

~~Chapter One~~

Alexi's legs pumped harder as she pushed through the deadened timber all around her. The boughs of the trees were heavy with snow, bending down toward her, almost reaching out to grab hold of her slim body.

When she had arrived here a few hours ago, it had felt right somehow to get away from the city. And this seemed the best spot to do so. She hadn't found it on her GPS or on some recommendation; she had simply been out for a drive in the countryside. The snow had been cleared on most of the roads, but not all; and when Alexi had driven past the third un-shoveled back road that morning on her winding route, she had found this stretch of woods.

Without a second thought or a care for the cold, she pulled the old hatchback over to the ditch and got out. She could imagine the scene without the snow, wisteria interlocking the overgrown tree tops, tall grass whistling its tune as each blade brushed against another. It called out to her and invited her in.

The immense weight of the past year had lifted steadily since she had found this copse of woods and walked into it - simply seeking respite from her tightly wound life - just a few moments of not looking over her shoulder in fear. The combination of the glittering snow and the small, quiet noise of the winter woods were like a magical balm for her wounded spirit.

Now, as she was running for her life, she no longer felt so good about having come out here. "Figures they would follow me out here", she resignedly thought. She should have known better than to think she could get away from them for too long. The anger at the interruption of even a single peaceful moment fueled her to bump up a notch in speed again. She could hear the men shouting to each other behind her, getting closer and closer as they hunted for her trail. Thankfully, the worst of the snow was merely in patches, so her footsteps were fewer and further between as she had progressed through the timber.

Suddenly, her foot caught on a downed limb, hidden by a small drift of white. She felt white hot heat in her ankle, and heard the first crack of the limb breaking under her dead weight before everything went black as her head found another fallen, frozen bough.

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"Tomas, what are we going to do with her? I don't think this is a good idea!" Jorin said. "I mean, we have no idea why those others wanted her dead and we don't need any extra attention here! It's hard enough to keep our little troupe safe as it is and you have the audacity to bring not only another mouth to feed, but another ass to save home!"

"Jorin... You know we couldn't leave her out there to die. Whether her death would have been by the hand of nature or the hand of man, we are more than common savages and you know you would have felt bad if we had left her there. You'll be thanking me for this later."

Tomas sighed as he finished his retort, hoping that he wasn't just lying to himself. He had seen this woman as she had entered the woods, and by his eye, she was just as entranced by the beauty of nature as he was. His heart had sung for her, and while he had learned not to always trust his heart - something about this woman was simply right. For now, he would ensure that she was safe, at least give her a chance to prove him wrong. He decided to comfort Jorin with the promise, "Let's just get her well enough to stand on her own again, and we'll see if she even wants to stay. You know Mags can do that memory trick - so long as it's short term - if comes down to it."

"I know, but I hate making Mags do that. She doesn't like it and it weakens her.", Jorin insisted. Tomas decided to ignore this continued protest and kissed Jorin. "Don't worry, my love. I have it all in hand." Tomas reached down and caressed Jorin's inner thigh - as both a tease for later, and a reminder that he indeed had everything under control.

"For now, we should see to talking to the troupe and letting them know we have a human in our midst. Let them know she is not to be toyed with or harmed in any fashion, and that for now, we are nursing her back to health. Tend to that, while I see to that head wound of hers. Hopefully the salve will have brought down the swelling by now."

Jorin nods, not quite fully swayed, but eager enough to please his love. He turns and heads out the low, rounded door to tell his townspeople the news.

Tomas sighs again before looking around the hut to see what he may need to take with him to tend to the woman. He finds the appropriate salve and bandages, and takes along a pipe of rosin in case she is in pain. The smoke always took the hard edge off of any ailment and made restful sleep easier for the afflicted.

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Tomas strides purposefully through the town, heading to the sealed cell room. The exterior was low and round, like most of the buildings in their wooded home. Earth, flora, and timber had been mated together and bound to form small homes that blended into the scenery to the untrained eye. Small carvings in the doors were the only identifiers of who or what each home housed. The cell house had the most carvings of all, as its door had more purpose. The runes and scripts all had magical power that could be activated at the will of the doorkeeper. For the past century, Mags has filled this position, keeping various things in or out of the cell as needed.

Today, it would keep a dainty human woman safe from not only whoever she had been running from, but also safe from prying, hateful eyes. Tomas knew that not every troupe member would be happy about a human in their midst. Some had lost entire families to the growth and expansion of human colonies as they cut, burnt, and took what they wanted from the world mother's belly.

He nodded at Mags, and she in turn waved at the door, letting down the barriers so that he could pass through. Before him, stretched out on the woven cot was Alexi - her face blushed red from the fever and

swelling of her forehead. She was in a fitful sleep, probably having nightmares fueled by her fear and the creeping fever.

Tomas knelt down, arranging his supplies next to his feet. He reached toward the woman's face, brushing strands of copper and gold hair from her cheek. His cool hands must have shocked her awake, her eyelids fluttered open, revealing eyes that reminded him of a summer field of grass. They locked onto his after finding a focal point and became both questioning and accusatory in the same blink.

Just as suddenly, her hand flew up to her head, nearly knocking into the hard patch of swollen skin. Tomas winced in anticipation and shifted his weight backwards so that he fell onto his butt - in the case that she decided to start swinging. He had seen that look before and understood it well.

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Jorin entered the communal hall, where most of the townspeople had gathered. Word had apparently already spread, and everyone was curious as to why their leaders had brought a human home. He noted that everyone had stopped talking and drinking and he took advantage of the break in conversation.

"Yes, my friends, it is true. We have a human woman among us as of this morning. Tomas and I found her injured in the woods as we were hunting, and we thought it best to bring her back to health out of the frost. Please remember that had we left her, it would likely bring more humans our way, and I know that I don't feel like having to pick up and leave our beautiful home. If you have concerns, please talk to either myself or Tomas as soon as possible. She is currently healing in our cell room, and we appreciate her being left in peace to heal. Thank you and continue about your daily business."

There were quiet murmurs among the crowd, but no one seemed particularly bothered. They knew that they could trust Jorin and Tomas, neither had failed them yet. It had been the safest years the town had ever known since Tomas had taken the mantle of leader over a century ago. His duty having been met for the time being, Jorin decided to get a drink and mingle with the crowd.