

When the labor pains sharpened to the point she could no longer deny them, Askeila packed herself a bag and hid it underneath the rickety bed. She wrapped a soft arm around her midsection, managed to heave herself onto the mattress, and after a break for panting, rolled onto one side and brought her knees up. *Too soon, little one.* Another pain tore at her thoughts, sent them into a frantic circle. *No time to run now.*

Her eyes found the cellular phone. It lay on a wooden trunk beside the far wall. In the dim light, her pupils expanded, focused on the outline of the call button. She rejected the next thought. *Too late for doctors, too.* If she'd wanted *that*, they may as well have stayed in the city.

She stroked the silvery fur covering her swollen abdomen, ran stubby fingers in a slow circle over the place where her child rested. Not for long. Her husband could return at any moment, and Askeila had run out of options.

At first, Brout resisted the idea of a retreat. He'd fought her tooth and claw, but in the end, Askeila's pleas to have their son in a natural habitat had won him over. Perhaps it had only been her confession that the baby was, in fact, a son. Brout would appreciate a boy. More accurately, he would appreciate the right sort of boy.

Askeila knew better.

She'd felt the baby's difference since the second month, and her mind had scrambled to and fro, searching for a way their child might live. The pains answered her now, sharp and quick. She'd waited too long to run. Her breaths panted, and her long ears swiveled left and right, listening, sending tension through a slender body that only needed to relax and let nature finish its job.

No time to think now. She twitched her nose once, caught the faintest whiff of her husband's odor. Probably left in the cabin from the morning. Probably nothing to fear at all.

The instincts her people loved so dearly shoved the fear aside. Time to loose her child upon the world, now. Time to focus, to rest when she might, and breath, and... push.

Her little cub was anxious for birth despite his mother's hesitation. Maybe there'd be some of his father in him after all. Askeila lay back and stared at the rough hewn logs above. She pushed and fretted, and caught the distant sound of heavy feet against brambles.

Her hound side snarled through the next pain, bared the sharp canines hidden between her lips and prepared to fight for her baby's life. The hare side stilled, tensed and listened to each fall of Brout's feet. She measured the distance, clenched her hands into furry fists and brought her child into the world with a scream that reminded her of their human ancestry.

Not something Brout would appreciate either.

*Come, little one.* A mother's chant against the wolves at the door. *Come, my cub. You must hurry.*

All her preparations failed her in the end. By the time she held her child against her hairless breast, Brout's hand was on the door. His long claws rattled against the steel as their baby breathed and curled into the warmth of his mother's pelt.

Askeila sighed, inhaled the child's scent, and prepared for battle.

The door swung inward, banged against the logs and permitted a gust of frigid night air to swirl into the cabin. Brout stood in the entrance, a dark outline of a man nearly twice her height. His shoulders spread wider than the doorway, and the moonlight outlined the shaggy hairs across his breadth. They danced in the breeze, black, shadowy tendrils.

"I heard screaming." His words rumbled with both his fear and his nature. He ducked sideways to step inside the room, and his feet made the floorboards shudder.

Askeila hugged the baby and breathed. Brout's bear side gave him the extra mass. He shook the walls in a good mood too, and she *had* heard fear in his voice. Fear for her and the child. Maybe there would be hope. "We're fine."

"The babies?" He'd hoped from the beginning for more than one, hadn't listened to her about that either.

"One boy." She stressed the *boy*. She'd known they'd have a single child when only the fur on one of her breasts fell away.

"My son." Brout's gruffness faded, a rare thing. His tone sparked another warble of hope in Askeila's chest. Her husband came to them with a step as soft as his bear would allow. He fell to his knees beside the bed and looked up at her with as much love in his eyes as she'd ever seen.

Once, she might have believed that would save her.

Even as she thought it, Brout's nose wrinkled. His eyes narrowed into black beads, and the hair around his nostrils ruffled. He snorted, sniffed, and his upper lip lifted just enough to show one massive canine. "He smells wrong."

"Different, maybe." Askeila's grip on the baby tightened. "Not wrong, Brout. He's your son."

"Let me see him, Askeila."

"Promise first." Her blood chilled at the sound of desperation in her own words. "Promise me you won't kill him, Brout."

"What's wrong with it?" He reached his hand out, settled fat fingers against her arm. Not harshly, not yet. Askeila still felt the tips of his claws parting her satin fur.

"Promise!"

Her husband growled. The claws drifted up her arm an inch. "You think me such a beast, Askeila? We don't do that anymore."

"That's not a proper promise, Brout" She might have been irrational. Their kind had not practiced infanticide for several decades. Still, the bear looked straight at her, and Askeila saw enough to know her fears were not entirely off base. She saw enough to hear a trap in his answer.

"I Promise I won't kill it."

"Thank you." She sniffled and let out a breath that didn't quite reach relieved. "I call him Jode."

The baby whimpered as her movement disturbed its nursing. The sound was a hound's noise, and hearing it, Askeila felt some of her tension ease. She saw her husband's eyes soften.

"A hound major isn't that bad." He stated it with a nod, oblivious to the insult if offered her personally. "What's his minor?"

"I don't know." She let Brout pull the blanket down, did her best not to tense when he looked at his son for the first time.

"Hairless?"

"It might be hare. Rodents are often born without—"

"Rabbits are not rodents." Brout had studied more than she, perhaps. Not that it mattered.

"They're still born naked."

"Were you?" He used a single claw tip to peel the cloth away from her cub.

"No." Askeila eyed the baby's bare skin. Only his head and feet bore any sort of proper covering, and that was sparse and gray as a storm. He was pink, and wrinkled, and nothing at all like a bear. She could feel that thought in Brout's rapid breathing, in the way he leaned back from them. "He has a fine tail, Brout. Look."

Gently, she lifted her husband's hand away and rolled the baby both closer to her chest and over onto its belly. Askeila ran a finger along Jode's tail, whip-like and covered in the feathery coat of a proper hound. It was a twin to her own tail, but it did little to ease the curling of Brout's lips.

"I see."

She tried to hide his naked pink bottom with the blanket.

"The pelt might grow in," Brout said.

"Yes. Of course it will." Hope again, a frantic grasping.

"Let me see his face."

No chance of hiding it now. *Oh, my cub.* She nodded, set her teeth tightly together, and adjusted the baby's position. Robbed of his mother's breast, Jode opened his mouth and howled. It was a good, hound's howl, but that wouldn't save him from his plump, flat-nosed face. It couldn't hide the white around his eyes, either, and when he reached one naked hand toward her chest, his long fingers and square, papery nails sealed his doom.

Brout pushed away from them, leapt to his feet with a snarl that rained dust from the ceiling.

"You promised." Askeila growled it, showed her own teeth, and rolled her body around her cub.

"You promised, Brout."

"Human?" His teeth flashed in the dark room. His hair danced and one big foot slammed against the floor. "His minor is... how can it be?"

"I'm keeping him." Askeila snarled back, let her instincts drive her to face his fury. *Be the hound now. For the baby's sake.* "He is *mine*, Brout."

"There are places we can send it."

"No."

"Be reasonable, Askeila." His words were sane, but she heard the rage behind them. The rage and also the shame. "They have facilities for this sort of thing."

"I won't do it."

"Not even to protect it? For its own good?"

"He is mine!" She grasped her cub against her chest and swung her legs over the side of the bed. "If you don't want us..." The bag was packed. All she needed was a path to the door.

"Stop." Brout's arm came up. His palm faced her, leathery and square and reaching halfway across the room. "You're in no shape to leave, woman. Nor will I let you go."

"And the baby." Askeila tried to sound definitive, to force dominance into the statement. Her hare gave her fear away and Brout's lips twitched into a smile.

"For now. Keep it." His eyes flashed. His head, as large and round as her middle had been, nodded.

"Keep it, if you must."

Askeila's breath released. Her body shuddered from the effort of holding her ground. From birth and fear and facing the monstrous bear she'd married. She scooted back onto the bed and lifted little Jode back to her chest, almost content, almost not hearing Brout's final word on the matter.

"No good will come of this, woman. One day, you'll see that too."

The throwback's mother only smiled, soothed by a thin promise and her body's chemical reaction to her child. Her Jode. *Sleep now, little cub. You are safe.*