saved.

So, on top of all the other duties Tyr found himself suddenly needing to shoulder, the most pressing and important was finding a mate. And since all the women of Evergreen were now past childbearing age, there was only one place where mates could be found—on the other side of the veil, among the humans of Earth.

And since Ryce was the only living person in all of Evergreen to have spent time among humans, he was the obvious choice to teach Tyr about their customs as they started the hike back to their respective villages.

“Dating is a big subject,” Ryce said carefully. “Maybe we should talk a little about human women first?”

Tyr shrugged. “I’ve met your mate,” he said, tipping his head in Kayla’s direction. She was walking a few paces ahead, deep in a conversation of her own with Mildritha, his mother’s former maid. “Aren’t they all like her?”

A laugh burst unexpectedly from Ryce’s lips. “Sorry,” he said. “Some are *similar* to Kayla. Others are vastly different. Not just in form but in personality. Saying they are all alike would be like saying you and Arran are the same.”

Tyr frowned. “That’s ridiculous. I am a bear, and Arran’s a raven. We have *nothing* in common.”

“Exactly,” Ryce said, “Human women expect their mates to understand and care about the ways in which they are unique.”

Tyr nodded. “So you’re saying that during these dates, I should tell her the attributes I appreciate about her.”

“Now you’re getting it,” Ryce said, looking impressed.

“Like her sizable bottom and prodigious breasts.”

Ryce’s smile slipped. “Yeah, maybe not those *exact* attributes.”

“But what other features would I care about?”

“Her smile, her sense of humor, her inner strength, her drive, her sense of justice,” Ryce had no trouble going on and on as his gaze fixed on his mate.

It was easy for Tyr to see how much the wolf cared for Kayla—how deep his love went.

That was the life he wanted for himself...for all his people. The bear clan had been living under a shadow for too long, and he was determined to bring a new light.

“How her sturdy body is capable of surviving a long, hard winter?” Tyr



tried.

Ryce shrugged. “That wouldn’t be my line of choice, but you’re headed in the right direction.”

Tyr beamed, buoyed by his friend’s praise. All he’d needed was a push in the right direction.

“Okay, I find a woman I like and list her most attractive qualities... anything else?”

If this was all it took to secure a mate, then he had worried for nothing. All he would need was a couple of days in the human world, and he’d be well on his way to ensuring the long line of Harker chieftains remained unbroken.

“You’ll be expected to take her out,” Ryce answered. “Usually for a nice dinner.”

“Where she can show off her hearty appetite.”

It made sense—the woman would want to impress him, too, after all.

Ryce shook his head again. “That’s more of a bear than a human thing,” he said. “Most human women where you’re going won’t eat much on the first date. Unfortunately, their culture has pounded it into their heads that appearing small and dainty is attractive.”

Tyr looked at his friend, aghast. “But if she does not eat, how will she have the energy to take to her bed afterward?”

Ryce cleared his throat. “Listen, Tyr...that might not happen right away.”

“No?”

“Sorry,” Ryce clapped him on the shoulder as they continued walking. “A good rule of thumb is to plan on giving it three dates before she’s ready to take that step.”

*Three dates?* It seemed pointless, but Tyr supposed if he’d held out this long, he could wait a little longer. “But then...what else do you do during these dates?”

“You could go to a movie,” Ryce suggested. “It’s always a solid choice.”

“A movie?”

“Right...” Ryce twisted his face like he was searching for the words to explain. “It’s a kind of entertainment...a story played out in front of an audience.”

“Like a public recitation of an epic poem?” Tyr tried.

“Sort of,” Ryce said, not satisfied with the analogy. “Winter’s coming, and you’ll be busy governing for the next few months. Why don’t we wait until spring, and then I can travel to Earth with you. I’ll show you some

restaurants. You can experience a movie or two—that way, you can get in some practice before you start asking women out.”

Tyr frowned. There was no way this could wait until spring. With his status as chieftain on the line, he needed to act swiftly. Otherwise, challengers would come out of the woodwork—and first in line would be his cousin Rand, who was already making noise about Tyr being too weak to lead.

No amount of talking would help Tyr fend off his potential opponents. The best thing he could do was to get on with the process.

Tyr gave a noncommittal grunt, ready to move on. “So, how do I get a woman to go on one of these dates?”

“You ask her.”

“And if she says no?”

“Then you move on and ask someone else.”

Tyr shook his head. That couldn’t be right. “But what if she’s the one I want?”

“You still have to walk away,” Ryce told him. “People on earth value each other’s rights and independence. At least, they’re supposed to. That means you can’t force anyone to do anything they don’t want to.”

“That makes no sense,” Tyr said, starting to get irritated. Everywhere he turned, Ryce seemed intent on shutting him down. “We’re talking about saving the entire clan. Saving all of Evergreen! How could one woman—one *person*—matter more than that?”

Ryce’s gaze fixed on his mate, Kayla, again. “I know it’s hard to wrap your head around now. But when you finally fall in love, you’ll get it.”

Tyr shook his head. Perhaps being mated had softened his friend’s brain. Because Tyr knew that when he finally had his mate—the perfect woman, pregnant and happily set up by his side, all of his troubles would be solved.

It didn’t take long after that for them to come to the fork in the trail where Tyr and Ryce shook hands—Ryce bound for Lupine and Tyr for Wynterhowe.

“Plan on seeing me in the spring,” Ryce said, “and we’ll take that trip through the veil.”

Tyr raised his hand to send his friends down the trail in peace. Then he watched them go, turning back toward home only when they’d disappeared into the distance, his mind made up.

He didn’t doubt Ryce’s word. He’d no doubt see the wolf in the spring.

But by then, Tyr would have already gone through the veil and returned with a mate of his own.

CHAPTER  
**TWO**

## MEREDITH

I was bored. Dear God, I was bored.

Unfortunately, that was nothing new. These days, while I was working, every hour, minute, and second seemed to drag.

“Yeah, like this is work,” I muttered to myself before quickly checking that my headset mic was muted. The last thing I needed on a night like tonight was for my family to overhear a comment like that. Fortunately, the dot next to my name on the monitor was indeed red.

I barely had time to breathe a sigh of relief before squawking from one of the monitors demanded my attention. I scanned the various video feeds, squinting through my yawn to see which of the dozen night vision field cameras showed the disturbance. I found it easily enough. One of the perimeter alarms hanging from trees around the camp had been tripped. They were connected to motion-sensor cameras, optimistically carted from site to site by my dad just in case something interesting happened to wander near the camp.

Switching my audio channel back on, I pulled my mic closer to my mouth. “Uncle Ken, it looks like an animal tripped the perimeter sensor in section three. Can you check it out?”

For a long few seconds, there was no answer. I was just about try again when my headphones crackled to life with the sound of wind, background static, and the unmistakable burble of a guy taking a wizz.

“Uh, sorry, Mer-bear,” my Uncle Ken’s voice filled my ears. “I’m a little busy at the moment.”

*Urg.* I let my head fall back against my shoulder blades, my eyes rolling up to the heavens beseechingly. What the hell had I done to deserve this?

All my life, I’d dreamed of working in the movies. I’d gone to film school, earned my degree. Cinematography, editing, sound and production design—I’d studied them all. But instead of working my days away on a studio lot in Hollywood, I was hunched over a tangle of cables and screens in a camping tent in the Siskiyou Mountains, listening to my uncle pee.

Needless to say, life had not worked out the way I had planned.

“Okay.” After letting out a deep breath, I tried again. “Well, when you finish your business, can you check out sector three? Whatever tripped the

sensor, it was big.”

“How big?” my brother, Matt, broke through on the comms. “Like Bigfoot big?”

*No, I wanted to shout. Not Bigfoot big...because Bigfoot doesn't exist!*

But instead, I closed my eyes, rested my head in my hand, and rubbed my aching temples. “I don’t know. I didn’t see what set off the alarm. The only way we’ll know is if someone goes over there and checks it out.”

Chances were it was a deer or raccoon. Nine out of ten times, those were the kind of animals that tripped the sensors. But on a few occasions, it ended up being a larger nocturnal predator—a wolf or even a bear. What it never ended up being, though, was the one thing my family and I were supposedly out here to catch.

Bigfoot.

God, how I wish I could tell you that was a joke. But that was our job—professional Bigfoot chasers.

Like every wild adventure my family was ever dragged into, creating a cryptid-hunting video channel had been my dad’s brainchild. It came to him the day after I graduated college, and he sweet-talked me into working on his pilot episode by saying that I could think of it as a thank-you for all the support he gave me through college.

I never dreamed it would amount to anything, but I shouldn’t have underestimated my father. He always had a true talent for spinning bullshit and convincing people it was gold.

The day I posted that first video, it only got a handful of views. The next day, it was pushing five thousand likes and a smattering of enthusiastic comments. By the end of the week, the damned thing was in the top five most-viewed videos in a search for ‘Bigfoot.’

“Just help me do a couple more,” my dad wheedled, “until I get the hang of it.” But a couple more turned into an entire summer, at the end of which I was making enough to get my own place, buy an almost-new Prius, and pay for my health insurance, which was frankly better than any of my friends from film school were doing.

And that’s when I knew Dad had me hook, line, and sinker.

It didn’t take long for the rest of the family to jump on the bandwagon after that. My brothers Matt and Briggs, Uncle Ken and his kids, Ron and Dave, all joined my dad on camera while I stayed on the technical side.

So far as I knew, none of us, except for Matt, actually believed in

Sasquatch. But what good was the truth matter when lies paid for mortgages, braces, pickup trucks, and jet skis?

Early on in our venture, I'd overheard my dad and uncle worrying that the river of cash would dry up when they failed to produce an actual, verifiable sighting. But the opposite had happened. The occasional grainy footage of a thermal hit—in reality, just a mountain lion or wild boar—was enough to send our audience into paroxysms of swooning delight. Sometimes I thought we could film an episode in the pharmacy department of the local Walmart, and none of our subscribers would mind.

God knew it would have been a hell of a lot easier than my usual routine of filming all night, catching a few hours of sleep on an inflatable mattress, and then editing everything together the next day from the passenger seat of Dad's truck while he led us to the next Sasquatch hotspot halfway across the country.

Of course, *hotspot* could be a subjective term. For instance, tonight, we'd set up camp just outside of Vidalia, Oregon, where a couple of months ago, two drunk loggers had stumbled out of a roadside bar and into what they described as a "Bigfoot brawl."

Dad had read about the incident in some shady online article, and that was good enough for him. We were off.

Eventually, the sound of Uncle Ken zipping up his pants played in my ears.

"All right, Mer," he said with a satisfied groan. "I'm off to check out that motion sensor."

"I'm headed that way, too," Matt practically shouted in his exuberance.

"Stay at your post, Ronny," Dad gently chided my brother. While he liked to think of himself as a self-appointed sergeant, in reality, he just didn't have the bite.

A fact that was made crystal clear from the sound coming over the radio of my little brother's loud footsteps as he raced through the dark forest. "*Urg*, don't call me that! I told you, I want to be called Raw Dog now."

Even though no one could see me, I still shook my head. "I am *not* calling you that."

"Oh, come on!" he whined. "You have a cool nickname—Mer-bear. I want one too."

"Then pick a cool nickname," I teased him. "Because there is no way in hell I am calling my brother *Raw Dog*."

“Enough!” Dad shouted us both down. “Ronny, just stay in position.”

“No way! I’m not missing out if it’s really him this time.”

I logged down the time stamp on the recording—2:34 a.m. While I could argue that my little brother was the most gullible member of the Ives family, he had a knack for soundbites. That one would be the perfect teaser for this video’s intro section.

I had just started to look back up when a blur on one of the monitors caught my eye.

“Um, Uncle Ken,” I said hesitantly. “Where are you right now?”

“Still heading toward sector three,” he answered.

“Why?” Dad asked.

“It’s probably nothing,” I answered. “I just thought I saw—“

The same blur blew past another camera—one closer to the camp. The hairs on the back of my neck started to stand on end.

“Oh my God,” Matt cried out loud enough to send any animal in a three-mile radius running for cover. “It really is one this time, isn’t it?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “It can’t be. There’s no such thing as—“

“That’s enough, Meredith,” Dad interrupted before I accidentally recorded proof of my doubt. “You know as well as the rest of us that autumn is the best time to find a Sasquatch. It’s their last chance to bulk up before going into hibernation.”

“Right,” I said, my eyes glued to the screen showing the next infrared trail camera closest to me.

It didn’t matter that I was only half-listening. Every video I edited for our channel contained a version of that nugget of bullshit, and astonishingly, our subscribers never questioned it.

In the winter, Leonard Ives told his followers it was the best time of year for Bigfoot hunting because the huge brutes were desperate for food. In the spring, he claimed they were likely to catch a distracted beast during mating season. Summer brought a bounty of easily available food, which according to Dad, made them somnolent and lazy.

Worry must come through in my voice because Uncle Ken checked in. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, all good. Just a...hang on a second.”

“If it’s coyotes, make a lot of noise, ‘cause—“

“Holy shit,” I yelled, jumping back from the camera as something big walked in front of the camera.



*Walked.*

But what I was seeing on the video feed wasn't a coyote. Whatever the creature was, it was covered in dark fur, was nearly seven feet tall, and was walking *on two legs*. Bears were known to do that occasionally, but never for more than a few seconds at a time.

"What is it?" my dad demanded in a voice of rising excitement. "Do you think it could actually be the real deal? Is it Bigfoot?"

*Seriously?*

"Of course not, Dad. It's just some asshole playing a prank. Somebody in town must have seen our preview video and decided to come out and mess with us."

An asshole who'd be having second thoughts when he found himself writhing on the ground after a shot from my stun gun.

"Stay put," Uncle Ken hollered. "I'll be there in two minutes."

I didn't have two minutes. The guy was so close now I could hear his footsteps crunching on dead leaves. Despite how confident I'd sounded a second ago, I was starting to get a bad feeling about this.

We'd been pranked before, but the kind of person who got their kicks that way generally didn't have the first clue about hunting or tracking and invariably announced their presence by accident before they could do any damage.

But this man? He'd approached with such stealth and silence that I wouldn't have known he was there if the alarm hadn't gone off. And I was equally sure the only reason I could hear him now was because he wanted me to.

A chill ran down my spine.

As quietly as I could, I untied the vent in the back of the tent, slipped out, and sprinted for the truck, keys in hand. But before I got there, a huge fur-covered creature stepped into my path, his massive jaws open in a silent roar, terrifying sharp teeth glistening in the moonlight.

I yelped and stumbled backward, my heel caught on a tree root. I went down hard. The back of my head bashed against the ground—and everything went black.

CHAPTER  
**THREE**

## MEREDITH

Something soft pressed against my cheek. I smelled soap and wood shavings. A cool breeze caressed my skin.

All of which barely registered due to one hell of a pounding headache.

I forced my eyes open—my movements felt sluggish and thick. My hair had fallen in front of my eyes, and all I could see through it was a sliver of pearly pink at the edge of the night sky. It was nearly dawn—which meant I'd been out for an hour at least.

There was something else, something far more worrying: my hair was streaked with dark red.

Blood.

Well, that explained the headache. Add to that the fact that the ground in my field of vision was moving, but my feet weren't, and my situation became very worrying.

Someone grunted very close to my ear, and I had the frightening realization that I was being carried.

The creature! The memory of a menacing, furry monster with fangs at least an inch and a half long walking on two legs coming straight at me rushed back into my head. I'd tried to run, had made it out of the tent, and tried to get to the stun gun...but then, nothing.

I had no idea what had happened next.

Shit. This was bad. Very bad.

I fought back against a wave of nausea and instantly tried to wriggle my way out of his hold. But the tanned, muscular arm holding me steady didn't budge.

At least it wasn't covered in fur.

Oh, thank God.

Either I'd been rescued from the creature, or, far more likely, it had been nothing more than a product of my stressed-out, over-worked mind.

Still, I had no way of knowing if I'd been rescued or kidnapped. If I was being taken to a hospital or...or something much worse.

I was used to pranksters. Until now, they'd been a pain in the ass but not dangerous. Usually, they'd try to scare us with a fake Bigfoot suit, then run

off into the woods to finish their case of beer.

This guy, though, didn't seem like the run-of-the-mill local looking for a cheap laugh.

The words of Uncle Ken came to me, his explanation for buying the most sensitive trip alarms he could find: Thing about bein' in pole position is, everyone's gonna try to take you down.

The rest of the family had mocked Ken at the time, but now I wondered if our competition—the handful of less successful bloggers and would-be influencers in the Bigfoot space (and yes, I know how ridiculous that phrase sounds)—would stoop so low as to literally take the Ives family out of the equation.

It seemed preposterous, but no more so than the fact that I was being carried through the forest by some colossal bodybuilder.

Which in itself was surprising since no guy had ever offered me—or any other plus-sized girls I knew—the chance to be carried around. Not that my kidnapper was likely to take me out on a dance floor or into a pool for volleyball or any other situation where skinny girls shrieked in fake protest at being literally picked up by hot guys.

The light abruptly dimmed, and my partial view of the woods gave way to an opening of a cave, one tall enough for this behemoth to enter without ducking.

Oh dear God, things were going from bad to worse. I could think of no innocent explanation for taking an unconscious girl into a cave—and what was that...that glow? Up ahead, shimmering and misty and extremely creepy

---

I had to do something fast. I twisted my body with all my might and managed to wrestle myself free of my kidnapper's grip—only to slam against the side of the cave, knocking the wind out of my lungs. I lay gasping on the filthy cave floor, looking up at...

For the briefest second, I thought it really was Bigfoot until I realized that the fur, fangs, claws, and so forth belonged to a bear who'd been relieved of everything but his skin. The poor animal's pelt was now draped over the broad shoulders of a perplexed-looking but otherwise ordinary man.

No, strike that: standing nearly seven feet tall with a broad chest, powerful shoulders, piercing blue eyes, and a lumberjack beard, the guy was anything but ordinary.

"You're awake," he observed, making no move to pick me up as I

scrambled to my knees, slipping in slimy, viscous mud. “And your reflexes seem normal. You hit your head pretty hard back there. Can you talk?”

Was he serious? I fought off a wave of dizziness and tried to scream but only ended up coughing. The bear man was blocking the path that led back to the cave entrance, so I had no choice but to run toward the shimmery light.

Within seconds, I was lifted into the air again, those strong arms wrapping around my torso while I kicked and writhed and finally managed a shriek. “Put me down, goddamn you!” I yelled, my voice muffled because my face was mashed against his chest.

Instead, the guy kept walking as casually as if he was carrying a sack of groceries.

“I will soon, but it would be better if you quit fighting. Not only is it pointless, but you also have nothing to worry about. I’ve been well-schooled in your people’s courtship customs. I’ve been taught how to date and do so as soon as I get you to Wynterhowe.”

What the...? Did he actually threaten to date me? Was that a euphemism for forcing me to be his cave-bride? Because ‘Wynterhowe’ sure as hell sounded like the name of some new-age cult, one in which men pretended to be bears and women were...

No. I was not going anywhere with this guy. But since he clearly wasn’t about to let me walk out of this cave willingly, I needed to stay calm and devise an escape plan.

“Ss-ounds good,” I said. Keep him talking; that was the idea. “Is this...do you live in here? And what’s the deal with the sparkly light?”

The chit-chat seemed to work, the guy’s grip on me relaxing slightly. I focused all my energy on imagining a giant spring being compressed all the way down...and suddenly released at full force.

“Unnghhh!”

I knew my knee had connected with the guy’s balls when he dropped me and staggered backward, clutching himself. I took off running, praying there wasn’t a brick wall on the other side of the mist—and this time, made it half a dozen steps before I was hoisted in the air again.

“This is getting old,” I grunted.

My kidnapper must have agreed because he responded by slinging me over his shoulder caveman-style, letting my head dangle down his back while he held on to my ankles. I pounded and scratched at him, but instead of telling me to knock it off, he laughed.

I was outraged. “Is this funny to you?” I demanded with an extra-hard whack.

“No, no—sorry, it’s just that it’s been a long time since anyone got the better of me—and he was at least twice your size. But don’t worry, I’m not mad. It’s fine. What’s your name, by the way?”

Wham. “Are you serious right now? You’re dragging me into your cult, and you don’t even know”—Wham!—“my name?”

“Cult? Who said anything about a cult? I told you I’m taking you to Wynterhowe. I can tell you’re exactly the right woman for me...whatever your name is,” he added cheerfully.

My hands hurt, and I was out of breath, so I stopped hitting him.

It was hopeless. Still, I had to try. My stomach churned thinking about being married off in some creepy ceremony by nightfall, dressed in matching his-n-hers bear suits.

“You’re all wrong about me,” I shouted in desperation. “I’m a total bitch. No one likes me. I’m not the right woman for anyone!”

“Don’t be so modest,” he replied enthusiastically. “Sure, maybe the raven clan wouldn’t appreciate your charms. But filled with fighting spirit, good reflexes, plump enough to survive a string of harsh winters, big hips for childbearing—you’re a perfect fit for the bear clan.”

I was dumbfounded. For once, I couldn’t think of a single thing to say. Plump? Big hips? And what the fuck was that about a clan?

I stopped struggling and let myself hang upside down in silent despair. Was there any chance I could still be dreaming? That I’d been knocked unconscious, and any moment now, my family would come back from the hunt and discover me lying on the ground?

But no, I thought as the mist began to clear. No dream could feel this real. The sensations were too sharp: the warmth of the man’s body, the rough texture of the bear skin, the pressure building behind my eyes as the blood rushed to my head.

This was actually happening, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

And just like that, I was carried out of the shimmering mist and into the golden light of morning.

CHAPTER  
**FOUR**

TYR

Finding a mate turned out to be way easier than Tyr expected. Ryce and Kayla had made it sound like humans were too afraid of the wild to wander out of the safety of their cities—especially at night. Tyr had been prepared to walk all night to get to the closest human settlement outside the veil. He'd even brought his bedroll and provisions in a rucksack, anticipating the need to spend several days searching for the right woman.

But it turned out none of that was necessary.

Instead, he'd barely been on the human side of the veil for an hour when he'd stumbled across the perfect mate right there in the forest. It was fate.

What else could it be? He couldn't imagine any other reason she would have been sitting alone in a very small tent—one too small for even the skinniest raven to stand up in—in the dead of night. She had to be waiting for him.

Sure, he'd sensed the other humans in the area. They were hardly stealthy and made enough noise to be heard for miles. He wasn't sure if they were family or part of her clan, but clearly, they didn't recognize the treasure beneath their noses if they were willing to leave her alone and unguarded at night.

It was a mistake Tyr vowed to never make. His mate would always be safe.

His mate!

Tyr had to resist a triumphant howl. He didn't want to spook the female, but this had to be the easiest hunt of his life. He couldn't wait to rub Ryce's face in it.

Clearly, the gods were on his side—because the female was flawless, built to withstand the elements with generous fat stores and sturdy limbs, lovely clear skin, thick hair, and a honeyed voice. He wasn't close enough to see the state of her teeth, but her breasts were a big, soft, beautiful bonus.

And on top of all that, she was feisty, with plenty of the internal fire unique to human women—at least the one other human woman he'd met. As soon as she'd woken up, she'd started shouting at him at the top of her lungs, and when that didn't deter him, she actually had the guts to lash out at him.

Tyr was delighted. It was only sensible of her to be wary of him until



she'd assessed his intentions...though it did make him laugh. Imagine attacking a bear chieftain when you were half his size! He hadn't anticipated choosing a fighter for a mate, but as he picked her up and draped her over his shoulder as gently as he could, he could see that it made perfect sense. It was only fitting that a warrior such as he should have an equally fierce mate.

"You can stop fighting now," he said when her heel came too close to jabbing his eye. He grabbed both her ankles and held them in one hand as if he were carrying a heavy sack of turnips. Unfortunately, this had the effect of making her lush breasts bounce gently against his back, even as she clawed at the backs of his thighs. The combination was surprisingly erotic.

Tyr had been dreaming of making love to a woman since he was barely old enough to know what it entailed. Sometimes, he thought he would die if he didn't get the chance. Lately, he spent so much time working his cock that his wrists were sore.

But no more. The spirited energy of his future mate, combined with her suppleness and flexibility, made him wish he could consummate their bond right then and there.

But that would be a disaster—for many reasons.

Tyr was confident enough of his own virility that it seemed entirely possible he'd impregnate his mate the first time they fucked, and that had to happen on bear land for his offspring to be bears.

But also, simply planting his seed in his new mate's womb wasn't enough to break the curse. If the bear clan was to thrive for generations to come with both sons and daughters, he would have to woo this woman until they both valued, respected, and loved each other. And the best way to ensure that outcome was to abide by her human courtship customs.

But damn, it was hard to wait.

Even though the woman's clothes covered her from top to bottom, he could still feel every soft curve as her body bounced against him.

Of course, it wouldn't matter what she was wearing; Tyr was willing to bet he would still want her. It didn't matter that her human clothes were odd to him—a thick, fluffy, long-sleeved shirt of heathered gray with matching pants. He tried to imagine the meaning of the letters embroidered across her chest—UCLA—but was left baffled.

Instead, he tried to imagine her gorgeously curvy body draped in traditional bear clothes. The common women of his clan tended to dress in comfortable, loose, flowing garb suitable for working in the fields and at

home. The noble women preferred more revealing fashion that not only showed off their best attributes but made it clear they had no intention of doing manual labor.

Either style would suit her well, Tyr thought. In fact, imagining her rounded bottom and breasts stretching the colorful fabric his clan was famous for made his—

“—if you don’t put me down right now, I swear to God, I’m going to hurl!”

Tyr snapped out of his reverie. He’d stopped paying attention to her nonstop blather hours ago, but now something in her frantic tone caught his attention.

“Hurl?” he repeated, intrigued. “Hurl what?”

“Are you for real? It means if you don’t stop walking and put me down, I’m going to vomit down your back!”

Since he didn’t want that, Tyr hastily set her down, which involved sliding her body over his chest with unintended consequences. He kept hold of one of her wrists, just in case it was a ruse.

She doubled over and stood swaying like that, moaning, for several moments before finally slowly straightening, her face pale but her frown intact.

“Better now?” Tyr asked hopefully.

“What the hell is wrong with you, carrying me off like a damn caveman?” she demanded, attempting to wrench her arm away. “That was miserable.”

“I thought...I didn’t think you would come with me otherwise.”

“So instead, you thought you’d slam your shoulder into my guts with every step?”

“That wasn’t my intention,” Tyr said carefully. He’d carried her as he’d carry any large creature—though they were usually dead and headed for the spit at the time and didn’t do a lot of protesting.

The woman gave a sharp tug against his hold. “You’re not going to get away with this, you know.”

She was behaving as if Tyr was a raider from a hostile clan rather than a leader on a quest to save all of Evergreen. If she just listened for a moment, he could explain that being his mate would ensure not just the survival of his people but the dawn of a new and prosperous era.

Maybe it was time to let her know how lucky she really was.

“I,” he said proudly, straightening up to his full height and squaring his

shoulders, “am the chieftain of my people.”

“I don’t care if you’re fucking Santa Claus, you’re still trying to kidnap me, asshole!” Denied the use of her hands, she rammed her shoulder into him. “My family will find me. And when they do, our lawyers are going to tear you to shreds. They won’t just lock you up. They’ll sue you for all your worth. You’re messing with the wrong family, pal.”

Tyr had to concede that she had a point there. Not that her family (or their lawyers, whoever they might be) posed any real threat to him—but yes, it made sense that they would be very upset to discover her gone. Her beauty and fiery spirit would make her very valuable to any clan. Maybe he could arrange to send some fine furs as recompense.

“My name is not Pal,” he corrected her. “I am Tyr Harker, Chieftain of the Bear Clan.”

“Ha!” Her lip curled in disgust.

“It is a very fine name,” Tyr assured her. Then he remembered something. “Or you can call me Buddy. It is a nickname given to me by one of your kind.

“I don’t give a shit what you or your weird-ass cult call yourselves.”

She was still trying to tug her arm back, which was getting annoying. He needed to find a way to reassure her so she would stop fighting him.

“What is your name?” he asked. It seemed like a good place to start.

“None of your damn business.”

Tyr frowned. He was beginning to question Ryce’s wisdom. “You are about to become my mate,” he said as patiently as possible. “That makes everything about you my business.”

She glared at him defiantly. “The only thing I’m about to be is the woman who pushes you off a cliff to your death.”

Tyr sighed. Nothing he tried seemed to be working. “If you didn’t wish to find a mate, what were you doing alone in the forest in the dead of night?”

“Are you out of your mind?” She jerked her whole body in an attempt to free herself. Tyr could have told her that all she was doing was tiring herself out, except that every time she moved, her hair did the most fascinating thing. He’d never seen anything like it, shiny dark brown with streaks of strawberry red and cut in such a way that no matter how violently she twisted, it fell right back into place in a straight line that grazed her shoulders. “Are you actually blaming me for my own kidnapping, you son of a bitch?”

Tyr gasped; there were few insults more provocative to a bear. No one

had ever dared call him that.

“My mother was a bear,” he said, his voice shaking slightly with emotion. “So was my father. My lineage can be traced back through the bear clan for centuries. None of my ancestors ever mated with a wolf.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize,” she said, sounding genuinely contrite. “I’m so sorry.”

She stared up at him for a long moment, and then—taking advantage of his momentary inattention, she gave one last, powerful wrench of her arm and broke free.

“No, I’m not fuckface!” she shouted over her shoulder as she ran.

Unfortunately, taunting him came at a price. She turned around to see where she was running too late and bashed straight into a thick branch. After a second of flailing wildly, she fell to the ground.

Tyr pulled her up, shaking his head. She was making this so much harder than it needed to be.

“Let me go, you bastard,” she cried, and Tyr pulled her against his chest.

“That’s not going to happen,” he said patiently. “As I told you, I’m taking you as my mate.”

She tried to knee him in the groin again, but Tyr was ready this time. He slapped a hand on her ass and pulled her in tighter. Like a baby strapped into a cradleboard, she could barely move at all.

He could, though, and was seized with the temptation to run his hands over her ridiculously soft clothes and feel every one of her deep curves.

But he gritted his teeth and restrained himself, wondering if the trek home could be counted as a first date—and how he was going to survive until the third. “I think it would be good if you just accepted the situation,” he said. “Fighting me isn’t doing either of us any good.”

She went rigid in his arms. For a moment, he wondered if she was still breathing—and then her shoulders started to tremble. Alarmed, Tyr pulled back so he could look at her and saw that her huge grey eyes were shiny with tears. One of them spilled over and rolled down her cheek, and she angrily rubbed her face on his shirt.

“You better not think I’m crying because I’m afraid of you,” she mumbled.

“Of course not.” Tyr was aghast. Given her behavior so far, he had concluded that she wasn’t afraid of anything.

“I’m...just a little overwhelmed,” she said, some of the determination

returning to her voice. “But you better stay on your toes. First chance I get, you’re a dead man, Buddy Bear.”

“I believe you,” Tyr said as much as it pained him.

Not that she stood any chance of killing him, but the fact that she wanted to bothered him more than it should have. This was a minor complication, he told himself. Nothing more than a tiny setback on the road to their long, happy life together.

Miraculously, his words seemed to soothe her slightly. She wiped her face once more for good measure and then resumed her defiant expression. “Well?” she demanded haughtily. “Are we just going to stand here all day?”

Without a word, Tyr picked her up again, but this time, he didn’t throw her over his shoulder. Instead, he cradled her in his arms, holding her against his chest. But it wasn’t just because he wanted to keep a better eye on her or keep her from vomiting down his backside.

No, it was because there were still several hours to go on the hike back to Wynterhowe, and he wanted to spend every last one of them looking at her beautiful face.

CHAPTER  
**FIVE**

## MEREDITH

**A**fter a few hours of traveling through the wilderness, I'd learned two things about my kidnapper: he was strong and fast.

I couldn't begin to guess what speed he moved through the thick forest, but it had to be Olympic-worthy. The feat was made even more impressive considering the bastard was carrying me the whole time...and trust me, I was far from light.

I suppose I should add superhuman stamina to his list of attributes since, after my second failed escape attempt, we didn't stop for another break. Not until hours later, when the sun was just past the center of the sky, and we finally came out of the forest onto a gently sloping hill. My mouth fell open as the sound of crashing waves and the taste of salt air filled my senses.

I couldn't believe it as I looked out over the windswept sea.

No fucking way!

I would've been the first to admit that I didn't have the greatest knowledge of Southern Oregon geography. Still, one thing I knew for certain was that when my family and I had set up camp last night, we'd been miles away from the ocean. And not just a handful of miles, but miles.

I turned my head to stare up at Tyr. How the hell had the bastard carried me the whole way here in such a short amount of time? It didn't make sense.

Then again, nothing about this made any sense.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"Wynterhowe."

That was no help at all. I'd never heard of such a place, and I didn't remember the name from any of the detailed topographical maps we carried with us on every shoot. Looking over his shoulder, I saw that we'd come down a rocky incline, following the path of a creek from high up on the seaside cliffs down to a protected crescent-shaped cove. Pulled up on the pristine beach were three boats unlike anything I'd ever seen before—canoe-like and large enough to accommodate two or three people, they seemed to be constructed of hides stretched over bentwood frames. There was actual fur on the exterior of the boats.

"Our fishing boats," Tyr said, following my gaze. "See out there? The last two are coming in now."

I barely glanced at the two dots far out on the water, then dazedly followed the curve of the shore to the settlement tucked set back from the water and sheltered by the gently sloping land above, the rugged promontory at the base of the mountains we'd come down.

Tyr's cult couldn't have picked a lovelier—or more secluded—spot for their compound, and then they'd gone all in on a back-to-nature theme. I didn't see a single vehicle of any kind, not unless you counted the handful of horses penned in on a scrubby, flat area above. There were no roads, no cell towers, no generators, not even a beer cooler anywhere in sight.

Instead, there were...I hesitated to call them houses. Huts, maybe. Tents, more accurately—though not like any I'd ever seen. Some were dome-shaped and made of hides stretched over a frame. Others were large and rectangular with angled roofs for rain to run off.

But it wasn't any of the individual tents that took me aback; it was the sheer amount of them. There were so many—hundreds, maybe even a thousand. They took up nearly every inch of space in the cove.

And so many people.

From our vantage point on the side of the hill, I could see them moving between the tents like ants on their way to this task or that. Nearby, there were men hammering away at an old fence, replacing weathered boards with new lumber. Others worked at a trough near the spring, gutting and filleting the day's catch. I could spot women pulling down their clean clothes from where they'd hung out in the sun to dry.

Everywhere I looked, people were working hard at tasks that had long since been relegated to machines. But unlike the staff of the reconstructed mining towns and colonial settlements I'd seen on our travels, these people weren't going home to a six-pack and a big-screen television at the end of the day. They lived here. And this wasn't some tiny hippy commune but a real and thriving town.

How long had this cult even been around? How had I never heard of it? How did they keep tourists and day-trippers and hikers away? I had questions galore for Tyr, but before I could start in on him, an older man came jogging toward us with a mane of gray hair streaming behind him.

“Chieftain, you've returned.”

The man bowed slightly when he reached us, then openly stared at me as Tyr put me down on my feet. He was as tall and broad as Tyr, even though he must have been at least thirty years his senior, and dressed in a similar bear-



skin coat—minus the head, thankfully—and fur-lined boots.

“Leodmar.” Tyr returned the nod. “Is there trouble?”

The man was so busy studying me that it took him a moment to tear himself away. The feeling of being gawked at was so uncomfortable that, without thinking, I pressed myself against Tyr’s side.

Which was totally absurd, but I blamed the instinct on stress and moved on.

“Not anymore,”Leodmar was saying. “As we feared, your cousin took advantage of your trip to the human world to shore up support.”

I could sense Tyr go rigid beside me. “Rand doesn’t have what it takes to be chieftain,” he boomed, making me jump. “He isn’t man enough, and he never will be.”

“Still, he will stop at nothing to usurp you. And...”Leodmar hesitated, and I realized that he was nervous.

“Speak your mind,Leodmar,” Tyr said firmly but not impatiently. “I want to know.”

“And there’s talk,”Leodmar mumbled. “More than before. People are starting to listen to his lies.”

There was a low growling in Tyr’s chest, and his lip curled in fury. Then, just as quickly, it abated, and he relaxed.

“They won’t be listening for long,” he said smugly.

Leodmar slid his assessing gaze back to me. “It’s true. Your success in bringing home a mate will go far, Chieftain, but I fear it won’t sway everyone. I can’t imagine she’ll impress Rand.”

I’d had enough—of being ogled, of being hauled around like a side of beef, of being talked about in the third person. All of it.

“Did you call me his mate?” I snapped. “Listen, buddy, I’m not anyone’s anything.”

I tried to bolt again, but Tyr held me back with an arm around my waist.

“She’s right,” Tyr said, surprising me. “You will address her with respect.”

Leodmar nodded apologetically. “Of course. Accept my apologies, my frue.” He bent his head so that he was staring at my sneakers. “It is my pleasure to welcome you to Wynterhowe.”

“What the hell is a ‘frue’?”

Tyr laughed, and I could feel the sound traveling through me. If the sound had come from anyone other than my captor, it might have been a nice laugh.

“Leodmar meant no offense. ‘Frue’ is merely a title,” he said. “Like lady or queen.”

Leodmar nodded hurriedly, still not meeting my eyes. “As your mate is our chieftain, you are our frue.”

I felt like screaming. How was I supposed to get it through these idiots’ thick skulls that they’d picked the wrong woman to try to subjugate and brainwash? I definitely wasn’t concubine material—not for some bear-cosplaying cult leader, not for anyone.

But I’d been arguing in circles from the moment Tyr had grabbed me. I had a feeling my chances of negotiating my freedom from a man who play-acted barbarian in a reproduction seaside fishing village were pretty damn slim.

That only left one option—escape—and it would be better if I focused all my energy on that rather than locking horns with Tyr or any of his cronies.

“Whatever,” I said dismissively, signaling I was done with the conversation. Thankfully, both men accepted my withdrawal without question.

Tyr turned to Leodmar and said, “Take me to see, Rand.”

He kept a firm hold on me as Leodmar led the way into the village. At first, I resisted, but as more and more people stopped what they were doing to stare at me, I found myself gravitating back to the safety of Tyr’s side.

An unsettled silence followed us as we zigzagged through the tangled lanes woven between the tents. Some of the stares were simply curious, but others were downright upsetting. Some of the men looked at me as if I were a bacon cheeseburger, and they were starving to death. Others appeared startled or even shocked, and some actually seemed angry. There was even a portion of the population that acted like my presence disgusted them—as if I was here by choice.

I’d say one thing for Tyr’s band of brainwashed followers—to a one, they were every bit as fanatically opposed to progress as he was. There wasn’t a synthetic fiber in the whole damn town. Instead, the men wore clothes stitched from fur and hides. The women were clad in natural fibers like wool and linen that looked like they’d been colored with natural dyes.

Instead of baseball caps and brand-name sneakers, there were fur hats and seal-skin boots. Those engaged in the most strenuous tasks, like stripping the hides, had peeled off their outer layers, and their powerful muscles were sheened with sweat. I didn’t notice much makeup on the handful of women

we passed, maybe a little eyeliner and lip stain.

Not only that—to my surprise, most of them were every bit as curvy as me. I would have expected them to be half starved from a diet of hemp and radical dogma, but these women had prodigious bosoms and wide hips and rounded stomachs and butts. At least I'd be able to trade clothes with my sister-wives, I thought grimly.

Except...That was weird. While the men ranged in age from late teens to hale and hardy seniors, I didn't see a single woman under fifty. The realization made my blood run cold. Did that mean they kept the young and fertile women locked up somewhere? Was that why everyone was looking at me so weird?

Before I could fly into a panic over the thought, Leodmar stopped in front of one of the tents.

“What's wrong?” Tyr asked.

“Are you about to lock me up in there and never let me out?” I demanded, eying the leather flap covering the door, which admittedly didn't look very secure.

Tyr frowned. “Why would I do that? You're—“

“Your imaginary mate, yeah, I get it,” I said, my voice rising along with my anxiety. “But I'm the only woman my age in this whole place! Where are you keeping them? What are you doing with them?”

“There aren't any,” Tyr explained, looking as confused as I felt. “That's why I had to come to Earth to find a mate.”

I felt like I was about to cry, and I must have looked like it, too, because Tyr's expression suddenly softened, and he touched my chin with a fingertip. “Don't worry. There will be time for me to explain everything later. Right now, though, we need to meet with my cousin, okay?”

He was speaking to me as if I was a frightened child, and I found myself giving in, nodding and letting him pull me in for a quick hug before leading me into the hut after Leodmar.

Inside, the light was soft and dimmer, with indirect sunlight coming in through slats cut into the walls to serve as windows. It was blessedly warm, with two fire pits at either end of the space, both of them venting through the roof.

Kind of ingenious, actually. These people might be radical, even dangerous, but they weren't stupid.

As my eyes adjusted, I noticed a man Tyr's height standing with his back

to us across the room.

“Rand.”

Tyr bellowed the name as if it was poison on his tongue, one of the most chilling sounds I’ve ever heard.

The man slowly turned to face us...or rather, to face Tyr. He looked past me as though I wasn’t there. Standing in the shadows, all his features were hidden except for his beard and powerful build.

“I see your trip was a success,” he said coldly. “But don’t make the mistake of thinking this changes anything. Just because you can now wet your cock in a human whore, you’re still not fit to fill your father’s shoes.”

A human...what the hell? Suddenly, it wasn’t fear I was feeling, but rage.

“Are you talking about me, asshole?” I demanded, straining to free myself from Tyr’s grip. The words came out a torrent, fueled by all my fear and confusion. “Because kidnapped or not, I’ll rip your—“

A hand was slapped over my mouth, cutting off the words I would have surely regretted. But Tyr had no right, either.

So I bit him but only managed to graze his palm. At least he flinched, and I took some small satisfaction from that.

“Control yourself, cousin,” Tyr snarled—and then swung me behind him so his massive body was between me and his asshole relative. And it was a good thing because Rand ignored Tyr’s warning.

The moment he stepped into the light, I recoiled. His face was brutal, twisted in fury, his lips pulled back from his teeth, his fists clenched. Tyr stood his ground as I cowered behind him, waiting for one of them to attack.

And then Rand curled his lips back, baring his teeth...and I saw that they weren’t teeth at all but the wicked, curved fangs of a wild animal. All my rage turned to horror as he raised his fists and unfurled his fingers one by one to reveal huge claws where his nails should have been. His beard darkened at the edges, and I realized with horror that he was sprouting two stripes of thick fur down the side of his neck.

Suddenly, it all came together. When Tyr told me he was the chieftain of the bear clan, he wasn’t talking about some new-age cult. He wasn’t talking about animal spirits or some other mystical bullshit.

He was talking about real goddamn bears.

“Oh hell, no,” I muttered, then I turned and bolted out the door.

CHAPTER  
**SIX**

## MEREDITH

I ran like a woman possessed, putting everything I had into it. I flew through the village, barely clocking the startled expressions on the faces I passed. I tackled the rocky slope, praying I wouldn't lose my footing on a loose stone, and reached the woods at the base of the cliffs with my lungs on fire.

But I couldn't stop. I was gasping for breath, but all that mattered was getting as much distance between me and that cursed village as I could. I didn't think about the miles and miles of wilderness between me and civilization or the risk of freezing or starving to death—anything was better than the alternative.

A man had turned into a goddamn bear right in front of me, for God's sake.

Okay—maybe that wasn't entirely true.

Rand hadn't fully turned into a bear. He'd only been half-bear...maybe just a quarter.

Teeth. Claws. Fur sprouting from his neck. But that was enough.

And it was also fucking impossible.

Because people couldn't turn into bears. Not even quarter-bears.

I was crashing through the forest on legs that were quickly turning to jelly when a big, solid arm wrapped around me and lifted me into the air. Deep down, I think I knew my capture was inevitable—but I didn't know how many of those creatures had pursued me. The possibility that someone other than Tyr had nabbed me terrified me to the core.

“Put me down, you hairy motherfucker!” I screamed, flailing and kicking with the last of my strength.

But then I had to stop to gasp for air...and the moment I inhaled, I went limp with relief.

Because I knew that scent, a heady combination of leather and pine shavings and musk. Apparently, my subconscious mind had catalogued Tyr's unique scent under ‘probably won't eat my face.’

I screamed anyway. It seemed like the thing to do. But after a while, when all the noise I was making wasn't having any effect, I stopped. In a hoarse and very small voice, I said, “I want to go home.”

Tyr had been holding me patiently around the waist the whole time, his chin resting on top of my head. He spoke quietly. “Of course. Let me take you to my tent.”

Fury welled up inside me, hot and fast. “I didn’t say I wanted to go to your tent. I said I wanted to go home. My home.”

“I understand you miss your world, but—“

My world?

“Wait just one goddamn minute,” I cut him off. There must have been enough steel in my voice to communicate that I meant business because Tyr sighed and put me down, turning me around to face him. His grip on my upper arms ensured I wasn’t going anywhere. “Are you telling me this isn’t Earth?”

“We left Earth when we traveled through the veil,” he said. “This is Evergreen.”

“Ever-what?” The panic rising inside me was accompanied by a thousand little realizations falling into place. Of course, that’s why I hadn’t seen a single road or car or billboard the entire hike out here. Sure, there might be a few eccentrics in Oregon, but there weren’t thousands of people living in tents on the beach and dressing like barbarians.

Oh yeah...and there weren’t monsters who turned into fucking bears when they got pissed off. I couldn’t forget that one.

Even though all that tumbled through my mind like a jumbled mess, all that came out of my mouth was, “The veil? Was that the shimmering blue thing in the cave?”

Tyr nodded. “It’s one of the gateways between Evergreen and Earth. Centuries ago, both our people traveled back and forth that way.”

It was too much. My mind felt like a cauldron about to boil over. “No, no, no,” I said firmly. “This can’t be real. None of this is real. I demand you take me home.”

Tyr gave me an odd look then—gentle, patient, a little sad.

“But sweeting...this is your home now.”

That did me in.

No matter how many times he’d said I was his mate or his frue or whatever other bullshit word his people had for “captive,” I’d fought against it. But now reality was finally sinking in—I was never leaving. Tyr never intended to let me go.

He was going to march me back to that terrible tent city, where men like

Rand could turn into violent monsters.

“Your cousin—“ I began, my teeth starting to chatter. Tyr had watched Rand transform right before his eyes, and he didn’t even blink. He acted as if it happened every day. “Are you one of those things too?”

“Am I a bear?” Tyr seemed thoroughly confused. “Of course I am. Like I told you, I’m the chieftain of the bear clan.”

And just like that, the comfort of his scent, the tiny crumbs of trust we’d built on our journey, vanished in a wave of terror. Imagining Tyr with fangs and claws...just no.

I started struggling again, but I was so weakened that I felt like a moth beating my wings against a porch light.

And the whole time, Tyr just kept holding me in place, not even trying to evade the kicks I landed on his shins. Eventually, all my fight was truly spent, and I sagged in his grip. Patiently, he gathered me up in his arms and sat down under a tree with me in his lap.

“Everything’s going to be okay, sweeting,” he murmured. I knew it wasn’t true—nothing was okay and might never be again—but his gentle tone lulled me into stillness. “I know you were frightened by what you saw, but no one is going to hurt you. Especially not Rand. I would never allow that.”

“But what about you?” I wailed. “How do I know you’re not going to turn into one of those monsters and—and murder me?”

Tyr was silent for a moment. I could sense him holding a tense breath. Finally, he turned me around in his lap, settling my legs on either side of his waist. He held my chin between his thumb and finger, staring into my eyes with such intensity that I froze.

“You know I would never harm you because you are my mate.”

I believed him.

I can’t explain why other than the fact that when he looked at me that way, it was like he was offering me a glimpse into his soul.

I know how that sounds. Hell, I would have laughed if anyone had said the same thing to me.

But believing him didn’t make up for the mess I was in. Any way you sliced it, this was all Tyr’s fault.

“Don’t call me that,” I said irritably.

“‘Sweeting’? What else can I call you when you refuse to tell me your name?”



Screw it, I thought. At this point, what difference did it make?

“Meredith,” I mumbled. “My name is Meredith Ives.”

Tyr grinned, pleased with himself. “It’s an honor to know you, Meredith Ives.”

“Know me? You don’t know me, Tyr. All you did was kidnap me.”

He didn’t take the bait. Instead, he settled back against the trunk of the tree, holding me more loosely. He gently tucked a strand of my hair behind my ear. “I’ve never seen hair like yours,” he said. “Some of it is as red as a poppy, and it lies as perfectly as a wren’s feathers.”

Pamela, the woman who’d been cutting my hair for years, would be pleased. Not that it mattered since I’d never see her again...or have another professional haircut or dye job. I tried to imagine myself with frizzy hair hanging down to my waist and wanted to cry.

It was almost as awful as knowing I was doomed to live in a damned tent for the rest of my life.

“Tell me, Meredith,” Tyr said, “what were you doing alone in the forest when I found you?”

“I wasn’t alone. I was with my family.”

“They may have been in the nearby woods, but you were the only soul in the camp. If anyone else was with you, I would have known.”

God, the arrogance of the man. “How?” I demanded.

Tyr was surprised yet again. “By scent, of course. The closest human was more than ten minutes away by foot.”

I wanted to tell him he was full of shit, but after what I’d seen Rand do, it didn’t seem preposterous that he could track like an animal.

“Okay, fine,” I said, sighing. “They weren’t in the camp with me right that second, but they were on their way back.”

“From a hunt?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer that. “Sort of...”

Tyr was watching me as if I was some exotic species of lizard he’d trapped, as if he was waiting for me to change color or detach my tail or something. It struck me as absurd that of the two of us, he thought I was the oddity.

“I thought most humans prefer domesticated livestock that can be killed with minimal effort.”

I snorted. “Well, my family is definitely unusual.”

Tyr perked up, and I realized he thought he’d found something we had in

common. “What type of game do they hunt?”

He looked at me with such hopeful anticipation that I almost felt sorry to burst his bubble. “My family hunts Bigfoot for a living.”

And just like that, he was back to looking confused. “I don’t know what that is.”

“That’s because it’s not real.”

Tyr blinked. “You’re saying...your family left you alone in the middle of the woods to hunt an imaginary animal?”

“Exactly.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“No, it does not.” I wondered if this was how all of our future conversations were going to go. It was an exhausting thought. “But it’s what they do for a living. Scratch that—it’s what we do for a living.”

“You hunt this imaginary animal as well?”

“Not exactly. My job is to stay in the command tent and run the AV equipment. I make sure all the video feeds are live, that the audio is clean, and that we walk away from the trip with enough usable material to edit down into five sequential twenty-minute videos that will appeal to our subscribers.”

Tyr scowled. “I don’t know what any of that means.”

“Don’t worry about it. Believe me, it sounds just as ridiculous in my world.”

“This Bigfoot creature...what will your family do if they ever catch him?”

“They won’t—because he’s not real, remember?”

“Then why do you hunt him?”

“Because some people like to believe that there are giant, fur-covered, humanoid beasts traipsing through the wilderness.”

Tyr laughed—softly at first, then louder and louder, until I asked, “What’s so funny?”

“Are you certain this creature isn’t real? The way you described this Bigfoot creature—giant, covered in fur, hides in the woods. He sounds like me.”

“Crap, you’re right,” I said, thinking of all the cameras around the camp and the footage my family was no doubt watching right now.

Footage of a seven-foot, hairy monster knocking me out and carrying me into the forest.

CHAPTER  
**SEVEN**

## MEREDITH

**A**nd just like that, all the fight went out of me.  
*Are you certain?*

With just three little words, Tyr had managed to turn my world upside down.

At this point, I wasn't certain of anything—not where I was, or who I was with, or why a shapeshifting bear-man had picked me of all the women to be his plaything.

But my certainty didn't matter. After all, I was clearly just a pawn in some bizarre fantasy game—one with monsters, and twin worlds, and rules that kept changing.

I didn't like it at all. Growing up with a dad who flitted from one get-rich-quick scheme to the next, I'd become the dependable one in the family.

Now, sitting on my abductor's lap in the wild, I was in control of nothing. I'd tried to run and failed. I'd tried to fight and failed. I'd even tried to keep my damned mouth shut...and failed. It was pretty easy to guess what would happen if I kept trying.

"Meredith." Tyr spoke my name as if he was still getting used to it, letting it rumble over his tongue. And since I had control over what he said or did, I decided to let the sound comfort me. "I'm going to take you home now."

Sure, whatever.

I let him pick me up. Curled in his arms, my legs flopped as he carried me back to the village. The sounds and smells of the place floated over me—conversations I didn't try to make sense of and the delicious smells of meat grilling over an open fire. When I dared to look at the people we were passing, I could only imagine them baring their fangs and lunging at me like Rand had done.

At least they didn't seem overly offended when I turned my head away. It wasn't as if they'd seemed thrilled to see their chieftain bringing me back in the first place.

It was almost a relief when Tyr carried me inside one of the largest tents, the roof pole pitched so that it was lower at one end than the other, the exterior draped in sealskin. Inside, it was surprisingly warm and scented with

fragrant incense. I was still blinking to get used to the dimness when Tyr laid me on a soft pile of blankets tucked under the lowest end of the tent and lit a couple of oil lamps.

A part of me expected it to be miserable and cold, like all the tents I'd suffered through while on the road with my family, but I couldn't have been more wrong.

Every inch of Tyr's home was lined with furs, covered with woven woolen carpets, or draped in shimmering fabrics in rich shades of red, blue, and gold. Tiny flames flickered from intricate metal lanterns hung from the tent poles. There were carved wood and polished metal tables, embroidered pillows and tapestries. In a corner sat an enormous hammered copper tub that I would have been willing to pay a small fortune for.

I was struck by how different this space was from Rand's spartan quarters. Being chieftain probably gave Tyr access to more luxuries than the rest of the clan, but it wasn't just the opulence of the furnishings that made the difference. This room looked lived in, luxuriated in, by someone with an appetite for beauty, someone who took joy in his surroundings.

I ran my hand over the pale, soft hide that comprised the top layer of the 'bed.' Underneath was some sort of padding or ticking that made it surprisingly comfortable and delectably warm, and there was a pile of blankets and quilts at hand should it get cold. But I remained wary, afraid that Tyr was planning to get into bed with me.

I had no what I would do if he tried. I was too exhausted to even attempt to fight him off. Every time I ran, Tyr caught me. No matter how I struggled, he only held me more tightly—and the only person I ended up hurting was myself. Worse, he seemed to have unlimited patience, as if he was prepared to wait me out no matter how long it took.

Maybe Tyr could sense how depleted I was. Maybe he had other things to do. Whatever the reason, he left me alone on the bed. I pulled a quilt over my head and turned toward the wall, like a child covering her eyes to make an adult disappear, and tried to shut every thought out of my mind.

It was impossible, of course. I could hear him moving around the tent, shuffling things around, sometimes humming a few disjointed bars. Once or twice, he stepped outside, letting in a rush of chilly air, and I could hear him talking to someone. I couldn't make out their words; even if I could have, I didn't have the energy to pay attention.

This can't be happening; this can't be real.

That mantra had been on an endless loop inside my head for hours, but I couldn't pretend to believe it anymore. Not when reality was pressing down on me, suffocating me into acceptance.

As the last strands of my denial were severed and drifted away, my circumstances came into sharper focus. Maybe it was a natural coping mechanism, my survival instinct taking inventory of my surroundings, but my senses started cataloging finer and finer details. The pelts lining the tent's interior were dense and stiff, providing insulation, while the one I lay on was thinner, as pale as eggshell and as soft as a cloud. The incense had notes of clove and something earthy, like drying clay. Beyond the tent wall, I could hear the pennants strung throughout the camp, flapping in the chilly breeze.

As one by one, I accepted these smaller sensory details as real, my mind began to open to the more shocking aspects of my situation, and I allowed myself to face the question head-on: who was going to save me from a freaking bear chieftain in a secret world?

No one...except me.

There would be no cavalry riding to the rescue. Even if my family searched until the end of their days, they'd never find this place. Hell, even the FBI didn't stand a chance.

For the moment, I was stuck here—but alive. And if I wanted to stay that way, I was going to have to pull myself together.

That was easier said than done. When my first efforts to sit up in the pile of blankets failed, I realized I was probably experiencing some sort of shock. I couldn't just snap back from what any qualified clinician would surely describe as a trauma.

So, I went slow. I counted deep breaths the way my meditation app directed. I imagined the deep golden light entering me through my toes, then my ankles, and so on, until I was a goddamn glowing model of tranquility.

Only then did I sit up, forcing a smile meant to remind me I could do this, even as my head spun and my vision blurred.

"There's no rush." Tyr's voice, slightly alarmed. "You should stay down until you're steady."

He was probably right, but I'd already been too vulnerable around him. I needed to set some boundaries, some limits, if I wanted to keep any autonomy at all.

"I'm fine." To prove it, I stood up.

And fell down.

I landed on the bed, so no harm done—other than proving that I wasn't aware of my own limits. Tyr was at my side in a split second.

“You're not fine, Meredith.”

I gritted my teeth and tried again, this time managing a single wobbly step before I fell down again. My vision was still blurry, so all I could make out was a big brown blob standing over me, reaching for my hand, and dragging me back onto the bed.

“Look,” he said. “I don't want you to have to spend your first night in your new home in restraints, but if you keep taking risks like that—“

“No!” I kicked blindly, connecting with his legs. “If you even try something like that, I will bite your goddamn hands off.”

Tyr didn't seem to be taking my threats seriously. He crouched down so that our faces were inches apart, and his came into focus. He didn't look angry...but he didn't look happy, either.

“You're afraid I'll hurt you. That I'll...force myself on you.”

To my surprise, it pained him to say it.

“Obviously,” I retorted. “You keep calling me your mate. And now you want to tie me up. What else am I supposed to think?”

Tyr shook his head slowly. He reached for me—but changed his mind and let his hand fall to his side.

“I give you my sacred oath: I will never harm you. When you give yourself to me as my mate, it will be willingly.”

I tried to ignore the traitorous warm rush his words caused. It would have been nice to blame my ladyparts' betrayal on shock, too, but I was pretty sure it didn't work that way.

I worked up some false bravado. “Then you might as well let me go now because that is never going to happen.”

“Oh, it will.” The bastard had the nerve to smile.

“What makes you so sure?”

“Because I know how to woo a human woman.” Tyr seemed very pleased with himself. “I've learned all about dating.”

I laughed. I didn't mean to—but the absurdity of what he was saying pushed me over the edge. I had no idea where he'd learned these things, and I couldn't be bothered to care.

“Yeah, we'll see about that,” I said.

“Great!” Tyr bounded up as if I'd just agreed to go to the prom with him. “Because the maids are here to help you prepare for our first date.”

Sure enough, a woman stood tentatively at the tent opening, sunlight streaming in. She entered, followed by five more middle-aged women carrying baskets of towels and clothes and something wonderfully fragrant. Behind them trooped men carrying massive pots of steaming water, which they poured into the big copper tub.

“I’m going to leave you to enjoy a bath now,” Tyr said smoothly, backing toward the door. “I hope you take the time to relax and enjoy yourself, but in case you get the urge to run again, I should warn you there are guards posted just outside, and they’ll do what they need to to keep you safe.”

With that, he was gone. I considered my choices—a nice hot bath or getting manhandled and shackled. The ladies were busy scattering dried flower petals and herbs in the water. They hung clothes from the tent poles and lit candles. One of them beckoned me up with a smile.

I wish I could tell you that I refused to play along. That I stood my ground, registered my objections, and held my head high as the guards tied me up.

But all that cave-crawling and world-hopping had left me filthy...and that water smelled so damn good.



CHAPTER  
**EIGHT**

## TYR

As Tyr left his mate to the ministrations of his mother's personal maid and her assistants, her name echoed in his mind.

*Meredith.*

It was an unusual name, but he liked it, especially the way the syllables felt on his lips. Soft but also spirited and strong—like the woman herself.

Tyr had gotten a sense of Meredith before he'd ever laid eyes on her, from the faint scent that had drawn him to her in the woods. It was feminine, with the sweetness of honeysuckle nectar, but also fiery, as if laced with the crushed seeds of a chiltepin pepper. There was something untamed about her that kept him on alert, never knowing what she might say or do next.

A challenge, in other words. The idea intrigued him.

Tyr hadn't gone looking for a puzzle to solve, much less a sparring partner. He'd expected to return to Wynterhowe with a suitably meek but capable woman who'd fulfill her role without complaint. But now that he'd found Meredith, Tyr was starting to realize that a mate might offer more than just sex and children and keeping house.

He paused outside the tent and listened but heard only the splash of water as the maids bathed his mate. Still, the thought of her naked in the water stirred his loins. He suspected that no amount of time in the fragrant bath would be enough to quench the fire inside her.

Meredith was only the second woman younger than his mother and aunties that Tyr had ever met. Still, he was certain nonetheless that she was a rare treasure. She'd already proved herself strong and determined and capable, not to mention smart as a whip.

Ryce's mate Kayla was all of those things, too, and Tyr was glad his wolf friend had found such a fine mate. But there were differences between the two human women.

While Kayla had easily taken to the support and protection that a wolveren mate could offer, Meredith was clearly accustomed to relying only on herself. What's more, she seemed to like it that way, so much so that his every attempt to guide and help had been met with wariness, even aggression.

In that way, Tyr's new mate reminded him of a badger. Despite her much smaller size, she had no instinct for surrender, and Tyr could easily imagine

her chewing off her own foot if she were caught in a trap. She'd go down fighting to her last breath.

As a warrior known to be exceptionally stubborn and strong-willed, even in a clan known for those qualities, he was glad the gods had delivered him a mate with a feral heart, a woman who would need to be tamed. He found that his spirit—as well as his cock—was hungry for the challenge. The memory of her fighting like a wildcat as he carried her through the woods made his dick hard.

Still, it wasn't going to be easy. Her willful nature added complications to an undertaking which, Tyr reminded himself, had implications far beyond his own happiness. Meredith might be his mate, but she represented hope for the future for every man and woman in his clan.

As if to underscore this point, Leodmar came striding toward him with a look of concern on his normally relaxed features.

Tyr raised his hand in greeting.

Leodmar nodded distractedly before getting straight to the point. "How is the frue?"

Tyr took his time answering, searching for the right words in a way he never bothered to with anyone but his most trusted advisor. The reason for this went beyond Leodmar's widely acknowledged wisdom and equanimity—Tyr had chosen him specifically because his father had despised the man, barely tolerating his presence on the council.

At first, the gesture had been meant to signal that Tyr's leadership would be based on openness and fairness after decades of his father's dictatorial rule. But he'd quickly learned to rely on Leodmar's counsel, his ability to identify Tyr's blind spots and push him beyond his comfort zone.

"She's well enough," he finally settled on saying. "Though I think it will take some time for her to adjust to Evergreen."

Leodmar gave a grunt of agreement. "Indeed. And your cousin didn't help matters."

Coming from Leodmar, it was a shockingly damning comment. But it was also a testament to the strength of their relationship that Tyr's second spoke so frankly about a member of the ruling family.

Besides, he was right. Rand baring his teeth to Tyr's mate was an outrage, the latest escalation in his insolence. Rand had made no secret of his intention to challenge Tyr's leadership since the moment his father had been led away in chains.

In truth, Rand's behavior enraged Tyr far more than the fact that his father would live out his days in imprisonment. Attor's thirst for power had made the former chieftain a stranger to his only son—but Rand and Tyr had grown up together. At one time, they'd been closer than brothers.

And it definitely didn't mollify Tyr to know that he was partly responsible for the way things stood. He'd taken over his father's reign with little warning and even less preparation, and the early days of his rule had been governed by the determination to repeat none of Attor's mistakes. In his zeal, he'd decided to govern with complete transparency, something that hadn't been tried for centuries.

The results were mixed. While some in the clan welcomed Tyr's ascendance, others remained distrustful after decades of his father's lies. But the worst were those who judged Tyr's efforts as a sign of weakness... including Rand.

The two young men had grown apart as teens. Among the dozen offspring of the ruling family, Tyr was known as the most strong-willed and Rand, the most ambitious. Rand had developed a chip on his shoulder once he was old enough to understand the whispers that followed him as the only illegitimate Harker son.

But Rand was a Harker, and as such, he had the right to challenge Tyr's leadership of the bear clan.

Even so, it didn't give him the right to disrespect the chieftain's mate. And unless Tyr put a stop to his cousin's outrageous behavior, his position would continue to be weakened. The fact that Leodmar had brought it up was evidence he shared Tyr's concern.

"Rand crossed a line," Tyr acknowledged angrily. "He's going to pay for it."

"Yes..."

Tyr caught Leodmar's hesitation and turned his head sharply, knowing the elder would eventually make his opinion known, even if Tyr had to pry it out of him.

"I would never think to second guess you, sir," Leodmar said after taking his pipe from his coat and polishing the carved wooden bowl on his sleeve. "But if I may offer some advice..."

"The sooner, the better," Tyr said impatiently. "Whatever you're thinking, I want to hear it, but can we hurry it up? I have a date tonight."

"A...what?"

“A date. It’s a human mating ritual,” Tyr explained somewhat proudly.

Leodmar betrayed no reaction other than a slight twitch at the corner of his mouth. “Even though your cousin crossed a line by threatening your mate, I suggest you wait to punish him.”

“But he’s out of control,” Tyr protested. “He’s hungry for power for the sake of it, and—“

“Look deeper,”Leodmar said. “Consider that Rand may be much more cunning than you or any of the other warriors give him credit for.”

Tyr was slightly taken aback; this wasn’t what he’d expected to hear. “Go on.”

“It is possible that there is more strategy behind Rand’s actions than appears at first glance. I know that his behavior seems rash—“

“Hang on,Leodmar. Are you suggesting that Rand planned to frighten Meredith? What would he gain from it?”

“What better way to diminish her in the eyes of the clan? It suggests that your mate—the clan’s supposed great hope—is nothing but a frightened little rabbit who runs at the first sign of trouble. And if that were to be the case...”

Tyr felt the fury rise behind his eyes, making his head feel like a ticking bomb. “If that’s the case, then what value am I to them? If Rand succeeds in making her look weak, they’ll see that weakness as my own.”

Leodmar said nothing, clearly satisfied that Tyr reached the conclusion on his own.

“I should kill him for his arrogance alone,” Tyr growled. “Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t lock him up this minute.”

Leodmar tilted his head, pretending to consider the possibility. “I wonder if that might also be part of his plan,” he mused.

“Explain yourself,” Tyr commanded, never one to play games. “Why would anyone want to spend the night locked up in the square, freezing his balls off in a cage?”

“Exactly—in a cage,”Leodmar concurred, “visible to anyone passing by. Imagine how that might be interpreted: the chieftain cannot control his human mate, so he takes it out on his own kin while punishing any challenge to his rule just like his father did.”

The pain behind Tyr’s eyeballs had become a steady drumbeat. “That bastard.”

“A move like that would have the potential not only to strengthen Rand’s support but to win him new followers,”Leodmar said.

And Tyr had almost played into his hands. He swallowed down his rage, thanking the gods that Leodmar had been there to stop him.

“So what would you suggest I do?” he asked, terrified that Leodmar would advise him to absolve Rand. The thought made him nauseous.

“Rand must be stopped,” Leodmar said thoughtfully, “but it doesn’t have to happen tonight.”

“What does that even mean? Come on, old man,” Tyr pleaded. “You’re killing me here.”

Leodmar allowed himself the ghost of a smile. “Right now, Rand is waiting for you to charge into his tent. Counting on it, I’d wager. If you don’t, he’ll start questioning himself, wondering how he misjudged the situation. He’s counting on provoking you, and the best way to fight him is not to allow yourself to be provoked.”

“So he just gets away with it?”

“No, of course not. Tomorrow, you’ll go to see him, not as a rival, but as his chieftain. In that role, and with the town looking on, you’ll order him to make a public apology to your mate—who, in the meantime, is clearly and publicly besotted with you. By waiting, you’ll give the men time to remember that they would never tolerate such an insult to their own mates—and the women time to warm to our new frue. Rand won’t have any choice but to obey.”

Tyr thought about that—about Rand bowing before him for all to see, admitting what he’d done, and begging forgiveness.

“My father was a fool not to take you on as an advisor,” he told Leodmar.

The elder shrugged away the praise. “Thanks, but it’s a simple matter to outsmart a political foe when you consider the task ahead of you.”

Tyr frowned. “What task is that?”

“Wooing a human mate,” Leodmar said. He cleared his throat delicately. “So I’ve been told.”

Tyr relaxed. “Oh, don’t worry about that. I know everything that’s required. Hell, give it a few months, and maybe it’ll be your sons’ turn to home mates.”

Leodmar refused to be baited. “If it pleases the gods. If I may ask, sir, what have you planned for this evening...for this ‘date’?”

Tyr rubbed his hands together excitedly. “The maids are helping Meredith bathe and dress right now. When she’s ready, we’ll share a meal. After that, the custom is to seek some kind of entertainment together.”

Leodmar looked surprised. In his time, he'd probably been wed to a woman of his family's choosing, then taken her directly home. "What sort of entertainment?"

"Music, or dramatic storytelling," Tyr explained, though in truth, he was still a little confused about that part himself. "In her world, dates commonly include watching something called a 'movie.' I understand that it's similar to the recitation of an epic poem, so I've arranged for the troubadour to come."

"A fine plan, sir. What have you asked him to perform?"

"The history of Harker chieftains." Tyr was pleased with himself for thinking of it. "That way, she'll learn more about the family she's joining." Not to mention how important and highly regarded the Harkers were and how fortunate she was to become a part of their storied lineage.

"Ah."

"I've been told that human women require an average of three of these dates before they are ready to consummate the relationship. So, it's unlikely that I will plant the next generation of Harker's inside her tonight." Since that was everything he'd learned from Ryce and Kayla, Tyr moved on to other matters. "What else demands my attention?"

Half a dozen wrinkles appeared on Leodmar's forehead. "Nothing that can't wait until tomorrow, sir. Surely you'd prefer to make your own preparations for your date...?"

Tyr waved the question away. "It's only the women who perform the bathing ritual. All I need is a dip in the ocean. I have a full hour before I need to get back."

Leodmar still looked slightly concerned, but Tyr knew he would offer no counsel that wasn't requested. "Well..."

"Look, Leo, I've been gone for two days hunting down a mate. I'm still the chieftain, no matter what Rand is telling people, so there must be important matters for me to deal with."

What Tyr left unsaid was that he didn't relish the thought of standing around outside his own tent waiting for his mate. Too many of Rand's supporters thought of him as weak already. The last thing he needed was to add fuel to the gossip's fire with his idleness.

"In that case, the most important thing you can do right now is to walk among your people, sir. Let them know that you've returned home and are ready to put your plan into action. Let there be no doubt that you are in control."

“I can do that,” Tyr said, pleased. “Good man, Leodmar.”

“Thank you, sir.”

They said their goodbyes, and Leodmar strolled unhurriedly toward his tent, where his mate would have his dinner waiting for him. Then perhaps she’d rub his feet or work on a sweater she was knitting for him.

Tyr smiled as he strolled through town, greeting the people he’d known his entire life, letting them know their leader was in charge. The old people would be reassured that they had nothing to fear, and the young men’s envy would be tempered with the knowledge that just like their chieftain, they too could look forward to the happily mated existence on which he was about to embark.



CHAPTER  
**NINE**

## MEREDITH

I never knew a bath could transform my life until I stepped into that copper tub. Whatever Tyr's army of maids put in the water, it smelled divine and released fragrant steam and tiny bubbles that caressed my skin as I sank in up to my neck. The warmth melted into my exhausted muscles and banished the chill from my bones as I let the undulating water gently rock me.

For the first time since I'd been kidnapped, I felt like I could truly breathe.

Oh God...*kidnapped*.

Anxiety gripped me all over again, my muscles tensing with fear as the unwelcome truth of my situation came rushing back. Even so, the word didn't accurately describe what had happened to me.

A kidnapping described mercenaries with guns jumping out of SUVs with blacked-out windows. Creepy men in shabby white vans. Kidnapping was blindfolds and rope and dank soundproofed basements.

None of that had happened to me. Instead, a giant had literally carried me off to another world. He hadn't beaten or assaulted me...hadn't even threatened me. The experience had a lot more in common with an alien abduction than a kidnapping.

Except with his power-lifter build and ice-chip eyes, Tyr wasn't what came to mind when I imagined an alien, but he wasn't human, either...at least not completely. Humans didn't grow fangs and claws when their emotions ran high. And while this little village wasn't exactly Mars, it wasn't like anything I'd ever experienced before.

A little whimper escaped my lips, and I felt a cool hand on my shoulder. I opened my eyes to see the head maid, a silver-haired woman called Mildritha, looking at me with concern.

"Is everything all right, Frue?" she asked gently.

"Yes. All good." I needed to reassure her, not send her running for help. "Just...homesick."

The irony of my excuse hit me half a second too late. 'Home' had been a series of rental cars and motel rooms lately. Even my bare-bones apartment couldn't soothe the ache that had settled in my heart sometime in the last few

years.

I knew that Mildritha was just doing her job. She and her assistants had been nothing but kind since Tyr left. But no matter how well they treated me, I doubted they could help me even if they wanted to. Just like me, they were quite a bit smaller than the men.

Still, railing at them about my situation wouldn't help, and Mildritha and the others were the first people to make me feel welcome in this village. Other than Tyr, who I wished I could put out of my mind for the moment.

Mildritha gave my shoulder a sympathetic squeeze. "That's to be expected, Frue. But the feeling will pass in time."

I sagged against the tub at the thought. "God, I hope I'm not here that long."

Mildritha seemed shocked by my words. "You can't mean that, Frue. Wynterhowe is a beautiful place. And just wait until spring when we head back to the fields of Sumorden. It's even better."

Easy for her to say. I, on the other hand, found it impossible to find a silver lining in my kidnapping. Or abduction or whatever it was.

I decided to change the subject. "Would you mind not calling me that?" I asked, sinking deeper into the water. It had occurred to me that I could simply go under and stay there, but even if I was doomed to spend the rest of my days in this nightmare fantasy realm, my survival instinct would never let me choose that way out. "My name is Meredith."

A shocked silence fell, the women exchanging impenetrable glances. I'd obviously made some horrible faux pas.

Mildritha's hand hovered over an earthenware pitcher. "I'm sorry, Frue, but it would be improper for any of us to call you by your given name. That privilege belongs to the chieftain alone."

Oh, for fuck's sake. "Says who?"

Mildritha surprised me by laughing. "Says thousands of years of bear clan custom."

"Okay, but I'm not a bear." I knew I should let it go, but I was fed up with all these bizarre rules. "I'm human, and where I come from, people call each other by their names."

I forgot my annoyance when Mildritha dipped the pitcher into the water and poured it slowly over my head, then began to lather my hair with a bar of soap that smelled of cloves, her strong fingers massaging my scalp and kneading the muscles of my neck.

It felt heavenly. I wasn't used to being tended to. I couldn't even remember the last time I'd paid for a massage or facial—two years ago, maybe three.

“You'll get used to our ways, Frue,” Mildritha continued cheerfully as she worked. “Now that you are mated to Tyr, your children will be bears. That makes you one of our clan.”

At those words, I sat up, sloshing water over the lip of the tub. “What did you—my what?”

“Your children, Frue.” Mildritha's smile was mirrored by the obvious delight of the other women, and I was forced to reconsider their role in this travesty. They might not be at fault—the women who got caught up in men's bullshit rarely were—but it was still bullshit.

“Do you honestly expect me to have kids with the guy who abducted me?”

Mildritha clucked her disapproval. “There is no reason to worry, Frue. Our people and yours have been linked since the dawn of time. Centuries ago, before the veil was closed, many families claimed mixed heritage, carrying the blood of both Earth and Evergreen parentage. In the end, we are the same.”

“The hell we are.” I couldn't help it, even though I knew I should just let it go. “A few hours ago, I saw a guy turn into a goddamn bear right before my eyes. That ain't human.”

Mildritha's eyes widened, whether at my tone or my cursing, I couldn't tell. Then she nodded and gently guided me back against the edge of the tub.

“I think I'm beginning to understand the confusion, Frue. We are not actual bears, obviously. But we are called the bear clan because our land is protected by the spirit of the bear.”

I rolled my eyes. “Like, you worship the big bad Bear God?”

“I suppose that's one way of putting it,” Mildritha said, doing her best to ignore my sarcasm. “There are three gods who share dominion over Evergreen. Before man was created long ago, they divided the land between them, each taking on the spirit of a noble beast. Our god chose the bear. The others bear the mark of the wolf and the raven.”

I had no comeback for that.

The things Mildritha claimed to believe were no more fantastical than everything else I'd experienced in this world—or many of the things humans believed on Earth, for that matter.

“And that’s why you turn into bears?” I said. The lines between what I knew to be true and the fantastical continued to blur.

“We don’t ‘turn into’ anything. The spirit of the bear enters those lucky enough to be conceived on our land at the moment of their creation. These children, like all of us in the bear clan, receive the gifts of great strength and stamina. The teeth and claws that emerge when we are threatened are tokens of the Bear God’s love of his people.”

Right. That’s what I said—they became bears. Well, quarter bears.

Also, giant teeth and claws were a hell of a weird way to show your divine love...but I kept that opinion to myself.

Mildritha continued smiling beatifically. “And the same gifts will be given to your children when they are born!”

I sighed, though I guess I should have expected the whole kid thing when everyone here insisted on calling me Tyr’s *mate*. “Again, that’s not going to happen. I don’t care if they’re human or bear, I’m not popping out any kids.”

Mildritha gave me a searching look. “Have you told this to Tyr?”

“I’ve told him lots of things,” I said ruefully. “Whether or not he listened is another matter.”

Mildritha considered that for a moment. “Knowing that you don’t want to bear children makes me wonder why he chose you to break the curse.”

“Uh...what curse would that be?” I asked, suspecting this couldn’t be going anywhere good.

She seemed surprised that I didn’t already know. “Fifty years ago, a curse was put on our world that caused women to bear only sons. With no girls being born, our people were on the verge of dying out.”

That would explain why I’d seen no young women here. At least that meant they weren’t being locked up somewhere.

“Hang on—you said ‘were’,” I pointed out.

“Yes. A couple months ago, a woman from your world was brought to Evergreen. She figured out how to end the curse.”

“She was brought here?” I repeated. “You mean abducted, like me?”

Mildritha gave me a blank look. She either didn’t understand the meaning of the word or didn’t believe I’d really come here against my will.

“A member of the wolf lord’s family found a human mate in your world and brought her home,” she said. “Just as Tyr found you. There’s no other way. All of our women are beyond their childbearing years, so if we are to survive, we will need the help of your people.”

And just like that, the last piece of the puzzle slid into place. I couldn't pretend any longer; this really was my worst fear come to life. I was being forced to help repopulate this dying world at the cost of everything—my hopes and dreams, my family, my friends, my independence. My freedom.

The realization left me numb, shock staving off what was sure to be devastation. I wondered how I would feel if things were reversed—if Earth's population was on the brink of extinction, and all it would take to save it was a few random women from another planet. A handful of lives to save billions.

Maybe I would have made the same choice. At the very least, I understood the decision...and somehow, that made me feel worse.

"But no one asked me if I wanted to be a part of this forced breeding program," I stammered, on the verge of tears. I hated to cry. I hadn't cried since my college boyfriend broke up with me with a text. "I didn't want to be knocked out and dragged here against my will!"

Mildritha started to reach for my hand, then changed her mind and twisted her own hands together. Behind her, the other maids seemed just as dismayed, whispering and staring.

"Please don't say that," she pleaded. "You don't understand. No one here thinks of you as—as a broodmare."

"Really?" My tears had given way to panic, my voice cracking. "Then what exactly am I supposed to be?"

"Our chieftain has chosen you as our frue," she said. "It's an incredible honor. You will be venerated by everyone. Meredith—just think about it: you will come to represent our clan's virtue and nobility to all of Evergreen."

She made it sound like I'd won the lottery. Obviously, she—and every other woman in the room—believed those words. There was no chance of convincing them otherwise.

That meant I had only one option if I ever wanted to return home. I would have to pretend to go along with the scheme until everyone let down their guard and wait for an opportunity to sneak out of this cursed village.

It wasn't a great plan, but knowing it was the only way helped me focus. I pretended to think about the 'honor' Mildritha was offering me—and then I pretended to like it.

I sniffled, wiped my eyes in a goddamn Oscar-worthy performance, and offered a wobbly smile.

I could sense the relief in the room. For the next hour, I let the women fuss over me, barely paying attention as they washed and dried my body, then

sat me down in one of two padded chairs, a short, squat woman with a toothy smile sitting opposite me.

“This is Gunhild,” Midritha said warmly. “She will see to your hair.”

Without warning, Gunhild leaned forward and grabbed a hank of my hair, examining it like a jeweler grading a diamond.

“Remarkable,” she said. “Do all earth women have striped hair? And this color—so bright, like bog sage. I’ve never seen anything like it!”

Despite myself, I winced. Not only did ‘bog sage’ sound hideous, but I’d paid a lot of money for my cut and fire-engine-red highlights. I’d always been very particular about my hair and didn’t like it being studied like some rare bug.

“It takes a lot of work to make it look like that,” I said shortly, then regretted it when Gunhild drew back as if I’d bit her.

If all the women here were as sensitive as these maids, I was in trouble—growing up with mostly boys, I wasn’t used to worrying about offending people.

“Gunhild really is very good,” Midritha murmured. “She is sought after for her braided designs.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to snap at you—but I’m not really a braid person. Maybe a few beachy waves...?”

“But this is a special occasion,” Gunhild said, sounding so plaintive that I relented. What did I care what I looked like, after all? I wasn’t trying to impress anyone.

“Fine,” I said, forcing a smile. “I’m sure whatever you do will be great.”

While Gunhild busied herself with my hair, Mildritha rifled through the clothes hanging on the rack and selected what I thought at first glance was some sort of undergarment or lingerie. Chrysanthemum red, it had a bustier top that laced up like those girls you see on beer bottles.

Then Mildritha held it up to me, tilting her head in concentration, and I realized that the thing was made of leather. Very fine, thin dyed leather, but still.

“This isn’t that kind of date,” I said firmly. “I’m not planning on getting undressed in front of anyone, so we can skip the fancy lingerie.”

Mildritha wasn’t having it.

“It’s perfect with your coloring,” she gushed. “It matches your hair. And see these gored panels? They’ll lift your breasts up to the heavens!”

“Wait, that’s the whole dress?” I nearly shouted in disbelief. “Not just the

underwear?”

“It’s the most highly sought-after fashion we have, I assure you, frue,” Mildritha rushed to say.

I could feel myself blushing, something else I rarely did. Every woman in my family has big breasts, and all of us received way more attention for them than we wanted. While I envied the confidence of women who liked to show off their curves, I tended to camouflage my own.

“You can’t be serious,” I said, fingering the soft leather, the black suede laces. “There’s barely enough here to cover my—“

“Nonsense. I used to wear something similar on special occasions.”

That shut me up. Mildritha was at least as big as me, with big hips, a rounded stomach, and dimpled arms. In fact, all of the bear women shared the solid, rounded build that, in Tyr’s words, would keep them warm all winter.

Don’t get me wrong. I’d dated plenty of men who appreciated my body, but most of society still thought women like me should be ashamed of our size. For a moment, I indulged myself, imagining what it would be like to live in a culture that didn’t just tolerate my curves but openly celebrated them.

“Lovely,” Gunhild said, breaking me out of my daydream as she put away her combs and brushes.

A moment later, Mildritha guided me up from the chair and behind a curtain, where she helped me into the dress—what there was of it.

Surprisingly, it fit as though it had been made for me, and she was right about the almost architectural design that pushed up my breasts without cutting into my sides the way I was used to. The skirt skimmed smoothly over my hips and ended just shy of my knees, but the slit up the side dispelled any suggestion of modesty. Mildritha laced the bodice tightly and led me back out to my waiting audience.

There was a gasp—then cheers. “You look beautiful!” I heard...and then I caught sight of myself in the mirror.

My hair had been transformed into a circlet of braids woven with tiny white wildflowers atop my head. But the dress! It left nothing to the imagination, amplifying my rounded ass and showing a scandalous amount of cleavage.

“Tyr is going to love this,” Mildritha said with a trace of smugness.

My heart sank as all of my old insecurities returned.

“Tyr is never going to see this!” It came out almost as a shriek. “I mean,



thank you,” I said quickly. “Mildritha, Gunhild...the rest of you. I...really appreciate your hard work. But I can’t wear this dress to dinner, and that’s final.”

Mildritha opened her mouth to speak, then closed it again. The room seemed to be holding its collective breath. Finally, she gave a brisk nod.

“Of course, Frue. It is your choice.”

“These dresses,” I said, turning to the rack so I wouldn’t have to look at the women’s disappointed faces. “They’re for me to choose from?”

A sudden rush of cold air made me turn around. Three more women stood just inside the tent, holding steaming pots and platters.

“Choose anything you like,” Mildritha said, her smile back in place. “But do be quick about it. The servers are here with your dinner, and Tyr will be right behind them. It won’t do to keep the chieftain waiting.”

CHAPTER  
**TEN**

## MEREDITH

I sorted through the dresses in a state of growing panic as the servers started to lay out the food on a long table set up at the back of the tent. One of two burly men accidentally jostled me as they carried the huge copper tub out of the tent, but I barely noticed, trying to find something reasonable to wear—but every dress seemed skimpier than the last.

“Look, Mildritha,” I said as calmly as I could manage. “How about I just wear the clothes I had on when I got here?”

Mildritha’s eyebrows shot up. “The...soiled gray garments?”

“Um, yeah.” My sweats—the comfiest I owned, fluffy, warm, and two sizes too big so I could disappear inside them.

Mildritha was trying unsuccessfully to hide her distaste. “I’m sorry, Frue, I had the washerwomen take them to the rag pile. I didn’t realize that you would want them back.”

No, no, no. I’d had those sweats since college; it had taken years to break them in just right.

“Of course I want them back,” I blurted. “They’re my clothes!”

“I beg your pardon, Frue,” Mildritha said, looking genuinely sorry. “I’ll have the washerwomen launder them and return them first thing in the morning. But now, you really must choose a gown.”

I grabbed the dress made of the most fabric, an off-the-shoulder column stitched of layers of sheer ivory silk. It draped low on my chest, but at least there was no danger of my nipples popping out, and the slit up the side was at least partially camouflaged by the layers that swirled around my knees when I moved.

“Are you sure—“ I could see that Mildritha was trying to hold her tongue but just couldn’t help herself. “But the red was so beautiful with your coloring. And this is too loose,” she added, slipping the tiny sleeves a little further down my shoulders to make the bodice stretch more tightly over my breasts.

I shoved the sleeves back up and glanced at the mirror. She was right; the dress didn’t flatter me at all. The pale silk competed with my skin tone, and my thighs looked like two sausages stuffed into a single casing. But what did I care? I wasn’t trying to impress anyone.

In fact, maybe it was better this way.

If Tyr arrived and saw how unattractive I looked, he might rethink his plan to make me his mate. If I was lucky, he'd cancel our date and march me right back through the veil tonight.

I didn't have much time to hope because as soon as the servers finished setting up the food, Tyr stepped into the tent.

And stopped cold. He took his time looking me up and down...and up again. "Damn," I thought I heard him mumble to himself.

"Welcome, Chieftain," Mildritha said, her good cheer restored.

He turned to the maids with a wide smile. "Ladies. You've outdone yourselves. Everything is beautiful."

Then he was back to staring at me, and suddenly, I forgot how to stand still. I shifted back and forth on my heels as I crossed my arms, first over my chest, then at my waist, before finally letting them hang limply at my sides like wet noodles.

The maids were already filing out of the tent behind the servers. Meredith paused at the entrance and shot me a grin over her shoulder. "I hope you have a pleasant evening."

Then they were gone, and silence fell in the tent. We were alone.

"So," Tyr said, dragging his gaze up from my breasts to my face.

The undisguised hunger in his eyes stole my breath, and I took a step back. I couldn't quite put a name to the emotion I was feeling, but whatever it was, it was extremely unsettling.

Of course, this wasn't the first time a man had ogled my chest, but it was different when Tyr did it. Maybe because he had given the same focus to the rest of me, his gaze lingering on my ankles, my knees, my shoulders, my braided hair. Or maybe it was just that, having grown up without any girls his age, he'd never seen anything like me—which meant he also didn't have anyone to compare me to.

Whatever the reason, I couldn't take another second of this torturous silence.

"What a feast!" I exclaimed a little too loudly and gesturing like an idiot at the table. "There's no way we'll be able to eat all that."

Tyr dragged his eyes away with effort, barely glancing at the platters of roasted meat, whole fish, herbed potatoes and parsnips, and bright grilled vegetables. While he didn't seem the least bit interested in the dishes, it seemed to remind him of his manners.

“Shall I assemble a plate for you?” he asked.

“Sure...yeah. I mean, yes, please.” I was stammering because Tyr had paused on the way to the table to loom over me. At five-foot-eight, I was far from short, but I felt downright petite next to him...especially when he stood so close that I had to tilt my head back to look at him. He was just so...*powerful*, and it left me flustered.

“Actually, no,” I amended, my pulse gamboling out of control. “I’m good.”

Tyr frowned. “Is something wrong with your appetite?”

God, no. I was ravenous. I couldn’t remember the last time I ate, and aromas wafting from the table were mouthwatering.

“No,” I clarified with an awkward laugh, “I just meant you don’t have to serve me. I’m perfectly capable of doing it myself.”

Tyr relaxed, his smile restored. “I don’t doubt it. I imagine you’re capable of all kinds of things. But in our clan, it is customary for a man to feed his mate on special occasions.”

“You’re kidding,” I said, imagining my most recent ex trying to stuff a jalapeno popper in my mouth at Applebee’s.

“Not at all. It represents his commitment to always provide for her.”

Right, okay. I should have seen that coming by now.

I was used to being the know-it-all, the one who had an answer for everything. My family made it easy; my dad was the kind of guy who couldn’t tell Kesha from Adele and needed my help to turn his laptop on, and my brothers’ idea of culture was getting avocado on their burgers.

Here, though, I was constantly caught up short, completely lost in this new culture. And I didn’t like it. It felt like I was always taking the wrong turn or putting my foot in my mouth.

“I’m not your mate,” I reminded him sharply, turning my back on him to grab a plate. “And I’m never going to be.”

“So you keep saying.”

Tyr was much too close, reaching past me to take a serving fork from my hand. He speared a slice of something delicious—venison, boar, hell, it could have been a veggie burger for all I knew—and laid it gently on my plate.

I moved away from him and dug a spoon into the first thing I saw: a puree of something red swirled with cream.

“Ah, the beets,” Tyr said approvingly. “Sigri does them with celery root and orange zest. They’re delicious.”

“Are you on a first-name basis with all your servants?” I asked, just to have something to say as I continued to fill my plate with whatever was closest.

“Of course. I’ve known them all my life. Sigri’s been with my family since I was born. Try the flatbread,” he said, pointing at a golden brown pastry studded with olives and nuts. “Sigri’s famous for it.”

When I passed it by without placing any on my plate, Tyr’s face fell. “Is the food not to your liking?”

He sounded concerned.

“No, it’s fine.” Better than fine—it all looked and smelled amazing, if I was honest.

“Then why aren’t you taking more?”

I...I honestly didn’t know. All I knew was enthusiastically accepting his hospitality felt a little too close to accepting *him*.

“I’m not hungry,” I said. My stomach chose that exact moment to growl.

Silence fell between us as we stared at each other. I could see storm clouds brewing in those blue eyes, and I caught my breath.

Suddenly, Tyr set his plate down and grabbed my shoulders. He was so close that I could smell the salt spray and soap on his skin.

“Meredith,” he said intently. “It’s all right. Ryce told me something like this might happen.”

“What—who the hell is Ryce?”

“A friend. One who lived in your world for many years. He’s been helping me understand human women. He warned me that you’re conditioned to eat very little while on dates with men.”

*Yeah...*that was not what I was expecting to hear. I almost laughed. “That’s not what’s happening here.”

Tyr barreled on. “Ryce says that in your culture, a woman’s appetites are considered unattractive. It seemed really strange to me, but he told me that women pretend not to be hungry when in the presence of men they want to impress.”

His words were ringing uncomfortably true. How many times had I ordered a salad on a date when I would rather have had a bacon blue cheeseburger? Still, none of that applied to Tyr.

“Even if your friend’s right, this isn’t—“

“I want you to know I’m not like those human men,” Tyr said earnestly. “I’d never judge you for eating what you want.”

I'll admit it—I was transfixed. The man who'd abducted me was somehow saying things I'd never knew I wanted to hear...and it was as confusing as hell. Not only that, he was looming ever closer. So close I could see a faint scar running along his jaw. I couldn't seem to look away.

"I want you to be satisfied." His voice had deepened to a rough whisper, and the effect was to melt me from the inside out. "In every way."

For a man who'd never met, much less seduced, a woman anywhere near his age, he was nailing this. It was as if Eros himself was pulling the strings. I licked my lips nervously, but all that did was to dial up the intensity of his predatory smile.

"That's—" I stumbled backward, grabbing a tent pole for support. "—uh, good to know." I scanned the room for a table and realized there wasn't one. "Where should I sit?"

"Wherever you like."

Tyr lowered himself down on a stack of plush, colorful cushions and arranged them to his liking.

"Right," I said coolly. "We're eating on the floor. So glad Mildritha insisted I wear a dress."

Tyr didn't seem to catch my meaning. He'd stretched out on one elbow like a sybarite being fed grapes.

I had lost control of the situation. The best I could do now was eat as quickly as possible and end this painful excuse for a date. I performed an awkward set of moves designed to get me to the floor without flashing him my crotch and ended up with my legs tucked primly beneath me like some fifties pinup girl.

Tyr had brought a pitcher and glasses, and I didn't hesitate to pour wine all the way to the top of mine. I was going to need it. Naturally, there didn't appear to be any flatware, so I was forced to pluck a carrot from my plate with my fingers.

I chewed woodenly until my taste buds came to life. Carrots had never tasted so delicious, their caramelized sweetness balanced by a bit of citrus and garnished with toasted hazelnuts. I almost groaned out loud.

"I'm afraid we don't have movies here in Evergreen," Tyr was saying, "but I've arranged for entertainment."

He seemed mighty pleased with himself, which was a warning sign if there ever was one. "Entertainment?" I echoed faintly.

Tyr twisted his head toward the closest vent in the tent wall. "Arne!" he

bellowed. “We’re ready!”

I was frozen in trepidation as a young man hesitantly entered the tent, carrying what looked suspiciously like a lute.

“Arne, say hello to my mate,” Tyre said cheerfully. “Meredith, this is Arne, our troubadour. Tonight, he will perform the story of the last four hundred years of my family’s history.”

The young man bowed deeply from the waist, his mumbled “Good evening, Frue,” muffled by the long fall of wavy hair hiding his face.

“How...delightful,” I said faintly.

I had a feeling I was going to need a lot more of that wine.



CHAPTER  
**ELEVEN**

## MEREDITH

By the time the troubadour had strummed the last stanza of his song, three hours had passed.

Tyr's family history was nothing if not thorough. Arne had done his best to make the information memorable. Every time a male Harker was born, achieved the rank of warrior, took a mate, or—most rapturously—slayed an enemy, his face would light up and hit every high note possible. Alternatively, there were fake tears and low, mournful wails for every moment of despair (basically whenever a Harker died or lost power). The generations of Sigurds and Haldors and Birgers quickly blurred together for me, but Arne could rattle off descendants like he was reciting the alphabet.

It was hard not to notice that female Harkers received a lot less attention in the telling. Though, after an hour, my eyes had glazed over, and I'd stopped paying close attention to all the skull cleaving and limb severing.

The wine helped with that.

A lot.

As Arne crooned about what every Harker chieftain for the last five centuries had for breakfast the day he died a glorious, I'd filled and re-filled my glass so many times I'd lost count. The only downside was when I jumped up to attempt a standing ovation when the troubadour finally took a bow, I drunkenly teetered over. I would have crashed into the lute if Tyr hadn't leapt up to steady me.

"Careful," Tyr said. "I think our wine might be stronger than you're used to."

He wasn't kidding. I blamed the high alcohol content for the surge of heat I felt as his strong hands curled around the curve of my waist. I sure as hell wasn't about to pin it on his touch.

Sure, it was handy to have a guy like Tyr around when you were about to face plant, given that it had taken him barely any effort to set me back on my feet.

Which kind of begged the question of why his arm was still around me...or why he was still gazing at me.

It was making me extremely uncomfortable, so I wriggled out of his grasp. "I'm fine. Thanks," I added belatedly.

“Of course. As your mate, I will always—“

“Let’s not ruin a perfectly nice moment,” I interrupted, attempting to fan myself with my dinner napkin. “Okay?”

Arne bowed a few more times as he made his way toward the front of the tent. A brief, awkward silence followed his exit, but Tyr wasn’t about to let me off the hook that easy.

“Did you enjoy the entertainment?” he asked brightly.

“It was...” I racked my brain for something positive to say. “It was very detailed. My goodness! So many...*details!*”

“Thank you,” Tyr said modestly. “I can’t claim credit, though. Obviously.”

Was that—surely not. I peered at him more closely, and sure enough, his cheeks had flushed a little. Until that moment, I would have said the man’s self-assurance knew no limits—but he actually cared what I thought. Not just of the performance but of his family history.

And that meant that he’d been trying to impress me.

Until then, I’d assumed he was going through the motions, checking the boxes his friend Ryce had suggested with his eye on the prize. The prize, of course, being a mate and sex and babies, not me specifically.

But he was holding all the cards. Tyr was so much bigger than me, so much stronger. He could do whatever he wanted, whether I liked it or not. And yet, he still wanted me to admire him...to like him. To *want* to be with him.

Even if that wasn’t in the cards, it made me consider him in a new light.

He did have a really nice smile, at least when he was talking about his family. He was genuinely proud of them. That meant something to me.

Even if my family and I gave each other shit all the time, we had each other’s backs and always would. And I *was* proud of them—Dad for his endless enthusiasm and bringing us all into the family enterprise, Briggs and Ron for their enthusiasm, my cousins for their endless good humor.

Tyr might be fearsome, powerful, and strong. Who was I kidding? The man was a bonafide barbarian—but he’d just given me a glimpse of another side of himself.

I must have been staring because his expression changed again, his bashfulness giving way to something darker. Hungrier.

Weirdly, though, it wasn’t...completely unpleasant. In fact, I could feel myself responding to it, a pleasant, fizzy current running along my nerves.

Not that I wanted him to jump my bones...at least, not entirely.

There was a familiar sweetness to the feeling that I couldn't quite place—and then suddenly, it came to me: I felt like I had back in eighth grade when Elliot Cavanaugh stopped me outside homeroom to ask me to the winter dance.

Butterflies in my stomach! My heart beating wildly! Throw in the scent of Bonne Bell lip gloss, and I'd be transported back to the halls of Fillmore Middle School.

Despite my drunken state, I was pretty sure that getting the hots for my abductor was not cool...no matter how ruggedly handsome he looked in the candlelight.

*Stop*, I told myself, perhaps less emphatically than I could have.

"Are you sure you don't want more to eat?" Tyr asked, his tone making it sound like a risqué proposition.

"Mm-mm." Words were hard when you were tipsy and confused, so I just shook my head.

My inner voice, however, was alarmed. *Pull yourself together, girl!* It hollered, but from a distance. Meanwhile, the images that replaced it involved me splayed on the pile of cushions with my skirt flipped up, tangling my fingers in Tyr's hair as he went to town between my legs.

"Oh!" I gasped, startled back to reality. I staggered backward, hoping Tyr couldn't tell what I was thinking. "I'm—it's late," I stammered, knocking into a low table, sending a dish of spiced nuts flying.

God, I was a mess—but Tyr seemed more amused than put off. After helping me steady myself for the second time, he released my arm with a polite and slightly formal smile.

"Of course. You must be tired. So I will say goodnight and see you in the morning."

He started for the door of the tent. "Wait," I blurted, "where are you going?"

He paused. "To the barracks. I'll spend the night with the warriors."

I was missing something. "Is that where you always sleep?"

One corner of his mouth twisted up. "I'm the *chieftain*, Meredith. Of course not."

"Right. You...sleep here. In your bed."

"Correct."

"But not tonight."

“Also correct.”

It felt like there was more to our little exchange than met the eye. Yet again, I found myself overheated, confused, and out of my depths.

Unfortunately, Tyr misinterpreted my silence as encouragement. “Ryce told me it usually takes a total of three dates for a human to feel comfortable taking a man to bed. But if tonight managed to convince you—“

“No!” I yelped—whether to shut him down or out of fear that I wouldn’t be able to, I wasn’t sure. “I was just...wondering. Because I’m curious about stuff.”

Tyr raised an eyebrow. “Curious,” he repeated.

“Yes. I like information.” I was back to drunk-stumbling my way through the conversation.

“Hmm.” Tyr had the grace not to respond to that remark. “Well, after our little talk this afternoon about your fear of being ravished, I thought you’d sleep better if I spent the night somewhere else.”

“Wow,” I said, genuinely touched by his thoughtfulness. “Uh, thank you.”

Belatedly, I remembered that I was supposed to be on the lookout for a chance to escape—and maybe he’d just provided it.

Tyr was still studying me. “If you don’t want to be alone, though, I can send Mildritha to stay with you.”

“That’s okay,” I said quickly. “I’m used to being alone.”

It was true. After spending weeks on the road with my family, I loved holing up in my apartment, my only human interaction with the pizza delivery guy.

“If you’re sure,” Tyr said, seeming unconvinced. “Still, my most trusted guards will be posted outside all night. I’ve given them strict orders not to let anyone but me pass. So...good night.”

Then he was gone, and with him, any hopes I had for escape.

I left the lamps burning, suddenly too tired to care. I didn’t even take off my dress before collapsing onto the bed, curling up, and letting my wine haze carry me gently off to sleep.

The last thought I had before sinking into a dreamless slumber was of Tyr watching me intently after I nearly fell the second time.

*It usually takes a total of three dates for a human to feel comfortable taking a man to bed.*

One down, two to go. Which meant I had two more nights to figure a way

out.

CHAPTER  
**TWELVE**

## MEREDITH

**T** *hump. Thump. Thump.*

I reached blindly for my phone, too groggy to open my eyes. My hand landed not on my nightstand but soft, coarsely woven wool. I pawed at it, desperate to turn off the damn vibrations of my alarm before my head split in two. However, I only succeeded in getting my arm tangled in the blankets.

Then, a shaft of light burned the back of my eyeballs, and it all came back to me in a horrifying flash. These weren't my blankets. This wasn't my bed. This wasn't my beloved condo with its soothing ivory walls and pristine maple floors.

And the thumping wasn't my phone alarm but the pounding of a headache I'd brought on all by myself.

Well, fuck me.

I burrowed back under the covers, soft fur sliding along my cheek as my mood plummeted to the darkest reaches of my soul. No amount of troubadours, feasts, scandalous gowns, and wine flowing from earthenware jugs could change the fact that I was being held captive so far from home I wasn't even sure it was in the same galaxy. And to top it all off, I had the worst hangover of my life.

Please, please, let me be alone, I prayed.

The last thing I needed was my big, determined suitor-slash-abductor stomping around the tent while I was dying from alcohol poisoning. With a great effort, I pulled back the furs and opened my eyes a sliver.

I was visually assaulted with sunshine and a bohemian kaleidoscope of color and texture—carpets woven from wool dyed indigo and goldenrod and sage, cushions embroidered in spiraling designs and trimmed in fur, wildflowers in glazed green pottery jars. The light glinted off the unlit copper lanterns and reflected in the mirror that I'd stood before last night, the intended bride of an ursine chieftain, unrecognizable to myself.

Though I had looked damn good.

That thought was quickly followed by an image of Tyr, his eyes widening when he entered the tent, halting almost comically stock still at the sight of me. Or the way his eyes shifted from their usual ocean blue to velvety navy



as he offered me the most perfect blackberries from his plate.

I banished those rogue visions with a groan.

Obviously, I must still be slightly drunk if I was still dwelling on my captor's ridiculous attempts to woo me. It was impossible to remember how many times I'd filled my cup last night, but it had been a lot. The wine had tasted so good, rich and soft on my tongue and laced with a sweet hint of wild berries and the earth that nourished them.

I remembered trying to stand and falling into Tyr's arms...bracing myself with my hands on his chest while butterflies rioted in my stomach.

I moaned again, this time in mortification. What had I been thinking, flirting with my abductor? I deserved my headache and the nausea gripping my gut, turning my skin clammy. When I heard the tent flaps being drawn, I figured that whatever further punishment awaited, I'd brought it on myself.

I reached weakly for another pillow to pull over my head, but it barely muffled Ty's voice, sending another round of thunderbolts through my head.

"The sun has risen," he announced. The deep, booming nature of his voice made everything he said sound like a commandment, like Moses revealing the tablets to his people.

"*Urg*," I moaned. It was as close to 'go to hell' as I could manage through my sticky, foul mouth.

Too late, I remembered I'd passed out without undressing last night. The scrap of a dress barely covered me in the tangle of blankets, and I struggled to pull them up to my chin.

"So you are not usually an early riser."

I bristled at the judgment in his tone. I'd be feeling chipper, too, if I had his bulk and metabolism. It would probably take a kiddie pool full of liquor to get him drunk.

"Don't feel good," I mumbled.

"What you need is fresh air." With that, he plucked my pillow from my face and tossed it aside.

I rolled up like a pill bug, burying my head in my arms. "What I need is a gallon of water and four more hours of sleep."

After a startled silence, Tyr let out a burst of laughter. "Ah, so you're not a lazy slug after all! It's just too much wine—why didn't you say so?"

Had he seriously just called me lazy? I lifted the pillow just enough to shoot him a withering glare.

"Please just shut up! I swear to God, your voice is rattling my brain

against my skull.”

Tyr took no apparent offense. “I have something that can help with that,” he said, crossing the room to dig around in a wood cabinet. He returned with a small earthenware cup and helped me up to a sitting position.

I glanced suspiciously at the amber liquid in the cup. “Hair of the dog?”

Tyr frowned. “Hair from a dog? How would that help?”

I wanted to laugh but knew it would hurt. “It’s—never mind. What is this?”

“A special brew of herbs concocted to combat the effects of too much wine.”

A hangover remedy? I took a tentative sniff. It smelled better than a raw egg and clam juice, anyway. Besides, I figured Tyr wasn’t likely to try to poison me since he was planning to make me his mate.

I took the cup and downed the contents in one go. Almost instantly, I felt a tingling warmth spreading through my body, washing away the effects of my hangover. Within seconds, my stomach stopped churning, my eyes stopped burning, and my head stopped thumping. I didn’t just feel better—I felt good.

“What the hell was that?”

“A brew of herbs concocted—“

“Yeah, yeah. But it just got rid of my hangover in seconds. How?”

Tyr grinned. “Magic. A gift from the raven clan centuries ago.”

My opinion of Evergreen shifted up a notch or two. As leery as I was of the claws-and-fangs variety of bewitching, this shit just might have been the greatest invention of all time.

“You could make a fortune on Earth if you bottled this,” I told him, detaching myself from him and standing up experimentally. All systems go—no nausea, no aches, and I was hungry as a horse.

“Why would I want to do that? We have no use for your money here.”

“You could buy a lot of nice things for your people with it,” I said, ducking behind the curtain where Mildritha had helped me dress. “Tools or weapons or whatever.”

There was no sign of the sweats Mildritha had promised to have cleaned, but the rack of dresses was still there. I rifled through them and found a long, peasant-style dress in soft marigold linen and quickly changed, hanging last night’s gown in its place.

The day dress was a huge improvement: comfortable, pretty, and fitted

just enough to flatter. Its long tiered skirt swirled around my calves. I pulled the last of the pins from my hair and attempted to comb it out, soft waves replacing my usual stick-straight blow-out.

“No self-respecting bear would use a human tool or weapon,” Tyr was saying dismissively. “Ours are vastly superior. In fact, nothing in your world tempts us.”

“Except our women,” I reminded him, stepping out from behind the curtain.

Tyr’s smug expression vanished as he took me in, from the tumble of hair framing my face to the sweetheart neckline of the dress, all the way down to my feet, where he lingered rather a long time at my ankles peeping from under the skirt. When he finally looked up again, that familiar hunger was back in his gaze.

“Can you blame us?” he demanded, almost angrily. “How can we resist any woman as gorgeous as you?”

I felt my face flush and turned away in unaccustomed embarrassment. I wasn’t usually susceptible to flattery. Chalk it up to film school—spend a few years around constant ass-kissing, and you develop an immunity.

An immunity that didn’t seem to protect against Tyr...maybe because he sounded like he really meant it.

At first, I felt torn and then impatient with myself for caring enough to examine his words. Tyr was actively trying to get me into bed, yes—but at the same time, he’d been nothing but honest. Sometimes painfully so.

Even so, a part of me immediately discounted his words. Tyr only found me attractive because he hadn’t met many women yet. He wasn’t aware just how many women there were back home—women who were far prettier and sexier than me.

But I held my tongue. It had been a shitty, stressful couple of days, and the forecast wasn’t looking any better. Tyr calling me gorgeous might be the best thing that happened to me for a while.

But that didn’t mean I was going to let it mess with my judgment.

I folded my arms stiffly and glared at him. “What’s so important that you had to wake me up at the crack of dawn?”

“The sun has been up for hours.”

“Whatever.”

“I thought I’d give you a tour of Wynterhowe.,” he said with innocent cheer, “Your new home.”

I was so grateful for the hangover remedy that I let that last bit go without pushback.

Tyr offered his arm, and I only hesitated briefly before taking it. It wasn't that I was getting used to the disconcerting sensations that touching him caused; I was only getting better at hiding them.

Still, there was a crafty note in his voice, a hint of scheming, that made me question his motives.

Then again...I had schemes of my own.

I wasn't all that interested in the sights and sounds of Wynterhowe. But, there was a lot to be learned about the layout of the place, the security measures meant to keep me here...and the inevitable lapses that would be my key to escape.

And a guided tour would be the perfect opportunity to learn about all of them.

CHAPTER  
**THIRTEEN**

## TYR

If Tyr had known that all it would take to tame his hellcat into a purring kitten of a mate was a little healing brew, he would have brought the tonic with him through the veil.

He'd been surprised when he'd walked into the tent and found her, still in last night's clothes, passed out practically where he left her. Clearly, he'd underestimated how much of their wine a human could tolerate. Fortunately, last night had been unusually warm for autumn, and she hadn't frozen. Still, she might not be so lucky in the future. Starting tonight, he would insist Mildritha stay with her to ensure she was properly looked after.

But at least she hadn't tried to run away again. He'd been pleased when he'd arrived back at his tent this morning, and Colbrand, his most trusted guard, didn't have any incidents to report.

It had been a quiet night. Whether that was another effect of the wine or evidence that last night's date had been a success, Tyr wasn't completely sure.

Tyr had never felt more confident than he did strolling through town with his new mate on his arm, showing her all that Wynterhowe had to offer and introducing her to his people.

Most of them had caught at least a glimpse of her by now. Still, Tyr made a point of offering a smile or wave or friendly word to those passing by, knowing that seeing him and Meredith looking happy together would do what words couldn't when it came to establishing her as his mate.

Fortunately, the tonic had restored Meredith's health and spirits, and she asked intelligent questions and commented appreciatively about everything she saw. The clear, calm morning showed Wynterhowe's homes, communal areas, and market in their best light, not to mention the sea and sheltering cliffs of the cove.

But while Meredith took in the views, Tyr couldn't take his eyes off her. The soft gold dress she'd selected set off her lovely gray eyes and hugged her waist in a way that accentuated both her plump bottom and beautiful breasts. Her hair, so straight when Tyr first glimpsed her, was softly waved now from Gunhild's ministrations, the bright red strands shimmering when the breeze stirred.

It didn't take Tyr long to realize that he wasn't the only one smitten by Meredith. As they enjoyed breakfast rolls at a table the baker brought out into the sun for them, he couldn't help noticing the looks they were getting.

Still, he couldn't blame them for their curiosity. It wasn't just her good looks that caught their eye; it was the way she held herself. She had a level of natural confidence and fortitude he'd never seen in a woman before.

Not even in Kayla, the human who had freed Evergreen from the curse.

Due to the lateness of their start, the day was already in full swing, with people coming and going as they went about their tasks. But no matter how busy they were, everyone stopped to look at their new frue. Most were openly admiring, from the elderly women whose smiles revealed a lifetime's wrinkles to the merchants who doffed their caps and touted their wares.

But some of the younger men forgot their manners at the sight of Meredith, daring to stare at her without disguising their desire. Tyr had to remind them of their place with a flash of his teeth, eliciting stammering apologies from most and sending the rest of them running.

Even more worrisome were the few who didn't bother to hide their displeasure at the arrival of a human woman in their midst. Their sneering and whispering threatened to turn Tyr apoplectic with fury, and he had to call on all of his self-discipline to ignore their behavior and pay attention to the conversation.

These were Rand's people. Tyr knew it from the open challenge in their eyes. His cousin had cultivated their mistrust of leadership with the same skill he'd once shown at diplomacy. Rand had always been a smooth talker for a bear, and he knew how to seed conversations with just enough hints to engender doubt and skepticism among others until they arrived at the conclusions he had in mind.

Nowadays, that conclusion was that Tyr was a weak and possibly dangerous leader and that Rand could do a better job of ushering the clan into a new era.

For now, at least, Rand's followers were in the minority. Meredith didn't even seem to notice them as she talked excitedly about the settlement, seeming especially interested in its layout in the curve of the cove.

She asked about the design of the residential and communal areas, the paths that connected them, approaches from land and sea, and the strategy behind the guard post locations and schedules. It made Tyr wonder about the town she came from, how different it must be from Wynterhowe to make this

settlement a subject of such fascination.

He looked forward to asking her about her home later. There were so many things to learn about each other and all the time in the world to do it—after he'd taken care of this impudent challenge to his authority, of course.

Once they'd finished their meal, Tyr escorted Meredith to the center of the settlement. The public square here was smaller than the one in their warm-weather settlement of Sumorden, but it still had enough open space for people to gather together when the weather was good. Nearly every morning, it buzzed with activity as the women of the clan saw to domestic tasks like laundry and the men took breaks from their toils.

At the center of the square was a platform usually reserved for clan announcements, debate, and entertainment, but on top now were half a dozen guards, Leodmar, and Rand.

The moment Meredith spotted his cousin, she stopped in dismay, clutching Tyr's arm tightly. "You didn't tell me he was going to be here!"

"It's okay," Tyr said, remembering Leodmar's advice. "I know what I'm doing."

But clearly, Meredith wasn't so sure. Her fingers dug into his arm as he started pulling her toward the stage. "You planned this? You tricked me?"

"I didn't trick you," Tyr corrected her, slightly wounded. "I was using diplomacy."

"Seriously? In my world, we'd call it a 'dick move.'"

Ah, perhaps the issue was the language barrier. Humans had different phrases for so many things. Tyr patted Meredith's arm placatingly.

"You'll be fine. You're under my protection. This is important, but it won't take long."

Meredith compressed her lips, an expression of exasperation that Tyr was growing very familiar with. But she reluctantly relented and allowed him to escort her through the growing crowd of onlookers drawn by the prospect of the clan's most important rivals squaring off.

*Good*, Tyr thought. The more people who witnessed Rand's humbling, the better.

He helped Meredith up the stairs and onto the platform, scarcely nodding at Rand before taking his place at the front and greeting the crowd.

"People of Wynterhow!" Tyr waited for the smattering of cheers to die down before continuing. "I am pleased to have this opportunity to introduce you to your new frue. Meet my mate, Meredith Ives!"



The crowd broke into applause, the number of people clapping far outnumbering the few who stood apart in stony silence. Tyr drank in the pleasure of seeing his clan united by hope for the first time he could remember—and tried not to dwell on Meredith’s agitation and the stiffness of her expression.

He took advantage of the moment to address his thorniest issue head-on.

“I have heard there are concerns among a number of clan members who believe that because she is human, your new frue will never be a true member of the bear clan.”

A murmur went through the crowd, some people looking confused or affronted while Tyr’s detractors nodded.

“I am here today to assure you that these concerns are unfounded,” Tyr said, putting a little extra force into his voice, showing them he was fully in command. “The curse has been broken, and soon, we will welcome a new generation to the bear clan.”

Another, louder cheer. Enthusiasm swept through even the more recalcitrant members of the audience. Tyr made a point of meeting the gaze of those he judged to be on the fence, showing them he could be trusted.

“I’m pleased that my cousin was able to join us today to help me address the questions that have come up. Please help me welcome Rand Harker, son of Whitgar.”

Rand shot him a look of pure hatred as he stepped forward, quickly replacing it with a bland smile before lifting his face to the crowd. Tyr knew that speaking his uncle’s name would infuriate Rand since, like Tyr’s father Attor, Whitgar had been imprisoned for his part in the plot to prevent the curse from being broken.

“Happy to be of assistance...*cousin*,” Rand spat the word like an epithet. Whatever Leodmar had said to convince Rand to go along with the script, he was making little effort to be convincing.

Which was fine. Rand could bitch all he wanted, as long as people heard him publicly recognize Meredith as the chieftain’s mate and the clan’s frue.

“Excellent. In that case—“

“Before we move on,” Rand interrupted, moving in front of Meredith and blocking the crowd’s view of her, “I have a few questions and concerns.”

Here it was—the challenge that Tyr had been lulled into thinking he’d sidestepped. He frowned, forcing down the bolt of fury that gripped him. His claws and fangs buzzed, kept retracted only with great effort.

Meredith had pulled away from Tyr when Rand approached, but he could still sense her pulse racing. Adrenaline scattered her thoughts as fear overcame reason. It wasn't the best timing, considering the audience's rapt attention. He tried reassuring her by drawing her back against his side, his arm around her shoulders, but she only grew more rigid with fear.

This moment—the showdown between two rivals for the title of chieftain—had to be perfect. Rand wasn't stupid—far from it—and he would seize on any mistake as an opportunity to attack.

"I expected as much," Tyr said coldly, meeting his cousin's gaze. "Do have your say."

Rand lifted his chin, unable to mask his arrogance. "Now that the curse has been broken, the clan is united in our determination to bring human women to Evergreen. But the purpose of these women is to breed, and we would all do well to remember it. Your insistence that we accept them as members of our clan is a step too far."

Tyr smirked. Was this the best his cousin could do? "You misunderstanding of the curse, cousin. Review it more carefully, and you'll see that merely conceiving a child is not enough to break it. Every man who wishes to take a mate must meet the requirements, or no daughters will be born."

"Requirements?" Meredith asked. Her voice was fraught with anxiety but far from timid. "What requirements?"

Tyr turned to give her a quick, indulgent smile before facing the crowd. They'd no doubt heard this several times since Kayla had discovered the secret of freeing Evergreen from the curse, but it was hammered home a little further every time it was repeated.

"Every man must value, respect, and love his mate." He waited for the usual murmurs of concern to die down before continuing. "I know how it sounds. You're all thinking it's impossible."

"That's what they're thinking?" Meredith looked horrified. "I hate to break it to you, but that's the bare minimum for any successful long-term relationship."

Tyr gave her a subtle shake of the head. This wasn't the time.

"But I assure you it is more than possible—it is ordained," he continued. "Ryce Stearne and his mate Kayla were faithful to the spirit of the curse, and now she is carrying the first daughter Evergreen has seen in fifty years. My friends, I don't believe for a second there is anything a wolf can do that a

bear can't do twice as well."

The words got the thunderous applause Tyr had been hoping for. He could sense Rand seething as he called for silence and delivered his follow-up line.

"And I intend to prove it to you. Meredith and I are well on our way to fulfilling all of the requirements."

He wasn't prepared for what happened next. Meredith twisted out of his grasp and stared at him, aghast.

Now was not the time for another outburst from her, and he shot her a pointed scowl...and realized he'd underestimated its effect on her. Just as the wine had taken an outsized toll on her, a flash of his fangs caused her face to turn white with fear and her body to teeter on the edge of collapse.

Tyr steadied her impatiently, holding Meredith upright by gripping her upper arm. He was sorry for scaring her, and he'd apologize...just as soon as he was done here.

"And I don't doubt you'll be successful," Rand was saying, too pleased for Tyr's liking. "But what about the rest of us? When do we get to pass through the veil and carry home a mate as you did?"

Tyr should have seen the question coming. He knew the answer, and it wasn't what the crowd wanted to hear.

"Soon," he settled for saying.

"No!" Meredith was shaking, and her voice wobbled, but she seemed determined to make her point. "You can't tell them that!"

Tyr attempted to ignore her. The crowd, buoyed by the promise he'd made, had picked up on Rand's question, and now it ran through them like a chant.

*When do we get mates?*

Tyr forced a smile and waved his hands to settle the audience. When that didn't work, he had no choice but to offer them something, a promise he could actually follow through on.

"Mass travel through the veil will have to wait," he said, riding the wave of their energy. "Winter conditions will make the logistics impossible. But once we return to Sumorden in the spring, I see no reason we can't begin—"

"Stop it!" Meredith ducked out from under his arm, her fear shifting to anger. "Just stop this, Tyr."

Tyr opened his mouth to silence her but found that he couldn't. His stomach twisted at the look of betrayal in her eyes, the disgust that was

directed solely at him.

“Meredith—“ he pleaded. “We can talk about this later.”

She seemed not to have heard him. She also didn’t bother to lower her voice, jabbing her finger at the crowd while glaring at him. “You can’t give all these people permission to go to Earth and kidnap women.”

But that was exactly what he *had* to do for the sake of the clan’s survival.

“We don’t have a choice,” he told her. “Besides, I am the chieftain of this clan. I make the decisions. No one tells me what my people can and cannot do. Not even my mate.”

“Fuck you! You’re a monster,” she cried, stumbling away from him. “You’re all a bunch of fucking monsters!”

Tyr recoiled, shocked by her words and the pure vitriol behind them.

She was obviously in some kind of shock, perhaps triggered by their proximity to Rand or by the unfamiliarity of this world. Tyr should have given her more time to adjust, adapt, accept.

But he couldn’t. Not if he was to stay in power and lead his people out of danger. Sacrifices had to be made by everyone—including his mate.

“That’s enough!”

Tyr’s roar echoed through the square, spittle flying from his exposed fangs. Meredith screamed and tripped over her own feet, falling onto her ass. Even then, she fought him as he attempted to help her up, kicking at him weakly in pure terror.

Tyr didn’t know what to do. If only Meredith understood that she was making everything worse, that fighting him on this risked erasing all the progress they’d made.

She took advantage of his hesitation to scramble to her feet. She leapt off the platform and plunged through the crowd before he could react.

*Fuck.*

Tyr was going to have to deal with her later. Right now, he had to finish what he’d started.

But as he prepared to face the crowd again, he realized they’d barely noticed Meredith’s outburst, electrified by the promise of a mate for every man in the clan. He’d never break through their zeal and get them to listen—not now.

Tyr turned on Rand in fury. This was all his fault—his hunger for power and his devious willingness to do whatever it took to get it.

“I don’t know what you hoped to accomplish today,” Tyr snarled. “But

you didn't succeed in turning our people against me.”

Rand's smile turned Tyr's veins to ice, especially when he tilted his head in the direction Meredith had run.

“They weren't the ones I was trying to turn.”

CHAPTER  
**FOURTEEN**

## MEREDITH

I tore through Wynterhowe like a tornado, propelled by fury and renewed determination to get the fuck out of there.

So far, I'd been thinking only of myself, of escaping this nightmare and returning to everyone and everything I loved back on Earth. But after what I'd just witnessed, that had changed.

It's not like there hadn't been plenty of hints at where Tyr and his clan were heading. While I would have liked to blame fear and too much wine for the fact that I'd ignored them, I was pretty sure it came down to my survival instinct.

*Save yourself, save yourself, save yourself*—humans had that urgent imperative built into them from the start.

But thanks to Tyr, the scales had just fallen from my eyes. I couldn't believe that after all his sweet-talking promises, he had stood up on that platform in front of all his people and given them the green light to ruin hundreds—*thousands*—of lives.

In the seconds after he spoke, it was as if every girl and woman I'd ever known flashed before my eyes, all the potential future victims of this madness. I imagined them stalked and assaulted by terrifying bear-men, dragged through the woods into an alien world where they had no rights and would serve as breeding stock until they outlived their usefulness and were cast aside.

Tina, our letter carrier. D'nae, my old babysitter. My cousins Emily and Gillian, the UPS delivery person, the women who cut my hair and rang up my groceries and walked their dogs down our street. Women of every shape and size and ambition with one thing in common: being of childbearing age.

None of them deserved to go through what I had. What's more, I doubted whether most of them would survive it.

I couldn't let it happen, not without a fight. I hadn't gone looking for a challenge, but someone had to warn women what was coming, and it looked like the only person who could do it was me.

Once that switch was flipped in me, the haze of uncertainty and fear lifted, and I became laser-focused on the steps I needed to take.

I reached the tent unobserved since everyone in town seemed to be at the

square. I grabbed a rucksack from a peg by the tent's entrance and started filling it with things I'd need for the journey—a waterskin Tyr had filled that morning, a fur coat that reached almost to my knees but could double as a sleeping bag, and all the nuts and dried fruit in his cupboard. I would have loved to throw in a compass and a GPS or even a tube of lip balm, but I was going to have to make do with what was available.

For the first time ever, I felt grateful for all the camping and hiking that had been forced on me in the last few years. While I'd hated every minute, I was confident it had given me the skills to survive the forest and make my way back to the veil.

I knew it would take me a hell of a lot longer to retrace my steps than it had taken Tyr to carry me here, at least two hard days' hiking. But at least all that time would give me an opportunity to figure out a battle plan for when I got home.

And it was going to be rough.

I imagined myself in front of a camera, ragged and dirty from the trip and raving about an army of bear-men coming to abduct women. Yeah, even our channel's most devoted followers were likely to be skeptical of a rant like that.

I wasn't worried about my ego. Everyone in my family was accustomed to being written off as attention-seeking conspiracy theorists. At this point, I didn't give a shit what anyone thought of me, especially not when the alternative was keeping quiet as women began disappearing. The thought of watching countless families' terror and devastation on the news was too wretched to even consider.

I was tightening the pack's drawstrings when my head start came to a screeching halt. Tyr entered the tent on a wave of fury, throwing back the flaps so hard the entire structure shuddered.

The image of him baring his fangs at me flashed through my mind, immobilizing me in pure terror. I could only imagine what those brutal claws and viciously sharp teeth could do, and from the expression on his face, Tyr seemed ready to show me.

But I forced myself to face him head-on, thinking of all the women who would suffer if I didn't succeed.

"Get out of my way," I snarled, trying to get past him with no success. He took up all the room in the tent in more ways than one, and trying to elbow my way around him was like trying to walk straight through a brick wall.



“I thought we were past this, Meredith,” he said tiredly, gently pushing me back.

The fact that he was so calm somehow infuriated me even more. “Is that what you thought? That you could put me in a dress, set a jug of wine in front of me, and get some guy to sing the world’s longest and most boring song, and I’d forget all about being abducted?”

Tyr’s eyes softened as if I’d hurt his feelings. “You didn’t like the poem?”

“*Oh my God!*” I gave up on trying to get around him and started pacing, getting angrier with each step, while he just stood there watching me like he had all day. After a few minutes, I couldn’t stand it anymore and got in his face again.

“*Get. Out. Of my way.*”

Tyr’s expression darkened, and a tic at the corner of his mouth jumped. I knew it meant trouble, yet it gave me a weird thrill to provoke him.

“I know your introduction to Wynterhowe didn’t turn out as we’d hoped,” he said tightly, sounding more like our tight-ass family accountant than a member of the bear clan, “but you will stop this ridiculous tantrum immediately. You’re behaving like a child.”

“You think this a *tantrum*?” We seemed to be switching places, his patronizing words bringing out my feral side. “I’ll show you a tantrum!”

I started pummeling Tyr as hard as I could with my fists, getting in a few kicks for good measure, but it soon became evident that my worst had no effect on him at all. I might as well have been raging against a boulder. It wasn’t until I nearly landed my knee in his balls that he bothered to defend himself, grabbing me by the waist, picking me up, and holding me at eye level.

“I said *stop*.” His tone was the same as when he’d silenced me in front of the crowd, but at least there weren’t any fangs this time.

“Or what?” I demanded, the humiliation of being held in the air with my feet dangling making me reckless. “Are you going to rip into me with those claws you’re so proud of?”

Tyr looked away guiltily and set me back down without releasing me. At least there were some lines he was ashamed to cross, I thought, before remembering that I despised him.

“I didn’t mean for that to happen. Rand backed me into a corner—but I’m sorry I lost my temper. You have to know that I’d never hurt you.”

“Why? Because I’m your *mate*?” Tyr flinched at my disdain, but I plowed on. “But I’m not your mate, and I’m never going to be. You admitted as much yourself.”

“I did no such thing!”

Oh, that temper of his—it took so little to set it off. “You said a man has to value, respect, and love a woman if they are to be true mates. You, on the other hand, kidnapped me—“

“Showing how much I *value* you—“

“—and now you’re holding me captive.”

“While allowing you to sleep alone during our courtship because I *respect* you.” Tyr genuinely appeared to believe he was making a sound argument. “And after our third date, I will take you to bed and make passionate *love* to you. Value, respect, love—all three requirements to lift the curse.”

I gaped at him in complete consternation. “I don’t know why I’m wasting my breath,” I muttered. “Let me go and get out of my way.”

He didn’t, of course. “So you can get lost in the woods and die from the cold or an animal attack?”

“So I can go back home and warn everyone that you monsters are planning to come take all the women and turn us into sex slaves.”

His reaction was not what I expected. His shoulders sagged, and though I was pretty sure he still wanted to hit something, I didn’t think it was me anymore.

“You think we want this?” he said quietly. “We don’t have a choice. Our world is dying.”

“So the women of my world have to pay? You know, if the clans had bothered to figure this out right after the queen died, you would still have plenty of your own women to mate with. But you couldn’t be bothered. You procrastinated, figured someone else would take care of it, just like—“

I was going to say ‘just like a man,’ but that didn’t really fit.

So instead I went with, “Just like a dumb bear.”

The words found their mark. Tyr’s eyes turned flinty, and his muscles tensed, the cords in his neck standing out in menace. For a second, I really thought he was about to attack me—but then he picked me up instead.

“Where are you taking me?” I shrieked.

“To bed.”

Panic shot through every inch of me, and I struggled to break free, writhing and arching my back while I shoved at his chest as uselessly as ever.

“You’re not going anywhere, Meredith,” Tyr growled, tossing me onto the bed. “Not now. Not ever.”

I scrambled to my knees and tried to throw myself past him, but—*surprise*—he was quicker, stronger, etc., etc., etc.

In seconds, I was on my back again, held there with one hand while he tore a strip of fabric from the sheer canopy. As calmly as if he was tying up a dog, he grabbed my wrist and tied it to one of the bed posts with a couple of sturdy knots, then did the same with my other wrist and both my feet.

“You think this will break me?” My wrath was laced with hysteria. “I’d rather chew off my own arm than let this happen to anyone else.”

“I appreciate the warning.”

The chill in Tyr’s words made my breath catch—as did the roughness with which he tied a gag over my mouth. Despite my brazen words, the knowledge of what was about to happen was nearly more than I could bear.

But then he walked away.

He was all the way to the entrance of the tent when I realized he wasn’t about to rip off my clothes and ravage me.

He turned and, catching the expression on my face, shook his head in disgust—and I knew it was because I had thought him capable of violating me in that way.

I almost would have preferred if he’d raged at me then. Reminded me of his promises never to hurt me—and of his honor.

Instead, he turned away. “Since you insist on acting like a child, I’m sending Mildritha to act as your nursemaid.” A strip of sunlight streamed across the floor as he lifted the flap. “When she lets me know that your tantrum is over, perhaps I’ll return.”

Then he was gone, and silence descended. I knew I was lucky to have gotten off so easily.

Despite being bound and gagged, the chances of that second date had gone way down.

CHAPTER  
**FIFTEEN**

## MEREDITH

“Try to see it from the chieftain’s point of view,” Mildritha pleaded. She’d been keeping up her end of the one-sided conversation since the minute she arrived that morning. I’d tried to signal I wasn’t interested in talking—not too difficult when you have a gag in your mouth. But every hour or so, in between the chores I was pretty sure didn’t really need doing, she gave it another shot.

The general theme of her monologues was how unfair I was being to Tyr, that I’d gotten the wrong idea about not just him but the bear clan in general. Didn’t I understand how merciful he was to punish me in private for my disobedience, sparing me the shame of public humiliation?

But Mildritha’s restlessness told a story that her words did not. There was a reason she was dusting the furniture for the second time, why every axe and dagger and knife on the wall had been polished to a shine—she didn’t want to face the doubts I was pretty sure she kept hidden behind her fervid defense of the men of her clan.

It didn’t seem to bother her that, tied up as I was, all I could do was follow her around the room with my eyes from the bed.

“What kind of leader would Tyr,” she demanded, getting on her knees to flick a rag at invisible dust bunnies beneath one of the tables, “if he stood by and watched his people die out when he knew that he could have prevented it?”

I coughed, not so much in response to her question but because my mouth had become painfully dry. The cotton rag lodged in my throat, and the cough turned into a full-on fit, my eyes bulging as I strained against the ropes, unable to get enough air into my lungs.

Mildritha came to my aid immediately, panic in her eyes as she grabbed a paring knife and cut through the knots. She pulled out the gag and threw it to the ground, pounding my back until I caught my breath. Then she brought me a cup of water and held it to my lips.

I drank greedily, so parched that my lips and tongue felt thick and useless, and water dripped down my neck. I’d never tasted anything more delicious, and I could feel it reviving my chapped lips and chafed skin as I drank.

“Thank you,” I rasped when the water was gone.

Mildritha was watching me with a cloaked expression. She made no move to reach for the gag and tied it back in place; instead, she heaved a heavy sigh and pulled a chair beside the bed.

“You’re breaking my heart, Frue,” she said sadly. “I don’t want you to suffer. But things don’t have to be this way. Tyr is a reasonable man. If you apologized—“

“Never,” I snapped. “I don’t know how you can call him reasonable. Tyr kidnapped me, Mildritha. Took me away from my family, my job, my life. And now he’s planning on doing it to hundreds, maybe thousands of other women.”

“But only because there’s no other way to save our people!” Mildritha insisted, twisting the fabric of her apron in her lap. “Besides, your world has plenty of women. Millions, from what I understand. Certainly, a few won’t be missed.”

Her words had a hollow, rote quality that made me suspect they weren’t her own. Someone else had repeated them often enough that maybe they’d begun to make some twisted sense to her—especially since she didn’t have the power to change anything. How better to keep people in line, after all, than to gaslight them into believing it was for your own good?

But that same hollowness in her tone, coupled with her refusal to look at me as she spoke, gave me hope. Because at some level, Mildritha knew damn well that the things she was trying to convince me of weren’t actually for my own good. They weren’t for *anyone’s* good.

“I can name several people who are missing me right now,” I said, then had to clear my throat because I hadn’t actually allowed myself to think about them until this moment, and it brought me to the verge of tears. “My family’s probably worried sick about me. All they know is that I vanished. They’re probably thinking the worst. I’ve got parents, Mildritha, and brothers. Aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, neighbors...”

“Of course, Frue.” Mildritha stroked my hair gently, combing out the tangles. “You’re obviously a very special lady.”

“But that’s the thing,” I objected. “I’m not. I’m ordinary, no different than any other woman you’d pass in the street on Earth. And yet, I’m still important to the people who love me. I don’t think anyone is expendable. I mean, you don’t see yourself as disposable, do you?”

Mildritha didn’t have an answer for that. At first, I thought she just didn’t want to concede the point, but then I saw the turmoil in her eyes.

“I don’t know about that, Frue,” she finally mumbled, and it made me want to find the person who made her feel that way and make him pay.

“Please call me Meredith,” I implored her. I’d spent more time with her than anyone but Tyr, and that meant something to me. “It’s what my friends call me.”

She was already shaking her head. “It wouldn’t be proper.”

“But there’s no one here but you and me. And I won’t tell anyone, I promise. Would it help if I called you something less formal, too? Like Millie?”

“*Millie?*” She tried out the sound of the nickname before a hint of a smile flashed across her lips. “I like it. The chieftain is right, you know. When he calls you a wildcat.”

I laughed. “I’ve been called worse.”

Mildritha hastened to correct me. “I don’t think he means it as an insult, Fr—Meredith. More of an endearment, like when my Vidar used to call me his spitfire.”

I couldn’t imagine anyone using that word to describe this patient, modest woman who readily complied with Tyr’s every command, no matter how unreasonable. “Vidar?”

“He was my husband.” I heard the shadow of old grief in the word. “I lost him to a border skirmish with the ravens over twenty years ago.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thank you. He was a good man, like your Tyr in some ways.”

Tyr wasn’t my anything, but that was beside the point. “I hope he never tied you up like this.”

A bit of color rose in Mildritha’s cheeks, chasing away her sadness. “Never out of anger, anyway.”

It took a moment for the words to sink in, and then I gasped. “Millie!”

“I’m sorry, Frue,” she said hastily. “That was terribly inappropriate.”

“No, it was awesome,” I said, delighted by the idea of this lovely woman having a freaky streak. “I’m glad your marriage was so...spicy. I hope you’re still able to have that kind of fun.”

She seemed taken aback. “But I told you, Vidar died decades ago.”

I’d obviously put my foot in my mouth. “And no doubt you loved him dearly,” I backpedaled. “But surely one of those brawny bears out there has caught your eye in the last twenty years?”

Mildritha looked decidedly uncomfortable. “This must be another

difference between our worlds. In Evergreen, widows are not permitted to remarry. The only exception is if a woman's husband dies before they conceive a child. Once a woman has children, her life belongs to them."

My righteous indignation surged yet again. "So you're expected to live the rest of your life alone just because you've had a kid?"

"I was lucky enough to have three children before Vidar left me," she said with a note of pride.

And those three kids had to be full-grown adults by now, capable of taking care of themselves. Had it ever occurred to them that their mother might want something more from life? That she might be lonely after their father's death?

"I take it from your expression that things are different where you come from," Millie said when I didn't respond.

"You could say that," I told her. "For one thing, this—" I wriggled my bound hands.. "—would be considered a felony. And widows like you can date whoever they like."

She peered at me, apparently unsure if I was teasing. "Surely not whoever I pleased."

"A beautiful, elegant woman like you?" It was no exaggeration; Millie would be striking in any world. "You'd have men lining up around the block."

"Now I know you're lying," she said with a laugh.

"I'm not. If we put your photo up on a dating app, you'd be swimming in matches."

Millie gave me a sidelong look. "Photo? App? I'm sorry, I don't know these words."

"A photo is a...a realistic picture of you. And a dating app..." That was a bit harder. "It's like a public list of single people who are available to date, so other people can arrange to meet them."

Millie seemed skeptical. "A list of single women, you mean. Right? For men to choose from?"

"No. Men and women," I said emphatically. "And both can ask for an introduction or a date."

For a moment, Millie didn't say a word. She just absently rubbed at a spot on the bedframe that she'd missed while dusting. I had a feeling I'd blown her mind.

"But surely no man would search for an older woman on this list," she



finally said, her voice tentative.

I had to hide a smile. “Sure they would. There are all kinds of dating apps and all kinds of people on them. Men who like men, women who like women, those who like everybody. There are definitely ones for older people to find each other. There are even lists for people who liked to get tied to the bed once in a while.”

Millie caught my teasing tone and blushed. “But you’ve never used these lists—these apps—before, have you?”

“Of course I have. Everyone I know does. These days, it’s hard to meet people any other way.” Especially when you spend most of your time hiding in the woods with your family, I didn’t say.

“But then, why did you never choose a mate?”

She had me there. There were lots of reasons, not the least of which was too many of the guys I’d gone out with turned out to be duds. But Millie didn’t need to know that—not if I wanted to convince her that Earth offered so much for a woman like her and that she should escape with me and lead me to the veil.

“Sometimes a woman doesn’t want a mate.” It was the truth, after all. “Sometimes all she wants is a good time, and if a guy’s got a handsome face and a hot body, so much the better.”

Millie was so scandalized that she leapt up from the chair. At least, I thought that was the reason until I saw the hulking figure blocking the sun in the opening.

“Mildritha!” Tyr’s voice boomed through the tent.

“Don’t you dare yell at her!” I hollered back, but he didn’t so much as look at me.

“I sent you here to watch my mate,” he railed. “To make sure she that she didn’t do anything stupid. Maybe even talk some sense into her. But now I come back and find you gossiping like a couple of old washerwomen.”

Gossiping? How long had he been standing there eavesdropping? Whatever he’d heard, it had obviously set him off.

“I’m sorry, Chieftain,” Millie said, edging past him. “It won’t happen again.”

“See that it doesn’t.”

Tyr stepped aside to let her leave, only then turning his attention to me. I glared at him defiantly, something that came more easily the less I had to lose. “You shouldn’t have talked to her that way. We were just joking

around.”

Tyr behaved as if he hadn't heard me. His lips twisted in an icy parody of a smile. He didn't so much walk toward me as prowl, a lethal threat in every step. My bravado evaporated, and I tugged futilely at the ropes.

“I don't think you were joking, Meredith. Not when you were describing the pleasure you take with all the other men you've dated.”

That wasn't what I'd been saying, but he didn't seem interested in a more thorough explanation. I felt more vulnerable than ever with him looming over me, unable to move more than a few inches. There were so many terrible things he could do to me while I was bound to the bed.

“You should have told me sooner instead of wasting my time,” he said coldly. “While I was trying to win you, planning the perfect evening, showing you around your new home, tempting you with wine and song...”

His gaze was unfocused, his thoughts unreadable. But then he seemed to come to a decision and pulled a wicked-looking knife from his belt.

“...when the whole time all you wanted was a good time and a hot body.”

CHAPTER  
**SIXTEEN**

## MEREDITH

“Please don’t,” I whispered, my eyes glued to the razor-sharp blade of the knife. “Whatever you’re thinking of doing to me, it’s not the answer.”

Tyr’s eyes didn’t leave mine as he tested the blade, running his fingertip along its edge.

“What is it that you expect me to do...Meredith?” He said my name like a taunt, letting his gaze slide down my body. My dress had ridden up as I shifted position and, unable to adjust it, was bunched almost to my waist, leaving my legs parted and exposed.

I’d never felt more vulnerable. At the same time, Tyr left a trail of heat in my body everywhere he looked, the inescapable sexual threat inherent in the tableau.

No: not a threat.

As angry as Tyr might be, his words weren’t so much a threat as a promise. And that idea made me shiver uncontrollably.

“After all, you’re the expert,” he was saying. “I didn’t realize you had so much experience. Please enlighten me, as I have never had a woman tied to my bed before.”

“You misunderstood,” I said frantically as he lowered himself to the bed next to me. “That’s not what Millie and I were talking about.”

“Oh, so she’s *Millie* now?” His tone was sharp. This wasn’t the jovial suitor of our date but someone more dangerous, closer to the blurring of man and bear.

“It’s just a nickname.”

Tyr reached for my bound hands, but instead of untying me, he traced his fingertip along the underside of my wrist, as light as the wings of a moth, lighting sparklers of sensation as he went. I trembled when he reached the inside of my elbow, my breath catching in my throat.

“I see,” he said. “So because you two are suddenly such good friends, you decided that this was the perfect time to tell *Millie* all about your habit of finding nameless men to satisfy your sexual desires.”

“That’s not—ow!”

I shrieked as Tyr plunged his fingers into my hair and twisted, forcing my

head up. It didn't hurt so much as shock me.

“Either that, or you were trying to enchant her with your stories of seduction so she would agree to help you escape?”

There was nowhere to look but into Tyr's snarling calculation. I had underestimated him, mistaking his confusion over our cultural differences for naivete—for stupidity.

But Tyr was no fool.

“Which was it, Meredith?” he demanded, his face dangerously close to my own as a wild energy crackled between us.

I knew what was called for: my best hope was to grovel, apologize, and swear to do better. But that energy...it drove me to do something else.

“I warned you,” I said fiercely. “I told you I'd do anything to get out of here.”

I held my breath, on the knife edge of fear and excitement, as Tyr held me fast. I was waiting for him to do something, and though I couldn't have named it, some part of me silently urged him on.

When Tyr abruptly released his grip, dropping me back on the bed, I was flooded with relief...and disappointment. His absence left an emptiness, even if it was just withdrawing his touch.

I didn't know what that meant. I wasn't sure I wanted to. For another second, his gaze flashed between my eyes to my lips and back again. I realized I was holding my breath, waiting for his next move—not that I could have expressed what outcome I was hoping for.

“That's true, at least.” He turned his back on me as he spoke. “You did warn me.”

He was angry and frustrated—that much was obvious. But whether it was because I still meant to escape or because I didn't give him the excuse he needed to vent all of his displeasure by kissing me hard and taking me even harder, I wasn't sure.

Still, passion had been stirred up inside him, and all that energy had to go somewhere. I shouldn't have been surprised when he raised his face to the heavens and roared.

His feral, untamed rage shook the ground beneath us. I could hear the wings of dozens of birds flapping as they took flight outside the tent in fear. I could sense the stillness in the camp, the cessation of village life for a moment as the reverberations echoed among the settlement.

I should have been afraid, but I wasn't. And I can't explain why not. It

was as if some kind of internal wildness that I didn't know I possessed answered his call.

I froze as I watched his blunt claws push through his fingers, but I didn't struggle or pull away.

Not until he turned to face me again and I saw that he'd mastered his passion. Tyr's eyes were cold and empty, his mouth a tight line.

*Now, that was a terrifying sight.*

"Whatever you were scheming, Meredith, you failed. I don't know if you were trying to fuck me or confuse me or—" Tyr rubbed his face roughly, grinding his palms into his eyes. "But it didn't work. It won't ever work."

He was still sitting on the edge of the bed, only inches away from me—and his claws had not retracted. When he leaned closer, I had the fleeting thought that this was when he would kill me—and something inside me erupted, that dogged part of me that refused to let him win.

"No," I snarled, ignoring the tremor in my voice. "You don't want to do this."

"Even if that was true, it doesn't matter. You've left me no choice."

He raised his arm, his entire body tensing, and I knew I'd lost. I squeezed my eyes shut, knowing there was only time for a single thought before my death.

*He might kill me...but he would never win me.*

There was a whoosh of air. A sharp jerk. My body went limp.

But I wasn't dead. My eyes flew open to see the ropes of silk fall to the floor. He'd severed them cleanly, and now he was slicing through my ankle bonds before his claws retracted.

It didn't immediately occur to me to run. Instead, I rubbed the abraded skin of my wrists, trying to get the feeling back in them. "Are you letting me go?"

He laughed, the bleakest sound I had ever heard.

"Never."

He went to the wall that held his weapons and tools and returned with heavy rope, then began knotting it.

"Why did you cut me loose if you're just going to tie me up again?"

"Because you've proved you can't be trusted." He grabbed my arm and yanked me to my feet. "And because you're too clever. If I let you keep your freedom, you'll run. If I leave you with a servant or guard, you'll attempt to poison them against me."

He wrapped the rope twice around my waist and tied it tightly enough that it almost constricted my breath. Then he knotted the other end to his belt.

“What the hell are you doing?” I demanded, though I already knew.

“Putting you on a leash,” he growled, “like the wild animal you are. But I’m warning you, Meredith, don’t think you can outlast me. Only one of us is going to be tamed—and it sure as fuck isn’t going to be me.”

“I’d rather you killed me!” I spat back, the lie the only ammunition I had left.

“Too damn bad,” Tyr said coldly. “I told you I’d never hurt you. And unlike you, I never lie.”

CHAPTER  
**SEVENTEEN**



TYR

“I ’ll fucking kill you in your sleep!”

Tyr rolled his eyes as he plodded grimly through the village, dragging his mate behind him. Meredith’s voice was little more than a rasp at this point, worn raw from screaming at him, but she refused to stop.

That was his mate in a nutshell: the woman had no damn quit in her. Tyr’s duties had started the moment he’d left the tent with his weekly meeting with the orchard overseer and ended only after dinner with the newest warriors to have earned the rank, and through it all, Meredith had fought him at every turn.

When she’d exhausted herself with kicking and hitting and struggling with the rope binding her to him, he’d had to resort to dragging her behind him. Halfway through the village, the head drayman offered Tyr one of the sledges normally used to haul firewood over the sandy earth.

But instead of gratitude, Meredith let out a fresh string of threats and curses. Though maybe “fresh” wasn’t the best way to describe them since, by this point, he’d heard them a thousand times before.

She was going to kill him. Throw him off a cliff. Slit his throat in the night. Drown him in his soup.

The woman might be a hellcat, but she was one with a vivid imagination.

Still, if she thought to earn the sympathy of the clan with her complaints, she was badly mistaken.

The sight of the new frue being kept on a leash might have been novel, but it was hardly the worst punishment a man had been forced to mete out to a stubborn or uncooperative mate. Besides, the chieftain had the right to punish any member of the clan for any infraction as he saw fit, something Tyr’s father had taken full and questionable advantage of all the years of his reign.

If anything, Tyr suspected that his people thought Meredith was getting off easy after her behavior in the square earlier. It wasn’t the rebellious speech—such outbursts were common in public discourse, as bears were known for their passionate and fiery nature—so much as the fact that a woman had dared to speak to her man that way.

All of which was making him begin to think that he’d made a mistake.

Not just because Meredith's presence had disrupted all of his meetings but because letting her continue doing so risked talk that the chieftain couldn't—or wouldn't—control his new mate, something he could ill afford when his leadership was already being challenged.

But that wasn't even the worst of it. Tyr had acted out of frustration and anger, something that often got him in trouble.

Overhearing Meredith's talk of her past lovers had inflamed his raging jealousy, making him want to do a lot more than bind her to his side—though not the things Meredith had feared.

And even that was an unbearable provocation. How could she think he would hurt her, take her unwillingly, when he had given his promise to never do such a thing? Having a mate was turning out to be a lot more complicated than Tyr had expected, primarily because he couldn't use his lifelong favorite tool for settling disputes—*force*.

But this jealousy, the thought of another man's hands on Meredith's body, made Tyr want to destroy something. Fortunately, the depth of his fury was balanced by the power of his hunger for her.

Tyr didn't want to hurt her. He wanted—*needed*—the opposite. To bind her not to him but to his bed, where he would take her over and over in every possible way until he had proved to her that no man in either of their worlds could pleasure her the way he could. To drive the memories of other lovers out of her head so completely that their names became dust.

A lesser man might have feared that his inexperience—the fact that, like every other member of his generation, Tyr had never made love to a woman—would make him a clumsy lover. But he'd had no experience on the battlefield the first time he cut down an enemy, yet he'd returned home a hero. He'd had no preparation for his unexpected rise to chieftain but would be the one to bring them back from the verge of extinction.

Tyr was a bear, and that meant he could do anything...other than figuring out how to tame his mate, apparently.

He'd seen the smirks when she threatened to cut off his balls with a rusty blade or push him off a cliff, when she called him every name she could think of using language that made the young warriors blush. Instead of inciting his anger, however, it had only driven him wild with need. He couldn't put her out of his mind, no matter how he tried, and not just because she was so damn loud.

No matter how diligently Tyr attempted to focus on crop projections, or

training regimens, or storehouse inventories, his mind was full of her presence. The tension of the rope binding them together was a constant reminder of her writhing in his arms. Her scent was intoxicating, her voice electric. With the day finally over, Tyr didn't know if it would be a relief or a torment to finally be alone with her in his tent.

Although he probably should have guessed it would be the latter.

Tyr had ordered an iron ring be bolted to the tent's center pole while they were out but didn't trust Meredith enough yet to use it. Instead, he untied her from his waist and bound her to his wrist instead.

She collapsed onto the bed in stony silence. Tyr settled in next to her, expecting to sleep even better than he had in the barracks, knowing there was no way Meredith could make trouble with him nearby. That she couldn't turn a trusted servant against him in a matter of minutes. Couldn't taunt his guards with her ridiculous threats.

Meredith was his responsibility, and he would deal with her decisively as soon...just as they'd both had some rest.

She'd crawled as far from him as she could, wedged between the wall and the mattress's edge, and turned her back to him, leaving several feet between them. Nevertheless, he figured he owed her a warning.

"I am not a deep sleeper," he told her. "If you try to escape in the night, I'll know."

Not that she stood a chance. The rope was made of manila hemp, the strongest fiber used by the clan. Even a runaway horse couldn't break it.

Meredith made no response, and Tyr extinguished the lamp and closed his eyes. But sleep didn't come.

She was both too far away and too close.

It would be easy enough to touch her. All he had to do was reach across the bed, and he could realize all the dreams that had kept him awake during thousands of lonely nights. It was a wonder he hadn't given himself blisters from all the jerking off he'd done. But Tyr knew better than to try it now. Not just because of the potential awkwardness, but because the frustration of such a pale substitute would probably kill him.

Instead, he passed the night in fitful dozing interrupted by Meredith's every soft sigh, every shift of her body, every breath of her scent. When the first light of dawn finally seeped into the tent, Tyr was both relieved to finally have the wretched night over and dreading the day that lay ahead.

As well, he might have.

Meredith woke that moment in a foul mood, too, glaring at him in silence as he dressed. The iron ring had been handy for that, though the constant tying and untying of the rope was wearisome.

As soon as they reached the communal dining area, however, she found her voice. As she mounded her plate high and tore through a breakfast that would have sustained a warrior three times her size, she kept up a steady stream of vituperative commentary—on Tyr’s character, his appearance, even his virility—raising eyebrows all around them until a servant took her plate away. Meredith thanked the woman and added, “I’m going to need all the energy I can get to escape.”

Things didn’t improve as Tyr went about his duties that day...or the next, or the next. After three tortuous days and nights of contention, strife, and aching blue balls, Tyr was no closer to taming Meredith than ever.

Something had to give. Exhausted and out of ideas, Tyr tied Meredith to the iron ring and ordered Colbrand, his most trusted warrior and the guard he’d posted outside the tent that first night, to watch her.

This time, Tyr took precautions, forbidding Colbrand in no uncertain terms to speak even a single word to his mate, no matter what she said or did. He ordered the warrior to not even react to anything she said. His only job was to watch her like a hawk and make sure she didn’t try to escape.

Once that was taken care of, Tyr went to see the only person he trusted to help.

He found Leodmar enjoying the unseasonably warm autumn evening outside his tent while his mate tidied up after their evening meal inside. Leodmar was the rare man who preferred the company of his wife to the communal meals served in the square. The pair was still happily mated after several decades, as evidenced by the second chair that awaited her when she was finished.

Tyr greeted Leodmar with a heartiness that belied his apprehension, knowing his advisor would see straight through his false cheer. The man seemed unsurprised by his arrival and bid him take a seat.

“I see you’ve left your shadow at home,” Leodmar said drily.

Tyr grunted. “Colbrand is watching her so I could come talk to you.”

Leodmar’s mate emerged from the tent, carrying a jug of wine and two cups. Leodmar stood to take them from her, saying, “You remember Denegyth. The chieftain has come for a word, love.”

A broad, handsome woman with permanent dimples in her cheeks and a

prodigious bosom under her pristine white smock, Denegyth bowed deeply. “It’s an honor to welcome you to our home, Chieftain.”

“Thank you. Please, stay,” Tyr said before she could duck back inside. “I believe I might need your advice as much as your husband’s.”

Startled, Denegyth nevertheless bowed a second time. “If it pleases you, Chieftain,” she said before taking a seat in the chair Leodmar had hastened to bring outside for her, along with a third ceramic cup.

“So this *is* about your little hellcat,” Leodmar chuckled. “I suspected as much.”

Denegyth poured the wine, moving with a natural grace, and handed Tyr the first cup. “Your hellcat?” she echoed, her bashfulness fading.

“The new frue,” Leodmar explained.

Tyr caught the flash of a smile that Denegyth quickly covered with her hand. “Ah,” she said, a world of meaning in the single syllable.

He let out a sigh that had been building all day. “I take it my mate has been a topic of conversation among the women of the clan.”

Denegyth glanced at her mate before giving a noncommittal shrug.

“It’s all right, love,” Leodmar said. “Tyr is not his father. He appreciates knowing the truth.”

“Please,” Tyr added. “Speak as freely as possible. You’ll be doing me a great favor.”

This time, Denegyth met his gaze. “Some of the women think Meredith is brave standing up to you day after day. Others...” She seemed to cast about for the right words. “Others wonder why she doesn’t just do what the rest of us have always done.”

“But that’s it exactly,” Tyr said. “Fall into line and do as her mate says.”

“Gods, no,” Denegyth said with a laugh. “Most of us women only pretend to do what you ask, then the second your backs are turned, we go back to doing whatever we’d planned in the first place.”

Tyr nearly spit out his wine.

“Denegyth, love,” Leodmar chided, trying to hide a smile.

“But you said the chieftain appreciates the truth,” she said innocently.

“Ah, yes. Still, few men can bear to hear the *whole* truth in one go.”

“Thank you, Denegyth, for your honesty,” Tyr said, even though he’d seemed to have lost both the upper hand and the thread of the conversation. “But I need to *tame* Meredith. She must learn to accept her place here among us. The future of the bear clan depends on it.”

Leodmar nodded thoughtfully. “The trouble seems to stem from the fact that your frue is human, sir. If she were a bear, it would be a simple matter to wear down her defenses, but no one knows what goes on in the mind of a human.”

“I must disagree,” Denegyth said. “Frue Meredith isn’t a complete mystery.”

Tyr grasped at this sliver of hope. “Go on.”

“It’s just that you call her a hellcat, Chieftain...”

“As your mate can attest.”

“Indeed,”Leodmar said gravely.

“But that’s where you went wrong!” Denegyth said. “You’re trying to tame her as if she were a dog, not a cat.”

Tyr frowned. The woman wasn’t making sense. “She is neither, obviously. It was a figure of speech.”

“Obviously,” Denegyth replied patiently. “But it does speak to her personality. One tames a dog by asserting dominance because it craves acceptance. As a pack animal, it’s primed to accept that its survival and happiness depend on obedience. But cats are independent creatures. They think and act for themselves. Trying to assert dominance over one will only bring out her claws.”

Tyr thought about that for a moment. “If you’re right, there’s no hope,” he said flatly. “No matter what I do, Meredith will fight me.”

“Not at all. You just need to change your tactics. Do you know the orange tabby that often sleeps in Widow Spooner’s tent?”

Tyr nodded; the cat had become fat from the remains of the widow’s meals. “Waste of fish, that one.”

“Perhaps,” Denegyth said. “But the creature could easily run with the mousers that live on the edge of the village, but the tabby knows that life is better and easier with someone willing to provide it with a soft, warm bed and a full belly. But the widow’s cat—“

“—stays because it wants to.” Smiling,Leodmar took his wife’s hand. “Some might say that a mate who stays by choice is worth the effort.”

Tyr took a sip of the dense ruby wine that tasted of the summer vines. He thought back to the first night with Meredith, when it seemed briefly that she might have warming to him before everything had gone wrong.

Maybe Denegyth was right. At the very least, it was worth a try.

“If I were to take you at your word,” he said slowly, “what should I offer

her? I don't think she'd go for fish heads."

Denegyth laughed and squeezed her husband's hand. "If you're serious about trying, I can tell you *exactly* what to do."

CHAPTER  
**EIGHTEEN**



## MEREDITH

“So...know any good jokes?”

Colbrand, the guard Tyr had left me with, didn't answer. He didn't even blink. I wasn't surprised. Even though it had been a little over an hour since Tyr had left, I hadn't heard a single word out of the guy.

“Okay, I've got one. Why does a robot make a terrible lover?” Nothing. “Because he just nuts and bolts.”

Personally, I thought it was hilarious when my cousin Dave had shared it. But Colbrand didn't react.

“I guess it's funnier if you know what a robot is,” I allowed, letting my gaze drift up to the ceiling.

Damn, I was bored. Being bound to a hot-blooded, gorgeous hunk of a man was one thing; being tied to a rusty iron ring was another entirely.

“What kind of name is Colbrand?” I asked just to fill the silence. “Does it mean anything?”

The man didn't say a word. Clearly, he wasn't the kind who could be drawn into a conversation easily. He hadn't even spared me a single glance since taking up his post at the entrance of the tent. His slate-colored eyes had stayed fixed on the wall behind me.

At least his refusal to engage with me meant I felt entitled to stare at him all I liked. Dressed in the deep red fur-trimmed coat worn by all of the bear guards, he wore a wickedly sharp axe strapped to his back along with a heavy club and a short, blunt-handled dagger at his belt.

He was shorter than Tyr by a couple of inches, but his shoulders were just as wide, and his arms just as thick. He might have been considered good-looking if he wasn't twisting up his face like there was a stick up his ass.

But it was probably his serious demeanor that made Tyr trust him enough to leave him with me. He certainly had the menacing presence down.

“Not that names need to mean anything,” I continued blabbering. “I read somewhere once that my name means ‘great leader’, but I'm pretty sure my mom just liked the way it sounded.”

The guard stood so still I could barely see his chest move as he breathed. Honestly, it was kind of impressive.

“If I had to guess just by looking at you, I'd say Colbrand means ‘slightly

intimidating statue.”

Finally—a reaction! Colbrand’s gaze shifted from the invisible spot on the wall that they’d fixed on to me for a second.

But shit—what a second. During that brief moment, Colbrand’s disciplined warrior mask fell away, and I caught a glimpse of the roiling, furious violence underneath. It was enough to make me suck in a startled breath.

“Sorry about the *slightly* part,” I rushed to smooth things over. “But don’t feel too bad. You’re excellent at the silent treatment. It’s just that I’ve just spent three days literally tied to the intimidation master. This is like a vacation for me.”

In a way, it was true. For the past seventy-two hours, I hadn’t even been allowed to go to the bathroom without Tyr right outside the lavatory building, the rope connecting us running under the door. I did my best to make Tyr suffer in return by keeping up a constant stream of criticism, using every curse I’d ever heard the men of my family utter, and coming up with a few new ones of my own.

But it still took me by surprise when, without a word of explanation, he’d untied me from his belt and bound me to the tent post.

Then he left. I had no idea where he was going or how long he planned to be gone, and I certainly wasn’t about to find out from Mr. Grumpypants here. Still, it was better than being left alone.

I was used to spending lots of time on my own, so it came as a surprise to me when real loneliness set in a few days ago. Other than the time I’d spent with Millie, I’d had only Tyr for company, and now he was barely speaking to me.

I’d tried talking to the people we encountered as Tyr dragged me around the settlement, but that had been a bust; one stony look from Tyr and even the friendliest-looking among them clammed up.

If I was frustrated, Tyr seemed on the verge of spitting nails. But the way I figured it, he had no one to blame but himself. He was the one who’d insisted on making a spectacle of our relationship, after all. Now, he was stuck dealing with the consequences of his actions.

Deep down, I knew he was worried that any conversation I had with a villager would just be a cover for getting them to help me escape...and he wouldn’t be wrong.

But even I couldn’t pull that off in a casual encounter. That kind of

subterfuge took time and finesse. Given the chance, I'd work the conversation around to the Earthly pleasures I missed, tempting them into imagining themselves sampling delectable foods, riding in self-powered vehicles, and shopping in markets where everything they could imagine was available year-round. At this point, I'd tell them that wine flowed from faucets and the streets were paved with gold if it convinced someone to help me get home.

I doubted that kind of tactic would work with Colbrand, though. He seemed too stern and humorless to be tempted by all-night diners and video games.

But before I could find out, Tyr returned, throwing open the flap on the tent and clapping the guard's shoulder.

"Thank you, Colbrand," he said. "I tried to make it quick. I hope my mate didn't give you too much trouble."

"Not at all, Chieftain."

I was still marveling that Colbrand could speak when he ducked out.

I waited for Tyr to hook me up to his belt again, but he made no move toward me, staying by the entrance with his arms crossed. I tried to mirror him, to let him know how little I cared that he'd been gone...but the truth was that he still intimidated me more than I wanted to let on.

All my outdoorsmanship training had come in handy over the past few days, especially the tricks I'd learned to hide my fear so as not to provoke a predatory animal. When confronting, say, a rattlesnake or a mountain lion, the idea was to 'get big,' to use large, sweeping gestures and be as loud as possible without making any sudden moves or attempting to run. The few times I'd had to use the technique—once on a wild boar and a couple times with vicious dogs—it had worked like a charm.

But Tyr was another matter. It didn't seem to matter how big I made myself. Something about him always reminded me just how small I actually was.

"Aren't you going to ask me where I've been?" he asked me eventually.

"I wasn't planning on it. Wherever it was, I just wish you'd stayed there."

That got me a smile, though a pretty humorless one. I hadn't been able to muster my usual venom, and I couldn't tell if Tyr was relieved or disappointed as he knelt down before me.

I wanted to look away. But I couldn't.

I felt pinned in place, and not just because of the stupid rope. I could see

every pore of his tawny skin, every bit of stubble. The faint lines around his eyes tightened as he seemed to bore ever deeper inside my mind.

I wished I knew what he saw there because, despite my best efforts, he remained a closed book to me.

Finally, he nodded and relaxed slightly. “You don’t mean that.”

I opened my mouth to contradict that, but the message somehow got interrupted on the way—a train that skipped its track, now hurtling directly into danger.

It was the tension in those lips I’d imagined kissing. The desire in those clouded-sky eyes.

All right, so I did want him to come back. But not for the reasons he thought or any reason I could understand.

“Yeah, well, don’t read too much into it,” I told him. “It’s not like I missed you. It’s just that a frozen barbarian who won’t take his hand off his weapon isn’t the best company.”

“Colbrand would never hurt you.”

“You sure about that?” I shot back. Because his eyes had flashed pretty hot for a second there when I’d offended him.

“No one in Wynterhowe would,” he doubled down.

“Except your cousin.”

Tyr’s expression hardened as he gripped my chin and made me look at him in the eye.

“No, he won’t. Rand is only trying to scare you. It’s part of his plan because frightened people are easier to control.”

That was one of the more reasonable things Tyr had ever said to me, and as such, it took me a moment to parse.

Something had changed, I realized. At least in this moment. Tyr was calm—I’d almost have said unflappable if it didn’t seem so out of character.

I had to know what was behind this abrupt change in him. I decided to see how far I could push him.

“I wonder where he learned that? Maybe from following his older cousin’s example. Learning to use brute force to get what he wants.”

Tyr only nodded thoughtfully. It made me want to slap him.

“That is a strategy that’s served me well, it’s true. It has its place on the battlefield and elsewhere. In fact, it wasn’t until I met you that I found out it’s not always effective.”

I shifted uncomfortably, wishing he’d stop staring at me. This scrutiny

felt like someone turning up the heat beneath me a little at a time, seeing how far they could push me until I cracked.

It made no sense. I'd slept in the same bed with the man for three nights straight. Heard him mumble in his sleep, watched him shave. He'd dressed and washed with his back to me only a few feet away. And yet, none of that had felt as uncomfortably intimate as this conversation.

I couldn't hold out any longer. "Where exactly *did* you go tonight?"

A smile flitted over his face before he could suppress it. "To see a friend. And also his wife, who turned out to be surprisingly wise."

Not what I expected, especially since I hadn't seen Tyr or any other male of his clan seek counsel from a woman. "What did she tell you?"

"That I wouldn't get anywhere treating you like a dog."

It wasn't exactly a big revelation, but I supposed it was progress. "Okay...." I said cautiously.

"And that I should treat you like the hellcat you are instead."

*Right.* That's what I got for getting my hopes up.

"I don't even want to know what that means," I muttered.

"She said it's not enough to convince you that staying here as my mate is your best option. That I have to convince you that it's what you *want*."

A bitter laugh escaped me. "Your friend is full of shit. That is never, *ever* going to happen."

"It will." His conviction was breathtaking, not so much arrogance as dead certainty. Enough that my own slipped a notch.

"And how do you plan to do that?" I aimed for scorn but missed the mark, my voice trembling slightly. "Because no matter how many dates you force me to go on—"

"This isn't about our dates. I'm not talking about seduction," he said, his gaze leisurely traveling over my body as if mentally undressing me. "This is about you deciding for yourself that you don't want to leave Wynterhowe."

*There* was the arrogance I was used to. The invisible dial of my discomfort twisted into the danger zone.

But I couldn't let him see that. Instead, I forced a bored expression. "I can't imagine anything that would make me want to stay."

"Me neither."

Everything that came out of his mouth seemed designed to upend me. I was more confused than ever.

"Then what the fuck are you talking about?"

Somehow, during this conversation, Tyr had drawn close enough that the fur trimming his coat brushed against my arm, sending a shiver of exquisite agony along my nerves. “That’s what we’re going to find out,” he growled. His voice was like dark syrup seeping into every hidden nook of my body. “You’re going to tell me, Meredith. The thing you want so badly that you’d trade away your freedom for it.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “Nothing is worth that,” I said harshly.

Tyr’s smile was dangerous, wicked. “You’re wrong. There is something...something you want so much that it steals your breath, even if you can’t admit it yet. But you’re safe with me. There’s no reason to be afraid.”

Tyr was wrong: I was more frightened in this moment than I’d been yet... because he was also right. There was something I wanted, something I’d sacrifice my own life for.

I hovered on the edge of saying it, knowing the stakes couldn’t be greater, that it was a step I could never come back from. The tension inside felt strong enough to shatter me.

“Promise me,” I ground out, forcing myself to hold his gaze. The decision was made, the only one could ever live with. “No other human women will be kidnapped and forced to come here.”

Tyr’s mouth tightened. I could tell it wasn’t what he’d expected from me. “That’s a hell of an ask.”

“So is my freedom.”

His silence served to concede the point. For a moment, neither of us spoke, his eyes flinty with calculation.

“My clan’s future depends on securing mates,” he finally said.

“And the women of my world deserve to choose their own futures.”

“Right...but what if the women *choose* to come here? To take a mate in my clan?”

I couldn’t tell if he was bluffing or if he really believed that would ever happen. Either way, though, I knew that Tyr would keep any bargain we made, no matter the conniving it took to reach it.

And I wasn’t going to be the one to blink first. “They’re free to choose whatever they want.”

“Then we have a deal.” The triumph in Tyr’s eyes made me uneasy. “For as long as you stay here with me, no human woman will be taken by the bear

clan without her consent.”

Before I knew what was happening, Tyr got up from the floor, took his dagger from his belt, and cut the rope, letting it fall to my feet. Then he walked away.

Alarm bells clamored in my mind. This was way too easy.

“What now?” I called after him, rubbing my wrists where the rope had chafed.

He paused at the entrance to the tent. “Now you should get some sleep. It’s late.”

“But what are you going to do?”

“I’ll sleep in the garrison. Colburn will continue to stand guard outside, so there is no reason to worry about your safety.”

A strange panic stirred inside me, and I didn’t know why. “Aren’t you afraid I’ll talk him into helping me escape?”

“Not anymore.” Tyr still hadn’t looked at me. “If you leave Wynterhowe, our agreement will be broken, and I will immediately send my warriors through the veil with orders to bring back whoever they like.”

“That’s barbaric,” I said.

But Tyr shook his head. “No, it’s the choice you made, Meredith. Goodnight.”

Then he was gone, swallowed by the night, leaving me alone and in shock.

Tyr called me a hellcat—but he was the devil himself.

CHAPTER  
**NINETEEN**



## MEREDITH

I couldn't sleep.

After hours of tossing and turning, ruminating on all the mistakes I'd made to get to this point in my life, I was deep in the throes of insomnia, almost certain I'd never sleep again.

How could I when I'd just traded my life away?

And sure, I'd done it for the best possible reason—saving countless innocent women. Yet, it was hard to feel righteous, proud, or honorable when I was all alone in the pitch dark, facing down a lifetime of living in a tent, eating fish, and making babies...and Rand.

No matter how Tyr tried to convince me otherwise, I was afraid of Rand.

Though I'd never admit it out loud, it was a comfort to know that Colbrand was outside. The man might have a mean streak, but I had no doubt he was capable. I doubted anyone would be able to slip past him to slit my throat while he was out there.

Still, I couldn't relax. All I managed to do was lay there, staring up at the stitched hides that comprised the ceiling and grieve the life I'd kissed goodbye.

It didn't matter that I hadn't figured out what to do with my life—not to mention my film degree—back on Earth. It wasn't as if wasting all my free time binging television on the couch was any better than camping on a beach.

Yet something nagged at me beyond the abrupt U-turn in my future. It was...an emptiness, a hollow place inside me. Like thirst or hunger, except that I couldn't quite put my finger on what I was craving.

*Liar*, a little voice inside me crowed, even as I clutched a pillow to my chest.

*His pillow.* The man I'd been sharing this bed with for the last few nights.

Somehow, I'd become accustomed not just to his solid presence and warmth but dependent on it. Now that I thought about it, the discomfort of that first night when I'd teetered on the edge of the bed as far as the rope would allow had dissipated in no time, and I'd slept like a rock.

And there was only one conclusion I could draw: Tyr was problematic in a hell of a lot of ways...but he wasn't *the* problem.

I'd reached that state of insomnia in which I was too tired to think straight

but too wired to relax, and I could think of only one thing in that damn place that could help.

I got up, instantly shivering as the cool air hit me, and shuffled to the tent's entrance. I opened the flaps a few inches and stuck my face out. Colbrand's huge figure stood just a few feet away. Even though I thought I'd been quiet getting out of bed, he'd already turned toward me.

"Hey," I said. "Uh, Colbrand...I hate to bother you, but is there any way I could get a jug of wine?"

I held my breath as he stared at me.

"Why?" he asked.

Why did people usually ask for wine? "Because...I'd like some."

He turned his head away, as stiff as before. "The chieftain ordered me to guard your tent, not act as your servant."

Right. I guess I'd offended him more than I'd realized with that "slightly intimidating statue" joke. Sometimes, I forgot I couldn't tease everyone the same way I did my family.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm really not trying to make your life difficult. I'd go get it myself, but I don't know my way around Wynterhowe very well. Especially not in the dark, and..."

"Elgar!" Colbrand's shout cut me off mid-sentence. One of the warriors in a group walking by turned toward us. "The chieftain's woman wants wine. Go fetch it for her."

*The chieftain's woman.*

Not his mate. Not the frue. Not even plain ol' Meredith.

I guess when it came to Colbrand, I knew where I stood. But at least he hadn't flashed any fangs or claws at me, and for that, I was grateful.

Colbrand must have outranked Elgar since the warrior thumped his chest in salute and ran off without hesitation. In less than five minutes, he was back cradling a jug like a baby in his arms.

Elgar's manners were far better than his superiors, though, and he bowed to me as he handed it over.

"I take it that will be all you require from me this evening," Colbrand said, not bothering to look my way.

*Sheesh.* Something told me I was not making his Christmas card list this year.

I didn't bother saying goodnight before ducking back inside the tent. On my way back to bed, I grabbed a cup.

Grateful for the warmth of the blankets, I pulled them up around me, poured myself a glass of wine, and drank it in one go. Then, just to be safe, I poured and downed another.

I didn't have any trouble falling asleep after that.

I felt good when I woke to the sun streaming into the tent, rested and refreshed. I was surprised to find that I was alone. No Millie, no Tyr, and when I ventured outside, I discovered even Colbrand had gone.

Not only that, they'd let me sleep until noon.

I loved sleeping in back on Earth and the slow pace of the days between work trips when I took naps, caught up on laundry, and ate take-out. Here, though, it made me feel unsettled.

I dressed, choosing another comfortably flared dress, this one in soft leaf green wool with a sweetheart neckline and flowing sleeves. I combed out my hair in the mirror, feeling a little sad I couldn't maintain the sculpted curve here like I did back home. But the shiny waves that naturally fell around my face as it air-dried were pretty enough.

I grabbed an apple off the table and headed out into the village...alone.

At first, I worried that my solitude would sound alarms, that guards would come out of the woodwork for me, dragging me off to face a very displeased chieftain. But all I was met with were a few curious glances and a muffled whisper or two as I walked through the settlement. Some people even greeted me with smiles or waves.

Honestly, it felt good. And the longer I walked, the better I felt.

Fresh air and freedom—that was the cure for the blues.

Of course, what I had wasn't *real* freedom, I reminded myself. Still, there was no point not enjoying the little I had now that I'd made my devil's bargain. It wasn't as if being miserable would change anything.

I didn't have a destination in mind as I wandered the twisted pathways. I couldn't leave the encampment, of course—even the thought of it made Tyr's chilling vow ring in my ears.

*I will immediately send my warriors through the veil with orders to bring back whoever they like.*

So what was I supposed to do? What exactly was the job of a frue? There had to be more to it than popping out babies.

I had complained plenty about my job, about driving around the country with my cousins farting and fighting over the music and staying up all night in a tent. About subsisting on fast food and gas station coffee, but now I

missed it, even the annoying parts.

I hadn't appreciated how precious it was to work with people I loved. Sure, it wasn't perfect, but we'd laughed a lot, and we made people happy. Maybe it was silly, maybe we stretched the truth, but I'd started to really care about the people we entertained, and they gave me a reason to get up every morning.

But it wouldn't do any good to think about that now. I had made my choice, and now I had to learn to deal with it. Because I certainly couldn't drink myself to sleep every night and roll out of bed at noon.

My pity party was over, I decided. Today, I would find something meaningful to do.

The answer came to me as I rounded the corner into the village square in the form of half a dozen women ringing the wash basin, doing laundry by hand. Their voices rang with laughter and conversation, which abruptly stopped the second they caught sight of me.

My heart sank until I spotted Millie among them. I waved and called her name, but the smile she gave me seemed strained. I saw her speak a few words to the other women, who quickly formed a sort of receiving line, their faces stiff and formal.

"My frue," Millie said, and the entire group bowed their heads as one.

It was too late to turn around, no matter how I wanted the ground to open up and swallow me.

"Please," I said, trying to keep my voice light. "Call me Meredith. All of you."

I was only making things worse. The women exchanged shocked glances, and Millie's shoulders sagged. "I'm sorry, my frue. I know that is your preference, but the chieftain forbade it."

"He was very firm," another woman said in a rush to back her up. "The chieftain gathered us this morning and reminded us to treat you with the proper respect."

I could see Tyr doing that, much as I wished he hadn't. He probably thought it would ease the transition to my new life.

"Respect can be a wonderful thing, but only if it flows both ways," I said, trying to keep my tone light. "Apparently, I need to make it clear to Tyr that I prefer for everyone to call me by my given name."

If the women had seemed unnerved before, now they were outright shocked.

“But the chieftain is...” A tall, weathered woman with tiny, tight braids seemed at a loss to finish her sentence, so Millie did so for her.

“Unbending,” she said. “When it comes to his expectations that we obey his orders.”

I snorted. “Just like he was *unbending* when he was dragging me through town a couple days ago, hollering about his plans to tame me.” I met each of their gazes in turn, a smile on my face. “And yet here I am. So tell me, ladies, do I look tamed?”

That got me a few nervous giggles.

“I’m not sure what you look like,” a woman said boldly. “Certainly nothing we’ve seen before.”

“Well, that’s something we have in common, then. Is it okay if I join you? I’d like to help.”

I held my breath as the women exchanged glances, waiting for someone to speak. I felt for them; I knew I was asking them to take a risk. And I suspected that what I was suggesting—that the mate of the most powerful man in the clan might join them in common labor—was outrageous.

“Don’t worry,” I said, wondering if I’d made a mistake. “If Tyr makes any trouble, I promise I’ll take the blame.”

Millie nodded once, giving the signal for the others to make room for me. I owed her, and I knew it. I would have to find a way to show her my gratitude later.

I took a handful of clothing from the closest basket and turned to the lady it belonged to, an elderly woman with bright green eyes in a nest of wrinkles. “I’ve never done laundry this way,” I said. “Would you mind teaching me?”

The woman gaped at me. “What other way is there to do laundry?”

“We use machines on Earth,” I told her. “One to wash the clothes and another to dry them.”

The woman laughed as if I’d said something hilarious. “I’ve never heard of such a thing! Machines to clean your clothing?”

“We use machines to clean a lot of things,” I admitted. “Clothes, dishes, rugs—you name it.”

“You humans and your machines,” another woman said, chuckling. I had to give them credit—I’d seen few old women back home in such vigorous good health as these two, with their strong arms, straight backs, and quick wit. “My grandmother used to say that if a human didn’t feel like doing something, they would just invent a machine to do it for them.”

“I heard those stories too,” the first woman said. “But what I never understood was, with machines doing all of your work, how do you fill your day?”

“I work,” I said. I was about to explain ‘just like you,’ but that wasn’t really true.

“I thought the machines were doing the work?”

I wasn’t doing a very good job explaining this. “The machines do *some* work, so I can do other work.”

“What other work?”

The faces staring at me were curious, not judging, yet I had no idea how to answer their questions. I knew that if I tried to tell them about my family’s videos, I’d only confuse things further. And telling them about film school would open up a whole other can of fish.

“I...work with a group of people to tell stories,” I decided on after careful consideration.

My words were met with confused silence, as I’d feared. Then someone giggled, and the women started to relax as they seemed to conclude that I was too useless to be intimidating.

“You tell *stories*?” the youngest of the group, no older than my mom, echoed in a teasing tone. “I tell stories too when my husband asks me to make his favorite honey cake after I’ve been scraping hides all day. I just tell him the honey jar is empty.”

That brought laughter.

“I told my sister it was too dark to check the mouse traps when I got up,” the old woman with the sparkling green eyes admitted.

“And I told her they were empty after I checked,” the other old woman retorted with a smile. “Won’t she be surprised when they are full tomorrow!”

I laughed along with the others, even though they’d missed my point entirely, and the thought of checking for dead mice made me feel slightly queasy.

This encounter hadn’t gone as I’d expected. Yet, once I’d stumbled off of my imaginary pedestal and shown the women there was nothing exceptional about me, their fear and judgment faded.

Never mind their good humor was at my expense; I found I enjoyed exploring our cultures’ differences.

“But seriously,” said the woman who reminded me of my mom, smiling now. “You said you work with a team of people telling stories. Why does it

take several of your people to do the job of a single bard?”

Remembering the interminable epic poem I'd endured on my first 'date' with Tyr. Since that was what passed for entertainment here, the question made sense.

“The stories we tell are big and exciting,” I said. “Some people act out the different parts. Others create the sets they use during the stories, or set up the lights, or write the lines the actors say. And the stories are amazing. They keep you on the edge of your seat, make you laugh one minute and cry the next. I'm pretty sure you've never heard anything like them before.”

The woman frowned, and I realized my mistake. I'd risked offending her pride by suggesting my world was superior. Before I could backpedal, Millie gave me a shrewd look. “If that's so, Meredith, why don't you tell us one?”

It took me a second to realize she was teasing, too caught up in the moment that she had slipped and called me by my name. In that second, I'd gone from feeling like a fish out of water to becoming one of them.

“I'd be delighted,” I said, knowing I was taking a chance. What if they actually preferred their sleep-inducing epics to anything I had to offer? I racked my brain for a classic tale that would stand the test of cross-cultural relevance while the women put down their work and settled in to listen.

It needed to be something spectacular but also relatable. Bigger than life while also emotionally evocative. A story that would mean something to every woman gathered here, no matter what life had given her.

Suddenly, it came to me—the story that first made me understand that movies could take a person to another world, that imagination held the key to experiencing more than what I could see around me.

I couldn't help grinning, delighted to be the person who got to introduce these women to the tale that had made me want to become a storyteller.

I took a moment to get comfortable on the rim of the basin, gathering my full skirt over my legs and taking in the expectant faces of my audience.

“A very long time ago,” I began, “in a faraway world called Kansas, a little girl named Dorothy watched storm clouds gathering in the sky above her beloved grandparents' farm.”

CHAPTER  
TWENTY



## MEREDITH

“They had barely entered the field of brilliant orange poppies nodding gently on their stalks when Dorothy spotted the glint of sunlight reflecting off tall spires far in the distance.

“‘There it is!’ she cried. ‘Emerald City!’”

“*Elwine!*”

Some of the dramatic effect of my words was lost as a portly, gray-haired bear came barreling toward us from the direction of the foundry. Wearing a scarred leather apron, he wielded a pair of tongs still glowing red from the fire.

“Where is my lunch?” he bellowed, mindless of interrupting the entire group.

The woman next to me waved him off without even looking at him. “Don’t mind him—what happened next?”

I was too surprised to continue. In all my time in Wynterhowe, I’d never seen a woman dismiss a man as Elwine had just done—especially an angry man.

And it wasn’t just her: none of the other women were paying him any mind either. All their eyes were on me, waiting impatiently for me to continue.

They were a great audience. They’d been completely rapt since I began, so swept up in the story that I was encouraged to use my best dramatic technique, coaxing gasps and laughter and lovingly describing the iconic characters in detail.

By the time the house landed on the Wicked Witch of the East, the laundry had been completely forgotten. I’d even pulled in a few passers-by who set down their market baskets to listen.

I tried to find my place, to segue into Dorothy’s encounter with the man at the city gate, but the newcomer wasn’t having it.

“You dare to hush me, Elwine?” he demanded, outraged. “I should have had my lunch an hour ago, and then Slean tells me you’re still idling at the basin. And the rest of you, have you no work to do?”

The women were all glaring at him now. “Shhh!” someone hissed.

The man took a shocked step back. It was obvious he did not expect to be

challenged by his wife—much less another woman. “What the hell is going on here?”

“The frue is telling a story,” Elwine said.

The man gave me a furious look. “A *story*? I knew nothing good could come from bringing a human here.”

“Heorot!” Elwine raised her own voice, another first for me. “Mind your tongue! This is our *frue* you speak of.”

Heorot gave a dismissive grunt, but on this one point I had to agree; I didn’t want the title any more than he wanted me to have it.

“What kind of frue spends her days with servants and washerwomen?”

“One who isn’t a pretentious pain in the ass,” I said hotly, forgetting to watch my tongue. I was rewarded with a shocked silence that was quickly followed by a few muffled giggles.

Heorot looked from me to the other women, taking the measure of the situation, his prodigious eyebrows knitted in consternation.

“Right,” he said eventually. “We’ll see what the chieftain has to say when he hears that his mate is keeping our women from their chores with her *storytelling*.”

I flinched. Something in his tone brought back memories of my family’s dismissal of my chosen field. They were kinder—but *what exactly will you do with a film degree, Mer-Bear?*—but the effect was the same.

Thanks to Elwine, though, that old shame didn’t have a chance to sink in.

“You’ll do no such thing,” she barked, even as he took hold of her arm. “Or I’ll put senna in your soup tonight, and you’ll spend the next three days in the latrine.”

I didn’t know what senna was, but the horrified look on Heorot’s face gave me a pretty good idea.

“What’s gotten into you, woman?” he said, dropping her arm. “You’ve never talked to me like this before.”

“I’ve never heard a story like this before. And you interrupted it with something that could have waited.”

“My lunch? You want me to wait for my *lunch*?”

“You could make it yourself,” one of the old women said wickedly. “My Peada cooked for me when I had the grippe.”

I raised my hands before things got out of hand. I didn’t want to be responsible for any family strife. “Heorot is right. I’ve taken up too much of your time today. I’ll let you ladies get back to work.”

“No!” someone wailed.

“We don’t know how it ended!”

“Just a few more minutes?”

I was warmed by a feeling of pride. I’d trained to tell stories that would capture people’s imagination, and this was the closest I’d come to actually doing it since I graduated. Yes, these poor people were starved for entertainment, but for the first time in this world, I felt as if I might have a purpose.

“I’ll come back tomorrow,” I promised. “I’ll be here at the same time, and I’ll finish the story.”

*Look at me, making plans!* I thought dizzily. It was starting to sink in that my stay here wasn’t temporary anymore. And it felt good to have something to look forward to, something other than drinking too much wine in an empty tent.

Then again, it was just one hour out of the day, and I still had to figure out what to do with the other twenty-three. Given Heorot’s reaction, I might have to enlist Tyr’s help to choose tasks that wouldn’t lead to insurrection among the men of Wynterhowe.

I gave Heorot a pleasant smile. “Speaking of the chieftain, do you happen to know where Tyr is?”

That got me a wary look. Heorot didn’t know what to make of me. “Try the beach,” he said shortly. “I heard the fishermen needed help today bringing in the catch.”

I said a hasty goodbye and headed toward the water, sticking to alleys between buildings and tents to avoid drawing any more attention to myself.

I spotted the fishermen at once, half a dozen of them at the far end of the beach, standing in water up to their waists, one of the long hide-covered boats I’d seen the first day anchored a dozen yards offshore. The men were hauling a long net onto the beach, full of a mass of shimmering fish. Even at a distance, I knew immediately which one was Tyr.

Why was that? Five shirtless men, each burlier than the next, calling to each other in deep, booming voices, muscles rippling in the autumn sun—yet there was something about how Tyr moved that made him unmistakable to me.

Not even in the way he moved, but in his...presence, perhaps, the effortless ease of his authority even as he toiled among the fishermen in this humble task.

Or maybe I was full of shit—so wrapped up in fantasy after telling imaginary tales for the last hour that I’d forgotten to come all the way back to reality.

I kept my eyes on him as I walked down the beach, my heart beating a little faster as he came into focus. The men were divided between the two ends of the net, and on Tyr’s count, they heaved as one, gaining a few feet each time, until the long net had been deposited on the beach at the foot of the wooden structure that served as a cleaning trough.

I was almost upon them when Tyr spotted me. He stood straight-backed, stretching out his muscles, looking like a Greek god silhouetted against the whitecaps. Waves lapped at his feet, and his skin glistened with the water streaming from his thick, dark hair.

I let myself stare. This man had carried me—a full-grown plus-size woman—through the wilderness for hours, but I’d been too distracted by terror to appreciate the strength such a feat required. Now, though, seeing that strength in action, the flawless machine of his body at work, I couldn’t look away. My breath caught in my throat. My fingers twitched with the desire to

—

Oh, *fuck* no.

I could not be thinking this way about Tyr.

Physical attraction was one thing—no jury on Earth would convict a woman for ogling men like these—but the images that came to me when I noticed the trail of dark hair that disappeared into the waistband of his damp, clinging pants went way past attraction to X-rated territory.

I tried to tell myself that the weakness in my knees, the ache deep in my belly, were purely a physical reaction. That they had nothing to do with Tyr specifically. It was merely biology, one healthy young specimen reacting to another, but any thought of discussing my daily schedule with him was out of the question since, right now, I doubted I’d be able to string two coherent sentences together.

“Sorry. Didn’t realize you were busy. I’ll go,” I called, but my words were swallowed up by the surf. And Tyr was already striding toward me, a grin splitting his gorgeous face.

It was too late to run away.

I did my best to steady my breath and settle my pounding heart as he stopped in front of me, suddenly awkward. “You came,” he beamed.

“Yeah, well. I wasn’t sure what to do with myself. I thought you might

have...suggestions," I stammered lamely. "I need to be productive."

Tyr frowned. "A frue doesn't need to be productive."

"This one does." I deserved a goddamn medal for resisting the urge to oggle his powerful chest, tiny droplets of water clinging to the curling hairs.

The old, familiar smirk came back as Tyr regained his confidence. "You're welcome to stay here and watch us bring in the catch," he said, only faintly suggestively. "The other boat will be here in a few minutes."

I looked out to sea and saw another of the boats heading in, its four-man crew rowing steadily, their movements perfectly coordinated.

"I want to *do* something," I huffed. "Not just watch other people work."

"Do something?" he echoed, making it sound like the punchline of a joke. "You really don't get what it means to be a frue, do you?"

"I guess not," I said peevishly.

"Okay, Meredith, I'll be more than happy to help explain it to you, but I can't leave until we finish this. Why don't you wait for me back in the tent?"

I suppose it was a reasonable enough suggestion, but what I heard was *Run along, little lady, until I can come home and explain your role to you.*

Once again, I found myself digging in my heels.

"Or," I said, looking Tyr square in the eye, "I can help you bring in the fish so you can finish sooner."

Tyr's laugh stung, even though I knew he didn't mean to mock me. I narrowed my eyes and waited for him to realize I was serious. Finally, his laughter faded. "Wait—are you really suggesting joining us?"

"Why not?" I demanded, a little more forcefully than I intended, practically daring him to tell me that wasn't part of the deal. "Last night, you said I was free to do whatever I wanted except leave. And right now, I want to—" I gestured at the men, who were waiting for the next ship to come in. "—haul in fish."

Tyr nodded, the corners of his mouth turned down in his effort to stifle a smile. "If that's what you want."

"It is."

"Then let's get to it," he said, wrapping his arm around my shoulders and pressing his wet body to mine, making me gasp from the cold.

We started toward the ocean, and, for the first time, I really took in the size of the crashing waves as well as the chill in the air.

*Me and my big mouth,* I thought. I'd finally gone too far this time.

CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-ONE**

TYR

“You can’t be serious, chieftain,” Osrik Falk said, regarding Tyr in undisguised horror. “You mean for the frue to bring in the catch?”

Tyr nodded.

“Is this a part of her punishment?”

It was a fair question, especially since Osrik didn’t know Meredith was the one who had insisted on helping with the task. Tyr would have wagered she’d been bluffing himself until she’d started taking off her shoes a minute ago.

But apparently, her desire was genuine. However, why she was adamant about doing the job was still a mystery.

Tyr himself would have found this situation unthinkable only a short time ago, but since finding a mate, he found that his ideas of what a woman could and should do were being tested on a daily basis.

Osrik leaned in closer, keeping his voice low as if to spare Tyr some embarrassment. “Aren’t you concerned she’ll be swept away by the waves?”

“I won’t let that happen,” Tyr assured him.

“If you say so, chieftain.”

He and Osrik had been friends since they were children, and that hadn’t changed when Tyr became chieftain, so he didn’t mind the fisherman’s doubtful tone.

Truth be told, he had plenty of doubts himself, but he couldn’t simply refuse Meredith, not after sealing their agreement last night. At least once they were in the water, he could keep a close watch over her and make sure she didn’t overexert herself.

“Ricmaer’s crew is nearly to shore,” he called out to the men lining the beach. As a group, they all started moving into the waves.

Tyr looked over his shoulder, half expecting to see Meredith making a quiet escape back toward Wynterhowe now that the task was at hand. But instead, he found her standing right behind him, wearing a determined expression.

“Let’s get to it, then,” Meredith said, echoing his own words.

Tyr watched her from behind as she hesitantly tested the water with a toe, wincing at the frigid temperature, certain that *now* she would call off this

ridiculous charade. She knew damn well that no noblewoman would think of stooping to such a task.

But Tyr had learned a lot about her over the past few days. She was easily the most stubborn woman he'd ever met. Once her mind was set, there was no dissuading her.

He had no idea what she hoped to prove with this stunt. Hopefully, she wasn't expecting him to call off their agreement and send her back to Earth just because of a little unpredictable behavior.

If anything, her actions were having the opposite effect. Clearly, Meredith had no idea that the harder she resisted him, the more he wanted her. His craving for her had doubled and redoubled until it was a constant ache, a distraction that threatened to blind him to everything else.

He was more determined than ever that someday he would know the sweet victory of Meredith's surrender.

"I don't have all day," Meredith called out to him impatiently as Ricmaer dropped the anchor, and the crew rushed forward to gather the ends of the heavy seine net full of mackerel they'd netted in the open waters to the north of the cove and pulled back behind the boat.

Before he joined her, Tyr looked over at Osrik. "Would you find Mildritha for me and tell her to get a hot bath ready in my tent. And some warm clothes."

"You're going soft, Chieftain," Osrik chuckled.

"Not for me, you idiot, for the frue!"

By the time Tyr reached Meredith, she'd advanced far enough that the water lapped at her thighs. The fishermen were watching her surreptitiously, undoubtedly wondering what the hell was going on.

"The frue and I will help," Tyr called. Hoping to skip any discussion of the matter, he moved quickly through the water and caught the edge of the seine. Ordinarily, he'd let the captain direct the group, but today, he needed to take charge quickly.

"We need a crew of four on this end and four on the other," he called out.

There was a startled silence before Ricmaer, an older man who'd been critical of Tyr's father, nodded. "I'll join the chieftain and Frue Meredith. You too, Sigehere. The rest of you take the other end. My frue," he added respectfully, bowing as far as was possible in water up to his chest.

Meredith took the hand Tyr held out to her and waded gamely toward the others, though she was soon shivering as the water plastered her dress to her



body, causing him some alarm.

“That’s far enough,” he said when she’d taken a few more steps. He was not about to let any other man look upon her breasts covered only by thin, wet fabric. “There’s no shame returning to the shore if the water is too cold.”

“I’m fine,” she snapped, shooting him a glare. Unfortunately, the effect was blunted by her chattering teeth.

Instead of annoyance, Tyr felt only concern. He knew the signs of hypothermia, and he’d carry Meredith out himself if she started showing symptoms, no matter how she protested. But for now, he kept silent and watched her take the section of the seine Ricmaer offered her, gripping it tightly.

“The net’s so rough,” she said, surprised.

“It’s called a seine,” the captain explained, his voice filled with pride and not a small amount of wonder that the new frue showed interest in his craft. “It’s made of knotted spruce root fibers. They—“

Meredith shrieked, then turned red with embarrassment and coughed, trying to pretend nothing had happened. The fishermen looked away, all of them knowing what Tyr did—that the swarming mass of agitated fish had swum into her legs, an odd sensation for someone who’d never felt it before.

Meredith didn’t need any coaching after that.

Ricmaer counted out the pull and rest...pull and rest as the day’s catch was dragged through the water. It was difficult work, and he had to credit Meredith for trying as hard as she did, her tendons standing out and muscles straining with every draw.

Never mind that her efforts paled next to those of even the oldest fishermen. Tyr marveled at her drive and courage, qualities she would need to not only survive in Evergreen but to thrive as his mate.

Soon, Meredith’s shivering had stopped, and Tyr knew that her body was providing the heat she needed through her exertions.

As she concentrated on the rhythm of the work, doing her best to keep up with the others, her self-consciousness faded. Tyr was struck by the thought that she had become just another member of the clan, contributing what she was able. It was a powerful moment for him, though he didn’t dare share it.

She had begun to tire, and when Tyr wordlessly put his hands to either side of hers, supporting her from behind, she didn’t object. They pulled together, the seine cutting through the water that lapped against their bodies.

He hadn’t counted on her full, rounded ass wriggling against his groin,

however, or her breasts bobbing gently against his forearms. He was as hard as iron in seconds, and he knew Meredith had noticed when she lost the rhythm and nearly went under the waves. Steadying her brought her body closer still, and there was nothing to be done but carry on that way.

Sensing Meredith's mortification did nothing to quell his desire. Gods help him, every inch of her was soft and yielding, every grunt of effort a harbinger of the sounds she would make when she finally yielded to him. Tyr's mind was consumed with thoughts of taking her from behind, feeling her tighten around him as she gasped with pleasure. To plunge into her softness, feel the heat of her passion, lose himself in release.

"Look alive, Chieftain!" Ricmaer shouted as a large wave crested just behind them. Lost in fantasy, Tyr hadn't braced for it—and before he could warn Meredith, it crashed over them, taking them to their knees in the sand, a rookie mistake if there ever was one.

By the time Tyr had helped Meredith up, coughing and choking from the salt water, the men had dragged the fish onto dry land and were doing their best to pretend not to see the chieftain and frue as they set to work tossing the fish into the trough.

"Stay here," Tyr commanded as he ran the short distance to the clothes he'd left on the beach, returning in seconds to wrap his coat around his shivering mate.

Not only did his coat provide warmth to counter exposure to the wintry air, but it also served to shield her body from view. The thought of any of the men seeing Meredith's body under the clinging, wet dress—her luscious curves and erect nipples and the dark patch at the vee of her legs—filled Tyr with a rage so blinding that he forgot all about his embarrassing mistake.

The right to look upon Meredith's beautiful body was his alone, and he would defend it to the death.

"Did you see that?" she said, disentangling herself from his arms with much more vigor than he'd expected. Her eyes were bright with excitement, and she was pointing at the mound of fish piled high at the cleaning station.

"See what?" Tyr asked teasingly.

"We did that!" she said, a look of pure joy accompanying her infectious laughter. "High five!"

She held up her hand, and Tyr took it and swung her in a pirouette. It only made her laugh again.

"I forgot—you've never high-fived! Here—hold your hand like this."

She lifted his hand to shoulder height and pried his fingers straight—then smacked it loudly.

“What the hell—*that’s* a ‘high five’?”

“Damn straight,” Meredith said, grinning. “It’s for when you do something awesome, like hauling a ton of fish straight out of the frickin’ ocean.”

She didn’t seem to be aware that the men were watching with astonishment, undoubtedly concluding that the chieftain had just allowed his mate to hit him on top of everything else. But the moment was too perfect for him to care. Instead, he waved Ricmaer over.

“Excellent catch, captain,” Tyr said. “That’s twice what you brought in last week.”

Ricmaer inclined his head modestly. “It was luck, sir. They came in on a warm cut just between the double ebb. Practically swam right into the seine.”

“What will you do with all of them?” Meredith asked.

Ricmaer seemed startled to be addressed directly, but he quickly recovered. “That’s up to the chieftain, my frue.”

Technically, it was true that Tyr had the power to distribute the catch—as well as the hunt and the produce from the fields—in whatever way he liked. In practice, though, he generally left that to the men, encouraging their input on matters ranging from scheduling and manning each task to harvesting, preserving, and storing what the clan produced.

Today, however, he had a different thought. “We’ve yet to celebrate since returning to Wynterhowe,” he said. “What do you think, Ricmaer—how about tonight?”

“Today is not a feast day,” the fisherman said carefully.

“I wasn’t aware that was a requirement.”

“Of course not, Chieftain. I’ve just—that is, your father—“

Tyr saw the problem and determined to correct it. “Ricmaer, I see no reason to remain in thrall of a man who betrayed us. I think you’ll find that I am not burdened by my father’s habits and practices.”

“Indeed, sir. Very good.”

“I’m glad we agree. Will you ask Sigehere to go find Leodmar? Tell him to announce a feast and begin the preparations.”

“I will. And if he asks the reason for the celebration...?”

Tyr glanced at his mate. Meredith was still smiling, the coat pulled up to her chin, her hair plastered to her cheeks.

“Tonight,” he told the fisherman, “we honor the clan’s new frue.”

CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-TWO**

## MEREDITH

The delight and pride I'd felt after helping with the catch stayed with me through a long, luxurious bath in the copper tub that had reappeared in Tyr's tent.

I'd still been shivering when I got in, but it didn't take long for the chill to be replaced by the heavenly warmth of the fragrant water. Letting my eyes drift eyes closed, I could hear Millie moving around the tent as she tidied, but with Tyr off doing chieftain things, I savored the moment to bask in my good mood for a change.

I was even looking forward to the night's celebration, if not to serving as its focus. I hoped my role would be limited to a queenly wave or two so I could spend the evening enjoying myself out of the spotlight. Tomorrow would be soon enough to return to my life as a captive, to the anger, resentment, and tension that had gripped me for days.

When I finally got out of the tub, my skin soft from the wildflower-scented essential oils, I saw something that lifted my mood even more: the clothes I'd been wearing when I arrived, washed and mended, and neatly folded on the bed. As soon as I'd dried off, I slipped on the plush gray sweatpants and faded pink crew-neck shirt, so delighted to be united with this comfort from home that I almost cried.

"Surely you don't mean to wear that to the feast?" Millie paused her dusting long enough to frown at me. I smiled, pleased that she'd become comfortable enough around me to tell me what she really thought.

"You don't know what you're missing," I replied. "Sweats are the best. If —*when* I get back to Earth, I'll bring you some of your own.

I snapped my mouth shut, shocked by the words that had just tripped off my tongue. As much as I'd love to give Millie a thank-you gift for the kindness she'd shown me, once I was home, I was never coming back here again.

Luckily, she didn't seem to notice. She had pulled a chair in front of the mirror, and now she gestured for me to sit.

"I'm not nearly as good with hair as Gunhild," she said apologetically, "but she's helping with the feast, so you're stuck with me."

"I was just going to run a comb through it," I said. "Seriously, you don't

need to fuss over me.”

“That’s enough out of you,” she scolded me briskly, draping a towel around my neck. “Now, hush so I can get to work.”

I complied happily, enjoying the feeling of her strong fingers kneading my scalp and then combing my hair into sections. As she began to twist and braid, she selected white flower buds and sprigs of ivy and shiny satin ribbon and wove them in until my head was encircled by a crown of tiny flowers.

“Beautiful!” I said. “You’re every bit as talented as Gunhild.”

Mildritha waved the compliment away, though I could see it pleased her. “It would look better with a proper dress,” she grouched.

“I’m sure you’re right,” I said lightly, not wanting to hurt her feelings.

Everyday attire for bear clan women tended to practical yet elegant tunics and trousers in fabrics dyed earthy shades of red, brown, and blue. I’d come to appreciate their simplicity and the ease of movement they offered. But the noblewoman’s wardrobe that still hung in Tyr’s tent was a different story. Nearly every gown featured a fitted, low-cut bodice, with skirts slit daringly high but still restrictive enough to make walking a challenge. They were neither comfortable nor, in my opinion, suitable to wear in public.

“Perhaps a shawl, at least?” Millie said, holding up a filmy, sheer length of fabric that sparkled with tiny pearls.

I laughed at her persistence. “Some other time. Besides, I got the sense from Tyr that tonight isn’t a formal affair.”

“Not for common folk, maybe. But you’re—“

“The frue,” I sighed, resisting the urge to roll my eyes. “How can I forget?”

Tyr’s duties required him to help coordinate the celebration, but he’d promised to meet me there and told Millie to accompany me. As we ventured outside and joined a cheerful throng heading down to the beach, I felt vindicated to see that people were dressed casually, the women’s ornamentation limited to flowers woven into their hair like mine or pinned to their necklines.

The sun had set, leaving behind it the velvety deep blue of twilight, and even from a distance, I could see the glow of the bonfire and the sparks it sent up to the sky.

With the boats stored neatly at the far end of the sand, the beach had transformed into a festival atmosphere. All around us, people smiled and laughed and chatted, admiring the tables laden with food, the mouthwatering

aromas of roasted fish coming from a huge grill set up to the side, the kegs of wine tapped and flowing into the jugs being passed around.

Strings of lanterns had been strung from poles driven into the sand, and music drifted from a trio playing pipes and shakers and rustic guitars.

“I can’t believe they put this together in so little time,” I said.

“Everyone helped,” Millie said with unmistakable pride. “Cooking, decorating, carrying everything down here—and there’s a crew who will be back at dawn to clean it all up.”

“The bears know how to party,” I teased. “Got it.”

“I don’t know about that,” she said primly. “But I daresay people welcome an excuse to celebrate. The mood has been...somewhat tense since Tyr’s father was jailed by the Council of Nine.”

I nodded but thought it wise not to press the subject. I hadn’t actually asked Tyr how he felt about his father’s imprisonment, but he never seemed particularly bothered when it was mentioned in passing.

But I knew that wasn’t what Millie was alluding to, but rather the fact that, unfortunately, Attor Harker’s agenda hadn’t disappeared with him. There were still those in the clan who opposed the breaking of the curse and the introduction of human mates, and from what I’d gathered, tensions simmered just below the surface.

I also expected to be judged, if not for merely being human, then for not behaving more like a woman of nobility. But that was too bad; not only would I not defer to every man I met, but I’d damn well have a good time—in my own way—if I felt like it.

Especially because I was right. The bears knew how to throw one hell of a party.

The bonfire was surrounded by a throng of people, young and old, dancing with abandon. I felt a pang of envy of their uninhibited joy, at the way they moved without self-consciousness. Dancing seemed to be the one activity to which the women gave themselves over without a thought to what their mates would think, as likely to spin in the arms of each other as with the men of the clan.

For all their faults, the bear clan possessed a freedom that I rarely saw among humans. Certainly, it had to do with their connection to nature. A culture that valued instinct over artifice had little room for etiquette rules and social niceties. And while sometimes they could come off as artless and simple, they didn’t overthink things. Didn’t stress about what others thought



of them or pretend to be someone else.

But as much as I envied their nature, I was human with all my human traits. Which meant that the confidence I affected as I linked arms with Millie and strolled among the revelers was an act.

“Let’s get a drink,” I suggested, eyeing the kegs and hoping they contained the same delicious vintage Ty served.

“I shouldn’t, Frue,” she demurred—but I caught the note of regret in her voice.

“Why not? It’s a party!”

“I’m here at the command of the chieftain. That means I’m expected to keep a clear head.”

I pointed to the guards, still in their uniforms, clustered around the kegs. A few of them already appeared to be drunk. “They’re on duty, and they’re drinking.”

Millie shrugged, not meeting my eyes, and I resigned myself to this being another gender inequity. One I was going to steadfastly ignore.

When the young guard manning the keg saw me, he did a comical doubletake. “Two cups, please,” I said, adopting what I hoped was a regal tone.

He hurriedly did as I asked, and I handed Millie one of the brimming cups. “Bottoms up!”

This, at least, appeared to be a familiar custom as she clinked my cup with her own after looking around guiltily to make sure she wasn’t being watched.

“Let your hair down, Millie,” I said daringly. “It’s okay. You’re not just my maid; you’re my friend.”

While I took a big sip, Millie only stared into her cup worriedly. “Frues aren’t *friends* with their maids.”

I touched her arm, forcing her to look up at me. “Maybe they *weren’t*, but they also weren’t human before, either. Besides, I need a friend,” I said quietly, like it was a secret. “And, like I keep trying to tell all of you, I’m not really a frue.”

I chugged the rest of the wine, knowing I failed to give it the proper due. I was pretty sure it would take top honors at any competition on Earth. But I needed the liquid courage. Having experienced its potency, I vowed to pace myself from that moment on since the last thing I needed was to be found passed out behind the bandstand.

Millie had given in, at least for the moment, and sipped delicately from the cup. “Where is your mate?” she asked, undoubtedly trying to change the subject.

“Trying to get rid of me so soon?” I teased.

Despite the darkness, I was pretty sure Millie blushed. “No, it’s not that, it’s just...”

“Come on,” I prompted when her voice trailed off. “We’re friends, remember? You can tell me.”

“It’s just that I always attend these events as a servant to the chieftain’s family, never as a guest,” she admitted. “But tonight, with the chieftain’s mother away—and since you’ll be with Tyr—”

“You were hoping to have some time to yourself,” I finished, smiling. “I think that’s a great idea. Go have some much-deserved fun.”

“But I can’t leave you here on your own,” she fretted. “You must have a chaperone.”

I laughed. “Millie, this isn’t a high school dance,” I said, “and I’m a grown-ass woman. I haven’t needed a chaperone in years. Besides, no one seemed to think anything of it when I explored the village on my own.”

“That’s different,” she protested. “Tonight, the wine is flowing freely, and there are many young men around. Men whose judgment may not be good.”

I was sick of talking in euphemisms. “Look, Millie, I’ve been around plenty of drunk frat boys, and a knee to the nuts usually does the trick if they get too handsy.”

Millie blanched, and I knew I’d gone too far. “What is a frat...”

“Sorry. Never mind. Look, you keep saying I’m your frue, right?”

“Yes—”

“Great. Then, as your frue, I order you to go and have a great time without me.”

“But—”

“Or I’ll have to tell the chieftain that you’ve disobeyed my direct orders.” I held my breath, knowing I’d back down if I couldn’t convince her.

Millie looked at the dancers around the fire. Then back at me. She touched the pendant she wore at her neck, and I knew I had her.

“But if I see the chieftain,” she said sternly, “I’m telling him exactly what you ordered me to do before sending him your way.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I waved her off, grinning as I watched her disappear into

the crowd.

It was true, what I'd told her about needing a friend. And I would have picked her on any world—for her kindness, her intelligence, the mischief she tried so hard to hide.

Hoping she would make the most of her night, I turned to the problem of locating Tyr. Because for all my brave talk, I knew it would cause trouble for us both if I was seen wandering around alone.

I looked for him in the crowd, the image of his magnificent, half-naked body wet from the ocean coming back to me. But it wasn't the way he looked that was seared into my memory—it was the way he'd looked at me.

He stared at me without apology, lingering on my breasts, then down across my belly to my round hips. He'd swallowed hard as if it caused him pain to be able only to look and not touch. I'd let myself imagine that he was inflamed with desire, so much so that all through my bath, I'd fantasized about him barging into the tent and taking me there on the floor.

And I'd wanted it.

Oh, I hated admitting it to myself, but the lie was proving too heavy to bear. The best I could do was to try to ignore the guilt and fear that my desire for Tyr had triggered. I told myself it didn't matter, that it was only a fantasy, and since nothing had come of it, it was completely harmless.

But now, failing to find him despite searching every corner of the beach, other uncomfortable feelings were starting to nag at me.

He wasn't here. Hadn't come to find me. I ought to be relieved and grateful that he'd given me even more freedom than he'd promised. But I'd grabbed another cup of wine from a passing servant and drunk half of it before I finally admitted to myself that his absence was tearing at my heart.

The servant bent to fill my glass again, and I started to thank him before realizing it wasn't a servant at all.

It was Rand—inches away, smirking down at me as he brandished the jug.

“Stay away from me,” I said, backing away in the sand, wishing I hadn't sent Millie away. Though I wasn't sure that even two of us would prove any kind of obstacle to the contempt in Rand's eyes.

He raised his free hand in mock surrender. “Easy, girl.” When I froze, he added, “I must admit I was surprised that my cousin chose someone so skittish as his mate.”

That last word was laced with so much sarcasm I couldn't let it pass.

“And I can’t figure out why he didn’t gut you when he had the chance.”

Given the man’s disdain for me, I was caught off-guard when he laughed. “Well, what do you know. The kitten has claws.”

I liked being called ‘kitten’ even less than ‘skittery.’ “Then keep your distance, or I’ll use them.”

“Duly noted. Now let me finish pouring you that drink.”

“As if I’d drink anything you gave me,” I said, clutching my glass more tightly.

Rand raised an eyebrow. “You have a lot to learn about bears. If I wanted to hurt you, I wouldn’t bother with poison—I’d slit your throat.”

Then he flicked an imaginary speck of dust off his coat—and for a fraction of a second, his claws flashed. If he was sending a message, it was plenty effective. I did my best to appear unmoved as I edged away from him.

But Rand’s expression shifted again, a near-perfect facsimile of a warm smile. “But surely there’s no need for such talk. All was forgiven—remember? We’re friends now.”

“I don’t remember any such thing.”

“But Tyr said as much when he laid out his plan to allow us to take mates from your world.”

My fear of the man gave way to anger. I had the strange and probably mistaken urge to defend Tyr. I remembered what he’d said about Rand and how he wielded power over people by instilling fear.

I took a deep breath and stepped closer, jabbing a finger in his face. “That’s never going to happen.”

But the words didn’t have the effect I’d hoped for.

“Oh, I know,” he said, seeming utterly unsurprised. I couldn’t imagine how he’d found out about what had been a private conversation.

“Tell me, Frue...how do you suppose all these men are going to take that news?” he continued coldly. “When they discover that their chieftain’s human mate browbeat him into throwing away their futures? How do you think they’ll feel about sleeping alone for the rest of their lives while their leader gets to enjoy the bounty between your legs night after night?”

“How dare you,” I hissed, but Rand ignored me.

“Who do you think they’ll blame? The man they’ve known and admired their whole lives—or the scheming human interloper with a thirst for power?”

Even as I tensed with fury, I recognized the dangerous kernel of truth in

Rand's words. I had given no thought to the effect of our bargain on the rest of the clan. It had been easier to assume that Tyr's authority would be enough, that his people would go along with whatever he decreed.

But the threat to that authority was standing right in front of me, impossible to ignore.

"When my people find out what you've done, I'll be the least of your worries," Rand continued relentlessly. "You'd better hope Tyr has enough faithful guards to hold off an angry mob. As for making it out of Wynterhowe, you won't stand a chance. They'll gut you and feed your entrails to the sharks."

I forced myself to maintain my defiant stance. I would not be the first to look away.

"You don't scare me, Rand."

His smirk said everything. "We both know that's not true. Know this, Meredith Ives—I'm every bit the monster you think I am. I'll do whatever it takes to save my clan. Things my cousin has proven himself too weak to do. And I won't hesitate to destroy anyone who gets in my way."

He took my glass from my unresisting hand and filled it before handing it back.

"I suggest you drink up, kitten, and enjoy the party while you still can."

As I watched him walk away, the cup fell from my trembling fingers and stained the sand with claret wine.

CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-THREE**

## TYR

Meredith's triumph on the beach stayed with Tyr long after he'd left her in Mildritha's capable hands and gone to meet with Leodmar about the dam that diverted one of the larger streams to pipe fresh water to the center of the village. A mudslide had damaged the structure, and repairs were urgently needed to prevent a collapse.

The two men had gone to meet the repair crew at the site of the damn, a two-mile uphill hike made easier by memories of Meredith's laughter, the sparkling pride in her eyes.

Tyr was determined to find a way to make her feel that same pride tonight when she took her place at his side on the platform, and he formally introduced her.

"Up here, Chieftain," the foreman called when they came into view of the dam, and Tyr immediately saw the problem. One of the supporting beams had failed, and debris and chaff carried by the rushing waters had lodged in the cracks, choking the flow to a trickle and clouding it with silt.

"We've been making do with the backup sluice," the foreman said, pausing from his work to wipe the sweat from his brow. The rest of the men barely looked up, some of them waist-deep in mud as they worked to clear the clog while others stripped the bark from a felled oak that would provide the lumber for the repairs. "But the longer it takes to restore the dam, the higher the risk of contamination in the public basin."

Tyr's heart sank as he calculated the amount of work remaining against the angle of the sun. It was tempting to tell the men to finish the job tomorrow, but he couldn't in good faith risk an interruption in the water supply. Nor could he walk away and join the revelry while these men toiled.

Tyr shrugged off his coat and tossed it onto the branch of a tree. Leodmar was already rolling up his sleeves. Under Attor Harker's rule, no nobleman would have engaged in such taxing labor—but the former chieftain was languishing in a cell, and Tyr knew he needed the support of as many among the clan as possible to stave off Rand's challenge to his rule.

Besides, it felt good to heft a pickaxe and put it to use in honest hard work—at least for the first hour. By the end of the second, Tyr was drenched in sweat, and the sun had nearly set, but at least the fresh lumber had been

nailed into place, and crystal clear water flowed once again down the mountain.

“I think I’ll run ahead,” he told Leodmar, aiming for a casual tone as he hefted an armload of tools. “I could do with a little exercise.”

“Indeed, sir.” Leodmar moved to take his burden off his hands, but Tyr refused. No one would accuse him of failing to do his share of the work.

Leodmar sighed. “You will change clothes, though, before the banquet?”

“Of course,” Tyr called, already on the move, though in truth, he’d been tempted to skip it. He’d looked forward to greeting his people with Meredith on his arm, but the faint strains of music rising from the beach made it clear that the festivities had already begun. The wine would soon be flowing, the dancing would begin, and the revelers’ attention would scatter like the sparks from the bonfire.

Tyr ran harder.

He made it to his tent in record time and, miraculously, without injury. He washed quickly in the cooling bath, trying to ignore the erection that resulted from knowing his naked mate had recently graced the same scented waters and dressed in clean clothes. He added a wool vest embroidered with the Harker crest and raced through the empty village toward the beach, his heart pounding with anticipation.

Tonight, he would present his mate to her people, and they would all see what he had seen that night in the forest when he stumbled on an enchanted human stranger in the woods of Earth. Not just beauty, but courage and intelligence, a quick wit and determination to spare. The bears would see that, far from shaming them before their rivals, their frue would become a symbol of their strength and pride.

His great hope was that, when Meredith saw the admiration she inspired, she would finally understand how well she fit here. That her place was with him, and his with her.

The celebration was in full swing when he reached the beach, laughter and singing replacing the dour mood that had hung about the clan for months. With any luck, tonight would break the hold of the curse’s shadow and banish the strife between tribal factions. His beautiful mate would serve as living proof of a better future, a signal of a new era of stability and renewal.

First, however, he would have to find her, a challenge he hadn’t anticipated. A young human woman was the rarest of prizes, but that alone didn’t make her stand out among the revelers. Failing to find her in his first



pass through the crowd, Tyr searched for Mildritha instead, quickly locating her by her height and intricate silver braids.

To his surprise, the family's longstanding maid was dancing with abandon, spinning from one partner to another as the revelers gyrated around the bonfire. Tyr searched for Meredith and grew increasingly alarmed as he realized she was not among the dancers.

The next time Mildritha spun past him, Tyr grabbed her arm and dragged her away from the fire. Her startled expression quickly gave way to mortification.

"Chieftain," she said, bowing low and attempting to catch her breath.

"Where is Meredith?"

"I left her near the casks," Mildritha said guiltily, "but she—"

"She's not there anymore."

"But she told me—" The maid broke off as she joined him in scanning the beach. "I only left her a few minutes ago."

Tyr's claws tingled with anger, and he had to force his temper down. "You *left* her? Why would you do that?"

"She insisted," Mildritha stammered, her voice edged with fear. "She told me she wouldn't be able to enjoy herself unless she knew I was having fun. Oh gods, I should never have left her."

"My mate can be very persistent," Tyr allowed. "I'm sure she left you no choice."

"I'll help you search for her. I'll—"

"No." Tyr released Mildritha, forcing a smile. "I'm sure she's fine. She probably went to get something to eat. Stay and enjoy yourself."

This new restraint was Meredith's doing, and he wasn't sure how he felt about the fact that a few days in her presence had him checking his impulses and considering others' feelings. But he would have to sort that out later. If he didn't find her soon, it might not matter.

*She wouldn't*, he told himself as he searched the feast tables for the second time. Meredith wouldn't have taken advantage of the festivities to try to escape, not after agreeing to their bargain. Not after the moment of connection earlier that day, the laughter they shared as she taught him how to high-five.

*It's for when you do something awesome*, she'd said, but the thrill of even that slight touch promised much more.

He moved faster, breaking into a jog along the periphery of the

celebration, searching by the light of the lanterns for Meredith—until his gaze fell upon his cousin standing among a handful of admirers a short walk down the beach away from the celebration. Rand was holding court, talking and gesturing as the half dozen men gazed out on the sea.

The sight prompted an unpleasant riffling of Tyr's hackles, a sense of impending trouble.

Tyr knew better than to question his instincts, even when he couldn't explain them. He moved silently and stealthily, focused entirely on Rand. If the bastard had so much as touched a single hair on Meredith's head, Tyr would make him pay in blood.

He was still a dozen paces away when the group turned and began to walk away—not back to the feast but toward the village. Tyr's sense of unease grew stronger as he wondered what business would take them away from the celebration and toward the empty tents and barracks. He was about to follow them when he noticed a figure huddled at the water's edge, faintly illuminated by moonlight.

*Meredith.*

Tyr broke into a run without questioning how he could be so certain that it was her. As her drew closer, he could see that she was sitting with her back against a large piece of driftwood, her knees drawn to her chest, shivering and vulnerable.

Mildritha had described Meredith as cheerful only moments earlier, but something had happened since then—something to frighten her.

And Tyr was pretty damn sure that something was Rand.

His vision darkened with fury as he contemplated how he would make his cousin pay for this assault on one of the foundational tenets of the clan: the absolute sanctity of the bond between a man and his mate.

Meredith raised her head from her knees as he approached. “Did Millie send you?” she asked dully.

That was when Tyr saw the half-full jug of wine at her feet and the empty cup next to it. He wondered how much Meredith had drunk already.

“She's worried,” he hedged.

“That makes two of us,” she said, slurring slightly.

“Was it Rand?” The words came out with more force than Tyr intended. Gingerly, he crouched next to Meredith, trying to gauge her state of mind. “What did that bastard say to you?”

“Screw Rand. He can go fuck himself for all I care.”

Tyr was out of his depth. He urgently wanted to break all of his cousin's limbs. Still, another opposing instinct kept him where he was, desperate to understand what had happened and make it better, with no idea where to start. "You left the party," he said stupidly.

"I guess I wasn't feeling it," she said bitterly.

"That's not what Mildritha said."

Meredith wouldn't look at him. "What am I doing here, Tyr?" she asked plaintively.

"We...you...we came to an agreement." Why was this so damn difficult? "You're my mate. You're staying here. With me."

"But we're not mates," she said impatiently. "We're strangers. I'm literally just the first woman you came across on Earth."

Sweat was starting to collect on Tyr's brow. "We're not strangers. It's..."

*So much more than that*, he wanted to say. *Fated for each other. What my heart has been seeking.* The thoughts, each more foreign than the last, lodged in his throat unspoken. He cleared his throat, feeling like he was being pulled into an undertow.

"I don't know why I expected you to understand," Meredith sighed at length.

"Then tell me!" Tyr clenched his fists hard enough to hurt. "All I know is what I see. You left a feast being held in your honor to sulk. Now that I finally found you, you're talking in circles. Please explain it to me, Meredith. Tell me what's really on your mind."

Abruptly, Meredith whirled on him, anger flashing in her eyes. "*Fine.* You want to know what's on my mind? You want me to believe that party was for me, but it's not. It's for 'the frue'—a fantasy that doesn't exist."

"What are you talking about? Of course, you are the frue."

"Bullshit," she spat. "I'm not some special princess. I'm just the corpse you'll be stepping over when it's time to pick out your next bride."

Tyr gaped at Meredith, wondering what the hell had gotten into her. Death? Corpses? It had to be Rand's doing.

"What did he say?" he demanded.

To her credit, Meredith didn't try to pretend she didn't know who he was talking about. "It doesn't matter."

Tyr's fangs tingled as blood lust rose in him. He would string Rand up in the square before dawn. "Tell me, Meredith. Did he touch you? Tell me he didn't hurt you because—"

“No.” She was getting impatient. “He just refilled my wine glass and explained how every man in the clan is going to rip my guts out when they find out that I’m the reason they can’t go get mates.”

“That is *not* going to happen.” Everything was getting twisted faster than Tyr could explain it. “I know how Rand thinks, and he was just trying to scare you so you would try to escape again.”

“Really? Tell you what, let’s just say for the moment that you’re right.” She was angrier than Tyr had ever seen her. “That Rand’s nothing but a big pussycat underneath it all, and we’ll have a big laugh about it later. But tell me this—what happens with the rest of the men around here don’t get the joke?”

“You can’t believe I would stand by and let them come for you,” he sputtered in disbelief.

“Why not? Come on, Tyr, it’s like I said. I’m nothing special—a stranger to you. By your own admission, the curse demands a hell of a lot more than that: value, respect, and love—and both of us know that’s not going to happen.”

“But—“

“There isn’t a single reason for you to step in to defend me, not when my death would solve your problems. You’d save face and get to find another mate, the right one this time, the one you can actually help you break the curse.”

Tyr was so agitated he was on his feet before he could stop himself, pacing at the edge of the surf. “Are the men in your world such cowards that this is all you can expect from them? I’d fall on my sword before forsaking you. Any bear would.”

Meredith gave a bitter laugh. Tyr dropped to his knees before her, desperate to convince her of the truth. “And I didn’t choose you because you were the first woman I came across.”

She was so close that he could count the strands of hair blowing against her soft cheeks, her long eyelashes as she stared at him.

“I picked you because you were brave,” he growled. “I could tell from miles away.”

She shook her head. “You’re lying.”

“I don’t lie. You were alone in the woods in the dead of night, without a trace of fear. Not even when you heard me outside your tent.”

“I was scared.”

“No. Concerned, maybe, but that’s different.”

“I thought you were some kid playing a prank,” Meredith countered.

“You knew I was bigger than you,” Tyr said. He would argue with her all night and into the next day if that’s what it took. “Faster. Stronger. But you didn’t run, didn’t try to hide. Didn’t wait for someone to save you. You came out and faced the threat, Meredith.”

Something shifted in her as she considered her words, then flickered out like a match in the wind. “And then I knocked myself unconscious.”

“That was an accident. If you hadn’t slipped, you would have fought like hell. Tell me that isn’t true.”

“I would have used my stun gun.”

Tyr didn’t know what that was, only that she wasn’t denying he was right. “That’s when I knew, Meredith. That I’d found my mate. I saw your fighting spirit, and I had to have you. No one else, and I’d die before I’d let any other man near you.” Something weird was going on inside him, making his heartbeat wobble, and his eyes burn. “I could search your whole world and never find your equal.”

Meredith blinked—once, then again, then several more times in rapid succession. “That’s...a nice speech,” she said falteringly.

“I can prove it,” he vowed, and before he could really think it through, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her.

CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-FOUR**

## MEREDITH

I didn't know what hit me.

I'd been standing there shivering, wavering on tipsy feet, when suddenly I was experiencing the kiss of a lifetime. Not just lips meeting, but Tyr's body enveloping mine, his arms surrounding me, his heart pounding against my skin. It was as if I'd been plugged into a socket; a thrill of electricity shot through me and held me suspended in a million watts of pure, shocking need.

I'd dreamed of this moment, no matter how I might have tried to deny it. But nothing—not the dozens of men I'd kissed in my lifetime, not the love scenes in my favorite movies that I replayed over and over, not the fantasies that followed me into sleep—could have prepared me for the reality.

Our lips gave way to our tongues and teeth, my cries of pleasure meeting his rumbling growl. We were two feral beasts gnashing and clawing at each other, but we were also the sum of every conversation, every argument, every fear and hope we'd had since the moment I first laid eyes on each other.

Maybe I should have known it would have been like this from the times we'd touched in the past. Even that first night when Tyr carried me, semiconscious and confused, back to Wynterhowe, there had been something beyond his strength and stamina that left its mark on me. Some...sense of connection, like a magnetic pull between us. I'd never believed in fate, but from those first moments, I'd been increasingly aware of forces beyond my own will.

And now I was here. In Tyr's arms, completely enveloped. Surrounded. Protected.

God, it felt right, so right that I gave in to the ebbing of my reason as the kiss grew hotter and hotter.

My last lucid thought was that this was Tyr's first kiss, a shocking impossibility that quickly morphed into a molten reality.

Tyr was no awkward virgin; he carried in him a millennia of blood history, men who'd loved as passionately as they'd lived. Who'd taken what they wanted in the knowledge that it was destined and been loved back with equal fire.

Nothing could have been more erotic. My past was littered with awkward

and fumbling encounters, men whose names I could barely remember, trysts I wished I could forget, fueled by crushes and rushed dates and alcohol and boredom and occasionally affection. Sometimes it was fun, sometimes even memorable...but too often it was regrettable. Never, ever was it like this.

This kiss echoed Tyr's passion for life. I knew he was a man of powerful appetites. He could be impatient and demanding and impulsive, but I'd also seen his joy when life offered up its bounty, whether in a good meal or a swim in the ocean or a sunset.

I felt all that as I tried to get even closer to him, clutching his shoulders and twining my body with his, kissing his jaw and neck, wanting more and more. *Needing* it—needing everything.

It was as if his touch scoured and cleansed me, blasting away my doubts and fears, the dark thoughts Rand had planted in my mind until they were nothing but cottony wisps floating away from us. Reality was Tyr's solid, substantial presence, the safety he surrounded me with...and the pyre of my lust.

"More," I mumbled as my teeth grazed his skin, and I pulled at his shirt, trying to tear it off.

I'd never been like this. I always held some part of myself back, no matter how drunk or horny I was, an instinctive bid for safety...but being with Tyr meant being all in because he saw into me, *knew* me in a way I'd never felt seen or known before.

I'd gotten one leg wrapped around him, and his hands were cupping and squeezing my ass. I pulled his hair without knowing it as if trying to burn the clothes off both of us with the heat of our need.

I couldn't let go, not for a second, and when Tyr ran his hand under my sweatshirt and tore the clasp of my bra apart, I cried out with victory. His other hand grabbed my thighs, pushing them open as he wrapped my legs around him.

I gasped as my quivering, wet pussy slid against his cock through our clothes. *Holy shit*, he was rock hard and bigger than life, so solid and thick my eyes rolled back in my head at the thought of it inside me. All the wine I'd drunk suddenly seemed like a good idea as I realized what I was in for, my shock and trepidation overcome by my pounding need.

Tyr was watching me unblinkingly, his jaw clenched with the effort of controlling his movements as he slid me back and forth over his bulge.

"*This*," he growled. "This is the proof of how much I want you. This is



what you do to me, Meredith. Sleeping next to you those nights, trying not to touch you, was torture.”

I bit my lip, afraid to let Tyr know how much his words turned me on. On the inside, though, I was turning liquid with want.

“Every night I’ve left you in the tent,” he went on, his smoky gaze relentless, “I’ve had to go behind the barracks and get myself off with my hand. My ache for you was so powerful I felt like I would die without release.”

Imagining Tyr touching himself—muscles taut, head thrown back, that monster of a cock in his hand—made me moan. It was too much, and I launched myself at him again, voraciously kissing him and running my hands over his hard, powerful back, trying to pull him closer. He responded in kind, grinding against me, driving me higher and higher.

It wasn’t enough. I needed more—needed all of him.

I fumbled at the leather closures of his coat, then at the woolen vest underneath, whimpering with frustration. He shoved my hand out of the way and made short work of pulling the layers over his head so that I beheld his glorious torso, not glistening with sea spray in the sun this time but shimmering in the moonlight, his shoulders a gilded expanse of satin under my fingers, giving way to the thatch of thick wiry hair on his chest.

I’d touched Tyr through his clothes, starting with the night he came for me, then again and again when our strange circumstances threw us together. But this was the first time I’d initiated it, the first time I’d had been emboldened to slide my hands downward, following the trail of dark hair across his flat, hard stomach...then further still, resting my fingertips on the waistband of his pants.

My breath caught in my throat as I gathered my courage. And then I ran my hands over the rough canvas to the rock-hard bulge that strained against them. Tyr said my name raggedly and covered my hands with his own, crushing them against his cock, making me feel the throbbing of his blood.

*This is what you do to me, Meredith.*

The memory of those ragged words took me past a point of no return. I would beg if I had to, but I had to have him—even if I couldn’t walk in the morning.

The thought briefly brought me back to reason. Morning...the cold light of a new day would come as it always did, demanding its due, and I would have to face whatever I did tonight. Was I really prepared for that?

The answer from the deepest part of me, the part where soul met instinct and history, nearly bowled me over.

*Yes. Now.*

There was no reason to fight it anymore. I would never be leaving the clan. I had bargained my chance away. And denying myself would only lead to a night of miserable second thoughts.

I'd thought at first that Tyr was a simple man. I'd since discovered that it wasn't true, that he possessed depths beyond my comprehension. Still, the pleasure offered by his body was an uncomplicated choice. Maybe another woman would have clung to her moral compass and walked away...but my compass had been forged on Earth, and I wasn't on Earth anymore.

I'd learned the hard way that my future was not in my control. That nothing in this place was. If the escape this night offered was temporary, then so be it. Misgivings and doubts would have to wait.

"Take me back to the tent."

My voice was foreign to my own ears, rough with the tension between commanding and pleading. As was his growl of response, a sound as wild as the ocean lapping at our feet.

He was lifting me into his arms when his foot jostled the cup I'd been drinking from. It made an eerie, hollow, metallic clang that reverberated in my bones.

But the effect of the sound on Tyr was instantaneous. He stiffened, every muscle in his body tensing, and then he set me down with exaggerated care and backed a step away from me.

I didn't know what was happening, the chill air a shock to skin that had been heated by lust. "What—"

"How much have you had to drink, Meredith?"

"How much...I don't understand."

"Easy question. How much?"

"Enough," I said, my mind sluggishly trying to make sense of this interruption. I reached for him, but he caught my hands in his and held them firmly.

"It's all right, Meredith," he sighed, his voice heavy with resignation—and then he picked me up and began to carry me home. I kept kissing him, but something had changed in him; his ardor had turned to tension as if he was battling with himself.

Up the deserted stretch of beach and into town, winding through the

village as the revelry continued in the distance, Tyr was both gentle and distant, as if it took all his will to shut himself off.

In response, the alcohol did its work, dulling my senses until my desire coalesced into a heavy, hazy ache.

By the time we reached the tent, I somehow knew the night was over, even if my mind couldn't comprehend the reason. When Tyr set me down, I clung to him, and he was forced to pry my arms away, gathering my hands in his and kissing them softly.

"You should get some sleep." His tone was not that of a lover, and my sense of loss was so great that I nearly missed its gentleness.

"No," I pleaded, trying to embrace him, but he held me away. "You brought me back here to—"

"To let you sleep off the wine."

Regret darkened his beautiful blue eyes, but in the moment, it was little solace. "I'm not drunk," I insisted, but my slight slur gave me away. This time, when I tried to reach for him, I stumbled, suddenly dizzy.

"You are." Tyr betrayed no judgment, but I felt mortified all the same. "And I don't want our first time to be something you regret."

"But I want you," I whispered helplessly.

Tyr ignored that and attempted to steer me toward the bed. "Go to sleep, Meredith. I'll send Colbrand to stand guard."

"Stay," I said, peeling off my sweatshirt, the bra Tyr had unclasped coming off with it. "You can guard me yourself."

As a last-ditch effort to seduce him, I doubt it was my finest moment—and yet I saw the way his eyes widened. He swallowed hard as if trying to forcibly ignore his arousal. That, at least, had not receded at all, judging by the state of his pants.

In the long moment of silence that followed, there was no sound other than Tyr's labored breathing. His eyes flicked from my breasts to my face in obvious torment.

"I can't," he said brokenly.

"But—"

"I respect you too much."

Then he backed away, through the entrance of the tent, and out into the night.

I sank onto the bed, stunned—not because Tyr had turned me down, but because of his reason.

*I respect you too much.*

My disbelief was quickly overridden by the knowledge that Tyr didn't lie. Such a proclamation from any other man would have only deepened my skepticism, but I had never once questioned his sincerity. And why was that?

In my drunken state, it seemed connected to this idea of respect. I had believed him because, at some level, I had known that he had come to respect me.

And that brought a new round of fear.

Two of the three tenets of the curse had been fulfilled. First, Tyr had valued me enough to throw a feast in my honor...and now he'd denied himself sexual pleasure, even after I'd begged him, out of respect.

That left only one requirement. Once fulfilled, the curse...

My thoughts blurred, the drink suddenly catching up with me. I let the darkness close over me, sinking gratefully into oblivion.

CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-FIVE**

TYR

Halfway back to the beach, Tyr stopped in his tracks, gloomily regarding the crowded beach where the feast was still in full swing.

*Bad idea*, his conscience warned—and as much as he would have appreciated the release of partying until dawn, he wasn't willing to take the risk.

If he walked down there, he would likely drink more of the vintage that had been opened for the celebration. And the more he drank, the stronger the possibility that he might convince himself to run back to the warm and welcoming bed where he'd left his mate. That he should have given in to her pleas. That she was self-aware enough to know what she wanted, no matter how incapacitated.

Before he could give in to this kind of thinking, he turned and almost ran back into the village, putting distance between himself and a bad decision.

"Chieftain!" A captain, who went by Jackin, shouted as he neared the barracks, scrambling to his feet and slamming his club on the ground in salute. He and another guard had drawn the short straws and were glumly playing dice while their comrades boozed it up at the party. "I didn't realize—I thought you'd be at the feast."

Tyr signaled for him to sit, in no mood for formalities. "Plans changed," he said tersely. "I'll need a guard posted outside my tent sooner than expected."

The captain nodded. "Find Colburn," he directed the younger warrior with him. "Tell him to report his post. Do you want the maids to ready a cot for you again tonight, Chieftain?"

It was a depressing thought. Tyr deliberated for a moment, his breath a frosty cloud in the late night chill. It had been less than a year since he'd been an official part of this garrison, bunking with them every night. As a member of the ruling family, he could have pulled rank and lived alone, but to his way of thinking, that went against the bear code.

As a warrior, he'd trained for battle every day with these men. He'd fought alongside them, spilled blood with them...*for* them. That kind of unity and loyalty could not be cultivated in luxury. The cohesion of the clan's

military had no place for any rank other than the ones they earned.

Besides, these men generally felt more like family than his own blood. When push came to shove, they had also proved more loyal.

Everything changed when he assumed leadership, of course.

At that point, Tyr needed his own quarters, but he hadn't minded trading his bed for a familiar cot temporarily while he wooed his mate. He slept well in the familiar milieu, to the sounds and smells of hundreds of his brethren.

Tonight, though, was another matter. The thought of trying to sleep through the return of rowdy warriors when he'd just passed on a chance at heaven...well, it was cold compensation.

Tyr wanted to sleep in his own damn bed with his mate. He wanted to breathe her scent, feel her warmth, and wrap his arms around her soft, pliant body. To grow hard to the sound of her soft sighs and feel her open to him. He wanted the contrast of her sharp nails raking across his back and her soft, sweet lips. Of her whispered demands and the exquisite yielding when she gave herself to him. He wanted to sink his hard cock into her pussy, to feel how wet she was for him, to spill his seed as a man was meant to instead of into the poor substitute of his hand.

But no matter how strong his craving, Tyr couldn't have any of it. Not until Meredith gave herself freely while in full command of her reason.

And so he accepted the captain's offer.

"Thank you, Jackin." On the heels of his frustration, a new thought occurred to him, some unfinished business he'd been too distracted to see to earlier. "But there's no rush. I need to take care of something before I retire."

He retraced his steps through the village until he arrived at his cousin's tent. A single lantern glowed from within, but there were no voices, no moving shadows. Rand was alone.

Tyr recognized the guard posted outside but didn't know the man's name. There was little question as to the young warrior's loyalties, but he still offered the formal salute Tyr's position required.

Tyr nodded, then entered the tent without announcing himself. Rand stood motionless at an open vent in the tent wall, staring out at the ocean with his back to the entrance.

"Cousin," he said.

Tyr frowned. "How did you—"

"There is only one man in Wynterhowe, other than me, for whom my men would slam their clubs. Though their respect is for the position, not the

man who occupies it.” Rand slowly turned to face him, his face a study in hard planes, his mood appearing to match Tyr’s.

“You have a way with words, as always,” Tyr said. “You could almost be mistaken for a raven.”

It was a cheap shot, one that begged a response, and Rand did not disappoint.

“I was wondering when I’d see you,” he drawled. “I was starting to think your advisor’s cowardice was contagious.”

Any fond echo of their childhood sparring vanished at the crack. “Leodmar is no coward,” Tyr said angrily. “His reticence comes from wisdom, which you ignore at your peril.”

“How tedious.” Rand went to a polished sideboard and poured two cups of amber liquor from a decanter. “If you’ve come to lecture me, at least join me in a drink.”

“I don’t think so.” With a caution he usually reserved for interactions with ravens, who were fond of elixirs laced with magic, Tyr refused the drink. Rand might be kin, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t dangerous.

Rand frowned. “You’ve been spending too much time with your human foundling. She suspected poison, too.”

Tyr forced himself to ignore the jibe. “So you don’t deny it. You approached her tonight without permission—another man’s mate.”

It went without saying that it was inexcusable behavior, but Rand didn’t respond immediately, instead tossing back the liquor in a single swallow.

“No permission was needed,” he rasped, the liquor no doubt burning a path down his throat. “She is our new frue, is she not? On the occasion of her debut, I should think it would be appropriate to offer my compliments. Not to mention the fact that I am still a Harker, a member of the chieftain’s family... no matter how much you might wish otherwise.”

Tyr wasn’t about to play this game. Family lineage had been important to his father, but Tyr didn’t give a shit about establishing legitimacy or nobility. There had been a time when Rand hadn’t either...but that was long ago, before his cousin had lost the ability to distinguish between power and character.

“It wasn’t compliments you brought my mate. You threatened her.”

Rand’s brow wrinkled in mock confusion. “I did no such thing.” He downed the contents of the second cup and set both on the sideboard. “I simply wanted to make sure she was fully apprised of the danger she has



been put in...through no fault of her own.”

Tyr felt his blood starting to boil, his nail beds and gums tingling a warning. “You wanted to scare her,” he snarled. “You failed.”

What he didn’t admit was that Rand had managed to do something worse: he’d robbed Meredith of hope, something Tyr wouldn’t have thought possible until he saw the bleak emptiness in her eyes as she knelt in the sand.

“If she isn’t afraid, she’s stupid,” Rand shot back. “Or, more likely, she’s both. Was there really so little to choose from on the other side of the veil?”

The tingling gave way to full-on rage, Tyr’s next words spat roughly past his bared fangs. “Meredith is stronger and braver than you will ever be!”

“Tell me, cousin,” Rand said calmly, obviously enjoying himself. “Do you really believe that? Or is it simply a lie you tell yourself to blunt your shame?”

Over the roaring in his ears, Tyr could hear Leodmar cautioning him to get hold of himself, to think first and act only when necessary.

“It’s the truth, you bastard,” he growled, the effort of holding back sending shooting pains through his fingers and jaw. “Now, it’s my turn to ask you a question. What do you hope to gain with this game?”

“I would have thought it was obvious,” Rand said, smirking. “I want your dull little plaything to scuttle back where she came from, and when you go running after her, everyone will see what I already know: that you are weak and spineless. That you haven’t made good on any of your promises. That they’d be better off with a true leader as their chieftain. That would be me, obviously,” he added unnecessarily.

Tyr gaped at Rand. He’d expected more of the bloviating and nonsense his cousin offered his followers, words designed to provoke and incite. Instead, Rand had skirted the truth, coming too close for comfort.

*Listen between the words*, Leodmar was fond of saying. It had taken Tyr a while to understand his advisor’s meaning—that his pride prevented him from hearing competing ideas, instead rising to every challenge with anger.

When Tyr had humbled himself enough to ask for guidance, Leodmar’s advice was unchanging: *Ignore both flattery and insult and consider your opponent’s strengths and deficits instead.*

Rand had never distinguished himself as a warrior. He was too impatient for the constant repetition required. Instead, Rand had become a master of manipulation, teaching himself to use his enemy’s mind against him, to substitute a host of tricks—distraction, obfuscation, intimidation, flattery,

confusion, the list went on and on.

It pained Tyr to admit it, but he was pretty sure his anger had been Rand's intention all along. His cousin had goaded and provoked him for a reason... and he needed to discover exactly what that reason might be.

Tyr's superior strength would not help him here. The best he could hope for was not to play into Rand's hands.

He took several deep breaths, grateful he'd reluctantly agreed to Leodmar's teaching. Slowly, painfully, his claws and canine teeth retreated until he could speak without seeing red. Enough for his claws to finally slip back inside his fingers. Only then did he open his mouth.

"And what will you do if your plan works?"

Rand's smile slipped a little. "What do you mean?"

"When you become chieftain," Tyr said plainly. "If you ever win the position you're so desperate for. What will you do then? I'm curious."

"I...will rule."

"Uh huh, makes sense. But all chieftains rule; it goes without saying. How will you distinguish yourself?"

"I believe I already have," Rand said coldly. "My followers' devotion should make that obvious."

"Yes, yes," Tyr said, doing his best to channel Leodmar's unflappability. "But I'm talking about concrete acts. Take today as an example. Ricmaer's crew was down two men due to illness. Ordinarily, he might recruit spare men from the workshop to help bring in the catch, but every available hand is working around the clock to finish the repairs and resealing before the rains come. Not to mention the problem with the main sluice—"

"What are you even talking about? These are personnel problems."

"You're wrong. They're matters of *governance*." Tyr skewered his cousin with his glare. "This job you're so desperate for, it's not what you think. Power and position are only the most visible elements, and they're a lot more fragile than you might expect. Ruling takes hard work every single day, and most of it isn't glamorous. It's sweat and sacrifice and tough decisions. It's putting your people's needs above your own, over and over. It's muddy and bloody—and let's be honest, it's nothing you're built for, Rand. And yet you're willing to tear apart our family—our *people*—to get it."

This speech had been a risk. Tyr didn't consider himself a strong orator, but the words had flowed from his heart, and he stood behind every one. Now he saw a flicker of doubt in his cousin's eyes, a hairline crack in his

countenance before he regained control of himself.

“You don’t know me, cousin,” Rand growled.

“Gods, how I wish that were true.” Tyr wasn’t faking the regret in his voice before he forced his memories back to the shadows. “This is your last warning: leave my clan and my mate alone.”

With that, Tyr left, pushing past the guard who looked a bit less confident than before. Tyr half expected Rand to come after him, to demand the last word, but the night was silent, even the last of the revelers tiring.

Walking back to the barracks, Tyr enjoyed the satisfaction of having bested his cousin in a war of words. He was confident that Rand wouldn’t dare defy him now.

Tyr joined a stumbling queue of warriors returning from the feast, stinking of alcohol and singing bawdy tunes. He found his cot, the sheet and blanket folded crisply, and fell into an untroubled and dreamless sleep. It wasn’t until he heard the three-note drum tattoo that announced a civilian visitor that Tyr woke to a crisp, sunny morning.

He dressed hastily, hoping it was Meredith who waited at the sentry post. Checking his appearance in a small mirror nailed to the wall, he smoothed his coat and threw back his shoulders to greet her.

But it wasn’t Meredith.

Kayla Stearne was waiting for him with a scowl and a sheaf of papers in her hand. Standing a few paces behind her with a slightly sheepish look on his face was Ryce.

“Ryce...?” Tyr said carefully, wondering why the wolf had allowed his mate to precede him. “I wasn’t expecting you for several months.”

“Are you responsible for this?” Kayla thrust out the papers, and Tyr had no choice but to take them. Frowning, he unfolded two pages, one bearing an incredibly realistic rendering of Meredith’s smiling face and shoulders, the other a blurry picture of *him*, clad in furs with a heavy bundle over his shoulder. It took Tyr a moment to understand that the picture was meant to represent the night he’d found Meredith and carried her back to Evergreen.

Recovering from his surprise, Tyr read the words printed neatly at the top of the second picture with a growing sense of confusion.

MISSING:  
Meredith Ives

Abducted from a wooded area approximately three quarters of a mile southwest of Vidalia, Oregon in the Rogue River Valley Wilderness. Beware —abductor extremely dangerous, possibly cryptid.

CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-SIX**

## MEREDITH

**I** *could be a millionaire*, I thought wistfully as I downed Tyr's hangover remedy work the next morning.

All I'd have to do was smuggle out a thimbleful of the stuff and sell it to some pharmaceutical company to reverse-engineer, and just like that, America could party like it was 1999 without ever having to pay the price again.

Just another broken dream, I thought—but I was already feeling better.

Twenty seconds more, and I was feeling positively stupendous.

I padded to the entrance and pulled back the flap to let in the sun. I guessed it to be early and congratulated myself on being an impressively early riser for someone who hadn't learned the first time she'd overdone it.

"Morning, Colburn!" I called cheerfully and received a glare for my efforts. I imagined he was probably upset at having to leave the party early last night to watch over me, so I decided to cut my losses and leave him be.

Back inside, I made a quick breakfast of bread and an apple, splashed some water on my face, and was ready to go. Still wearing my trusty sweats, I headed for the square for my appointment with the laundry ladies.

I hoped I wouldn't be too early, but even if I was, the fresh air and sunshine felt wonderful on my face. Besides, it beat being cooped up in the tent, where my thoughts had too much room to roam, and I'd inevitably end up dwelling on how much of an ass I'd been last night.

It had started off well enough. Walking to the feast with Millie, my first sip of wine...in those moments, there was still promise in the air, a giddiness I hadn't felt in a long time.

But by the time Rand confronted me, my early optimism had been replaced by hazy anxiety—and things only got messier from there.

I walked on the beach. I drank. I watched the waves and fought a losing battle with my fears.

When Tyr showed up, I was in no state for conversation, but that hadn't stopped me from talking. Tyr had a few things to say, too. I couldn't remember much, but the words that stayed with me seemed seared permanently into my brain.

*I could search your whole world and never find your equal.*

Maybe it had been some sort of fever dream, but all my instincts said it was real. Tyr had been achingly sincere, holding my gaze and speaking from the heart. Remembering now had almost the same effect on me as it had then: shock, longing, and bone-deep certainty that I'd fuck it up.

The odds were high that I already had. Because what I'd done in the aftermath of that moment—what I'd driven Tyr to do—couldn't be taken back. I'd entirely behaved like someone else, moaning, screaming, grinding, and scratching at him with no thought to my dignity. In the end, I'd practically begged him to take me to bed...and he'd refused.

Deep down, I knew he was right to do so. I *was* drunk—too drunk to navigate that razor edge of right and wrong, self-will and regret. If nothing else, my willingness to take on that monster of a cock showed I lacked judgment.

But I still wasn't sure I would have regretted spending the night with Tyr. Fucking him, making love, whatever it would have turned out to be.

Still, his words wouldn't leave my mind. *I respect you too much.* Strange words from a man willing to abduct a stranger...and yet I knew they were true.

These were the thoughts spinning in my brain as I came into the square, abruptly vanishing as I heard the sound of women's laughter and remembered the reason for my errand. The women I'd spoken to yesterday ringed the basin, but there were others, six or seven newcomers. They'd brought their laundry but also baskets of baked goods that they were passing around, turning the atmosphere festive.

Bears, I had to admit by now, were fond of celebrating.

The conversation tapered off as the women turned to me, but their expressions were welcoming today. I navigated their smiling faces until I found Millie, who'd made a space for me on the stone steps of the meeting hall adjacent to the basin, where everyone would have a view of us.

I tried to ignore the nervous flutter in my stomach, remembering how positively the group had responded to yesterday's impromptu story hour.

"Welcome, everyone," I said. "Shall I take a minute to catch the newcomers up on the story?"

"We told them everything already," one of the elderly sisters called.

"Jump in where you stopped yesterday," added a familiar voice.

"Elwine!" I greeted her, noticing that she was wearing a pretty embroidered headscarf today. "Your husband must have come around."

“Yes—I told him he could wash his own socks otherwise.”

This was greeted by laughter. It made me wonder if all it would take to improve the bear men’s behavior would be a mass strike by their mates.

“Dorothy had just seen the gates of the Emerald City,” someone prompted me.

Within minutes, I was absorbed in my old favorite tale, my own enthusiasm reflected back to me by the little group. More people joined us, men and women both, some pretending they were just wandering by and others hurrying from other tasks. Before long, I was addressing what could only be described as a crowd—one that rewarded me with their active participation, cheering on the heroes and hissing whenever danger threatened Dorothy.

As for me, I was so caught up in my performance that I didn’t notice when a hush fell over us until I looked up and saw that I’d lost their full attention. I followed their gazes to see a most unwelcome sight: Tyr, standing at the edge of the square with his arms crossed and a scowl on his face.

Behind him was a stranger, a man so different in appearance from the bears I would have put money on a wager that he was not of this clan. He wasn’t quite as tall as Tyr but was about the same age. His powerful muscles hewed compactly to a more sinewy physique that was every bit as threatening. His most compelling feature was his coppery eyes. Still, his thick, silver-laced dark hair and classic good looks made him an undeniably handsome man. Beneath his gold-colored coat, I could see at least two daggers at his belt.

I wasn’t the only one taken off guard. Millie leapt to her feet and bowed.

“Lord Stearne and Lady Wolf.”

So these were wolves? The man’s looks and his air of lupine stealth should have given it away. But the woman looked...normal. A pretty, slender young woman with light brown curls and freckles across her nose and a friendly smile who wouldn’t be out of place in Vidalia, she could pass as a student, a waitress, or a young mom.

“Oh my god, you’re human,” I said halfway across the courtyard before I realized what I was doing.

I had already thrown my arms around her when it occurred to me that I was being completely inappropriate—but she was hugging me back by then. When I finally pulled away, I had tears in my eyes.

“Oh!” she said, then “you poor thing.”



There was a little more hugging, and she slipped me a handkerchief so I could compose myself before I faced the rapt audience.

“I’m Kayla,” she said kindly, “and you’re Meredith, and I’m very happy to meet you.”

“You are?—I mean...” I suspected I was embarrassing myself, but this kind stranger was the last thing I expected today. I was overcome by the relief of seeing someone from Earth. “But how do you know who I am?”

Her expression turned worried. “Your family is very worried about you,” she said, handing me a flyer with my picture on it.

I skimmed the words in shock. *Missing...Abducted...Extremely dangerous.*

Then I took a closer look at the finer print: *Possibly cryptid.*

Holy shit, what had they done? Did my family seriously think that after all our online bullshit and gaslighting, I’d actually been spirited away by Bigfoot?

How many of these flyers had they handed out? How many sleepless nights had they spent looking for me?

My mind spun as I thought about my parents, my uncle...Briggs and Ronny, about my cousins...friends, neighbors, and everyone I’d ever known.

Below my headshot, the same one I’d had taken for the website, was a grainy photo that must have come from the security feed we’d set up in camp. In it, I had to admit it did look as if I was being hauled off by a giant, furry creature.

“Dear God,” I whispered—and then Tyr was there, his hand on my shoulder, concern edging out some of the anger in his expression.

“We should continue this conversation back in our tent,” he muttered, too quiet for the crowd to overhear.

“I’ll—I’ll be back when I can,” I called weakly. “I’ll come find you, Millie.”

Kayla walked on one side of me, Tyr and Ryce on the other, making me feel both protected and as if I had no say in the matter. But I was consumed with the impact of my disappearance back home, something I’d managed to ignore completely, denial being the only way I could deal with what was happening in real-time, the only way I could survive.

But fast on the heels of that thought came self-reprimand. I hadn’t been just *surviving* last night when I tried to get in Tyr’s pants. I wasn’t focused on self-preservation while begging him to fuck me.

“What were you doing with those women back there?” Kayla asked, breaking into my reverie.

My initial shock had faded, and now I remembered hearing talk of Ryce and Kayla among the bears. They were the ones who had figured out how to break the curse, a wolf who’d traveled through the veil and the woman he’d brought back. The woman who had become his mate—and didn’t seem too upset about it.

I guess I’d imagined that a woman who’d give in to that fate would be ultra-feminine, traditional to the point of subservience. That or some kind of hardcore badass. But Kayla was neither. Beyond her scrubbed, fresh friendliness, I sensed a foundation of strength and pragmatism as well as serene contentment.

“I was...well, actually, I was telling them the story of *The Wizard of Oz*,” I said, suddenly embarrassed.

Kayla laughed. “What a great idea. It looked like they were really into it.”

“It’s just that they seem starved for entertainment.” A thought occurred to me. “Does the wolf clan do epic poetry? Like, with troubadours?”

She gave me a blank look. “Not that I’ve experienced.”

“Then thank your lucky stars,” I said, “because it is total shit.”

Kayla laughed again, loud enough to get the men’s attention.

“We’re all good,” I said hastily. “Just getting to know each other.”

Tyr looked at me sharply, and I wondered what he was thinking, but almost immediately, the guys went back to ignoring us. We had left the town center and, to my relief, seemed to be headed back to Tyr’s tent. Whatever this was about, I didn’t think I wanted an audience.

“You’re not exactly what I expected,” Kayla admitted.

“I guess that’s not surprising. If there’s a rulebook for how to act in this situation, I’m sure I’m doing everything wrong.”

“So it’s true? Tyr really did abduct you from your camp?” Worry lines appeared on her forehead.

“Yes, but—“

“*Tyr!*”

Startled, Tyr stopped dead a few feet from the entrance to his tent. I knew for a fact the man didn’t have much experience with women yelling at him.

“Uh...yeah?”

“Inside.” Kayla shoved him through the opening after Ryce. To me, she added, “I’ve learned the hard way to mind who’s around before I speak.”

Once we were all inside the tent, she faced off against Tyr with her hands on her hips. If I wasn't mistaken—and to my great confusion—Ryce was suppressing a smile.

“For heaven's sake, Tyr! You did the one thing we told you *not* to do.”

“What you *advised* me not to do,” Tyr said stubbornly, obviously uncowed. “I appreciate everything you've done, Kayla, I really do. But I'm the chieftain of this clan, and I make the final decisions.”

“That doesn't mean you can go around kidnapping women, Tyr!”

As grateful as I was to have an ally, I knew Kayla was wasting her breath.

“It won't work,” I told her. “Trust me, I've tried.”

Tyr gestured at the piles of cushions. “Sit.”

Once we were all seated and Tyr had plopped a bowl of nuts in the center of the floor in a nod to hospitality, he made his argument.

“I had no choice.”

I sighed audibly, wondering if Ryce was going to jump into the discussion. From the way he was sitting, slightly in front of Kayla with a low level of tension in his pose, it seemed clear he was protective of his mate, but beyond that, I couldn't tell what he was thinking.

“Would anyone care for something to drink?” I reached for the jug of spring water I kept behind me, but everyone shook their heads.

“Of course, you had a choice,” Kayla scoffed. “Even if you didn't want to wait for Ryce to go with you on your trip through the veil, I know he went over the basics with you—how to ask a woman out, how to talk to her, how to take her to dinner.”

“So you're the one who told him about dating!” I exclaimed. It made a lot more sense now. “I really wish you would have spent more time explaining the whole concept to him.”

“Your way would have been fine if I had all the time in the world to waste,” Tyr said. “And even if I'd done everything your way, it wouldn't have worked. Meredith would have never agreed to follow me back to Evergreen.”

“Is that true?” Ryce said, seeming genuinely curious.

“Well, obviously,” I said, resisting the urge to roll my eyes.

Tyr took that as some sort of affirmation, grinning smugly. “I hate to tell you, Kayla, but my way has been extremely successful.”

“You've got to be kidding,” I said. “Even allowing for cultural nuance, how could you *possibly* consider anything that's happened between us in the

last week a success?”

Tyr looked stung. He might be the most powerful man in Wynterhowe, but I'd managed to hurt his feelings with a few little words.”

“I admit there have been some difficult moments,” he said, “but it's all worked out. Meredith is happy with her life here now.”

“I am?”

“She is?” That was from Kayla, but Ryce also looked pretty dubious.

“Of course she is!” Tyr thundered, but I noticed he wasn't looking at me. “Just last night, she was begging me to take her to bed to consummate—“

“Stop!” I yelped, raising my hand, about to slap it over his big mouth. Noticing the looks I was getting from Ryce and Kayla, I sheepishly backed down. “Er, we don't need to get into that right now.”

“But Kayla said I took you against your will,” Ty grumbled. “It's important that she knows you were the one doing the seducing last night. You were standing right here, stripping off your clothes, showing me those gorgeous fucking breasts, and—“

This time, I couldn't restrain myself. I smashed my hand against his mouth and gave him my best death stare. “I think they got the point.”

Even though Tyr could have tossed me across the room with a flick of his wrist, he nodded meekly. Only then did I take my hand away.

“Is it true?” Kayla asked, frowning with concern. “Not the seduction part. But is Tyr telling the truth when he says you're happy here?”

I opened my mouth to say it wasn't true...but the words wouldn't come. “It's complicated,” I eventually mumbled.

“In what way?”

I let out a heavy sigh, unable to figure out how I'd become willing to air my dirty laundry to strangers.

“Tyr and I came to an agreement a couple days ago. He gave me his vow that as long as I stay with him, no one from the bear clan will kidnap any more women.”

There was an uncomfortable silence before Kayla prompted, “...and?”

“And since then, things have been...okay.”

For a moment, Ryce and Kayla just stared at me slack-jawed and silent.

“That's not an agreement, Meredith,” Kayla finally said in the tone of someone approaching a lost child. “That's blackmail.”

Yes...obviously...but somewhere along the way, I'd stopped thinking of it like that. As I didn't want to admit it, I didn't hate our arrangement anymore.

I'd always found it difficult—not to mention unpleasant—to try to sort through my own emotions, but even I could tell that my feelings about Tyr and this world had changed. That I'd come to appreciate certain things, even to enjoy them, and the agreement had given me cover.

As long as I could point to it, I could deny my feelings of guilt and shame whenever I realized I was having fun, when I was telling stories or helping with the catch, or making out with Tyr on the beach. *Especially* that last one.

Our bargain let me pretend that I had stayed with Tyr out of duty and obligation, not because I wanted to. And now that I was being pressured to admit to the truth, I felt the stirrings of panic, the urge to block it all out.

I faced Kayla, unable to meet her eyes. "It's just the way things are."

"I refuse to accept that answer."

"That's what you do, sweetheart," Ryce said with surprising gentleness, putting his arm around her. "You refuse...until you don't. It's your process. So let's not worry about this now. There will be plenty of time to discuss this later, assuming we're invited to stay for dinner."

"Of course you are," Tyr said heartily. "We're friends. So let's get you a tent so you can rest up from your trip."

"I'm not tired at all," Kayla said coolly. "I'm up for hammering this out now."

"I know you are," Ryce said with surprising tact, helping her to her feet. "But remember what the healers said. The baby needs you to take care of yourself, and that means getting enough rest."

*Baby?*

I tried not to let my surprise show. I would never have guessed Kayla was pregnant, but she wasn't very far along. At least now I understood what everyone meant when they said she and Ryce had ended the curse.

"Congratulations," I said, squeezing her hand. "Ryce is right. You should go lie down, and we'll talk more tonight. After all, it's not like I'm going anywhere."

CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-SEVEN**

## MEREDITH

The moment Ryce and Kayla left, I turned on Tyr. “Why would you tell them that!” I shrieked, realizing too late that our guests had probably heard me through the walls of the tent.

Tyr seemed confused. “Tell them what?”

“That we—that I—“ I was *not* about to repeat what he’d said about me begging him to fuck me. “Why did you have to bring up sex?”

I’d kept it together for the rest of the visit, ignoring the knowing looks on our guests’ faces—but now I couldn’t contain myself any longer. Not only did Tyr seem determined to humiliate me at every opportunity, he insisted on playing dumb.

“Is this one of those cultural nuggets?” he ventured.

It took me a second to figure out what he was referring to.

“Cultural *nuance*,” I snapped. “And no, this was you being rude and disrespectful, plain and simple.”

“I don’t get it.” Tyr still seemed mystified. As hard as it was to fathom, he truly didn’t seem to understand. “Why is it disrespectful to want to have sex with your mate? It’s the most natural thing in the world.”

“In the first place,” I said, trying to control my temper, “I’m not your *mate*. And before you say anything more, can you please tell Colbrand to leave?”

“What do you mean, you’re not my mate?”

“Tyr—the guard,” I hissed, jabbing my finger in his direction. “Or I’m not saying another word. The man already doesn’t like me very much.”

It took some grumbling, but he did as I asked. I heard the two men exchange a few words outside, then the ground-jarring salute with the club. When Tyr returned, we were truly alone.

And he didn’t look happy. “Now tell me what the hell you meant with the mate thing. I thought we’d settled this.”

“I only agreed to stay here with you, nothing more. It’s bad enough to be called your mate in public, but I refuse to pretend when there’s no one around.”

Tyr narrowed his eyes at me. I’d seen his temper plenty of times, but having it directed at me was still discomfiting.

“I’m well aware of the wording of our agreement. That isn’t what I was talking about.”

I rolled my eyes, exasperated. “What else is there to talk about?”

He’d been moving toward me, slowly and unblinkingly. Menacingly. I’d been backing up, but now I ran into the table. I felt like trapped prey, our bodies only inches apart.

If Tyr was trying to intimidate me, it was working. But I had just watched Kayla, an ordinary human woman just like me, not only stand up to her mate but basically steamroll him.

I told myself that if she could do it, so could I—and so I crossed my arms and glared right back at Tyr.

But he had an advantage that I hadn’t counted on: arousal. Our argument had perversely turned him on, and if his erection didn’t make that clear enough, the look in his eyes left nothing to doubt.

Somehow, I had experienced dozens of seductions and flirted my heart out without understanding that the most erotic thing in the world is to be looked at with pure hunger.

I’d never experienced that before. When men came on to me, their feelings were generally tempered by insecurity, arrogance, alcohol, or any of dozens of mitigating factors. It was probably true of my response as well. The politics and practice of sex back home were so complicated.

But Tyr was anything but.

He stared at me as if I was the only woman in the world, the only thing on his mind, the only intention that mattered. And I found that impossible to resist.

By physically overpowering me, it was almost as if he was daring me to flee—but my body refused to break free from the intoxicating chemistry between us.

“Words have their place,” he rumbled. The timbre rather than the volume of his voice vibrated through me like a caress. “The wolf clan constructs contracts and treaties from them. The ravens twist and manipulate them to suit their purposes. But to a bear, it’s what a person *does* that matters, not what they say.”

I saw my out and took it—coward that I was. “But we haven’t done anything.”

His laugh was devoid of humor. “You mean you haven’t given yourself over to me completely yet. But I defy you to tell me that the way you kissed



me last night *wasn't anything.*"

My breath caught in my throat. I felt dizzy like I was losing control of not just my will but of reality.

"Tyr," I gasped.

He ignored my unspoken plea. "The way you touched me. You want me to believe that was nothing?" Even his scorn felt sexual as he raked his gaze over my body. "The way you ground yourself against my cock? You were so wet, Meredith, I could smell you on me all night."

I whimpered—with mortification, with need, with the feeling of being unable to control myself. I couldn't deny anything he was saying. The rest of the night might have been hazy, but even all the wine I'd drunk couldn't obscure the way I'd felt in his arms. That heat was rising up inside me again now, the ache for him as sharp and hungry as ever.

I needed to stop this fast, before someone—before *I* went too far.

"Whatever happened was only because I drank too much," I said, impatiently tossing my hair. "You said so yourself when you left."

"You're not drunk now." A challenge. A dare.

I said nothing, hoping he would take my silence as indifference. It was like hoping a tsunami would come along and stop this.

"I wonder what would happen if I kissed you again," Tyr mused, and somehow, the bastard managed to make it sound like cool conjecture. It wasn't fair. He revealed all his cards without the slightest misgiving, then used my own to argue against me.

To compel me.

My pounding heart announced exactly what would happen. I wanted Tyr even more than I had before. So badly I thought I might faint. And still, I clutched at straws.

"But we haven't had our third date," I protested weakly.

"We just shared a meal," he said patiently as if I was an impertinent student. "Since you're so fond of agreements, you might want to review ours."

"But it was a handful of nuts," I said, my voice becoming high and shrill. "And Kayla and Ryce were there."

"Those were never agreed upon as exceptions." He bent toward me so that my body molded to his, our faces separated by inches. "But if you insist, we can test your willingness another way."

It went without saying what he intended to be that 'test.' Still, Tyr refused

to make the move, suspending us both on the excruciating brink. I could easily have gotten away. A step to the left or right was all it would have taken.

Yet I didn't move.

Until suddenly, as if choreographed by some outside force, we were kissing. My arms were around his neck, my hands in his hair, my hips jammed against him. He bit my lip, grazed my cheek with his stubble, muttered my name, sending me into overdrive so fast that everything else was a blur.

We stumbled together to the bed, me tripping over his feet until he picked me up and dropped me roughly beneath him. My dress was pushed up to my thighs, but Tyr pushed it further still, then parted my legs with his strong hands.

My own hands fumbled with my panties, my head thrashing as I tried to pull them off, but Tyr slapped my hand away and tore them in two.

Even the friction of the silken fabric against my skin as he tore them from my body felt like a revelation.

I reached for his coat, desperate to feel his skin on mine, his warmth against me. I managed to pull it off and was still working on his shirt when he twisted out of it, his muscles flexing and rippling from the effort. I grazed the contours of his sculpted abdominal muscles with my fingertips before remembering my own clothes. I tore at them with frenzied movements until I was naked to the waist.

Tyr stopped me with a hand pushed firmly against my shoulders, pinning me in place. He held me resolutely, even as he stumbled through his words. "This," he said brokenly. "This was where I nearly lost myself last night. Where I nearly lost control."

"But you don't have to—"

"I've never wanted anything as much as I want you now, Meredith."

*Then have me, I silently begged. Take me.*

"I can't believe that this is your first time," I gasped as he moved slowly down, stroking, searching, and teasing with his fingertips. He was a maestro of my body, a virtuoso, instinctively advancing and retreating, demanding and giving.

"Your body tells me what you need," he said simply.

I knew it wasn't modesty; this was another difference between humans and bears. Tyr was able to give himself over to his feral side with a freedom

that was unimaginable to me...at least until he stripped off his pants and released his huge, magnificent cock.

The sight of it expanded my imagination by bounds, destroying what I thought I knew and breeding a new, ravenous hunger inside of me.

My inhibitions shattered, and my hands were on him before I knew what I was doing...then my mouth.

My need drove me to taste him—to take as much as I could. I licked the velvet contours of his length before sliding him between my lips. I filled my mouth with him, and it wasn't enough. I whimpered with frustration even as Tyr wrapped my hair around his fist and moaned.

I found my rhythm so fast I might as well have been inside his head. Somehow, I knew exactly what to do. My hands, my lips, my tongue, my voice—I used them all as my instincts drove me, greedily lapping at the pearly bead that signaled he was close.

Abruptly, Tyr pulled me off him and dropped me onto my back. He pulled off my pants in one rough motion, then yanked my legs up and draped them over his shoulders. He gazed down at my swollen, wet pussy as I shivered and begged, and when he finally lowered himself and began to tease me with his tongue, I cried out.

I could have come right then, but Tyr wouldn't allow me to. He somehow knew precisely how to toy with me, bringing me to the brink and then stopping, growling with nearly cruel mirth as I arched against him in desperation. When I was at the limit of what I could endure, Tyr shifted again, my legs falling to the bed. Then he was above me, towering and dark.

Though the silhouette of him was undeniably that of a man, I had never sensed the animal within him more strongly than I did in that moment.

Yet when he began to enter me, he did so with a control that defied the fire that burned around us.

I bucked against him the moment he entered me. I screamed. I begged for more...and he gave it to me at a measured, nearly tortuous pace. Until, with one hard thrust, he took me completely.

I came immediately, my head thrown back, screaming as he pounded in and out. Finding my clit, he played it mercilessly. One orgasm tripped into the next until I'd lost track, and my mind had become an infinite whorl of pleasure.

I was begging him to stop, to let me breathe, to let my body find itself again when he pulled out and flipped me over so that I was on top of him,

straddling him with my hair plastered to my face.

I cried out in shock when he slapped my ass hard twice in quick succession, and then my cries turned to moans as the sharp sensations brought me back and ignited the ascent all over again.

I took him inside me, riding him with abandon, focused only on sensation and the solid, anchoring sense of him beneath me.

I had never understood the interplay of force and retreat before, of pain and pleasure. I realized I had understood nothing at all.

At some point, the balance shifted, and Tyr was in control, his hands on my hips molding me to him, his cock buried so deep in me we were like one being wracked and driven by need.

I felt him swell inside me as his face contorted with ecstasy, and the knowledge that he was about to come threw me over the edge. I cried out over and over as Tyr rammed one final time. His roar echoed through the air as I felt his hot essence jet inside me.

Claiming me.

Anointing me.

When my awareness returned, I had collapsed on Tyr's chest, breathless and bruised but more serene than I'd ever felt before.

I could feel him slowly softening, but he made no move to pull out, content to let the sweat slowly cool on our bodies.

*Just this*, I thought, as I caught my breath. It was all I'd ever wanted.

And the most frightening thought I'd ever had.

CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-EIGHT**

## MEREDITH

The trouble with making love before noon is it kills the possibility of rolling over and going to sleep.

With the sun up and high in the sky, there's no hiding from the reality of what you've just done. No chance to turn off your brain and dream for a few hours while your unconscious mind works overtime to rationalize what just happened and how in the world you're ever going to look that person in the eye ever again.

All I had was twenty minutes of languid afterglow, silently lounging on Tyr's chest—then it was time to get up.

At least for Tyr.

"I'm sorry I have to leave." His regret seemed genuine. "I am meeting with Leodmar to discuss the winter grain stores."

"Okay." I sat up, pulling the sheet to cover myself up to my neck, suddenly feeling shy.

"Or I can send word that we'll reschedule for later," Tyr said, the fire beginning to simmer again in his voice as his gaze dipped down to the thin sheet. One thing I'd learned about him in the last few hours was that he was a big fan of my breasts. "If you need me to stay, just say the word."

"I'll be fine," I said, trying to sound cheerful. "Go have your meeting."

There was no reason for him to stay; I wasn't even sure if I wanted him to—yet the thought of being alone in the tent didn't appeal much either.

He was still watching me as if trying to decide if there was some hidden meaning to my words. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

I stayed where I was as Tyr dressed. Utterly unself-conscious, he walked naked in front of me, fetching his clothes and then pulling them on.

"You sure you're all right?" Tyr asked, lingering at the entrance of the tent.

Suddenly, I had a fleeting urge to go to him, to kiss him goodbye, to tell him to have a good day.

I'd been so worried that he would change after we had sex, that he'd be smug with victory or indifferent and bored after getting what he wanted. But nothing had changed; he was the same gruff, menacing, thoughtful, sweet

mass of contradictions as before.

I waited until he was gone to pull down the sheet to take a look at myself. I was covered in evidence ranging from scratches and bruises to half a dozen hickeys.

Yeah, today was definitely not a dress day. Only the comfort and familiarity of my sweats would do. Slipping them back on was like pulling on a full-body hug. Instantly, I felt a little more self-assured.

Though, I couldn't say why I was feeling insecure in the first place. Everyone in Wynterhowe knew me as Tyr's mate—a title that practically screamed that we'd been banging since day one.

That's when I realized that all the uncertainty I was feeling had nothing to do with anyone else. This was about my own conflicted emotions.

Whether I wanted to face it or not, I'd just stepped over a threshold. I couldn't pretend that Tyr was just another hookup. What I felt had nothing in common with the occasional awkwardness of slipping out of a guy's house in the morning before he woke up.

For one thing, Tyr wasn't a *guy*. He wasn't even just a bear—he was the damn chieftain of his clan...and he'd chosen me to be his mate.

What was I supposed to do with that? How could I possibly have thought it was a good idea to complicate things with sex?

I felt my face get hot as I realized how ridiculous the latter question was. I hadn't thought it was a good idea—I hadn't thought at all.

One kiss and all I'd been interested in was getting more of what he was serving. And I hadn't been disappointed.

God help me, but given the chance, I'd probably do, complete with the screaming and clawing and...

The *point*, I told myself sternly as I walked out of the tent and into the cool, coastal air, was that some part of me was actually considering Tyr's offer. That I was contemplating what it would mean to be his mate.

Tyr and I obviously had chemistry. But relationships required more than that...at least, I was pretty sure they did. I had very little actual experience to draw on. Despite my healthy libido, my dating life rarely turned into anything long-term.

Part of that was just the nature of my job. Being on the road for weeks at a time made most of my encounters fleeting. But I'd also never met anyone who'd tempted me to settle down.

But with Tyr, it was different—and I couldn't figure out why. I wondered

if it might be some sort of Stockholm Syndrome thing, then rejected it as ridiculous. I was pretty sure I wasn't turned on by power and position. Maybe I'd simply been hanging around the bears so long I was starting to behave like one—next thing I knew, I'd be growing claws and rutting like an animal.

I decided to go for a walk, hoping some brisk exercise might clarify my thoughts. I considered the beach but didn't feel like running into anyone, so I set out for the woods instead.

The few people I passed seemed happy to see me, waving or exchanging a friendly word. I realized I was beginning to feel like part of the community, which only added to my confusion.

I'd started up the cliff path, a steep series of rocky switchbacks, when someone called out from behind me.

"Where are you going?"

I turned to find Colbrand standing a dozen yards below me. I wondered if Tyr had sent him to shadow me and make sure I didn't run into any trouble. It seemed like something he would do.

"I'm fine, Colbrand," I said with as much authority as I could muster. "Just going for a walk. I won't be long."

"Does the chieftain know you're out here?"

Apparently, I couldn't get even a few minutes on my own without having to answer for myself. I knew the man was only doing his job, but I couldn't help bristling at his authoritative tone.

"No, not exactly. But I have Tyr's permission to go wherever I like as long as I come back."

Colbrand frowned, though I had no idea whether it was because he didn't believe me or simply didn't like me.

"Look," I sighed. "Tyr is meeting with Leodmar right now. I promise I'll be back before he is, okay?"

He gave it some thought before finally relenting. "Take your time, *frue*," he said stiffly before heading back the way he'd come.

Finally—for the first time in a week, I was alone with my thoughts. I relished the feeling as I crested the ridge and veered off the path to follow one of the many streams up toward its source high in the mountains. Alone, I could take the time to pause whenever I liked, to watch chipmunks chase each other or admire a pretty patch of lichen or a tiny purple wildflower.

I'd done enough hiking to know what to avoid, but there was no poison oak, no rattlesnakes sunning themselves on flat rocks, not even any annoying



gnats to fly into my eyes. Truly, Evergreen was a beautiful place, and when I paused at a tiny waterfall to take in the view, looking out over the village so far below that it looked like a collection of toys, I realized that I was privileged to be experiencing something that no human had laid eyes on for centuries.

I decided to rest for a while and see if the tranquility of the setting would calm my inner turmoil. A moss-covered rock provided a comfortable perch, and I drank from my waterskin and inhaled the scent of wild sage. I let my eyes drift closed and was surprised at how much more of my surroundings I experienced that way, listening to the drone of bees in the wildflowers, surf crashing on the beach far below, birdsong volleying above me, tiny creatures moving about the forest floor.

I started to relax. The tension began to drain from my body, my lungs filling with the clean mountain air. The last step was to let go of my thoughts and simply let myself experience this moment with no agenda or expectations.

Needless to say, this wasn't a strength of mine. I managed fifteen, maybe thirty seconds of serenity before my thoughts started popping up again like groundhogs checking the weather. Eventually, I gave in and decided that I was doing the best I could under the circumstances.

And it wasn't half bad.

I was thinking this as I took another long, slow breath in, focusing on the scent of dirt and bark and wildflowers, when a new odor filled my lungs.

It was horrid, possibly the worst thing I ever smelled. I coughed, then I gagged. I shot up to my feet, bent over, and heaved for breath.

Oh God, I was going to vomit—but before I could, I heard a twig snap nearby.

Someone stepped out of the woods as the odor became even worse. I looked up in terror to find my brother Briggs staring down at me, his face streaked with camo paint.

Thinking I was hallucinating, I edged backward, forgetting how close I was to the edge of the overhang. I would have fallen to my death if Briggs hadn't grabbed me and hauled me back.

“Meredith, you dumbass,” he said as he hugged me hard, “we didn't come all this way for you to throw yourself off a cliff!”

And all of a sudden, I was laughing and crying at the same time, hanging onto my brother's bony frame for all I was worth.

“I can’t believe it!” I snuffled. “How did you get here? How did you know where to even look? And what is that godawful *smell*?”

“Deer urine,” Briggs murmured. “It covers your scent so animals can’t track you.”

“Did you have to take a bath in it, though?”

“We aren’t taking chances. And keep your voice down.”

This was when I noticed that my ordinarily irrepressible brother looked uncharacteristically wary. Anxious, even.

“What’s going on?” I whispered because if Briggs was worried, I knew an average person would be terrified.

Briggs leaned in close and spoke into my ear. “We’re not alone. Someone’s following you.”

“Oh, that,” I said, relief flooding through me. “It’s probably just Colbrand. My, um, guard. He might be a pain in the ass, but he’s harmless.”

“Your...” There was another rustling nearby. This time, Briggs slapped his hand over my mouth and pulled me to the ground, ducking behind a boulder.

“Frue?” Mildritha stepped into view, her skirts hiked up with a belt, a look of concern on her face.

Briggs released me, and I scrambled to my feet, brushing twigs out of my hair.

“Millie—what are you doing out here?”

She gave me an odd look, and I wondered what she’d seen.

“I was going to ask you the same thing! Everyone thought you would come back to the basin to finish the story, but that was hours ago. I started to worry. Someone thought they saw you going up the cliff path, so I came after you to make sure you were all right.”

I heard movement behind me, and sure enough, my brother stalked out, glaring—not at Mildritha but at me. “You’ve been entertaining your kidnappers with stories?” he roared.

Mildritha’s hand flew to her mouth, and she whimpered in fear. Suddenly, I realized that she had no idea who—or what—Briggs was.

Unfortunately, my uncle Ken and cousin Dave picked that moment to crash into the clearing, staring down the barrels of their shotguns.

“Nobody move!” Dave yelled.

I grabbed his barrel and shoved it downward.

“Stop it! This is my friend, Millie,” I yelled at all of them. “Any moron

could see she's not a threat, just a frightened woman. So put your damn guns away."

Sheepishly, my uncle and cousin men lowered their weapons as I looped my hand through Millie's arm. "Don't mind them," I said, so glad to see them I couldn't stop grinning. "They're idiots, but they're harmless. Mostly."

"What happened?" Uncle Ken demanded, looking from me to Briggs.

"Mer-bear happened, that's what." Briggs gave a theatrical sigh. "Apparently, she was having so much fun at story time she couldn't be bothered to let us know she was okay."

"That's not true, and you know it," I said fondly. "If I could have—*oof!*"

Dave had picked me up and was swinging me around, hugging me so hard he knocked the air out of me. "We've all been so worried! You have no idea. Raw Dog cried on cable news—"

"Please don't call Ronny that," I groaned.

"Dad's a wreck," Briggs broke in. "Mom's barely holding it together."

"I had tickets for Bon Jovi," Uncle Ken said, his hand clutching his heart. "I gave them away so I could search for you."

"I—don't know what to say. How did you find me? How did you even know how to come to this world?"

"We organized a search in Vidalia," Dave said.

"I coordinated with the local authorities." Uncle Ken spoke in a strangely deep voice, standing very straight as his gaze kept flashing over to Millie. "Over a hundred kids from the university came. A local pizza joint kicked in dinner."

"This woman showed up and started asking me all kinds of questions," Briggs said. "It seemed a little suspicious, so we decided to follow her. She led us to that cave and the weird blue rip in time and space."

Dave giggled. "Man, every time I hear that, it's like—holy shit! A rip in time and space!"

"That had to be Kayla," I said.

"Wait, you know her?"

I nodded. There was so much to explain, and I had no idea where to start.

"They call it the veil here," I said weakly. "The time and space thing."

"We followed this Kayla and the man she was with to some weird medieval walled village," Uncle Ken continued. "Thankfully, they didn't stay long, just picked up supplies. Then we followed them here."

"We spotted you as soon as you came out of one of those tents," Briggs

said. “Your sweats made you easy to find when everyone else was wearing those Renaissance Faire outfits. We were trying to come up with a plan to retrieve you when you shocked the shit out of us by just walking up here.”

It finally sunk in how much effort they’d put into finding me. “You have no idea how happy I am to see you,” I said, my voice breaking.

Uncle Ken wiped his eyes. “Not half as happy as we are to find you, kiddo.”

“You wouldn’t believe some of the weird shit we’ve seen since stepping out of that cave,” Dave said. “That town? With the walls? We saw a fight through the binoculars. Looked like a bar brawl, but get this—those guys had claws and fangs.”

“You’re so full of shit,” my brother said cheerfully.

“Actually…” I said, wondering how much to tell them now. “Those were wolves. I mean people from the wolf clan. They’re kind of like werewolves.”

“For real?”

“Yeah. For real.”

Dave pointed at Mildritha. “Is she a werewolf?”

Mildritha had been watching all of this with a bemused look, her arms folded. She was one tough cookie.

“I already told you,” I said sternly. “Millie is my *friend*.”

“I am no wolf,” she said disdainfully. “I belong to the bear clan.”

“*Bear*?” Dave looked horrified. “Like a werewolf except a freaking bear? That’s so much worse!”

Uncle Ken slapped him on the side of the head, surprising all of us. “I didn’t raise you to talk about women that way. Now, you apologize to the lady.”

“Dad, that ‘lady’ is a fucking—“

Another smack, hard enough to hurt. “I said, *apologize*.”

Dave looked down at his feet, embarrassed. “I’m sorry, ma’am. I didn’t mean nothin’ by it.”

“What is ‘ma’am’?” Mildritha asked me.

“It’s a little like ‘frue,’” I said, but Uncle Ken was clearing his throat, clearly having something he wanted to say.

“I apologize from the heart for my son’s behavior, miss.” He made a sort of bow, doffing his Cabela’s ball cap. “My niece is an excellent judge of character, and if she calls you a friend, then it would be my honor to do the same.”

“Oh,” Millie said. There’s no way she could have known that this was probably the longest speech I’d ever heard my uncle make, but something about it made her blush. “Frue, you never told me the men in your family were such gentlemen.”

That’s because they weren’t. At least not usually.

But the way Uncle Ken was gazing at Millie suggested that this was no ordinary encounter. Interesting.

Dave and Briggs, on the other hand, were oblivious. “What the hell is a frue,” my brother asked, “and why does she keep calling you that?”

“It’s...a long story.”

“Then you can tell it on our way back to the cave. C’mon—let’s try to cover some ground before nightfall.”

“I can’t,” I blurted, earning a disbelieving look from Briggs. “I mean—just give me a minute.”

“A minute to do what?” Briggs said, “You really want to give your kidnappers a chance to come back for you? For fucking werebears to maul us all to death?”

“That’s not going to happen,” I vowed, willing them to believe me. “Look, I know none of this makes sense, but I can’t just leave with you. Not right now, at least.”

“Why the hell not?”

Briggs looked at me as though I was speaking in tongues, and I couldn’t blame him. What was I supposed to tell him—that I’d fallen for my captor? That the thought of leaving Tyr without saying goodbye felt like a knife to the gut?

As I was still trying to come up with some sort of response, I felt the ground tremble beneath my feet. I could see from the others’ expressions that they felt it too—but only Millie reacted with terror.

“Oh no,” she whispered as a dozen bear warriors clad in leather and furs came thundering out of the woods, surrounding us.

Uncle Ken and Dave raised their shotguns.

“Don’t!” I shouted. “Throw them down, or they’ll rip you to shreds before you can pull the trigger.”

The men exchanged a look I’d seen a thousand times before. This time, thankfully, they decided that the girl might actually have a point and dropped their guns.

I searched the faces of the men, recognizing some of them from around

the village—but I was surprised to see that Rand was not among them.

Though not as surprised as I was when my gaze fell on Colbrand. He stood slightly in front of the others, watching me with a hint of amusement. My stomach dropped as I realized he'd betrayed not just me but Tyr.

“Sorry, Frue, but you and your family aren't going anywhere. Not back to Earth, and unfortunately not back to Wynterhowe, either.”

“What are you doing?” I asked, my throat dry.

Instead of responding, Colburn signaled to the other men, who began to bind our hands roughly behind our backs.

“It's called a coup, *human*,” he snarled. “It's been a long time coming, but with you for leverage, today's finally the day.”

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-NINE

## MEREDITH

After binding our hands behind our backs, the warriors lined us up, spacing themselves between us, and started marching us through the woods.

“Where are we going, Colbrand?” I demanded.

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“What are you even talking about, bro?” That was Briggs, always Dave’s straight man. I silently willed them both to shut up, knowing it was pointless. “Why would he take us there?”

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We were all silent after that—until Colbrand noticed Millie struggling to keep up. It was her shoes, stitched leather moccasins that were perfect for the lanes of Wynterhowe but completely inadequate for hiking.

“What’s the matter with you?” Colbrand said, grabbing her roughly by the arm. “As if it wasn’t bad enough that you’re an Earth-lover, now you can’t even walk.”

Mildritha said nothing, but I caught the fury in her downcast eyes.

“Something wrong with your hearing?” Colbrand demanded, pinching her ear and twisting it until she shrieked with pain.

“Please, I’ll walk faster,” she pleaded.

“Stop!” Uncle Ken yelled. “You’re hurting her!”

Colbrand gave him a droll look. “That’s the idea, human.”



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Unfortunately, now that the warriors knew my uncle would stick up for Millie, they began taunting him—by taunting her. It was obvious they despised her for befriending me, and now they were free to take it out on her.

I begged Uncle Ken to stay quiet. So did Millie, but it was like asking the sun not to shine. I wasn’t the only stubborn one in the family.

Ken had gotten himself slapped a few times, but then Colbrand went too far.

“You should be nice to me,” he told Millie. “Once we start bringing in the cartloads of human women, we won’t have much use for old bags like you. Then what are you going to do?”

That’s when he grabbed Millie’s ass and squeezed—and Ken jerked so hard he got away from his guard. He was headed straight for Colbrand and would have attacked him if one of the warriors hadn’t decked him in the gut.

My uncle’s knees buckled, and he crumpled to the ground, only to be hauled up roughly by his guard. Colbrand laughed. “What’s the matter, human? You hungry for a piece of her yourself?”

He continued to chuckle as we started moving again. Despite his pain, Ken glared at him with so much hate that I wouldn’t have been surprised if he set Colbrand on fire.

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“Or what?” he barked, pulling it so hard I was afraid he’d break my wrists. When I yelped in pain, he laughed. “This isn’t Wynterhowe. Out here, you’re not the frue—you’re nobody.”

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before me. Which he knew damn well since he'd been stationed outside our tent every day.

"Or I won't cooperate," I settled for saying, keeping my voice controlled. "You saw what happened when Tyr tried to force me to submit. I didn't give in to him, and I sure as hell won't give in to you."

Colbrand's mouth twisted into a cruel smile. "You're a lively one, aren't you? But you need to learn that there's a time and place for a woman to speak."

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"You keep acting up, and I'll show you how a real bear deals with a disobedient woman."

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much had he heard?

CHAPTER  
**THIRTY**

## MEREDITH

I lay uncomfortably on the dirty, slanting wood floor, watching the sky begin to turn a deeper blue through a hole in the roof. Evening was coming, and still, no one had come for me.

Because of my bound hands, I was forced to lie on my side, shifting whenever the aches and numbness became too much. I would hardly call it restful, but the real agony was not knowing.

Not knowing what was happening to my family members. Not knowing what lay in store for me. Not knowing what these men would do to Tyr when the time came.

I listened to the sounds outside, the warriors patrolling in shifts and playing dice games to pass the time. Each time one passed by close enough that I could hear his footsteps, my heart would start to hammer with the fear that this time, they were coming to carry out Colbrand's threat.

I was hungry and would eventually need a bathroom break—yet these small discomforts were the least of my worries. I knew my situation could get so much worse.

As the hours ticked by and the initial adrenaline rush of terror had subsided into a disconsolate sort of boredom, I tried to distract myself by pressing my ear to the wall to see if I could hear anything I could use to my advantage. But if anyone was discussing strategy, they weren't doing it here. Mostly, there was just the crude humor and conversational jousting I was familiar with on Earth among bored young men.

More telling was the fact that Rand's voice was not among them. I wondered if it was really him I'd seen, and if so, what his game was.

If this was the first he'd learned that he was being used, he might have retreated to Wynterhowe to plan his strategy. I wanted to believe he might tell Tyr, might even form an alliance to fight this insurrection, but the rift between them seemed too deep for that.

Given what I knew of Rand, it seemed more likely he'd use his name and charisma to amass a new group of followers to challenge both Tyr's leadership and Colbrand's band of warriors, and then there would be even greater fractures in the clan.

I could see no possible outcome that wouldn't make things worse for the



bear clan, but at least focusing on them kept me from dwelling on the fate of Millie and my family. If a confrontation came sooner than later, all of us would be sitting ducks, in real danger of being killed in the crossfire.

I was still trying to swallow down that thought when the chatter outside kicked up again. I could hear men getting to their feet and talking over each other, though I only caught a word here and there.

*Good to see you.*

*Wondered when you'd show up.*

*She's in there.*

*Waiting for you.*

And then I heard them say his name.

*Fuck*—Rand had returned.

The pure, raw panic returned to me as I scrambled to the corner and crouched there with my heart pounding. It wasn't long before it came—heavy footfalls on the decaying wooden porch.

The door opened with a creak, and a man stood silhouetted against the dusky light. In this moment, he seemed even larger than the average, massive bear, as if he were a figure from mythology come to wreak destruction.

Then he lifted the lantern he was holding and illuminated his face—hard planes, dark, intent eyes, the taut line of his mouth. Whether it was vengeance or rage that drove him, I couldn't tell. All I sensed was menace. I remembered the waning hours of the feast when Rand had described in almost loving detail how he would see me dead.

But now, after Colbrand's vile threats, it was the intervening hours I feared most.

"They saved you for my return," he said, his lips forming a sadistic smile. "Lucky me."

I tried to snarl through the gag in my mouth, an empty threat if there ever was one.

Rand snorted. "You think you're tough? We'll see how long that lasts."

He spoke loud enough for the men outside to hear every word, and my blood curdled with the knowledge that he relished having an audience. I could hear laughter, taunts, and encouragement. The warriors seemed almost frenzied with the knowledge of what was about to happen.

I looked around wildly, but there was nothing to defend myself with. Still, I wouldn't give up easily. I'd aim for his eyes and balls. I'd use my fists, feet, and teeth.

But the moment Rand pushed the door shut, his demeanor shifted. His swagger instantly melted away, and his expression softened, the rabid threat in his eyes fading to keen alert.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he said quietly.

I stayed where I was; every muscle in my body tensed. What the hell was this? I wondered what game he was playing, studying him for a hidden weapon, a trick.

“I’m going to take your gag out,” he said. “But don’t speak. Got it?”

I nodded warily, and he crouched down in front of me and worked at the knot. I stayed silent, but only because calling for help would never bring it. He pulled the sodden cloth from my mouth and threw it to the floor.

I worked my aching jaw, trying to get the feeling back, while he returned to his post just inside the door.

“What the fuck is going on?” I asked, matching his quiet tone.

“We’re waiting.”

“For what?”

“For the men to get tired of eavesdropping and go back to what they were doing.” He gave me a calculating look. “If you want to hurry things along, you could scream.”

“*What?*”

“Scream. Act like I’m doing everything you’re afraid I’ll do.”

“What—what are you talking about?”

“Are you daft? Those men are lining up to take their turn after I’m done with you—what do you think they’re expecting to hear?”

I barely understood what he was asking of me and had no clue why. When I gave a halfhearted whimper, Rand rolled his eyes.

Then he pulled back his lips and flashed me his huge fangs. This time, I screamed for real.

Outside, the men laughed and hollered obscenities, and I didn’t know what was worse—knowing what they meant to do to me or the collective, evil thrill it gave them. Eventually, they settled down to their conversations and dice, but there was a brutal hum of anticipation in the air now.

“Get up.”

Rand’s fangs had retracted, and he made no move to touch me, but I was still wary as I clumsily got to my feet. My arms ached from the unnatural position.

“Turn around.”

“You must be joking,” I said, mashing my body into the corner of the room. I knew it made no difference—Rand would do what he liked with me no matter what I did—but I refused to comply. Even an insignificant rebellion was better than none.

For his part, Rand didn’t seem surprised. With an air of resignation, he grabbed my arm and forced me around so that I faced the wall. I felt the rope tighten and then abruptly fall away, falling to the ground. I turned back around just in time to see Rand’s thick, curved claws receding back into his hands.

I rolled my shoulders and rubbed my wrists as the feeling returned to my fingers. “What are you going to do with me?”

Rand had taken a step back, and the look on his face was of pure disgust. “You and my cousin really are a couple of imbeciles. What does it look like I’m doing? I’m getting us out of here.”

My head spun from the effort of trying to understand what was happening. “But—you despise me.”

“True,” he said grimly. “But at the moment, I hate those numbskulls out there more. I can’t take them all on alone, and if I’m going to have any chance of convincing Tyr to help, I can’t exactly leave you here.”

It made a kind of sense. Until this moment, I couldn’t have imagined anything that would put Tyr and Rand on the same side—but Rand stood to lose not just his family’s support but the following he’d painstakingly built if they didn’t work together.

But there was a big problem with his plan. “What about my family and Millie? We can’t leave them here!”

Rand shook his head. “It’s the only way.”

“I can’t leave them behind.”

“You have to. It’s the only way the plan works.”

“What plan?” I said, my voice rising in volume as I grew increasingly panicked.

Rand let out a roar, which in turn made me shriek. “That’s right,” he said, thumping his fist on the wall of the shed. “You know you want it.”

There was more laughter and intoxicated hooting, along with the smell of a campfire. The men had settled in for the evening, waiting for a turn with me.

“Keep it up,” Rand muttered, digging into his pack for a small metal box. “We want them to think we’re screwing all night so they won’t come in

here.”

“But even if we escape somehow, they’ll investigate the minute it’s quiet. When they see that I’m gone, they’ll kill my family and then come after me.”

Rand turned a tiny crank on the side of the box before setting it carefully on the floor. “That’s what this is for.”

“What is it?”

“A bit of dark raven magic. I traded a barrel of whiskey for it.”

As he was speaking, sounds started coming out of the box...the sounds of fucking, so realistic I would never have believed they came from a device. Even more shocking, they were *our* voices—mine and Rand’s, moaning and gasping and crying out and saying filthy things to each other.

I couldn’t help recoiling. “How...”

“It’s a mimic player. You feed it the kind of things you want it to say and then expose it to voices. It will replicate them for as long as you tell it to. I set it up before I came in here.”

“Yeah, baby,” Rand’s voice came from the floor, making me jump. “Take it all. I’m going to pound you all night long.”

Rand buckled his pack back up, seeming pleased with himself. “That ought to give us time to get back to Wynterhowe.”

“And then what?” I asked, thinking of my uncle, Dave, and Briggs, my heart in my throat.

“We’ll help Tyr muster his forces and come back. With any luck, Colbrand will be dead by dawn.”

There was another problem with Rand’s scheme, one I was mortified to bring up. “But no one actually makes love all night. It’s just a figure of speech. Maybe an hour or two, tops.”

“Really?” Rand seemed genuinely surprised—not to mention disappointed—by that. “But *they* don’t know that.”

He was right. It was easy to forget how little experience these guys had.

Rand’s plan was far from perfect, but it wasn’t as if I’d come up with anything better. As much as I hated leaving my family, our only hope of saving them was to move fast. And that meant I had no choice but to put my trust in Rand.

“The men will sleep in shifts,” he was saying, “starting pretty soon. Once things settle down out there, I’ll pry up a couple of the floorboards, and we’ll sneak out the back.”

I couldn’t help but be impressed by his preparations. Now, with nothing

left to do but wait, I sat back down in my corner while Rand took a position by the door.

I wasn't sure what was worse—the vile festival atmosphere outside the shed or the terrible sounds within.

CHAPTER  
**THIRTY-ONE**

## TYR

He should have known something was wrong the moment he came back to an empty tent.

It didn't matter that they'd agreed she was free to come and go as she liked, as long as she didn't escape. Or that he knew a woman as curious and energetic as Meredith wasn't likely to sit around and wait while he worked.

But it wasn't until after strolling to the square and discovering that she'd never returned to finish telling her story at the basin that Tyr felt the first twinge of worry. One that only deepened when the women there told him how Mildritha had gone to look for Meredith hours ago.

Once he'd scoured the entire village and failed to find either woman, he was in a state of true panic. One bad enough that he'd gone to Ryce and Kayla in hopes they might have some insight into where Meredith had gone.

He'd found the couple enjoying tea in their guest quarters. Unfortunately, they were as mystified as he as to her whereabouts.

"But don't worry, Tyr," Kayla said, patting his arm. "She'll come back."

Tyr knew that Ryce's mate was trying to reassure him, but there was no way he could stop worrying until Meredith was back by his side.

His mind was spinning to come up with an explanation for her disappearance. A few days ago, he might have assumed she'd escaped, but now that seemed impossible. After the intimacy that had grown between them—not just the spectacular sex, but every precious hour they'd spent together—Tyr simply couldn't believe that Meredith would leave.

"I should have sent the guards out the minute I got back, and she was gone," he said, furious with himself.

Even worse, Colbrand hadn't been at his post. Tyr briefly considered sending the clan's most skilled tracker, Borisu Ohlson, to find Colbrand—but he'd immediately realized that it would take more than one man to conduct a thorough search. As a captain, Colbrand could make that happen quickly.

"Isn't that your man?" Ryce said, shielding his eyes from the sun as he looked up the broad lane through town.

Sure enough, Borisu was running toward them...alone. Tyr didn't

understand how that could be; it made no sense that he hadn't been able to find Colbrand in the small settlement.

"Where is he?" Tyr demanded as Borisu caught his breath. He'd obviously run the whole way; Tyr had made it abundantly clear that this was a serious matter.

"Training, Chieftain. Apparently, he took a squad to the Twin Stream course for agility work. But—"

"That makes no sense," Tyr said. "They cut back the brush last week." The entire point of the course was its dense vegetation, in which the men practiced low-visibility maneuvers, but it was cleared each fall to reduce the risk of fire.

"I thought so, too," Borisu admitted. "Maybe the sentry heard wrong. But there's something—"

"Never mind. Go find Jackin and tell him we need every available man."

Tyr was past trying to pretend to be calm. His sense that something was wrong was now full-on alarm, a certainty that Meredith was in danger.

"That's what I'm trying to tell you, Chieftain. After you talked to the women at the basin, they were worried enough to report the frue missing. Jackin and his men took the dogs and followed her scent up the ridge path. She left the path just past the black granite rockfall, but that's where her trail ends."

"What do you mean, that's where her trail ends?" Tyr had to force himself not to shake the man. "She didn't just disappear!"

"There was a strong odor of deer urine," Borisu said, obviously very uncomfortable to be the bearer of bad news. "Jackin's convinced whoever took her used it to cover their tracks."

*Whoever took her.* There was no other conclusion to be reached.

And Tyr knew exactly who had done it.

"Go find Rand, Borisu," Tyr snarled. "And bring him to me in chains."

Borisu looked startled. "Chieftain?"

"Now!"

As Borisu took off again, Ryce laid a hand on Tyr's arm. "Careful, friend. Don't go jumping to conclusions before—"

"I'll kill him myself," Tyr vowed, flinging off Ryce's hand. "You don't know that bastard. He's been gunning for me ever since I took over."

Ryce nodded, accepting Tyr's assessment. "Does he have the backing to mount a significant challenge?"



Tyr scowled. “He has a following,” he conceded. “More than that, Rand’s got a silver tongue. He’ll say anything to get what he wants.”

“Do you consider him dangerous?”

“As a leader, if not a warrior. He was one of the most promising marksmen in the clan when we were young warriors, but he let his training lapse to practice politics.”

“And you don’t know where he’d take her—“

Tyr gestured helplessly, taking in the beautiful, imposing vista of the mountains rising up above the village. “He knows this land as well as I do. He could have gone anywhere.”

Ryce left Tyr to his pacing after that. There was nothing to be done until Rand was found—or, failing that, until he communicated his demands. Because Tyr was sure that Rand would exact a high price for Meredith’s return.

As the hours dragged on, Kayla tried to get Tyr to eat, but it was impossible. Part of him wished his friends would leave him alone with his misery, but he had a feeling that would only worsen his fear and rage.

Night fell, and there was still no word from the searchers. The news had spread through the village, and a tense silence had settled around them. There were no shouts of children playing, no communal bonfire, just the agony of waiting.

Jackin returned to report that he’d dispatched every available warrior and would stay to establish a command post with Tyr. Colburn still hadn’t returned, and Tyr assumed he’d taken his men to join the search. That meant that every bear warrior was combing the land for Meredith. They *would* find her—he just prayed it would be before Rand could—*no*. He would not allow himself to consider what his cousin might do.

Instead, Tyr imagined Meredith miraculously emerging unharmed from the forest. She would run into his arms, his name on her lips, her heart beating against his...and he would never let her go again.

“Tyr.” It was Kayla, sitting gingerly beside him. “Meredith’s tough.”

Tyr only nodded. Kayla didn’t know the half of it. Meredith was the boldest, most courageous, not to mention stubborn person he knew. Despite being a defenseless human, she was never afraid to speak her mind. Hell, she’d even threatened him in the heat of argument—as if she stood any chance of catching him unawares and strangling him in his sleep or shoving him off a cliff.

He'd give anything to argue with her again, to watch the fire in her eyes as she promised to kill him. So great was Tyr's anguish that he resorted to something he hadn't done since childhood: he closed his eyes, raised his arms to the heavens, and prayed to every god.

*Please bring her safely back to me. I'll do anything. Give anything.*

"Tyr!"

Tyr's eyes flew open at Kayla's tone, just in time to see two figures emerging from the darkness at the edge of town. His agony evaporated the instant he recognized Meredith's form.

His eyes were only on her, oblivious to everything else, as he ran toward her. They met in the distance between them, Tyr sweeping Meredith off her feet and into her arms, murmuring her name as she clung to him fiercely.

They stood that way for a long moment, unable to speak, their hearts hammering in unison. When they finally eased apart, Meredith was smiling and crying at once.

"I thought I'd never see you again."

Tyr's heart folded in on itself, tearing his breath from his chest—only to then expand until he thought he couldn't contain his emotions. The hours of fear, of not knowing what had happened to Meredith, had been the worst of his life. Thoughts of her being afraid and in danger had been made worse by the torture of being unable to help her.

But holding her in his arms, knowing that she'd been thinking of him during her own torment—something shifted inside him. Something he couldn't explain.

He kissed her hair, breathing in her scent as if trying to preserve it forever. Unfortunately, he was rewarded with the dizzyingly wretched stench of deer urine.

"Was it Rand?" he demanded, his fury returning like a tidal wave. "Did he do this to you?"

A strange look came over Meredith's face, and Tyr could barely contain himself. "I'll rip out his heart and feed it to the dogs."

Meredith pressed a hand to his chest in alarm. "No, Tyr, you don't understand."

A man stepped into the lantern light, followed closely by Jackin. "Hello, cousin."

Tyr reacted by instinct, shoving Meredith behind him with one hand while pulling his hammer from his belt with the other. He would have

smashed Rand's head to pulp if Meredith hadn't thrown herself in front of him, blocking his swing.

"It wasn't him!" she cried, pulling at his arm with all her strength. "He's the one who rescued me."

Shocked, Tyr looked between his mate and his cousin, trying to understand. Jackin stood at the ready, waiting for his command.

It seemed impossible—but Meredith was adamant. Eventually, he lowered the hammer—but didn't relax his grip or take his eyes off Rand.

"*Explain.*"

"It was Colbrand." Rand held his gaze, unblinking.

"That's impossible."

"It's true," Meredith said. "He tracked me and my family up near the ridge. Him and a dozen of his followers. They jumped us—we didn't stand a chance. Colbrand's planning a coup, Tyr—he wants to overthrow you and install Rand as a puppet chieftain."

"Never," Rand growled. "I'm no one's fucking puppet."

And just like that, Tyr knew it was true. He saw in Rand's eyes the fire that had been missing, the genuine passion that had slowly vanished as their relationship had deteriorated.

His cousin might despise him—but at least Tyr finally felt like he was speaking from the heart.

Before he could respond, however, something clicked for Tyr, something Meredith had just said. "What do you mean he tracked you and your *family*?"

"My brother, my uncle, and my cousin. They followed Kayla through the veil and all the way to Wynterhowe."

"They..." His voice quavered, and he had to clear his throat before trying again, feeling something dangerously close to fear. "Your family came to take you home."

A statement, not a question. A possibility he should have considered all along but was too distracted and headstrong to let in. "Were you going to go with them?"

Meredith's gaze slipped sideways. "That doesn't matter right now. Colbrand is holding them hostage. Mildritha too. If he realizes we've escaped before we can rescue them, he'll have them killed."

Tyr felt paralyzed. He didn't doubt what Meredith was telling him, and the knowledge that a man he'd trusted had betrayed him filled him with rage. Tyr knew what Meredith was asking of him, and the warrior in him was more

than ready to act.

But Tyr's insidious fear of losing Meredith told another story, whispering that all he had to do to keep her was to leave Colbrand's hostages to their fate.

Rand was watching him shrewdly, and Tyr felt exposed. They'd once been so close they finished each other's sentences; now he was certain Rand could see into his heart.

"We don't have much time," Rand said carefully. "Until dawn, at the latest."

Then, he went on to explain the ruse that had bought Meredith's safety.

Tyr felt nauseated at the thought of his mate's voice being twisted so obscenely—but also weak with gratitude that she was alive. So weak that he could barely stay on his feet, his legendary strength helpless in the face of his emotions.

Tyr knew that Jackin would not act without his order. Rand, however, was watching him with troubled eyes, and Tyr's sense of exposure only increased. His cousin was waiting for him to decide. Waiting for him to reveal his true character.

Tyr tried to buy himself some time, looking up at the night sky as if beseeching the stars for answers. Meredith's family had come to rescue her. And if he was honest with himself, he couldn't blame them.

Only moments ago, he'd been the one fearing that he'd lost her forever. Like them, he would have done anything to get her back. He'd thought the gods had heard his pleas when she was delivered back into his arms.

But now he saw that he'd never had the right to consider her his own. To these men, these humans who had known her for her entire life, he was a monster—just as Tyr had felt blind hatred toward whoever had dared take Meredith. Dared to treat her as chattel, as something to be used and even destroyed in his own quest for power.

If he left Meredith's family to die, he would be no better than Colbrand. He had no right to sacrifice the innocent so that he could evade the pain of loss, of having loved with his entire being.

Meredith was gripping his arm tightly, beseeching him with her gaze. A few paces away, Kayla and Ryce waited anxiously, Ryce's arm encircling his mate. The woman for whom he'd risked everything, for whom he'd been willing to sacrifice his happiness and even his life—just so that she could lead the life she wanted.

Ryce had been rewarded in the end because it turned out that the life Kayla wanted was with him and the child in her belly. But he couldn't have known they would end up together. Still, he'd taken the risk anyway.

Because that was love.

Meredith would suffer unimaginably if her family was murdered. If she knew that Tyr had done nothing to stop it, she would never look at him the same way again. Even if she stayed in the clan to honor their agreement, her heart would be lost to him forever.

“Jackin.” He spoke in a strong, clear voice. “How soon can you pull your squad from the search and get word to the rest of the men? We can't risk them forcing Colbrand's hand.”

The captain considered the question. “Two hours, sir.”

It would take another two hours to reach the abandoned camp. If they encountered no further obstacles. Tyr calculated that they would reach it just before dawn, “Assemble them here,” he ordered Jackin. “I will be ready.”

Tyr sensed the relief in Meredith as she relaxed her grip on his arm. The look that passed between them made it clear that he'd made the right decision.

Rand, however, was harder to read. Tyr wondered if his cousin would have come to a different decision in his shoes.

Meredith cupped Tyr's face with a cool hand. “Thank you,” she murmured.

“It's too early for gratitude,” Rand said grimly. “We haven't won yet.”

CHAPTER  
**THIRTY-TWO**

## MEREDITH

It was odd returning to Wynterhowe after escaping Colbrand's men. Suddenly, a place that had once felt like a dangerous prison felt like home.

Being reunited with Tyr had been a blessed moment of pure relief and joy. But it ended all too quickly when the men started discussing strategy, and I was forced to face the very real possibility that further bloodshed was coming.

Since I used the excuse of still smelling like a latrine to excuse myself to scrub up.

There was no time—or manpower—for the beautiful tub to be brought to our tent, so one of the servants set up a curtain behind it and brought me a bucket of steaming water and a new bar of soap studded with rosemary and lavender. I didn't want to bother Tyr for a towel, so I took the sheet from the bed and undressed in my makeshift shower stall under a silvery moon.

It didn't take long to wash off the grime from the hike and the dusty shed. The smell of deer urine took a little longer to dissipate...but even when every inch of me was squeaky clean and sweet-smelling, I felt as if a film of invisible filth clung to me, unable to shake the image of Colbrand's cruel smile as he described the unspeakable things the men would do to me.

I could still feel his fingers digging painfully into my arm, the whiplash pain of my head being knocked sideways.

I wanted Tyr. Longed for his solid presence, the comfort of his arms. The feeling of safety. I somehow knew it would be the tonic I would need to heal from what had happened, but it was out of reach—at least until my family was safe.

The other possibility—that rescue would come too late—was unthinkable. I kept scrubbing as if sheer will could fix things, but finally, when the water was cold, and I was shivering, I had to give up and dry myself off with the sheet.

I'd forgotten to bring clean clothes, and I couldn't bear to put my old stinky sweats back on. Luckily, the linen sheet was large enough to wrap around me twice, covering me from shoulders to feet, toga style.

Back inside the tent, the men huddled around the table. Rand and Ryce

studied a large map while Leodmar and Tyr were in animated discussion, all of them so absorbed that they didn't notice me enter.

"Even with the cover of darkness and moving with extreme stealth, our men will only be able to get several hundred yards from the camp before they are detected," Leodmar said, his tone as measured as ever.

Ryce looked up from the map. "Even if they're taking shifts, a single guard would have plenty of time to wake the rest."

"And the approach is from below, putting them at a distinct disadvantage," Rand added. "Colbrand has the clan's top warriors with him, and if we attack in a single line, they'll be able to cut us down easily. If we're going to stand a chance, we'll need to circle the hill entirely and rush them from all angles."

"But what about my family?" I broke in, unable to contain myself. "What about Mildritha? If what you're saying is true, Colbrand's men could kill them before the fighting even begins."

The men turned in unison, and suddenly, I felt four pairs of eyes boring into me. Then, just as quickly, three of them looked away.

I pulled the sheet tighter, even though it left me less exposed than any noblewoman's gown I'd seen. I wondered if it was the fact that I'd obviously come from bathing, my hair wet and my feet bare, that scandalized them rather than what I was wearing.

But there wasn't time to change. Besides, I had more important things to worry about.

"Tyr," I prompted him when no one spoke. "There has to be a way."

He glanced at me, his face slightly pink, his gaze lingering on my curves under the thin, draped fabric.

"Right. Rand says they are being kept in the old mess hall here." He tapped the map in the center of the clearing, then traced a line to the edge. "If we pull the battle toward the eastern ridge—and your family stays put—they should be fine."

"*Should?*" I echoed, my panic rising. "What if Colbrand sets fire to the building the minute he sees you coming? What if my brother breaks down the door and tries to make a run for it?"

*What if you're defeated?* I couldn't speak the words—but I couldn't discount them, either.

"I'm sorry, Frue," Leodmar said. He'd gotten up from the table in a show of respect, his hands formally clasped. "But it is impossible to predict the



course of the battle.”

“Or promise the safety of any soul,” Ryce added. “Even innocent bystanders, unfortunately.”

I looked from one man to the next, knowing they were right. This was no backyard skirmish—it was a battle. Lives were going to be lost.

But I was determined to do everything I could to ensure that my family’s were not among them. This wasn’t their fight. “That’s why I’m coming with you.”

The silence that followed my words was deafening. Tyr stared at me while the others looked up at the ceiling, down at their feet—anywhere but at me.

“Men, give us a few minutes,” Tyr said.

They didn’t need to be told twice, tripping over each other to get out of the tent. Tyr and I stared at each other until they were gone, both unwilling to blink.

“You have to know that’s out of the question, Meredith,” he rumbled. “You’re just going to have to trust me to bring your family back safely.”

“I *do* trust you, damn it!” The words were out of my mouth before I realized they were true. I’d trust him with my life—but I couldn’t trust him with theirs. “But my family doesn’t know you. Any of you. All they see are the men who stole someone they love. They see predators powerful enough to rip them to shreds. My family may not be bears, but they’re brave, fierce, and reckless enough to take on a fight they have no hope of winning.”

Tyr frowned. “But that’s ridiculous. They have to know they wouldn’t stand a chance.”

My hands twitched with the desire to shake him. “Have you forgotten how I reacted when you came for me? You’re twice my size, easily, and that didn’t stop me from fighting you with all my strength. The only reason I’m still around to talk about it is because it was *you* who took me instead of a cold-blooded killer like Colbrand!”

Tyr’s brow furrowed, but I could tell he still wasn’t convinced. “But what good would it do for you to be there? You’ll just get yourself killed, too.”

“I’m the only one who can stop my family from making a terrible mistake.” I was shaking with the need to make Tyr understand. “It’s their job to listen to me. If I tell them to get down, they will. If I tell them you’re one of the good guys, they’ll believe me.”

Tyr thought about that for a long moment, then finally nodded. If

anything, though, his mood seemed even more mercurial. “Then what?”

I searched his piercing blue eyes. “What do you mean?”

“Will you leave with them right then and there?” He spat the words as if they were poison. “Or say goodbye first?”

I’d never seen Tyr like this, completely in the grip of his emotions. Of... fear?

“Why would you even ask that? You know I can’t leave. We have an agreement.”

“Fuck our agreement!” He towered over me, radiating energy like the moment before lightning strikes. “I release you from it. I’m no longer interested in a mate who’s only with me out of a sense of obligation.”

I knew passion was driving Tyr’s words. I’d come to know his pattern of speaking before thinking. But I also sensed that this time, he meant it.

“Tyr...I—“ I didn’t know what to say. Couldn’t understand what had led to this.

“You *what*? It’s simple, Meredith. A yes or no question. Are you going back to Earth with them?”

I was desperate to give him the answer he wanted, but my mind and heart were hopelessly tangled. So much had happened. So much had changed. I wasn’t the person I’d been yesterday, much less before we met. I could barely keep up with my reality, much less predict the future.

I gave him the only answer I could. “I don’t know.”

Tyr’s face darkened—with anger or regret I had no way of knowing. He advanced on me slowly until I had to tip my head back to look up at him. Then we were touching, our bodies pressed together on the precipice of what felt like immolation.

I felt the first tendril of his comforting, familiar heat. The rhythm of his pulse. The memory of his touch in the darkness. Everything we’d shared compressed into this moment in time.

And I had the fleeting sense that Tyr was the realest part of my life. That we’d both been searching until we found each other. From the start, we’d each been the piece that completed the other.

“If you’re telling me that this may be the last time we’re alone together,” he said hoarsely. “Then let’s make it one neither of us will forget it.”

With that promise—that threat—Tyr kissed me.

Or I kissed him.

I’ll never know for sure because the spark that ignited what happened

next was lost in the force of our ardor.

Tyr backed me up against the center pole as I tore at his clothes, nearly keening with my need for him. He clamped a hand over my mouth, and that only drove me more wild.

I screamed into his hand as he yanked down the sheet and forced my legs apart, finding me wet and desperate for him. Flipping me around, He flipped me around, grinding his hardness against my ass.

“Meredith,” he growled, entering me in one hard thrust.

After that, the sounds he made were wild and indistinct, those of the animal at his core. I gripped the pole with both my hands, shaking the tent around us, willing him to go harder, faster, until it was as if we were on another plane entirely, rocketing toward an exploding star, blinded by the light of the fire that consumed us.

We came together. I know no words to describe it, the feeling of shattering into the very molecules of our bodies, scattered to the ends of the universe only to be restored as something new. We were sweating and breathless and weak from pleasure when it was over, our hearts beating wildly, tangled together on the sodden, twisted sheet. Slowly, the world around us came back into focus, the light from the oil lamps flickering in the tent, revealing the scattered maps and the untouched meal left by the servants.

“My love,” Tyr said so gently it almost broke my heart. I knew he was going to tell me it was time to go...and I knew he was right.

“Just one more minute,” I begged, pressing my face to his neck, breathing him in, holding him tightly.

In a moment, I would rise and dress and go with Tyr to save my family.

What came after that, I had no idea, and that terrified me—because while I had never asked for any of this, I knew now that I couldn’t bear to let go.

CHAPTER  
**THIRTY-THREE**

## MEREDITH

If the rest of the men objected to my presence on the counter-offensive, they kept it to themselves. It probably had something to do with Tyr's bearing when we emerged from the tent to rejoin the others: I'd never seen him more sure of himself, more in command.

And I had to reign in the thrill of knowing that it was because of me, because of the passionate storm we'd just weathered together. There would be time to savor that memory later—God willing—but now I needed to focus all my energy on the task ahead.

As the men exchanged a few quick words, I realized that we weren't alone. Jackin had joined Rand, Ryce, and Leodmar. Beyond them, in the darkness, were arrayed at least a dozen warriors—the captain's elite squad.

In moments, we were off. It was a credit to the clans' mastery of battle tactics that they could communicate and cooperate so effectively despite the short notice and the enormity of the task ahead.

As someone who'd spent many nights in the wilderness, I was amazed at how silently and efficiently they moved. Even after we left the trail for the dense woods, I heard little more than the occasional rustle of leaves or snapped twig. Even the creatures that prowled at night seemed to ignore our presence.

They made it look easy, but for me, it was a herculean effort to follow in Tyr's footsteps. Not only wasn't I nearly as strong and fit as the others, but I also didn't want to be the one to give away our presence.

I figured as long as I placed my feet exactly where someone else had stepped, we'd be all right. It also helped that Leodmar, who stayed directly behind me, seemed to instinctively know when to offer me a hand as we traversed rock formations or fallen trees. Even as the oldest man in the group, he moved with the agility and strength that would put human men in the prime of their lives to shame.

I was sure that hours had passed and was becoming tired and more careless when Tyr held up a hand, bending and flexing his fingers in a signal to the others to spread out. I marveled at how efficiently the move was executed, the warriors melting into the trees on either side. Despite my efforts, I'd never been able to train my family to follow my commands so

effectively.

Only Leodmar remained, staying close while Tyr bent down to speak softly into my ear. “We’ll do everything we can to draw the fighting away from the buildings to the far side of the clearing so you can get your family out undetected.”

“I understand.” I had thought I would feel terror when we reached the brink of battle, but all I felt was a calm, ferocious determination.

“Promise me that you won’t take any unnecessary risks, Meredith,” Tyr said, some of his self-assurance slipping. “No matter what happens.”

“The only thing I care about is getting my family out of there safely,” I lied. I was very much afraid of what might happen to Tyr in battle. But if I was going to succeed, I needed to force those fears down deep.

I could tell Tyr wasn’t satisfied with my answer. He knew me too well. I always followed my instincts when tested, even when they brought me face to face with impossible odds—and I wasn’t about to change now.

“Make sure she doesn’t get herself killed,” he muttered to Leodmar.

“Of course, sir.” But as soon as Tyr turned away, Leodmar shot me a look whose meaning was clear: *Do not make this any harder for me than it needs to be.*

Moments later, the soft call of a night bird broke the silence. I could tell from the way Leodmar and Tyr tensed that this was the signal they’d been waiting for. Tyr nodded at me as he unsheathed his hammer, then disappeared into the woods alone.

My body rebelled against the waiting. I could feel Leodmar’s stern gaze on me and knew there was nothing to be gained by trying to advance before he gave me the go-ahead.

I’d seen the anger and hatred in Colbrand’s eyes, heard his promises of violence. I had no doubt that Tyr and his men were fearsome fighters...but so were the traitorous warriors who awaited them.

As the moments ticked past, frustration began testing the limits of my endurance. I felt something start to shift within me. Thoughts of Millie and my family had propelled me this far, but now my fears for Tyr’s safety were starting to encroach.

I knew he would fight with everything he had, despite the unfathomable danger—and there wasn’t a damned thing I could do to help.

When finally, Leodmar signaled me to proceed, I followed in his cautious shadow, entirely focused on reaching the building in which my family and

Millie were imprisoned—

—until a battle cry split the night.

I don't know which side gave it—ours or Colburn's. All I know is that the night was calm and quiet one second, and the next, we was surrounded by a cacophony of shouts and clanging metal.

I figured there was no point in trying to be quiet after that.

I raced up the hill so fast that Leodmar was the one chasing me and crested the top right behind the shack where my family and Millie were being held.

But the moment the battlefield came into view, my feet froze to the ground just a dozen yards from my family.

The hill had become a vista of unimaginable violence. It wasn't like the movies. It wasn't even like my nightmares. There was no epic soundtrack or slow-motion lingering. There were only bodies slamming into each other, blades sinking and clubs smashing into flesh, ungodly cries of pain, and the unimaginable sounds of bones breaking and limbs severing.

I may not have been able to see all the blood spilling onto the ground, but in my mind, I envisioned a scarlet river, the lifeblood of countless souls mingling together as it sank into the earth.

I found Tyr, singling him out as much with instinct as in recognition of his familiar outline. He was locked in hand-to-hand combat with a man I recognized—the bastard who had punched my uncle in the gut.

It was that memory that broke the tableau's hold on me. I was already turning away when Tyr wrestled the man to the ground, so I was spared the sight of his hammer smashing the traitor's head to pulp—but the sickening sound would stay with me forever.

I knew these were the consequences of men hungering for power, of evil finding a foothold, of honorable men taking a stand. But now I understood for the first time the cost of justice. It was death—not just for those who took to the battlefield, but for innocents who came too close to the fray. For people like me, and my family, and Millie.

Even for Tyr.

He could die. I could die. My family...the threat was as real as the heart pounding in my chest, and I used the fury that knowledge released in me to sprint to the mess hall's door. An iron bar had been pushed through the hasp, and I gripped it and pulled with all my might, but the weight of the sagging wood kept it wedged in place.

The sounds of the battle were receding. True to his word, Tyr and the others had pushed the battle toward the far edge of the clearing. I gave one last furious tug, grunting with the effort. The bar pulled free, the force sending me tumbling to the ground.

“Meredith!”

My brother’s voice sent relief flooding through me as I scrambled to my knees. Strong hands pulled me up, and I looked into the faces I had never loved as hard as I did in that moment.

“Thank God you’re alive,” Uncle Ken said. “When we heard those horrible sounds—“

His voice broke off. My cousin Dave, usually fearless to the point of foolishness, clutched at his own chest, unable to speak.

“I’m fine!” I said, grabbing his shoulder and shaking him. “See?”

“But...” Dave pointed at the battle raging in the distance.

“What the hell is going on out there?” Briggs demanded.

It was strange seeing them so afraid. They were usually so sure of themselves, talking tough on camera or decimating each other in their bloody video game battles. But none of us had ever seen anything like this before.

“Is that a fucking werewolf war?”

“Were-bear,” I corrected Uncle Ken automatically. “And yeah, kinda. That’s why we need to get the hell away from here *now*.”

Leodmar emerged from the shack with Millie out in tow. I’d forgotten all about him in the emotion of the reunion. Millie looked terrified, her eyes wide, her hands trembling at her throat, her silvery hair tangled around her shoulders.

Ken stepped in front ofLeodmar and took Millie’s arm as if the other man weren’t even there. He put an arm around her waist, and I knew it would stay there until he’d seen her to safety.

“This way,”Leodmar said with enough calm authority that we all followed him without question. Briggs and Dave flankedLeodmar with Ken and Millie right behind them, moving steadily across the field toward the forest that would provide cover for their escape.

We’d gone only a few yards when I heard a groan of pain that stopped me cold. The others didn’t stop, but I knew that voice. The timbre and pitch behind that agonized groan reverberated in my bones. I couldn’t ignore it any more than I could live without air.

As the others disappeared over the rise, I turned—and there he was,



trying to fight off two men at once. One warrior's head was gripped in the crook of his left arm while he tried to defend against repeated blows from a club with his right—

*Colbrand.* He wielded his club with gusto, roaring each time he swung it into Tyr's body.

And Tyr was tiring.

Each time, the club came closer to a mortal blow. I heard something crack when the next hit connected with Tyr's torso and feared his ribs had been broken.

I glanced over my shoulder one last time, just to make sure every member of my family had it to the tree line...knowing I couldn't go with them.

Not when Tyr was in trouble. Not when he needed me.

I'd never be able to live with myself knowing that he'd given his life to save my loved ones while I'd done nothing to help him.

As I ran, I prayed Tyr would hold on a little longer. That he would know I had come for him.

Maybe the hammer in my path was the answer to those prayers because I picked it up without thinking, barely taking note of how heavy it was in my hand.

God, adrenaline, fate—I don't know which was responsible for propelling me forward—maybe it was all of the above. The only thing I was certain of was that when I slammed that mass of iron into Colbrand's chest, the club flew from his hand just before he could deal what was sure to be a killing blow.

But the same sudden burst of momentum that allowed me to disarm Colbrand slammed me into Tyr at full speed, knocking him backward... directly over the cliff.

I dropped to my knees and screamed. Desperately, I scanned the valley floor, terrified I'd saved him from one bloody fate only to kill him myself.

"Meredith!" A voice called up to me.

*His voice.*

I gasped in relief when I peered directly over the edge and saw Tyr hadn't plummeted several hundred feet but had landed on a rocky ledge only fifteen or twenty feet down.

"Tyr!" I shouted back. "Thank God! I thought—"

But there wasn't time for explanations.

"Run!" he yelled as his expression turned tight with urgency. "Meredith,

go! Get out of here! *Meredith!*”

If he hadn't roared my name with such ferocity, I might not have come to my senses and rolled out of the way just before Colburn's hammer landed right where I had been kneeling. A huge chunk of earth broke off on the impact.

I swiveled around to see him towering over me.

“You!” he snarled. “I should have known you would cause more trouble.”

I threw myself out of the way as his hammer came down again, spraying dirt and making the ground shake. I crawled as fast as I could, ignoring the rocks slicing into my hands and knees, as I missed death by inches twice more.

Colburn's grunt was far too close as he lifted the hammer again, so I hit the ground and rolled, hoping to go faster. It worked...until my shoulder hit something hard, stopping me short. A quick glance told me I'd rammed myself into the side of a boulder.

Colburn had me cornered.

This was the end.

The bastard laughed, his eyes glittering with hatred as he raised the club one last time.

I closed my eyes, and in that split second, I realized that I was ready to die. There wasn't a single twinge of regret. Millie was alive. My family was alive. Tyr was alive—and I'd loved him before it was too late, the greatest grace of all.

I felt the bone-throbbing battle cry before I heard it, a roar so menacing that my eyes flew open again.

I thought I was imagining the vision before me: Tyr balanced at the edge of the cliff, larger than life against a backdrop of stars, his hammer raised high.

Colburn never stood a chance. His expression was frozen as the hammer whistled through the air. The only shift was the sudden flash of fear in his eyes before the weapon landed, tearing his head from his body and sending it flying a dozen yards through the air while the rest of him crumpled to the ground.

With Colbrand dead, it was as if a dark spell lifted from his ragged band of followers. To a man, they threw down their weapons in surrender. One even dropped to his knees to plead for mercy, possibly the most un-bear-like thing I had ever seen.

“Jackin, secure the traitors,” Tyr shouted, already moving toward me.

In seconds, he’d lifted me into his arms, enveloping me in the comfort and safety of an embrace so fierce and protective I knew I’d never need anything more.

When he spoke, though, there was fury in his voice.

“I told you to stay out of danger.”

“Colburn was about to kill you,” I protested, knowing his anger masked his terror of losing me. “Besides, I always told you I’d throw you off a cliff one day.”

Leodmar appeared, out of breath from running. “I’m sorry, Chieftain,” he said, obviously distraught. “I thought she was right behind me when we escaped.”

“Don’t worry about it,Leodmar,” Tyr told him. “I think it’s time to accept that my mate will never be tamed.”

CHAPTER  
**THIRTY-FOUR**

## MEREDITH

It was a somber group that started back to Wynterhowe, with Jackin in the lead. Two of Tyr's men had been gravely injured, and one had died. The warriors were carrying the casualties, much as Tyr was carrying me.

No warrior feared death, Tyr told me. It wasn't just a risk they faced each time they faced an enemy; it was an honorable end. Something to be celebrated as much as grieved.

To the bear's way of thinking, Colbrand's death and those of his men were the true tragedies because they died without honor.

As time passed, the single-file line gradually spaced out so that I could barely see the warrior in front of us and only occasionally heard the shouts of those behind us. Our little group, however, stuck together—Briggs and Dave steps in front of me and Tyr, with Ken and Meredith a few paces behind. Inevitably, my cousin and brother grew bored and started peppering me with questions.

*Who was Tyr?*

*Why wouldn't he put me down?*

*I'd seriously married him? After knowing him for a mere week?*

I tried to provide answers, but it proved difficult. For instance, since the bears didn't really observe the choosing of a mate with a ceremony, there hadn't been a wedding—which didn't stop those clowns from joking endlessly about the wedding night.

I was glad they couldn't see my face.

When I'd gotten fed up with the constant questions, I told them they'd better watch their step because I was now the frue, the most powerful woman in the clan. This made them hoot with laughter.

"She better not expect us to bow or anything," Dave teased.

"Nah," Briggs shot back. "Knowing her, she'll make us curtsy."

At least it didn't take long for my brother and cousin to get bored making jokes at my expense and turned to busying themselves with taking pictures and videos on their phones instead. Every now and then, I'd catch their enthused whispers about how the audience back home would shit their pants when they saw the new content, but at least they left me alone.

As for Uncle Ken, he barely seemed to notice the boys' antics, instead

entirely focused on his conversation with Millie. I would have given my left arm to know what they were discussing, especially since I'd never seen Millie so starry-eyed or my uncle so attentive to a woman.

Eventually, though, fatigue set in for everyone but Tyr and Millie with their impossibly sturdy constitutions. By the time we reached Wynterhowe, all I wanted was to sleep for a week.

Before we went our separate ways—the boys to barracks to get cleaned up, Millie to show Uncle Ken to the guest quarters—Tyr announced that he'd promoted Borisu to captain following Colbrand's death. His first duty was to announce a celebration feast to take place that night.

Tyr seemed oddly subdued as we headed for our tent. He'd seemed worried about something even when he was discussing the feast.

As curious as I was about the reason, I was too tired to bring it up, too tired to do anything but collapse face-down onto the bed.

It had been a long night—following on the heels of a long and terrifying day. In the last twenty-four hours, I'd been kidnapped, held hostage, escaped, and helped save my family while a battle raged around us. I figured I deserved a nap.

I felt the mattress shift as Tyr lay down next to me. He pulled me into his arms, where I promptly fell asleep.

Instead of the nightmares I would have expected after everything that had happened, my dreams were serene, even happy.

I dreamed of a future in which I was not only content but supported and loved and doing work I was proud of. But unlike my old dreams of reporting to a movie studio every morning, this one didn't take place in Los Angeles... or even on Earth.

I was here in Wynterhowe, in this tent with its walls of stretched hides and colorful tapestries. Over the distant sound of the waves, I could hear the bear clan going about their day, working together to provide for their needs, enjoying the simple blessings of this bounteous cove.

I was happy. Happier than I'd ever been, whether in school, on the road with my family, or out with friends. I felt safe and wanted.

But most of all, I felt loved.

When I woke, night had fallen, and Tyr was gone—but that lovely feeling lingered.

I wondered why Tyr hadn't woken me to walk down to the beach with him, especially because I could hear the sounds of celebrating drifting up to

the village, but that was something I could easily fix.

I dressed hurriedly, choosing a gown of deep claret velvet, the bear clan's ceremonial color, and pinned up my hair in a messy bun. In the time I'd been in Wynterhowe, my hair had picked up a bit of curl, and now a few loose strands fell in tendrils around my face.

When I reached the beach, it was clear that the entire clan had turned out for the celebration. The bonfire sent bursts of sparks into the night like golden fireworks as the first few dancers began to circle it while the warriors feasted at a long table festooned with deep red and gold bunting.

It wasn't hard to spot Tyr. He was the one surrounded by people congratulating him on his victory.

Any lingering doubts about his ability to lead had clearly been put to rest. With Colbrand's rebellion quashed, any remaining troublemakers wisely kept their own counsel. Even Rand seemed only mildly nonplussed to be standing next to Tyr.

I located my uncle near the bonfire and was shocked to see him dancing, although without nearly the abandon of Millie's joyous gyrations. Dave had his phone out to capture the event, and my brother was playing dice and drinking with a group of rowdy warriors.

It gladdened my heart to see the welcome the bear clan had extended to my human family—though with me as their first brush with humans, the goofballs of my family must have seemed incredibly unthreatening.

I took some time to stand at the edge of the crowd and simply watch the celebration. I kept an eye on my family, but mostly, I kept stealing glances at Tyr as I wrestled with the most important decision of my life.

I was so absorbed with my thoughts that I jumped when Kayla appeared and said hello. She looked happy and lovely, her hair braided with flowers that matched her coat.

"How are you doing?" she asked.

"Confused," I admitted.

"I bet. I don't think I'll ever forget my first few weeks here. I didn't know up from down."

Hearing that brought me some relief, especially since it came from the only person who knew what I was going through.

"So...are you planning to go back to Earth with your family?" she prompted gently.

There was so much kindness in her gaze that I blurted the truth. "I know

I'm supposed to say yes. I mean, my entire life is there."

"But...your heart is here."

I gaped at her, wondering how she could be so sure. "Is it that obvious?" I finally asked.

"Um, well...you've been standing here for fifteen minutes, and the whole time, you haven't been able to take your eyes off him.."

"It's just that..." I bit my lip. I hadn't even admitted this to myself. "When I thought about my future, I never, ever imagined anything even remotely like this."

"Neither did I," Kayla laughed. "I guess we're just lucky."

Not the response I'd expected. "Do you really think so?"

Catching my tone, Kayla took my hands in hers with a serious expression. "Think about it, Meredith. We get to travel between two completely different worlds. We've found amazing men. We get to see and experience things people back home can't even imagine. I know what you mean when you say you never imagined a life like this. But now that I have it, I can't imagine ever giving it up."

I took a breath, knowing I was about to venture into territory that was none of my business. "I, um, heard you had a pretty crappy life before. That your family didn't treat you well."

"That's for sure," she said readily. "And I can see how having a loving and supportive family would make your decision harder. But you're not losing them, Meredith. Your life is just getting bigger."

Emboldened by her openness, I asked a question that had been nagging at me. "Do you think you'll keep going back even after you finish school?"

"Oh, definitely. That's the thing—we don't have to choose. Before I met Ryce, I had a very black-and-white way of thinking. Everything was either good or bad, right or wrong. But once I came to Evergreen, I realized that sometimes things can be both. That I could switch 'either/or' for 'and.'"

"You mean spending time in both worlds? Or not judging one better than the other?"

"Both, I guess, but there's more to it. Before, I used to question every decision I made. Now, I tend to trust my instincts and do what feels right. Sometimes, I go back to Vidalia just to get coffee from my favorite place or see a movie I'm excited about."

I thought about that. "I guess I'd figured I'd have to give up everything 'human' if I stayed here," I said slowly.



Kayla snorted. “No one can make you do that—and I’m pretty sure Tyr wouldn’t want you to. That’s another thing I’ve realized. A lot of the rules I used to live by were really just limitations I’d imposed on myself. Ryce helped me see that I deserve to be happy exactly as I am. That I shouldn’t have to change for anyone. The same goes for you, Meredith.”

Kayla’s words were perfect—describing a life I didn’t realize I’d been dreaming of. She was right—I didn’t have to give up anything. I could have Tyr *and* my family, Evergreen *and* Earth.

My gaze drifted back to Tyr.

“Excuse me, Kayla,” I said, already moving toward Tyr.

He saw me coming. Our gazes locked as I wove through the revelers. By the time I reached him, he was detaching himself from his conversations, but his expression was grim as he led me to a sheltered area where we could talk in private.

“Is everything all right, Meredith?” he asked in a much too formal tone.

“I, um...made my decision.” My heart was pounding so hard I could barely think.

“I understand.” His attempt at a smile was unsuccessful. “After spending time with your family, I can see why you want to return. They obviously love you. They want the best for you, and I was—“

He faltered then and had to clear his throat before continuing.

“I was wrong to take you away from them. I’m sorry.”

I could barely stand to see the pain in his eyes. It was all I could do to keep from touching him. But instead, I concentrated on what I needed to say.

“Thank you for that,” I told him. “But how can I go back to my old life and pretend that everything is the way it used to be? Everything changed when I fell madly in love with you, Tyr.”

He couldn’t have looked more shocked if I’d hit him with a frying pan. “You...love me?”

I gave a nervous little laugh. “Trust me, I was just as surprised as you when I realized it.”

I watched his face melt into a grin. “Meredith—“

“But if I’m going to stay here, I have a few conditions.”

“Anything. Anything you want.”

So, I laid it all out for him. That I wanted to be free to visit Earth from time to time. Not every week, like Kayla, but major holidays, maybe a week or two in the summer. That I hoped he’d come along.

Instead of replying, Tyr picked me up and spun me around. “Whenever you want,” he promised.

“And no more epic poetry dates.”

“That’s easy.” He’d put me down but kept his arms around me as we grinned at each other like a couple of fools. “We don’t have to go on *any* more dates now that you’ve agreed to be my mate.”

I swatted him playfully. “You’ve got a lot to learn about romance.”

“Yeah? Well, I’m a fast learner.”

“And I’m a damn good teacher.”

CHAPTER  
**THIRTY-FIVE**

MEREDITH

TWO WEEKS LATER

“Moving on,” the helmet-haired newswoman said with a tight smile. “What do you say to those who accuse you and your family of staging your disappearance as a publicity stunt to create more interest in your channel?”

I drew in a deep breath. We’d obviously dispensed with the pleasantries and arrived at the merciless grilling part of the interview segment. I was ready, however, having done a dozen of these television spots since returning through the veil.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Tyr, just out of range of the cameras, glowering at the woman who’d just come very close to calling me a liar. His instinct to defend me was absolute, which was handy on a battlefield or in village politics but not so helpful when navigating the expectations of a human audience.

I directed my smile at the audience, widening my eyes in the expression I’d practiced in the mirror. Even though I usually preferred to stay behind the camera, there was a reason I had taken on the public face of the story. I might not share my family’s snake oil salesman charm, but what I did have was credibility.

Never mind that I was, in fact, about to tell a whopper.

“Now that everyone knows what my family does for a living,” I said sweetly, “I totally get that some of you are feeling pretty skeptical right now. That’s why I accepted Ashley’s kind invitation to come on *Good Morning Oregon* today to clear up any misconceptions.”

I could see on the overhead monitors that they’d cut to the video—right on cue.

“Gosh, looking at that, I can see why people thought I was abducted. But thankfully, that’s not what happened. As you see, I came out of the tent because I thought I heard something outside. The man you see was headed to the river to fish, and let me tell you, he was just as startled as I was. But I was the one who stumbled and fell, accidentally knocking myself unconscious.”

“Fishing at two o’clock in the morning?” Ashely said, lifting a perfectly shaped brow. “Really?”

“Oh, yes. Night fishing’s great for trout. Ask any local angler. Anyway, the man was kind enough to take me to get help. It was a good thing that he was a big, fit guy since I was unconscious, and he had to carry me the whole way.”

“I have to say the man in the video bears a striking resemblance to the one who accompanied you here today.”

“You must have better eyes than me because no matter how hard I’ve tried, I can’t make out the man’s face in the video. The only distinguishing feature I can see is his big fur coat.” I was pretty sure I’d missed my calling as an actor with the way I delivered that line so believably.

“But they’re the same size,” the newswoman tried.

“What can I say? You must grow them big in out here.”

“Are you in touch with your...rescuer?”

“Oh, I wish! He didn’t give his name. All I know is that I woke up days later in a cabin on the Rogue River all alone.” I dialed up the wattage of my smile and put my hand on my heart. “If you’re out there, sir, I want to say thank you. You’ve restored not only my faith in people but my fiance’s as well. We’re all just so grateful.”

Ashley wasn’t too pleased with that answer, but she couldn’t exactly skewer me while the studio audience was breaking into spontaneous applause. She cut to a break and stalked off the stage without a word.

I, on the other hand, thought the interview was going well, getting out the message that both Earth and Evergreen desperately needed to hear. If anyone else had claimed to stumble on a cryptid outside Vidalia, it would be chalked up as a stunt.

Because with my family’s millions of followers, not to mention the local eccentrics who were all too willing to believe, the story had gotten out of hand fast.

From what I’d seen over the last week, many Vidalia residents were happy for the publicity since an influx of tourism was filling the coffers of local businesses. Some objected, but they were outnumbered by students throwing Bigfoot-themed parties and people flocking to Sasquatch trivia nights in local bars.

A minute later, Ashley returned, freshly powdered and reinvigorated, just as the commercial break ended.

Ashley squared her notecards. “It does strike me that there are a lot of....*convenient* details in your story.”

I pretended to be hurt. “I know some people will never believe me,” I said, my voice quavering. “But I also know that I did nothing wrong.”

That much, at least, was true.

“Certain members of your family are telling a different story—to millions of people on the internet. They say you were taken to a ‘shadow world’ inhabited by people who are half human and half bear.”

If Ashley had been hoping to exploit a rift in my family, she was in for a disappointment. I grinned as though we were in on the same joke.

“What’s there to say? If you’ve seen my family’s videos, then you know that fantastical claims are their bread and butter.”

“But is the video they’ve been showing legitimate?” she pressed.

Oh, that video. My cousin Dave had uploaded it the minute he got home. Of course, I would have preferred for him to wait, if only so I could have done a more professional job editing and polishing it.

Instead, the world was treated to a jerky montage of the bear clan, everything from battle footage to scenes from the party the following night, including a couple of drunken warriors showing off their claws and teeth for the camera.

I probably wouldn’t have opted to put it up, but I understood why the rest of the family couldn’t resist. For a cryptid hunter, this was the holy grail.

Besides, I knew that few people would actually take it seriously; in the age of high-tech VFX, it took a lot more to convince people than some cell phone footage and a couple of still photos.

I gave a genial laugh. “All I can say is that I hope people find it entertaining.”

Ashley knew when she was beat, especially since the crew gave her the thumbs-up. She ended the interview and offered a stiff handshake before turning away.

A crew member appeared to remove my lapel mic.

She was blushing when she glanced at Tyr. “I’ll say this—your boyfriend actually looks like he could have come from another world of savage warriors,” she said teasingly. “If they all look like him, I’d sign up to visit in a heartbeat.”

I laughed. “Be careful what you wish for.”

When I rejoined Tyr, he was still glaring at Ashley’s back. “I don’t like

the way she spoke to you. If we were back home, I'd—“

“If we were back home,” I said firmly, “you'd be freezing your ass off hauling in the catch instead of sipping hot coffee in a cozy television studio.”

“Just tell me we don't have to do any more of these,” he grumbled.

“That's the last one,” I said. “For me, anyway. My parents are doing radio all afternoon, but since they're promoting the channel, I didn't want to join them.”

“Meredith,” he said, turning serious. “Now that the veil has been opened and the clans are starting to come through again, you have to know that it's only a matter of time before the people here find out about Evergreen.”

“That doesn't mean we have to expedite the process,” I said. “Trust me, Tyr—there are some truths humans can't just handle having sprung on them all at once. They need time.”

“If you say so. I'm just glad we're going home.”

“Don't forget that we're having dinner with my uncle and Millie tonight,” I said as we walked out of the building and into the crisp fall night air. “But we can leave first thing in the morning.”

Tyr shook his head. “I don't understand how a woman who's been a bear all her life can leave it all behind for some human she barely knows on Earth.”

“Seriously?” I said, laughing. “You can't imagine someone giving up everything they've ever know to be with the person they love?”

“That's not the same!”

“Why not?”

“Because...just *because*.”

I had to admit that Tyr had a point. After all, I loved him for the same reason...*just because*.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ever since she was little, Callie Rhodes' imagination has been landing her in trouble. From daydreaming about far off worlds in class, to escaping into the made up stories of her mind in the meeting room, she's been creating tales to take her away from the real world for as long as she can remember. Now she lives among the tall trees of Northern California and has found a way to make a living off her fantasies.

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