Cursed

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Reading edition: 2026-10-29. Typography: Crimson Text (SIL Open Font License).

Chapter ONE

“My ass is getting sore, Thorin. Are we almost there?” Imara shifted from side to side on the bench and put her hands on her low back as she arched and stretched away the searing pain.

Thorin rolled his emerald green eyes and shook his head. It was only about the hundredth time his sister had asked that question since they left the hotel this morning. “It isn’t much longer now, my dear.”

As the scent of hay from the fields reached her nose, Imara crossed her arms as she looked around her and noticed it was mostly farmland and woods. “Please tell me that there is at least some kind of proper shopping and entertainment here. I don’t want to be just sitting around talking to you all day.”

Thorin sighed as he rearranged the reins on his hands. “Imara, I understand that it isn’t easy for a young woman to be stuck out here in the country with nothing to do, but we’re in hiding, darlin. Remember? The less people that see that pretty ole face of yours, the better.”

As the house came into view down the road, Thorin smiled and looked at his sister. “We’re home, Imara. There it is.”

When he made the turn for the drive, Imara saw a large French Colonial with weeping willow trees lining the sand and gravel driveway. She put her hands over her mouth as she gasped back in awe. “Oh, Thorin, it’s beautiful.” Then, she clapped her hands together. “Look at that porch swing! I just love it.”

Grinning at his little sister’s enthusiasm, Thorin pulled around the driveway circle and parked near the door. After he jumped down from his seat, Thorin extended his hand to help Imara down from the buggy, then began to tend to the luggage and horses.

“Go on in , Imara, dear. They should be along soon. Open the windows and air it out before they arrive if you don’t mind. This place has been locked up tight for years.”

Imara dusted off the skirt of her dress and then rubbed her hands together to wipe away the dirt. She looked over the beautiful home and smiled. “Yes. This will do just fine.”

She pushed the skeleton key into the door and jiggled it for a moment before the lock popped open. When Imara pushed the door aside, she was smacked in the face by the stale, musty air of a house unloved for too long. She coughed a few times and swatted away the stench and dust. Imara looked back over her shoulder. “Thorin, can you bring my bag please? It needs a proper saging. It’s full of spirits.”

Thorin blew out through his mouth as he leaned across the buggy and grabbed her bag. “Imara, it hardly matters. We’re witches for Pete’s sake, it seems a bit silly to be afraid of a few ghosts, don’t you think? Just ignore them and they’ll go find some poor human to bother when they realize they can’t harm us.”

“I don’t like them watching me when I change my clothes and take a bath,” she yelled back.

He chuckled to himself over how silly Imara could be sometimes. “Here you go. Now, after you’re done chasing away the boogeyman, can you come out and help us with the crates and bags? I hear them coming down the road now.”

Imara set her bag on the table in the foyer and searched through it. “Fine, fine. I won’t be long.” Imara found a bundle of sage in her bag of holding then snapped her fingers causing it to ignite. As she blew out the flames, the smoke circled around her and she walked from room to room while she fanned the smoke. “Be gone you all. It’s time to leave and go wherever you mortals go. You don’t live here anymore.”

As she came back down the stairs, she was met by Thorin in the foyer with an arm full of sheets that he’d just removed from the furniture. “So, what are your thoughts Imara?” Thorin asked as he pushed his dark hair off his face.

She looked around and smiled as she nodded her head. “I have a good feeling about this. Better things are coming for us.”

He smirked as he laid the sheets on the table. Imara’s youth has been full of sadness and frequent moves. She didn’t know anyone other than Thorin and the servants. He was happy she finally felt peace somewhere. “Well, that is something, I suppose.”

She twisted her lips to the side and looked back around the room. “Yes. It is. Everything’s going to be great, I just know it.”

“Where should I put this?” asked Shaw as he and Thomas carried a trunk through the door.

Imara nodded her head to the side. “Kitchen’s this way.”

Imara followed them as they inched towards the other side of the house. “What do you think, Shaw?”

He set down his end of the crate and wiped the sweat from his face with a handkerchief. “It’s very nice. Not a lot of neighbors. Seems safe enough. You like it?”

She smiled and nodded her head. “I do. Maybe we could stay here a while this time.”

Shaw wiped the back of his neck and furrowed his brows. “Don’t go falling in love with this place, Imara. This is the third time we’ve moved this year.”

Imara sighed and sat down on the chair at the small kitchen table. “It’s safe here. Who’s going to come looking for us all the way out here in the boondocks? No one’s bothered us in ages, anyway. I wager no one at the Order even remembers who we are anymore. I’m not moving again. I won’t. I swear I’ll die here.”

Shaw bent down in front of her and lifted her chin until she met his eyes. “It’s safe when I say it’s safe. You’ll do as you’re told.”

An orange haired, short, plump lady came through the side door with a stack of dishes in her hands. “Are the three of you going to help me? We’ll be here til Kingdom Come if I have to unload that wagon all alone. We have deliveries coming and nowhere to put them, you know.”

Imara walked past her and said, “Yes, ma’am.”

Thomas, the handsome blue-eyed English born butler, handed Imara a small crate of flatware. “You’re far too old to have Shaw dictating your life to you. It’s time for you to have your own adventures and find some nice man to settle down with.”

Imara huffed through her nose and smirked as she looked up to him. “They treat me like a child.”

Shaw grabbed a large trunk from the wagon with a jerk. “I’ll stop treating you like a child when you stop acting like one. Now stop flapping your gums and move your ass.”

Thomas sighed and shook his head. “You’re not her father or any kind of relative at all, Shaw. It’s not your place to tell her how she should live her life.”

Shaw raised his brow to the much smaller butler and said, “I’ve been watching over her since the day she was born. I’m as much her father as anyone.”

When Imara came back outside the kitchen door, Thorin was inspecting the side of the home with Shaw. There must have been a storm recently because there was a large branch sticking out of one of the attic vents.

Shaw crossed his arms and backed up as he surveyed the damage. “We’re going to need a few workers, someone’s going to have to climb up on the roof and it’s not going to be me.”

Thorin laughed an amused chuckle at the thought of a big, strong man like Shaw being afraid of heights. “Finally, something you’re afraid of. I never thought I’d live to see the day.”

As the sound of hooves on the dirt road reached her ears, Imara turned and watched as a wagon with a lone rider came up the drive.

Imara’s heart began to beat against her chest as she saw the driver get down off the seat and walk towards her and Thorin. When he saw Imara, Ben’s heart fluttered and he found it hard to breathe

as he looked over her bathed in sun light. She glowed like a raging fire the way the sun caught the red tones in her chestnut hair. He took a deep breath and whispered to himself, “It’s you.”

Ben extended his hand to Thorin and said, “Mr. Parker. I’m Ben Logan.”

Thorin smiled, then put his arm around Imara’s back and said, “Oh yes, Mr. Logan. Imara this is Ben Logan, he’s from the farm down the road.”

Ben looked Imara over then quickly looked to the ground as his heart broke in a million pieces when he saw Thorin embrace her. “Mrs. Parker.”

Thorin and Imara looked at each other and laughed, causing Ben to dart his eyes back to them.

“No, Mr. Logan. This lovely creature is my sister.”

With his hopes restored, Ben looked back to Imara, but before he could say another word, Thorin said, “The kitchen’s round back. Imara would you be so kind as to introduce Ben to Sofia?”

Imara nodded her head towards the rear of the home. “Please, come with me.” She crossed her arms in front of her as she slowly walked beside Ben. She tried to think of something to say, but words escaped her as the big man towered over her. Imara licked her lips then looked up at him and caught Ben admiring her behind. She turned her eyes back quickly and curled her lips under, hoping he didn’t see her because, deep inside, she wanted him to keep looking.

Sofia came out the kitchen door wiping a cup out with a dish towel. She smiled and nodded at Ben. “How do you do?”

Imara said, “Sofia, this is Ben Logan from the farm just down the lane. Mr. Logan, this is our cook, Miss Sofia.”

Ben shook Sofia’s hand. “I have your delivery, Miss Sofia.”

“Lovely. You can just bring it round the side here, dear.”

As Ben and Sofia exchanged words, Imara fidgeted with the charm on her necklace while she looked him over slowly. Ben was a tall and ruggedly handsome man. His wavy black hair covered his slightly prominent ears and he nervously pushed it off his face as he spoke. His shirt was a bit tattered, but it showed off the outline of his chiseled chest muscles perfectly.

Imara was staring at Ben’s body so intently that the weight of her stare caught his attention. He cleared his throat, interrupting her thoughts. As she glanced away with embarrassment, Ben grinned and said, “I’ll be back in just a moment.”

As he walked away, Imara’s eyes snapped back to his ass and she fanned her face. “Great balls of fire!”

Sofia laughed out loud. “Yes, he’s quite handsome, isn’t he? Why, if I was 20 years younger.”

Imara turned her head to Sofia and huffed through her nose then swallowed hard. “My knees are shaking.”

Putting her arm around Imara, Sofia chuckled. “Yes. I think he was feeling the same, Imara.”

Imara licked her lips. “Really? Are you certain? How can you tell?”

“I’m old and experienced, Imara, and you’re young and not experienced. He was breathing so hard, I thought he might faint right here on the ground.”

Imara smiled and tucked her long, curly hair behind her ear as she saw Ben bring the wagon around the side of the house. When Ben climbed down from the seat, he locked eyes with Imara. His brown eyes were nearly as dark as the midnight sky and they peered straight through her. Imara shifted on her feet as she struggled to control her breathing when a sudden warm feeling surged through her body.

“Imara!” yelled Thorin as he walked around the corner.

Her eyes snapped away from Ben as his voice broke their moment. “Yes.”

Thorin came to her side and grinned at Ben before he looked at her. “My dear, I need to run into town to find someone to help fix the attic vent and remove that branch. Would you like to ride along?”

“I can do that for you, Mr. Parker,” said Ben quickly.

“Well, that would be fantastic. Whenever you have a spare moment, of course. Do you have someone who can help you? Our caretaker is terribly afraid of heights.”

Ben glanced back to Imara as she shyly met his eyes again before he looked back to Thorin and nodded. “Yes, I have help. I can come back tomorrow after my morning work.”

Thorin shook Ben’s hand. “Excellent. Come Imara, let’s allow Mr. Logan to get his work done. He’s probably anxious to get back home.”

As Thorin put his hand on her back and ushered Imara away, she looked over her shoulder. Ben stood beside his wagon and stared into her eyes until she finally left his sight. Ben looked up into the afternoon sky and smiled. “Thank you. I was starting to think you’d make me wait forever.”

Chapter TWO

“Are you sure I look alright Sofia? I’m not sure about this color on me.” As Imara straightened her skirt, she shook her head in frustration. “Ugh! I need some new clothes. Everything I have is rubbish. I look like a little girl.”

Sofia turned from the sink and looked her over. “Imara, you’re 25 years old. You’d look alright in a potato sack. Ask me again when you’re my age. Besides, he’ll be here to work, not to stare at you all day long. And, trust me, no man alive would ever mistake you for a little girl.”

Rolling her eyes, Imara looked in the window and smoothed her hair down as she caught her reflection. “I’m so nervous, Sofia. My hands are shaking like a leaf. Here, feel them.”

After she wiped her hands on her apron, Sofia took Imara’s in them. “Bless your heart, your hands are ice cold.”

Starting to hyperventilate already just at the thought of him, Imara shook her head. “I can’t help it. I haven’t been able to stop thinking about him since I met him. I’m just getting so worked up at the thought of him being here. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.” Imara felt her forehead then pressed softly on the sides of her throat. “Maybe I’m fevered. Do I look like I’m getting sick to you?”

Sofia pushed Imara’s hair off her shoulder then looked in her eyes and smiled. “There ain’t nothing wrong with you. This is love, besides your kind don’t get sick. That little cherub done shot you right in the ass, baby.”

Imara laughed out until she heard the hooves beating against the dirt road. Trying to calm herself, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath through her nose. “Oh, Sofia, he’s here. Should I go out there and say hello? I don’t want to be a bother, but…”

“But you want to look at him,” said Sofia. Imara swallowed then nodded. “Trust me, he’s going to figure out a way to get a glimpse of you, sweet girl. You don’t even need to worry about it. Men are natural born hunters; he’s going to want to take a look at his prey before he leaves here today.”

Imara chuckled then said, “Alright. I suppose I can make myself useful in the meantime. What can I do to keep myself out of trouble? ”

“You were wanting to get your garden started. Why don’t you see if Shaw can help you since he’s too yellow to go up on the roof like a real man.”

Imara laughed out loud then said, “Yeah, alright.” As she left the kitchen Imara saw Shaw putting in a new fence post across the yard. “Shaw! When you’re finished with that, can you help me figure out where I can put my garden?”

Shaw looked up and then took out his handkerchief and wiped his brow. “Of course, but this soil is no good. We’re too close to the shore, it’s all sand and clay. We’re going to need some good soil and manure.” Then, he looked past Imara. “Ben, you think we can get a load of soil and manure for Imara’s garden before she throws a conniption?”

As her heartbeat pounded in her ears, time stood still for Imara. She closed her eyes and blew out through her mouth as she tried to steady her nerves.

His deep, calm Southern drawl was like music to her ears. “I reckon we can bring that tomorrow afternoon.”

As his healing voice soothed her, Imara unfroze from her panic then turned to face Ben as he walked towards her with an older gentleman. Ben looked her over and smiled as he approached. “Miss Parker, this is my father, Harold.”

The much shorter blonde man put out his hand to Imara. “It’s a pleasure, Miss Parker. You’re just as pretty as Ben said you were.”

Ben’s cheeks flushed with color as he smirked and looked down at the ground while he kicked the dirt. Imara smiled and shook Harold’s hand. “It’s good to meet you too, sir.” She turned back to Ben and said, “I’m so happy to see you again.”

Ben pushed his hair off his face and grinned. “You are?”

Before Imara could answer, Shaw said, “You can both follow me.” While Ben and Harold followed Shaw to the kitchen, Ben looked back at Imara as she crossed her arms and curled her hair around her finger. He paused before he crossed the threshold, then lifted his hand to wave goodbye. Imara took a ragged breath and put her hand over her heart and smiled as Ben went through the doorway.

Imara put her hand on her forehead. “Phew! Oh, sweet Jesus! What’s happening to me? It’s you, isn’t it? Is this real?” As her senses returned to her, she shook her head. “No, it can’t be. You’re a human. Aren’t you?”

As Sofia made a pitcher of tea, Imara put glasses on a serving tray while she looked out the kitchen window at Shaw and Thorin talking to Ben and Harold at the picnic table in the yard. “Do you think Thorin and Shaw would allow me to spend time with Ben? Alone, I mean.”

Sofia chuckled through her nose as she poured tea into the glasses. “I highly doubt it, baby.”

Imara sighed then sat down in the chair by the counter. “I just want to be near him without everyone looking. Is that awful?”

Sofia shook her head. “No, baby. I believe that’s normal. Why don’t you ask him if he’d like to come sit with you in the evening or go for a walk around the property? That way they’d still be close by. I’m sure they’d be alright with that. You’re a grown woman for crying out loud, they can’t expect you to stay single forever. Here, baby, take this basket.”

Imara took the basket handles in her delicate hands and lifted it in front of her. “No, I couldn’t do that. I can barely speak to him as it is without making a complete fool of myself, much less ask him to spend time with me. Oh, this is hopeless.”

Sofia lifted the tray and said, “Imara, he wants it too. He seems just as shy and backwards as you are. If you like him that much, you may have to be the one that makes the first move.”

Sighing frustratedly, Imara’s heart sunk as she realized that this was going nowhere fast. “Grand!” She followed Sofia to the backyard where Ben and Harold were waiting at the picnic table.

Sofia waddled over with a smile then set the tray on the table. “Here you go, fellas. You must be mighty thirsty after being up in that hot old attic all day. Let me have that basket, baby. We brought you some crackers and cheese.” Imara handed the basket to Sofia, then bit her lip before she looked at Ben. Every glance at him sent a fire through Imara’s veins and made her feel short-winded. She sat down beside Sofia so that Ben couldn’t see her, she needed a moment's reprieve from the heat coursing through her body.

Harold looked at Ben and smiled then he glanced at the back of Imara’s head as her shoulders heaved up and down and she fanned her face. “Miss Parker, do you think you’d like to go to the fair with us this weekend? We got a mess of pigs to sell off in the morning, but after that you and Ben could go have some fun.”

Ben’s eyes snapped up to Harold and he gave him a side grin as he figured out the plan his father was forming in his head. Imara turned around then glanced up to Sofia before she looked at Harold. “Umm...I would love that, really, but I’ll have to ask my brother.”

Sofia smiled and nodded to Thorin and Shaw in the carriage house. “Go on, Imara. It doesn’t hurt to ask.”

After she hesitantly walked off to the carriage house, Sofia said, “That was awful nice of y’all to ask her, but Thorin and Shaw never let her go anywhere. They’re very cautious with her. I’ve been with this family a whole lot of years and Imara’s never been anywhere without Thorin or Shaw at her side.”

When Imara got to the building, Shaw was smoking his pipe while Thorin tinkered with an old clock. “I’ve been practicing witchcraft for over a hundred years now and I can’t even make a blessed clock run on time.”

Shaw crossed his arms as Imara sheepishly entered the door. “What’s on your mind Imara? Go on and speak up, we ain’t got all day.”

She glanced back over her shoulder then licked her lips and said, “The Logan’s invited me to the fair this weekend. May I go? Please.”

Thorin and Shaw looked at each other then Shaw snorted out through his nose. “Un-Un, no way.”

Imara looked down at the ground, then put her hand on her hip and the other on her chest. “You can’t keep me locked up here forever, you know.”

As he straightened up, Shaw uncrossed his arms and said, “Pardon me? I don’t believe I heard you right. Why don’t you try that again little girl.”

Thorin sighed then stood up from his stool. “Imara, we’ve been over this about a million times in a million different ways. Now, go thank them for asking and tell them you have other obligations.”

Imara crossed her arms and grabbed the charm of her necklace. “The two of you are always saying how you’re just trying to keep me safe, but you know what? I think it’s you two tyrants that I need to be protected from.” Having finally said what she’d been dying to say for years now, Imara turned around and walked back to the table.

As she saw the disappointment in her expression, Sofia sighed. “Sorry, fellas. It doesn’t look like that went very well.”

Imara came to the table and looked around at the ground as she said, “Umm, thank you and all, but Thorin reminded me that we have other…he said no. Excuse me.” Imara turned and walked around the table then hurried to the kitchen door before the teardrops fell from her eyes.

Sofia clicked her tongue as she shook her head. “That poor girl. I know you can’t tell with all their nice things and this big ole house, but life’s just not been very fair to her.”

After hearing the way Shaw spoke to her and seeing the wounded look on her face, Ben felt sick to his stomach. Fighting back the urge to go rip him to shreds, Ben came up with a plan of his own to spend some time with Imara.

As she traced the wagon with her fingertips while she watched them leave the drive that evening. Imara knelt in a chair and pressed her forehead against the glass as the disappointed ache filled her belly. She knew he’d be back tomorrow, but every fiber of her being wanted to chase after him now and beg him to take her with him. “Please come back Ben.”

Chapter THREE

"And I have loved you oh so long, delighting in your company, hmm, hmm." After dinner, Thorin and Imara sat on the front porch and relaxed to the sounds of Thorin's clumsy guitar playing and the serenade of the frogs at the pond on the Logan's farm across the road. Thorin strummed along and sang the words that he could still remember as Imara sat on the edge of the porch and swayed to the sounds of summertime. "I like that tune, it's real pretty. Can you play it one more time for me?"

"Why yes, of course, sweet girl, anything for you." Thorin restarted the ballad and hummed along.

"What's that one called anyways? Was it Green Trees?" Imara asked as she looked back over her shoulder.

As he laughed to himself at her mistake, Thorin shook his head. "I believe you mean Greensleeves. It was written by a right nasty man named Henry a long, long time ago."

Imara sighed and knitted her dark brows together as she imagined how a horrible person could make something so beautiful. "Are you serious? But it's so dreamy, though. Was he a friend of yours or something?"

Thorin laughed out a deep roar from his belly. "Oh, good heavens no, Imara. I'm not quite that old yet. Henry the Eighth was a king about 400 years ago over there in England."

"Well, what did he do that was so bad?" asked Imara as she stared off into the stars above her. Imara didn't know much about life or the world going on around her, but she loved to read about the stars and the stories behind them. Her parents and Shaw had kept her under lock and key her whole childhood, but when she read about the stars, Imara's imagination took her places that her family couldn't even prevent her from reaching.

Thorin contemplated how to condense it all for an innocent soul like his sister. "He had kind of a penchant for chopping off his wives heads or throwing them in prison to get rid of them when he got a hankering for a new one."

Imara made a face of disgust and shook her head. "I'm sorry I asked. He doesn't sound like much of a king or a husband."

Thorin chuckled at her response. "Yes, humans aren't much into fidelity, I don't believe. You know, they're just different. They don't have mates like we do, they get to choose who they spend their lives with and, well, sometimes they like to change their minds. They just toss out the old one and move in the new one like a piece of furniture they bought."

Imara fidgeted with her chain and swayed to the melody as it echoed out into the darkness. “What a bunch of fools they are. That just doesn’t seem right at all.”

Thorin closed his eyes and nodded. “Yes, you are correct about that. They don’t appreciate at all the fact that their creator gave them the option of free will. Those twisted old Fates of ours would never be so kind. A jealous bunch of wretches they are.” Thorin was a well-educated man and knew the old religion better than probably anyone. His blasphemy was within reason, though.

Seeing a glimmer of light behind a tree, Imara looked into the darkness and squinted as she tried to focus on the outline of the large dark animal watching them. “There’s something out there watching us Thorin. It’s a dog, I think.” She stood as the animal shifted to another tree closer to her and slyly peeked around the side. Imara stepped barefoot into the cool summer grass as Thorin stopped playing.

He furrowed his brows as he tried to see into the darkness. “Careful, dear. You don’t know what’s out there, I hear they got gators down here and such. You don’t want it to bite your toes off.”

“Stop trying to scare me, Thorin.” Imara lifted her hand and snapped her fingers, then a ball of green light emerged from her hand. She held it out in front of her and saw a large black wolf come out from behind the tree. “It’s a wolf, Thorin.”

Thorin stood and looked out across the yard. “Nah, it’s just a big ole dog. They don’t have wolves in the South, Imara. They like the cold and snow.”

Imara walked closer then knelt down on one knee as she put the glowing ball on the ground beside her. “Are you hungry boy?” She put out her hand and wiggled her fingers. “It’s alright. We won’t harm you. We’re the good sort of witches, I promise.”

The wolf came closer then lowered his head as he approached Imara. She touched his soft furry head and smiled. “Oh, look what a handsome beast you are! You must have a pile of ladies in your back pocket.” She stroked his head and he laid down before her then licked her hand. “Oh, look at you getting fresh with me. You’re just the biggest flirt I ever did see. I bet there will be a bunch of jealous she-wolves barking outside my door later when they find out you’ve been catting around with me tonight.”

Thorin came to her side and said, “I think you made yourself a new friend, sugar.”

Imara sighed as she played in the soft wavy black hair on the top of the wolf’s head. “He seems lonely. Poor fella. Do you think he’s lost?”

Thorin crossed his arms and shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe he’s feral. Shaw would tan your backside, though, if he knew you were playing with a stray animal, Imara. Even one as nice as this one.”

She continued petting his head and back. “Well, then don’t tell him, please. He isn’t bothering anybody. He just wants someone to love him.” Imara sat down in the grass beside the wolf and ran her hand in long strokes against the length of his back making him groan and shake his leg. Imara grinned at his amorous behavior. “You just have no shame at all, do you?” Thorin went back to the porch swing then picked up his guitar and continued to play.

As the animal continued to encourage Imara to pet him by rolling onto his back, Thorin chuckled to himself and said, “I think that critters in love with you.”

Imara smiled and laughed through her nose. “Oh yes, I think I am too. He’s just the nicest thing I’ve ever seen.”

Imara hummed along with the tune as she laid down next to the wolf and placed her head in her hand while she rested on her elbow. “Don’t you pay any attention to my brother now. I know exactly what you are and you’re no scruffy old mutt, I can tell you that. You know, witches are supposed to have black cats, but I suppose a big black wolf would be better for a big sissy like me. I need someone who can look after me. What’s your name handsome? Hmm…let’s see. What shall we call you? I’m so terrible at this, you know I’ve never had a pet before. I suppose I’ll just call you sweetheart for now.” She poked her finger gently into his side. “Because you are a sweetheart, aren’t you?”

Thorin stood and stretched out his arms as he yawned. “Time for bed, Imara.”

Imara waved her hand at Thorin. “I’ll be in in a few minutes. I want to say goodbye to my boyfriend here.”

As the door shut behind Thorin, Imara kissed the wolf on the top of his head. “Thank you for coming to see me, I’ve been so terribly lonely, and this was just what I needed.” She pushed herself up and dusted off her clothes. The wolf growled low in his chest at the sudden loss of her touch. “Yes, I know. But you can come back to visit me whenever you wish, my love. Now run along before they send a search party after me.” She waved her hand to usher him away.

As he walked off, Imara watched the wolf trot along the driveway. “See you tomorrow, sweetheart.” When she turned away, the wolf looked back and saw the orb of light follow Imara onto the porch before she snapped it away and went inside.

The wolf sprinted down the road until it came to the next lane and went to the door of the farmhouse then howled. “Owooo!”A black-haired woman answered the door, then stood aside as the animal came through and went upstairs.

A few moments later, Ben came downstairs buttoning up his pants. He walked into the living room and slumped down in a chair across from the couch his parents were sitting on. “You’re right, Momma. They’re witches, both of them. She’s a lighter. I didn’t think they even existed anymore.”

Anna smiled and said, “I knew that I remembered that name. Thorin’s a very decent man as I recall. Their family is quite high in the Order, or at least they were. I highly doubt they’d be living all the way out here with us if they were still in the Order’s good graces.”

Ben licked his lips and nodded his head. “She’s it, Momma. I can feel it.”

Anna leaned forward in her seat. “You need to make sure, Ben. Try to find out more about what brought them here. We have to be careful; they may be running from something as well.”

Ben wiped his mouth with his hand. “Yeah, I will. We’re heading back over there tomorrow. I’ll talk to her if those two will let her out of their sight for a damn minute.” Ben bit his lip as he knocked his fist against the arm of his chair. “They treat her like a goddamn child. That shits about to come to a stop.”

As Ben pulled his pants off and sat down in his bed that night, he smirked as he thought back about Imara lying beside him in the grass then chuckled out through his nose as he thought about her kissing him. As he clasped his hands behind his head, he closed his eyes as the warmth of his skin against the humid air around him made Imara’s scent fill his nostrils once again. She smelled like warm apple pie cooling on the windowsill and his mouth watered as it fanned out through the room.

He ran his hands through his hair then brought them to his nose and took in every molecule that remained of her on his body. From the instant he saw Imara standing in the yard by her house, he knew without a doubt that she was his Fated mate. Witches don’t feel the pull like Lycan’s do, but every atom in his body cried out for Imara. He craved her scent like the air that filled his lungs. “Soon, baby.”

Chapter FOUR

“Mmm,” hummed Imara while she stretched out her arms in the morning sunlight as it passed through her room. “Oh, I wonder what time he’s coming.”

Imara pushed herself to the side of her bed then fanned her face as the thought of Ben sent a hot flash though her body. “It sure is a hot one already.”

As she went through her armoire, she found a loose, white cotton dress. It buttoned up the front and should be nice and cool on a hot summer day in Louisiana.

After she shimmied it down over her body, Imara looked in her mirror and twisted from side to side as she admired it. She grabbed her floppy hat from the bedpost and slid her feet in her leather sandals then walked out of her room.

Imara could smell the bacon cooking in the kitchen as she walked down the stairs. As she passed the ornate mirror, she took a second to double check her hair and face.

“Did I buy that?” Thorin asked as she entered the kitchen.

Imara stopped and looked down over herself. “Well, of course you did, it’s not like you let me go out anywhere to shop on my own. What’s wrong with it?”

Thorin leaned over from the table and looked her over. “Kind of skimpy, isn’t it?”

“Hell’s bells, Thorin, it’s August.” Imara crossed her arms and blew a stray curl off her face. “Would you like me to go put on my full bustle and winter coat?”

Thorin shook his head then took a sip of his coffee as Imara took her seat. “This little get up wouldn’t have anything to do with that young farmer coming over this afternoon would it?”

Imara rolled her eyes and sighed as Thorin glanced back to her and smiled an amused grin. “It’s alright, my dear. I’m just picking on you. You’re a grown woman, there’s nothing wrong with a little harmless flirtation. Just watch it around Shaw. Daddy’s don’t like seeing their daughters messing around with young men. We got to deal with these people on a regular basis, it’s best to keep him on Shaw’s good side.”

As she picked up her glass of juice then brought it to her lips, Imara tried to think of a way to broach the subject. “Thorin, you ever wondered about what it was like to meet your mate?”

Thorin furrowed his brows and swallowed. “Is there something you want to tell me, Imara?”

Imara shook her head from side to side and took a sip. As she swallowed, she licked her lips and said, “No, I just wondered what it felt like. I remember Momma saying that she knew from the minute she met Daddy that he was the one for her. You ever met anyone like that?”

Thorin breathed in through his nose then looked to the table and shook his head. “No. I met a few women who I thought might be but then I quickly realized they weren’t.” He smirked to himself. “I don’t think she’s here. I’ve been alive a long time now and have been a lot of places. I figure if she was here, Fate would’ve thrown her at me by now.”

Shaw leaned in through the kitchen door and shook his head as he looked over Imara. “I got the garden marked off and tilled. You want to come take a look before they get here?”

“Yes, sir, I’ll be right there.” Imara wiped the sweat from her neck then stood and put her hand on Thorin’s shoulder. “Wherever she is, Thorin, she’s a lucky woman.”

As Imara walked out the door, Thorin sighed and looked at Sofia. “I think she’s in love with that boy, Sofia.”

Sofia cleared the plates from Imara’s spot and nodded. “And I’m quite sure that he feels the same.”

Thorin wiped his mouth with his hand and said, “Well shit.”

“You sure about this spot, Shaw? You don’t think it’s too much sun, do you?” Imara looked up in the sky and squinted as the hot Louisiana sun beat down on her pale face.

Shaw rested his arm across the handle of his shovel as he watched Imara test the soil. “Plants like the sun, Imara. You might know healing, but I know everything else. This here’s the spot.”

Imara blew out a frustrated breath as she looked around at the holes she had dug. “I just don’t know. Maybe we should try the shady spot near the carriage house.”

“Good afternoon Miss Parker, Shaw” Ben smiled as he stood at the edge of the tilled-up yard and crossed his arms as he watched Imara on her hands and knees with her ass in the air. He’d seen her in a similar position in his dreams last night.

Imara smiled to herself before standing up and turning around. She rubbed her hands together to remove the dirt as she walked over to him. “Hello, Mr. Logan. I’m glad you’re here.”

Ben slowly looked her over before settling on her eyes. “You can just call me Ben.”

She smiled and glanced away as she saw Harold bringing the wagon around the side of the house. When Imara looked back, Ben was still looking at her making her cheeks flush with color as she grinned. “Well then, you may call me Imara. I wanted to thank you for bringing that on such short notice, I hope it wasn’t too much of a bother. I just need to get my planting done soon before the season passes.”

Shaw rubbed his chin and looked Ben over. “Hey, Ben, will you tell Imara this here’s the best place for her garden. I figure being a farmer and all, you’d know best.”

Ben looked down at her face as she crossed her arms in frustration. “Sorry, but he’s right. Plants like the sun.”

As Shaw walked past her, he said, “Told you so.”

Imara smirked and looked down to her feet before facing Ben again. “I just don’t want my plants burning up out here in this hot sun.”

Shaw went to the wagon to take a look at the soil mixture and began a conversation with Harold. Ben glanced over his shoulder to make sure they were out of ear shot then he licked his lips as he looked back to Imara. “What are you growing, Imara?”

As she dusted off her dress, she pulled her lips to the side and shrugged. “Herbs mostly.”

Ben looked at her eyes so that he could see her expression. “Are you a healer, Imara?”

Her heart skipped a beat as her eyes snapped up to his. Only supernaturals called their physicians healers. As her heart thumped and flipped in her chest, Imara’s normally pale cheeks and ears burned red as her fear seeped out of her skin. She glanced over to Shaw and she could tell he hadn’t heard what he said, thankfully. Imara looked to the ground and swallowed hard to get the taste of the lie she was about to tell out of her mouth. “Umm…no, it’s just a hobby, I suppose.”

“A hobby? Is that so?” Ben asked coldly as Imara avoided his eyes. He ducked from side to side to meet each direction she tried to look away to until she finally met his eyes again.

“You’re not a very good liar, Imara. Please don’t ever lie to me again.” Imara’s hands started to shake, so she crossed her arms and tucked them under where Ben couldn’t see. She didn’t realize he was a Lycan and that he could hear her blood speeding through her veins or smell the adrenaline wafting from her pores. He was a living, breathing lie detector. Imara knew their secret was out, but if Shaw realized it, Ben was a dead man.

“Where are y’all from Imara?” Ben asked as he continued to look in her face for answers. “You’re from Savannah, aren’t you?”

Imara’s eyes teared up and she looked at him then shook her head no. “Please stop. You don’t know what you’re doing Ben.”

Ben stepped closer to her and looked down into her face. “Then just tell me. What are you running from? You can tell me. I know what you are, it’s alright. Trust me, no one here’s going to hurt you.”

Feeling his prickly stare upon her, Imara looked back to Shaw and their eyes locked. Shaw knew Imara had too kind a heart to be dishonest and it wouldn’t be the first time he’d had to rescue her

from a conversation that got away from her. He looked at her suspiciously as she nervously spoke to Ben. It was obvious to anyone with a pulse that Imara had a crush on Ben, but she had been sheltered all her life and was extremely naïve about men. He studied her face as he tried to figure out if she was just a poor flirt or if she was in trouble.

Imara nervously played with her necklace as she tried to remain calm in front of Shaw. "If they find out you know about us, Shaw and Thorin will leave with me tonight and you'll never see me again. Please don't say anything else. I don't want to leave."

Ben shook his head. "No, I won't let that happen. Just talk to me. I won't let them take you anywhere."

As Shaw lifted his chin to Imara, she tucked her hair behind her ear and smiled to him so he wouldn't be suspicious. "No one can find out we're here. Do you understand? Just forget whatever you think you know."

Imara tried to turn away, but Ben grabbed her hand and pulled her back. "No, don't walk away from me Imara. You're all I've been able to think about since I met you. There's no way I could ever just forget about you now."

A smile curled up on the side on Imara's mouth and she rubbed her forehead with her fingertips. As the electricity of his touch shot through Imara's arm, she looked back into his eyes. Ben rubbed his thumb across her fingers and said, "You feel it too. Don't you?"

Imara looked down at their hands and licked her parched lips then nodded. "If you ever want to see me again, Ben, you can't say anything." As she heard Shaw clear his throat, Imara snapped out of the trance Ben had her under then quickly took back her hand and walked to the picnic table. As she sat down with Sofia, she wrapped her arm around Imara then wiped the tears away from her eyes with her apron. "It's alright, baby. Love is a terrible business sometimes."

Shaw grabbed a shovel from the wagon and went to the plot he marked off then he looked back to Imara and groaned to himself. "Goddamn it, that's just what we need right now."

Ben kept his eyes on Imara as he walked towards the wagon. "Well? What did she say?" asked Harold softly.

As he ran his hand through his hair, Ben took a deep breath to calm himself. "I don't know what they're running from, but it's bad. She's terrified that someone's going to find out who they are."

Chapter FIVE

As the orange and pink sun slid down behind the corn field on the Logan's farm, Imara thought about the way she felt when Ben touched her. Her fingertips still tingled with the thrill of his skin on hers and she pressed them to her lips as she smiled. It was like he opened the windows of all the stale lonely places in her heart and she ached for another taste of it.

Ben consumed all her thoughts and even going to sleep at night wasn't an escape from the budding desire smoldering beneath the surface. Even though she'd never know a man's love, Imara imagined all the things Ben would do with her and it only made the longing for him worse.

"It sure is a pretty night. That little rainstorm certainly cooled it off, didn't it?" Sofia asked as she braided Imara's hair.

"Mmm-hmm," hummed Imara as something caught her eye out in the distance. As the wolf slowly approached her, she lifted her head then smiled. "Look Thorin, it's my sweetheart. He came back."

Shaw sat up and looked out in the yard then curled his lip when he didn't see anything. "Are you crazy? I don't see anything at all."

"Well, you are a human, so your vision is shit," said Thorin as he leaned forward to catch a glimpse of the canine. "There he is on the edge of the lawn."

Imara stood up and patted her leg for the wolf to come closer. "Come here, sweetheart. It's alright. Don't be afraid of the big scary man."

Shaw huffed through his nose as the animal approached Imara then he leaned back in his chair. "He should be afraid cuz if it bites you, I'll tear him apart, Imara."

Imara rolled her eyes as she sat down and scratched under the wolf's chin. "Don't be ridiculous, he's not going to bite me. He's my little ole lover boy, isn't he? Here, sweetheart, come sit beside me."

The wolf hopped up on the porch and laid down with his head on Imara's thigh. She stroked his coat gently as Sofia continued to plat her hair. "You should ask Ben if he wants to come over here and sit with you some evening. You two can hardly get to know each other when he's working."

Shaw took a draw from his pipe and groaned before he said, "She doesn't need to be getting close to that boy."

Thomas stretched out in his chair and ran his hands through his blonde hair. "Imara's an adult. It's really none of your business Shaw, besides he seems like a decent man."

Shaw blew smoke rings out through his mouth and glared at the butler then said, “He does seem like a decent man, but we’ll be moving along eventually and Imara’s heart will be broken. None of us need that kind of headache, most especially her.”

Shaw may be just a familiar, but he took his job of protecting Imara and Thorin’s secrets seriously. He wouldn’t think twice about killing Ben and his parents; he's done far worse in his time with the Parker family over the years.

As she pushed her quivering lips together, Imara fought to choke back the pain rising in her throat. “You don’t need to worry Shaw. I won’t get involved with him.”

As tears started to run down her face, Imara licked her lips and looked down to the wolf. He looked up in her eyes and whimpered as he put his leg over hers. “Oh, aren’t you just the biggest flirt,” she said as she smiled at him and wiped her tears away.

Shaw heard Imara sniffling back her tears and it tugged at his heartstrings. Above it all, Imara was the closest thing he ever had to a child of his own. The Parkers had always treated him like family and trusted him with Imara’s safety. He wore that like a badge of honor, and it was the single focus of his life. He pulled on his pipe again and said, “I’m not saying anything’s wrong with the boy, Imara. He seems like good people, but you don’t know what he’d do if he found out about the two of you. If you really like him, you’ll shove that down deep where it won’t hurt either of you. If he’s like you, he’s dangerous and if he’s human, you won’t be able to take him with you when you go anyway. You’re just setting yourself up for a heap of pain.”

“I said I won’t get involved with him Shaw,” Imara said louder. “Now, please leave it alone. I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

As the evening went on, everyone left the porch except for Thorin and Imara. Thorin sat beside her on the edge of the porch and sighed as he looked out into the darkness. “I suppose you really do like him, don’t you?”

Imara scratched between the wolf’s ears and pushed her tears away with her other hand. “It doesn’t really matter, does it? It’s not like you or Shaw would ever let anything happen between us anyway.”

Thorin took her hand and said, “It does matter, my dear. He’s a human. Shaw was right, they can’t live in our world. I’ve never heard of a single human ever being allowed into the Realm. They don’t belong there.”

As she huffed through her nose at the irony of it, Imara said, “We don’t seem to be doing so well, either.”

Thorin laughed as he kicked the dust off the steps. “You might be right about that. I know life’s not been easy since Momma and Daddy died. Once we track down Uncle Haldir, we’ll pop off to the Realm and put all this nonsense behind us, Imara.”

Imara’s lip quivered. “But I don’t want to leave, Thorin. I just want to stay in one place for more than a minute. We’re witches for Pete’s sake. Why can’t we just stay and…”

Cutting her off from that train of thought, Thorin shook his head. “You’re not that kind of witch, Imara. You’re a witch that heals. What the ancients used to call a white lighter. You’re a rare and precious creature. You’re not a killer. You can’t protect yourself from death dealers, honey.”

She swallowed back her tears and said, “The Order let us leave on our own, Thorin. Why would they come after us after all this time?”

Thorin sighed as he looked out at the darkness. “I’m not worried about the Order, Imara. Our parents were ancient and had lots of enemies from all over the place. It could be anyone.”

Wiping her tear stained face on the shoulder of her dress, Imara asked, “But why would they care about a couple of nothings like us? You’re not much of a warlock and I can’t do any proper magic at all.”

Thorin pushed her hair off her shoulder. “Because sometimes people are just cruel, Imara. They have mean, ugly hearts and a darkness that lives right in the center of them that can’t ever be lit up again. They don’t need a reason to do what they do, they’re just evil. When we get to the Realm, we can finally settle down. We can find our right mates and you can have a hundred children if you like.”

Imara shook her head. “What if our mates are here, Thorin. What if...what if I met my mate here in this little town? Would you still make me leave?”

Thorin sighed and scratched his head. “No, of course not, Imara. But I would strongly encourage you both to leave as soon as possible. Mate or not, you’re still in danger.”

Imara thought about something for a second then took a deep breath. She knew she wouldn’t be able to take it back once it left her lips. “If I tell you something, will you promise me you won’t tell Shaw?”

That got Thorin’s attention. He sat up straight as he prepared for what came next. Imara didn’t have a deceitful bone in her body, keeping secrets from Shaw was out of character for her so it must be something important. “Well, I can’t promise, but I’ll try my best.”

Imara swallowed the lump in her throat then looked at Thorin. “Ben asked me if I was a healer and he knew where we were from. He knows we’re hiding from someone.”

Thorin's eyes widened and he nodded as he curled his lips under. "Well, shit. I suppose at least we know now they're not humans." He pinched the bridge of his nose in annoyance. They weren't even finished unpacking yet and the thought off finding another safe house was testing the limits of his patience.

Shaking her head, Imara knew she'd made a mistake telling her brother. "I shouldn't have said anything."

Thorin rubbed the back of his neck. "No, no, Imara. I don't want you to start keeping things from me now. Look, the good news is that these folks aren't strangers here. They've lived here a long time and have a business. But the bad news is that if they're supernaturals like us, they sure as hell don't want anyone knowing it. They're probably in the same boat we are and that makes them even more dangerous. We don't need to get caught up in whatever they're hiding from too."

The wolf raised its head and groaned as he listened to them talk about him. Imara chuckled at Ben then looked back to Thorin. "I think he's my mate, Thorin. I know he is. I've never felt anything like this before. He's on my mind constantly. Please don't make me leave him."

Thorin blew out through his mouth. "Damn it all to hell. Let me think about all this for a while, Imara. It's not something to be taken lightly. Now, say good night to your friend and get to bed." Thorin leaned over and kissed her forehead then put his hands on his knees and pushed himself up. As he walked inside, Thorin looked back at his sister. He'd kept her running for so long, that he never considered that she might actually run into her mate along the way. He knew the religion as well as anyone and if Ben was Imara's mate, there was little he could do to keep them apart.

Imara sighed as she rubbed the wolf's head. "Well, at least that wasn't a no, was it? Ok, sweetheart. I'll see you tomorrow night, alright?"

The wolf pushed itself up to its feet then nuzzled its snout into Imara's neck. He inhaled deeply as she wrapped her arm around him. Ben savored the scent of apples and cinnamon he had been craving since he first smelled her. She chuckled and said, "Awe, I'm going to miss you too. Maybe I can convince them to let you stay with us. You seem meek enough. Alright, go on. I need my beauty rest."

The wolf licked Imara's cheek as she giggled then jumped off the porch and ran off into the darkness. Imara yelled out, "Goodnight, sweetheart. Be careful out there."

Chapter SIX

"I don't like this, Thorin. It don't feel right." Shaw sat on the bench with his arms crossed as Thorin drove the wagon down to the Logan's farm.

Thorin sighed as he looked ahead down the road. "Imara seems sure of herself and Ben seems to be quite smitten with her as well. I know, being human, you don't understand the significance of the mate bond, but trust me when I tell you, if it's true, there will be no keeping them apart. The Fates won't allow it."

As he furrowed his brows, Shaw glanced at Thorin. "Try me."

Thorin smirked to himself. "If it's true, it's a good thing, Shaw. The more people we got looking out for her, the better off she is. Meeting Ben Logan may be a blessing in disguise. We got to give this thing a chance."

Nodding to Ben and Harold at the pig pen as Thorin parked the wagon beside the house, Shaw grunted in frustration "We should just pack up and leave tonight. I don't feel good about this anymore. I'm telling you, something in my bones says this boy's not right for her."

As Ben and Harold walked to them, Thorin said, "When's the last time you felt good about anything, Shaw? If it's meant to be, then it will. No amount of moving and hiding her away is ever going to be able to protect Imara from her fate. We just have to see how things play out and hope for the best."

When Thorin and Shaw left their carriage, Ben crossed his arms and looked them over. After the conversation last night on the porch, Ben wasn't feeling welcoming. "Is there something I can do for you two?"

Shaw scowled at Ben as he ran his tongue over his teeth. Ben glanced to him and asked, "Are we cross, Shaw?" After the things Imara said to him in the yard, Ben had no patience left for Shaw and the way he intimidated her.

Thorin put up his hands. "No. No, not at all, Ben. We'd just like to talk with you about Imara."

Ben rolled his head from side to side then looked back to Thorin. "Come on inside."

When they entered the back door of the house, Ben nodded to the table. "Have a seat. Let me wash up real quick."

As Ben walked out of the kitchen, his mother entered the hallway. "What does he want?"

Ben started upstairs and said, "He wants to talk about Imara."

Thorin sat down at the table and looked around the kitchen. “Can you try not to raise that boy's ire? He may be family soon.”

Scoffing at the thought, Shaw shook his head as he looked out the window. “He sure as hell ain’t my family. My loyalties are to you and Imara. That boy ain’t nothing to me.”

Thorin grinned and playfully pushed his fist against Shaw’s chin. “Awe isn’t that sweet. Big daddy don’t want that young stud taking his little girl away from him. Our little girls all grown up, Shaw.”

Rubbing his shiny bald head, Shaw said, “Shut the hell up. He don’t even have any money, Thorin. She needs someone who can take care of her. She’s not cut out for farm life and working hard. Can you imagine prissy old Imara waking up when it’s still dark outside and milking cows or slopping pigs?”

Thorin had a good chuckle as he bit his lip and imagined it. “No. I can’t say that’s something I can see her wanting, but one things for certain, she wants that boy. I’m not going to stand in the way of her being happy anymore.”

While Ben climbed the stairs, Anna put her hand over her mouth and tapped her foot on the floor as she waited. When he came back a few minutes later, Anna asked, “Do you want me to come in there with you?”

Ben looked to the kitchen then nodded. “Let’s get this over with. They didn’t know I could hear them yapping their mouths all the way upstairs. I’m not in the mood to deal with much more of their horseshit.”

Anna followed Ben into the kitchen and as soon as Thorin saw her, he laughed to himself and stood up. “As I live and breathe, Anna.” He crossed his arms and put his thumb to his chin then he pointed a finger at her. “But it wasn’t Logan then, was it?”

Anna sat down and smiled. “No, Thorin, it wasn’t. A lots changed in 30 years or so.”

Thorin took his seat again and clasped his hands in front of him. “Why yes, I can see that. Shaw, this is Anna Logan, I take it she’s Ben’s mother.”

Anna nodded. “Yes, I am.”

Thorin grinned and turned his head slightly to the side. “Now Anna, everyone thought you were dead, seeing how you disappeared after that man of yours was killed the way he was. Shame, really, he seemed like quite a good man.”

Anna nodded her head and looked to Ben then sighed. “The death dealers came for us in broad daylight, in front of humans and everything right there on the street. I barely got away. I went as far as my money took me and met Harold and the rest, as they say, is history.”

Looking down at the table, Thorin smirked as he put the pieces together. “Your mate was a Lycan, as I remember it. I suppose that explains the big black wolf that keeps coming to my door at night looking for my baby sister.”

Ben shifted in his seat and exhaled through his nose as Thorin glanced up at him and raised his brow. Thorin grinned and said, “So, back to the reason for my visit today. It seems that you and Imara…”

“We’re mates,” Ben said as he looked in Thorin’s eyes.

Thorin huffed through his nose and nodded. “Yes, that’s what she seems to think as well.”

As he glared at the two men sitting in front of him, Ben crossed his arms. “You’re not taking her anywhere ever again. Now, that we’re all on the same page about what’s happening, she’s going to be moving in with me.”

Shaw chuckled and said, “She goes where I say she goes, boy. I don’t give a damn who you think you are to her. That mate nonsense don’t mean a damn thing to me at all.”

Ben uncrossed his arms and leaned forward. “Those days of the two of you pushing her around and telling her what to do are over, Shaw. She’s my little girl now.”

Realizing Ben had overheard their prior conversation, Thorin sighed and pushed himself back in his seat. “Gentleman, this unpleasantness is unnecessary. Imara isn’t a child anymore. If she says you’re her man, well then, you’re her man. No one’s going to question your claim on her.” Thorin inhaled deeply as he decided how to deliver the bad news. “Let me tell you a little story, Ben.”

Ben glared at Shaw then eventually turned his eyes to Thorin. He sat back in his seat and nodded to Thorin to continue.

Thorin sat up straight and clasped his hands again. “When our dear mother was expecting Imara, a clairvoyant stopped her on the street. Not looking for money or anything, mind you. The mood just struck her; I suppose. She went on to tell my mother that Imara would live a tortured life and would never live to see her 30th birthday. Of course, there were some other things she said concerning my folks that , unfortunately, they didn’t take heed to. The crime of it all for Imara and I is that everything the clairvoyant told my mother has come to pass. Everything. We’ve been running all over God’s creation trying to keep the inevitable from happening until we can find someone to get us to the Realm where she’ll be safe.”

As he clenched his teeth, Ben looked away towards the window. “What’s supposed to happen to her?”

Shaking his head, Thorin blew a raspberry through his lips. “I don’t know, Ben. We’re immortals, there are only a few things that can kill us. Aren’t there? My parents, being wealthy and powerful and all, they had lots of enemies. They were executed by the Order’s last leader. He was kind enough to let me take Imara and leave Savannah, but that doesn’t mean that anything's been forgiven or forgotten. So, every time we get found out, we move on. However, in this instance, we can hardly do that. Can we?”

Ben bit the inside of his lip and shook his head no.

As he drummed is fingers on the table, Thorin came to a decision. “I’ve never told her about this prophecy. I don’t see the point of it. She thinks we’re running from the people who killed our parents and, well, maybe we are. I seriously can’t imagine why anyone else in this whole world would want to harm Imara. So, as I was saying, we need to talk about what happens next. It’s come to my attention that the tortured life she’s living has been of my own design. I’ve dragged that poor girl to every backwoods shithole I can think of and she’s weary. I know we can’t keep her safe forever, Fate will catch up with her eventually if that’s what’s laid out for her. I’ll see her again in the other Realm if that’s the case. But I can’t stand the thought of her suffering some horrible end, she’s too pure and sweet for that. I was hoping to find Haldir and get the hell off this filthy planet before that happened, but it’s been nearly ten years and I haven’t heard a word from him. I want my sister to be happy with whatever time she has left here. Imara wants to stay here with you, I just need to know that you’re a man worthy of whatever terrible fate might await her. Mind you, if the old Viking bastard ever bothers to show up, I’ll rip her out of your arms so fast, it’ll make your head spin.”

Ben’s steely eyes glazed over as the harsh reality of Thorin’s words finally reached his heart. He swallowed down the pain and said, “No one will ever love her the way I will, Thorin. I’ll be good to her. I’ll die for her a hundred times if I have to keep her safe.”

Thorin sighed and nodded his head as he looked Ben in the eyes. He knew Ben meant every word he said. “Well then, the spell is made. Blessed be.” Thorin and Shaw stood up then Thorin leaned across the table, “I’ll hold you to every word of that, Ben, in this life and the next.”

Before he left the kitchen door, Thorin looked back and said, “You may come sit with her tonight after supper, if you wish. Not that she minds your little canine friend, but I’m sure she’d rather have you there in the flesh.”

Chapter SEVEN

“Imara, my dear, would you mind terribly answering the door for me? I’m afraid Shaw might pull another card if I leave,” said Teddy as he and Shaw played cards at the kitchen table.

“Who in the world could that be this time of night?” asked Imara as she took off her apron and walked to the front door. “It’s mighty late for someone to come calling.”

Thorin chuckled to himself as he drew another card then yelled out, “Maybe your wolf friend finally learned how to knock, sugar. He’s got awful good manners at least.”

As Imara straightened her dress, she gave her hair a shake as she walked by the foyer mirror then opened the door and gasped. “Why, hello Ben. It’s nice to see you.”

Ben tried to control his breathing as the scent of Imara swirled around him like a tornado. “Good evening. Thorin told me I could come sit with you tonight, if you want to that is .” He looked past Imara and nodded his chin to Thorin as he peeked out from the kitchen doorway and waved.

Imara glanced back over her shoulder then licked her lips and smiled as she turned back to Ben. “He did? He didn’t mention it.”

Ben nodded and glanced away quickly. “Would you like to come outside? Or?”

Imara put her hand to her forehead as her cheeks flushed with color. “Yes, of course. I’m so sorry.” Imara opened the screen door then went outside and closed it behind her. “Umm…would you like to swing with me?”

As he looked down in Imara’s face, he got so lost in her sparkling green eyes that he forgot to answer. Imara smiled nervously while she walked to the porch swing and sat down, then Ben climbed into the seat beside her and leaned back with his arm behind her.

Taking a deep breath as she tried to find something to say, Imara rubbed her hands along her skirt. Ben glanced down to her fidgety hands and grinned at her nervousness then slid his hand on top of hers and pulled it onto his lap. Ben leaned into her ear. “Don’t be nervous, Imara. I just want to spend some time with you before those two change their minds.”

Imara huffed through her nose as she smiled. “I can’t hardly help it. My hearts beating out of my chest. Believe it or not, this is the first time I’ve ever been called on by a man.”

Ben lifted his arm from the seatback then slid it around Imara’s shoulder and pulled her into his side. “And it’ll be the last time because I’m going to marry you, Imara.”

She looked up in his face and bit her lip as she looked in his eyes. She wasn't sure she heard him right, but she didn't care. Imara just wanted everything to stay just as it was right now.

Ben looked around Imara's face then settled on her lips. He wondered what they tasted like. They weren't just pink like most people, they were cherry red, and Ben imagined they tasted just as sweet. "Did you hear me? I'm telling you I'm going to marry you."

Imara nodded slowly as she looked in his eyes. "Are you sure you mean that? Don't you be changing your mind and breaking my heart."

Ben snorted out through his nose and he grinned. "Of course, I mean it. A man would have to be clean out of his mind not to want you." Ben released her hand and gently placed his fingertips on her chin then closed his eyes and pressed his lips against hers. As he pulled away, Ben opened his eyes and licked his lips. It was better than he imagined. The faint taste of sweet red wine still lingered on her and Ben decided then and there he'd keep her swimming in it forever.

As he swept his fingertips across her cheek, Ben looked into Imara's eyes. "I knew the minute I saw you that you were mine. Things are going to change, Imara. All these people keeping you under their thumb, that's all over now. The only man you ever need to answer to again is me. You understand what I'm saying to you?"

Imara breathed heavy against Ben's chest as her eyes became glassy with tears. "Yes, I understand."

Glancing back to Imara's mouth, Ben thumbed her bottom lip. "You mind if I do that again?"

Rolling her eyes playfully, Imara said, "I'd like that very much."

Ben slid his hand around Imara's head then pulled her onto his lips. As he moved slowly against her in short, soft kisses, he pulled her closer to his chest. Imara slid her hands up his big firm pecs then around his neck as he gently parted her lips with his tongue. He slowly entered her mouth and explored it while she softly moaned into his.

When he finally released her, tears rolled down Imara's cheeks. Ben looked at her with concern as he wiped them away with his thumbs. "I'm sorry. Did I do something wrong, baby?"

Imara smiled and shook her head. "No. It was wonderful. I just can't believe this is happening."

Ben took back Imara's hand and kissed the back of it before he pulled her back into his chest. "Well, it is. You're all mine now. So, I want to know all about you. Tell me everything."

"From when?" asked Imara as she rubbed her cheek against the threads of his shirt.

Ben rubbed the tip of his nose into her hair and inhaled deeply like he'd wanted to do since he first caught her scent when he was riding up the driveway before he ever saw her face. "From the beginning, as far back as you can remember. I got all night."

Imara licked the taste of Ben away from her and closed her eyes a moment so she could lock it up in her memory in case it was just a dream. "I was born in Savannah. My parents, Dot and Elsie, they were killed when I was a teenager and my brother came back from Europe to take care of me. He was a teacher there. History or something like that. Umm…he didn't think it was safe for me there anymore because, well, he thinks the people who killed them might want to hurt us, so we move around a lot. I guess that's pretty much it."

"You're a healer." Ben said then kissed her forehead. "That's a fairly important detail you're leaving out."

Imara relaxed into Ben's embrace finally and slid her hand onto his chest. She could feel his heart pounding under her fingertips, and it made her feel better to know she wasn't the only one feeling nervous. "Well, I don't have any schooling or anything. Thorin says I'm a white lighter, I just have the touch he says."

Chuckling to himself because a wealthy lady like Imara knew even less about the religion then he did, Ben said, "Lady of the Light."

Imara nodded. "Yes, that's what he calls it. He said it's in my blood."

As he softly slid his fingertips up and down Imara's arm, Ben said, "You're an ancient kind of creature. You're very special. The ladies of the light decided who got to stay or had to be reincarnated when men were struck down in battle. You can drive all the darkness out of the most terrible of spaces with just a wave of your hand. I've seen some of that myself, Imara."

Imara shook her head and snickered. "No, that's silly. I can't do anything special. I'm terrified of my own shadow."

"I never cared for learning much about the religion, but I remember when Momma told those stories. I remember thinking how beautiful the ladies must be, that they must just sparkle like glass in the sunlight. It all makes sense now." Ben closed his eyes as he thought about Thorin's warning and he swallowed hard to keep from choking up.

"The warlocks hunted your kind to near extinction because they didn't want you interfering in their plans. They didn't like that women could undo all their works with just a touch of their hand, so they either killed you outright and made you start all over again as children or they locked you in cages until you learned to behave yourself or just faded away."

Ben sniffed back his tears then straightened up and looked out across the dark lawn. "I suppose now I know why that story struck me so. It was you. It's always been about you." Ben felt like he finally understood the prophecy, why Imara was in danger. He knew if he could just keep her secret, hidden away, no one would ever come looking for her. He'd been so angry at Shaw and

Thorin for keeping Imara so guarded, but now he understood it was Imara's gift that damned her to her Fate. They'd been right all along to be so overprotective.

Imara looked up into his face and asked, "What do you mean it was me?"

Licking his tears away, Ben shook his head. "I, I just mean why I liked the story so much. It must've been because I knew deep in my heart that you were going to be mine someday, even though I didn't even know you yet. I had to know how to take care of a prize like you."

Imara looked doubtfully over his face but then smiled. "You sure do know what to say to make a girl's heart flutter."

Ben put his hand on Imara's cheek as he looked down over her. He felt like the master of all things now with her by his side. He didn't know how empty his life had been until this moment.

"That's how I feel every time you look at me, Imara. Every single time." He slid his hand in hers. "It's true what they say about you. This hand right here, it saved me. I was just living, not doing anything special, and now I have you. Now I know what I was put on this Earth for. My purpose. I could have lived another hundred or so years being miserable, but you come along now and changed everything."

Melting into his chest, Imara rubbed her fingertips against his, even the touch of his fingers made her feel warm all through her body.

"You know that Thorin thinks that there's folks coming after us, don't you? Are you sure you want to go getting yourself all mixed up in this mess?" asked Imara.

Ben inhaled sharply through his nose and nodded. "He told me everything. But you don't need to worry, baby. I won't let anyone hurt you. They'll have to kill me first."

Chapter EIGHT

"Do you think he's alright, Thorin? I'd never forgive myself if something happened to him. I just knew we should have taken him in." Imara stood on the porch with her arms crossed searching the darkness for signs of the wolf.

Thorin looked up from his guitar and gave her a sympathetic smile. "I'm sure he is darlin. Try not to worry yourself into a fit."

Imara sighed a pained breath. She hasn't had any friends besides Thorin and the servants since they started moving from town to town. Shaw never allowed anyone to get too close to the family. The absence of the wolf was particularly bitter, because Imara also hadn't seen Ben for days now and her whole body ached to feel his touch one more time.

She sat down on the swing beside Thorin and slumped over on his shoulder. "I wonder where he's been."

Thorin kissed the top of her head. "Are we talking about the wolf or Ben?"

Sniffling back her tears, Imara said, "Both, I suppose. I just don't understand why he hasn't been back."

Thorin grinned and nodded. "I figured. I heard he's been working on some big project at his house and it's taking up most of his time."

Imara looked up to Thorin as hope returned to her. "Really? What sort of project?"

Thorin twisted his lips to the side and shook his head as he tried to hide what he knew. "I really can't say. It must be important, though, to keep him away like this."

Looking off in the distance for her mate, Imara's hope started to recede. "Maybe he's changed his mind about me."

Thorin sighed and rested his head against hers. "I don't think that's true at all. Not everyone is as fortunate as us when it comes to money, Imara. He's doing what he has to do. Just be patient. It's getting terrible late, my dear. Why don't you go on and get to bed now."

Imara stood from the swing and looked out across the yard one more time before she opened the door and went inside.

Shaw came around the corner and sat down on the porch in the rocking chair. As the floorboards creaked under him, Shaw lit his pipe.

Thorin put down his guitar and cracked his knuckles. “How’s it coming along over there at Ben’s?”

Shaw blew out a smoke ring then said, “He’s working his ass off, that’s for damn sure. Doesn’t even want any help.”

Thorin chuckled in amusement. “He is a proud and stubborn man, that Ben.”

Shaw nodded his head. “Sure is.”

Thorin looked into the darkness and twisted his lips to the side as he looked for Ben. “Imara’s getting right upset, though.”

Shaw shrugged then drew from his pipe. “He’ll be along soon enough.”

Thorin crossed his arms and leaned back. “You think he might consider sleeping inside this time? I hate to see a man sleeping on a porch. That don’t feel right at all after all he’s doing for her.”

“No, I don’t expect he’d agree to that.” A rare smile came to Shaw’s gruff face. “I’m starting to like that boy. Sleeping on the doorstep.” Shaw chuckled. “Never seen anything like that before. He must be crazy in love with little Miss Priss.”

Thorin laughed out then from the corner of his eye he saw movement. The black wolf came running down the drive, then leaped up on the porch.

“Good evening Ben. We were just talking about you. You know, you’re welcome to stay inside if you’d like. I’m certain Imara would be thrilled to have you nearby.”

Ben paced in front of the door then finally laid down on the porch and tucked his snout under his paws.

“Alright then. Well anyhow, if you’re free tomorrow evening, I’d like for you and your parents to come over for dinner. Imara’s missing you terribly. We need to come clean to her. She’s thinking you don’t want her anymore.”

The wolf raised his head and shook it out with a whimper.

Thorin pursed his lips as he put up his hands and shook his head. “Now, I’m not making any judgements, Ben. I’m just telling you how she’s feeling. She’s a tender-hearted woman. You need to be careful with her.”

Ben tucked his snout again and sighed.

“Well, it’s past my bedtime. I’ll see you tomorrow evening, I suppose. Goodnight Ben.”

Shaw remained on the porch and rocked away as Ben drifted off to sleep.

Ben left early the next morning before the sun came up again. He had a lot of work to get done before dinner.

“Are you about finished for the day, Imara?” Thorin asked as he crossed his arms and watched her work in the garden.

“Not really. There’s still a lot of light left today.” She glanced up in the sky. “It’s barely four o’clock.”

“You should go wash up and put on a pretty dress. We’re having guests tonight.”

Imara shielded her eyes from the sun as she looked up to Thorin. “Guests? We’ve never had guests. Ever. What’s the occasion?”

“I invited Ben and his parents over for dinner.”

Imara sighed then continued pulling weeds. “Why?”

“Why? Wasn’t it just a week ago that you told me he was your mate, my dear?”

“Yes, and it’s been a week since he’s bothered to come see me at all. I guess I was wrong.”

“He’s a working man, Imara. He doesn’t have time to worship you every second of the day. If you’re going to be his wife, you’ll have to just get used to that.”

Imara chuckled and stood up then dusted off her hands. “I don’t think that will be a problem.” She started walking off to the kitchen door. “I’m ready to leave this place whenever you are.”

Thorin rolled his eyes and wiped his hand across his mouth. “Jesus, what the hell is that boy thinking ?”

As the sun went down in the horizon, Imara heard the hooves coming up the drive. She looked out her bedroom window and saw them nearing the house, so she took another look at herself in the mirror.

Imara wore the green dress that Thorin bought her in New Orleans, the one he said made her eyes glow like highly polished emeralds. It fit her good and unlike the other dresses in her armoire, it showed off her womanly features. It narrowed at the waist and revealed just enough cleavage to not be obscene. Imara left her hair down and curly with the sides pulled back. She wanted to look good enough to make Ben pay for ignoring her all these long, lonely days.

Imara heard the door open downstairs and the sounds of Thomas and Thorin welcoming their guests. Imara looked at herself one last time and sighed before walking out her door. As she descended the stairs, she glanced up and saw Ben looking at her. She quickly looked back to her feet and pushed her lips together as her plan to make Ben suffer started falling apart. All she really wanted was to be in his arms again.

Ben knew he was in the doghouse with Imara, but he hoped when she learned why he's been gone so long, she'd forgive him.

Thorin held his arm out to Imara and then wrapped it around her as she approached. "Imara you've, of course, met Ben and Harold. This beautiful creature is Harold's wife, Anna."

Anna leaned over and kissed Imara's cheek. "I'm so happy to finally meet you, Imara. I've heard so much about you."

Imara gave a quick grin and said, "Lovely to meet you, madam."

Sensing Imara's bitter attitude, Thorin smirked and swept his hand to the side. "Please everyone, the dining room is this way."

Imara crossed her arms and walked into the dining room ahead of everyone. Thomas waited for her to sit then pushed in her chair. As Ben took the seat next to her, he leaned over then whispered in her ear. "You look beautiful, Imara."

Imara shook out the napkin and placed it on her lap. "Thank you."

As Thomas served them drinks, Thorin flicked his fingers between himself and the Logan's and said, "Well, why don't we let Imara in on everything before this dinner gets any more tense than it already is. My dear sister seems to have left her manners upstairs this evening."

Imara rolled her eyes and swallowed her wine then set down her cup. "What exactly are you talking about, Thorin?"

Thorin took a deep breath and scratched his chin. "Anna and I are old acquaintances, Imara. We met, oh, I don't know a little over 30 years ago."

Imara huffed through her nose and looked at Ben. "So, you really are a witch?"

Ben licked his lips and took Imara's hand then looked back to her face. "I'm a half blood, Imara. My father was a Lycan."

Imara looked away and nodded her head. "Lycan? Of course, you are. Silly me. There are no wolves in the South."

Imara looked around the table in front of her taking in everything she had just heard. Then, she took her hand back from Ben, pushed her chair back with her feet and said, "Excuse me," as she left the table.

Ben sighed then pushed back his chair and chased after her. "Imara wait! Stop."

She threw open the front door then walked quickly down the stairs to the drive.

“Imara stop!” He grabbed her arm and spun her around.

“Was that funny making a fool of me that way? Does it amuse you to torture me like this? Where have you been? I waited every day for you and that stupid wolf. Why would you do that to me?”

Ben wrapped his arms around her and leaned down until his lips met her forehead. He kissed her skin softly and laced his fingers through her hair. “I couldn’t marry you until I gave you a proper house. It’s not quite what you're used to, I’m afraid, but it’s ours. I've been working on it bit by bit for years, but now that you’re here I had to finish it. Every spare moment I’ve had has been spent on our home, Imara, I swear.”

She closed her eyes as the tears spilled over and her lip quivered. “Why didn’t you just tell me? I could’ve helped you.”

Ben shook his head. “No. That’s one thing I will insist upon. You’re a lady. I won’t have you working like a man. That’s my job.”

Imara shook her head and buried her face in his chest while he wrapped his arms around her. “I thought you’d given up on me, Ben. I’ve been a mess.”

Ben rocked her slowly back and forth and put his nose in her hair. “Never. I’ll never give up on you. You’re mine til the very end of all things.”

She pulled away and looked up into Ben’s face. “Take me there. I want to see it.”

He looked down between them then said, “It isn’t much. I’ll build more later, I just had to finish it enough for us to move in.”

Imara put her hand on Ben’s cheek. “Show me.”

Ben closed his eyes and they disappeared into a black mist. As they reappeared in front of the cabin, Ben took Imara’s hand. She snapped her fingers on her other hand and a ball of bright white light appeared beside her.

Imara looked over the outside of the small cabin. Ben couldn’t tell from her face what she was thinking, and he felt sick in the pit of his stomach because she didn’t seem very impressed. “I tilled up space for a garden for you around back.”

Imara nodded as her eyes took in every feature. “Thank you.”

Ben opened the door and waited for Imara to come inside. She walked to the stone fireplace first and slid her fingers across the wooden mantle. Ben said, “I dug the stones from the creek down the road.”

Imara looked back at the small kitchen and the dining room table before she walked away from Ben. His heart dropped in his chest as she walked down the short hall that led to the pantry, washroom and bedroom. She quickly peeked in the small rooms then sighed when she looked around the bedroom. The bed was small, barely big enough for Imara, much less a giant of a man like Ben.

With shaking hands, Ben walked up behind Imara. “Please say something, Imara. You hate it, don’t you?”

Imara turned to Ben and shook her head. “No. It’s perfect Ben. I love it. You made me a house with your own two hands, that’s just so amazing.” She looked around the room then reached behind her and put her hand on his forearm. “This is our house.”

Ben took her hand and pulled Imara close to his chest. He looked down at her and softly traced her face with his fingers. Imara closed her eyes and leaned into his touch. “I’ve never had anything of my own before.”

Ben put her hand over his heart. “You have me. As you can see, I don’t have much though, but I’m all yours.” He slid his hand up to the back of her head, then gently kissed Imara’s lips. “I promise you that I’ll be all you ever need.”

Chapter NINE

Ben walked Imara home the old-fashioned way that night. As they strolled lazily hand in hand with a bouquet of colored orbs surrounding them, Imara looked up in the sky and stared into the constellations that lit up the heavens above them. “Do you know much about the stars, Ben?”

“I know they sure are pretty. Not nearly as much as you are though,” he said as he smiled at her.

She glanced back to him and rolled her eyes then looked back up. “I know a little bit. I like to read all the stories about the ancient Earth gods. They were some mighty strange folks. Like that constellation right there, that’s Antares. It’s my favorite story of all. You see, this gentleman named Orpheus could charm everyone with his magical harp. He could even stop battles with the beautiful music he played on it. One day he married a beautiful woman, I can’t recollect her name, but on their wedding night she was bitten by a snake and died. He had to go all the way to hell to find her soul and bring her back to the land of the living because he loved her so much. Isn’t that just the most beautiful story you’ve ever heard?”

Ben huffed through his nose and pushed out his lips. “That doesn’t sound like much of a wedding night. I’m kind of hoping I fare a little better tomorrow night, baby.” Imara laughed out at his joke, not realizing it wasn’t one.

“He loved her so much he braved the fires of hell to bring her back. Can you just imagine?” Imara sighed as she dreamed of what it was like to be loved that way.

Ben stared at Imara with wonder as she missed the irony of her words. “I’d do that right now, Imara. I hope you know that; I’d do anything to keep you safe with me. I’d be right down in the thick of it with that harp man to save you.”

Imara curled her lips under as a tear fell from her eye, then she pushed it away. “Oh, I’m sorry. I just get real emotional sometimes. It’s just, I didn’t ever think I was going to find you and here you are. I can’t believe how very lucky I am that Thorin found that old house in the newspaper.”

Ben lifted their joined hands and kissed the back of hers. “It was meant to be, Imara. This was one thing the Fates got damn right.”

Once they got back home, Imara opened her bedroom door and Ben looked around before he passed through the threshold. His eyes settled to the rug beside her bed and he said, “I’ll sleep right there.”

Imara walked to her dresser and opened the top drawer as she searched for something appropriate, but not too much. She was getting married to this man tomorrow, there wasn't much point in hiding her body to him now. "You don't have to stay on the floor tonight. I don't bite, I swear."

Ben took off his socks and placed them inside his boots, then looked up to Imara. "It's not proper for me to sleep in your bed."

Imara rolled her eyes playfully. "Not proper? I'm a witch and you're a werewolf and we're getting married tomorrow after knowing each other for less than two weeks. What about any of that says proper to you?"

He looked her over then asked, "Where's the washroom?"

Imara removed her nightgown from the armoire then held it to her chest as she turned around. "Down the hall, last door on the right."

Ben looked at her gown and nodded before he left the room and shut the door. He rubbed the back of his head and chuckled to himself as he walked the hall. "Just keep your hands to yourself Ben. She's a lady. You can get all over that tomorrow."

Imara hurriedly took off her dress then shimmied her gown over her head. She walked to the vanity and took the clasp from her hair then shook it out and licked her lips. "Is this really happening?" She pinched her cheeks a few times then went to her bed and sat down on the edge. Her hands trembled as she imagined what might happen when he came back.

A light knock came at the door and she said, "It's alright. I'm decent. Come on in."

As Ben opened the door, he saw her sitting there in her silken white gown and his heart fluttered in his chest. He stopped to take in her nipples poking through the fabric like ripe cherries and blinked away as he closed the door. The fire inside him started to rage and he worried he wouldn't be able to handle this because all he really wanted was to taste them.

"Please lay with me Ben. I don't want you sleeping on the floor." Imara made an x across her chest with her finger. "I promise I won't do anything naughty."

Ben huffed through his nose and grinned then he pulled his shirt over his head. Imara curled her lips under and blushed as Ben slowly came to the bed and sat down beside her. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes as he leaned into her ear. "What makes you think that I won't?"

Imara laughed out then looked up in his face. "Because I can see what kind of man you are. You're a real good man, Ben."

Ben put the back of his hand on Imara's cheek and gently slid it down. "I'll be good to you, Imara. So good."

She took his hand and said, “Oh, sweetheart, I know that. That’s the one thing in this crazy world I am sure of. You.”

He looked around the room at her expensive furniture, fine clothes and perfume bottles he imagined cost more money then he’d ever seen. “I know you’re used to certain things. I won’t be able to give you everything you want, but I’ll always make sure you have what you need. You’ll never go without.”

Imara leaned against Ben’s chest and rested her head on his shoulder. “I just want you and our little house, Ben. Nothing else in this whole world matters to me.”

Wrapping his arm around her, Ben pulled Imara closer and kissed her forehead. As his soft lips rested against her skin, Ben’s eyes grew heavy and he turned his head to yawn. “I’m so sorry.”

Imara patted his leg. “Come on, sweetheart.” She stood and pulled his hand to bring him with her, then she pulled the covers down and slid in. As Ben took his place beside her, he wove his arm under her neck and wrapped her in the other. She combed her fingers through his black hair and smiled. “Is this a dream? I’ve seen this in my head so many nights now, I just don’t know what’s real anymore.”

Ben nodded. “I think it might be. Every time I wake up though, you’re always gone. I’m going to hold you real tight tonight, I won’t let you get away from me this time.”

Imara rubbed the tip of her nose against his. “I don’t ever want to wake up again if it is, Ben.”

As he flinched at the way her soft touch tickled him, Ben said, “Neither do I.”

She sighed and said, “You won’t be here in the morning, will you?”

“No, but I’ll be back as soon as I can. I’ll always come back to you, baby.” He smiled as his heavy eyes started to knit together. Imara leaned in and kissed his lips. “You shouldn’t do that. I’m a weak man when it comes to you, Imara. I won’t be able to stop if you keep doing what you're doing to me. I want you too goddamn much and I’d like to do this right.”

Imara softly dragged her fingertips down his cheek. “Soon.” Ben opened his heavy eyes and nodded, then pulled her close to his chest and went to sleep.

Ben tried not to wake Imara as he got up to leave the next morning. He smiled and looked her over while she slept as he put on his shirt. “Look at you laying there like a little angel.” When he was finished putting on his boots, he leaned over and kissed Imara’s lips gently. “See you tonight, baby. I’ll be the one in the suit.” When he was finished putting on his boots, he leaned over and kissed Imara’s lips gently. “See you later, baby. You’re all mine after tonight.”

Ben made his way down the staircase and as he got to the bottom, he noticed the front door was already opened. A flash of an image of his cottage door half opened appeared across his vision. The hairs on his arms and neck stood on end as he was suddenly struck with a sick feeling in his gut.

Smelling Shaw's pipe, Ben smirked to himself and went outside then pulled the door shut behind him. As he blew out a smoke ring while he rocked in his chair, Shaw shifted his eyes towards Ben. "Morning Ben."

Ben tucked in his shirt as he stretched out his neck. "Morning. What are you doing up so early?"

Shaw set down his pipe on the side table and then pushed off on the balls of his feet as the floorboards creaked underneath the chair. "Wanted to catch you before you left. We need to settle a few things between us."

Ben crossed his arms and inhaled through his nose sharply. "Go on speak your mind then, I got to get to work."

"I've been looking after Imara since she was a baby and when her parents told me about that ridiculous woman on the street, I swore to them I'd protect her to my dying breath. She's like a daughter to me. It's my job to make sure she's taken care of."

Ben looked him in the eye and shook his head. "No. That's my job now."

"I know that, but I'm never going to stop looking after her. Know that. I don't agree with all that mess Thorin said to you at your Momma's house. I know y'all believe in Fate and that everything's meant to be kind of horseshit." Shaw held up his two hands. "But I believe in these and they've kept her safe for 25 years now. Whatever's coming for Miss Imara, it's not Fate, it's an evil curse the devil himself put on that sweet angel. You can't change Fate, Ben, but you can break a goddamn curse. You can crush its fucking head in those two hands of yours like a real man. You understand me boy?"

Ben looked at the floor and nodded as he considered what Shaw said. "Yes, sir. I do understand."

Shaw stood and offered his hand to Ben. "Thorin may be comfortable accepting this thing, but I intend to fight it until there's no more breath in my body like I promised her folks. Don't you give up on her, Ben. Don't you ever give up on her. You keep fighting no matter how hard it gets or how long it takes."

"I will, Shaw. I won't ever stop fighting for Imara, I promise you. You can count on me. We'll beat whatever this thing is if I have to spend the next hundred years doing it."

Chapter TEN

"Oh, Thorin. It's perfect, thank you so much." Imara stood in front of the full-length mirror and looked over the lace wedding dress he bought her this morning.

Thorin leaned against the doorway and admired her. He wished he could've found something more fitting, but time was short. "You don't have to thank me, my dear. I needed an excuse to get over to New Orleans anyway. Father Michael sends his love by the way." Thorin reached in his pocket and took out a small velvet bag then handed it to Imara.

"Wasn't that sweet of that angel!" Imara opened her bag and found a sixpence. She took off her shoe then slid it inside before putting it on again. Imara turned around and said, "What do you think?"

Thorin came to her and put his hands on her upper arms as he looked her over. "Perfection, Imara. There was never a more beautiful woman on her wedding day, I'm sure of it."

Imara shook out her hands and blew out through her mouth. "I'm full of nerves. Did Shaw take all my things to the house?"

"Well, some of them. It's a bit too small for everything. It'll be here though for when Ben builds an addition someday."

Imara smiled and nodded. "Did you see it inside? It's just adorable, isn't it?"

Thorin gave a small grin and nodded his head. He knew Imara was excited about having a home of her own, but it was little more than a cottage for holiday. Hardly a proper house for a woman who's used to a more extravagant lifestyle.

As Imara straightened her mother's pearls around her neck, she looked up to Thorin. "I'm ready now."

While Thorin carefully helped Imara down the stairs, he looked over her face. "Relax, Imara. It's just us."

"Yes, I know. I just can't believe it's happening. I can't believe I was lucky enough to find someone so wonderful. I must've done something right once."

Thorin smiled and said, "Ben's the lucky one darlin."

As Thorin and Imara entered the sitting room, Ben turned from the painting he was looking at and bit his lip. His eyes teared and he smiled at Imara before pushing his hair back behind his ears. He

walked across the room then took her hand from Thorin. “Baby, you look like an angel. I’ve never seen anyone so pretty before.”

A tear fell down her cheek as she admired Ben. “Dear Lord, you’re so handsome. Every woman will be so jealous of me from now on.”

He pulled her closer to him and asked, “Are you ready?” Imara smiled sweetly and nodded. “Oh, yes. I’ve never been so ready for anything in my life.”

As they stood hand in hand in front of Thorin, he smiled and licked his lips. “We are all gathered here to witness the marriage of Ben and Imara. As in the old times, we recognize that marriage bonds us forever to our mate. In honor of what the Fates have gifted to us, we offer this sacrifice.”

Thorin produced a knife from the table beside him. He took Ben’s hand and sliced deeply into his palm, then did the same to Imara. Thorin placed their hands together, then stood back as a glowing white sash wove its way around their joined hands. “The Fates are happy with this union and pleased with their sacrifice of blood. Ben, do you promise to love, protect and honor Imara. Forsaking all others. Faithful only to her and your children.”

Ben looked in Imara’s eyes and said,” I swear it.”

“Imara, do you promise to love, protect and honor Ben. Forsaking all others. Faithful only to him and your children.”

Imara smiled and nodded. “Oh, yes. Yes. I swear it.”

“Then I now pronounce that the Fates have bound you as mates. You are now husband and wife. Blessed be.”

With those words, searing pain began in the still joined hands of Ben and Imara as a spell written in the old Realm language was burned onto their ring finger and the sash disappeared.

The smell of burned skin still lingered as Imara suddenly wrapped her arms around Ben’s neck and clumsily smashed her lips on his. He smiled as she innocently hummed against his lips, then he wrapped her little body up in his big, strong arms and lifted her off the floor as he softly moved his lips against hers. Imara finally pulled away and panted for air. “You’re mine now, Ben Logan.

As he looked in her eyes, he said, “I always was, Imara. From the instant I took my first breath and I always will be.”

As Thorin told stories about the good old days at the dining room table, Imara leaned over to Ben. “When can we leave?”

Ben grinned as he put his wine glass to his lips. “Soon.”

Imara sighed, then pushed her food around her plate. Thorin looked to the awkward couple and smiled before going back to his conversation. When he was finished, he pushed himself back in his chair and cleared his throat. As Ben and Imara looked to him he nodded towards the door. “Alright, you two, get out of here.”

Ben smirked then nodded to Thorin as he pushed his chair back and stood. He took Imara’s hand and pulled back her chair. “Come on, baby. It’s time to go home.”

Imara stood and wrapped her arm around Ben’s back as they walked out of the sitting room. She looked back over her shoulder and wiggled her fingers goodbye as Thorin and Thomas chuckled at her.

As soon as they got out the front door, Ben misted them inside his cottage. He pulled Imara’s hand gently as he led her into the bedroom, then shut the door behind him. As he looked over Imara he licked his lips then started pulling his shirt from his pants. Imara curled her lips under as she watched him pull his shirt over his head and toss it aside.

Imara turned around then looked over her shoulder. “I’ll need some help with the buttons.”

Ben huffed through his nose then stepped closer to her and started undoing the long row of buttons that ran down her back. It was slow torture as his hands fumbled with the tiny tabs, he just wanted to get to the good stuff already. After 5 or 6, he growled to himself then put his hands on either side and pulled forcefully sending buttons across the room. Imara gasped and asked, “Was that really necessary?”

Ben brushed her cheek with his lips as he leaned over her and asked, “You weren’t planning on wearing this again were you?”

She looked back and kissed the tip of his crooked nose. “No, never.”

Placing his hands onto Imara’s shoulders, Ben lifted the lace dress with his fingers and slid it down her arms . As the goosebumps rose across her flesh, an amused smirk curled up on Ben’s lips, knowing that just the touch of his fingers could spark a reaction. As he slowly teased himself with the painfully prolonged undressing, Ben smelled Imara’s hair and breathed hot across her shoulder as she shimmied the dress down her legs then stepped out of it. She turned to face Ben and he exhaled sharply as he saw her perfect body standing before him. “My God, you're just...oh, beautiful isn’t enough. I don’t know the right words.”

Imara bit her lip as she playfully rolled her eyes. “Oh, go on.”

Ben shook his head. “I mean it.” He swallowed hard then slowly touched her breast. “You’re like a goddess. Like one of those statues.”

Taking Imara's hand, Ben backed onto the bed then pulled her down on his lap. Imara's fingers shivered as she slid them up his chest and traced the outline of his muscles. "You're shaking, baby. Are you afraid of me?"

Imara's eyes fell away from his gaze as she tried to find her courage. Placing his two fingers under her chin, Ben lifted her face to meet his eyes again. "I asked you a question."

Imara's quivering lips said, "I don't want to disappoint you. I don't know what I'm doing."

Her innocence was one of the most beautiful things about Imara, in Ben's eyes. "I know that, baby. I don't know what kind of life you think I was living before you came to it, but I'm not exactly an expert either. We'll learn together, but don't ever be afraid of my touch, I want my hands to be the safest place you know."

Fanning her face and blinking the tears off her lashes, Imara swallowed the lump in throat and put her hand on his chest. "Everything you say is just so…it's just so beautiful." Then, she moved her hand to her own chest. "I keep it all right here. I don't want to ever forget a word of it. You're just so sweet to me."

Brushing her curly hair back behind her ear, Ben said, "What else should I be. I'm your man."

Imara leaned against Ben's chest and swept the back of her fingers against Ben's cheek and glanced at his lips. "Yes, you are and I'm all yours now."

Ben could smell Imara's building arousal dripping off her as he gently fingered her nipple. He pushed himself back on the bed and flipped her slowly to her back.

As he rubbed her lips with his fingertips, he said, "I've been thinking about this since the moment I saw you."

Imara pushed his hair off his face. "So have I."

Ben buried his face in Imara's neck and placed soft kisses along the crook then down her collarbone. As he slowly pushed himself backwards, he continued placing kisses on her hot skin.

The pulse between her legs became an unbearable pounding as Ben slid down between them. Imara closed her eyes tight to hide her embarrassment as Ben pushed her thighs apart and inhaled deeply. As a low hum of a growl started in the depths of his chest, Ben parted her lips with his fingers and rubbed them in her juices. "Mmm," moaned Ben as he licked up her slit. Imara grabbed the bedsheets in her hands and moaned behind tight lips as he explored her sweet pussy. He took a lip in his mouth and tugged gently while he sucked on it. When Ben finally pulled up her clit into his mouth, Imara opened her eyes and gasped at the new euphoric sensation.

As he flicked his tongue across her bud, Imara pulled at the sheets and tried her best to be quiet. But that's not what the wolf wanted. He reached up with one hand and grabbed hers away from the sheet then brought it to his head, then he did the same with the other side. Imara laced her fingers through his hair as Ben did his best to please her. She looked down and saw Ben between her legs then she licked her lips and smiled as she saw his head move furiously against her.

As his soft, strong tongue finally discovered the right combination, Imara dropped her head back to the pillow while tears fell from her eyes. She closed her eyes and cried out, "Ah! Ah! Ben! Ah!"

Ben gave her clit one last suck before he licked the taste from his lips then sat up and unbuttoned his pants. He stood then quickly pulled them off and crawled back on top of Imara. While her legs still quivered, Ben rubbed the tip of his cock in her wetness then slowly slid inside. Imara gritted her teeth and shut her eyes tight as she held her breath to brace herself against the pain. Knowing there was no easy way to do it, Ben grazed her cheek with his lips and said, "I'm sorry. I'll be gentle."

Imara wrapped her arms around his back and steadied herself against his chest as she prepared for the unknown. From the way she burned, Imara feared that every move he made would be agony, but as he slowly rolled his hips into hers and grunted his hot, moist breath into her ear, Imara's eyes rolled up to the ceiling and she took a deep, throaty breath as the excruciating ecstasy devoured her slowly.

As Imara melted back into the bed and her legs fell open wide for him, Ben closed his eyes as he plunged deeper with each thrust. He braced himself on his elbow and pushed himself to hover over Imara so that he could see her face. Gripping his shoulders, Imara arched away from Ben, offering her firm breasts to him. Remembering the way they looked under her silken gown, Ben leaned down and took one of the ripe cherries into his mouth. As his teeth brushed against her hard, sharp nipple while he tried to hold onto it, it sent Imara over the edge and the pulsing squeeze of her tight walls made Ben suck back a breath through his clenched teeth as she brutally clutched his thick cock and begged for it to fill her.

Taking the hint, Ben gladly pumped harder. As she cried out, "Ah! Ah! Ah!" Ben gritted his teeth and hissed in her ear then exploded inside her.

Ben buried his face in her neck and fisted his hands. He wanted nothing more at this moment then to sink his teeth in Imara, but he knew she wasn't ready. As the last drop of him spilled, Ben pulled out and collapsed on the bed beside her.

As she panted and tried to catch her breath, Imara turned her head to Ben. "I want more." Ben turned to her and licked his lips. "Don't worry, baby. I'm going to spend every night of your life pleasing you every way I can."

Chapter ELEVEN

As Ben entered his parents' kitchen, he smelled the metallic stench of blood wafting through the air and saw it pooled all over the kitchen tile. "Momma! Dad! Where are you?" Ben yelled as he walked up the stairs.

When he stepped into their bedroom, Ben saw their bloodied bodies on the floor. Ben slowly backed out of the room and then ran down the stairs and threw his shoulder into the door. As it burst open and he fell out onto the ground, he heard Imara's screams coming from the cottage behind the house. "Ben please help me!"

As he pushed himself up off the ground, Ben screamed out, "Imara! Baby I'm coming!" No matter how hard he willed his legs to move or how fast he swung his arms, he just couldn't get to the tiny four room house quick enough. It was like some force was holding him back and begging him to stop and take in the scene around him.

Ben's heart raced uncontrollably as he finally approached the house. His hand trembled as he put it against the half open door and pushed it all the way open. Ben blew out through his mouth as his buckling legs carried him through the doorway.

He gasped as he saw Imara lying on the kitchen floor in a pool of blood, a faceless man wearing a black cloak straddling her pregnant belly.

Sensing Ben in the doorway, the man stood and looked back over his shoulder. He wiped the blade on his cloak as he walked to Ben and then he plunged it into his chest. "How much pain can you endure, Ben? Well, we shall see."

"Oh God! Imara, No!" Ben shot up in bed and clutched his chest as he fought to catch his breath. As he suddenly realized Imara wasn't next to him, his whole body broke into a tremor as he frantically darted his eyes over the room. He threw back the covers then jumped from bed and ran into the kitchen. "Imara! Baby, where are you?"

Imara turned around and chuckled. "Dear God, this is the best way anyone has ever said good morning to me, sweetheart."

Ben hurried to her then threw his arms around her. Imara sensed how frantic he was and said, "What is it? Did you have a nightmare or something?"

Ben put his chin against her forehead and nodded. "Baby, it was awful. I was so scared."

Imara pulled away from his chest and looked up in his face as she put her hand to his cheek. "What happened? Tell me all about it."

Ben bit the inside of his lip and shook his head as he tried to fight away the vision of Imara on the floor right beside where they stood. “No. Just a dream, that’s all. Nothing to worry about at all.”

Imara twisted her lips to the side as she looked down at his cock pressed against her. “So, are we having another go this morning or were you going to work? Because your friend here looks like he wants to say hello to me again and, to be perfectly honest, I’d love to invite him in for a while. He was just such a kind guest last night.”

Ben smirked and said, “I really have to go soon. Don’t think for a moment I wouldn’t rather stay in bed with you for the next week or so making house calls to you over and over again.”

Imara dragged her fingers down the curves of his abdomen then circled the tip of his dick while he sucked in a breath. He licked his lips as he looked at her face while Imara watched herself touching Ben’s dick. “Fuck it. I guess those cows can wait a few goddamn minutes.” Ben quickly picked Imara up and threw her over his shoulder then playfully smacked her ass. “I got my own critter that needs her titties handled.”

Imara giggled as she bounced around his shoulder. “Ben! You put me down right this instant!”

He nibbled on her ass cheek then said, “Oh, I will in just a minute, baby.”

As he got to the bed, Ben laid Imara down gently then he climbed between her legs and hovered over for belly. While he took the silk belt of the robe in his teeth, Ben pulled until it released then he parted the robe with his hand.

He started at the soft curve of her lower abdomen placing gentle kisses on her skin. As he worked his way up between her breasts, Imara looked down at his face and slid her fingers through his hair. Stopping to take in her nipple, Ben circled the other with his fingertips as it hardened with his touch. Imara moaned softly and closed her eyes while Ben took his time cherishing her body.

Ben took Imara’s chin in his fingers and pushed it gently to the side then continued pressing his warm wet lips against her skin until he met her lips. In all her life, Imara never felt so safe and loved as she did when she was wrapped up underneath Ben’s strong, hard body. While the warm musky smell of balsam radiated from his skin, Imara breathed Ben deeply into her memory, forever linking the scent to feelings of comfort and home.

The spicy notes of cinnamon made Ben’s mouth water as he took the side of her face in his hand and gently sucked in her sweet bottom lip between his. While his hot breath covered Imara’s face, an ache ignited in her cunt. As the need traveled up her body, Ben’s hand slid down to her mound. Sliding his fingertips in her slickness, they found her clit and slowly rubbed circles on it as he continued to weave his wet, soft lips and tongue with Imara’s.

As Imara moaned softly in his mouth, time stood still for Ben. He was so lost in becoming one with Imara, that the whole world around him faded away. He hovered above the only thing that he ever desired in his life and nothing else mattered at all.

While Imara panted against his mouth, the smell of her juices ensnared Ben's senses. Not being able to wait any longer, Ben's hand left her cunt and gripped his hard, throbbing cock. As he pushed inside of her tender opening, Imara whimpered and sucked back a pained breath that was quickly swept away by the magic in Ben's kiss.

Ben gently rolled his hips into hers as she gripped his tight buttocks in her hands, seeking out more of him. As his hot lips grazed her face, he watched his love while she parted her lips and her eyes fluttered closed when she was finally washed over by the blissful peace of euphoria. When she cried out against his cheek, he wrapped his arm around the back of her neck and braced his other against the bed while he grunted and drove into her harder until he finally released himself inside her.

As she shuddered under his body and her cunt squeezed out the last drops, Ben licked his lips then sunk his teeth in her neck. While the sounds of her whimpers vibrated against Ben's teeth, the wolf growled low in warning that she belonged to only him now.

While his DNA surged through her veins and took over control of Imara's body, she collapsed into the bed as he pushed himself deeper inside her. Finally completely satisfied, Ben snickered as he licked her wound closed and slowly pulled out of her.

Imara's body continued to twitch as it seeked out any traces of Ben inside her while her heavy eyes struggled to stay open. Ben leaned on his arm beside her and pushed her hair away from Imara's neck as he admired his mark. "Oh, shit. That looks just awful. I'm sorry, baby. I really didn't mean to do that, it just felt so good I couldn't help myself. When you're feeling better you can be mad at me if you want. I deserve it. I should have warned you first." He leaned over and kissed her cheek. "You'll be alright, I promise, but I think Shaw might actually kill me for this."

Imara smiled as her drowsy eyes bobbed up and down. "I won't say a word," she whispered.

"Let me show you something, though. I think you'll like this." Ben slid his fingertips across the bite and Imara's hips grinded against the bed. While she moaned out in ecstasy, Ben laughed then leaned into her ear. "Yeah, that's not so bad now is it?"

As the height of her orgasm fell over her, Ben panted against her cheek while he watched her enjoy his touch. "That should help with the pain for a little while."

Ben took her hand and kissed the back of it. "Alright, baby, let's get you straightened out." Ben gently lifted Imara up in bed then he got a gown from the wardrobe and pulled it over her head and

slid it down her body. As he lifted her with care, he placed pillows under her head and arms. "You're probably going to be asleep for a while. I'll come check on you as much as I can, and I'll get Momma to come sit with you."

Imara lifted her finger and motioned for him to come closer. Happy that she didn't appear to be angry, he put his knee into the bed and lingered over her body. "Yes, baby."

She pointed to her lips and Ben lowered himself onto her then kissed her. "Is that what you wanted?" Imara nodded then closed her eyes. Ben kissed her again then pulled the blankets up. "Love you, baby. I'll be back soon."

As Ben shut the front door behind him, he blew out through his mouth and a proud smirk came to his lips. It seemed like a cruel thing, but it was basic instinct for a wolf to mark their mate. It was an important rite for their kind that solidified their bond forever. No matter what happened to her or where she went, his mark would always remain as a testament to their love. He was truly part of her now...in more ways than one.

Chapter TWELVE

"I don't like this at all Imara," Thorin said as he slid his fingers down his neck. "Was it really necessary to bite you like that?"

Imara stacked the dishes on the shelf in front of her then wiped her hands on a towel. "It's just what they do. It's tradition like their version of this brand on my finger."

He twisted his lips and shook his head at the still bruised mark on her neck. "It looks just terrible. What a miserable rite of passage."

"It's nothing, really. It's been nearly three weeks now, it's almost healed." Imara slid her fingers across the bite and it disappeared. "See, all better."

As he knitted his brows together, Thorin said, "My dear, you can use all the glamours in your arsenal, but that thing must feel terrible."

Imara shook her head. "Actually no, not at all. When he touches it, well...let's just say I like it. I can't really explain it. And he can kind of feel what I feel and see my thoughts, a little bit anyway."

He raised his brows and pursed his hips. "Well, that is useful, I suppose. So how is married life treating you, darlin? Other than that nasty love bite, you look positively radiant."

Imara sat down across from Thorin and grinned. "I'm really happy."

Thorin put down his cup and nodded. "Well, yes I can see that. Have you been helping Ben and his folks out around here?"

Imara rubbed her fingers across the grain of the table and shook her head. "He won't let me. He said I could collect the eggs and work in my garden, but he doesn't want me doing man's work."

Thorin smirked. It was probably best that way. Imara is a lovely soul, but she's not much for real work. Her hearts in the right place, but when Fate blessed her with the touch of healing light, it forgot to give her much common sense for things like physical labor. "Can't say I blame him. He's a good man, Imara. I'm really happy that you two found each other."

Imara looked out the window and saw Ben bent over, pulling a stump from the ground and she twisted her lips to the side.

"What's that look about?" Thorin asked as he made a circle in front of him with his finger.

Imara sighed and pushed herself back in her chair. “He’s been having just God-awful nightmares. He wakes up screaming and crying nearly every night. About me, I suppose. He becomes nearly hysterical if he wakes up and I’m not laying beside him.”

Thorin bit his lip and drummed his fingers on the table. It’s not uncommon for supernaturals to have visions. Thorin grew concerned that these were more than nightmares. “Hmm. I’m sure it’s nothing to be concerned about. Not worth worrying your pretty little head over.”

Imara smiled and nodded. “You’re probably right. So how was your trip? Did you hear anything?”

Thorin sighed and shook his head no. “Afraid not. Michael seems to think that Haldir’s living in the Realm right now.”

Imara grinned quickly. She knew Thorin was still hoping against all odds to get her to the Realm. She put her hand on Thorin’s and said, “Whatever happens, Thorin, no matter what Fate has planned for us, know that right now, this was the best gift you could have given me. I’ve never been so happy in all my life. Ben, he’s just everything to me. If I die tomorrow, it’s alright. The Realm is just beyond the veil. You don’t have to worry, because I’m not afraid of what might happen.”

Thorin looked up at her as he tried to hold back his tears. “I know, sugar. If anything happens, I’ll find you. No matter where you go, I’ll never stop looking for you.”

Imara looked back out the window and licked her lips. “Promise me, if anything happens to me, you’ll watch over him. You keep him close, Thorin. Don’t you leave him all alone, he’ll be so lost without me.” Then, she swallowed hard and said, “If they come for me, you end this. Don’t let them get away with torturing us like this all these years. Swear it.”

Thorin nodded then brought her hand to his lips and kissed the back of it. “I will, darlin. I swear. My soul won’t rest until the job is done.”

After Thorin shut the door behind him, he straightened the collar of his coat and started down the road.

Ben walked around the side of the house and yelled, “Imara’s upset. What the hell happened in there? What did you say?”

Thorin turned and faced Ben. “That’s a neat trick. I guess something useful should come out of such an ugly goddamn tradition.”

Ben smirked and wrinkled his nose as he glanced away. “It’s done and it’s none of your goddamn business. There’s no use in drudging it up again .”

Thorin looked over the fields and then glanced back to Ben and clicked his tongue. “So, tell me about these nightmares you’ve been having.”

A frustrated scowl curled up on the side of Ben’s face. He told Imara not to worry about the nightmares, now wasn’t the time for her to be afraid. “Just dreams, that’s all. They don’t mean nothing.”

Thorin pulled his lips to the side and glanced to the ground. “You sure about that?”

Ben cracked his neck then looked back to Thorin. “Imara doesn’t need to be worrying herself over them like this.”

“But she is worrying, Ben. She can sense that something’s going on in your mind. She’s naive, but she’s not a stupid woman. She’s worried to death that something's going to happen to her and that you’ll be left all alone.”

Ben clenched his jaw then scratched his head. “Umm…I dream that a man in black comes and kills her.”

Thorin blinked away then ran his hand down his chin. “What else?”

“Uh…she dies on the kitchen floor in a pool of blood and,” Ben took a deep breath. “She’s always pregnant, Thorin.”

Thorin nodded as he licked his top lip. “Well, I suppose that the two of you might want to hold off on having a baby for a while then, just in case. You have the rest of eternity for it, it doesn’t need to happen right now.”

Ben glanced down from Thorin’s eyes and wiped his hand across his mouth. Thorin shook his head and ran his hands over his hair as the truth hit him hard in the gut. “Oh, Ben. Are you sure?”

Ben nodded as tears filled his eyes. “I can smell it on her, Thorin. She doesn’t realize it yet, it’s too early still.”

Thorin closed his eyes. “Dammit.”

Ben’s leg shook as his shame and regret built inside him. “It happened the first night, I was careful with her after that first nightmare, but it was already too late.”

Thorin looked back to the cottage. “I can’t find Haldir. I’m fairly sure he’s in the Realm and I don’t know anyone else who can travel. We’re just going to have to face this on our own.” As he mulled it over, he rubbed the pad of his thumb over his lips. “She can spend the days at my home. Don’t worry, she will be waited on hand and foot. Shaw can watch over your house at night.”

Ben scoffed and shook his head no.

"Ben, listen to me. If your dream is always the same, then we change the elements. Her being with me is something different. At least you will be able to go about your day and work without having to worry about whether or not she's safe."

Ben rubbed the stubble on his chin. He really wanted to shave it, but Imara liked the way it felt against her skin when he cuddled next to her at night. "Fine."

As Ben closed the front door behind him, Imara looked up from the table she was setting. "You all done for today?"

Ben took off his shirt and hung it up on a nail by the door. "Yep."

She smiled at herself as she admired the placemats and candlesticks Thomas and Sofia gave her at her wedding. "Well, dinner's ready, whenever you are."

Ben leaned against the table with his arms crossed and looked at her. "Thorin told me you were talking about my nightmares."

She licked her lips then stopped arranging the table and looked at him. "I'm just worried about you, sweetheart. You're barely even sleeping now. Why won't you just tell me about them? Maybe if you talk about it, it will go away."

Ben looked to the floor and shook his head. "Imara, you don't need to worry about me." He took her hand and pulled her close to him then put his hand on her cheek. "That's not your job, baby. The only thing I want you to do is be happy."

She smiled and said, "I am happy. For the first time ever, maybe."

Ben glanced down between them and took a deep breath. "Baby, there's something we need to talk about. You're expecting, Imara."

Imara took a ragged breath and covered her mouth with her hands. "Are you sure? I couldn't be! You've been careful."

He clenched his jaw as his disgust with himself ate at him. "Not every time, not that first night."

Imara's eyes teared over. "Umm...are you happy? You don't seem very happy about this right now to me, Ben."

Ben nodded and deep inside, he was thrilled. There wasn't a prouder man in the whole world than Ben at that moment. He wanted a whole house full of children, but the nightmares were only getting worse. The baby was on its way ,though, whether the timing was right or not, so Ben was going to make things as easy as possible for Imara. "Of course, I am. What man wouldn't be happy to have you carrying their baby."

Imara sighed a breath of relief and laced her arms around Ben. “It’s so early though. You should’ve waited to tell me for a while, it’s going to seem like an eternity now.”

Ben closed his eyes to stop the tears from coming. “That’s why I’m telling you, baby. I want you to enjoy every second of it. We’re going to make this last as long as possible.”

Chapter THIRTEEN

"Throw them big ole things on up here," said Sofia as Imara stretched out in her chair.

Imara put her foot on Sofia's lap and she rubbed the bottoms as Imara sighed. "I'm as big as a house. My feet are so swollen. Well, I think they are, I haven't seen them for months."

Sofia kneaded deep into the arch of Imara's foot making her moan. "Baby, all of you is swollen. It won't be much longer, Imara. That moon is awful big and bright in the sky, it'll probably be any day now. So, have you picked out a name yet?"

Imara smiled as Sofia's calloused hands scratched her foot. "Well, if it's a girl, we're calling her Eliza Mae and if it's a boy, we're calling him Jason Dean."

"Oh, those are just wonderful names. You know, I crocheted a little bunny rabbit for the baby. It's got big giant floppy ears and a button for its nose and this big silky ribbon round it's neck. Don't forget to take it home with you this evening."

Imara and Ben couldn't afford much and hadn't bought anything for the baby. Ben made a cradle out of the stump he pulled from the field and Thorin had some clothes made the last time he was in New Orleans. Imara had no idea what raising a baby entailed, but she was excited to meet her little one. "Thank you, Sofia."

"You about ready, Imara?" asked Shaw as he sat down across from her in the sitting room.

Imara took a deep breath and nodded. "Sure, but y'all will have to help me get up." After Sofia put her shoe back on, Shaw took Imara's hands and pulled while Sofia placed her hand on Imara's back and pushed her up.

"Thank you for doing this every night, Shaw." Shaw climbed in the buggy then gave her his hand to pull her up.

"No hardship at all." Imara wrapped her arm in Shaw's as he cracked the reins and the horse started down the drive. "I'm going to miss having you around all the time once that baby of yours gets here."

Imara rested her head against Shaw's big arms. "Yes, I'm definitely going to miss all this pampering I've been getting. You've all made me feel like a queen through this whole thing."

Shaw sighed as he looked out across the corn field at Ben's farm. No one had expected Imara to make it this far and now that it was getting so close to the end, everyone was on edge. Thorin and Sofia waited on Imara during the day and Shaw kept watch outside the cottage every night.

As the buggy turned down the lane, Ben walked out of the barn to meet it. When it stopped, Ben took Imara's hand and helped her down then pulled her into his arms and kissed her. "I'll be back soon, baby. I just have to go drop off this load to the market."

She poked her finger into his chest. "Well, I will be right here waiting, my love. I'm far too big to do much else."

Shaw got the basket Sofia sent over from the buggy then took Imara's hand and walked her inside the cottage while Ben drove off. Shaw pulled some dishes off the shelf and put them on the table then he started removing the food from the basket.

Imara straightened herself in her chair and put her hand against her low back. "Dammit, I can't wait for this to be over."

"Watch your mouth," said Shaw as he poured water in her glass.

Imara took the deepest breath she could then sighed it out. "Everything hurts, I can't breathe, and I can't even see my feet."

Shaw chuckled to himself then sat down beside her. "I'm pretty sure a healers supposed to know how babies are made, Imara. This was hardly a surprise."

Imara grimaced in pain as a stabbing sensation started in her back. "Oh God. Shaw. Oh, go get Anna."

Shaw scooted off his chair and knelt beside her. "What's wrong, Imara?'

Squeezing her eyes tightly shut, Imara held her breath while the first contraction tore through her back and around her belly. When it started to pull back, Imara panted and said, "Oh! I'm in labor, Shaw."

Shaw's heart began to race, and he wiped his hand across his mouth. "Come on, let's go walk over to see Anna." He took Imara's hand and as she tried to stand, another contraction started.

Imara collapsed back in the chair and whimpered. "Oh, no! No! I can't walk. It's too late. Please Shaw go get her now."

Shaw looked to the door and tried to think. Ben hadn't been gone very long and he couldn't leave Imara alone in the house. Shaw put Imara's arm around his neck then he put his around her as he started to scoop her up. "Come on, Imara, I'll carry you baby girl."

Imara braced against him and gritted her teeth as the pain tore through her again. "No please."

Shaw knelt down in front of Imara and pushed her hair off her sweaty face. “Imara I can’t leave you here alone.” Imara’s quivering lip tugged at Shaw’s heart and he pinched his eyes shut to stop his own tears. “It’s just for a minute, Shaw. Please, I need Anna.”

Shaw took a deep breath then stood and quickly ran out the door leaving it wide open.

When Ben got to the barn, he tied the horse to the post while he unloaded the wagon. He could already smell the fried chicken Sofia sent over and his stomach rumbled in anticipation.

“Oh, God it hurts. Please help me!” he heard Imara crying from the cottage. His heart pounded in his ears and his hands went numb as the moment he’d been dreading finally came.

Ben dropped the crate in his arms and bolted to the house. “Imara! Baby, I’m coming!” He froze in horror when he came inside and found Imara on her hands and knees on the kitchen floor.

Anna came from the washroom drying her hands on a towel. “Ben, go wash your hands. It’s almost time.”

Ben bent over and panted as relief washed over him. Anna shot him a sympathetic smile then said, “Ben, go! Hurry.”

As he quickly washed his hands and face, Imara continued to moan and scream in pain. His hands trembled and he looked at them and laughed. “Big strong alpha wolf, my ass.” He took a deep breath before turning to go back to the kitchen.

Ben knelt beside Imara and put his arms around her. “It’s ok, baby, I’m here now.”

Once Ben looked over his two most prized possessions sleeping soundly in bed, he walked out to the kitchen and stretched his arms over his head. The half open front door caught his attention, so he went to close it but noticed Thorin standing on the porch. “That girl of yours sure is a beauty,” Thorin said as Ben came outside.

Ben smiled widely and nodded. “She’s perfect. Did you see her when she puckered her lips and smiled? Momma says babies don’t smile, but I know what I saw. She looked right in my eyes and smiled at me.”

Thorin grinned at Ben’s prideful boasting. “I sure did see it. She’s going to be a real heartbreaker just like her Momma.”

Ben curled his lips under, then looked away and closed his eyes. He pinched his nose between his eyes and started sobbing. Thorin put his hand on his shoulder and shook it gently. He knew exactly what Ben was feeling. Neither one of them ever expected this day to actually happen or to ever meet little Eliza Mae Logan.

Ben stood up straight again and sniffed back his tears. “I don’t know whether I should feel relieved or terrified, Thorin.”

Thorin nodded. “I know, Ben. All we can really do is try to stay vigilant and try to enjoy life as it is here in this moment. We enjoy every day the Fate gives us with them, Ben.”

“Do you think…” Ben started.

“That the dangers over?” Thorin inhaled deeply through his nose and glanced around the darkness. He slowly shook his head from side to side. “No, I don’t reckon it is. It’s a terrible thing isn’t it? It’s always the anticipation that’s the worst. Always having to be on guard, never knowing which direction to take. You always have that little voice telling you that you’re missing something, but since we have no idea what or who is coming, there’s no way to really prepare.”

Thorin closed his eyes and swallowed hard to push down the pain. “I always wonder what kind of life Imara led in her past lives, was there something that happened to bring her this kind of punishment. Why karma has been so cruel. I just can’t see it. I know my sister and she has the most beautiful heart. I don’t know, maybe my family’s just cursed.”

Ben washed his face and hands and walked to the bedroom as he dried them on a towel. He stood in the doorway watching Imara nurse Eliza and smiled as he admired her. “You know on our wedding night, I told you that you were the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen,” Ben shook his head, “I was wrong Imara.” He pointed to her as he walked to the bed and sat down. “This woman right here feeding my baby, she’s the most beautiful woman.”

“Oh, Ben, isn’t she just so beautiful? Look at all this dark hair. She already needs a haircut.” Imara licked her hand and tried to tame the tall hair standing on Eliza’s head.

Ben took Imara’s hand off Eliza’s head and put it to his lips. “I’m so proud of you, baby. I hated seeing you like that, but you did such a good job. I wasn’t sure you had it in you.”

“Yes, I know I have a reputation for being a fraidy cat, but...I just couldn’t wait to see her face. It was like I didn’t feel nothing at all, all I could see is me holding her in my arms and it took all the pain away.”

“It’s so funny now, Imara. Not even a year ago, I was just living my life, it was nothing special and now I got you both.” Ben sucked in his lip and then blew out hard as he tried to stop the tears. “I don’t know what I did to deserve this, baby.” He stopped and looked down at the bed and swallowed hard. “You two are everything. I didn’t even know that I was missing out on anything Imara and I can’t…” He tapped his fist against the bed, “I don’t want to ever not have this again.”

Imara took his hand from the bed and squeezed. “You don’t have to worry about that Ben. No matter what happens, we’re always yours. No time or distance will ever keep us apart.

Chapter FOURTEEN

"Ben, have you seen Mr. Rabbit?" Imara got down on her knees and looked under the table in the kitchen. "I can't find him anywhere."

Ben pulled his shirt on as he came into the room then he smiled as he saw Imara with her ass high in the air just like it was when he was slamming into it before he went to bed last night. "Sorry, baby. He has to be here somewhere."

Imara pushed herself back to her feet then walked to Ben and stood on her tip toes and kissed him gently on the lips. "Good morning, Mr. Sleepy Head."

He tucked in his shirt and licked her taste off his lips. "Tell me you haven't been up all night again."

Imara looked at Eliza playing happily on the floor with her wooden blocks and pulled her lips to the side. "Well, not all night. She got back up right after about midnight as soon as that big old moon started poking through the curtains. You Lycans and your full moon."

Ben smirked. "Thank you for letting me sleep."

Imara put a plate of food in front of Ben's place at the table. "You can pay me back for it later, sweetheart."

Ben sat down then pulled Imara onto his lap and rubbed his hand between her legs through her skirt as she closed her eyes and moaned. He leaned into her ears and whispered, "I'd like that. I've been wanting to get back in between those legs for a while. I might be the only man who likes owing favors to someone." He smelled the back on Imara's hair, and the crisp scent of apples and cinnamon filled his nose. Imara tilted her head away and smiled as Ben placed soft kisses over his mark.

Hearing Eliza giggle behind her, Imara pulled his hand away from her and straightened her dress as he sighed in disappointment. "Later, Mr. Logan."

Eliza crawled up beside them then pulled herself up as she wrapped her tiny hands around the wooden rungs. Imara pushed Eliza's dark hair to the side, "I can't believe it's been a year already."

Ben rubbed his hand along Imara's thigh and looked down at Eliza. As he pressed his face against the back of Imara's head, Ben closed his eyes as the burning sense of impending doom rose in his chest. "Me neither, baby."

Imara pushed herself up from Ben's lap and sat down next to him. Ben leaned down and picked up Eliza then sat her on his lap. "Hey, there sweet pea." Eliza bounced back and forth and smiled a big

gummy grin that showed off her two sharp bottom teeth. Her green eyes twinkled as she slapped her hands playfully on Ben's chest.

"Do you have many deliveries today?"

Ben pushed a piece of Bacon in his mouth and shook his head no.

Imara drug her fork through the egg yolk and broke it then cut a piece of it off before giving Eliza a bite. She wiped off Eliza's chin then said, "Wonderful. They'll be here round dinner time."

Ben looked to the door as a knock came, he could tell from the scent that it was his mother. "Come in Momma."

Anna quietly opened the door and peeked inside. As Eliza saw her grandmother she excitedly rocked on Ben's lap and giggled. Anna came to the table and held out her arms. "Come to Grammy." As she scooped Eliza from Ben's lap, Anna twirled her around. "Happy Birthday, sweet pea."

Ben stretched out his back and rolled his neck from side to side. "I heard you got sweet pea something special, what is it?"

Anna gave Eliza an exaggerated smile and said in a sing songy voice, "No. No. No. That is Grammy's secret. You'll just have to wait and see." Anna had lots of secrets. She kept them buried deep in the graveyard of her past, but the cruel hands of Fate were about to uncover them all.

As the evening sun beat against Imara through the window as she washed dishes, Sofia spread the last of the icing onto Eliza's birthday cake then licked the remains off her thumb. "What do you think?"

Imara looked back over her shoulder and smiled. "It's perfect. Thank you so much. Eliza will love it. So will Ben, he just loves sweet things."

Sofia chuckled to herself. "Mmm-hmm, I just bet he does you little vixen."

Imara snapped her in the behind with her dish towel. "Stop! You're making me blush."

Sofia brought the bowel and spatula to the sink and said, "Oh come on, Imara. Tell me all the disgusting details. So, is he...well, judging by the size of his hands and feet, I'd wager…"

Imara covered her mouth with her hand as her cheeks flushed and she nodded. "He is. I swear the first time I saw it I was terrified Sofia. I could hardly walk the next morning."

Sofia fanned her face and chuckled. "Oh, Imara, you dirty little tramp you. Oh, I'm so happy you found Ben. You just seem so very happy. Well, I guess I know why now."

As they laughed at each other, Thorin, Shaw and Thomas came through the doorway. Shaw came to the sink and kissed Imara's forehead. "What are you old hens cackling about?"

Imara waved her hand as Sofia dried her eyes with her apron, "Nothing at all, Shaw."

Thorin stooped down and picked Eliza up from the rug and held her to his chest. "Hey there sweet pea. How's my number one girl?" Thorin made num-num sounds as he kissed her cheek making Eliza chuckle joyfully.

As Ben walked through the door behind his parents, he caught a glimpse of Imara laughing with her arm around Shaw and the flash of an image of Shaw lying face down in a pool of blood crossed his vision. He gasped and closed his eyes as his heart pounded against his chest. "Stop it. Don't see it. Not tonight," he whispered to himself.

Once everyone left, Ben kissed Eliza and stopped down then placed her in her cradle and covered her. He rocked it slowly as Eliza puckered her fat lips.

Ben stood up and stretched as arms then rolled his neck from side to side. "I need to get cracking on that other room. Eliza's nearly pouring out of that cradle, she needs a proper bed."

"Ugh! I won't like her sleeping in another room at all, sweetheart." Imara sat on the bed brushing her long dark chair. Ben took his pants off then slid in bed behind her. He clasped his hands under his head and said, "Might be nice, though, we can get as crazy and loud as we want."

Imara put down her brush on the table then put her legs in the bed and pulled up the covers, as she put her fingers up in the air to snap the pale glowing orb away, Ben grabbed her hand. "Leave it on."

Ben pushed himself up and climbed on top of Imara. "I told you I'd pay you back, didn't I?"

Imara grinned and nodded as she played in his black hair. "You surely did."

Ben kissed Imara's lips then slowly slithered back her body and pulled up her gown as he did. Once he pulled it over her belly, he pushed it up and uncovered her breasts then squeezed one in his hand while he took the other in his mouth. As he sucked and licked her nipple, the smell of Imara's building desire wove itself around him and he growled against her skin.

He released her breast from his grip and slid his hand between her legs then rubbed his fingers in her slick juices. After he'd finished his proper adoration of Imara's breasts he sunk down between her legs to begin his favorite sacrifice to her.

He licked her juices off his fingers then slid them inside her. As Imara bit her lip and shifted her hips she looked down to see Ben watching her. He kept his eyes on hers as he slowly leaned into her and kissed her clit.

Imara licked her lips as Ben slowly flicked his tongue up and down her swollen clit then closed her eyes and moaned as he synced his fingers to match.

As the feeling spread through her, Imara slid her hands to her breasts and rubbed at her nipples. Ben opened his eyes and took in the sight of Imara pleasuring herself and he smiled against her skin then started to suck her. Slapping her hand across her mouth, Imara cried out into her palm as Ben pushed her thighs to his ears and ate her like a starving man until she couldn't take anymore and pushed the top of his head until he hesitantly pulled away.

"I wasn't done yet," he said as he hovered over her face and slid his fingers across her forehead. "It's so good, baby. I can't get enough." Dragging the back of his fingers down her cheek while she panted for air, Ben pulled down his brows and said, "I need you. You're like the blood in my veins. I can't live without you."

Looking around his eyes for the truth, Imara pouted her lips then slid her hand between them and wrapped her hand around his manhood then pulled it to her entrance. Ben asked, "You won't stop me this time, will you?" Imara looked at him in sincere remorse and shook her head no slowly.

As he pushed off the bed with is toes, Ben slide powerfully in and out of Imara, as she tilted her head away from him in submission, Ben smiled a dominating grin while he watched her pant and moan for more. As soon as the first twitches began around his dick, Ben found himself strikingly moved. It was like he knew he'd never feel the warm embrace of her pussy ever again. He missed it already.

The slow burn of her ecstasy seeped into her abdomen then up through her breasts until it finally fell from her lips. "AH! AH! Ben!"

Having finally fulfilled his obligation for Imara's kindness the night before, Ben closed his eyes and snarled then his seed shot from his body as it filled her up inside.

Ben collapsed on Imara and boxed her head in with his elbows as he kissed her softly. "Baby, I love you. Don't you ever leave me."

As Imara panted, she looked around his face and saw the trouble in his eyes. She knew he'd been more on edge lately from his terrible nightmares. Imara put her hand to his face and rubbed her thumb across his cheek. "There's nothing that can take me from you. Not even death will break our bond. I'm yours forever."

Chapter FIFTEEN

"Mmm…" Imara moaned as Ben buried his face in her neck and kissed his mark.

He lifted his face away then pushed her hair back behind her ear. "Good morning, baby. I just wanted to see you before I left."

Imara opened her heavy eyes and smiled. "Be careful out there, sweetheart. I love you."

Ben kissed Imara one last long tender kiss. "I love you too, baby. I'll be a bit late, got a new stop to make."

Imara nodded. "That's alright. Shaw's coming over to help me with my harvest."

"Alright, baby." Ben kissed the back of Imara's knuckles then leaned over and kissed Eliza as she laid tucked in Imara's arm. Eliza sighed and puckered her lips then pushed her arm over her head. "See you later, sweet pea. Daddy loves you."

After Ben milked the cows and fed the animals, he packed the wagon while Harold started plowing the fields. Ben looked back to the cottage. He had a gnawing feeling in his gut and had second thoughts about leaving, but he often did.

His nightmares never ended, but now that Eliza was getting older, he didn't give them as much credence as he used to. Besides, Shaw would be there soon, and he'd happily give his life to protect Imara and Eliza.

In the afternoon, Ben pulled into the lane at Thorin's house and parked by the kitchen. As he opened the door, he saw Sofia at the sink. "Sofia, I got your load."

Sofia walked to the sideboard and cleared it as Ben brought in a large crate. After he sat it down, he asked, "Where's Thorin?"

"Oh, he's popped off to New Orleans for the day, should be home round supper. Something about that old Viking he's been looking for."

A wave of relief rolled over Ben and a smile curled up on his lips. "Haldir? There's news about Haldir?"

Sofia chuckled. "Yes, apparently he's back in the country. I expect y'all be leaving us soon, then." Sofia's lip began to quiver as the realization of what she said hit her. "Oh, damn, I'm just going to miss y'all so much."

Ben smiled and pulled her into his side then kissed the top of her head. “It’s a good thing, Miss Sofia. We won’t have to worry about Imara anymore.”

“Oh, I know, honey. It’s just I’ve been with the Parker’s so very long. I don’t even know what I’ll do with myself when they’re gone.”

Ben sat down in the chair by the counter. “Where will the three of you go?”

“Thorin’s sending us back to Savannah. They have a new leader at the Order who’s a right good man, an old friend of their family’s. Since we're familiars, he’s going to let us work there for them and stay in the Parker’s old family home.”

Ben sighed. “That’s good, I was worried about you.”

“Oh, don’t you worry none. Soon, you all will be safe and that’s all that matters.”

Ben knocked his fist against the counter. “Will you tell him to stop down when he gets home?”

“Course I will. Now give little sweet pea a big old hug from me.”

Ben hugged Sofia goodbye then walked out to his wagon and climbed in. He laughed aloud then ran his hands through his hair. “Oh shit. We’re almost there Imara. Oh, baby, we made it.”

When Ben arrived at his parents’ house, he hitched the horse to the post outside and entered the house through the kitchen door. The room was dark, the oil lamp nearly out.

As he walked around the table, his foot slipped in something wet. He looked down on the floor and saw blood. Ben’s heart started to race as a surge of adrenaline coursed through his veins. He stepped over the puddle and yelled, “Dad! Momma! Where are you!” He continued into the sitting room and then stopped at the bottom of the stairs. “Momma!”

As his hands trembled, he grabbed the handrail at the staircase and slowly started climbing the stairs. He could smell the bitter stench of blood and as he got halfway up the staircase, he saw a dark handprint of the wall. While the hair on his arms stood on end, he exhaled a ragged breath through his dry mouth.

He looked down at the floor and saw bloody footprints leading to and from the direction of his parents’ bedroom. Ben rounded the corner of the doorway and slowly looked into the room.

Ben gasped as he saw Harold’s lifeless body lying in a pool of blood in front of the bed. As if taken over by another force, one he couldn’t control, Ben walked to Harold and looked down at him. His throat had been cut and his eyes were opened wide in horror.

Then, Ben glanced to the bed and saw Anna stretched across it. The front of her body was covered in stab wounds and the entire bed was soaked with blood. Ben stood looking at his parents and he began to breath faster as he slowly started to wake from his trance.

“Oh God, no. Imara!”

Ben turned and ran from his parents’ room then leaped down the staircase. He dashed through the kitchen and backdoor then bolted towards his house.

“Imara!”

When he reached the front door, it was halfway open. He kicked it in as he ran through and then froze in his tracks. Shaw was face down on the kitchen floor with his arm reached out in front of him and a dagger sticking out of his back. Ben shivered in fear as he slowly crept to Shaw’s body. His field of vision was so narrowed that he didn’t notice the scene at his kitchen table.

“Eh-hmm” a male voice cleared his throat and Ben’s head snapped at the man sitting at his table. “I’ve been waiting for you, Ben.”

Unlike his nightmares, Ben was able to see the man in black’s face clearly this time. His skin was so pale that Ben could see the veins underneath the surface and his arrogant pointy nose lit up orange as Selvin took a drag from his cigarette.

Ben searched his mind for Imara. His bite had strengthened their bond and he could usually feel her and read her thoughts when she was close. “Where are they?”

“Oh Ben, I’ll get to that soon. Have a seat. We have much to discuss.” Fearing that if he failed to do so, he would doom his wife and child, Ben took a seat across from Selvin.

Ben looked him straight in the eye and tried to calm himself. He needed to clear his mind so he could think properly, but his wolf was begging to be set free so he could tear apart the monster from his nightmares.

Selvin flicked his ashes on the floor. “You know I have been looking for your mother for a very long time, over thirty years now. She was quite tricky to find.”

Ben glanced around Selvin’s face as he continued to think of where Imara and Eliza could have hidden themselves.

“Oh, forgive me, my manners are terrible sometimes. My name is Selvin Marcos. I used to be the head of the coven that your mother belonged to in Massachusetts. Did she ever mention me?”

Ben shook his head slowly. “No.”

"Hmm. Well, let me tell you a little story," Selvin said with a wink. "Many years ago, your mother and I were married. Well, I suppose we still are officially."

"Not anymore," Ben said dryly.

Selvin smiled devilishly and cocked his eyebrow. "Yes, I suppose that's true. Back to my story...One day, she met a Lycan fellow and as the Fates would have it, they discovered they were mates."

Ben heard what the man was saying, but it didn't register. He went through the layout of the house in his mind. He called out in his thoughts, *Where are you, baby?*

Selvin continued, "Your mother decided to run off with her new Lycan friend. Of course, Massachusetts witches aren't nearly as progressive as you Southerners and we don't allow blood mixing." He pointed at Ben. "And, Ben, this concerns you, especially, but we'll get to that. Anna was given the chance to reject her mate and return to her coven, no questions asked, but she just disappeared off the face of the planet. I was quite heartbroken really. I did love the woman. Anyhow, the coven put a bounty on Anna and the Lycan's head. And well, you know how the rest of this story goes."

Ben nodded his head yes.

"What I didn't know is that Anna was carrying a child with her when she left. I was quite surprised when my spies finally tracked her down here and discovered that she had a son. I was so hoping in the back of my mind that you were mine, but Anna quickly shot down that idea." Selvin clapped his hands together and smiled. "Oh, this is the best part," he said as he leaned back in his chair and looked at Ben.

"You see, I didn't intend on killing your mother. I really just wanted her to come home. She is a Realm witch and they just don't grow on trees you know. But the witch really angered me with her shabby attempt to stop me. It was quite pathetic the way she tried to save that human's life."

"Where's my wife?"

"Patience Ben. I'm getting to that. See I wanted Anna back, but when I found out she had polluted herself with a half blood child, I changed my mind. Then as I was leaving, I noticed this lovely little cottage." Selvin looked around the room. "Did you build this yourself, Ben?"

Ben nodded and licked his parched lips.

"It really is nice. You do very good work. Anyhow, back to Imara and your daughter. You see, your wife and that human laying over there put up quite a fight. Silly little witch, thinking that she can beat a warlock. I had to make her pay for that."

Ben gasped and a tear fell from his eyes as he realized there was no saving them, they were already gone.

Selvin stopped and glared at Ben. “You just can’t allow witches to run all over you. So, I made her watch while I killed her daughter and then, of course, I killed her.”

Ben leapt across the table and grabbed Selvin by his neck then took him to the floor. He sat on top of the warlock and punched his face mercilessly all the while the warlock laughed a sinister cackle. The warlock then said words in the old language, and it sent Ben flying across the room. He crashed into the hutch sending shards of glass and ceramics on the ground around him.

Selvin stood over Ben as he laid wounded on the floor. Selvin said, “You silly, stupid half breed bastard. I enjoyed killing them really and I am just loving the feeling of your torment right now. Tell me, Ben, how much pain can you endure? Well, we shall see.”

After collecting his blade from Shaw’s back, Selvin kneeled down beside Ben. He raised his hands above Ben and in the old language said, “ Cuirim mallacht ort do chrà a chónaí arís agus arís eile,” (I curse you to live your torment again and again) then plunged the dagger into Ben’s chest.

Chapter SIXTEEN

"Jesus, I really hope those lucky bastards moving in here love you as much as I do."

Ben stood in front of the old red brick Georgian Revival on Jones Street with his work tools in a bag slung over his shoulder as he looked over the best-looking house on his route. The new residents of the old Parker house would be arriving in the morning, so Ben needed to make sure all the storm damage from last night was repaired as soon as possible.

Not that he minded at all. He loved this house from the first moment he saw it nearly a year ago.

Ben walked up the stairs to the front door, then put the key in the lock and jiggled it until he heard it click. As he opened the door, he inspected the mechanism. "I guess I'll get to you next." Ben looked around the foyer and inhaled deeply. The air was stale and musty, but underneath it was the lingering scent of apples and cinnamon. He'd noticed it the first time the Order sent him to the home to do its monthly servicing. Ben carried the memory of that smell wherever he went. Out of all the homes he cared for, the scent of this one always made him happy to return. He knew a man like him didn't belong in a mansion, but the scent always made it feel like home to him.

Ben walked through the house and removed the sheets that covered the furniture then opened all the windows. When he got upstairs, he walked to the bedroom at the end of the hall where the smell of apple pie was the strongest. He sat down on the bed and pushed his hands across the blanket as he slowly laid down on his back. Ben smiled and closed his eyes as the smell wove itself around him. Nearly every day, Ben went to a diner across the street from the Order, where he lived rent free for his services as a caretaker. He ate the same apple pie every day and savored each mouthful that past his lips. It was familiar and comforting and one of the few things that brought any joy at all to his miserable, empty existence.

Ben rolled over and stretched his arm across the bed. The painful stench of loneliness pushed its way through Ben's gut as he licked his bottom lip and bit it to choke down the tears. He loved this room the most of all, but it always left him feeling empty and sad.

"Oh shit. I'm going to really fucking miss this place. It's not fair that some rich assholes get to have you, they won't appreciate you like I do." Ben shook off the thoughts of it. It was pointless to torture himself like this. "I guess it's time to get to work."

Ben pushed himself up then grabbed his bag off the floor and went back downstairs. Yesterday's storm had knocked down a tree and broke out a few panes of window. The glazier was due to deliver the new glass sometime today, so Ben was using the opportunity to spruce up the home before the owners arrived. Maybe if he did a good enough job, they'd ask for him to come back

since he already knew it so well. He didn't know much about them other than they were descendants of the Parker family, one of the oldest bloodlines among the supernaturals on Earth.

As Ben repainted the handrail of the front porch, the servants began arriving. An uptight looking blonde man with a disapproving smirk interrupted Ben

"Hello, I am Aster, the Parker's butler. And you are sir?"

Ben squinted as he looked up into the bright light of a Georgia morning in the summer. "I'm Ben Logan. I'm the Orders caretaker."

Aster looked Ben over and grinned with a tight-lipped smile that screamed arrogance. "Nice to meet you Mr. Logan."

Ben huffed through his nose. He was used to the condescending looks and attitudes from the wealthy elite of the Order, it didn't bother him anymore. Living amongst them for the last year, he'd learned a lot of their secrets and witnessed their shabby behavior. He was proud to be a man unlike them. "The windows weren't delivered yet. I'll have to return in the morning to put them in."

"Very good. The Parker's will be arriving around noon tomorrow, so please try to have that done before they arrive. Is the rest of the work finished?"

"Yes, everything else is done, just the windows left." Ben stood up and dusted off his pants before putting the lid back on the can of paint. He carried the can and brush to the mudroom and cleaned up then stacked them on the shelf. As he walked through the kitchen he nodded to Aster. "I'll see you tomorrow morning."

"Take care, Mr. Logan."

Sleep didn't come easy for Ben, he had horrible nightmares that kept him awake sometimes. He dreamed of walking into a house and seeing dead bodies lying everywhere covered in blood. The thought of it made Ben rub the scar over his heart as the burning sensation pulsed through it.

Then there were other dreams, the ones that were wonderful. When he woke up breathless and had to pleasure himself because the dreams drove him to the brink of ecstasy. Always the same beautiful woman with a warm smile, green eyes and curly, chestnut brown hair. He looked for her in the face of every woman he met.

When Ben woke, he washed his face and dressed. He looked at his reflection in the mirror and pushed his wavy black hair back off his face as he replayed his dream in his head. "Where are you? Just for once tell me where to look and I'll find you. I won't ever stop looking."

Ben blew out a hopeless breath through his mouth as the desperation overwhelmed him. He wished he could go back to bed just a little bit longer, but his dream woman would have to wait until tonight. He closed his eyes and shook her away from his thoughts. “I’ll see you when I get back, baby.”

When he stepped out into the street, he looked across the park and saw the movers bringing things to the Parker house. As the glazier took the windowpanes off the truck, Ben said, “Let me give you a hand with that.”

Like with everything he did in that home, Ben took great care as he installed the windows. He measured and filed and sanded like it was his own house. As his mind drifted off, Ben sliced into his finger with the sharp file. He gritted his teeth as the blood dripped on the worktable. While he sucked on the wound to stop the bleeding, he looked at the blood and a flash of a dark haired woman laying in a pool of it came across his vision. He closed his eyes tight and shook his head. “Stop. Don’t see it.”

After Ben was finished with the windows, he looked around one last time. He wouldn’t be needed anymore since the Parker’s would certainly have their own people to do the work from now on. As he slung his bag over his shoulder, Ben waved goodbye to Aster and headed out the door as a car pulled up to the gate.

Ben slowed his pace as a tall man with dark hair appeared from the far side of the car and locked eyes with him. Ben could smell the familiar scent of crisp autumn apples radiate from the car’s open door.

Thorin’s eyes widened and he gasped as he put his hand to his mouth. Realizing Ben didn’t recognize him, Thorin walked around the car and opened the passenger door. He gave his hand to Imara and she put her legs outside the car then stood.

Time stood still as the woman from Ben’s dreams straightened out her dress and said, “Thank you, Thorin. It’s so good to finally be back home again.”

Imara walked a few steps before she looked up and saw Ben. Her eyes slowly took Ben in from head to toe and a smirk came across her lips. She leaned into Thorin’s ear and whispered, “Oh, Thorin, he’s so handsome. Is he for me?”

“Yes, my dear. I think he is,” said Thorin as he chuckled. He knew Ben’s wolf ears heard everything she just said.

As they approached him on the walk, Thorin smiled a toothy grin and shook Ben’s hand. “Good morning, sir. I’m Thorin Parker.”

Ben nodded as he glanced away from Imara. “Ben Logan, I’m the caretaker from the Order. Was just finishing some work on the house.”

Thorin nearly laughed out loud as Ben introduced himself. “Yes, of course, Mr. Logan. This beautiful woman beside me is my sister, Imara. Imara say hello to the nice man.”

Ben reached out and took Imara’s hand then planted a kiss on the back.

Imara smiled at Ben and her cheeks flushed as a warm pulse rushed through her body. “It’s lovely to meet you Ben.”

Thorin put his hand on Imara’s back and pushed her towards the house. “Imara my dear, would you like to go in the house and settle. Perhaps I could convince Ben here to help me with the bags.”

Ben said, “Umm. Yeah, of course.” As he started to follow Thorin down the walk, he glanced back over his shoulder and found Imara still standing there watching him. He turned back away from her and smiled to himself. He thanked the Fates in his heart for finally letting something good happen in his wretched life. No matter what he had to do, he’d find some way to ingratiate himself into Imara’s world. Ben knew it was a long shot, given their very different lifestyles, but there was no doubt in his mind that it was meant to be and there was no way he was ever letting her go.

When he reached the back of the car, Thorin opened the trunk then looked to Ben. “You don’t remember anything do you?”

Chapter SEVENTEEN

Ben squinted at Thorin as his heart began to race. Could this man know something about his past and how he ended up here? “Remember? What are you talking about? Do you know something about me?”

Thorin looked at him then took a breath to say something but stopped. He looked around the ground before him and blew out through twisted lips as he glanced into the street before looking back to Ben. “How far back can you remember Ben?”

Ben stood and wiped his hand across his mouth. “How do you know that?”

Before Thorin could answer, Aster appeared and said, “Mr. Parker, Jasper Mason on the phone for you.”

Thorin looked over Ben’s shoulder and nodded. “Yes, I’m coming Aster.” Then he said, “Ben please don’t leave yet. I need to speak with you.” As he walked away, he looked back over his shoulder and said, “Just come in and make yourself at home. I got a lot to talk to you about.”

Ben nodded his head. “Alright then. I’ll bring your bags in.”

“Thank you,” Thorin yelled as he walked into the house.

Ben didn't know much about what had happened to him, but he now knew that Thorin did. Ben had little memory of his life before Savannah. The last he recalled was living with his parents in a small town in Louisiana, then woke up one day in the infirmary at the Order with a chest wound.

When Ben brought in the last of the bags, he set them down in the foyer and then waited for Thorin. He heard him speaking on the phone to Jasper, “Yes, we need to get Haldir here at once. Please send a cable to Norway. Now, do you mind terribly if I take him off your hands?” As Ben wondered what they were discussing, he caught Imara’s scent.

He followed the smell of apple pie to the back garden. From the window, Ben watched Imara as she sat on the edge of the rectangular pool with her feet in the water. Her hair glowed as the sun highlighted the red tones in her hair. She wore it long and it flowed down her back to her waist. She was like a beautiful painting that he wanted to hang in his room and stare at forever.

“She is a lovely creature, isn’t she?” asked Thorin, interrupting Ben’s thoughts.

Ben glanced over to Thorin and said, “Yes, she is. You wanted to talk to me, sir?”

Thorin put his hand on Ben’s shoulder and nodded to the foyer. “Yes. Please let’s have a drink.”

Ben followed Thorin into the parlor and had a seat on the sofa. Thorin poured Ben a bit of whiskey and handed it to him.

"Thank you," said Ben.

Thorin took his drink and sat in his father's brown leather tufted club chair facing Ben. He took a deep breath as he decided how to begin a conversation like this. "So, tell me Ben. How did you end up here in Savannah?"

Ben pushed himself back in his seat and cleared his throat. "I, uh, I'm not sure, really. The cleaning lady found me up in that back bedroom upstairs with a stab wound in my chest."

Thorin scrunched up his face and rocked like he was in pain for a moment. "Oh, shit, Ben. I'm so sorry."

As he knocked is fist against the wooden arm of his chair, Ben looked around the room and sniffed. "Are you going to tell me how we know each other or what?"

Crossing his leg over the other, Thorin relaxed back into his chair. "You've seen my sister before haven't you? Perhaps in a dream."

Ben shifted uncomfortably in his seat as visions of their nights together flashed across his mind. "Yes, I have."

Thorin grinned sympathetically and nodded. "Tell me about them."

Ben licked his lips and rolled his neck from side to side. "What do you want me to say?"

Thorin swirled his drink as he looked Ben in the eyes. "The truth, of course. It's alright. I can promise you it won't offend me in the slightest."

Ben leaned over with his elbows on his knees and clasped his hands together as he looked at the floor. He wanted Imara more than anything and the thought of not seeing her again was too much to handle. He took a deep breath then looked back to Thorin. "You want the truth? You want to hear about how I make love to Imara every night in my dreams? Or do you want to hear about the bloody bodies on the floor?"

Thorin smirked and looked away to the cars passing by on the street outside the window. "There will be someone delivering a suit to you later. There's a party tonight at the Order and I want you dressed appropriately. You might want to shave that mess on your face too. I don't care what my sister says, it's not a good look on you."

Ben chuckled uncomfortably through his nose and looked at Thorin with confusion in his eyes. "Why in the world would I go to one of their goddamn dog and pony shows? If you want the truth,

I think you Order socialites are a bunch of assholes and I damn sure don't want to spend the evening watching you people act like fools."

Thorin bit his lip back as he grinned at the brutally honest and down to Earth brother he remembered. "Yes, well, my sister will be attending this particular event and you will be escorting her for the evening. We'll arrive at 7.

Ben exhaled forcefully through his mouth as his eyes began to tear at the thought of having Imara on his arm. He thought for sure this was a joke. "You want me to take your sister to a dance after I just told you about the things I want to do to her? What the hell kind of brother are you?"

Thorin took a drink then grinned as he set down his cup. "Yes, as a matter of fact, I do. As of right now, you're going to be working as Imara's personal bodyguard. You can gather your things back at the Order, you'll be returning home with us to live after the party."

Ben knitted his brows together and sat up straight. "Are you serious?"

Thorin chuckled as he knocked his fist against his chair. "I am. I've already spoken with Jasper, it's all settled."

Ben wiped his hand across his mouth. "Why me? I don't know anything about protecting people. I'm just a caretaker, Mr. Parker"

Thorin sighed and swirled his drink around. "I need someone I can depend on to guard my sister. Someone I can trust with her life. I can trust you to do that, can't I?"

Ben nodded. "Yes, Mr. Parker. I'll die for her a hundred times to keep her safe if I have to."

As Thorin's eyes teared, he swallowed down the painful memory of Ben saying that same thing to him fifty years ago. He sniffled back the tears and said, "Thank you Ben."

Ben looked over Thorin. He knew there was more. "Mr. Parker?"

"Thorin."

Ben looked closely at Thorin's face. "Thorin. Do we know each other? Do you know what happened to me? Why I ended up in Georgia? I can't seem recall anything."

Thorin sighed and glanced at the fireplace. "Ben, after tonight, things will start making more sense to you, I promise. You need to trust me like I'm trusting you with Imara. I can't really tell you everything right at this moment because I still need some answers myself, but soon. Just hang in there. Alright?"

Ben scratched his head and stood up. "Are you sure this is a good idea? The way I feel about her…"

Thorin raised his hand and nodded. "It's alright, Ben. We'll see you there at seven sharp."

Ben rubbed the back of his neck. “Right, I’ll see you then I guess.”

As Ben left the Parker house, he started to laugh to himself. “Holy shit! What is happening right now? I don’t know what I did to deserve this but thank you.” He sniffed back his tears and laughed into his hand. “Thank you.”

Thorin glanced at the grandfather clock in the foyer, then looked back at his reflection and straightened his tie. “Imara! Are you about ready dear?”

As the click of her heels started on the marble floors, Thorin pushed back his slick hair and turned from side to side as he inspected his face.

“I’m ready. How do I look?” Imara asked as she rotated her knee inwards while she checked out the back of her shoe.

Thorin turned and looked her over from head to toe. Her green beaded dress left little to the imagination, but she was a married woman attending a party with her husband and it was hardly his place anymore to chastise her about her appearance. “Well, darlin, you look beautiful as always, of course.”

Imara sighed in relief. “I was afraid it was a tad, you know.”

As he took her arm in his, he said, “Awe no, Imara, you’ll be the belle of the ball, for certain.”

While Thorin and Imara walked across the park to the Order, Imara straightened her necklace. “Do you suppose Ben will be there?”

“Yes, my dear. Ben will be escorting you this evening.”

Imara’s eyes snapped over to Thorin. “Are you serious?”

Thorin looked around at the people walking back and forth. “Yes. There’s something I need to discuss with you. Ben’s going to be staying with us starting tonight.”

Imara stopped him then chuckled. “When I asked if he was for me, I didn’t really expect for you to make it so.”

Thorin took her hand again and pulled her along the path. “We’re going to be late. Ben’s going to be working as your bodyguard.”

As she struggled to maintain pace with him in her dainty heels, she asked, “Bodyguard? I can’t say I’m not thrilled with the concept, but how did this come about?”

“He’s very highly recommended, my dear. Trust me.”

“Well, far be it from me to argue with that. He’s so handsome he makes my knees buckle.”

Thorin smirked to himself. “Yes, well, he’s all yours now.”

Chapter EIGHTEEN

As she walked through the door to the ballroom arm in arm with Thorin, Imara looked around the room in search of Ben. Not seeing him, the disappointment began to rise in her stomach.

"Where is he? Was he supposed to meet us somewhere? You don't think he changed his mind about all this, do you?"

Thorin smiled to himself as his eyes darted around the crowd. "No, my dear, I know for a fact he wouldn't. He'll be here. Don't worry yourself so much."

Feeling eyes upon her, Imara looked around then finally tracked him down on the balcony. Ben leaned over the rail and smiled as Imara found him. Imara put her hand over her heart as it began to beat wildly underneath her palm. Ben slowly backed away and walked down the stairs, never taking his eyes off of her. As Ben left the staircase and approached her, Imara took deep breath.

Thorin shook Ben's hand and said, "You look fantastic, Ben."

Ben looked himself over. "Thanks, but I feel kind of ridiculous. I can't believe you people dress like this all the time." The tailor had made quick work of putting a tuxedo together for Ben. His clean wavy hair was pushed back, and he'd shaved. Imara liked the stubbly beard, but this was good as well. It's hard to mess up a face that looks that good, she thought to herself.

"It suits you, though. Don't let all these phonies around here fool you. Your blood is just as pure as any of them. You belong here. Well, Ben, if you don't mind taking Imara off my hands for a while." Thorin unwrapped Imara's arm from his then gave her hand to Ben. "I have some people I simply must speak with about that situation we were discussing earlier. Enjoy the party you two." Thorin kissed Imara's cheek and winked at Ben then patted his shoulder before walking off into the crowd.

As Imara fidgeted with her necklace, she smiled nervously and looked around the room. "Should we dance?"

Ben shook his head and smirked. "I don't know how to dance. That wasn't super high on the list of priorities on the farm I grew up on."

Imara smiled sweetly as she let go of her necklace and took his hand. "Can you hold me close and move from side to side?"

Ben nodded his head at the thought of holding Imara close. "I can surely do that."

Walking backwards towards the dance floor, Imara pulled on his hand. "Well then, you can dance with me."

As Imara wrapped her arms around Ben's neck, he licked his lips and put his arms around her waist. Imara put her cheek against Ben's chest and melted into his arms as she listened to the beating of his heart. Her breasts rose to meet his chest as they both breathed heavily against each other. A side grin curled up on his lips. "Today has been the most confusing and wonderful day of my life, I think."

Imara smiled and asked, "What do you mean?"

As he curled a lock of hair around his finger, he brought it to his nose and closed his eyes as he took in the sweet smell. "Well, I started today off as a lowly caretaker and now here I am in a fancy suit dancing with my dream woman."

Imara pulled away from Ben to look up in his eyes. "Dream woman? I'm your dream woman?'

Ben nodded then swept his fingertips over the wispy curls that framed her face. "I was just thinking how funny Fate is. How I woke up this morning with nothing and now I have you in my arms. I never believed in miracles until right now, but I just can't find another explanation for what happened."

Imara glanced at his lips then back to his eyes. "I was kind of thinking the same thing. What a lucky girl I am right now."

Ben glanced around the room. Not seeing Thorin anywhere, he took Imara's hand and said, "Come with me."

Ben led Imara outside to the verandah. He stood looking at her, his shoulders heaving up and down as he wondered if she was really feeling what he was. The little voice inside him told him he was crazy for thinking he could have someone like Imara, but the wolf that had been asleep for so long begged him to kiss her right now.

Not being able to control himself any longer, Ben took the sides of Imara's head into his hands then walked her back into the wall and smashed his lips into hers. Imara wrapped her arms tightly around his waist as Ben hungrily consumed her mouth. She gasped for air between each deep, wet kiss and swirl of the tongue. Ben kissed her like a man who'd been starved of affection his whole life.

When he finally let her go, he put his forehead to hers. "Do you want to go to my room, Imara?"

She smiled as she panted against his face and nodded. "Yes."

Ben kissed Imara's forehead then took her hand and led her back inside through the crowded ballroom.

Imara glanced around to make sure they weren't being watched. Thorin rarely let Imara out of his sight and she thought he would surely snatch her arm and drag her away at any moment.

When they got to his room, Ben shut the door behind him and locked it then pushed Imara against it. As he braced himself against the door with his arm, he rubbed small circles on her chest with his fingertips. "If you don't want to do anything it's alright. I just don't want to share you with all those people. You're mine."

Imara looked up in his eyes and nodded. "I know it, Ben. I've never been more sure of anything."

Ben bent down and brushed his lips against Imara's cheek. "You're all I've even wanted. The way you, your scent is like home to me. I just want to be wherever you are."

The feeling of his voice against her skin sent shivers through every nerve in her body. Taking a deep breath through his nose, Ben leaned into her and pressed his lips against the crook of her neck. As the blast of euphoric joy surged through her from his kiss, Imara's knees buckled underneath her. "Whoa! Where are you going?" Ben asked as he caught her in his arm.

Imara opened her eyes slowly as her senses returned to her. "I don't know what happened, but you can do that again if you want. You can do that anytime."

Ben licked his lips and smiled. "I can honestly say that's the first time I've ever swept a woman off her feet."

Imara smiled as her eyes pleaded with Ben for more. He traced the line of her jaw with his lips. "If you want to stop tell me now. I'm a weak man when it comes to you Imara. I want you too much."

Imara knotted his shirt in her fists as she looked in Ben's eyes and slowly pulled it out of his pants. He looked around her face as her trembling fingers unbuttoned his pants then

pulled apart the zipper.

As Ben slid his fingers over Imara's lips, she pulled his pants and boxers down over his round, firm buttocks. She took his throbbing cock in her hand like it belonged there and gently milked it upwards in long strokes as Ben closed his eyes and licked his lips.

When Imara tightened her grip on him, the angry scowl of primal fury curled up on Ben's face. The wolf, ignored for far too long, made its presence known as he snarled his teeth while he bent down and clutched the skirt of Imara's dress. As the excitement grew inside her at her lover's rage, Imara panted like a rabbit being chased through the forest by the maddened animal before her.

When the dress reached her waist, Ben took her thighs in his hands and lifted her against the wall. Looking down in his hungry eyes, Imara wrapped her legs around Ben's waist then without warning or gentleness, Ben plunged his cock into Imara's born again cunt. He watched her in

prideful satisfaction as she gritted her teeth and groaned in sweet suffering as she adjusted to his thickness and length. Ben was a poor man, but his more than ample size was the one gift he knew he could give her, and he wanted a proper thank you for it.

Bracing himself with his arm against the wall, Ben gripped her hip and thrust into her, sending her sliding up the door as she sucked in a grunted breath when he struck her inside. As he panted against her chin, he asked "Are you alright?"

Shaking in anticipation of the mindboggling thumping he was about to bestow on her, Imara gave him a look that said do it now as she nodded once. Ben pushed her chin up with his forehead and licked her neck as he began beating her against the door.

Whimpering at each brutal thrust, Imara closed her eyes and let Ben reclaim his manhood over and over again while he grunted against her throat as he quietly demanded of himself, "Yes! Come on! Uh!"

When the numbing wave began in her clit, Imara circled Ben's neck in her arms and pressed him hard against her chest as she cried in ecstasy into the poorly lit vacancy of the room.

Feeling her warm comfort sucking him in, Ben emptied himself and filled up the lonely space inside her.

With hitched breaths, Imara watched her Lycan wizard lover furrow his brows in aching gratification as he recovered from his generous donation into her womb.

In Jaspers office, Thorin sat in a high-backed chair and swirled the ice in his glass. "As soon as Haldir gets here, we'll see if we can't knock the cobwebs loose in Ben's mind." He took a sip then sucked back the bitterness through his teeth. "I'm afraid Imara may not be so easy. Ben at least understands that his life isn't correct. He knows he doesn't belong in Savannah among all this opulence. Imara won't even acknowledge that something is amiss. She's not concerned at all that it isn't the 1890's anymore and she won't see the ring on her finger or the mark on her neck. Her denial is endless."

Jasper scratched his head, messing up his dark curly hair. He pushed himself back in his chair and crossed his leg on top of his knee. "I haven't seen this curse in a lot of years. There's almost no information on it. I have researchers working in the library as we speak. Don't worry, Thorin, we're going to get this thing straightened out, you have my word."

Chapter NINETEEN

"I hope you don't think poorly of me, Ben. This isn't the kind of thing I do." Imara slid her dress back down her body as she straightened it and Ben pulled the zipper up then smirked and shook his head.

"I don't Imara. Not at all. I can't really explain it to you, you'll think I'm crazy, but I've been dreaming of doing that for a long time."

Imara looked back at him and smiled then walked to the dresser and looked over her hair. "Do I look alright? My hair must be a mess."

Ben appeared behind her in her reflection and he put his hands on her arms. "You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen." Goosebumps erupted all over Imara and she crossed her arms then put her hands on his. "Do you know why your brother hired me? Are you in some kind of danger or something?"

Imara looked to the floor as she tried to ignore the sound of knocking. "Umm...I don't believe so. I really don't know why he did, but I'm not going to complain at all. I could get used to this kind of personal attention."

Ben turned her around, then put his arms around Imara. "Well, whatever it is, you don't need to worry none. I won't let anything happen to you."

Imara smiled and pushed his hair off his face. "I can't believe this is happening. I think Thorin may have lost his mind. He's always been so protective of me; this just seems so strange."

Ben leaned in and kissed Imara then closed his eyes at the thought of having to let anyone into the little bubble they shared. "We should get going before your brother comes looking for us. This isn't exactly the kind of position I want him to find us in on the first night."

Imara took his leather bag as he grabbed his bag of tools. Before he opened the door, Ben grabbed Imara's arm and pulled her close again. "Just in case he changes his mind about all this," Ben said then pressed his lips against Imara's one last desperate time. "Just know that I'm never giving you up. I've been waiting too long to have you by my side. If I have to come up in that house and snatch you away in the middle of the night like a dirty thief, I will."

Imara smiled and poked her finger into his chest. "I'll hold you to that, Ben Logan."

As they walked out the door, Ben shut off the light then closed the door behind him. While they walked down the hall, Jasper poked his head out his office door and said, "Come on in."

Imara was sure that they could tell what her and Ben had been up to, the smell of his seed was thick on her body. Her cheeks flushed as she took a seat on the sofa beside him and faced her brother.

"Are you all set then, Ben?" asked Jasper as his leather office chair scoffed underneath him when he pushed himself back.

"Yes, sir. I wanted to thank you for everything you've done for me Jasper. I know I can never repay that debt, but if ever I can do anything to help you, I will."

Jasper smiled warmly. "You don't need to thank me. I'm glad that I could help you folks out."

Thorin stretched his back then pushed himself up off the too comfortable leather chair and said, "So, are we ready then?"

As they walked home, Imara wrapped her little finger around Ben's. Thorin looked back over his shoulder and saw the couple gazing at each other then he smirked to himself. He wasn't stupid, he and Jasper had seen the two of them sneak off earlier. In her last life, Thorin had taken every precaution to keep Imara safe and, in the end, it meant nothing. Keeping her away from her mate was a cruel and useless tactic that he wouldn't use again.

When they got to the front door, Aster opened it and said, "Welcome home. I trust you enjoyed the party."

As they stepped through the door, Thorin nodded as he allowed Ben and Imara through. "Yes, it never disappoints. Is Mr. Logan's room ready?"

Aster gave him a disapproving look and said, "Yes, sir."

Thorin smirked at his butler's snooty attitude then turned to Ben and Imara. "Darlin can you show Ben to his room? It's right next to yours. Please entertain him, if you will. I have some work I need to take care of."

Imara looked at him in surprise then rolled her eyes. "This way Ben."

When she got to Ben's room, she opened the door and stepped inside then waited for him. "So, would you like me to show you around?"

Ben smiled as he sat on the bed and shook his head no. "I've been taking care of this place for almost a year now. I know every square inch of it."

Imara smiled nervously and licked her lip. "Yes, of course. Umm...I suppose I'll see you in the morning then."

Ben stood and walked over to her. "Do you want to go sit up on the roof?"

Pulling her brows down, Imara tried to decide if he was serious. "The roof?"

Ben nodded as he picked at the beads on the front of her gown. They shimmered against her skin as the light hit them and made her green eyes twinkle. “The one that sits over the back garage. It’s a pretty night and the stars are out. Plus, I’m just not ready to let you go tonight yet.”

Relief washed over Imara, because she couldn’t imagine being able to sleep tonight anyway. “Alright. Let me go change into something else.”

Imara went to her room then quickly changed into her nightgown and robe. As she looked herself over in the mirror, Imara put her hands to her mouth. “It’s you. Isn’t it? You have to be him.” When she came out, Ben was leaning against the wall with a blanket in his arms. He took Imara’s hand and pulled her to him and he shook his head. “I am. You know I am.”

After he stepped out onto the roof, Ben held Imara’s hand as she climbed through the window. He laid out a blanket on the flat tarred roof then sat down and pulled her down beside him.

As she watched the stars above her, Ben gazed at her delicate face. Feeling his eyes on her, she glanced over and smiled. “Do you know much about them?”

Ben shook his head. “I never cared much for reading and all. I’m much better with my hands.”

Imara smiled widely at the implication. “Yes, that’s true. I am a believer in that. Well, I know a little about astronomy. You see that star right there? The bright red one?”

Ben watched her face as she looked up again then turned his head up to the sky and squinted where she pointed. “Yes.”

“That’s Antares. The story of it goes that a handsome man named Orpheus could charm everyone with his magical harp. He could even stop battles with the beautiful music. All the women just loved him. One day he married a beautiful woman, I just can never remember her name though, but on their wedding night she was bitten by a snake and died. He traveled all the way to the underworld to collect her soul and bring her back to the land of the living because he loved her so much.”

As the pain in Ben’s wound began to radiate through his chest, he looked back to Imara. Something about this whole story sounded so familiar. “Sounds like quite a fella.”

Imara laughed out loud. “Yes, I believe he was.”

Ben took Imara’s fingers in his hand and rubbed his thumb over them. “Have you ever loved anyone like that? Enough to go through hell for them?”

As she inhaled through her nose and pouted her lips, Imara shook her head. “If I did, I can’t remember it.”

Ben nodded and licked his lips as he contemplated how to say what he felt. He blew out through his mouth and looked into Imara's eyes. "I don't remember much up until about a year ago. I just don't know what happened between the time I lived with my parents and when I got here. But I can't imagine that I ever felt for anyone what I feel for you. You can think I'm crazy if you want, but I've been dreaming about you for as long as I can remember."

Pinching her lips together, Imara tried to ignore the knocking on her mind's door. Every day she heard it, but since she met Ben, it was getting harder not to answer. "I don't think you're crazy. I feel it too."

Imara got to her knees then crawled up on Ben's lap and wrapped her arms around him. As she ran her fingers through his wavy black hair, she gently kissed his plump lips. She softly dragged her fingertips down his cheek and said, "I've never wanted anything in all my life the way I want you. You're like, it's like you're part of me and I was so lonely without you." She laughed as her eyes teared. "But now you're here and I feel like I'm whole now."

He nodded because he understood exactly what she meant. "I know." As Ben kissed Imara's neck, she gasped and instinctively rubbed herself into Ben's lap. Ben pulled up the back of her gown until her legs were free of it while Imara unbuttoned his pants. He lifted his hips, then pulled them down between his legs. While she looked in his eyes, she climbed on him and slowly slid down his cock. Ben took her ass cheeks in his hands and guided her as she rocked her hips on his.

"You're so beautiful, Imara. Don't you ever leave me." Ben buried his face in her neck as her hair fell around him.

Imara looked up to the stars in the sky as the pressure built inside her. "Oh, Ben. Ah!" she moaned softly in his ear. She bit her lip and tried to swallow as the pleasure erupted from inside. As Ben felt her throb around him, he lifted his face to watch her ride out her orgasm.

Ben closed his eyes and licked his lips, then he gritted his teeth and leaned back on his hand as he released his seed inside her.

Imara panted against his forehead head as she came down from her high while Ben nuzzled against her neck. Ben knew this was crazy, but it felt right. He put his hands around her face and pulled her down onto his lips. "I love you, baby."

Chapter TWENTY

"Mr. Haldir, so nice to see you again."

Haldir walked into the house and slapped Aster on the back. "How the hell are you Aster?"

"Very good sir," Aster said as he shut the door behind them. "Please follow me. Mr. Parker and Miss Imara are in the back garden."

As Aster led Haldir through the kitchen on his way to the home's courtyard, Haldir picked up an apple from a bowl at the kitchen counter and wiped it off on his arm. Aster left him at the door to the garden and when Imara saw him walking in, she smiled and waved. Ben looked up and saw the tall blonde man with a bushy beard walking towards them. He was rough looking, like he'd seen a few brawls in his time from the old scar he wore down his face. His long, muscular arms stretched the sleeves of his shirt as he lifted one and took a bite of his apple.

"Hello there kiddo. How are you getting along?" Haldir wrapped his arm around Imara and pulled her into his side then gave her a kiss on the forehead. Ben crossed his arms and stood, looking the two over with a scowl on his face.

"Never better, Haldir. I'm so happy to see you again. Will you be in Savannah long?"

Haldir let her go, then took another bite of his apple. As he continued chewing, he said, "Mmm-hmm. I got some business here to take care of, so you'll get to see this handsome face of mine for a while." He looked to Ben and nodded in acknowledgement then put out his hand. As Ben grabbed it, Haldir said, "If I recall correctly, you must be Ben."

Ben looked hard at Haldir's face. Haldir seemed very familiar with Ben, but he was sure they never met before. "That's right."

Imara pushed her hair off her shoulder as she admired Haldir. His handsome, rugged face and bawdy way always made Imara smile. Most of the men in her life had been overly protective of her to the point that it made her feel like a very large child, but Haldir could see past the poor witch that she was. He knew deep inside with the proper training, Imara didn't have to feel powerless against whatever danger was facing them.

"How's it going old man?" Jasper said as he pulled his old friend into a hug.

Haldir patted his back as he pulled away from his embrace. "You know me, I keep on keeping on."

Thorin put his hand on Imara's shoulder. "My dear, could you excuse us? We have some urgent business to attend to."

Imara nodded. “Of course.”

As Thorin, Jasper and Haldir started to walk off, Thorin turned back and said, “Ben, could you come with us please?”

Ben looked at him in confusion then nodded. As the men walked in the house, Ben took Imara’s hand and kissed her cheek. “I wonder what that’s about.”

Imara shrugged. “It’s hard to say with those three.” She pointed her finger into his chest. “I will see you later, I’m going to finally finish unpacking my things.”

He pulled her close and leaned down to put his forehead against hers. “I love you, Imara.” Then, he kissed the tip of her nose before turning to walk into the house.

As she watched him go through the hallway behind the wall of windows that overlooked the courtyard, she softly said, “I love you too, sweetheart.”

“Ben, please have a seat,” said Jasper, as Ben entered the parlor.

Ben looked over the three men facing him then sank into a high-backed chair. His heart began to pound against his chest. He could tell by the tension in the air and the smell of adrenaline wafting around the men that there was something wrong. Haldir poured himself a drink and threw it back quickly then leaned back against the wall.

Thorin rubbed the stubble on his face as he glanced to Haldir and Jasper, then he crossed his arms and licked his lips. “I thought if I let you have a little bit more time alone with Imara, maybe it might bring back something. Did it, Ben? Do you remember anything?”

Ben pushed himself back in his chair as he searched his mind. She was familiar to him like a word stuck on the tip of your tongue. He felt like if he could just push the curtain aside on the window of his mind, he’d be able to see the answer.

“I’m not sure. I feel like,” he looked out the window to the street. “I know her. I told you about my dreams, but it’s like I know her so well.”

Thorin sat down across from him. “How long has it been since you’ve shifted, Ben? Have you since you woke up in Savannah?”

Ben shook his head no. “No, it, it doesn’t talk to me anymore.” He turned his head slightly to the side as he swallowed hard. “You know me, don’t you? You have to. I didn’t tell anybody that I was a Lycan.”

Thorin gave him a sympathetic smile and nodded slowly. “Oh, Ben, I know you very well. I’ve known you a very long time.”

Ben began to hyperventilate as he looked around the room. “This, this isn’t right. This isn’t like home at all.” He nodded to the cars passing on the street outside. “What the hell are those things anyway? Why is everything so different here?”

Thorin leaned forward and put his elbows on his knees then clasped his hands together in front of him. “Ben, when you woke up in this house, you weren’t close to death, you were coming back from it. That scar on your chest, it killed you over fifty years ago. I know, because Haldir and I are the ones who found your body.”

Ben’s lip quivered and his eyes teared over as he clenched his jaw and looked away. Then, he started nodding and looked back at Thorin. “Yeah. That makes sense. The last thing I remember was pulling the wagon into your driveway and seeing you…” Ben’s eyes widened as he realized what he was saying. “You and Imara were standing outside.” He gasped in a breath. “Oh, you lived down the road.”

Thorin said, “I’m afraid time isn’t on our side Ben, we need you to remember everything now.”

Ben looked past Thorin to Jasper and Haldir. Jasper was gripping the arms of his chair so tightly that his knuckles had turned white. Haldir clenched his jaw as he looked back to Ben, then he pulled on his beard. “Remember what exactly?”

Thorin sighed and looked down at his hands. “Imara. I need you to remember what happened to Imara. I know you don’t want to face it, Ben, but we need to know everything you two went through.”

As he fought his wolf’s urge to comply with Thorin, Ben gritted his teeth. He furiously shook his head from side to side as Haldir came up behind him slowly. “No! I can’t. Don’t!”

Haldir slapped his hand onto Ben’s shoulder. “Enough of this bullshit, you will remember now.”

As a burst of electricity surged from Haldir’s hand, a stabbing pain ripped through the scar on Ben’s chest. Every memory of Imara came flooding back into his mind as Haldir ripped the veil of denial away. The first time he saw Imara standing in the yard. Her petting him on the porch. Their wedding night. Holding Eliza in his arms. Selvin.

“Selvin!” Ben shouted. “His name was Selvin!” Tears streamed down Ben’s face as he tried to breathe. He looked up at Thorin as the disgusted look of grief washed over Ben’s face. When the first breath of clarity finally entered his lungs, he closed his eyes. “Oh, God Thorin. Eliza! He killed my baby!”

While Ben fell apart in the chair, Thorin grabbed the back of his head and brought their foreheads together. “We’re going to get him Ben. We’re going to find him and he’s going to pay for what he’s taken from you. I swear this to you, brother.”

As the realization hit Ben that his dead wife was just footsteps away in the house, he looked up. "Imara." He tried to push his way out of the chair as Thorin pushed him back. "Let me go! Thorin. Let me go!"

"Ben you need to listen to me. I know you want to go charging in there and tell her everything right now, but you can't." Ben shook his head. "Yes, Ben. She doesn't remember anything. She doesn't want to."

Ben let out a pained sob then gritted his teeth to stop the one's to follow.

"Ben she's doing this to herself. She won't let herself feel the pain. She has blocked out every single memory of you, Eliza, Shaw, living in Louisiana, everything. She showed up on my doorstep fifty years to the date she died, looking just as she did the last I saw her. It was like nothing even happened. She didn't care that we had electricity in the house or cars on the streets and a telephone in the kitchen. She can't see the mark on her neck or the brand on her finger. But you know what she can't deny?"

Thorin looked Ben in the eye. "She can't deny you. The minute she saw you, that spark reignited. There's hope for her still."

Ben pushed himself up and paced in front of the window. He wiped his hand across his mouth and shook his head. "You warned me that she was cursed. I'm the curse, Thorin. Selvin killed them because of my mother's sins. If it wasn't for me, it wouldn't have happened."

Thorin sighed and went to Ben. "The circumstances don't matter now, goddamn it. Imara and you are drawn to each other like a moth to a flame. The Fates have made it so and there's nothing anyone can do to stop that. We have to find the warlock that cast this curse on you and Imara. Ben, this curse, it's a mighty terrible one. This will keep happening to the two of you over and over again for all eternity if we don't stop it."

Ben ran his hands through his hair. "I can't. I won't do this to her again." He looked to Haldir. "Take her away. Leave. Take her to the Realm."

Haldir glanced at Thorin, then looked back to Ben and set down his glass. He scratched behind his ear and said, "We tried to Ben."

Ben closed his eyes and pinched his lips together. Haldir sighed as he watched Ben's pained expression. He could feel his desperation dripping from him. "As soon as she showed up again, I tried to take her there. You and Imara are bound to each other and bound to this planet. There is no escaping this curse, Ben. Not for any of you."

Ben's hands trembled with fear as he searched his mind for a solution. "I won't be with her. Fate can bind us together, but it can't force me to relive the same mistakes. She died because she loved me. Eliza died because I was her father. I won't do it. I won't let Imara love me."

Jasper stood and looked at Ben. "It won't matter, Ben. This curse is called a Deja Vous curse. Every event in your life will play out again over and over again whether you want it or not, whether you cooperate or not. You can say you won't let Imara love you, but that ship has already sailed. The wheels have already been set in motion; you can't stop it now."

Ben looked out the window and put his hands on the apron as he pressed his forehead against the glass. "Yes, I can. Imara and I are over. I won't love her anymore."

Chapter TWENTY-ONE

Ben rubbed the back of his neck as he leaned against the stone fountain in the courtyard and watched the sun go down behind the house across from them. “Oh, fuck! How are you going to do this? She’ll be destroyed.”

He went over every word that Thorin, Haldir and Jasper told him in his mind. He heard them, but he had plans of his own. He couldn’t shake the guilt and regret of what happened to them and, no matter what he had to do, Ben was going to change the course of events this time.

When Thorin told him about the prophecy all those years ago, he spent every day for the rest of their lives trying to protect Imara, but it was all for nothing because the only thing she ever needed to be protected from was loving Ben. He was the curse her parents were warned about. She fulfilled that terrible hex the minute the Fates brand was burned into her finger. As Ben looked down over the ancient Realm writing on his ring finger, it only reminded him that he had damned the only two people that meant anything to him at all. His sole reason for living.

Imara looked out over the courtyard and saw Ben standing there alone. He’d been distant to her all day and it left her feeling confused. She slowly walked into the garden then slid her fingers across Ben’s shoulder as she walked by. He grabbed her hand away coldly, then put it down beside her. This sudden change in attitude stung her neck. As she rubbed the pain away, she asked, “Is something wrong? Did I do something to make you angry? You’ve barely even spoken to me all day.”

Ben bit his lip and shook his head. “I could never be angry at you, but we need to talk about a few things, Imara.”

She leaned against the brick wall of the fountain beside him and looked at him suspiciously. “Well. I’m right here. What is it?”

He wiped his hand across his mouth then stood to face her. “I can’t protect you like this, Imara.” He blew through his mouth then crossed his arms. “We can’t be together anymore. Not like you want to be.”

Imara gasped as his words sunk in and her eyes teared over. “And you’re telling me this now? Well, that’s very convenient isn’t it? You didn’t seem so concerned about your ability to do your job well when you were inside me the other night. Oh, I see. Things just look different in the light of day, don’t they?”

Ben gritted his teeth as the pain of her words stabbed him. “That was a mistake. It was wrong of me to take advantage of you like that. I’m sorry.”

"You're sorry?" she scoffed. She tucked her hair behind her ear as she looked back to the house. "Well, isn't that grand? That just fixes everything. And telling me you loved me, that was a mistake as well? Just a lapse in judgment?"

Ben clenched his teeth and looked away. "Yes, it was."

As the pain of his words swept through her chest, Imara nodded her head and grunted "Ehm!" Then she chuckled at herself. "Well, aren't I just the biggest idiot in Savannah. I guess I deserve this. I never have been very smart about how things really are in the world. You must've had quite a laugh over me." She laughed at her own stupidity. "Fine. Consider yourself unattached, Mr. Logan."

Ben took Imara's hand and said, "No, it's not like that at all."

Imara snapped back her hand then put up her finger. "Stay away from me." As Imara walked away, she put her hand over her mouth to conceal her sobs, but nothing escaped Ben's ears. He closed his eyes and yelled "I'm sorry."

When she was out of sight, Ben bent over as the pain of his damaged mate bond tore through his body. It was only amplified by knowing that Imara felt it too, but in Ben's battered mind, there was no other choice. He would do anything to keep her safe, even breaking her heart and making her hate him. At least she might live long enough for him to figure out how to beat this thing.

Imara walked cross armed into the parlor and shut the doors behind her. "I don't want Ben as my bodyguard anymore."

Thorin looked up from his drink and sighed. "We can't fire him, Imara. You two are just going to have to learn to get along."

Imara licked her lips and shook her head. "No, Thorin. You can keep him around for whatever reason you want, but if you want someone protecting me, find someone else. I don't want him anywhere near me anymore."

As he rubbed his forehead, Thorin cursed Ben for being so stubborn. "I'll see if Haldir wouldn't mind, I guess. Imara, Ben, he's…he's just going through something right now. Whatever he said to you, I promise you he doesn't mean it. He thinks he's doing you a favor."

Imara's lip quivered as the embarrassment rose in her throat. She thought for sure Ben was her mate and she was ashamed of the things she did with him now. "I don't care, Thorin. Just find someone else and keep him away from me."

As Imara walked out the door, Ben nearly ran into her. He saw the tears in her eyes, and it dug into his gut. As he stepped aside, he said, "I'm sorry." Imara swallowed down the last bit of pride she had left and ignored him as she walked away.

He blew out through his mouth then walked into the parlor. Thorin looked back over his shoulder from the window and chuckled through his nose. "I hope you're right proud of yourself for what you're doing to her. She wants a new bodyguard. In fact, she asked that I just keep you away from her entirely. You know," Thorin rubbed his chin, "I just don't understand you at all. She's right here in front of you Ben, right at your fingertips after all these years and you're just going to squander that chance with her."

Ben sank back into the leather chair and pulled at his lip as he thought. "I don't want anyone else near her. No one."

Thorin leaned against the windowsill and crossed his arms. "So, what do you suggest then? Just keeping her locked up tight in her room like a prisoner? No. Un-un. I won't go that route again."

Ben pushed the hair off his head then steepled his hands over his mouth. "She's my wife, Thorin. My mate. I get to decide."

Thorin chuckled to himself and shook his head before grabbing his drink then pointing his finger at Ben. "You're being an asshole. As far as she's concerned, she's a single woman and I'm not stopping her from living her life as she sees fit anymore, I won't do it. You're on your own this time. Whatever she does, you drove her to it and you'll just have to live with the consequences of your stubbornness."

Ben and Thorin spent most days after that training with Haldir and Jasper. It was the one thing that kept his mind off Imara and made him feel like he had some control. There was less than two years between the time Imara met Ben and the day she died, so it seemed a safe bet that it would be that way again. They needed to learn every trick they could to defeat the ancient warlock, Selvin.

As Ben, Thorin and Haldir sat in the kitchen around the counter, Imara walked in with a silly plan in her tattered mind. Thorin looked up and smiled. "How are you, my dear? You're looking as lovely as ever." The truth was though, she looked like a broken-hearted woman. She'd lost some weight and her eyes were dark and soulless.

Imara smirked as she avoided looking at Ben. "Thank you. Thorin, I wanted to let you know I'm going to the Order party this evening."

Ben stood up straight and said, "No, we're not going. Not tonight."

She glanced over at him. "I wasn't asking you to go with me Ben. As you recall, you're no longer my bodyguard anyway so I wasn't really looking for your insight." Looking back at Thorin and Haldir,

Imara crossed her arms. “I’m 25 years old, I’m not going to ask for permission to go across the street like a child. Would you mind the trouble of escorting me, Haldir?”

Haldir chuckled uncomfortably as he wiped the crumbs of his muffin off his hands. “Escort a young, beautiful woman to a party? That doesn’t sound like any trouble at all, Imara. I’d love to.”

“Lovely. I’ll see you this evening.” Imara triumphantly turned and walked out of the kitchen.

Ben rolled his neck from side to side then threw his food back on the counter. As he walked after her, he said, “Imara! Stop!”

Imara stopped in the hallway and turned to face him then crossed her arms. “Yes, what is it?”

As he stopped in front of her he put his hands on his hips and shook his head. “What are you doing?”

She looked at him and snickered knowing she’d finally upset him. “I’m about to go find myself a dress to wear. You know, something just irresistible.”

Ben closed his eyes and rubbed the throbbing pain between them. “You know what the hell I’m talking about.”

“Give me one reason, Ben. Just one reason why I shouldn’t go. I’ll be with Haldir for Pete’s sake. There isn’t a person alive who would bother me while I’m on the arm of that brute.”

Ben bit on his lips then looked at her. “I’m asking you not to go, Imara. Please.”

She rolled her eyes and twisted her lips to the side as she shook her head no. “No. You don’t get to do that. You’re not my bodyguard anymore, you’re not anything to me at all. You made that perfectly clear.” She put her finger in his chest. “You wanted this, remember? If you don’t want me, I’m sure there’s some nice young man who will. I’m not going to spend one more second wallowing around this old house over you and if you don’t like it, that’s just too bad.” As she turned and started down the hall again, Imara sucked back a jagged breath. As much as she wanted him to feel her pain, it sent a stabbing jolt of agony through her chest.

As he watched her walk away, Ben pinched his eyes together and squeezed his forehead with his hand. The thought of Imara in some other man’s arms was like a well-timed punch to the gut, it took his breath away.

Chapter TWENTY-TWO

When Haldir returned later, he walked into the parlor wearing his tuxedo. Thorin looked him over and chuckled to himself. “It’s always entertaining to see a thousand-year-old Viking savage like yourself all cleaned up and looking dapper. You just might be confused with a proper gentleman if you’re not careful.”

Haldir twisted his arm in front of him to check his cufflink, then looked up at Thorin. “The ladies love this old savage cock. They drop their panties the minute I start talking about all the battles I’ve been in.”

A scoff came from the corner where Ben was drinking whiskey, already a few glasses in. “Just keep your fucking hands off my wife.”

Haldir bit his lip and chuckled. “I’ve known Imara since she was in nappies, I’d never lay a finger on her. You’ve brought this shit on yourself, my friend. She doesn’t know she’s a married woman, and you’re not acting like much of a husband. Whatever happens tonight, that’s your doing and you have no one to blame but yourself. She’s a beautiful woman and the men will be all over her. You just let that sink in.”

Ben smelled Imara as she came closer to the parlor and he set down his glass then pushed his hair off his face. No matter how much he said he didn’t want to be with her, his body disagreed. Just the smell of her made Ben want to make himself presentable to her.

“Well, aren’t you just a vision!” said Haldir as Imara waltzed through the door. She wore an ankle length black gown with a slit up the thigh and a neckline that left no doubt that she was all grown up and looking to punish Ben for his error in judgement. Her chestnut hair was arranged on her head in a cascade of curls that begged to be fondled in some lucky man’s hands. She went to the mirror beside Ben and leaned over to check her red lipstick. She didn’t even acknowledge his presence in the room.

“Thank you, Haldir.” She turned and walked to him. “Is that for me?” She asked as she put her hand on her chest.

Haldir removed the corsage from the box and placed it on Imara’s wrist. She held up her hand and looked over the sparkly jewels and delicate miniature flowers. “It’s magnificent. Wherever did you find it?”

Haldir took her arm in his. “You don’t live as long as I do without knowing where to find things to please the ladies. You ready?”

"Oh yes, I most certainly am." As they walked out of the parlor, Imara looked over her shoulder to Thorin. "Don't wait up. You never know what I might get into."

Once the front door closed behind them, Ben stood up and threw his glass at the fireplace sending shards of glass flying through the air. He leaned over and put his hands on the back of the sofa and sucked back his tears as he shivered in anger and doubt.

Thorin rolled his eyes. "Well, that was certainly ridiculous. That crystal is older than you are. Do you feel better at least?"

Hearing the noise, Aster came into the room and quickly swept up the mess then excused himself.

"Ben, Haldir's right. You can't keep Imara locked up here forever. Do you remember how angry you were at me and Shaw for doing the same exact thing? It's not right, Ben. It wasn't right when we did it and it's not right now. Now, you can either be with her or not, but you can't force her to be miserable with you like this. In the end, it will all turn out the same anyway."

Ben stood up and pushed his hair back then the tears from his face. "It's all my fault."

Thorin sighed and shook his head. "It was Fate, Ben. Fate brought you together for a reason, and it will not be denied. Imara was cursed the day she was born, Ben. You didn't do that. Fate gave you Imara so you could save her from this. Only you can save her, I believe it with every cell in my body. You need to believe it too." He wrapped his arm around Ben's neck and pulled him into a hug. "All this pain and unhappiness. This is exactly what that monster wanted, Ben. You're just feeding the curse and making it stronger. Don't you know that?"

As Imara danced with Haldir, she felt the heavy prickly weight of eyes on her. Her eyes darted desperately across the room, then finally landed on a blonde-haired blue-eyed gentleman standing near the bar. He was looking her over intensely, but her heart sank because she was praying it was Ben. As much as she tried to ignore her feelings for him, it ate at her every minute. Her attempt at making him jealous was shabby, she knew, but she would try any tactic in the game of love to get him back. Her body called out to him and every rejection made her loathe herself even more.

As the man approached her, she took a deep breath and damned herself for being so tacky. "Excuse me. Can I cut in?"

Haldir turned and smiled at the handsome stranger, then he glanced up at the balcony. "Absolutely. I'll be at the bar if you need me, Imara."

The man took Imara in his arms, the feeling of them around her sent a dull pain through her body. It felt wrong and her skin crawled as he pulled her close to him.

Haldir took a seat at the bar then ordered a drink. After he grabbed a handful of mints from the counter, he turned and watched Ben staring at Imara from the balcony. He clicked his tongue a few times then popped a mint in his mouth. “I warned you, boy. Now, get angry. Let it fill you up and burn you. That’s the only way were ever going to beat that son of a bitch.” He looked back to the man who had his arms around Imara and sighed. “Sorry, about this son, but you’ll be alright. That boy just needs to get his mind right.”

As the song played on, the man threaded his fingers through Imara’s hair. As he wrapped the coils around his pointer finger, his other hand slid down Imara’s back. She reached around and grabbed his hand then shook her head no. He sighed and looked at her, then pulled her closer to him. Ben clenched his jaw as the rage built inside him. He had pushed the wolf down too long, but this insult was too much for his primal side to handle.

As the man’s hand slid down her back again and reached her buttocks, Ben growled out a warning as he jumped over the side of the balcony and landed crouched on the floor. He stood and stalked over to Imara then pulled her out of the man's grip and punched him in the jaw, sending him sliding against the floor. The man stood and ran to Ben then tackled him to the floor, but he was no match to the much bigger and stronger Ben. As he made his way to the top, Ben straddled the man's abdomen and pummeled his face with his fist as his guilty rage and the flashbacks of Selvin laughing at him came back again.

Haldir shook his head and laughed to himself then pulled Ben away from the bloody man underneath him. He patted his chest and said, “It’s done. It’s done. You did well.”

Ben wiped the blood from his fist on his pants, then turned for Imara but she was gone.

“Imara?” As panic spread through his chest and arms and his pulse bounded in his ears, he frantically scanned the room for her. Ben pushed his hair off his face then ran out the entrance of the ballroom and lifted his nose into the air to catch her scent. He followed it to the front doors and out onto the sidewalk. Seeing her crossing the park alone, he ran after her. When he got to Imara, he grabbed her arm and spun her around then took her in his numb and trembling arms. “I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!”

Imara sniffled back her tears as she pressed her forehead into his chest. “Why are you doing this to me?”

He combed his fingers through her hair while he kissed her forehead. “You don’t understand, baby. I’m just keeping you safe. You just have to trust me, Imara.”

“You’re killing me, Ben. I can’t go on living like this.” Tears spilled from Ben’s eyes and he pulled her close. “I’m sorry. I love you so much. I’m so sorry. It’s just better this way. I promise you.”

Imara pushed him away and shook her head. “What kind of game are you playing with me? Is this your idea of fun?”

Ben bit his lip and looked off across the park. Imara nodded and said, “ This is insane. If you don’t want me then just stay away from me. Stop making me feel like there’s some chance for us then ripping it away. Don’t you know what you’re doing to me?” Imara turned around and walked quickly back to the house.

As Ben watched her walk away, Haldir slapped him on the back then came to his side. “It’s time for you boys to tell her the truth Ben. Keeping her in the dark is doing more harm than good, just look what you’re doing to her. That’s your mate, the mother of your child for Christ’s sake.”

Ben looked at the blood stains on his hands then shook his head. “She doesn’t need to remember any of that. I won’t do that to her. I wish to hell I could forget.”

“Do you really though? Would your life be any better if you’d never met her?” Haldir asked as he walked beside him.

Ben huffed through his nose and looked at the ground. “No. Of course not, that’s not what I meant. Being with Imara and Eliza was everything. I didn’t even know what I was missing.”

Haldir nodded. “But you do know. You have the memories of your life together and all the good times to balance out all the bad. Imara, she’s only got memories of a life of running and hiding and a mate that won’t love her. All she knows is the bad, Ben. You need to let her have her memories and help her deal with the grief. The longer you let that build up inside her, the more explosive it’s going to be when she finally remembers. Your actions are fucking that kids head up more than any goddamn curse ever could.”

Chapter TWENTY-THREE

As Imara slammed the door shut behind her, Thorin sighed as he rolled his eyes then pushed himself up out of his chair and came to the foyer. “Unless you’re planning on paying for that glass out of your own pocket, young lady, I suggest you treat the door a little kinder.”

Imara threw herself down into a chair beside the hall table and panted heavily as she fought back her tears. “This is as much my house as it is yours. I’ll break out every window if I want to.”

Thorin knelt down in front of her and looked up in her face. “I take it your evening didn’t go as expected, sweet girl.”

As tears escaped her eyes, Imara chuckled to herself. “You know something? I think I must be cursed, Thorin. Cursed to never be happy. For Pete’s sake, why did you hire him for me? All he ever does is hurt me and make me look foolish. Oh God, I’m so stupid for caring about him. What’s wrong with me?”

Thorin cupped Imara’s face in his hands and pushed her tears away with his thumbs. “No honey, there’s nothing wrong with you. You’re a beautiful soul, Ben’s the one who’s lost right now. But you have to believe me when I tell you that you two belong together Imara. If you look deeper, you’ll know that I’m right.” Thorin pulled her into his embrace then kissed the side of her head. “Alright, darlin. Get yourself upstairs and snuggle up in bed. I’ll have Aster bring you some hot cocoa or something. You’ll feel better in the morning.”

Imara licked her lips and nodded. “Fine. I don’t want to see his face anymore tonight anyway.”

Thorin smirked and shook his head. “You don’t really mean that, do you? It doesn’t sound like you at all.”

She sighed then pushed her lips together as she shook her head. “No. I’d rather see him every day like this then never see him again.”

Thorin kissed Imara’s hand then nodded towards the stairs. “Go on now. Get some sleep. You’re far too pretty to be worrying yourself like this.”

While Imara climbed the stairs, Ben and Haldir came inside then went to the parlor. Thorin sat leaned over in his chair with his head in his hands. He looked up then blew out a long breath. “We need to tell her.”

Ben threw himself down into a chair and shook his head. “Absolutely not.”

Thorin slammed his hand on the table beside him. “Dammit, Ben. Things are starting to stir in her head. Do you want her remembering everything and thinking you’ve not wanted her all this time? She’ll be crushed, she already is. I told you, you had to be careful with someone like her. Now this thing is happening whether we want it to or not, you’re just torturing her, and yourself, for no good reason at all.”

Ben rocked back and forth in pain then finally leaned over with his hands on his head. “I don’t know what to do Thorin. No matter what I do, she’s going to die. That man’s going to take my baby away and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

Thorin went to Ben’s side and knelt by his chair. “Ben if it’s going to happen anyway, just let her be happy. Let her have a few wonderful moments before that monster comes for her. If something happens tomorrow, Ben, if we’ve been wrong about the timing and he comes for her before we’re ready, do you really want her leaving this world thinking you don’t love her anymore? Is that better than her just knowing the truth? Oh, Ben. Eventually that will come to light anyway. It always does.”

“You’re so damn silly, Imara. What did you think would happen? He told you he made a mistake.” Imara looked at herself in the mirror and shook her head. As tears filled her eyes, she curled her swollen lips under and swallowed the bitter truth. “He doesn’t love you. You’re an idiot. Shaw would be so angry with you for being so foolish after he told you to not get involved with him in the first place.” Imara looked at herself in confusion, then she glanced at the door as the knocking returned. “Is that you, Shaw?” When he didn’t answer, she looked back at herself. “Where has he been anyway? This isn’t like him at all. He would’ve done whopped Ben into oblivion for what he did to me.”

When Imara left the washroom, she heard Ben and Thorin speaking loudly downstairs. “Serves you right, Ben Logan.”

As she crept quietly down the hall to her room, she passed Thorin’s bedroom and noticed an old trunk at the foot of his bed.

Imara heard the faint laughter of a child and thought she must finally be going crazy. “What is that? Is someone there?” Imara heard the men talking in the parlor room, so she pushed the bedroom door open and went inside then knelt before the trunk.

As she looked around the trunk, she twisted her lips to the side. “Hmm, no key. Wonder what you did with it.” As the sound of distant laughter filled her ears again, Imara took a hair pin from her hair and shoved it in the lock. After she jiggled the handles and fidgeted with the locks, she finally heard a pop. Imara smiled as she congratulated herself internally, because she never has been very good at things like that. She pushed open the locks then opened the lid.

The smell of must and stale air wafted from the old things inside making Imara cover her mouth as she choked back the stench of it.

"What in the world are you doing with an old wedding dress, Thorin? Is it Momma's? I didn't even think that lace existed that long ago." Imara lifted it up to her body and looked it over. There were several buttons missing from the back. "Oh dear! I definitely hope that wasn't Momma's," Imara said as she cringed at the thought of her father ripping it apart on their wedding night. "Such a shame though, it's ruined. Look how yellow it is. Honestly, Thorin. You really should've taken better care of Momma's things. I could have worn this someday."

As she set the dress aside, the brief flash of a memory of her looking in a mirror wearing her mothers pearls returned to her. Imara looked around as she searched her mind for an answer. "What was that? Is this thing haunted?" Imara sighed and shook her head. "I'll have to sage this place tomorrow. I hate when they watch me."

"What do we have here?" Imara picked up a large velvet bag. She squeezed it as she wondered what it held. As she pulled out the toy, she closed her eyes and heard the laughter again. Imara looked over the handmade stuffed rabbit with a button nose, then another flash came across her vision of a dark-haired baby smiling with two sharp front teeth.

She held the bunny in front of her then pressed it against her face. Imara inhaled deeply and the faint smell of a baby's fuzzy head invaded her senses. "Sofia, you made this didn't you? You said…wait."

Imara stood then looked down at the rabbit in her hand and searched around her mind. "Is that real?"

Imara looked back to the wedding dress and then she closed her eyes. When she opened them again, she looked down at her finger and the brand she tried so hard to ignore was suddenly visible again. "What the hell's going on?"

Imara's shaky hand slid up to her neck and fingered the scar as she remembered how her knees buckled underneath her as Ben's lips pressed against it. As the knocking in her head became unbearable, she put her hands to her ears and closed her eyes. "What happened to me?"

Suddenly, a flash of headlight beamed through the window and a car beeped its horn. Imara's heart began to race as she realized something just wasn't right.

"Thorin!" Imara walked out of the bedroom then down the stairs, as she crossed the house another flash on the green-eyed baby crossed her vision and she shook it away. "Thorin!" She picked up her pace until she reached the parlor, then she threw open the doors. "Thorin!"

As she came through the threshold, Thorin saw the rabbit and he stood up wide eyed. “Thorin, what happened to me?”

He wiped his hand across his mouth as he tried to quickly think of what to say. Imara raised her hand and showed him the rabbit. “Whose toy is this?” She looked at the headlights passing outside. “This isn’t right. What’s going on? Where’s Shaw? He wouldn’t just leave me like this.”

Ben leaned over with his head in his hands and sobbed. He had forgotten all about Mr. Rabbit. How could he forget about his baby’s favorite thing in the world?

Imara walked towards Thorin as Haldir shut the doors behind her. Tears started streaming down her face and her voice faltered. “Tell me, goddamn it. What happened to me?”

Haldir gently placed his hands on Imara’ shoulders and whispered in her. “I’m sorry kiddo, but there’s no easy way to do this.” As Haldir willed it so, the door to the dark corner of Imara’s mind opened and the memories came flooding from it like a swollen river.

“Eliza! No!” Imara cried out as her knees buckled. Haldir caught her in his arms then lowered her to the floor. She pushed herself to all fours and wailed for her baby. “Oh, God! Why? Eliza!”

Ben rushed to Imara and pulled her up into his chest. “Ben, he killed Eliza! I’m sorry. I couldn’t stop him. Shaw tried to get her back but he…Oh God! No!” As she sobbed against his shirt, Ben looked to Thorin then he lifted Imara up in his arms and carried her to bed.

Ben put his knee into the bed as he leaned over and laid Imara down then crawled in beside her. As he pushed her tear-soaked hair off her face and wiped her cheeks, he looked in her eyes. “I’m sorry for not telling you, baby. I didn’t want this for you.”

Imara shuddered and put her hand over her mouth as new tears began. “I’m going to get him, baby. I promise you.” Ben kissed her forehead and whispered, “Shh…” As Imara fell under his spell, her heavy eyes closed.

Watching Imara sleep soundly in his arms, Ben suddenly realized what a fool he’s been since the courtyard. “I’m so sorry baby. I love you more than anything. Please forgive me”

Chapter TWENTY-FOUR

Imara sat on the edge of the garden pool with her feet in the water. Her lips were swollen and chapped from the unending stream of tears. She inhaled deeply and smiled as the warm wind blew through her hair and eased the ache in her heart for just a second.

Dying isn't what you think it is. For supernaturals, death is a rebirth. Whether it's on Earth or in the Realm, life goes on. When Imara died, her soul tried to enter the Realm only to be ripped out of its warm embrace by the cold, evil hands of the curse. Knowing what awaits her there made the cruel reality she was living in all that much worse.

She looked into the air and begged for mercy. "I can't do it anymore. Please blessed mother let me go home this time. Don't make me come back. I'll do anything."

As she heard the door shut, she fanned her face dry then sat up straight. Thorin pulled up a metal chair and sat beside his sister. "I'm worried about you, darlin. Is there anything I can do for you, Imara?"

She glanced away from the water and shook her head no. Imara leaned over and skimmed her hand across the water and smiled to herself. "Are you going to tell me the truth now? I think the time for keeping secrets is long gone."

Thorin looked down at her and smirked. "Who told you?"

Imara shook the water off her hand then sighed and looked up to Thorin. "Thomas."

Thorin chuckled out loud. "Of course, it was. He never much approved of the way me and Shaw coddled you."

Thorin sighed as he looked up into the evening sun.

"You know, the truth is dangerous when you only have a small piece of it. This one time, Haldir told me my mate had blonde hair and blue eyes. So, every time I saw some blonde haired, blue eye woman, I naturally thought she was my mate and acted like a damn fool. It drove me completely mad. I looked for that woman everywhere and I still haven't found her. You see, having a little bit of knowledge can be a terrible thing if there's no context. I know a little bit about my mate but not enough to be useful because in the end, it isn't up to me, it's up to Fate. We knew a little tiny bit about how your life would unfold, but not enough to be able to stop what happened. We assumed they'd come after you because of your gifts. No one could've known that some secret from Anna's past would be your undoing. We all did the best we could with what we knew. I'm mighty sorry for how I drug you all around the South all those years. I did what I thought was best with the truth as

I knew it." Thorin's lip quivered and he stopped to compose himself again. "I'm so sorry, darlin. I tried so hard to keep you safe, but I just didn't know which way to turn. I was just throwing punches in the dark and hoping for the best."

Imara put her arm around Thorin's calf and put her cheek against his knee. "I know that. I appreciate everything you and Shaw ever did for me. There's no better brother anywhere Thorin. You're the absolute best." As she remembered how hard Shaw fought for her, she licked her lips and said, "You should know, Shaw did everything he could to save us. That warlock was just too powerful. He ripped Eliza right from those big strong arms."

Thorin looked up to the sky and blinked away his tears. "I have no doubt about that. Shaw loved you like you were his own daughter, Imara. You were his entire reason for living, it was his pleasure to die for you. Don't you feel guilty about that. It's what he wanted."

Imara looked down into the water as the wheels of her mind started to move. "So, remember that promise you made to me?"

Thorin pushed the tears from his eyes and said, "I've made you a lot of promises over the years, my dear. You'll need to be more specific."

Imara rubbed her cheek against the rough wool threads in Thorin's pants leg. "You promised me that if anything happened to me, you'd make sure Ben got to me again. You'd watch over him and make sure he wasn't left alone."

A terrible feeling started seeping into Thorin's core as he looked down at Imara. "Yes, darlin. I remember that."

Imara nodded and she looked out across the pool. "Good. Do you think...this curse, if something changed, say if something were to happen to me before Selvin could get to me or if I never have Eliza, that it would break the curse?"

Thorin closed his eyes. He prayed to whoever was up above pulling the strings above them that Imara wasn't thinking what he thought she was. "No Imara, I don't believe it would. I believe it would just start all over again. The curse it…it won't ever let go of you until it's done."

Imara let out a ragged breath as her eyes filled with tears. "I'm so afraid, Thorin. I can't face that man again. I won't do it. I won't let him hurt her."

Thorin looked off into the distance as he ran his fingers through her hair. "I know, darlin. I know."

Thorin remembered back to the night he and Haldir returned from New Orleans. He went home and spoke with Sofia about packing his things because they'd be leaving for the Realm that night. He and Haldir misted to the cottage only to find the bodies of his whole family. He and Haldir

spent the night stacking and burning the bodies in the corn field. Imara had only just discovered the gut-wrenching grief and horror that Thorin's been living with for 50 years. The one he would undoubtedly be facing again very soon. Thorin knew they may have to relive that nightmare many times before they got Selvin, but he promised Imara he would make sure it got done no matter how long it took.

"Don't you give up, Imara. I know you're afraid, sweet girl. No one could blame you for the thoughts swimming around that pretty little head, but we got to see this thing through. When he comes again, we'll be waiting. He won't best us this time." Imara sucked back a sob then just let them flow while Thorin gently rubbed her head.

After seeing Imara to her room, Thorin went to the parlor and poured himself a drink as he thought about his conversation with her.

"Thorin, you need to watch Imara closely. She's not right here," Haldir said pointing to his head. "She's been talking crazy things."

Ben rolled his eyes away from the picture window and glanced over his shoulder. "She lost her baby Haldir, how the fuck is she supposed to act?"

Thorin swallowed the last of his drink then set it on the table and licked his lips. "Haldir's right. She can't be trusted right now. She's making her own plans on how to end all this, and it doesn't include facing that monster again. I'll have Jasper send over guards starting tomorrow."

"I'll stay with my wife," said Ben as he watched the world pass by the window.

Thorin sat down in his chair and bumped his fist into the arm of it. "No Ben, we have work to do and she's still quite upset with you anyway."

When the men were finished talking, Ben returned to bed and laid beside Imara. She was turned away from him, but he knew she was awake. "What are you thinking, baby?"

"I don't want to get pregnant, Ben. Not until Selvin's gone. I can't lose Eliza again. I can't."

Ben felt a burning in his throat. "I understand. We'll be careful." When she didn't respond, Ben licked his lips and rubbed the mark on his chest. "Or do you mean that you don't want me anymore?" asked Ben.

Imara rubbed her fingers back and forth the soft cotton sheets underneath her. "It was you that said loving me was a mistake, Ben."

He grabbed Imara's arm and pulled her over to face him. "That's not what I said, Imara, and it sure as hell wasn't what I meant." He looked over her swollen, splotchy tear-soaked face and traced her cheek with his fingers. "I thought if I could make you not love me, or if I could try to not love you,

that all this would end. I was happy just to let you go on not remembering a damn thing. I didn't want this pain for you, Imara, but…there is no not loving you. It's like the air I breathe. I need it. I can't go on without it." He took her hand and put them to his chest. "I love you so much. I'd let you go on never remembering our life together or that you ever even knew me if it would keep you safe from all this."

The sting of her tears on her chapped skin was nothing compared to the pain coursing through Imara's body. She looked into Ben's eyes and said, "Nothing in the world ever hurt me as much as you not loving me Ben. Nothing."

Ben pushed the tears from Imara's face. "I was trying to love you the best I could, baby. I know I was wrong for what I did. Please forgive me."

Imara closed her eyes and leaned into Ben's chest. As he combed his fingers through her hair, he said, "You know, everyone's afraid baby. They all think you're going to do something awful. That you're saying things you shouldn't. Please tell me that they're wrong. You can't leave me here all alone, Imara. I was so miserable and lost without you."

Imara played in Ben's chest hair and replayed the talk she had with Thorin in her mind. "I won't Ben. You won't ever be alone."

Chapter TWENTY-FIVE

"Lub-dub, lub-dub, lub-dub." Ben's eyes snapped open as the faint ticking filled his wolf's ears. He pushed himself up to his elbows and looked around the room as the early morning light filtered through the shutters. Not seeing anything out of place, he closed his eyes and laid back down on his pillow beside Imara. "Lub-dub, lub-dub, lub-dub." The quick, faint ticking came again but this time lingered in his ears.

As it finally dawned on him where the sound was coming from, Ben rolled over to Imara and looked down at her finally peaceful face. He leaned in and smelled her, then closed his eyes and gasped as he caught the scent. Ben slid his trembling hand down to Imara's lower abdomen. As the pulse of life surged into his fingertips, Ben's face scrunched up into the ugly face of a desperately conflicted man. "Oh Eliza." Ben whispered. "Hi sweet pea."

As Imara started to stir, Ben blew out a breath through his mouth then quickly sniffed back his tears while wiping his eyes. He grabbed the hand that she had laid across her stomach and brought it to his chest. As Imara's eyes fluttered open, Ben smiled and kissed her knuckles.

Imara smiled and looked around his face. "I could get used to this."

Ben leaned in and kissed her, then said, "Me too. How are you feeling, baby?"

Imara took a deep breath through her nose as she stretched out her shoulders. "Just fine, I suppose."

Ben gently rubbed Imara's fingers as he looked at them, then he licked his lips. Imara knew Ben well and she could tell he had something on his mind. "What is it, sweetheart?"

Ben closed his eyes. "You're pregnant, baby."

Imara didn't seem surprised or upset by his words. She inhaled deeply through her nose and glanced around like she was trying to decide between two outfits. "Hmm. So, I know you all usually train all day, but I'd like to spend some time with you. Do you think you could come home early?"

This wasn't the reaction he'd expected from Imara, she'd made it very clear she didn't want to bring Eliza into the world again until the threat was over. "Whatever you want. I can stay home today. They'll understand."

Imara looked in Ben's eyes and smiled as she pushed his shaggy hair behind his ear. "I'd really like that."

As Imara flipped pancakes on the griddle, Thorin came into the kitchen and looked at her wide eyed. He glanced over to the table at Ben and he shrugged as he pulled his lips to the side.

Thorin approached his sister slowly. It's not that he wasn't happy to see Imara out of bed and acting like herself again, but after their talk yesterday, he was suspicious of this sudden change of direction. He pulled the chair out and then took a seat facing Imara. "Good morning, my dear. I'm so happy to see you up and about."

Imara stacked the pancake on a plate, then turned to slide it in front of Thorin. "Can't mope around forever."

Thorin scrunched his face up in confusion, then he looked at Ben and cocked his eyebrow. Ben shook his head. "Thorin, I'm staying home with Imara today."

Thorin looked back to Imara making pancakes and nodded. "Yes, I think that's a good idea. So, what do the two of you have planned?"

Imara swallowed the truth down hard. "I just wanted to spend the whole day with my handsome husband."

"Alrighty then," said Thorin. "Why are you cooking breakfast, Imara. Where's Andre? I pay that cook a lot of money to do this so we don't have to."

Imara turned around and smiled awkwardly. "I wanted to cook you both breakfast, and I needed a few things, so I sent Andre out to the store. He won't be long. Don't you like my cooking?"

"It's just wonderful, Imara. Thank you."

Imara tucked her hair behind her ears and turned around then started to clean up the kitchen. As she wiped down the counters, she got lost deep in thought. When she snapped back out of her thoughts, she said, "What would you like to do today Ben? This is your day. Whatever you want."

"Whatever I want?" Ben asked.

Imara put the washcloth in the sink, then wiped her hands on her apron and turned around. "Yes, of course." She licked her lips then curled them under as she sat down beside Thorin and looked across the table to Ben. "Umm, we could go on a picnic or we could take a carriage ride." Her eyes glassed over, and she fidgeted with her necklace nervously. "We could go to one of those picture shows I heard about."

Ben looked her over and pushed himself back in his chair as he pushed his plate away from him. "Imara, we could just stay here in bed all day, if it's all the same to you."

Imara nodded her head. "If that's what you want." Then, she looked back to Thorin. "Will you be back for dinner? I was going to have Andre make something special."

Thorin took Imara's hand and kissed the back of it. "I'll be here, Imara. Darlin? Are you alright?"

She sniffed back her tears. “Oh, yes. I’m fine. Everything’s just fine.” As the front door opened Imara looked over herself and said, “I’m a mess. I’m going to go get cleaned up. “ She kissed Thorin’s cheek and said, “I love you. I’ll see you at dinner.”

“Andre! Andre!” Imara said as she walked into the foyer. “Did you get it?”

“Oui, Mademoiselle,” said Andre as he pulled a small bag from his pocket and handed it to Imara.

“Merci, Andre,” Imara said then she kissed his cheek. As she walked away, Imara clutched the bag to her chest and smiled as tears streamed down her face while she walked back to her bedroom. When she got inside, she went to her dresser and tucked the bag inside the top drawer.

When Imara left the kitchen, Thorin rubbed his hand across his chin. “Huh. I don’t know about this.”

Ben took his plate to the sink then crossed his arms and faced Thorin. “She’s pregnant.”

As it all became clear to him, Thorin closed his eyes and shook his head. “Ben, you can’t leave her alone for a second. She’s already made her mind up.”

Ben nodded. “I’ll be with her all day. You still have those guards coming right?”

“Yes, Jasper said they’ll be here in the morning.”

“Good.” Ben tapped the countertop and said, “I’ll see you this evening.”

When Ben closed the bedroom door behind him, Imara was looking out over the park outside the window with her arms crossed.

“It’s just so beautiful, isn’t it?”

Ben came to her side and looked down at her. “Yes, it is.”

Imara smiled to herself. “You know, I was born in this house. Right here in this room actually a long, long time ago.”

Ben wrapped his arm around her and kissed the top of Imara’s head. “Of course, all this is, well, it’s different, isn’t it? Everything’s so...I suppose I just liked it the way things were back then. It was quiet and simple. You know, living in that cottage with you, those were the best days of my life, Ben. I don’t regret a single day of it. If I could, I’d go back there with you right now to our little house. Away from all this noise and all the people.”

Ben turned Imara to face him. “So, would I, baby. In a heartbeat. Someday we’re going to get that back, except, I think I want to live in the mountains or near a lake or something. We’re just going to go somewhere and find a little house and it’ll just be the three of us again.”

Imara threw her arms around Ben. “I can’t wait for that day, Ben. I wish, I wish we could just skip ahead.”

“So do I.” Ben kissed Imara’s forehead then looked down at her. “We don’t have to do anything, baby. I just didn’t feel like sharing you with the rest of the world.”

Imara slid her hand into Ben’s shirt and felt his bare chest. “I want to Ben. I need to.” She slowly unbuttoned Ben’s shirt as he watched her face then he pulled it free from his pants and slid it off his shoulders.

He hoped that if she could see something good in all this, that whatever she was thinking would just fade away. As Imara kissed his chest, Ben grabbed the back of her head and pulled her to his lips. Ben swirled his tongue with hers then reached down and pulled up the skirt of her dress then pulled the rest over her head and threw it on the floor.

Ben picked Imara up and she wrapped her legs around his waist as he carried her to bed, then he gently laid her down. As she pushed her panties down her hips, Ben stood over her and pushed off his pants then he climbed between Imara’s legs.

Imara closed her eyes and locked away every memory of the feeling of Ben inside her as his powerful hips pounded her into the bed. She didn’t care that the servants could hear them, she cried out for him with every thrust he landed inside her and smiled drunkenly as the bed beat against the wall.

“That sure was quite a dinner.” Thorin rubbed his belly as he slumped down his favorite chair. “That Andre was worth every penny I spent bringing him here from France. Thank you for putting that together, darlin.”

Imara snuggled up against Ben on the sofa as he put his arm around her. “Yes, he’s wonderful. I’m glad you enjoyed everything.” Imara put her hand on Ben’s chest and closed her eyes as she listened to his heart beating.

Ben placed his hand on Imara’s and rubbed the tip of his nose against her forehead. “I love you baby.”

“I love you too, sweetheart. Always.”

Chapter TWENTY-SIX

"I want someone with her at all times." Thorin briefed the guard the Order sent as he finished his coffee in the kitchen. "I don't want her to feel smothered, just keep her company. If you notice anything unusual call the Order immediately."

"Yes, of course, Mr. Parker."

Ben kissed Imara's head and pulled the covers up under her chin. "I love you, baby. I'll see you later."

As he came down the stairs, Thorin was waiting for him by the front door. After he closed the door behind him, Thorin asked, "How's she feeling today?"

"Still sleeping."

As Ben and Thorin walked across the park to the Order house, Ben saw Haldir waiting out on the sidewalk.

"You boys ready?"

Imara sat out in the courtyard and closed her eyes then took a deep breath through her nose. The smell of jasmine invaded her senses and she caught the faint note of a newborn Eliza inside the fragrance. As memories of her sweet baby came flooding back, Imara slapped her hand against her mouth and quietly sobbed against it. She knew she was being closely watched and she didn't want to set off any alarms.

After she composed herself again, Imara wiped her tears away and fanned her face. She pushed herself up from the bench and walked to the guard as she fidgeted with the charm on her necklace. "Umm, I think I'd like to go to my room now."

The guard sat in a chair outside Imara's bedroom door and flipped through the pages of a magazine while Imara slowly crept across her room. She sat down at the desk and looked down at the piece of paper sitting in front of her. She blew out through her mouth as she thought about all the things she was feeling, then she wrote down the words. When she was finished, she folded the paper in half then tucked it into the belt on her robe.

Imara looked out across the park and remembered how it used to look when she was a little girl. Everything was so strange and scary now. "Alright, then."

Imara stood and walked to the dresser then opened the top drawer. As she took the vile from the paper bag, she looked back to the door. Imara pulled the stopper from the vile then quickly drank

back the liquid. She licked her lips then wiped them off. She knew Ben would kiss her and she didn't want him to taste it.

Pulling the covers down, Imara began to laugh. She crawled into bed then straightened her robe and hair. She made sure the note was visible, then she put her hand on her belly. "He won't get us this time. We're safe sweet pea. I love you. I love you, Ben. I'll love you forever, sweetheart."

As Imara's breathing began to slow, a smile curled up on her lips. "Ben, is that you? No, it can't be." As her eyes fluttered closed, she said, "Alright. Are you sure?"

While Ben watched Thorin and Jasper spar with their swords, he heard Imara whisper "I love you, Ben," then a sharp pain tore through the scar over his heart. He fell to his knees as he clutched his chest and struggled to breath.

Thorin ran to his side, "What is it? What's wrong?"

Ben pressed his forehead in Thorin's chest as he panted for air. "Jesus, I don't know. It's my heart."

Suddenly, Haldir crashed through the door then grabbed them both by their shirts and misted them to the sidewalk outside the house. Haldir frantically ran up the stairs. Thorin asked, "What is it?"

Haldir's shaking hands fumbled with the door so he started beating on it. "She took something, Thorin. I saw her drink something from a vile."

As the words left his mouth, the trance like state from the farmhouse fell over Ben. His heart pounded in his ears as he saw Aster open the door then Thorin and Haldir run through. Ben followed behind them slowly like he was walking in quicksand. He heard muffled sounds around him as he cleared the staircase and turned the corner to the hall. He saw Thorin drop to his knees in the hallway outside the door. Tears fell from Ben's eyes as he walked past Thorin and saw Haldir shaking Imara's lifeless body against the bed.

As the world around him slowly came back to him he screamed, "No!" He leaped to Haldir and threw him to the floor. "Don't you fucking touch her!" Ben turned away from the truth and gnashed his teeth as he snarled at Haldir.

Thorin slowly approached the room then looked around. He saw the vile sitting on the dresser and his breath hitched as he realized what she'd done. He leaned over and took Haldir's hand to help him up, then he walked to the dresser and picked up the vile. Thorin turned back to Haldir and Ben then smelled the vile and pinched his eyes closed as he looked away. "Belladonna."

Haldir leaned over with his hands on his knees as he panted to catch his breath. "Goddamn it. I'm so sorry. She kept her back to me, I couldn't see it until she'd already set the bottle back down. I'm

so fucking sorry." This wasn't the first time one of Haldir's visions had gone badly. It was a skill he'd picked up over time, but it wasn't perfect and usually not particularly helpful.

Ben looked down at Imara's purple fingers then closed his eyes tight. "Un-un, no!"

Thorin came to stand in front of Ben and he wrapped his arms around his neck. Ben's body shivered as Thorin hugged him tightly. "She's gone, Ben."

Ben sucked back a breath and choked out, "Un-un!"

Thorin pushed himself away then looked in Ben's eyes. "Don't you shut this out again, goddamn it. Don't you dare forget her again. Look at her, Ben."

Ben's trembling body wouldn't let him look. He slowly reached down and touched her cold fingers as tears streamed down his face and his lips quivered. "No! Baby, what did you do!" Ben threw his arms back around Thorin and sobbed into his shoulder.

As Thorin and Jasper made the arrangements downstairs, Ben sat with Imara and held her hand. "I suppose I'll be seeing you again soon, baby. To tell you the truth, I just can't wait to find you and fall in love with you all over again. I'm sorry for the things I said to you and for pushing you away. Please forgive me, I won't do it again, I swear. I want you to know that loving you and Eliza was the best gift I ever had. I love you baby, always." Ben leaned over and kissed Imara's lips one last time and then put his hand on her belly and closed his eyes. "I love you, sweet pea."

Ben went to the parlor where Haldir, Jasper and Thorin were waiting then threw the note on the coffee table. Thorin hesitated for a minute before he finally picked it up and opened it.

I'm afraid. I'm sorry. I love you.

Thorin licked his tears off his lips then looked out the window.

"He'll be coming for you soon Ben," Haldir said. "That fucking coward will show up the minute he senses you're alone."

Ben nodded his head then blew out through his mouth. " I know. It's alright, I'm ready. When I come back, we'll pick up again. Maybe that motherfucker will die in the meantime."

"Ben, listen to me," said Thorin as he looked back from the window and leaned over in his chair. "We lost too much time this time because the two of you wouldn't remember, tell yourself, right now," Thorin said as he tapped his fingers against the table, "that you'll remember."

Ben looked Thorin in the eye." I won't forget Thorin. Please find me quickly. Please. I need to see Imara. I need to tell her I'm sorry."

"I will Ben, I swear. Wherever you end up, you come back here. You go to the Order." Thorin scratched his head as he quickly tried to think. He knew there wouldn't be much time. "It was 50 years to the day; I expect it will be again. Maybe a year or two off because she...I'll make sure to let them know you'll be coming, and I'll have people watching out for you if you can't remember."

Ben looked around the room and curled his lips under as he nodded. "Yeah. I...I think I'm going to go out for a run. My wolf, he's ready to go now."

Thorin pushed his lips together as his eyes teared over. "Don't show him any fear, Ben. Don't do it. Look him in the eye and tell him to go to hell."

As Ben walked to the foyer, he slipped his shirt over his head, then folded it and put it on the hall table. As he unfastened his belt, he smiled. "I'll be there soon, baby." When he pulled off his pants, he kicked off his shoes and underwear, then put them in a pile on the floor. "I love you, Imara." Ben closed his eyes and his face pulled up into a pained scowl as his bones and muscles snapped and his body contorted.

As the black wolf shook out its fur, it howled out low. "Owoooo."

Haldir walked out into the foyer, then opened the door and said, "I'll see you in the next life, Ben."

The wolf ran out the door then ran full measure down the street as it dodged the cars and trucks that drove by. Ben followed the scent of water until he came to the riverside then he sat down at the water's edge. The sun was beginning to set behind the trees, so Ben shifted back and let his witch eyes take in the splendor of the sunset one last time.

As the night came Ben heard a rush of wind behind him and he smiled. "So nice of you to dress for the occasion, Ben," Selvin said as he looked over the naked man.

Ben chuckled as he stood up to face him. "You know what, you can go straight to hell. Let's just get this shit over with, kind of anxious to see my girl again, you know."

"Pity," Selvin said. "She cheated me out of my rights. I will have to make her pay for that next time."

Ben pulled his lips to the side and nodded. "So, how are we going to do this? Knife in the heart again?"

Sounding disappointed, Selvin said, "I was expecting more from you Ben. The mighty son of an Alpha. Pathetic. You're really taking the fun out of this for me. You must make it more interesting for the next time."

"Don't worry Selvin. Next time, I'm going to fucking kill you." He held up his hands in front of him as he recalled his conversation with Shaw. "I'm going to crush your fucking head in these two hands right here."

Selvin's arrogant smirk disappeared as he removed his dagger from his jacket. Ben held his arms up in the air and looked in Selvin's eyes. "Next time, asshole."

Chapter TWENTY-SEVEN

The dreaded King Daniel of the Darke stood in front of the stained-glass window in the castle library with his hands clasped behind his back as Imara started to appear from the mist. Unlike every other witch he'd ever encountered, Imara's mist glowed white and gold like a cloud on a sunny day. There were no white lighters left in the Realm, or at least they kept their existence hidden away. Daniel's deep dark eyes weren't used to her shine and he needed a few moments to adjust to her brilliance.

Imara looked around the stone walls and book lined shelves until she finally saw him. The tall man before her looked like Ben with his strong, broad back and shoulders and shaggy black hair. "Ben, is that you?" When she remembered what she'd done, she shook her head disappointedly. "No, it can't be."

Daniel turned around to face Imara and he smiled warmly, a rare thing for a dark Warlock like him. "No, I'm afraid not, Imara, my name is Daniel Darke." He held out his hand to the table. "Please, won't you have a seat so we can talk. I know you've had a difficult journey. You must be tired."

Imara tucked her hair behind her ears and slowly pulled out the chair. "Alright. Are you sure?"

Daniel nodded then sat down beside her. Imara's shaking hands slid quickly back and forth on the smooth wood table so Daniel put his on top of them to calm her. Her eyes teared over and she smiled at him in her sweet, innocent way. "Umm...you just look so much like my husband, Ben. It's uncanny, really." She looked back over her shoulder and asked, "He's not here, is he?"

Daniel shook his head. "No Imara, but you'll be with him again soon enough."

She smiled and patted his hand. "Oh, wonderful. Did they get that mean old warlock Selvin?"

Daniel shook his head. Tears rolled down Imara's cheeks and she bit her lip. "Damn!" She shook her head and looked at Daniel. "Can't I please stay here? This looks like a safe place. He won't find us here."

Daniel smiled and squeezed her hand gently. "There isn't much time Imara. I can't keep you here for long, I'm still learning how to control spirits. I'm afraid it's been a little harder than I expected it to be."

Imara gave him a sympathetic grin. "It's alright, you're doing a fine job. Thank you for bringing me here. It's just lovely."

Daniel smirked to himself at Imara's kind and naive nature. He'd never met a real Lady of the Light, only read about them in the ancient texts. In the spectral light free of its shell, Imara's spirit glowed gold like the sun and illuminated the usually dim and stuffy room. "When you go back, Imara, I need you to give a message to Haldir. Can you do that for me?"

"Uncle Haldir? Oh yes, of course, I just love him so."

Daniel chuckled through his nose and nodded. "Yes, I agree. He's a very good man." As he let go of Imara's hand, he leaned over the table and grabbed a leather-bound case then set it back down in front of her and looked at Imara. "I know you're a little confused right now, so I'll try to keep it simple, but you must tell Haldir what I say word for word. Do you understand?"

Imara looked in Daniel's eyes and nodded. "Yes, sir."

Daniel tapped the case in his hand and licked his lips. "There are four knives in this case, one for each of you. They're special knives. They're made of elven steel and have the death curse imprinted on them."

Imara gasped and put her hand over her mouth. "Oh, dear. The death curse." She moved her hand from her mouth to her chest. "But what if I cut myself with it? I'm so very clumsy."

Daniel shook his head. "They can't kill the one it's made for."

As she gazed at his features, she thought of Ben and smiled. "Oh, that's brilliant. Aren't you just so smart?"

Daniel smiled at her childlike soul. "Thank you. You don't need to be afraid of Selvin anymore, Imara. I wish I could tell you that this time will be different for you and Eliza, but it won't be. I'm very sorry about that. But I do promise you that Fate is on Ben's side." He put his hand on Imara's chin and leaned in. "Tell Haldir that if these knives cut Selvin, he won't be able to undo it. It will all be over. The knives are brothers. What one does, the other knows."

Imara grinned and said, "So strange. Are you sure you're not related to Ben?"

Daniel nodded. "We are related. That's why I need for him to end this, you're both needed here. Can you tell Haldir that? Tell him to remember the vision he showed my wife. Tell him to bring Ben to me when it's over."

"Oh, I will. I promise you, sir."

Daniel stood then pulled Imara's chair out from the table and handed her the case. Imara hugged it in her arms close to her chest. "Thank you for letting me visit, Daniel. I hope I get to come back again someday. Thorin would just love it here so much. You know, he just loves old castles and such."

"You can come back anytime you like, you will always be welcome in my kingdom, but your parents and Anna have been waiting a very long time to see you. I'll have the gatekeeper keep an eye out for you and when you get back here, I'll take you to them straight away."

"Oh, you'd do that for me?" Imara put her hand on his arm. "Aren't you just the nicest man ever."

Daniel chuckled to himself and blushed. "Thank you. I can honestly say that no one's ever given me such a nice compliment."

As the ethereal mist returned and started to consume Imara's feet, she flinched and said, "Oh my!"

Daniel crossed his arms and said, "It's alright. It's just taking you back to Ben, don't be afraid. It's just a stitch in time Imara, it will all be over soon. Don't forget what I told you. I'll see you when you get back."

Imara looked at the mist swirling around her and smiled then waved. "Bye, Daniel. Thank you so much for having me over in your pretty castle."

As she finally disappeared into the mist, Daniel cupped his chin in his hand. "How in the world did Ben and I get mated to two such wonderful women?" He looked up at the ceiling and shook his head. "You have just the strangest sense of humor."

When Imara reappeared from the mist, she was standing outside a gray stone and wood bungalow by a lake in a forest, still clutching the case Daniel gave her. Imara looked around and twisted her lips to the side. "Hmm...this doesn't look familiar to me at all. I hope that nice man sent me to the right place. Oh, I'm sure he did, he was just so clever." She took a deep breath and shrugged. "Oh, well. I guess I better see where I ended up." She hummed to herself as she climbed the stairs and knocked on the door.

As she looked back out at the driveway to admire the pretty car sitting in the drive, Thorin answered the door. "Imara?" he whispered.

Imara snapped back around and smiled. "Hello Thorin. What was the name of that tune again? Was it Green Trees?"

Thorin chuckled as a wide grin came to his mouth. "No, darlin. I believe you mean Greensleeves."

She nodded and said, "Greensleeves, yes that's it." She curled her lips under and looked around again. "I don't remember this place. When did you get it?"

As he bit his lip, tears came to his eyes then he took her hand and ushered her inside. "I've been here for a while, darlin. Savannah just got too grown up for an old man like me."

"Oh yes, I completely understand. It seems right nice here though."

Closing the door behind him, Thorin sniffed back his tears and nodded. “Yes, its peaceful and quiet. Are you hungry, sweet girl? I was just about to make something to eat.”

She looked around, hoping to see Ben. “Umm, not really. Do you think I could lay down for a while? I’m mighty sleepy after that trip to the castle.”

Thorin pulled his brows down in confusion. “Why sure. Why don’t you go lay down on the couch over there while I make some phone calls? Do you want me to take that satchel for you?”

Imara looked down to the case she was carrying. “Oh, this. No, I better hold onto this. Daniel told me I had to give it to Haldir directly.”

Thorin watched Imara as she looked around the house. “Daniel?”

Imara nodded as she slumped down on the couch and pulled her feet up on the side. “Yes, Daniel Darke.”

Thorin huffed out a worried breath. “Did you say Daniel Darke?” Even witches on Earth knew of the murderous tyrant Daniel.

Imara pulled the blanket from the back of the couch and draped it over her feet then said, “Oh yes, he’s just the sweetest man and he said he’s related to Ben. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised; they look almost exactly alike. Don’t tell Ben, you know he’s so jealous and all, but I nearly ran up and kissed that man when I saw him from behind.”

Thorin put his hand over his mouth and chuckled as he listened to Imara go on. “Well, darlin, you go make yourself comfortable and I’ll get supper started and work on those calls I need to make.” Thorin turned on the floor model television to the after school cartoons. “Is this channel alright, Imara?”

“Mmm-hmm, thank you.”

As Imara closed her eyes, Thorin picked up the phone in the kitchen and dialed. “Hello, Billy? Yes, it’s Thorin Parker. I don’t suppose Mr. Logan’s made an appearance yet has he? Huh, well son of a bitch. Is Haldir in town by any chance? Fantastic. Can you let him know that Imara’s arrived and she has a message for him from King Daniel YouKnowWho. Yes, you heard that right. Who the hell knows? Uh-huh. Tell him he can use my car, just stick to the back roads and get here soon. Yes. Thank you, Billy.”

Thorin hung up the phone then wiped his mouth with his hand. “I suppose I better get the guest house ready. Looks like I’m about to have lots of company.”

Chapter TWENTY-EIGHT

"Imara! Slow down. Baby, please wait for me!" Ben called out as he ran down the narrow dirt path she was walking along. No matter how hard he tried to reach her, she was always a few steps ahead. Once he got past the tall gates, Ben followed her scent down a cobblestone road to a harbor. Imara sat on an old wooden dock with her feet dangling in the water watching the ships sail off into the fiery sunset beyond the horizon.

As a gust of wind caught her hair, the smell of warm apple pie slapped Ben in the face.

"Imara!" Ben shot up in bed and looked around the room.

"No, not with this ugly mug, I'm not."

Ben closed his eyes and shook his head. "Haldir? Of all the faces I have to see when I wake up, it's yours? Really?"

Haldir screwed the cap back on his flask then stuffed it in his shirt. "Welcome back to the land of the living, Ben."

As Ben clutched at the pain in his chest, he asked, "Where is she?"

Haldir lit a cigarette then threw the match in the ashtray as he puffed. "Up in bumfuck West Virginia somewhere with Thorin waiting for us. You ready to hit the road or what?"

Ben nodded as he tried to get his bearings. "How long have I been here?"

As he blew out the smoke from the side of his mouth, Haldir squinted and said, "A couple days maybe. Some poor cleaning lady found you in Imara's bedroom bleeding all over the goddamn place again. You really need to pick another way to come back next time."

Ben snickered to himself. "There won't be a next time and there's no other place in the world I'd rather come back to even if I do."

Haldir raised his eyebrows quickly as he pushed out his lips and took another drag. "You seem to be in a better frame of mind then the last time. That's good. We got a lot of work to do before we face that prick again. It'll be a whole lot easier if you don't start a lot of drama straight out of the gate."

Ben sat on the side of the bed and cracked his neck on each side. "Does she remember anything?"

Haldir flicked his ashes in the tray and nodded. "Seems to, but something happened when she did what she did. You might not believe this, but Imara taking her own life may have just turned things around for us."

As he shook out his hair then pushed it back, he asked, "What do you mean?"

"Not sure yet. But it looks like she went to the Realm. Says she has a message from a friend of mine there." Haldir stood up and picked up a duffle bag then threw it on the bed beside Ben. "Get dressed, I'll meet you outside."

As Ben watched the cars drive by on the interstate, he shook his head then took a bite of his BigMac. "This shit is crazy. What year is it anyway?"

Haldir threw his cigarette butt out the window then rolled it up. "1995."

Ben's head whipped to Haldir. "Did you say 1995? Are you serious?" Ben turned towards the window again and put his elbow on the door and his hand to his mouth then laughed. "That's so funny. You know I promised Shaw that even if it took me a hundred years, I'd kill that asshole."

Haldir glanced to Ben and said, "You're a year late you know."

Ben nodded. "Yeah, thanks for that, Haldir. You always did know what to say."

When they pulled up in the drive, Thorin's car was gone. They walked up to the door and as Haldir looked inside through the glass, Ben took the note from the door and opened it.

Hi Sweetheart. Thorin's taking me shopping. Go on in and make yourselves at home. I love you.

Ben smiled then he kissed the paper and put it in his pocket. Haldir opened the door and said, "Nice place. Not quite the mansion you were used to last time, is it?"

Ben shut the door behind him and shook his head. "No, it's perfect. I bet Imara just loves this place." As he felt the doorframe and looked around the full kitchen, Ben said, "She's going to be really disappointed when I tell her I can't build one just like it."

As Haldir and Ben sat at the kitchen island drinking beer, Thorin's red Cadillac pulled into the driveway. Hearing the sound of the tires hitting the gravel, Ben stood up and pushed his hair back off his face.

Haldir swallowed his beer then said, "Don't worry, Prince Charming, you look good." He nodded to the door and said, "Go see about your girl."

As Thorin was helping Imara from the car, Ben opened the front door. "Imara!"

He jumped down the stairs and ran to the car then scooped her up in his arms. As she wrapped her arms around his neck, Imara pressed her lips to Ben's and giggled. "Hello there, Mr. Logan. Did you miss me?"

He put her down then slid his hands to her cheeks. "Did I miss you? Oh, Imara, I missed you so much, baby."

Imara balled his shirt up into her hands as she started to shake her head. “I’m so sorry Ben. I’m sorry. I was so sad, and my mind was…I’m sorry for leaving you like that.”

Putting his forehead against hers, Ben took her hands and kissed them. “It’s ok baby. We’re together now. How much do you remember Imara?”

“I remember everything Ben. Everything. I feel good.”

Thorin opened the trunk and shook his head as he looked at all the bags. “Would you mind terribly prying your hands off of her and helping me with these bags, Ben? My sister made up for the fifty years of shopping she’s missed on our little excursion today. I believe I just singlehandedly saved that little town financially.” He continued to mutter to himself as Ben reluctantly let Imara go. “Maybe they’ll build me a statue. Prince Thorin…the savior of small-town America.”

While Ben and Thorin carried the bags inside, Imara hugged Haldir as he sat at the counter. “I hear you had a run in with a friend of mine.”

She put her hand of Haldir’s arm and put her other on her chest. “Oh, yes. Your friend Daniel is just the sweetest man, Haldir.” After nearly choking on the beer in his mouth, Haldir swallowed and asked, “Is that so?”

“Oh, yes. Haven’t you ever noticed his resemblance to Ben before?”

Haldir stood from the stool he was sitting on and glanced at Ben as he set the bags on the floor. “Yeah, I can see it, I guess. They all kind of have that tall, dark and handsome thing happening for them”

“Well, he said that he and Ben are relatives. Oh, wait a minute, I don’t want to have to do this twice. Thorin!”

Thorin kicked the door closed behind him and put the last of the bags down. “Yes, darlin.”

Imara patted the counter. “Come sit down so I can tell you what that nice man said.”

As Thorin sat down beside him, Ben pulled Imara to sit on his leg. “Well, the strangest thing happened. I just appeared in this library and Mr. Darke was there waiting. He said he brought me there to give Haldir a message and a gift.”

“What gift?” asked Haldir. Thorin took the brown case from Imara’s bag and put it in front of him. As Haldir uncovered the knives, Imara continued.

“Mr. Darke…”

Haldir put up his hand as he looked over the knives, “His Majesty.”

Imara put her hand to her mouth. “Oh dear. He must’ve thought my manners were just awful. Well, his Majesty Daniel told me that these knives were elven steel and that they carried the death curse. He said that Ben would need them to kill Selvin.”

“And what if he uses them on us?” asked Thorin as he picked one up and admired it.

“He can’t. It will only work for the one it’s made for. He sent one for each of us. The knives are brothers. They bind us to one another. When Selvin comes, if the knife is used against him, they will all know. If he comes for me, if I’m able to fight back, you will all know it and can come to help me.”

Haldir glanced up. “Was there anything else, Imara?”

“Well ,yes, he said to remember the vision you showed his wife. He said that’s why it was important to end this, because Ben and I were needed there. He said that he and Ben are kin and that he wanted you to bring him there as soon as this business was all settled.” Imara was breathless by this point. She tried to say everything before she forgot any of it.

Haldir picked up his knife and brought it in front of his face while reading the inscription. “Well, this certainly fucking changes things, doesn’t it?”

Imara snickered. “Yes, I believe it does. Daniel was quite sure of himself when he told me that this would be over soon.”

Ben wasn’t so hopeful. “But he’s still coming. He’s still coming to kill you baby.”

Imara put her arms around Ben’s neck and looked him in the eyes. “Yes, but I’m not afraid anymore, Ben. This curse, it’s not you Ben. You were right the first time, it’s me, it always was. Fate sent you to me to save me.”

He pushed Imara’s hair behind her ear and shook his head. “I don’t want you to suffer anymore.”

“It’s ok Ben. I’m not afraid. Don’t be afraid. That’s what this whole curse is about, making us suffer. Don’t do it. We’re going to live our lives and be happy no matter what. He can kill us, but he can’t wipe those memories away from us. You don’t have to be afraid of losing me and Eliza. We will always, always come back to you. Fuck him. Fuck that ugly, creepy bastard.”

Ben laughed out loud. He didn’t remember ever hearing Imara say fuck before, not outside of his bed anyway. He took her chin in his hand. “Where’d that dirty mouth come from?”

Imara put her hand on Ben’s. “Everything’s different now, Ben, even me. It’s a good thing. That mean old man doesn’t know what’s waiting for him this time.”

Chapter TWENTY-NINE

As Ben stood by the window, he looked out over the lake at an old man with a floppy hat fishing off the shore on the other side. Hearing Imara walk into the room, he said, “This place is like paradise, I wish we could just stay here forever.”

A familiar electricity radiated through his back as Imara put her hand on him. He lifted his arm and slid it around her, drawing her close beside him. “I know it’s just beautiful, isn’t it?” asked Imara.

Seeing the old man finally reel in a fish, Ben fisted his hand in victory and smiled. “I could teach you how to fish. We could rock on the porch swing every night. You know what? I bet it snows here. I’ve never even seen snow before.”

Imara grinned at him in the reflection of the glass. “Me fish? Well, I could watch you but I’m not touching those stinky old things.”

Ben looked down into Imara’s face. “You know, Thorin said there’s a boat tied up to the dock. You want to go for a ride?”

Putting her head against his warm chest, Imara said, “Why sure, but I don’t know how to swim.”

Ben scoffed through his nose. “Baby, you really think I’d let you drown. Damn, I don’t even know if we can drown.”

Imara turned into him and wrapped her arms around his waist. “Well, no, I don’t expect you would. I just don’t want to get all that dirty lake water all over my nice new clothes.”

He knitted his brows together as another plan came into his mind. “Well, we could just stay here, and you could shimmy yourself out of them, then you won’t have to worry about them being dirty. We could just go crawl up in bed and cuddle.”

Imara pushed her lips together as she slowly shook her head. “Oh, no, Ben. You and me are going to go have some fun. Have you ever been to the movies? I mean you lived in Savannah for a while before I got there. Did you ever?”

“No.”

“I was thinking that we could go. We could have a proper evening like normal people. Go to the show, to dinner. Just us,” said Imara.

Ben sighed as the thought of doing something in public plucked his nerves. “I don’t know baby. Are you sure? I think we might be out of place in town.”

"I'm sure I want to show off my handsome man. Besides, Thorin said during the week the movie house and restaurants are nearly empty because all the humans have to work."

Ben wrapped his arms around her shoulders, crossing them behind her head as he looked into her eyes. "We should be training. Planning."

"There's time for that Ben. But I need you now." She poked his chest lightly a few times. "Right now. We know that time is short, I don't want to waste a minute of it. Not one."

A lingering pain rose from Ben's chest then spilled out from his mouth. "Imara, when we, when we're together again, you know what's going to happen. Don't you?"

"I know, Ben. There's nothing we can do to stop that. Fate will just figure out some way to make it happen whether we want it or not." Imara thought about what Daniel told her. "I won't have my actions dictated to me by that wretched old warlock. I won't let him steal my happiness while I'm still able to have some. Now...what about that boat ride, sweetheart?"

As Imara walked out of the bedroom in her t-shirt, jeans and boots, Ben crossed his arms and shook his head. "Un-un, nope. You just get back in there and change."

Imara looked down over herself and then to him, "What's wrong with it?"

Ben twisted his lips to the side and scrunched up his nose. "I don't like this at all, it's too tight. I can see your tits right through that shirt, baby."

Imara smiled and put her arms around his neck. "Don't be silly. Besides, who's going to see them out here. The squirrels?"

"Well, at least put on a jacket or something."

Imara rolled her eyes. "Oh, Ben! Do you want me to go with you or not? There's not much daylight left."

Ben inhaled sharply through his nose and pushed out his lips as he shook his head in disapproval. "Fine! Let's go."

"Watch your step, baby." Ben held onto Imara's hand as they carefully walked down the hillside to the dock.

As they floated out in the middle of the lake in the late afternoon shade, Imara swayed back and forth with the motion of the boat. "So, what's in that bag, sweetheart?"

Ben glanced down to the bag and smiled. "It's a surprise."

While he popped the cork on the bottle of wine, Imara took in a deep breath of the clean mountain air. "Oh, Ben, this is so nice. Thank you for bringing me."

Ben watched Imara's face as she closed her eyes when the sense of peace finally washed over her. "Here you go, baby." As she took a sip and licked her lips clean, Ben thought back about their wedding night. "When we first got married, this is the kind of stuff I wanted to do for you, but I, I had so much work to do. I'm sorry I couldn't make more time for you and Eliza. I regret a lot of things I did and didn't do, but that's the biggest one, Imara. You did everything you could every day to show me how much you loved me, and I couldn't even take you on a proper date just once."

Imara frowned at Ben's pain, she knew it ate him up inside. "Ben, there was no better husband or father in the universe. You were the best. Don't you feel guilty. Those were the best days of my life. I'd give anything to go back to our life on the farm, sweetheart. Anything. Keeping house and being Eliza's Momma and waiting for you to get home so you could love all over me, that was everything I ever wanted. It still is."

Ben looked her in the eyes. "You think they got all that in the Realm? We could just get a little house out in the country somewhere and be alone?"

"Yes, I think they do. You know that Daniel man, he said that my parents and Anna were waiting on us, Ben. That when I got back, he'd take me to them right away. I know you're scared for what's going to happen, but don't you be. What's waiting over there is good, sweetheart. Don't you be afraid for me. Don't let it cloud your thinking. You have to beat him. You have to rid the world of that kind of evil and find your way to me again. Do you understand? No matter what he does to provoke you, you keep your wits and you kill him."

Taking Imara's hand, he rubbed his thumb over her branded finger. "I will, baby. I swear to you."

Imara squeezed his hand. "I know you will. You're the only one who can. It was meant to be this way."

When they returned to the guest house, Ben opened the door and flipped on the lights as Imara went inside. "I am going to get a nice, hot shower and wash all this nature off of me? You feel like joining me?"

Ben closed the door behind him and locked the door. "Oh, yes ma'am."

While Imara turned on the taps and adjusted the temperature, Ben looked over her naked body and his mouth watered. Watching her standing under the warm downpour, Ben slid down his pants and kicked them off his feet.

As he closed the shower door behind him, he grabbed the bar of soap from the dish then rubbed it between his hands to a lather. He started by rubbing deep circles on her back as she tilted her head side to side and the water flowed down her chest. His fingers found their way to the curve of her buttocks and slid up and down her crack making her thighs squeeze together.

Ben lathered his hands again then gently kneaded her breasts. As the warm water fell from her nipples, it dripped from the dark curls between her legs. The warm humid air carried the sweet smell of her juices through it making Ben inhale deep and close his eyes as it took him back to those hot summer nights on the farm when they would make love all night long.

As he carefully fell to his knees, Ben began his adoration of the only goddess he ever knew, the only one that mattered at all. He kissed the curve of her lower belly as it met her navel then parted her folds with his two middle fingers. When Ben's tongue found her fleshy bundle, he pulled it into his mouth as he flicked and sucked. Imara fisted his hair in her hands on each side of his head as she looked down to watch Ben work his magic on her.

Imara trusted Ben with her very soul so when her knees buckled and she lost complete control, she knew Ben would hold her steady so she could enjoy every last moment of his mouth against her body.

Chapter THIRTY

"Hurry up, baby, the shows going to start soon." Ben waited in the living room of the guest house while Imara got ready for the afternoon matinee in town. As he looked in the mirror over the fireplace, Ben pushed his shaggy black hair back off his face then shook it back out. He hated his ears and how they stuck out, but no matter how he wore his hair, it never quite covered them. He stepped back and turned to the side as he admired his arm muscles and how they stretched the fabric of his shirt.

"My, my, my." Imara stood in the doorway watching Ben flex for his reflection. He smiled at her in the mirror as she walked over to him and wrapped her arms around his waist. "You're incredible, Ben. I'm not sure I want all those other women out there looking at you."

Ben turned around and pulled her hips closer to him as he glanced down to her red lips. "We can stay here, baby, if you want. I don't want to share you anyway. I'd be more than happy to climb back into bed with you all day."

Imara pushed out her lips and shook her head no. "Un-un. No, sorry, my love. In the hundred or so years we have been married we have never been on a proper date; you can brave the next few hours with me."

"Alright then, Thorin's waiting out on the porch. Let's get moving." Smacking her ass as she walked by him, Ben looked down over Imara's body from the back. He'd never seen her in anything but dresses and skirts, but the way those jeans hugged her curves sent shivers down his spine. He couldn't wait to get her back home and peel them back off again.

"You now, I believe this is the first time we've ever been car riding together before," said Imara as she looked out over the farmlands on their way into town. "I must admit that these leather seats are more comfortable than that old wagon of yours."

"Uh-huh." Thinking about his parents, Ben's chest ached as he saw the tall corn growing along the roadside. The simple farm life was all Ben ever really wanted but was the furthest thing from his grasp anymore. "Maybe when…someday you and me are going to live on a farm again, or maybe in a cabin at the lake.

Imara could feel the longing in Ben's heart for the simpler times when they first were married. It was all she wanted as well. She smiled and squeezed his hand. "We are living in a cabin by a lake, Ben." She unlaced a finger from his grasp and pointed it down into the leather seat. "Right now, we are living that life. Be here with me now, sweetheart. Save the dreaming for bedtime and live with me right here and now while we still can."

Hearing her words, Ben sighed and nodded. “I guess I spent a lot of time wishing and hoping that I could save you, that I ended up just…” Ben pushed his lips together tightly as he huffed out a disgusted breath through his nose and looked out the window. “I’m sorry, baby.”

“Stop, Ben. I don’t blame you. This curse is meant to torture you, not just by what he does to us, but what you’re doing to yourself with your guilt. You need to let that go and just love me.”

Ben clicked his tongue then kissed the back of Imara’s hand. “That won’t be a problem. I’ll love you until the very end.”

When Ben closed the car door behind Imara, he leaned into the window and took the cash from Thorin’s hand. “Alright, Ben, you should have plenty of money there for the movie and supper if you want it. You sure you don’t want me to pick you all up afterwards?”

Ben shook his head. “No, I can get her home alright. Thanks for the ride though.”

As they stood in front of the movie posters, Ben crossed his arms and sighed. “Any of this look good to you, baby.”

“Umm…don’t you laugh at me or anything, but can we watch this one? The one with the toy sheriff.”

Ben chuckled as he looked over at Imara. “Sure, baby, whatever your little heart wants.”

When they got to the ticket counter, Ben took the money from his pocket and said, “We want to see that show with the toys please.”

The woman behind the glass said, “That’ll be $5.00.”

Ben and Imara looked at each other in shock. “Excuse me ma’am. Did you say $5.00?”

“Yes, sir.”

Ben huffed through his nose and raised his eyebrows as he handed her his money. When they walked away with their tickets, Ben leaned over and said. “Jesus H Christ! If they’re going to rob you, they should at least wear a mask, so you know what’s happening. $5.00? That more than I made in a week back home on the farm.”

Imara wrapped her arm in Bens and sighed. “It’s just one day, Ben, and it’s not like me and Thorin can take all of that money of my family’s with us when we go to the Realm anyways. You worked hard all your life, let’s just enjoy this. You’ve earned every penny of it.”

Ben groaned and said, “I can’t wait to see what supper’s going to cost.” He lifted up his arm, “Maybe they want my lifeblood.”

When they sat down in their seats, Ben looked around the dark theater. “Looks like we’re all alone, Imara.”

“Oh, good.”

Leaning into her ear, Ben asked, “You want to fool around?”

“No, I do not. You just behave yourself, Mr. Logan.”

As Imara rested her head on her arm along the seatback in front of her, Ben watched her while she laughed and marveled at the technology. His smile fell as he suddenly realized that someone like Imara, so sweet and pure of heart, just wasn’t meant for this world. That the truth was that the worst curse of all was that they were born into the wrong world and forced to continue in it long after their times were through. They just didn’t belong there anymore, but no matter what they did they had to keep returning anyway. They were living ghosts haunting the world with no way of crossing over.

“That was a right funny picture,” said Ben as he walked out of the theater with his arm around his wife. Catching a glimpse of the drugstore around the corner of the small shopping center, Ben glanced at Imara as he thought of a way to say it. “I was thinking that we should go get some…well, Thorin was telling me about these things you could buy so you don’t get pregnant.”

Giving him a quick smile, Imara just nodded. She didn’t have the heart to tell him that Daniel had already warned her that Eliza was coming again. “Alright, whatever you think is best.”

When the doorbell above their heads clinked, Imara looked over the aisles of supplies. While Ben went to the counter to inquire about the condoms, Imara browsed the shelves. In the back corner of the store was a photo booth, Imara looked over the pictures on the outside and smiled to herself.

With a brown paper bag in his hand, Ben came to Imara’s side. “I hope you’re alright eating back home, those things were even more expensive than the dang movie. I cleared the damn shelf though, so I hope you’re feeling energetic.”

Grazing Ben’s arm with her fingers, Imara looked at Ben and nodded to the booth. “Take a picture with me.”

Ben pulled down his brows and groaned. “Really?”

“In three lifetimes, we’ve never had a picture taken of us. I want one Ben.”

As Ben tried to figure out how to put money into the machine, Imara slid across the seat and straightened her hair in the mirror. After he victoriously got the coins inserted, Ben climbed through the curtain then sat down beside her and gave her a kiss on the cheek just as the flash snapped.

Imara smiled and pushed him playfully away. “You ruined it.”

Ben shook his head. “Nah, baby, it keeps taking them for a minute.” He put his arm around her back then pulled her in close and kissed her lips as the flash snapped again.

“Alright then. Let’s get at least one good one, please.” Imara took a deep breath then faced forward and smiled. Ben rolled his eyes and smirked at the camera as it flashed.

“There it is, now kiss me.” Ben tickled Imara as he puckered his lips to try to kiss her. She roared out in laughter as his fingertips found her ribs and the flash clicked again.

Ben pulled Imara onto his lap then put his hand on her cheek. “I’m not letting you out of here until you kiss me right.” Imara leaned into Ben’s face then gently pressed her lips to his as the flash snapped for the last time.

While Ben waited with his back against the booth, Imara tapped her foot of the floor as her eyes glanced around the delivery door. When the pictures finally came, she slid them out and put her hand over her mouth. “Oh, look at that Ben. I’ve never had my picture done before, is that what I really look like?”

Ben bent over to look at them and nodded. “Yep, that pretty girl is you, baby.”

Imara sighed as she curled her hair around her finger and inspected each photo. “When…if we, if she comes, Ben, I want pictures.”

Ben rubbed his forehead then looked at Imara. “She’s not.”

Imara nodded. “But if she does. I want pictures. It’s getting harder to remember her face and…I don’t want to forget. I miss her so bad, Ben.”

As his eyes teared, Ben blinked hard and blew out through his mouth. “I know.” Ben put his arm around Imara’s neck then pulled her to him and kissed the top of her head. “We will.” Pulling her away from the booth towards the door, Ben leaned into Imara’s ear and said, “Now let’s get back home. I got about a hundred of those things, when I’m done you’re going to need about a week to recover.”

Chapter THIRTY-ONE

"Welcome to the North Woods, Ben. I'm Lord Nicholas," said the long black-haired man in a green robe as he stood outside the ancient gates beyond the narrow dirt path.

Ben looked around at the city by the sea surrounded by the cover of lush forest and tall cliffs. "Thank you, sir. Is my wife here by any chance? I've been looking for that little woman everywhere."

"They're waiting for you inside," said Lord Nicholas as he nodded beyond the gates. He stepped aside to allow Ben entry. As he turned slowly around, Ben took in the buildings made of stone and wood with intricate carvings in the old language on them. "Is this real, sir?"

Lord Nicholas walked beside him with his hands clasped behind his back. "You're dreaming, but not for long. She'll be waiting for you, safely wrapped in these cliffs and shores. You don't need to worry anymore. We'll take good care of her until you get here. You know, your wife is quite special. We're very honored that she chose us."

Ben glanced around in search of her and said, "Yes, I know she is."

As he crossed the Great Hall, the red and orange autumn leaves fell around him while the earthy smell of dirt and sea water sank into nose. Ben hear the familiar laughter coming from the library that overlooked him. He looked to Nicholas and put out his hand. "Thank you for looking after her." Nicholas smiled politely and shook his hand. "You don't need to thank me. The time will come when it is I who will be thanking the two of you."

Ben bit his lip and furrowed his brows as he wondered what he meant. Lord Nicholas held out his hand to the staircase, "You'll find her upstairs, I believe."

When Ben climbed the stone staircase, he smelled the scent of apple pie when he reached the top. He followed his nose through the library filled with ancient books and statues until he came to a rounded wooden door. He pushed it open to find Anna, Imara and Eliza sitting at a table near a window with the setting sun illuminating them. Imara looked up at Ben and smiled then said, "We've been waiting for you, sweetheart. Welcome home."

Ben smiled as his eyes fluttered open until he realized he was alone in bed. He sat up and looked around then heard Imara and Haldir in the yard outside. Ben rubbed his head then sighed. "Dammit. We were almost there, Imara."

After he left the bathroom, Ben grabbed a shirt from the dresser and pulled it over his head while he walked outside. Thorin was holding up his hands while Imara punched at them and Haldir coached her on her moves.

Noticing Ben, Imara stopped and said, "Breakfast is in the kitchen, sweetheart." He snickered to himself as he saw Imara swat at her brother while he walked across the yard and into the main house.

He grabbed a couple pieces of bacon and some coffee then returned. "What the hell are you doing exactly, baby?"

She stopped and blew her hair out of her face then said, "Oh, Haldir's teaching me to fight."

He took a sip off coffee then cleared his mouth. "Yes, I see that. I bet you've been wanting to take a whack at old Thorin for a long time for being so mean to you all those years, haven't you?"

Thorin looked over to Ben and said, "Yeah, well, you're next, you beast."

Ben smiled as he sat and watched Imara. He knew it was a good idea, but he honestly couldn't imagine her ever hurting a flea much less a powerful warlock. But if he was going to kill her anyway, Ben liked the idea of her landing a blow or two before he did.

Haldir set up a knotty stump in the yard and then brought out the case that Daniel sent. "Gather round children. If these little beauties are the key to finally killing that prick, then we need to spend some time learning to handle them."

Ben put his arms around Imara and inhaled her hot, salty aroma. He leaned in her ear and whispered, "I like you all sweaty like this. I say we ditch all this and go wash you up good in that big old shower again."

Imara smacked his arm and said, "Shh…later, sweetheart."

"You're damn right later," Ben said then he playfully bit her neck.

As Imara attempted to throw the knife, Thorin jumped out of the way when it came sailing towards his feet. She blew her hair off her face again in frustration then put her hands on her hips. "This is hopeless, Haldir."

Haldir chuckled out from under his bushy reddish blonde beard. "Don't be ridiculous. You're doing just fine." As he stood behind her, Haldir took her hand then placed the knife in it as he softly said instructions in her ear. A twinge of jealousy started in Ben's center as he clenched his jaw and cracked his neck. Even for a man Haldir's age, no one could deny his rugged good looks. He'd been quite famous in Savannah for his playboy nature and even Imara acted like a silly little girl in his presence.

When Haldir finally gave the command, Imara closed her eyes then released the knife. As it found the center of the target, Imara clapped her hands together and jumped up and down then threw her arms around Haldir. “I did it!” She turned to Ben who was looking less than thrilled to see her in another man’s arms. As she let go of Haldir she walked to Ben and grabbed his hands in hers. “Did you see that, Ben? I did it.”

Ben huffed out through his nose and grinned. “ I saw it, baby.” He wrapped his arm round her neck and pulled her into his side. “You did good. I like the new tough girl.” He grabbed her bicep in his hand. “Let me see those muscles.”

“Alright, Ben. You’re up,” said Haldir as he motioned with his hand. When Ben took the knife in his hand, the ancient writing carved into the side glowed gold in his hand as the raspy voice spoke inside his head in the old language. “What the hell’s that?”

Haldir crossed his arms and pulled on his beard as he shook his head. “Is it speaking to you?”

Ben glanced to the ground as he struggled to listen to the distant voice. “Yeah. Little good it does, I don’t know what the hell he’s talking about.”

Haldir huffed as he mulled it over. “I’d wager that little voice in your head has an important message.”

Ben looked in his hand at the knife and chuckled. “Yeah that figures, doesn’t it? He’s probably popping off the secret to life and the directions to Atlantis and I don’t speak a damn word of the language.”

Thorin chuckled out behind Ben as he took aim again. Ben closed his eyes and took a deep breath then opened them and threw the blade. It sunk deep into the stump, then the hard piece of tree fell in two before him.

Haldir’s head snapped back in surprise then he looked back to Ben. “I think I know what he was saying. Ben, Daniel is the most powerful being I’ve ever met, but you’re older and, if I were a betting man, that means your blood is purer.”

Ben put his hand in his pocket and laughed. “I’m just an old farm boy that knows some fancy tricks and likes to be dog sometimes. I’m definitely no goddamn warlock king.”

Haldir rubbed the back of his neck as he sized Ben up. “You’ve never had any proper training Ben. Neither did he when he got to the Realm, he wasn’t always the man you’ve heard tale of.”

As he shook off the silliness of the idea, Ben grinned and said, “Mmm-hmm,” as he walked past Haldir and claimed his knife. Walking back to Haldir, Ben said, “Anyhow, I don’t even need to know how to throw a knife, because I’m going to kill that old piece of shit with my bare hands.”

Haldir sighed and said, “Apparently, you didn’t hear the words coming out of Imara’s pretty little face.”

Ben crossed his arms and turned to face Haldir. “I heard her just fine.”

Haldir came closer and said, “Well, then, you understand that it has to be the knife Ben. To end this, to keep Selvin from coming back and starting this whole nightmare over again, you have to use the knife.”

Ben nodded his head with a scowl on his face. “I got it. But that don’t mean I’m not going to beat that son of a bitch until he’s nothing but a bloody pile.”

Haldir grinned and slapped Ben’s shoulder. “Now we’re talking. So, have you ever set a fire with your mind before?”

Ben knitted his brows together as he twisted his lips to the side. “Are you serious?”

Haldir nodded. “It’s in your blood, Ben. Daniel is the Master of the Flames, I have to believe you have it inside you too.” Then he sniffed as he thought it over. “Yeah, I bet you are. Lady of the Light and Keeper of the Flame.” As he thought back over his visions, he nodded. “It was meant to be that way. I guess we have some new skills to work on, don’t we?”

Chapter THIRTY-TWO

As Ben watched the lightning cross the sky from the window, he wiped his hand across his mouth and shook his head. “Dammit Ben! How could you be so fucking stupid?” He took a ragged breath then wiped the tears from his eyes as he heard Imara yawn and stretch herself awake.

Finally spotting Ben across the dimly lit room, Imara smiled to herself. “Good morning handsome. Why don’t you climb back in here and love me some more?”

Ben sniffed back his tears then swallowed them down as he turned to face her. Imara’s eyes drew down in confusion when she saw his worried expression then when she thought for a moment, she realized what was bothering him. “I’m pregnant again, aren’t I?”

Ben’s whole body jerked as he released the sob he’d been holding back. “I’m sorry, baby. We’ve been so careful. I’ve even been wearing those goddamn rubbers all for nothing.” Wiping his forearm across his eyes, Ben gritted his teeth. “Why is this happening, baby? I’d let that fucker kill me a million times, but I can’t lose her again. My heart can’t take it anymore.”

Imara closed her eyes and smiled a pained grin. “Some things are bigger than us, Ben. Eliza’s part of this curse too.”

Ben slunk down onto the bed and pressed his head into the mattress as the ache of guilt tore through his gut. Imara put her hand on his arm and said, “Don’t do this to yourself, honey. It’s out of your hands.”

As he clenched up against the bed in pain, Ben cried, “I may as well have killed her myself, Imara.”

Imara rolled over and curled herself over his back. “No sweetheart. Don’t you do that. What’s happened to us was out of our control from the very beginning. How it end’s though, Ben, that is under your control. And, this time, will be different. Fate is finally on our side, don’t give up on me now.”

As he pushed himself up and wiped his eyes, he said, “No matter what I do, it ends up with losing you both.”

Imara pulled on Ben’s arm until he finally crawled into her arms and buried his face between her breasts.

“You know, no one really knows what will happen to them. If it hadn’t been that awful man that came for us, it could have been a fire or a tornado or any number of things that could have killed us. The only thing that makes us any different from other folks having a baby right now is that we happen to know the manner in which it’s coming. And, you know what, this time, I’m grateful for

that. You told me that your biggest regret was that you didn't get to spend enough time with us. Well, all we got right now is time. We get one glorious year with her and we're not going to waste a single second of it. We're going to spend every day of sweet pea's life showing her love and happiness. No matter what happens to us, we'll always have those memories , sweetheart."

Imara wrapped Ben's hair around her fingers and kissed his forehead as he breathed hard against her chest. "The clock's ticking, baby."

Imara rubbed her lips against his skin and moaned softly. "Yes, it is. But you know what? I've been to the other side of it all. When I was in that castle, you know what I felt for the first time in about a hundred years? I felt safe, Ben. I looked around at everything and I know that Selvin couldn't touch us there. You're going to end things this time and you're going to meet me there and we'll never be apart again, Ben. So, to that end, I can't wait for the clock to run out." Imara snickered out as she gasped back her tears. "It's almost over, Ben. We're almost home and that sounds pretty good, don't it?"

Ben looked up to Imara's face and she leaned down to kiss his lips. "It's almost over," she whispered.

He smiled through his tears and nodded as the soothing pitch of Imara's smooth Savannah drawl rubbed his aching heart. "You know what I'm going to do? Down at that store when I was waiting on those worthless rubbers, I saw they had these little cameras. You just take the pictures and take the camera back to the store then pick up the pictures later. I'm going to go buy a big stack of them and take pictures of everything. Everything. That way when…if there's a next time, Thorin can just pack them away in that trunk with all our other things for us."

Imara smiled and rubbed Ben's arm. "Yeah, that's exactly what we should do."

Looking over Imara's breasts as they popped out of her night gown, Ben raised his brows and slid his fingertips down her chest. "I could think of a few things I'd like to get some pictures of right now."

Imara shook Ben's hair in her hands. "Well, it doesn't look like there will be any training going on today anyway. Why don't you just climb on up, sir. You're looking like you could use a little Southern comfort right now."

Pushing Imara to her back, Ben slid his leg across her and lingered over her body. He tucked a curl behind her ear making Imara shiver as his fingers glided across her skin. He slid his fingers across her lips and said the truest thing to ever cross his, "I just want to love you both as long as I can."

Imara could feel the conflicted feelings of desperation and joy at the thought of Eliza returning. Ben was the best man Imara knew and his doubts about himself broke her heart. "Here I am, Ben. We're still yours, no matter what we'll always be yours."

As she pulled up her gown, Ben freed himself from his boxers. Imara felt her body relax as Ben traced her jaw with his soft kisses until they met her ear earlobe. As his pulsing cock found its way home, Imara's lips grazed Ben's shoulder while he rocked in and out of her. He didn't care about satisfying her or filling her with his seed. For these few moments, he just wanted to be one with his wife, part of the family he created. They were all that existed.

Imara slid her nose across Ben's jaw, inhaling the warm, musky smell of her long-ago home, of Ben. He released a pent-up breath as he cried softly against her ear. Imara sniffled back her own pained sobs as she felt Ben's grief for her eventual death wash over him. His feelings of failure for not being able to protect what he loved. "I wish we could stay this way forever, Imara," he said between hitched breaths.

She placed an open mouth kiss on his chin and said, "Someday we will, Ben. I promise you."

While the midsummer storm raged against the house outside, Ben drifted off back to sleep in the comfort of Imara's embrace. He dreamed he walked through a dense, dark forest.

The ravens overhead cawed out a warning to him as he came to the opening beyond the trees. As Ben left the forgiving shade of the tree cover overhead, a blinding light hit his face.

As he turned his head away from the false sun above him, Ben held out his hand to shield his eyes from the bright illumination. Walking through the field of war-torn bodies, Ben saw a castle built into a mountain side through the rays of gold and white light. When his eyes finally adjusted to the glowing orb above the battlefield, Ben said, "Baby, is that you up there? What in the hell are you doing Imara?"

Chapter THIRTY-THREE

“Ben, have you seen Mr. Rabbit?” Imara yelled from the living room floor with a ball of light by her head.

“I feel like we’ve had this conversation before, baby.” Ben leaned against the doorway of the bedroom and he laughed to himself as he watched Imara’s ass move while she reached under the couch in search of Eliza’s toy rabbit. “Damn, girl. Why don’t you reach a little further? I think he’s way in the back there somewhere. You know how tricky those damn bunny rabbits can be.”

Imara sat up and looked over her shoulder as she triumphantly shook the rabbit at Ben. “I didn’t need your help, anyhow. I found it all by myself.” She walked to the playpen and handed Eliza her toy then pushed her long dark hair back off her little face. “There you go sweet pea.”

Ben wrapped his arms around Imara’s waist and pulled her ass into his hips. “I like to watch you on your hands and knees. I just can’t help myself, it’s the wolf in me.”

Imara turned around in his arms and slid her arms around him. “So, what do you want to do tonight?”

Ben pinched his lips together and shook his head. “You know what I want, baby.”

Rolling her eyes, Imara said, “Yeah, that’s what you always want. It’s our date night, so pick something.”

“Damn hell, Imara, I think we’ve done everything this little town has to offer a few times over the last two years.”

Imara nodded and sighed through her nose as she glanced outside and thought about it. “We could go back to that field and have a picnic again; the wildflowers are in full bloom and the raspberry bushes should be full.”

Thinking about all the naughty things he did to his wife the afternoon they spent there, Ben nodded. “Yes, ma’am, that’d be just fine with me.”

Imara grinned and poked her finger in his chest. “Yeah, I thought you’d like that one, you dirty old man.”

As the distant rumble of thunder echoed behind the mountains, Imara groaned. “Well, I suppose that will have to wait until next week by the sounds of it.”

Ben buried his face in Imara’s neck and nibbled on her skin. “It’s alright, I like fucking you in bed just the same.”

Imara's knees buckled under as his tongue found her mark. As her eyes closed tight while the euphoric wave of pleasure gripped her between her legs, a knock came to the door. Ben breathed in sharp through his nose as he released Imara and said, "God dammit, your brother has the worst timing. That man's been cockblocking me for a century now." As Imara pulled away from his warm chest, Ben yelled, "What is it Thorin?"

Thorin opened the door and smirked as he realized he was interrupting something he wasn't meant to. "We were just wondering if you were going to stay in since there's a storm coming."

Ben rubbed the back of his neck and nodded. "Yeah, I suppose we will."

Thorin peeked over to the playpen and looked over to Eliza. "We were going to order something to eat. You want that pizza or the Chinese?"

Blowing out in disgust at both options, Imara asked, "Bleh! Isn't there anything else around here?"

Thorin shrugged and pushed out his lips. "Sorry, sugar."

As she rubbed small circles on Ben's back and he rolled out his neck, she said, "Alright, whatever you two want I suppose."

Tapping his knuckle against the doorframe, Thorin clicked his tongue as he decided. "Alright, give it about thirty minutes or so."

As the door shut behind Thorin, Ben stooped down with his chin resting on his arm against the playpen as he rubbed his hand along Eliza's head. "She's asleep, baby."

Imara sat on the couch and sighed a relieved breath. "Good. She's been mighty fussy today. I don't guess she likes thunderstorms either."

Ben stood then came to the couch and sat beside Imara while he rubbed his hand back and forth on her thigh. "So, we got thirty minutes and she's asleep. What do you say we finish what we started earlier?"

Imara rolled her eyes and looked over at Ben. "Seriously? Don't you ever get enough of me?"

A side smile curled up on Ben's face as he looked at her sweet, red lips. "You know we don't have much time, baby. I just want every drop of you I can wring out."

It was nearing the end for Imara and Eliza, and she knew it. She felt it in every cell of her body. Each minute she had with them now was a gift she wanted to savor and lock away in her memory. And then there was Ben. What if Daniel was mistaken and Ben had to go on without her again? Imara put her hand on Ben's and squeezed. "You're absolutely right."

Ben licked his lips as his smile fell. "So how do you want it this time, Mrs. Logan?"

There was nothing Ben did to her that she didn't enjoy. Their bodies were made for one another and every touch from him sent her out of her mind. "Surprise me."

Ben stood up and took Imara's hand then pulled her up. When they got to the bed, Ben sat Imara down then knelt at her feet like the divine spirit she is as he slid his hands up her thighs and hooked his fingers in her panties. "I can't wait a half hour. I'm starving. I need something sweet to eat."

Imara giggled and then bit her lip as she laid back on the bed while Ben pulled off her panties. As he leaned into her, he inhaled deeply through his nose and smiled as her scent filled him and made his mouth water.

He wiggled her lips open with his nose then sucked on them as he pulled them apart. Ben slowly licked her entrance then pushed his tongue inside and lapped it against the bundle of nerves. Imara's breath hitched as the roughness of his tongue ignited the fire inside her like striking a match against the flint.

Ben pulled out his tongue and slid his finger inside then went to work on her clit. He slowly flicked his tongue up and down her bud as he massaged her with his finger. He slurped against her skin as he took turns sucking her and flicking his tongue. As Imara's legs started to twitch, Ben removed his finger and put her legs over his shoulders.

Ben growled because he knew the vibration mixed with his tongue's movements drove Imara crazy. He got more aggressive with his pace as he sucked against her, seeking out her moans and cries. When he finally felt her legs quake against his head, she moaned out, "OH, Ben! Ah! Ah!"

He gave her one last flick of his tongue then pushed her leg as he motioned for her to flip over. "You know what time it is, baby."

As Imara spread her torso out across the bed before her, Ben unzipped his pants and pulled them down to his feet as he looked over Imara's ass in front of him.

He slid into Imara like a fine oil as her pussy dripped with a combination of her juices and saliva. Imara's thirsty cunt swallowed Ben quickly as her tight wall's gripped him and he groaned. "Mmm!"

As she braced for what came next, Imara shivered in anticipation. "We don't have much time, sweetheart. Get to work."

Ben smirked at Imara, "Oh, yes, ma'am."

As the thunder rolled outside, Ben grabbed her hips and pounded into Imara like a jackhammer. The bed beat against the wall as Imara slid back and forth across the mattress and grunted through gritted teeth. "Oh, God! Ben! That's so good."

“Is it good baby? You like that? How about this?” Ben smacked Imara’s ass, making her giggle.

Ben slid his hand to Imara’s shoulder and pulled her back to meet his thrust as he gritted his teeth and pumped himself against her with every ounce of strength he had.

When Imara pulled up the bedsheets in her hand and her eyes closed and her lips parted, she cried for more. “Yes! Oh, Ben! Yes! Right there.”

“Right there?”

“Yes! Oh! Don’t stop!”

Ben closed his eyes as Imara’s legs shivered and her cunt throbbed around him. As his cock pumped its gift inside Imara, Ben smiled and moaned out, “Baby, that was amazing.”

Imara squeezed out the last of Ben and smiled as she pushed her hair off her sweaty forehead. “Mmm! Yes, it was. Where have you been hiding that?”

Ben pulled out carefully then turned and sat on the bed beside her. “Ugh! Phew! I don’t know. I told you seeing your ass like that does something to me.” He looked over to her still bare ass beside him then smacked her cheek. “We best get going before Haldir drinks all the beer.”

Imara slid back off the bed and grabbed her panties from the floor. “I’ll be right back.”

As Imara went to the toilet, Ben pulled up his pants and waited for her. The rain had started to trickle down as an eerie black sky was forming off in the distance and Ben got a sinking feeling in his gut. “Shit! Imara hates thunderstorms. That scaredy cat won’t sleep at all tonight.”

Chapter THIRTY-FOUR

Imara stood beside the big picture window nervously playing with her necklace as lightning flashed in the background. “Just relax. It’s just a storm. You’re getting yourself all worked up over nothing.” Summertime in West Virginia brought lots of storms, but this night felt different. Goosebumps rose on her arms and neck as her veins coursed with energy.

She picked Eliza up from the play pen then put a blanket over her as Ben came from the bathroom. Something inside her told her to hold on tight. Imara’s heart was already racing as her fear of lightning began to overwhelm her and she found it hard to breath. “We better get moving before it really starts pouring. It’s dreadfully ugly out there.”

Ben kissed Imara’s forehead. He always thought it was amusing that a white lighter was afraid of something like that, she should be able to tame the lightning like Zeus himself if the stories were right, but he knew the fear was very real for her. “Yeah, I’m ready. Don’t be scared, baby. It will all be over soon.”

As Imara closed her eyes and took a deep breath, Daniel’s voice rang through her ears. *It will all be over soon. Don’t be afraid. You’re coming home and I’ll be waiting for you.* Imara gasped as you opened her eyes. “Yes, I know it will. I’m ready to go.”

Ben held the door while Imara walked quickly outside then he followed her through the yard to the main house where Thorin was waiting by the door. “That fella on the television set said that a terrible storm’s heading this way any minute now.”

As he shut the door behind them, Ben shook the rain from his hair. “Yeah, I can feel it coming. My wolf’s all worked up right now, he’s pacing like a son of a bitch wanting to get out.”

Haldir squinted his eyes as a suspicion grew inside him. He slid his hand down to his hip and fingered the handle of his elven blade. “Everyone’s at the ready? Yes?”

Ben looked to Haldir as Imara laid Eliza back down in the playpen in Thorin’s living room. Suddenly his mind filled with all of Haldir’s thoughts and Ben’s mouth dried as the adrenaline started to surge through his veins. “Yeah, I got it. I’m ready.”

While Ben and Haldir kept watch at the windows, Imara set the table as Thorin went through containers of food. Thorin sensed Imara’s fear from the way she chewed nervously on her lip.

The last thing he wanted was for her to be afraid if Haldir was correct about his feeling. If they were going to face Selvin, he wanted her to be clear headed. He came to her side and put his arm around her.

"So, what do you have planned for sweet pea's birthday next week. I thought we could take her to that petting zoo we went to a few months ago. Then maybe we could go to that place where they have all the games and that singing mouse that I saw on the television. Can't you just see Uncle Haldir in one of those pointy hats?"

Imara chuckled out as she looked over the table then nodded. "That sounds fun. She surely enjoyed the little piggies when we were there, didn't she?"

As the lightening flashed outside, the lights above them flickered. Imara took a deep breath as her anxiety started to grow. Thorin tugged her closer. "Just a storm, darlin'. They don't get them bad here like we did down South thanks to these big ole mountains. It'll blow over soon."

As the whoosh of air met Ben's ears, a growl of warning rose from his chest. When the next flash came outside the window, the lights suddenly went dark. While her heartbeat pounded in her ears, Imara lifted her shaking hand and snapped her fingers as a red ball of light rose from her palm. The front door opened and Selvin ran through the doorway with Eliza sleeping in his arms.

Imara gasped in horror as Ben and Haldir ran after Selvin. Thorin yelled at Imara but she was frozen in shock. He turned her to face him and shook her until her eyes finally snapped up to his. "Imara! Get your knife!"

As Imara slowly nodded, she crouched down to grab the blade from her ankle then her eyes caught Eliza stirring in the playpen. She sucked in a breath as she shook Thorin's leg. "Thorin!" she whisper yelled. "Thorin!"

Imara stood slowly as her eyes darted around the room. She pulled Thorin close to her. "Thorin, look at the playpen. It was a glamour Thorin. He's still here."

Thorin looked at the play pen and saw Eliza sit up and look around and he gasped. "Imara," he whispered. "We're going to creep over there, and you snatch her up. Quietly! You reach out to Ben in your mind."

As the two of them shivered and panted in unison, they slowly approached the play pen. Eliza put her arms in the air and said, "Momma." As she spoke with Ben in her mind, Imara reached into the playpen and took Eliza in her arms quickly as Thorin held his blade ready in his hand.

As the sudden shockwave hit them, the three were thrown across the room. Imara held tight to Eliza as she was thrown into the wall.

With Imara knocked unconscious, the dim red light went out. Thorin pushed himself up from the floor and searched for Selvin as his eyes struggled to adjust to the dark. Sensing movement in the corner, Thorin knelt down and searched the floor around him for his blade until the burning pain of it tore through his back and into his lung.

Selvin knelt down beside him as he struggled for air and said, "You aren't much of a witch either, are you? I was expecting more from a Parker. Excuse me now, I have a little score to settle with Imara. I'll get right back to you in a moment."

Selvin stepped over Thorin and made his way to Imara and Eliza who were motionless on the floor.

As Thorin reached behind him and pulled the blade from his back, the dripping blood slowly receded back into its wound as it began to heal itself. Thorin raised his hand and pointed the blade at Selvin. "Ceanglaím tú leis an áit seo! Ceanglaím tú leis an áit seo! Ceanglaím tú leis an áit seo!"

Selvin spoke the death curse over Imara and Eliza and cackled an evil laugh as he turned to Thorin then clicked his tongue. "You can bind me to this place only as long as you live and that won't be for long." As he walked slowly back to him, Selvin crossed his arms and gave a quizzical look. "Why aren't you trying to throw the curse at me. I already took care of your little bitch of a sister. You could end this whole thing right now just by speaking the words. What exactly are you waiting for? I simply must know."

Thorin blew out hard through his mouth as he pushed himself to stand. "It's not my place. Unfortunately, someone else called dibs on killing you."

Ben stood in the doorway and glanced to Imara lying on the floor. As he closed his eyes he whispered. "For you, baby." Ben raised his hands and called out in the voice of the ancients, "Ceangailim ort gan aon dochar a dhéanamh!"

Selvin fell to his knees as Ben's spell ripped his powers from him. As they lingered in the air, Ben turned to Imara and scooped the two of them up in his arms. He rocked them gently and took one last sniff of Imara. "I'll be there soon, baby. It's all over. Just wait for me at the docks, you hear me? Baby, I'm coming." Ben sniffed back his tears then nodded to Haldir. "Tie him up!"

As Thorin and Haldir picked up the whimpering shell of a once powerful witch, Thorin said, "Oh, I've been waiting a very, very long time to see you face to face. I'm going to enjoy every second of this very much."

Ben held tight to Imara and Eliza then grunted as he lifted them while he stood up. He carried them to the spare room where Imara gave birth then laid her gently on the bed. As he covered them in the blanket, he leaned over and kissed Imara's cold lips. "I love you, baby. I got to go finish this now." Then he pushed Eliza's hair off her cheek and kissed her. As he pressed his face against hers, he said, "Next time, sweet pea, it's forever. I'll see you soon. Daddy loves you."

As Ben closed the door behind him, Haldir began to laugh his raspy, hearty laugh of amusement. "Oh Selvin. I guess you could say that this curse is finally broken. Just like your fucking skull is

about to be." Haldir knocked his knuckles against the top of Selvin's head. " Broken into a million fucking pieces."

Chapter THIRTY-FIVE

While Selvin's battered and broken body hung limp from the pole in the dirt floor basement, the storm started to let up outside and in Ben's heart. Ben wiped his bloody hands on a towel as he panted for breath after the vicious beating he gave Selvin. "Anybody want seconds on this old pathetic asshole?" he asked coldly as he turned to Thorin and Haldir.

Thorin shook his head. "No, I'm quite tired of seeing his ugly face. I won't waste a minute more of my life on this…this nothing. Let's be done with this and get moving on. She's waiting for us."

Haldir pulled on a clean shirt and sniffed through his nose. "I agree. This has been fun and all, but we have a long journey ahead of us. I may be pretty fancy here on Earth, but the Realm's a big goddamn place and you can't just mist into the Darke's lands without his permission. It's quite a trek."

Ben rolled his neck from side to side and clenched his jaw as he nodded. The beating he gave Selvin wasn't nearly as satisfying as he'd hoped it would be. Until he had his family safely in his arms again, Ben would never be a content man. The hole in his chest ached for them and no amount of suffering he inflicted on Selvin filled it.

"Alright," Ben pulled his knife from the sheath on his waist. "For you baby." Ben grabbed Selvin by the hair and lifted his face until their eyes met. Ben smiled and said, "Now, I get to go be with my wife and daughter and there's not a fucking thing you can do about it anymore." He slapped the blade against Selvin's forehead a few times. "I told you I was going to kill you, asshole."

With a scowl and a grunt, Ben dragged his blade across Selvin's throat. While the spark of life left Selvin's eyes, Ben took a deep breath and laughed as he realized his nightmare was finally over. He looked up to the ceiling and said, "I'm on my way, Imara. I'll be there soon, baby."

While Selvin slumped onto the floor, Ben cleaned his knife off on the towel and tossed it aside. As he looked around at the blood-soaked floor, Ben rubbed the back of his head. "What do you reckon we should do about this? We can't hardly leave three dead bodies behind for the humans to find. I don't think the council would take kindly to that."

Haldir pulled on his beard and nodded. "We'll burn it when we leave. By the time the firemen get here, the place will be leveled."

Thorin shook his head. "You don't think we should give them a proper send off, Ben?"

Ben bit his lip and shook his head. "No, that's not them anymore, Thorin. My girls are waiting on me over there. Let's go get them."

After he closed the tie on his backpack, Ben slung it over his shoulder and reached back with his other arm then threaded it through the strap. As he centered it on his back, Ben looked around the guest house.

He walked to the play pen and picked up Mr. Rabbit and kissed the toy. "Can't forget that again." Ben tucked the toy into the inner pocket of his coat near his heart. He took the stack of photos that Imara wanted to keep and put them in a Ziploc bag then put them in his other chest pocket.

Before he walked out of the house, Ben grabbed the blanket that Imara had just knitted and her favorite book from the table.

As he met Haldir and Thorin in the yard, Ben slid the dark brownie beanie Imara made him over his head and tucked in his ears. Ben slid the book in his waist pocket then slung the blanket over his shoulders and tucked it into the bag straps to secure it. Thorin handed him Imara's knife and Ben looked at it as tears filled his eyes. "She never had a chance, even with this."

Thorin shook his head. "No, Ben, she didn't. Even if she did, Imara could never hurt a soul. Not even one as black as Selvin's. She's not that kind of witch. You were meant to save her. Only you." Thorin put his hand on Ben's shoulder. "We couldn't stop this thing from happening, but you saved her and Eliza from the eternal damnation of this curse Ben. You saved their souls. They're free of it now. You did that. Only you could do that."

Ben nodded and threaded the extra sheath onto his belt then buckled it again. "So, are we ready?"

Thorin looked back and nodded. "Yes, I suppose we are. And you know what? I'm not even going to miss it. I'm tired of this ugly, old world."

Ben shook his head and pushed out his lips. "Me neither." He put his finger to his mouth and whispered "Shh!" then pointed it to the main house. As flames erupted from the kitchen, Ben turned to the guest house and whispered, "Shh!". The smaller guest house quickly raged into an inferno as the roof of the main house began to shoulder.

Haldir chuckled through his nose as he put his hand on Ben's shoulder. "Well, I guess you are one of the Darke's. No wonder he's so eager to collect you."

Ben closed his eyes and saw Imara walk through the gates of the city in the woods. As she got to the other side, she looked back over her shoulder and smiled as she pushed the windblown hair from her face. *I'm home, Ben. I'm waiting for you.* "He's going to have to wait. I got to see about my girl first."

Haldir motioned to Thorin to come closer with his hand. "Let's go Thorin."

As Thorin walked to him, Haldir put his hand on his shoulder then misted them both away.

When they reappeared, they were outside a great tall castle that sat in a valley surrounded by snowcapped mountains. On the Northern border sat the entrance to a dense, dark forest.

Haldir said, " This is the kingdom of King Eliphas the Wise. He is the gatekeeper for departed spirits to enter the Realm. Imara would have come here first."

As the three men approached the tall glass doors of the fortress, the doors parted and an elderly man with a long white beard stood before them. "Welcome Haldir. I've been expecting you. Daniel said that you would be on your way."

Haldir walked forward and kneeled before Eliphas. "Your majesty." Haldir looked back at Thorin and Ben and nodded for them to join him. They walked toward Haldir and knelt as he was.

"Please stand." The three men rose and followed Eliphas as he turned and walked away. "You are here seeking the Lady of Light?"

"Yes," Ben said quickly.

"Do you know where she is?" asked Haldir.

Eliphas said, "Yes, of course. You can find her in the city in the North Woods. She is under the protection of Lord Nicholas now."

Ben asked, "How far is that?"

Eliphas answered, "Nearly three weeks as the crow flies."

"Three weeks?" Ben asked as his heart sank.

"Yes, Ben Logan. You didn't really think this would be easy, did you?"

"Yeah, I was kind of hoping it would be for once. Can we mist there?" asked Ben.

"I've never been there before, and I doubt Lord Nicholas would take kindly to three strange men misting into his city," said Haldir.

Eliphas chuckled to himself. "Fortunately for you, Daniel the Darke has already made arrangements. Once you reach his lands, he will escort you to the North. You may stay the night here if you wish or start off after dinner. The choice is yours."

"Thank you, your majesty," said Haldir.

"I have something that I will need you to deliver on your journey, Haldir."

"Yes of course, anything," he said.

After dinner, Eliphas gave a scroll to Haldir. As he tucked it into his belt, he smiled at Eliphas. "This couldn't have been done by crow?"

Eliphas smiled a devious grin and nodded. "Yes, I suppose it could've, but I wanted to surprise them. Daniel won't be expecting this at all."

Haldir turned his head slightly and pulled his lips to the side as he looked at Eliphas trying to figure out what he meant. "He's not going to kill me for it. Is he?"

Eliphas shook his head. "No! He'll be quite amused. It's not often that I can surprise that young wizard."

Haldir patted the old gentle King on his arm and said, "Thanks for everything."

Eliphas nodded his head once then held out his hand to usher the men to the door. As the three men walked off to the path North, Eliphas cupped his hand to his mouth and shouted, "You'll have to come back and tell me what his face looked like when he reads it. I really must know!"

Chapter THIRY-SIX

“So, tell me that all the stories about Daniel Darke aren’t true Haldir. Tell me were not traipsing directly into a slaughterhouse. I mean, he can’t be all that bad, right?” asked Thorin as they walked along the dirt path.

Haldir nodded and said, “Daniel can be quite a scary man when he’s properly provoked.”

Thorin rolled his eyes at Haldir’s vagueness. “He was very kind to Imara though. I mean, he was quite interested in bringing us all here.”

Haldir laughed to himself. “I don’t recall him asking for you, Thorin. Daniel is amassing an army. He’ll went Ben to join him, no doubt.”

Ben shook his head. “That’s too goddamn bad. All I want is my family. I don’t give two shits about Daniel fucking Darke or his kingdom.”

Haldir blew out through his mouth as he shook his head. “Bury those thoughts down deep. Daniel’s a terribly powerful psychic, Ben. He’s not one to be trifled with. He’s quite kind to me because I save his wife’s life long ago, but even I don’t truly trust him not to burn me alive. He’s possibly the only person alive that I actually do fear.”

“Well, isn’t that just lovely,” Thorin huffed as he looked around the forest.

“However, his wife Rosemary, she’s a breath of fresh air. Reminds me a lot of Imara, honestly. Gentle and kindhearted. He’s also got two children named Sigrid and Damien. They’re every bit their father. His family is everything to him so be respectful. Not that I guess I need to tell such fine Southern gentleman that, but Daniel has no patience when it comes to them, and family or no, he’d kill you in a heartbeat, Ben. So, like I said, keep that buried deep inside you. Just remember that you got that sweet girl waiting on you and hear whatever he’s got to say.”

After a week of walking and camping, the men finally came to the clearing that signaled the border of the Darke. As Lord Commander Agamori’s horseback security riders approached, Haldir crossed his arms and smiled.

Agamori and Sir Eason dismounted their horses then Eason threw his arms around Haldir. As he patted his back when he released him, Eason said, “Good to see you again, old friend.”

Haldir playfully punched the knight’s arm and said, “Still ugly I see.”

Eason grinned and pushed his long sun-bleached hair off his shoulder. “The ladies don’t seem to think so.”

The disapproving eyebrow of Agamori, the white-haired ancient wizard, raised itself as he asked, "Are you two quite finished? His Majesty awaits and, in case you've forgotten, he doesn't like to be waiting for long."

As the castle doors opened to them, Haldir nodded inside and said, "This way you two." Ben looked over the castle he'd seen in dreams as it passed over his head. When he walked inside, he inhaled and smelled the faint scent of Imara. "She was here." Ben grinned as his eyes glassed over. "Thorin she was here. She was just here not long ago. I can still smell her."

Haldir put his hand on Ben's shoulder and said, "Well, let's go deliver this message and see what he wants so we can get out of here."

As he entered the Great Hall, Haldir lowered his head to Daniel and Rosemary. "Your Majesties."

Daniel shook his head as he approached the men. "I've told you before, it's just Daniel."

Haldir smiled quickly with closed lips and said, "Daniel. This is…"

"Thorin and Ben, yes, I know." Daniel looked the two men over then pushed his black wavy hair off his face before extending his hand to Ben. "I've been waiting a very long time to meet you."

Ben nodded as he looked Daniel in the eye. Imara wasn't wrong when she said they looked alike. He even had Ben's crooked.

As he shook Thorin's hand, Thorin said, "Your Majesty, thank you for taking care of Imara as you have."

"She's been here recently," said Ben.

Daniel raised his brow and pointed at Ben. "You're a Lycan this time, I nearly forgot. Yes, Imara had dinner here with us before I took her to the North to be with her parents."

Ben sighed a ragged breath out as the words left Daniel's mouth. He wiped his hand across his lips as his eyes teared. "Is she alright? I mean, she remembers everything?"

Daniel gave Ben a sympathetic half smile and nodded. "She's well. Anxious to see you, of course. I'll get you there after dinner. Please, you can leave your things by the fire and sit at my table." Daniel held out his hand to usher them to the fireside.

After sitting their packs along the brick hearth, Haldir nodded to Rosemary and Damien as he took a seat across from them. "Good to see you both again."

Rosemary smiled warmly and said, "I'm so happy you're here Haldir. It's been too long."

Daniel's son Damien was a devastatingly handsome man with dark wavy hair that fell to his chin and the darkest brown eyes like his father. "It's been awhile, Haldir. We were beginning to think you'd never return."

"Yes," Haldir pointed his thumb over his shoulder to Ben and Thorin as they sat down beside him. "These two have kept me quite busy for the last hundred years or so."

Rosemary looked to Ben and said, "Imara is just the loveliest woman. You must be very proud of her. She is just a beacon of light, such a kind soul."

Ben pressed his lips together as he tried not to cry and nodded. "Yes. I'm very proud to call her my wife. Thank you."

As Thorin patted his brothers back in comfort, a white-haired woman with blue eyes came into the room and locked eyes with him. He gasped as her piercing icy gaze sank into him and his heart beat wildly in his chest.

Haldir took a drink from his cup and chuckled. Thorin licked his lips as he glanced to Haldir. He nodded and said, "I told you she was a beauty Thorin."

As Sigrid took a seat across from Thorin, he glanced up to her penetrative eyes and grinned. While his thoughts swirled around him, he remembered that he's in the company of psychics and he closed his eyes hard as he tried to shut them out of his thoughts. When he opened them again, Sigrid smiled at him and shook her head gently. "That doesn't work here, not on us."

Thorin huffed out a nervous chuckle and said, "My apologies, Miss."

Sigrid's smile fell and she said, "It's alright. I'm glad you're finally here."

Haldir put down his cup as the reason for him being there returned to him. "I nearly forgot, King Eliphas asked me to deliver a message." Haldir removed the scroll from his belt then handed it to Rosemary as Daniel sat down in his chair at the head of the table.

As Rosemary read the scroll, she laughed hysterically and made Thorin flinch in surprise as she snorted through her nose. Rosemary handed the scroll to Daniel then said, "He's just such a prankster."

Daniel read the scroll then looked to Thorin and chuckled to himself as he tossed the scroll on the table and shook his head. "Thank you for that, Haldir."

Haldir looked at him in confusion as he pulled on his beard. "You're welcome, I think. He was quite interested in what your reaction would be."

Daniel nodded. " Yes, I bet he was. He's been trying to surprise me for centuries now." He reached out in his mind and spoke in Haldir's ears. As the news hit him, Haldir smiled a toothy smile from

under his bushy reddish blonde beard. “Well, shit. I guess the cat’s out of the bag now. Yes, of course I will.”

Daniel sat up in his chair and clasped his hands in front of him. “You know Ben, you and I are kin.”

Ben swallowed his mouthful of food and licked the front of his teeth. “Yes, that’s what Imara told me.”

“Quite distantly of course. Actually, by rights you have more claim to this kingdom than I do. If you had an army of your own, I might be afraid you’d come snatch it from me,” Daniel said coldly.

Ben put down his cup and looked in Daniel’s eyes. “I don’t care about being a king, I just want to be with my wife. You see, she’s my Queen and she’s waiting on me. So, can we stop messing around here and go?”

Haldir closed his eyes and shook his head at Ben’s attitude. A smile curled up on Daniel’s lips and he nodded. “I understand completely. There is something I need to show you first, Ben. The reason for bringing you here.”

As he put a vision of the future in Ben’s head. Ben closed his eyes and slowly shook his head. Daniel said, “Yes, it’s true. So, you may go to your wife, but when the time is right, I’ll call upon you both to return.”

Ben opened his eyes and pushed the tear from them and nodded. “When the time comes, we’ll be there. I swear.”

Chapter THIRTY-SEVEN

When Daniel misted the three men to the Gates at the North Woods, Ben turned to him and said, “Thank you for everything you’ve done for us.”

Daniel crossed his arms and gave a quick grin. “We’re family, Ben. There’s nothing I won’t do for my family. Remember the things I’ve shown you.”

Ben looked to the ground and nodded. “I’m not sure I could forget if I wanted to.”

As he glanced at him and chuckled to himself, Daniel held out his hand to Thorin. “I’ll be seeing you soon, Thorin Parker.”

Thorin swallowed hard as he shook Daniel’s hand. “Yes, of course, your Majesty.”

Daniel slapped his hand on Haldir’s shoulder. “See you soon, old friend.” Then, Daniel walked a few paces towards the woods and misted into the night.

Thorin looked at Haldir and asked, “What in the hell, Haldir? You didn’t think it was important to mention that my mate is Daniel Darke’s only daughter and a goddamn psychic?”

Haldir chuckled to himself as he pulled on his beard. “I had to make sure you wouldn’t try to run away.”

Thorin ran his hands through his hair. “Jesus! That was more terrifying than waiting for Selvin to show up. Oh my God, am I really going to live in an honest to goodness castle?”

Ben grabbed Thorin’s shoulder and pulled him towards the gates. He looked at Ben and said, “Holy shit, Ben. I’m a prince now. I’m going to be a proper ass prince.”

Ben smiled and nodded then said, “Yep, but he’s a psychic and every time you sleep with his daughter, he’s going to know what all you’re doing to her. What do you think about that?”

Thorin cringed and said, “Oh, sweet Jesus. He’s going to kill me.”

When they got to the other side, they came to the gate that Ben had seen in his dreams. They were met there by a tall man with long dark hair who said, “Hello Ben Logan. I am Lord Nicholas. Welcome to the North Woods.”

Ben grinned and held out his hand. “It’s good to see you again Nicholas.”

As the ancient sorcerer returned his knowing smile and shook Ben’s hand, he nodded towards the entrance. “I believe you’ll find her watching the ships leave. Would you like me to show you the way?”

Ben laughed out then bit his lip as his eyes teared over. He shook his head as he sniffed. “No. No, sir. I’ve been here so many times, I think I know where I’m going by now. Thanks anyhow.”

Nicholas stepped aside to let Ben through, then nodded his head to Haldir and Thorin. “If you follow me, I’ll show you to your rooms.”

When Ben reached the Great Hall, he pushed his lips together then looked up over the cliffs from his visions and closed his eyes as he inhaled deeply. As the faint smell of Imara filled his nose, Ben smiled and sighed. As much as the wolf in him wanted to be set free so he could track down his mate, Ben held it back.

With no more fear or danger lingering in his mind, Ben wanted to take his time and savor the first glimpse of Imara. In all their lifetimes, it was his favorite memory of all.

As he stepped out onto the cobblestone path, he looked right and saw the shimmering water beyond the hill. “I’m coming baby.”

Ben’s heart started to race and his hands became numb the stronger the scent became. When the smell of apple pie mixed with the salty sea air, Ben shook out his hands then rubbed his sweaty palms on his pants.

As he came to the downside of the last hill, he saw the fiery red glow of Imara’s hair bathed in the evening sun as she sat on the dock with her feet hanging over the side. The sound of Imara humming Greensleeves to herself hit Ben’s ears like a bolt of lightning as the reality of it all set in.

With trembling hands, Ben set his pack along the roadside then ran his hands through his dirty hair to push it off his face. When his foot met the wooden slat of the boardwalk, it creaked and caught Imara’s attention.

As a soft grin curled up on her lips, she heard Ben’s footsteps as he approached the dock. Without looking up, Imara stopped humming and sighed. “You wanted a cottage by the lake, do you suppose one by the sea will do?”

Sitting down crossed legged beside her, Ben knitted his brows together and curled his lips under as she looked over to him. He inhaled deeply through his nose as he looked out over the water and nodded. “Yeah, I reckon that’d be nice too.” As he laced his fingers in hers, he brought her hand to his lips and kissed it. “Wherever you are is home, baby.”

Pulling her into his side, Ben wrapped his arm around Imara and kissed her forehead. “You like it here, baby?”

Imara lifted her hand and ran her fingers over his new beard. “Mmm-hmm. Everyone’s just so nice. You know there’s a lot of people waiting to see you.”

As he rubbed his lips against her soft, fragrant hair, Ben said, "Well, they're going to have to wait a little bit."

Imara looked back over her shoulder. "You ready to become a Daddy again?"

Ben looked down over her sweet face and kissed the bridge of her little nose. "Yes, ma'am. I can't wait to see how things turn out this time."

As they got to their cottage, Ben looked it over. The wood and stone construction was like the one Thorin lived in, but the intricate cravings were a touch that Ben really liked. He ran his fingers over the words above their door. "What do you reckon that says? You think it's like a spell or something?"

Imara giggled then slid her pointer finger from right to left underneath it. "It says Ben and Imara's Home."

Ben chuckled through his nose. "Oh. It's just so fancy looking, I thought it must be something really special."

"It is special, Ben. It's ours."

Ben looked down to Imara and nodded. "Yeah. That is special."

When he walked through the door, Ben took a deep breath. Imara's scent filled the little house already and whatever doubts Ben may have had about living there disappeared.

Imara turned on the water taps to the garden tub while Ben undressed. "You going to get in here with me? It's not like it's not big enough."

Imara filled a pitcher of water then put it on the table beside the tub. "No sir. I don't want all that mess on me. You just get on in there."

As she washed his hair, Ben leaned back and closed his eyes while her fingers massaged his scalp. "I could get used to this, baby."

"You go right ahead. We got nothing but time now." Imara poured the pitcher of warm water slowly over his head as he pushed the water out of his eyes."

Holding out a towel for him, Imara wrapped it around him as he stepped out of the tub. She smacked his bottom and said, "Go get in bed while I take care of this."

Ben sat on the edge of the bed as he dried his hair, he bounced up and down and chuckled to himself as it hit the wall. "You won't last long."

Walking through the door, Imara slid her dress over her head then threw it on the floor. Sliding her hands around the back of Ben's neck, she leaned into him and pressed her lips against his. As

her tongue fluttered against his gently, Ben scooted back the bed as Imara climbed in on top of him. As his hand entered the deep softness of her hair, he gripped it in his fist then rolled her over to her back.

As he laid on his side, his strong, calloused hand traveled down Imara's body. When he took her chin in his mouth, Imara tilted her neck in submission. Smiling against her neck, Ben softly made circles on her clit as she shuddered underneath his fingers. While she swelled against the rough pads of his fingertips, Ben inhaled the warm scent drifting from her skin then took his hand back as he climbed on top of her.

Hovering above her, Ben watched Imara's face as he gently pushed himself inside her. With his knees and his toes, he dug into the bed as he delivered his throbbing cock to her over and over again. As she gasped with each thrust, tears of joy and relief escaped her.

As the need enveloped Ben, he quickly buried himself into Imara's thirsty spaces. Between shallow and deep thrusts, Imara closed her eyes and smiled the drunken grin of a woman walking down the path to bliss. When her cunt erupted into throbbing waves, Imara wailed loudly for her ancient lover. "Ah! Ben! Ah! Ah!"

Greedily watching Imara's expressions of joy and pain mixed together, Ben moved faster and faster and grunted until he joined her in her ecstasy.

Chapter THIRTY-EIGHT (EPILOGUE)

“Dammit, why can’t I ever find that blessed bunny!”

Ben walked out of the bedroom tucking in his shirt and smiled at Imara on her knees again, searching for the toy rabbit.

As she finally got hold of its silk ribbon, Imara pulled Mr. Rabbit from under the couch and looked at it then she glanced up to Ben with an accusing look. She pointed her finger at him and clicked her tongue. “It’s you, isn’t it? You’re the one who keeps hiding the rabbit. How else would it get all the way back under that piece of furniture?”

Ben curled his lips under as a guilty smile came to his face. Imara swatted at Ben’s arm as he started laughing at her. “You shit!”

Ben pulled Imara into his arms and said, “I thought you would’ve figured it out after all these years, baby.”

Imara pouted her lips and said, “That’s a very cruel trick, you know. I’ve spent hours on my hands and knees looking for that thing.”

Ben leaned in and kissed her. “Yes, I know that’s why I did it. That’s my favorite view. I’m sorry, baby. I’ll pay you back for it later.”

Imara pointed her finger in his chest and said, “Yes, you most certainly will. You best be prepared to spend some time on your knees if you catch my drift.”

As Imara picked the baby up from the blanket on the floor, Ben went to the kitchen table and looked at the drawings scattered all over it. “Those are very good, sweet pea.” Ben sat down beside Eliza and pushed her hair off her shoulder. “Who is that fella right there ,though, with the yellow hair?”

Eliza swayed back and forth as she hummed. “That’s my boyfriend. He doesn’t live here though.”

“Boyfriend? Imara did you hear what she said?”

Imara sat down at the table across from them and put Jason in his highchair. “Yes, she’s told me all about him. She says he lives in a faraway land and that he’s a wolf like Daddy.”

“A wolf? Well, I guess that’s alright then. Just as long as Daddy’s your number one.”

Eliza stood up on the bench then threw her arms around Ben’s neck and kissed his cheek. “You’re my hero Daddy.”

Imara smiled at Ben and said, “Yes, sweet pea. He’s my hero, too.”

Looking back at the drawings, Ben moved one aside as he noticed an angel surrounded by golden light hovering above a castle. As his heart started to pound against his chest, he looked at Eliza with teary eyes as he remembered Daniel’s vision. “Sweet pea, what’s this?”

Eliza looked up to him and smiled. “That’s Momma. She’s a hero too.”

Ben looked back to the picture in his hand as he swallowed back the burning rising in his throat and nodded. “Yeah, you’re right sweet pea. Momma is a hero. She’s the greatest hero that ever lived.”

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