



THE  
MINOTAUR  
NANNY'S BRIDE

CELESTE KING

# THE MINOTAUR'S NANNY BRIDE

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## DEX

The weight of grief sits heavy on my shoulders as I trudge up the cobblestone path to Iris' home. My sister—my brilliant, fierce, stubborn little sister. Gone. Just like that. The morning sun mocks my sorrow, shining bright and cheerful like it hasn't the decency to recognize that the world has lost one of its brightest flames only days ago.

I pause at the door, my massive frame suddenly feeling fragile. My fingers trace over one of the bronze rings adorning my left horn—Iris' gift on my thirtieth birthday. "For the most successful merchant in Milthar," she'd said, eyes twinkling with pride. Now those eyes are closed forever.

Taking a deep breath that does nothing to steady my nerves, I push the heavy oak door open. The hinges creak in protest. Inside, two healers in their white cloaks stand conversing in low tones with a pair of maids. They all turn at my entrance, their faces a mixture of sympathy and wariness—probably wondering if the giant minotaur filling their doorway might collapse in grief.

Then I hear it—a high-pitched wail cutting through the somber atmosphere. My ears prick forward instantly, swiveling toward the sound like twin weathervanes finding true north.

"The baby," I whisper, my voice unexpectedly hoarse. "The baby survived."

One of the maids, a plump human woman with silver-streaked hair, steps forward. "Master Ironhoof, we've been expecting you. Yes, your nephew lives, though it was a close thing."

My hooves carry me across the room without conscious thought. "Take me to him."

"Of course." The maid nods, leading me down the hallway. "We've done our best, but he's been fussy since—" She stops, choosing her words carefully. "Since your sister passed. He seems to sense that something's missing."

"Smart kid," I mutter, ducking my head to avoid scraping my horns on the ceiling beams. Iris always teased me about my size, said she'd build me a proper door one day. Now she never would.

The nursery is small but well-appointed—Iris had prepared for this child with her typical thoroughness. A mobile of carved wooden animals hangs above a hand-crafted crib. The second maid stands beside it, gently rocking its occupant.

"Here he is," she says as we approach. "Ellis, your uncle has come to meet you."

I peer down into the crib, my breath catching at the sight. He's tiny, even for a newborn, with tawny fur so like Iris'. Soft little nubs where his horns will eventually grow peek through the fluff on his head. His eyes—gods above—they're gold like mine, wide and curious despite his distress.

"Hey there, little one." I reach down with one finger, careful to keep my merchant's rings away from his delicate skin. He grasps it with surprising strength, his crying subsiding into hiccupping breaths. "I'm your uncle Dex."

The older maid clears her throat. "Master Ironhoof, there's something you should know. The child's father..."

"Passed a few months ago. I know." My heart aches for my sister, who loved her mate fiercely and was fearful of racing their baby without him.

She didn't even have our mother to guide her. My parents had died in the Red Fever outbreak five winters past. Iris' death has left me the last of our bloodline—except for this tiny bundle.

"The child has no one else to care for him," the younger maid states bluntly, her eyes meeting mine with unexpected boldness. "He needs family. And your sister had said your name just before she passed."

Ellis chooses that moment to release my finger and make a grabbing motion toward one of my horn rings. Even in my grief, a laugh rumbles up from my chest.

"Well, you're certainly an Ironhoof." I carefully lift the small bundle, cradling him against my massive chest with a gentleness that surprises even me. "Don't worry, little one. Your mother might be gone, but you've got me now. And I've got you."

I'VE BEEN CARRYING ELLIS FOR THE WHOLE WALK HOME, HIS TINY BODY NESTLED AGAINST MY CHEST INSIDE MY OPEN VEST. IT



seemed like the right thing to do—natural even—but my stomach churns with doubt as I approach my front door.

"Well, here we are, little one." I fumble with my keys, trying not to jostle the bundle of fur and potential against my heart. "Home sweet home."

Ellis makes a gurgling sound that I choose to interpret as approval. Pushing open the door reveals my bachelor quarters in all their chaotic glory—trade ledgers stacked on every surface, half-finished cups of honeyed marka scattered about, clothing draped over furniture. It's the home of a merchant who lives alone, not a nursery.

"Might need to tidy up a bit." I chuckle nervously, but Ellis doesn't share my humor. His face scrunches up, turning an alarming shade of red, and suddenly he's wailing at a volume that seems impossible for such a small creature.

"Hey, hey, what's wrong?" I bounce him gently like I've seen mothers do in the marketplace. "It's not that bad, is it?"

The crying intensifies. Perhaps he's hungry? The healers packed a bag with bottles and milk, which I set down somewhere—where did I put it?

Ellis' cries ratchet up another notch while I frantically search one-handed. My ears pin back against my skull in distress, and sweat beads along my brow despite the cool spring air.

"Found it!" I triumphantly hold up a glass bottle, only to realize I have no idea how to prepare the contents. The instructions are written in tiny script, and Ellis is now screaming so loudly my neighbors will think I'm torturing him.

"Give me a minute, little guy." I set him down on my couch, propping him between two cushions. He immediately rolls sideways, nearly tumbling off before my quick reflexes catch him. My heart nearly stops. "By Zukiev's horns—okay, bad idea."

I scoop him back up, his cries now interspersed with hiccupping sobs that break my heart. His face is bright red, his little fists balled up in rage or distress—I can't tell which.

"I've negotiated trade deals with fierce minotaur sailors and even the occasional dark elf," I mutter, trying to read the formula instructions while holding a squirming, screaming infant. "Surely I can figure this out."

Twenty minutes later, the milk is too hot, then too cold, then spilled across my kitchen counter when Ellis kicks the bottle from my hand. My usual cheerful confidence is crumbling faster than poorly made pottery.

"Please, Ellis," I beg, offering the fourth attempt at the bottle. "Your uncle Dex is trying his best here."

He turns his head away, wailing with renewed vigor. My chest aches—not from his weight, but from the crushing feeling that I'm completely out of my depth. What would Iris do? What would she say if she could see me now, fumbling through this simplest of tasks?

The thought of my sister makes my throat tight. I sink down onto the floor, cradling Ellis against me.

"I miss her too," I whisper, grief ripping through me. "I'm sorry I'm not her. I'm sorry..."

Ellis pauses his crying just long enough to look up at me with those wide golden eyes, so like mine, yet so like Iris' in their intensity. Then he resumes his protests, perhaps even louder than before.

Night falls. Ellis refuses to sleep in the makeshift crib I hastily assembled from a drawer and blankets. He won't take the bottle. He soils his wrappings faster than I can clean him, each change more disastrous than the last. My hands—steady enough to thread a needle in a storm at sea—fumble with the tiny fastenings of his clothes.

"What am I doing wrong?" I pace the floor, horns lowered in dejection. My usual booming laugh, my ready smile—both seem like memories from another lifetime. The merchant who can charm anyone can't soothe one tiny minotaur. "I can't do this. I can't, little one."

Ellis cries on, inconsolable, and in that moment, I've never felt more lost or alone.



# MAYA

I awaken to the amber light of dawn filtering through my herb-strewn curtains. My back complains from yesterday's harvest as I push myself upright, blinking away sleep. My small apartment above the shop is exactly as I left it—comfortably chaotic, with books stacked beside my bed and dried herb bundles hanging from every available beam.

"Morning already?" I mutter, running fingers through my silver-blond hair. It sticks up at odd angles, but who's here to see it?

The familiar scent of herbs embraces me like an old friend. I breathe it in, letting it clear the fog from my mind. Unlike most women my age in Karona, my mornings aren't punctuated by a husband's snores or children's demands. Instead, there's just the soft rustling of Shade, my onyx-feathered bird, hopping along the windowsill with impressive determination.

"You're impatient today," I tell him, swinging my legs over the bed.

Shade cocks his head, beady eyes fixed on me. His morning ritual never changes—inspect the window for threats, preen dramatically, then judge me for sleeping past sunrise.

The floorboards creak familiar paths as I move through my morning routine. I splash cold water on my face, catching my reflection in the small mirror—gray eyes, a touch of exhaustion beneath them, and that stubborn streak of practicality my mother always complained about. I trace the scar on my right hand absently, the raised tissue a permanent reminder of choices I don't regret.

"Worth every stitch," I whisper to no one.

Downstairs, my shop waits in predawn stillness. Glass bottles catch the early light, sending prisms dancing across walls lined with shelves of dried herbs and neatly labeled potions. Everything has its place, even if that place sometimes looks like organized chaos to visitors. I can find any ingredient blindfolded—a point of pride.

The garden beckons through the back door. While Karona still sleeps, I step outside, dew-covered grass tickling my bare feet. My little sanctuary spreads before me—beds of medicinal plants arranged by properties rather than aesthetics. Beauty has its place, but function rules my world.

"Let's see what needs harvesting today," I murmur, fingertips brushing against mint leaves that release their sharp scent into the morning air.

I kneel beside a row of healing herbs, carefully selecting mature leaves while leaving younger growth intact. My knees sink into the soft earth as I work, dirt collecting beneath my fingernails. The Silverleaf family would be appalled—a genteel healer's daughter on her knees in the dirt like a common laborer.

Shade lands on a nearby fence post, watching me with that judgmental tilt of his head.

"What?" I ask him, securing a bundle of feverfew with twine. "This life suits me just fine."

He caws sharply.

"I don't need a husband to provide for me." I cut another stem with more force than necessary. "And I certainly don't need children to give my life meaning."

Another caw, this one somehow sounding skeptical.

"I'm content," I insist, the words familiar on my tongue. I've repeated them so often they should feel true by now. "I built this place from nothing. My own shop, my own rules. No family prejudices dictating who deserves healing."

Shade flutters down, landing beside the scar on my right hand. He pecks gently at it, then looks up at me with those knowing eyes.

"Fine," I mutter. "Sometimes it's quiet. Sometimes I wonder." I gather my harvest, cradling the herbs against my chest. "But wondering isn't the same as regretting."

Shade caws at me again, louder this time.

"You're calling me a liar," I translate, laughing despite myself. "Keep your opinions to yourself, bird. Not everyone needs what everyone else has."

But as I turn back toward my shop, arms full of the day's work, Shade's accusation follows me like a shadow I can't quite outrun.

The morning flows into the afternoon as customers trickle in and out of my shop. I've wrapped delicate pain remedies for an elderly man with gnarled hands, mixed a tincture for a young woman with moon-cycle cramps, and advised a nervous father about fever treatments for his daughter. By midday, my shelves have noticeable gaps where popular remedies once stood.

"Looks like a market run," I mutter to myself, mentally cataloging what I need. "Yellowroot oil, gankoya root, and those glass vials from Tauros the glassblower."

I flip the shop sign to "Returning Soon," grab my market basket, and step into Karona's bustling streets. The city pulses with midday energy—merchants hawking wares, food vendors calling out their specials, children darting between stalls like schools of fish. The smell of fresh bread mingles with spices and the salt-tang from the nearby harbor.

My first stops are quick and efficient. I bargain hard but fair, maintaining the reputation I've cultivated over years. Most merchants know better than to try overcharging "the herb woman with the silver hair and sharper tongue."

"Maya!" Demetrius, my favorite spice merchant, waves me over. His stall overflows with exotic offerings from across the seas. "I've been saving something special for you."

"If it's another marriage prospect, I'll pass," I say, approaching his counter with a raised eyebrow.

He throws his head back in laughter. "No, no. Though my nephew still asks about you." He produces a small packet wrapped in waxed paper. "Rare meqixste from the interior mountains of Osiris. Stronger than what you usually buy."

I take a whiff and nearly stagger back. "Gods, that's potent."

"Good for your special remedies, yes?" He winks conspiratorially.

"At the right price." I cross my arms, settling in for our usual haggling dance.

Three stalls and four successful negotiations later, my basket grows heavy with supplies. I'm examining glass vials at Tauros's stall when I notice her—a young woman, perhaps twenty, with dark circles under her eyes that speak of sleepless nights. She struggles to balance a market basket while a red-faced toddler tugs at her skirts, wailing with impressive lung capacity.

"Please, Nyzie," she pleads, shifting her heavy basket. "Just a little longer, then we can go home."

The merchant she's trying to buy from looks increasingly irritated as the child's screams escalate. Other shoppers cast sidelong glances, some sympathetic, others clearly annoyed.

"Here," I say to Tauros, placing coins in his hand. "I'll take these six."

Without fully understanding why, I find myself moving toward the woman. Perhaps it's the exhaustion etched on her face—I recognize a soul at the end of its tether.

"Excuse me," I say, reaching into my pocket for a small sachet of lavender and chamomile I keep for nervous customers. I kneel to the child's level. "Hello there, little one. Would you like to smell something magical?"

The boy pauses mid-wail, curiosity momentarily overriding his tantrum. His mother looks at me with equal parts suspicion and desperate hope.

"It's just herbs," I assure her. "Nothing harmful."

I offer the sachet to the boy, who grabs it with pudgy hands and immediately brings it to his nose. His eyes widen in surprise, and the crying stops as abruptly as it began.

"Pretty smell," he declares, clutching the small pouch.

"A miracle worker," his mother says, relief washing over her face. "Thank you. I'm Thea."

"Maya," I reply. "No miracle, just distraction."

As the merchant completes Thea's purchase, I help steady her basket. "Let me carry this to the next stall for you."

"You're too kind. Nyzie's father works at the shipyard—dawn to dusk. It's just me and this little whirlwind most days." She looks down at her son with a mixture of exhaustion and fierce love that makes something twist in my chest.

"Do you have children?" Thea asks as we walk.

I laugh, the sound coming out sharper than intended. "Me? No. I'd be a terrible mother. I enjoy my freedom too much." The words flow automatically, my standard response to such questions.

Thea smiles. "Some days I envy that freedom."

We part ways at the fruit stall, Nico now happily clutching both my sachet and an apple his mother purchased. She thanks me again, genuine gratitude in her tired eyes.

As I walk away, something gnaws at me—a splinter lodged beneath my skin. I helped without taking responsibility. I made a difference for a moment without changing my life. That's enough.

Isn't it?



## DEX

I slump against the cool stone wall of my home, sliding down until my massive frame hits the floor with a thud that would normally concern me about disturbing the neighbors. Right now, I couldn't care less. My head drops into my hands, fingers digging into the fur between my horns where a headache pulses like a blacksmith's hammer.

"Waaaaaaaah!"

Ellis's cries pierce the air again, his tiny lungs somehow producing a sound that could wake the dead in the catacombs. I lift my bloodshot green eyes to the cradle where my nephew's tawny fur is slick with sweat, his little body arching and twisting as if possessed.

"Come on, little one," I whisper, my normally booming merchant's voice reduced to a ragged plea. "What do you want from me?"

I've tried everything. The bottle sits rejected on the side table, barely touched. Each time I try to rock him, his cries intensify as if I'm torturing him. Sleep? That's become a distant memory for both of us.

I drag myself up, my seven-and-a-half-foot frame feeling heavier than a wagon of iron. One of the bronze rings on my left horn is loose—I haven't had time to tighten it. My brown fur is matted in places, especially around my chest where Ellis has spit up more milk than he's consumed. There's a sour smell clinging to me that no amount of washing seems to remove.

"Let's try once more," I mutter, reaching into the cradle.

Ellis's gold eyes—so like mine—are swimming with tears. His tiny horns, barely nubs poking through his downy head fur, gleam with moisture. I lift him as gently as my massive hands can manage.

"Shhhh," I try again, patting his back with a fingertip that seems absurdly large against his small frame. "Your uncle's got you."

His response is a hiccupping sob that breaks my heart and my patience simultaneously.

"Gods below," I groan. "I've faced down a band of river pirates with nothing but a broken oar. I once convinced Theron to attend a Spring Festival dance." I look down at the wailing infant. "But you, little one, might be my undoing."

The walls of my house feel like they're closing in. I need air. Maybe that's what Ellis needs too.

"A walk," I decide, grabbing a light blanket to wrap around him. "The evening air might calm us both."

I step outside, the cool evening breeze a blessed relief against my overheated skin. The sun is starting to set, the warm light spilling across the cobblestone streets. For a moment, Ellis's cries soften, and I feel a surge of triumph.

"That's it," I encourage, taking a few steps down the street. "See? Much better out here, isn't it?"

My victory is short-lived. Within moments, Ellis is screaming again, possibly louder than before. A window slams shut across the way. Someone mutters a curse that even I, a former warrior's son, find impressive.

I bounce Ellis gently as we walk, trying to remember the lullaby my mother used to sing. All that comes to mind are ribald drinking songs from the portside taverns.

"Not helpful," I mutter, adjusting Ellis in my arms. His tiny fingers grab at my chest fur and pull, bringing tears to my eyes. "Careful there, strong one."

We make a circuit around the block, then another. My legs ache. My horns throb. My eyes feel like they're filled with sand. Ellis continues to cry, his little body shuddering with each sob.

"What would your mother do?" I ask the stars, not expecting an answer. The question sends a pang through my chest sharper than any physical pain.

It's been one week. One week of this impossible task. One week of being completely, utterly inadequate to the needs of this tiny life in my arms. One week of missing sleep, missing meals, missing the knowledge that should have been passed down but never was.

"I don't know if I can do this," I admit aloud, voice cracking. "I really don't."

I'm about to turn around and head back home, admit defeat, when suddenly, a voice cuts through the fog of my exhaustion. "You look like you're about to drop dead."

I barely lift my head, not even caring who's addressing me. A human woman stands before me, silver-blond hair catching

the last light of day. Her gray eyes assess me with clinical precision, taking in my disheveled appearance, Ellis's tear-stained face, and the general aura of defeat hanging over us both.

"Feels like it," I mumble, not bothering with my usual merchant's charm or social niceties. What's the point? I've failed at the one task that matters.

Without waiting for permission—not that I'm in any position to grant or deny it—she reaches for Ellis with confident hands. I'm too surprised to protest as she gently extracts him from my grip. Part of me wants to snatch him back—he's my responsibility, my blood—but I'm too damn tired to move, and something in me just wants to watch her.

She lifts him to her chest with natural ease, like she's done this a thousand times before. Her humming starts low and sweet, a melody I don't recognize but that somehow feels ancient and right. She sways on the balls of her feet, a gentle, rhythmic motion that has Ellis... quieting?

I stare in disbelief as his wails soften to whimpers, then to sighs. His little golden eyes, perpetually wide and frightened for days, begin to droop. My mouth opens, then closes again. No words come out.

"How...?" I finally manage, gesturing helplessly at the miracle unfolding before me.

The corner of her mouth lifts in a smirk that's somehow both smug and sympathetic. "You're big and scary. I'm soft and warm. He knows the difference."

I should be offended—I've built my merchant reputation on being approachable despite my size—but I'm too grateful for the sudden silence to argue.

"I'm Dex," I offer, straightening my spine with a crackle that makes me wince. "Dex Ironhoof. And that's Ellis." I nod toward my now-peaceful nephew, his tawny fur rising and falling with each tiny breath.

"Maya Silverleaf," she responds, her eyes never leaving Ellis's face. There's something in the way she holds him—professional but tender—that speaks of experience beyond simple intuition.

I exhale sharply, a sound that carries the weight of a week's worth of helplessness. Relief washes over me, but there's something else too. A peculiar flutter in my chest as I watch her—really watch her. The silver-blond hair cut practically short, the way she balances Ellis's weight without a second thought, the small scar on her right hand that speaks of a story I suddenly want to know.

Without thinking, I blurt out, "Stay."

Her gray eyes snap to mine, widening slightly. "Excuse me?"

Heat rushes to my face, my ears flicking back in embarrassment—a tell I've never been able to control. I clear my throat, suddenly flustered in a way I haven't been since I was a gangly teenager trying to ask a girl to dance.

"I mean—Can you help me? He hasn't slept in a week." I rub the back of my neck, aware that I sound desperate but past caring. "I haven't either, if I'm being honest."

I'm not even sure what I'm asking. For her to walk Ellis around the block? To come home with me and show me what I'm doing wrong? To move in permanently and save us both from my incompetence?

Maya studies me for a long moment, her expression unreadable. Then her eyes drift down to Ellis, now peacefully asleep against her chest, his tiny fingers curled into the fabric of her tunic. Something shifts in her face—a softening around the eyes, a slight furrow between her brows.

Against what appears to be her better judgment, she gives a slow nod.

A wave of relief crashes over me like a monsoon-season tide, so powerful I nearly stagger. Ellis—silent, peaceful Ellis—nestles against Maya's chest without a single snuffle or sob. The absence of his cries leaves an almost dizzying quiet.

"Follow me," I say, keeping my normally booming voice soft, afraid to disturb the fragile miracle I'm witnessing. "My place is just around the corner. We should—" I gesture vaguely toward the sleeping infant—"continue this somewhere I'm not terrorizing the whole street."

Maya nods, following my lead with Ellis cradled expertly in her arms. The way she holds him—confident but gentle, like she's done this a thousand times before—stirs something in my chest. Something warm and unfamiliar that I immediately try to tamp down. But gods below, when her lips curve upward into a small smile at my comment, I find myself staring.

The silver-blond of her hair catches the last golden rays of sunset, creating a halo effect that seems almost too perfect to be coincidental. Her gray eyes, practical and direct, soften slightly at the corners when she looks down at Ellis.

I want her to smile again.

I clear my throat, suddenly aware I've been silent too long. My ears flick back again and I hope she doesn't notice. Trade negotiations with the stingiest guild masters don't make me flustered, yet here I am, tongue-tied because a human woman managed to soothe my nephew.

"It's not much," I warn as we approach my home, a solid stone structure with wide doorways built to accommodate minotaur proportions. "Been a bit preoccupied to clean lately."

"If you're apologizing for baby mess, don't bother," Maya responds, her voice rich with amusement. "I've seen worse."

I push the door open with my shoulder, suddenly seeing my home through a stranger's eyes. It's spacious but currently chaotic—a merchant's eye for quality furnishings now buried under an avalanche of baby things. Blankets draped over chairs,

bottles in various stages of preparation littering tables, my normally meticulous account books pushed aside to make room for a wooden cradle carved with traditional minotaur symbols.

"Impressive," Maya murmurs, her eyes taking in the space with no judgement. "Give me a second and I'll get him down."

"She works miracles," I tease, and she grins wider this time.

My heart leaps, and I wonder just how exhausted I am if I'm reacting this way. It has to be the lack of sleep—nothing else.





## DEX

I sink down onto my sofa, the wooden frame creaking under my weight as exhaustion crashes over me like a wave. My muscles feel like molten lead, heavy and burning simultaneously. For the first time in a week, Ellis isn't screaming. The silence in my home rings in my ears almost as loudly as his cries had.

Maya moves through my cluttered living space with a confidence I find mesmerizing. Her practiced hands fold discarded blankets, arrange scattered baby items, all while keeping one eye on Ellis's cradle. Nothing about her movements seems calculated or forced; she simply flows from one task to the next like water finding its path downstream.

"I should be helping," I mutter, though I make no move to rise. My body has apparently decided that now that danger has passed, it can finally surrender to a week's worth of sleep deprivation.

"You should be resting," Maya counters without looking at me. She leans over the cradle, adjusting the tiny blanket around Ellis with gentle precision. Her fingers, small compared to mine but strong and sure, tuck the fabric securely around his tawny fur without disturbing his precious sleep.

I watch her check the temperature of the room, moving to crack a window just slightly to let in fresh air. She tests the draft with her palm, ensuring it won't chill the baby, before nodding to herself in satisfaction.

"You seem to know exactly what you're doing," I observe, unable to keep the wonder from my voice. "While I've been stumbling around like a drunk at a wine festival."

This pulls a smile from her—a small one, but genuine. The expression transforms her practical features, softening the determined set of her jaw. I find myself wanting to say more ridiculous things just to see it again.

"The beginning is the hardest," she assures me, moving to the kitchen area where bottles sit in various stages of preparation. Without asking permission, she begins organizing them, cleaning some and setting others aside. "And he seems very young. Everyone is scrambling to just make it when they are that age."

The gentle understanding in her voice threatens to undo me. I've had traders try to swindle me, competitors threaten me, and once even had a knife pulled on me in a tough negotiation. None of it fazed me. But this human woman's simple compassion has relief sweeping through me, taking some of the weight off my shoulders.

"Do you do this often?" I ask, desperate to change the subject before I make a complete fool of myself. The bronze rings on my horns clink softly as I tilt my head to watch her work.

She glances over her shoulder, that smirk returning—the one that somehow manages to be both challenging and sympathetic at once.

"Soothe crying minotaurs? No," she quips, her gray eyes sparkling with mischief. "But babies? Sometimes. I grew up in a big family."

The laugh that bursts from me takes us both by surprise. It's rusty and rough, but genuine—the first time I've laughed in what feels like years rather than weeks. The sound rumbles through my chest, releasing some of the tension I've been carrying since Ellis arrived.

"That's not what I meant," I protest, though I can't stop grinning. My ears perk forward with interest, as I tell my friend Theron always teases me about. "Though I suspect there are plenty of fully-grown minotaurs who'd benefit from your skills."

Maya's movements pause as she looks at me directly, assessing me with those perceptive gray eyes. "You're doing better than you think, you know. He's clean, fed, and safe. That's half the battle right there."

I gesture helplessly at the chaos surrounding us. "And the other half?"

"Figuring out how to do all that while still taking care of yourself." She points at a plate of untouched food on my table, now dried out and inedible. "When's the last time you actually finished a meal?"

I honestly can't remember, which seems answer enough. Maya shakes her head and continues her methodical organization of my living space, somehow making it feel less like criticism and more like caretaking.

"I'm a merchant," I explain, feeling compelled to defend myself. "I can haggle with the best of them, manage inventory that would make your head spin, and calculate profits faster than most humans can count to ten." I look over at Ellis's peacefully sleeping form. "But this? This is uncharted territory."

"You need to eat something," Maya says, crossing her arms. The stance transforms her from gentle caretaker to unmovable force in an instant. "And, not to be rude, but you should probably take a bath. I think there's been more milk spilled on you than you realize."

I sniff at my fur and wince. She's not wrong. I smell...sour. "Ellis might wake—"

"I'll handle him." Her tone leaves no room for argument. "I've survived plenty growing up. I think I can manage one sleeping infant for twenty minutes."

"Twenty minutes," I agree, rising from the sofa with a groan. My knees crack in protest after so long sitting motionless. "If he makes the slightest noise—"

"I'll come get you immediately," she finishes, though the twitch at the corner of her mouth tells me she's humoring me. "Now go. You're worse than Ellis with the stalling."

I lumber toward my bathing chamber, glancing back twice before I close the door behind me. When I catch sight of my reflection in the polished metal mirror, I understand Maya's insistence. Wild-eyed, fur matted in places and sticking up in others, I look like some mountain hermit rather than a successful merchant. The bronze rings on my horns are dull and unpolished, and there are stains on my tunic I don't even want to identify.

The warm water feels like salvation against my hide. I sink into the large ancient wooden tub I had custom-built to accommodate my frame, water sloshing over the sides. One benefit of minotaur craftsmanship—we build things to last. This tub was my first major purchase when my trading business turned its first real profit.

As I scrub away days of neglect, my thoughts drift to Ellis's mother—Iris, my little sister. I hope she knows that I'll take care of him, that when she told the maids my name that I would take her son in. I'll raise him, teach him strength. But...I don't know if I can give him everything my sister would've. If I can show him the kind of love he deserves.

What do I know about love? Sure, I've had my share of dalliances, even came close to marriage once. But raising a child? Teaching him what it means to be loved?

I duck my head underwater, letting it wash away the stinging in my eyes that has nothing to do with soap.

By the time I emerge, freshly groomed and dressed in clean clothes, the house smells different. Not just the absence of chaos, but the presence of something... homey. My stomach growls embarrassingly loud as I follow my nose to the kitchen.

Maya stands at my hearth, stirring something in a pot. She's found ingredients I didn't even know I had and transformed them into something that smells divine. Ellis continues his miraculous slumber in his cradle, which she's moved closer to the kitchen's warmth.

"Feel better?" she asks without turning around.

"Like a new minotaur," I admit, running a hand over my now-smooth horns. "Whatever you're making, I may propose marriage after I taste it."

She shakes her head with a smile. "It's just burgona stew with somana and a bit of spice," she says, but I catch the pleased note in her voice. "Nothing fancy."

"At this point, anything that isn't stone-cold or half-eaten standing over a sink qualifies as fancy." I clear my throat, suddenly awkward in my own home. "Thank you. For all of this."

Maya ladles stew into a bowl that looks comically small in my hands and gestures toward the large wooden table that dominates the center of the room. I settle onto my chair while she takes the seat across from me. The first spoonful nearly brings tears to my eyes—simple food, yes, but warm and filling in a way that feeds more than just hunger.

"You're really good with him," I say, gesturing with my spoon toward the peacefully sleeping Ellis. "I can pay you. If you're willing to stay a little longer. Until I find someone permanent."

Maya raises a brow. The scar on her right hand catches the light as she taps her fingers against the table, considering. "I have a shop. A farm. My own life."

"I don't expect anything more than what you're willing to give." The words come out more sincere than I intended, revealing the desperate edge beneath my casual request.

For some reason, that answer satisfies her. Her expression softens just slightly—not quite a smile, but the rigid line of her shoulders relaxes.

"Fine," she says. "I'll help. But this doesn't make me a nanny. And it sure as hell doesn't make us a family."

I nod, pretending that sentence doesn't sting. Of course we're not family—we barely know each other. But after a week of a screaming infant and crushing loneliness, even temporary help feels like finding water in a desert. I force a jovial grin, falling back on the persona that's gotten me through most of life's rough patches.

"Understood. Professional arrangement only," I agree, raising my bowl slightly in a mock toast. "Though Ellis might have other ideas. I swear he's been plotting against me from day one."

Her answering chuckle sends warmth spreading through my chest, and I can't help but smile. Gods, I hope this isn't a bad idea.



# MAYA

The morning light filters through the half-drawn curtains, touching my face with gentle persistence. I stir, momentarily disoriented by the unfamiliar ceiling above me. The events of yesterday flood back—the wailing minotaur calf, his massive, desperate uncle, and my impulsive decision to help them both.

I slide from the bed, my bare feet meeting cool floorboards. The guest room Dex offered is surprisingly comfortable, if sparsely furnished. A quick glance outside tells me it's barely past dawn—my usual waking time. Some habits never break, even away from my own farm.

The house is quiet except for a soft snuffling sound coming from down the hall—Ellis, thankfully sleeping. I tiptoe past Dex's closed door and make my way to the kitchen, only to stop short at the threshold.

"By the gods," I mutter.

The kitchen looks like a battlefield, worse in the daylight than last night. Unwashed bottles crowd every surface. Empty milk cartons and forgotten food lay on the counters. Something sticky covers a portion of the counter, and there's a distinct smell of spoiled milk hanging in the air.

I press my fingers to the scar on my right hand—an old habit when I'm thinking—and take a deep breath. This won't do. Not at all.

Without hesitation, I roll up my sleeves and get to work. I wash the bottles first, scrubbing each thoroughly before setting them to dry. I clean out the food that's gone bad, wipe down every surface, and sweep the floor. The rhythm of cleaning calms me, gives my hands purpose.

When the kitchen gleams to my satisfaction, I move on to the living area. Blankets are strewn everywhere, alongside scrolls, ink bottles, and what appears to be Dex's merchant ledgers. I straighten everything, folding blankets and stacking papers, careful not to disturb his organizational system—if there even is one.

Next, I tackle Ellis's things. Baby supplies are scattered throughout the house with no rhyme or reason. I gather swaddling cloths, tiny tunics, and soft blankets, folding each neatly before arranging them in a chest in Ellis's room. The poor calf is still sleeping soundly in his crib, his tawny fur rising and falling with each breath. His tiny horns catch the light as he shifts in his slumber.

"You deserve better than this chaos," I whisper, carefully tucking his blanket closer around him.

By the time the sun properly rises, I've transformed the interior of the house. Everything has a place now, surfaces shine, and even the air smells fresher. I pull open a window just as I hear hoofsteps behind me.

I turn to find Dex standing in the doorway, one hand absently rubbing at his horns. His massive frame nearly fills the entire doorway. His copper-tinted fur catches the morning light, giving him an almost burnished glow. Sleep still clings to him; his green eyes are heavy-lidded and his posture relaxed. Without the panic of yesterday animating his features, he looks different—softer somehow, and undeniably handsome in a wild, untamed way. His curved horns with their bronze rings catch the sunlight, giving him a crowned appearance that suits him.

He looked pretty deranged when I met him, but after a bath, it was impossible to ignore how good he looks. And right now, sleepy and at ease, he's hard to look away from.

"What... happened?" His deep voice rumbles through the room, doing something to me it shouldn't.

I lean against the wall, trying not to let my eyes wander down the full length of his body. "I made it livable," I reply, forcing my gaze away.

"I thought you weren't staying." There's confusion in his voice, but no anger.

I shrug. "I'm not. But I can't work in chaos."

Dex doesn't argue. He just assesses me, his massive form still and silent. Something warm and unexpected flutters in my chest at his attention. I try to ignore it, focus on the task at hand, but I'm acutely aware of him—his presence, his scent carried on the morning breeze, the quiet strength he exudes without effort.

*This is a job*, I remind myself. Nothing more. The fluttering sensation means nothing.

But I can't help the way my stomach flips as he shifts, his eyes meeting mine. "Thank you," he says with such sincerity that I

don't know how I couldn't want to help this minotaur, this gentle giant. I feel so...drawn to him.

Just then, a tiny, insistent cry breaks the moment between us. Ellis has awakened, and his displeasure at finding himself alone is evident in every wailing note.

"I'll get him," I say quickly, grateful for the distraction. The brief connection I felt with Dex has left me unsettled, my heart beating a touch too fast.

But Dex's massive hand gently blocks my path. "No, let me." His voice is firm but anxious. "I need to learn, don't I? Can't depend on you forever."

There's something so unexpectedly vulnerable in his statement that I step back, nodding. "Of course. I'll prepare his bottle."

I move to the kitchen, grateful I organized everything earlier. The milk is easy to find now, and I measure it precisely, warming it to the perfect temperature. Behind me, I hear Dex's heavy hoofsteps followed by Ellis's continued protests.

When I return to the living area, the sight before me nearly makes me laugh. Dex, this enormous minotaur merchant who probably intimidates half his business associates with his sheer size alone, looks completely terrified of the tiny calf in his arms. Ellis squirms against his uncle's stiff hold, little hooves kicking in protest, his gold eyes wide with frustration.

"Here's the bottle," I say, handing it to him.

Dex takes it with a determined nod, then proceeds to hold it at an awkward angle that has more milk dribbling down Ellis's chin than into his mouth. The baby's cries increase in volume, and Dex's expression shifts from determination to panic.

"I don't understand," he says, frustration evident in his voice. "The bottle is right there. Why won't he just drink it?"

I bite my lip, feeling an unexpected wave of tenderness for this struggling uncle. He's trying so hard.

"He's new to the world," I explain, stepping closer. "And you're new to him. Here, like this."

I move behind Dex without thinking, reaching around his broad frame to adjust his hold on Ellis. The closeness hits me immediately—his warmth, the solid wall of muscle beneath my fingertips, the clean, earthy scent of him. My breath catches as I guide his large hands into a better position.

"Support his head more," I murmur, suddenly conscious of how my arms brush against his. "Tilt the bottle so there's no air. That's it."

Ellis latches onto the bottle properly, his cries ceasing as he drinks eagerly. Dex's entire body relaxes against mine, and I become acutely aware of how I'm practically embracing him from behind, my chest pressed against his broad back.

I should step away. I know I should. But I find myself lingering, watching around his shoulder as Ellis drinks contentedly in his uncle's arms. My hands remain lightly on Dex's forearms, feeling the powerful muscles beneath his copper-tinted fur. For a merchant, his physique suggests years of physical labor or training.

Dex turns his head slightly, and suddenly we're face to face, inches apart. His green eyes meet mine, surprise and something warmer reflected in their depths. I've never been this close to a minotaur before—close enough to see the individual strands of fur along his jawline, to notice how his eyes aren't just green but flecked with gold near the pupils.

Something unspoken passes between us, a current of understanding or attraction or both. My heart beats faster, and I realize I've forgotten to breathe.

I clear my throat and force myself to step back, suddenly self-conscious. "You're not bad at this, you know," I say, trying to sound normal despite the unexpected flutter in my stomach.

Dex swallows visibly, his attention returning to Ellis. "Doesn't feel that way," he admits, his deep voice quiet. "Every time I think I'm figuring him out, he changes the rules."

There's such honesty in his admission, such openness in his expression. This isn't the confident merchant I glimpsed yesterday; this is a man—a minotaur—completely out of his depth and courageous enough to admit it.

"You'll get there," I say, my voice softening. I reach out impulsively and touch his arm. "No one knows what they're doing at first. But look at him now."

We both glance down at Ellis, who's drinking contentedly, his golden eyes half-closed in satisfaction. Dex's entire posture has changed, becoming more natural, more confident with the baby. He just needed guidance, not replacement.

"He needs you," I add quietly. "And you're already learning."

I'm not sure when I became this coach, but I want to help him. I've never felt like my life was empty before, but with Dex, I find myself wanting to help shoulder his burden. Like I was meant to be there for him, knowing he would do the same for me.

Gods, when did I get so soft?



## DEX

I sit stiffly on the nursery floor, my legs crossed in a way that feels unnatural for my massive frame. Ellis squirms in the crook of my arm, his tawny fur damp with sweat from all his fussing. The small weight of him—barely anything compared to a sack of grain—feels heavier than all my merchandise combined. His little hooves kick against my forearm as if trying to escape.

"Hey now, little one," I murmur, my voice coming out rougher than intended. "You need to eat."

Ellis turns his face away from the bottle I'm trying to position at his mouth. His golden eyes, so like mine, are puffy from crying. Gods, I never thought it would be this hard.

My grip tightens reflexively as he twists—a jolt of panic shooting through me. What if I drop him? What if my massive minotaur hands crush something important? Every movement I make feels wrong, every position awkward.

"Come on, Ellis," I plead, hearing the desperation in my own voice. "Just take the damn bottle."

The baby's face scrunches up—that familiar precursor to another crying fit that'll probably wake half the neighborhood. I've gotten better at the feeding part, at least compared to that first disastrous week, but everything else? Complete taura shit.

I feel her presence before I see her. Maya stands in the doorway, arms crossed over her chest, silver-blond hair catching the late afternoon light streaming through the nursery windows. I didn't even realize she was back from her shop.

Her gray eyes take in the scene—me, defeated on the floor, and Ellis working himself into another fit. She doesn't rush in to help. Just watches. I like that about her—most of the time. She wants to help, not just tell me what I'm doing wrong. She makes me feel like maybe I could learn.

And then there are moments like this where I think I'm hopeless.

"Don't just stand there," I grunt, trying to adjust Ellis's position for what feels like the hundredth time. "Either help or leave me to my misery."

Maya's lips quirk up at one corner—that almost-smile that somehow makes me feel both chastised and encouraged. "You're doing fine," she lies smoothly.

"Fine? Look at him! He hates me."

"He doesn't hate you." Maya pushes off from the doorframe and approaches, her movements graceful and confident. "He's a baby. They don't hate, they communicate."

"Well, he's communicating that I'm terrible at this."

She kneels beside me on the floor, close enough that I catch the scent of herbs that follows her everywhere—zabilla and rirzed, sweet yet medicinal. Without a word, she reaches out, her hands moving to guide mine.

"You're holding him like he might shatter," she murmurs, repositioning my fingers with her smaller ones. The scar on her right hand stands out against her skin as she demonstrates. "Loosen up. Babies feel tension. He's not a weapon, Dex."

Her touch is firm but gentle as she adjusts my grip on the bottle next, tilting it slightly. "There. Let him control the pace a bit."

To my utter amazement, Ellis latches onto the bottle properly—just like when she showed me yesterday—his tiny hands coming up to press against the glass as he starts to drink. No resistance. No crying. Just the soft sounds of contented feeding.

The relief that floods through me is almost dizzying. My shoulders drop several inches, and I exhale a breath I hadn't realized I was holding. The tight coil of frustration in my gut begins to unravel.

"I was doing it wrong." The admission comes out heavier than I intend, weighted with a week's worth of failure.

Maya's eyes meet mine, steady and without judgment. "You were trying," she corrects, her voice soft but firm. "That's what matters."

Her fingers linger on my wrist for a moment longer than necessary before she withdraws them, settling back on her heels to watch Ellis drink.

"I'm a merchant," I mutter, staring down at the small miracle happening in my arms. "I can haggle with the stingiest traders in all of Milthar. I can lift cargo that takes two humans to move. But this?" I shake my head, the bronze rings in my horns clinking softly. "This scares the shit out of me."

"Good thing you are a big, strong minotaur." She winks and I find myself grinning. "I know you can handle this."



Maya leaves with a soft "I'll be back after my bath," her footsteps fading down the hallway, leaving me alone with Ellis for the first time since she arrived this morning. The house settles into the kind of quiet that feels like a held breath—waiting for something to go wrong.

Ellis is still suckling at the bottle, his tiny fingers pressed against the glass. I stare down at him, memorizing the contours of his face—my sister's son. The weight of that responsibility sits on my chest, heavier than any merchandise I've ever hauled.

"Just you and me for a bit, little one," I murmur, my voice sounding too large in the nursery's stillness.

When the bottle empties, Ellis makes a small noise of protest. I carefully set it aside and shift him to my shoulder the way Maya showed me—supporting his head, patting his back with gentle taps from my massive palm. His body feels impossibly small against mine.

"Your mother would laugh herself sick seeing me like this," I tell him quietly, thinking of Iris. My throat tightens. "She always said I didn't know my own size. Too big for my own heart."

Ellis hiccups against my shoulder, a tiny sound that somehow fills the entire room.

The nursery feels too confining suddenly, the walls pressing in. I carry Ellis to my bedroom, careful not to jostle him. The late afternoon sun slants through the windows, casting long shadows across the floor. I ease myself onto the edge of my bed, the frame creaking under my weight.

With deliberate movements, I loosen the front of my shirt and settle Ellis against my bare chest. Maya mentioned something about skin contact being important—one of the dozens of bits of knowledge she's dropped casually, like they're things everyone should know.

Ellis's fur is softer than anything I've ever touched, finer than the most expensive silks I've traded. His tiny body radiates heat as he settles against me, his heartbeat a rapid flutter against my own slower, heavier rhythm. The contrast hits me hard—how fragile he is, how much damage these merchant's hands could do if I'm not careful.

I run a careful finger over Ellis's forehead, tracing the barely-there bumps where his horns will someday grow. They're nothing more than slight protrusions now, velvety nubs at the edges of his hairline. Mine took years to fully emerge, curving out and up like my father's before me.

"Will yours look like mine?" I whisper, touching one of the bronze rings that adorn my own horns. "Or did you get your mother's? Hers were straighter, sleeker."

Ellis makes a small noise, a contented sigh as he nestles deeper against my chest. His eyes are closed, long lashes resting against his cheeks, his tiny fists curled against my skin.

It's such a simple thing—a baby falling asleep. It happens countless times across the world every day. But this—this undoes something in me.

I don't know when I started holding my breath, but I let it out now, a slow, shuddering exhale. My chest expands and contracts beneath Ellis's small form, and he moves with it, completely trusting.

"You're really stuck with me, aren't you?" My voice comes out rougher than intended. "Pretty shitty trade, little one. You could've done better."

I press my palm over Ellis's small back, feeling the rise and fall of his tiny ribcage. His ears twitch slightly in his sleep, and I find myself smiling despite the exhaustion weighing down my shoulders. The smile feels rusty, like a door hinge that hasn't been used in too long.

Ten days. It's been ten days since I walked into my sister's house and walked out with her son. Seven days of fumbling, failing, and fearing I'm ruining him with every mistake. Seven days of feeling like I'm drowning.

But right now, with Ellis's heartbeat steady against mine, something shifts. Something takes root. Not confidence—I'm nowhere near that yet—but a fierce, protective instinct that runs deeper than blood or obligation.

"We'll figure this out," I promise him quietly. "I don't know what the hell I'm doing, but we'll figure it out together."

I rub small circles on his back, careful to keep my touch light. The first real threads of attachment weave through me, forming something I know instinctively will be unbreakable.



## MAYA

The morning light creeps through the curtains, illuminating my guest room. It's been a week since I first stepped into this controlled chaos, and somehow I've slipped into a routine I never expected. My hands move in practiced motions as I braid my short silver-blond hair away from my face—a small act of control before facing the day.

I pause at Ellis's nursery on my way downstairs. The little one—Dex has me in the habit of calling him that, too—is already awake, watching the mobile above his crib with those wide gold eyes. So observant for one so young.

"Good morning, little one," I whisper, and he turns to me, his tiny hooves kicking in excitement. My chest tightens. I shouldn't be getting attached.

When I carry Ellis down the hall, I find Dex in the kitchen, his massive frame hunched over a mug of kaffo. His eyes look a little unfocused, and his copper-highlighted brown fur looks dull in the morning light. He's wearing the same tunic as yesterday after spending the night taking Ellis' feedings. He's supposed to be asleep right now, but I guess it works in my favor he's not.

"Your turn." I hand Ellis over, observing how naturally the baby settles against Dex's broad chest. "I need to head to the shop soon."

Dex's green eyes flicker with momentary panic before he adjusts his nephew in his arms. "We'll be fine. Same as yesterday."

I lean against the doorframe, folding my arms across my chest. "When was the last time you left this house?"

His ears flick back slightly—a tell I've learned means he's uncomfortable. "I've been busy."

"Busy hiding." The words slip out before I can stop them. Too direct, as usual. My mother always said my tongue would be my downfall.

Dex's nostrils flare. "I'm not hiding. I'm adjusting. There's a difference."

"You're both coming with me today." It's not a question.

"To your shop?" His voice pitches higher. "Ellis isn't ready for that."

"Ellis isn't," I raise a skeptical eyebrow, "or you aren't?"

He grumbles something under his breath, one finger gently tracing Ellis's soft baby horns. The little one coos in response.

"You need fresh air. You look like you're one sleepless night away from passing out in a corner."

Dex opens his mouth to argue, but I've already turned to rummage through the bag of supplies I bought at the market two days ago. I pull out a long cloth wrap—soft, sturdy material in an earthy green tone that complements his fur.

"Here." I push it into his hands. "This will keep Ellis secure while leaving your hands free."

Dex stares at the cloth like I've handed him a live yillese. "I can't—"

"You can." I take Ellis while Dex reluctantly stands, his full seven-and-a-half-foot height making me tilt my head back to maintain eye contact. "Watch first."

I demonstrate with quick, efficient movements—wrapping the cloth around my waist, creating a pocket, adjusting for support. My hands move with the practiced ease of someone who's helped many new mothers in my shop.

"Now you try." I unwrap and hand him both Ellis and the cloth.

Dex fumbles immediately, his large fingers struggling with the folds that seemed so simple in my demonstration. The cloth tangles, Ellis fusses, and frustration clouds Dex's face.

"Here." I step closer, placing my hands over his. "Like this."

My smaller hands guide his movements, steady and patient. The warmth of his fur brushes against my skin, surprisingly soft despite his rugged appearance. I keep my voice calm, instructive.

"Cross it here, then under and through." I feel the tension in his fingers as they follow my lead. "Now tighter—Ellis likes the security."

For a moment, we're standing too close, my hands still resting on his as the final fold falls into place. Ellis is now snug against Dex's chest, tiny hooves occasionally kicking against the merchant's massive torso.

I step back, trying to ignore the lingering warmth on my fingers. "See? Not so terrifying."

Dex doesn't respond verbally, but I can read the relief in his posture as he adjusts to the weight against his chest. Ellis has

already settled, content in his cocoon.

"Grab your coat," I say, retrieving my satchel of dried herbs. "The morning air is still cool."

As we step outside together, I watch Dex take his first deep breath in what must be days. His shoulders lower slightly, the mountain of tension he's been carrying visibly lightening. One thick finger gently strokes Ellis's head through the wrap, an unconscious gesture of affection.

I hide my smile by pretending to adjust my satchel. Progress, even reluctant, is still progress.

The walk to my shop isn't long, but I find myself slowing to match Dex's hesitant pace. He moves like someone unused to stepping beyond familiar boundaries, glancing down at Ellis every few steps as if the baby might somehow vanish from his secure wrap. His massive frame draws stares from passersby—a minotaur with a baby strapped to his chest isn't something you see every day in Karona, even with our mixed population.

"They're not staring because you're doing something wrong," I murmur, noticing his discomfort. "They're staring because what you're doing is rare and good."

Dex snorts softly. "More likely wondering when I'll drop him."

"Stop that." I knock my elbow against his arm—or try to, reaching his elbow is a stretch. "You're doing fine."

My herb shop sits on the edge of town, where the cobblestones give way to the soft dirt path leading to my fields. The wooden sign—"Silverleaf Remedies"—swings gently in the morning breeze. Not the most creative name, but my family name still carries weight, even if I'm the black sheep who refuses to acknowledge it.

"This is it?" Dex's voice carries a note of surprise as he takes in the modest building with its herb-filled window boxes and dried plants hanging from the eaves.

"Were you expecting something more impressive?" I unlock the door, the familiar scent of dried herbs and tinctures washing over me.

"No, it's just..." He ducks his head slightly to enter. "It feels like you."

I pause, not sure how to take that. "Is that good or bad?"

"Good." His lips quirk upward. "Practical. Unpretentious."

I hide my smile by turning to open the shutters. "High praise from a merchant."

The morning passes in a comfortable routine. I sort through yesterday's dried herbs, checking for quality before placing them in labeled jars. Twice customers come in—regulars who barely blink at the enormous minotaur cradling a baby while examining my collection of zabilla salves. Ellis, surprisingly, seems content, occasionally making small noises that draw Dex's immediate attention.

By midday, I lock up the shop and lead them through the back door to my garden and fields. The sun beats down, but a gentle breeze keeps the heat manageable. I breathe deeply, letting the complicated symphony of scents center me—rich soil, goligan trees lining the eastern border, the sweet-tang of rirzed herb in full bloom.

"This is all yours?" Dex's voice holds genuine wonder as he takes in the neat rows extending toward the tree line.

I nod, a small burst of pride warming my chest. "Seven years of work. Started with just a quarter of the space and gradually expanded."

Ellis makes a small sound, and Dex adjusts him with growing confidence, large fingers surprisingly gentle as they tuck the fabric more securely around the baby's legs.

"You look more natural with him now," I observe, leading the way between rows of gankoya root. "Less terrified."

"Still terrified," Dex admits. "Just hiding it better."

A dark shadow passes overhead, and I automatically extend my arm. Sharp talons grasp my forearm gently as Shade lands, his slate-gray feathers ruffling in the breeze. Dex startles, instinctively covering Ellis with one large hand.

"This is Shade," I introduce them, stroking the karasu's sleek neck. "My messenger and occasional business partner."

"A karasu?" Dex looks impressed. "They're almost impossible to train."

Shade fixes him with an intelligent stare from his three black eyes, cawing like he's arguing with the sentiment.

"I found him with a broken wing three years ago," I explain, offering Shade a seed from my pocket. "He decided to stay after it healed."

Shade preens, chirping. He always has to add in his own opinion.

"He makes deliveries for me to customers who can't travel," I explain, feeling the familiar warmth of the bird's loyalty. "And keeps me company."

Dex steps closer, letting Ellis see the bird. "I've never been this close to a karasu before."

"Few have." I smile as Shade hops to my shoulder. "They're particular about their company."

I move through the garden, checking plants, pinching off dead leaves, with Dex following behind. The steady rhythm of tending soothes me—this has always been my sanctuary. I begin humming softly, an old tune my grandmother taught me before she discovered my friendship with Lyra and cut me off.

Caught in my work, I almost forget I have company until I glance up to see Dex watching me. There's something in his expression I can't quite read—a kind of quiet appreciation that makes my cheeks warm. He's adjusting Ellis's tiny hat, a soft

cotton thing I found in the market that's slightly too big. His massive fingers move with surprising delicacy, tilting the brim to shield the baby's face from the sun.

"What?" I ask, suddenly self-conscious under his steady gaze.

"You belong here," he says simply. "I've never seen anyone so... in their element."

The compliment catches me off guard. I turn back to the herbs I'm harvesting, hoping he doesn't notice the flush creeping up my neck. Something about the way he said it—with such straightforward admiration—stirs feelings I thought long buried.

Ellis makes a happy gurgle, kicking his hooves against Dex's chest. Even he seems at peace here, content in a way he hasn't been since I met them that first desperate day. The sight of them together, finding their rhythm, warms something deep in my chest—a feeling I'm not ready to name.



## DEX

I'm bone-tired. My arms ache. My back aches. My hooves ache. Parts of me I didn't know could ache, ache. The past week has become one endless blur of feeding, changing, and walking the floor with a fussing baby who seems determined to never sleep again. Maya helps, but I don't let her lose sleep during her nights because she still has a shop to run. I'm trying to bear as much as I can on my own.

Tonight is no different. Ellis squirms in my arms, his little hands pushing against my chest with surprising strength for something so small. I adjust him for what feels like the thousandth time, trying to find that perfect position that might—just might—convince him to close his eyes. His tawny fur tickles my chin as he nuzzles restlessly against me, those tiny horn buds barely visible beneath the fluff on his head.

"Come on, little one," I rumble, my voice reduced to a gravelly whisper. "Your uncle needs to sleep sometime this century."

Ellis responds with an unhappy gurgle and squirms harder.

I rock back and forth in the chair that suddenly feels too small for my seven-foot-five frame. The wood creaks beneath me in protest. One of the bronze rings on my left horn has come loose—I can feel it sliding dangerously toward the tip with every motion. I should fix it, but that would require letting go of Ellis, and the last time I tried that particular maneuver, his protests woke half the neighborhood.

My shirt hangs half-unbuttoned, evidence of an earlier failed attempt at getting comfortable. Ellis rests against my shoulder, his breathing uneven, still fighting sleep with every ounce of his tiny being. I'm losing this battle. My eyelids feel like they're weighted with lead, and I catch myself nodding off mid-rock.

"You look like you haven't slept in days."

Maya's voice cuts through my exhaustion-induced haze. She stands in the doorway, silver-blond hair tousled from the wind outside, a small smile playing on her lips. Even in my current state, I notice how the lamplight catches the scar on her right hand as she leans against the doorframe.

I grunt. "Feels like it." I don't have the energy for my usual banter. The witty merchant in me has been replaced by this hollow-eyed creature that only speaks in monosyllables and baby talk.

She crosses the room, her steps light and purposeful. Maya still runs her shop during the mornings, and while sometimes Ellis and I go with her, mostly we stay home. She's been pushing me to be a parent, not just rely on her. Sink or swim, as she puts it. Most days, I feel like I'm barely treading water.

"Has he eaten?" she asks, reaching for Ellis.

I hesitate, oddly reluctant to give him up despite my exhaustion. There's something about his weight in my arms that feels right, even when everything else feels wrong. "About an hour ago. Wasn't interested in the bottle after that."

Maya raises a brow, her gray eyes assessing me with that direct, no-nonsense stare that somehow makes me feel both scolded and cared for at the same time. "Go bathe. I've got him."

I should argue. Should tell her I'm fine, that I don't need help, that I can handle this. The words don't come. Instead, I carefully transfer Ellis to her waiting arms, watching as she settles him against her shoulder with an ease I still haven't mastered.

"Twenty minutes," she says, not looking at me as she begins to sway gently with Ellis. "Go. You smell like sour milk and defeat."

A week ago, I might have laughed at that. Now, I just nod, my horns feeling unusually heavy as I haul myself up from the chair. Every joint in my body protests the movement. I shuffle toward the bathroom, not even having the energy to be embarrassed about the state of my home or myself.

"Dex?" Maya calls after me.

I turn, one hand already on the bathroom door.

"He's going to be okay," she says softly. "And so are you."

I don't respond. I just slip into the bathroom and close the door behind me, leaning against it for a moment before I can summon the energy to move again.

Somehow I don't fall asleep in the bath. Clean but still bone-tired, I get dressed. The hot water has eased some of the ache in my muscles, but it's done little for the weight of exhaustion dragging at my eyelids. My bedroom door stands open, the bed calling my name with its rumpled sheets and promise of oblivion. I should collapse into it face-first and not move until Ellis's next feeding.

Instead, I find myself following the soft amber glow seeping under the back door. My hooves make dull thuds against the wooden floor as I move through the darkened house, guided by instinct more than sight.

The night air hits my damp fur as I push open the door. Maya is on the porch, sitting on the bench I dragged out here years ago when the house felt too empty. Ellis is nestled against her, his tiny form bundled in the blanket I knitted for my sister when she told me she was pregnant. Maya rocks gently, her movements in rhythm with the night breeze that rustles through the trees lining my property.

She looks up as I step out, her gray eyes catching the light from the oil lamp hanging from the eave. There's a softness to her face I rarely see in daylight hours. Her practical, no-nonsense demeanor has given way to something more vulnerable in the darkness.

"Can't sleep?" she asks, her voice barely above a whisper.

I lean against the porch railing, crossing my arms over my chest. The wood creaks under my weight, a familiar sound that reminds me of all the nights I've stood in this exact spot, watching the stars and dreaming of sea voyages and trade routes before Ellis came into my life.

"Didn't want to," I admit. It's only half a lie. Sleep beckons, but something stronger pulls me here.

Maya shifts slightly, making room on the bench beside her. An invitation, not a command. That's new for her—usually, she tells me exactly what I need to do with Ellis, no room for debate. I've come to appreciate her directness, even when I bristle against it.

I lower myself onto the bench, careful not to jostle her or Ellis. The seat is barely wide enough for my bulk alongside her smaller human frame. Our shoulders almost touch, and I can feel the warmth radiating from her, a counter to the night's chill.

The silence between us isn't uncomfortable. During the day, we fill the spaces with instructions about feeding schedules and diaper changes, with Maya's exasperated sighs when I fumble something simple, with my jokes that fall flat when I'm too tired to land them properly. But here, now, the quiet feels... steady. Real.

Ellis shifts in Maya's arms, his tiny snout wrinkling as he sighs against her chest. One tiny hand escapes the blanket, reaching up to tangle in her silver-blond hair. She doesn't flinch or move to extract it, just adjusts her hold to make him more comfortable.

"He likes you," I say, immediately wishing I'd kept the obvious observation to myself.

"He just knows I'm not as nervous as you are." Maya's voice lacks its usual edge. "Babies can sense that."

"I'm a merchant, not a nursemaid." The defensive words come automatically, an echo of the excuses I've been making to myself since Iris died. "Trading goods is straightforward. Tiny minotaurs are... complicated."

"You sell people things they don't know they need. Make them happy with their purchases. Not so different from keeping a baby content."

I snort, the sound escaping before I can hold it back. "If only I could calm him with a good sales pitch."

A smile tugs at Maya's lips as she looks down at Ellis. "Have you tried? Might work better than that lullaby you attempt to sing."

I clutch my chest in mock offense. "My singing voice is magnificent. Ask anyone."

"I've asked Ellis. He votes no."

I laugh, the sound genuine for the first time in days. "Traitor," I mutter, gently brushing a finger over Ellis's tawny fur.

I watch them together, something stirring in my chest that I'm not ready to name. It's warm and aching and terrifying—like standing at the edge of a cliff and discovering you want to jump. Maya meets my gaze, her expression open in a way it rarely is during daylight hours. She doesn't say anything, but she doesn't have to.





## DEX

The sound of heavy hooves reaches me before the voice does. Powerful steps that I'd recognize anywhere—deliberate, purposeful, and entirely too loud for my newly-discovered need for silence. I've barely had a moment to myself since Maya left with Ellis this morning, and the blissful quiet has been allowing my mind to settle for the first time in weeks.

Then the front door is pushed open without a knock.

"You're alive. Barely."

I sigh before I even bother turning around. Of course Theron wouldn't knock. The concept of personal boundaries seems entirely lost on my oldest friend.

Theron stands in the doorway, massive arms crossed over his broad chest, looking me over with an expression hovering between amusement and concern. The copper rings on his horns catch the mid-morning light as he tilts his head, assessing me. Even as exhausted as I am, I notice the new silver thread woven into the hem of his tunic—subtle evidence of the wealth his shipping business has accumulated. Typical Theron, understated but precise.

The towering minotaur steps inside, his amber eyes sweeping over my living space. I see my home through his eyes suddenly—too clean, too structured for a man who has spent the past two weeks drowning in exhaustion. The toys that Ellis won't be able to use for months are neatly arranged on a shelf. The blankets are folded in perfect squares. Even the herbs hanging from the kitchen rafters are tied with precisely measured twine.

None of it is my doing.

Theron gestures vaguely toward the organized shelves and the faint scent of herbs lingering in the air. He came by the first day when he heard I had released my contracts, knowing I wouldn't be able to fulfill them, and found me drowning in my new responsibilities so he knows how bad it was. "What happened in here?"

I grunt, rubbing a hand over my face. The motion dislodges one of my horn rings, and I irritably push it back into place. "I... I found someone to help me for a bit."

"Help?" Theron's voice carries that note of skepticism that I've heard countless times over our years of friendship, usually right before I convince him to back one of my more questionable trade ventures. "What kind of help?"

"That human herb seller on the edge of town," I mutter, suddenly feeling like I need to justify myself. "She's good with Ellis."

Theron's eyes widen, his brows lifting until they nearly disappear beneath the dark fur of his forehead. "Maya Silverleaf? The one with the silver-blond hair?"

Now it's my turn to be surprised. "You know her?"

"She's Lyra's best friend," Theron says, his tone somewhere between disbelief and amusement. "They grew up together."

The knowledge hits me square in the chest. Lyra—Theron's human mate. The healer who everyone said would never last with him, yet somehow they've built one of the strongest partnerships I've ever witnessed. And Maya is her best friend.

I shrug, suddenly feeling defensive. "She's helping."

Theron doesn't look convinced. He steps farther in, his sharp amber eyes sweeping the space again, more critically this time. His gaze lands on the neatly folded blankets, the cradle tucked beside the fireplace, the drying herbs strung up in the kitchen—rirzed and zabilla, harvested fresh just yesterday when Maya insisted we needed more "natural calm" in the house.

"This doesn't look like help," Theron mutters. "This looks like a woman making herself at home."

I catch the underlying meaning in his words. Theron knows me too well—knows my history with relationships, knows how I swore off the whole mess after my engagement to Arekia fell apart. Knows I've thrown myself into trade and commerce instead of family life.

I exhale slowly, irritation curling at the edges of my exhaustion. "She's not staying forever."

Theron hums noncommittally, the sound rumbling deep in his chest. He settles his bulk into my reading chair, which groans under his weight. "And that doesn't bother you?"

I don't answer. I just clench my jaw and look away, fixing my gaze on the window where I can see Maya's herb garden spreading out from the back of my house—already flourishing after just days in the ground. Plants that weren't there a week

ago, now thriving. Like everything else she touches.

My silence speaks volumes, and I know it. Theron waits me out, familiar with my stubborn streaks. We've played this game for decades—me refusing to admit when I'm in over my head, him waiting patiently until I crack. Usually over trade disputes or inventory issues. Never over a woman. Never over a child.

Instead, I lead Theron outside to the stone bench under the sprawling goligan tree. The shade feels like a blessing against my fur as I sink down onto the cool surface, my muscles aching with the bone-deep exhaustion that's become my constant companion. Even the simple act of walking across my own yard seems to drain what little energy I have left.

"You look like you haven't slept in days," Theron observes, lowering his massive frame beside me.

"That's because I haven't." My voice comes out gruffer than intended. "Not properly, anyway." I never knew that I could struggle so much, every little noise having me up and checking on Ellis.

I'm growing very protective over my little nephew.

The breeze stirs the goligan's needle-like leaves above us, creating a soft rustling sound that's almost musical. Across the yard, Maya's newly planted herb garden catches my eye—neat rows of zabilla and rirzed standing at attention like tiny soldiers, their scent carried on the breeze. She planted them just three days ago, but they're already thriving under her care, unlike my previously neglected yard.

"How's Mira doing?" I ask, deliberately steering the conversation away from myself. "Has her breathing improved with the new treatment?" She's improved so much with Lyra but she still has the occasional problems, more prone to getting sick and out of breath than most kids.

Theron's expression softens at the mention of his daughter. "Much better. Lyra found some bluefrost flower growing in the mountain passes. Mixed it with zabilla oil for a chest rub that works wonders."

"And Kai? Still hiding in the library every chance he gets?"

A chuckle rumbles from Theron's chest. "He's started teaching Mira her letters. It's... something to see."

I smile, picturing the serious little minotaur patiently showing his sister how to form her letters, his dark fur contrasting with her unusual silver-white coloring. The image feels comforting, familiar—a reminder of normalcy when my own life has been turned upside down.

"And Lyra? How is she handling life with three minotaurs?"

"Four," Theron corrects with unexpected gentleness. "She's pregnant."

My eyebrows shoot up, and I clap a heavy hand on his shoulder. "By the Lady of Light! Congratulations!"

"Thank you." Pride colors his voice, and I recognize the look in his eyes—that mixture of terror and joy that comes with expanding your family. A look I've seen in my own reflection lately, though under very different circumstances.

I expect him to elaborate, to share more about their plans or Lyra's health, but instead, his gaze drifts toward my house. Toward the drying herbs hanging in the kitchen window, the newly repaired fence, the garden flourishing where only weeds grew before.

"Maya's been busy," he observes, his tone casual in a way that immediately puts me on guard.

I grunt noncommittally, suddenly finding the pattern of bark on the goligan tree intensely interesting.

"You never let people in, Dex. Not easily." His words hit with unexpected precision.

I frown, shifting uncomfortably on the bench. The stone suddenly feels too hard beneath me, the shade too cool. "She's not—"

Theron cuts me off, his voice gentle but firm. "She is." He gestures vaguely toward the house. "Look at this place. Look at you. You're different."

I clench my jaw, the rings on my horns catching the dappled sunlight as I tilt my head away from his searching gaze. My fingers curl into fists against the stone bench, then slowly release. The truth in his words stings more than I want to admit.

Different. Am I? The organized home, the flourishing garden, the way Ellis's cries no longer send me into a panic—all of it feels like it belongs to someone else's life, not mine. Yet here I am, sitting in the shade of a tree I've barely noticed before, suddenly aware of how the midday light filters through its leaves, how the scent of herbs mingles with the earthy smell of freshly turned soil.

Maya showed me these things. Made me notice them.

Theron exhales, shaking his head. "You trust her. That's rare for you." He pauses, letting that settle before continuing. "But what happens when she leaves?"

The question lands like a physical blow. My breath catches, and for a moment, I'm back in that first night with Ellis, the helplessness threatening to drown me as the infant screamed and nothing I did seemed to help. Until Maya appeared, her silver-blond hair catching the moonlight, her confident hands taking Ellis as though she'd known him all his life.

I don't respond to Theron's question. Because for the first time, I don't have an answer.



## MAYA

I'm elbow-deep in grinding fortisia leaves when the bell above my shop door chimes softly. Ellis shifts against my chest, nestled securely in the woven sling I fashioned from an old shawl. He makes a tiny snuffling sound before settling back into his nap, his warm weight both comforting and distracting.

"If you're here for the fylvek elixir, I already set some aside for you," I say without looking up, recognizing Lyra's light footsteps. My hands continue their rhythm—grind, scrape, collect, repeat—the dark green paste slowly filling the stone mortar.

The expected rustle of Lyra approaching the counter doesn't come. Instead, I hear her lean against the nearest shelf, the wood creaking slightly under her weight.

"I'm here for you," she says, her voice carrying that particular tone she reserves for when she thinks I'm being stubborn about something.

My hands pause for just a moment before I resume grinding with perhaps a bit more force than necessary. "I'm fine."

Lyra snorts, the sound entirely unladylike and perfectly her. "Are you?"

I finally glance up at my friend. Her copper-red hair is braided today, little sprigs of zabilla woven through it—likely from tending her healing garden this morning. Despite her petite frame, Lyra has always carried herself with a quiet confidence that makes her seem larger. Today, her bright green eyes study me with uncomfortable intensity, like she's trying to read something written beneath my skin.

A long pause stretches between us, filled only by Ellis's soft breathing and the scrape of my pestle against mortar. The morning sun streams through the shop windows, catching dust motes in golden beams that illuminate the rows of jars and bundles of dried herbs hanging from the ceiling. The familiar scent of my life's work—earthy, green, sharp with medicinal potency—usually calms me, but today it can't quite settle the strange fluttering in my stomach under Lyra's gaze.

"So," Lyra finally breaks the silence, pushing away from the shelf to approach the counter. "When exactly were you planning to tell me about your new little companion? The entire market district is buzzing about how Maya Silverleaf is suddenly caring for a baby."

Ellis shifts again in the sling, as if sensing he's the topic of conversation. One tiny hoof kicks out, catching me in the ribs.

"He's not mine," I say, setting down the pestle and wiping my hands on my apron. "This is Ellis. I'm helping his uncle out."

"His uncle?"

"Dex. Dex Ironhoof. Maybe you know him." I'm hoping she doesn't for some reason.

Lyra's eyebrows shoot up nearly to her hairline. "Dex Ironhoof? As in, the merchant? The one with the shop near the west gate?"

I nod, gently adjusting Ellis in his sling so Lyra can see his face. His tawny fur is soft against my fingers, his baby horns barely more than nubs beneath my touch. "His sister passed away in childbirth. The father was already gone. Dex is all he has left."

Lyra steps closer, her expression softening as she peers at the sleeping infant. "Poor little one," she murmurs, reaching out to stroke one finger along his cheek. Ellis stirs, his gold eyes blinking open for a moment before closing again.

"Dex was at his wits' end when I met them," I explain, finding myself smiling at the memory despite everything. "He couldn't get Ellis to eat or sleep. The poor thing was screaming his lungs out in the middle of the street."

"And you swooped in to save them both?" Lyra's lips quirk into a knowing smile.

"I just showed him how to hold the baby properly," I say, defensive for reasons I can't quite articulate. "It's temporary. Just until Dex finds a proper nurse."

"Dex Ironhoof," Lyra repeats thoughtfully. "You know he's Theron's closest friend, right? They've been inseparable since they were young."

This stops me short. "Theron? Your Theron? The grumpy minotaur with the trading house?"

"The very same." She smiles, her hand moving to rest on her slightly rounded belly in an unconscious gesture. "They're practically brothers. How did you not know this?"

"I don't exactly run in merchant circles," I say, blinking as I process this new information. "And why would Dex never

mention it? I've been helping with Ellis for over a week now."

Lyra shrugs. "It's not like you two have met. Maybe he doesn't know we grew up together, either."

I nod, surprised either way. Karona isn't huge, but what are the odds?

She looks around. "Are you expecting any orders?"

I shake my head. "Just filling for right now— What are you doing?"

She locks my front door, flips the sign, and grabs my shoulder, turning me. "Then, come on."

I follow Lyra to the back room of my shop, the familiar space where I mix my more complex remedies. Ellis is still asleep against my chest, his tiny hooves occasionally twitching as he dreams. The room smells of dried herbs and powdered minerals, with bunches of rirzed hanging from the ceiling beams and jars of labeled powders lining the shelves.

"Sit," Lyra commands, already moving to the small stove in the corner. "When's the last time you took a moment for yourself?"

"I take plenty of moments," I protest, but sink into the worn wooden chair anyway. It's the truth. Dex won't let me help with Ellis at night so I do get more rest than he does. The weight of Ellis against me has become so natural that I barely notice it anymore. "I'm fine, Lyra."

Lyra throws me a look over her shoulder as she sets the kettle on to boil. "You have shadows under your eyes."

"Those are just my natural good looks," I quip, but when I absently reach up to touch my face, I can feel the tired puffiness beneath my eyes.

While Lyra busies herself with the tea preparation, I watch her efficient movements. She's always been this way—nurturing but precise, no motion wasted. It's what makes her such an excellent healer. And now she's carrying a child—half minotaur, half human. The thought makes me glance down at Ellis, his soft breaths steady against me.

"Here," Lyra says, setting two steaming cups on the table. The rich scent of mint and honey rises between us, familiar and comforting. "Gankoya root for energy. You clearly need it."

I accept the cup with a nod of thanks, careful not to disturb Ellis as I shift to sip the hot liquid. The silence stretches between us, comfortable and worn like an old blanket. I can almost pretend this is like old times, back when we were just two apprentice healers learning our craft together.

But the weight against my chest is a constant reminder that things are different now.

Lyra studies me over the rim of her cup, her green eyes thoughtful. Her gaze drops to Ellis, then back to my face.

"You've always been practical," she says, voice softer now. "You don't get attached."

I stare at the dark liquid in my cup, watching the tiny particles of herbs swirl in lazy patterns. The words shouldn't sting, but they do. Is that how she sees me? How everyone sees me? The practical one, the one who keeps her distance?

Lyra sets her cup down gently, the ceramic making a soft click against the wooden table. "But you're different now."

I scoff, leaning back in my chair, one hand automatically moving to support Ellis's back. "Because I'm taking care of a baby?"

"No." Lyra watches me carefully, her expression gentle but unflinching. "Because you care about him. Both of them. And I don't want you to get hurt."

I don't respond immediately. My fingers trace absent patterns on Ellis's back, feeling the rise and fall of his breathing. Her words hit too close to home, brushing against something raw and tender I've been trying to ignore.

Instead, I think about how hard it was for Lyra at first—balancing her relationship with Theron, navigating the cultural differences, the stares and whispers from both humans and minotaur. She fought for that love, embraced the complications. I've watched her struggle and triumph, seen the joy it's brought her.

But that's not for me. I've built my life carefully, intentionally. My herb farm. My shop. My independence. A relationship—especially one as complicated as caring for a minotaur merchant and his orphaned nephew— isn't part of that plan.

Lyra leans in slightly, her voice barely above a whisper. "Be careful, Maya. Because when this ends, you're the one who's going to break."

I swallow hard, the tea suddenly bitter on my tongue despite the honey. My scar—the one that cost me my family and former life—itches on my right hand, a physical reminder of what happens when I follow my heart instead of my head.

But I don't deny Lyra's words. Because deep down, beneath all my practiced practicality and careful distance, I know she's right.

I've watched Ellis's tiny face scrunch up when he yawns. I've felt the weight of Dex's grateful smile when I showed him how to mix the formula properly. I've started to look forward to our chaotic evenings together, to the quiet moments when the house is still and it's just me rocking Ellis while Dex dozes in the chair nearby.

I'm getting attached. To both of them.

And I have absolutely no idea what to do about it.



## DEX

I step through the front door, my hooves scuffing against the worn welcome mat—a touch I never bothered with before Ellis came into my life. My shoulders ache from hunching over ledgers all afternoon at the trading post.

I've been trying to ease back into work, just a few hours here and there while Maya handles Ellis. After a month of this arrangement, and I'm still not sure which part of my day I look forward to more—the familiar rhythm of commerce or coming home to... this.

The house envelops me in warmth, nothing like the empty space it used to be. A sweet, herbal scent hangs in the air—something Maya brewed, no doubt. The woman has filled my kitchen with jars and bundles I couldn't name if my life depended on it. But they make the place smell alive, and I find myself inhaling deeply.

Before I can announce myself, a high-pitched squeal cuts through the calm. That sound—unmistakable, impossible to ignore. Ellis. My heart does that strange little leap it's been doing lately whenever I hear him.

I follow the sound to the sitting room where Maya stands swaying, her practical silver-blonde hair catching the late afternoon light. She's holding Ellis against her chest, but the little one's attention is entirely on me. His tiny arms flail wildly, tawny fur just a shade lighter than mine, those gold eyes—Iris' eyes—wide with recognition and excitement.

Maya arches one eyebrow, her gray eyes dancing with something I can't quite name. "I think someone missed you."

Simple words. Nothing fancy. But they hit somewhere deep, somewhere I've kept locked up tight since Arekia walked away years ago. The weight of it settles in my chest, pressing against my ribs.

I move toward them, no longer the hesitant bull who once held Ellis like he might shatter. My arms reach out naturally now, and Maya transfers him with a practiced handoff we've perfected over weeks.

"Hey there, little one," I rumble, my voice automatically softening the way it only does for him. "Giving Maya trouble today?"

Ellis immediately snuggles against me, his tiny form finding that perfect spot against my chest. His baby horns, barely nubs poking through his fur, brush against my shirt as he settles with a contented sigh. The tension in my shoulders melts away, replaced by something else entirely.

"He was perfect," Maya says, stretching her arms now that they're free. "I read him your ledgers from last season while you were gone. Ellis has quite the head for numbers." Her dry humor slips out with that half-smile I've grown to expect.

I stroke Ellis's back with one large hand, feeling his heartbeat against mine. "You hear that? Already following in your uncle's footsteps instead of charging into battle like a proper Ironhoof." I grin, remembering my own father's disappointment when I chose commerce over combat.

Something cracks inside me—a fissure in the walls I built after my parents died, after the marriage that wasn't meant to be. Because I missed him. I missed them both.

The realization hits like a physical blow. I didn't think I'd ever be the kind of man who longed to come home to someone. The merchant who thrived on independence, who laughed off his friends' domestic contentment while pouring them another drink.

But right now, standing in this quiet home with afternoon light painting the walls gold, holding my nephew's small body against my massive frame, with Maya watching me with that knowing look like she belongs here—like they both belong here—I wonder when that changed.

"You look different," Maya says suddenly, studying my face. "When you hold him. Less..."

"Intimidating?" I offer with the grin that's charmed countless business partners.

She shakes her head, unimpressed by my practiced charm. "Real. You look more real." She gives me a soft smile, the kind that sends warmth through me that I don't even bother to ignore anymore. "Looks like you can be taught after all."

Ellis shifts against my chest, his contented stillness transforming into tiny, restless movements. His face scrunches, gold eyes squinting as he lets out a grumbling noise that I've learned means hunger is imminent. Amazing how in six weeks, I've become fluent in a language I never knew existed.

"Someone's getting hangry," I say, bouncing him gently. "Takes after his uncle that way."



Maya rises from her chair, all efficiency and purpose. "I'll get his bottle ready."

"I'll feed him this time." The words leave my mouth before I can think better of them. I've been gone most of the day, and something in me craves this simple connection. "If you show me how you're mixing it now." She told me he needed more nutrients, and I'm not going to argue with someone who knows her herbs.

"Sure," she says with that slight quirk of her lips. "About time you learned the secret recipe."

I follow her into the kitchen, Ellis tucked securely against me. From the doorway, I watch as Maya moves through the space that was once just a room where I occasionally heated leftovers from the tavern. My kitchen now holds dried herbs hanging from the ceiling, jars of mysterious substances lining the shelves, and an order I never could have maintained myself.

She reaches for specific containers with confidence, not hesitating for a second. The way she moves reminds me of how I navigate a negotiation—knowing exactly which pieces need to be in place for success. Her silver-blond hair catches the lamplight as she bends to retrieve a pot, her movements precise and practiced.

"The gankoya helps with his digestion," she explains, measuring a small amount of powder. "And the zabilla extract soothes him before bed."

I nod like I understand completely, though I'd be hard-pressed to identify either herb if my life depended on it. The merchant in me still wants to memorize the process, to be self-sufficient, but there's something else too—something about watching her work in my space that feels... right.

She hums under her breath, a melody I don't recognize but have heard countless times now in the quiet moments around the house. Ellis responds to it instantly, his grumbles subsiding as he turns his head slightly toward the sound. Smart kid.

Maya tests the temperature of the milk against her wrist, another gesture I've seen so many times it feels like a ritual now. "Perfect," she declares, pouring the mixture into a bottle with practiced ease.

The domesticity of it all hits me like a physical blow. This isn't some temporary arrangement anymore—this is routine. This is life. Maya stands in my kitchen, making my nephew's dinner, humming a song that soothes him to sleep, completely at ease. Like this is something she does every night. Like she belongs here.

And gods help me, she does look like she belongs. The practical healer with her no-nonsense attitude fits in these walls better than I do sometimes.

Ellis's tiny fingers grip my tunic tighter, those little claws catching on the fabric. I swallow hard, my large hand moving to support his back, feeling the rise and fall of his breathing. This—this moment—feels too damn good.

Business deals, drinking contests, village festivals—I've known plenty of good feelings in my life. But this quiet moment watching Maya prepare a bottle while Ellis nestles against my chest tops them all.

And that terrifies me.

Because things that feel this good don't last. My parents, taken by the Red Fever. Iris, gone before her time. Even Arekia, though that wound healed cleaner than I expected. Life has a way of snatching happiness away, especially when you start thinking you deserve it.

"Something wrong?" Maya's voice breaks through my thoughts. She's extending the bottle toward me, her gray eyes searching my face with that unsettling perception she has.

"Just hungry myself," I lie, taking the bottle with my free hand. My massive fingers dwarf the container, a reminder of how fragile all this is. "Think you could work your magic on something for the adults after the little one's settled?"

She nods toward the living room. "Yeah, I don't mind."

I settle into my favorite chair, the one with the worn arms and a reinforced frame that even my bulk can't damage. Ellis takes the bottle eagerly, his tiny hands reaching up to grasp at it alongside mine. His gold eyes—so like Iris'—stare up with complete trust as he feeds.

"He's getting stronger," I murmur, watching those small fingers curl and uncurl against the bottle. "Grip like a proper merchant already."

Maya leans against the doorframe, arms crossed over her chest. In the lamplight, her silver-blond hair catches golden highlights, and for a moment, she looks softer than the practical healer I first met.

"Most babies his age can't grip that well yet," she says, that note of pride in her voice mirroring something in my chest. "He's advanced."

"Of course he is," I say with a wink. "He's an Ironhoof."

She snorts, but there's fondness in it. "I'm sure that's it. Nothing to do with all the exercises we've been doing with him."

We. Such a simple word. When did it happen? When did this arrangement—this temporary solution—become a partnership? I watch Ellis suckling contentedly and realize it doesn't matter when. It just is. Even if it shouldn't be.

Maya moves to the kitchen, and I hear the familiar sounds of her preparing our dinner. The rhythm of her knife against the cutting board, the clink of pots, the soft hum under her breath—they've all become as familiar as my own heartbeat.

"You know," I call out, keeping my voice low to not disturb Ellis, "I've been thinking about expanding the eastern storeroom at the trading post. Could use an herb section. Specialize in medicinals."

The chopping pauses. I hear her set down the knife.

"Is that right?" Her voice carries that dry tone that I've come to enjoy far too much. "And who would manage this herb section? Certainly not the minotaur who can't tell gankoya from goligan."

I chuckle, jostling Ellis slightly. He makes an indignant sound around the bottle, and I readjust. "I know a skilled herbalist who might be interested. If the terms were right."

She appears in the doorway again, a bunch of fresh frisse in her hand. Those gray eyes study me with an intensity that makes my fur prickle. "Terms?"

"Partnership," I say, the word slipping out before I can reconsider. "Fifty-fifty. Your knowledge, my connections. We could supply half the healers in Karona."

Something flickers across her face—surprise, interest, and something else I can't quite name. "That's... generous."

It is. Too generous, from a purely business standpoint. But nothing about this feels like just business anymore.

Ellis finishes his bottle with a satisfied grunt. I set it aside and shift him to my shoulder for burping, a move that felt awkward a month ago but now comes naturally. His warm weight against me, the faint milky scent of him—they ground me in a way nothing else ever has.

"Just practical," I say finally, patting Ellis's back gently. "Your herb knowledge is valuable. And you've proven reliable." The understatement of the year. She's been my salvation these past weeks.

Maya returns to the kitchen without answering, but I hear her humming again—a good sign. Ellis burps loudly, and I laugh, the sound rumbling deep in my chest.

"That's my boy," I say, shifting him back to the crook of my arm.

The words hit me like a physical blow. My boy. Not mine at all, but Iris' son. My nephew. The child I've sworn to raise, but not... not mine.

Yet my heart doesn't seem to know the difference. Every day, this little baby burrows deeper into places I thought long sealed shut. His tiny hands grip my fingers with complete trust. His gold eyes light up when I enter a room. His sleepy sighs against my chest as he drifts off feel like the most precious thing I've ever been entrusted with.

And Maya—gods help me—Maya with her no-nonsense attitude and her unexpected gentleness with Ellis. The way she's transformed this house into a home. How she knows exactly what Ellis needs before he even cries for it. The quiet conversation we share over wine after he's asleep.

It's all temporary. It has to be. I can't let myself believe otherwise. Someone like Maya doesn't stay with someone like me—a merchant minotaur with more ambition than sense, according to my late father. And Ellis deserves better than a bachelor uncle fumbling through parenthood.

But for now, in this moment, with Ellis drifting to sleep in my arms and Maya's humming drifting from the kitchen, I allow myself to pretend. Just for a moment. That this is mine to keep.

Ellis's eyes flutter closed, his long lashes brushing against his cheeks. His breathing deepens into the rhythm of sleep, and I find my own breath matching his. In. Out. Together.

"Dinner in ten," Maya calls softly from the kitchen, knowing Ellis is likely asleep by now.

I should put him in his crib. That's what I should do. But instead, I hold him closer, savoring the weight of him against my chest. These moments are fleeting. I know that better than most. Better to hold tight while you can, even knowing that someday I'll have to let go.



## MAYA

The marketplace pulses with life around me, a cacophony of voices haggling over prices and wares. I adjust Ellis in his wrap against my chest, his warm weight now familiar after these weeks of caring for him. His tawny fur tickles my chin as he shifts, tiny hooves pressing against my stomach. My fingers automatically find the edge of his blanket, tucking it more securely around his soft baby horns.

"Need to make a stop over there," I tell Dex, pointing toward Widow Fenna's herb stall. The old woman's display is heaped with bundles of dried plants I don't grow on my farm. "I'm running low on meqixste bark for that teething salve Ellis likes." The speed at which minotaur grow is insane and his gums are already inflamed. I swear he'll be walking at six months at this rate—though if he's going to grow as large as his uncle, I'm going to need him to.

Dex nods, his massive frame casting a shadow over me. "Lead the way."

I expect him to wander off to examine the nearby weapons display—minotaur men always gravitate toward steel—but he stays close, one step behind my right shoulder. His presence creates a bubble of space around us in the crowded marketplace. People naturally give way to a seven-and-a-half-foot minotaur, especially one with horns as impressively curved as Dex's.

"You don't have to shadow me through the entire market," I say, navigating around a merchant's cart piled with burgona tubers. "I won't run off with your nephew."

"It's not that." Dex's green eyes scan the crowd, watchful. One hand hovers near my lower back, not quite touching but ready to guide me through any sudden crush of people. "The marketplace can get unpredictable. Pickpockets. Drunks. Better safe than sorry with the little one."

Ellis coos at the sound of his uncle's voice, tiny fingers reaching out from the wrap to grab at nothing. I smile despite myself.

As we make our way through the crowd, I notice the glances—some curious, some indifferent, a few disapproving. A human woman with a minotaur infant strapped to her chest, a massive minotaur male at her side. I catch our reflection in a polished metal shield hanging at a merchant's stall, and the image stops me short.

We look like a family.

The thought sends a sharp pang through my chest. An unexpected ache, like pressing on a bruise I didn't know I had. I shake it off quickly, forcing my attention back to the herbs ahead.

"Something wrong?" Dex asks, his voice rumbling close to my ear.

"Just realized I need fialon berries too," I lie, avoiding his gaze. "For Ellis's digestive tincture."

A group of young men stumble by, laughing too loudly with wineskins in hand. One bumps against me, and before I can steady myself, Dex's arm wraps around my shoulders, pulling me against his side. Ellis makes a startled sound, but doesn't cry.

"Watch where you're going," Dex growls at them, the bronze rings in his horns catching the sunlight as he lowers his head slightly—a subtle but clear warning. The young men mumble apologies and scatter.

I should step away, reestablish the proper distance between us, but Ellis has settled against the solid warmth of Dex's chest, his tiny hand gripping one of my fingers. We're connected, the three of us, in this strange tableau.

"Sorry," Dex murmurs, loosening his hold but not fully releasing me. "Protective instinct."

"It's fine." My voice sounds too soft, even to my own ears. "You're good with him. With us."

An older minotaur woman passes by, her gaze lingering on us with something like approval. A human spice merchant raises an eyebrow, his expression unreadable. It occurs to me that we're crossing invisible boundaries—species, culture, propriety—simply by standing together in this marketplace.

I finally pull away, adjusting Ellis against me. "The herbs," I remind myself as much as Dex.

But as we continue through the marketplace, I'm acutely aware of his presence beside me—a solid, protective force. And I'm surprised by how much I don't mind it.

Once we get the herbs I need, I meander between the market stalls with Dex beside me, our shopping nearly complete. Ellis has fallen asleep against my chest, his tiny snores vibrating through the fabric. The marketplace hums around us—merchants calling their wares, customers haggling over prices, the occasional burst of laughter cutting through it all. I've become more

attuned to the ways people look at us now, the curiosity in their glances. Most are harmless, some approving, a few narrowed with judgment.

"Just need to get more fylek grass and we can head back," I say, adjusting my basket on my arm. The weight of herbs, spices, and a small bag of cryots pulls at my muscles.

Dex reaches over, his massive hand eclipsing mine. "Let me carry that."

I surrender the basket without protest, knowing better than to argue with a minotaur about bearing burdens. Their culture values physical strength almost as much as honor. Besides, my arms are grateful for the reprieve, especially with Ellis's weight against my front.

"This way," Dex says, steering us toward the northern edge of the marketplace. "I want to check something before we leave."

I follow him to a weaponsmith's stall, where gleaming blades of various sizes are displayed on dark cloth. The smith, a weathered minotaur with silver rings in his horns, nods at Dex with recognition. This is clearly a regular stop for him.

"New stock came in yesterday," the smith says by way of greeting.

Dex's eyes light up. "Any kuruk steel?"

"Two pieces. Premium price, of course."

While they talk, I hang back slightly, bouncing gently to keep Ellis asleep. My eyes drift to Dex's hands as he lifts a dagger from the display. His fingers—massive by human standards but surprisingly dexterous—curl around the hilt with practiced ease. The merchant passes him another blade, this one with an ornate handle inlaid with copper that matches the highlights in Dex's fur.

There's something mesmerizing about watching his hands work. The careful way he tests the balance, the strength evident in every controlled movement. He handles these deadly weapons with the same gentle precision I've seen him use when checking Ellis's tiny horns for irritation.

My throat feels suddenly dry. I shouldn't be noticing these things—the breadth of his shoulders as he leans forward to examine the blade's edge, the rumble of his laugh when the smith says something I can't quite hear. I shouldn't care about how steady he is on his hooves, how his brow furrows slightly when he concentrates, how the marketplace seems to shrink around his imposing frame.

I shouldn't be thinking about how, in just a few short weeks, he's transformed from a panicked, helpless new guardian into someone who can cradle an infant with one arm while preparing breakfast with the other. Someone who remembers which herbs soothe Ellis's stomach and which cloth he prefers for his morning bath.

Someone who looks increasingly right standing beside me.

A bizarre heat creeps up my neck as I realize I've been staring. I shift my attention to a nearby fruit vendor, pretending interest in their display of mueske.

"The grip could be better," Dex says, turning the dagger in his hand. His fingers trail over the hilt, testing its contours. "But the balance is perfect."

He looks up suddenly, his green eyes finding mine across the short distance between us. Something in his gaze makes my breath catch—an intensity, a question, something thick and unspoken that neither of us seems ready to name.

For one suspended moment, the marketplace noise fades to background. It's just us, connected by this strange, unexpected thread that's formed in the chaos of new parenthood and midnight feedings and learning to be something to each other that neither of us planned.

Dex breaks first, clearing his throat and returning the dagger to the merchant's table. He rubs the back of his neck, a gesture I've come to recognize as discomfort.

"Let's head back," he says, voice gruffer than usual. "Ellis will need feeding soon."

I exhale slowly, steadying myself. The moment passes, reality reasserts itself. This arrangement is temporary. Professional. I'm helping him until he finds a permanent solution for Ellis. That's all.

This isn't supposed to feel like this.

But as we turn away from the weapons stall, my basket in his hands, his shoulder occasionally brushing mine as we navigate the crowd, I can't help but wonder what exactly "this" is becoming.



## DEX

The house is silent except for the rhythmic creak of the rocking chair. I lean against the doorframe, arms crossed, watching as Maya cradles Ellis, her thumb stroking his tiny back. The soft glow from the fireplace bathes her in warm light, making her silver-blond hair look almost golden. She doesn't know I'm watching—at least, not at first.

Gods, it's the first time Ellis hasn't been screaming in what feels like days. It's been a rough few days, and neither of us have been sure why.

My shoulders are still tense from the hours of walking and bouncing and pleading with a child who can't understand me. But Maya? She just picked him up and he settled right into her arms like he was meant to be there.

She hums some tune I don't recognize, something soft and melodic. Her lips barely move, but I can see the corner of them turned up in a small smile. Practical Maya with her no-nonsense attitude, melting for a tiny minotaur with barely-there horns.

"Come on, little one," she whispers to Ellis. "Your uncle needs a break from your lungs. I know you miss her. I know."

The tenderness in her voice catches me off guard. I've been so caught up in the logistics—the feeding, the changing, the not sleeping—that I haven't allowed myself to think about what Ellis must be feeling. How terrifying it must be to suddenly lose the person who was your entire world.

Ellis makes a small noise, not quite a cry, just a confirmation that he's listening. Maya adjusts her hold, moving him so his head rests against her heart. Her scar—that jagged line across her right hand—stands out as she supports his weight. Battle scars from the herb trade, she called it jokingly the first day. Only learned later it came from saving a minotaur child from a workshop fire. She never mentioned being disowned for it.

"There's a big world out here," Maya continues, "and it's scary sometimes. But your uncle Dex? He's loud and obnoxious and thinks he's funnier than he is, but he's got a good heart. He's going to keep you safe."

I should be offended, but honestly, it's the nicest thing anyone's said about me all week. Even if she doesn't know I'm hearing it.

The firelight dances across her face, highlighting the determined set of her jaw that somehow doesn't detract from her beauty. She's not conventionally pretty in the way that minotaur women are—all curves and softness. Maya's angles and purpose, her silver-blond hair cropped short for practicality rather than style. And yet, it all draws me in. She looks stunning, even tired from helping with my nephew, like she always does.

My family would have hated her. Not because she's human—though there's that—but because she doesn't pretend. Doesn't soften her edges. Mother always insisted women should be seen, admired, and controlled. Maya looks like she's never been controlled a day in her life. And I don't want it any other way.

I shift my weight, and the floorboard betrays me with a creak. Maya looks up, her gray eyes finding mine instantly. For a moment, neither of us moves. Ellis sleeps on, oblivious to the strange tension suddenly filling the room.

I should look away. I should leave. But I don't.

"How long have you been standing there?" she asks, her voice quiet but direct.

"Long enough to learn I'm loud and obnoxious."

A small smile tugs at her lips. "And that you think you're funnier than you are."

"That part's slander," I say, finally pushing off the doorframe. "I'm exactly as funny as I think I am."

She makes a noise that's half-snort, half-laugh, careful not to disturb Ellis. "Keep telling yourself that, merchant."

Something tightens in my chest—an unfamiliar feeling I can't quite place. Or maybe one I don't want to name. It's been a long time since anyone looked at me and saw more than horns and height, more than merchant or bachelor or scandal. Maya sees right through my carefully constructed jovial façade to the man underneath, and I'm not sure if that terrifies or fascinates me.

Maya stands slowly, placing Ellis down carefully before turning to face me. The room feels smaller, the air heavier with each breath. She approaches with that purposeful stride of hers—direct, like everything else about her. Her footsteps whisper against the floorboards, somehow both cautious and certain.

I don't step back as she stops just inches from me. Close enough that I can smell the faint herbal scent that clings to her—

zabilla and rirzed, earthy and sweet. Close enough that I have to look down to meet her eyes, those storm-gray eyes that never flinch, never waver.

Her gaze flickers down to my mouth for half a second—just long enough for me to notice, just long enough to make my breath hitch. The fire pops behind her, sending shadows dancing across her face, highlighting the curve of her cheek, the determined set of her jaw.

I could kiss her. By the Lady, I want to. Want to bend down and close that small distance between us, taste whatever witty retort she's holding behind those lips. My heart hammers against my ribs like I'm some green youth, not a merchant who's haggled with the finest traders in Karona. But Maya doesn't haggle. She states her price and expects you to meet it or walk away.

My fists clench at my sides, the rings on my fingers suddenly too tight, too constricting. What am I doing? She's here to help with Ellis, not to entertain whatever madness has taken hold of me. I've seen what happens when business mixes with pleasure—seen good partnerships crumble when feelings get involved. I built my trading house on reliable partnerships, on trust and good faith dealings. Not on impulse.

And besides, she deserves better than a minotaur merchant with too many responsibilities and a newborn nephew he can barely keep alive without her help. We're from different worlds—literally different species. My world is ledgers and trade routes and hard-won respect despite my middle-class status. Hers is herbs and healing and fighting against prejudice.

I force myself to step back, the floorboard creaking under my weight like an accusation.

"You should get some rest," I say, my voice rougher than I intended. "Ellis will probably be up before sunrise. He seems to sense whenever I'm about to fall into a deep sleep."

The joke falls flat, hanging awkwardly between us. Maya watches me, something unreadable in her expression. Not anger, not disappointment—something more complex, something that reminds me of how she looks when she's examining a new herb, trying to determine its properties.

"Goodnight, Dex." Her voice is steady, but there's something beneath it. Something that makes my chest ache as I turn and walk away. Something that sounds almost like understanding.

I move through the hallway with less grace than usual, my shoulder bumping against the wall. The house suddenly feels too confined for my seven and a half foot frame, the ceiling too low, the walls too close. Or maybe it's just me that doesn't fit in this moment.

I pause outside my bedroom door, horn rings catching the dim light of the oil lamps. Beyond the walls, the night air carries the distant sounds of the city—not quite asleep, never quite silent. That's what I love about Karona. It's always moving, always trading, always making deals and breaking them and making new ones.

Maybe that's all this is. A business arrangement getting complicated because we're both tired and she's beautiful and I'm... I'm a fool who should know better. A fool who nearly kissed the only person keeping his nephew alive and happy.

Smart merchants know when to walk away from a bad deal. Even smarter ones know when to walk away from a deal that's too good to be true.

I slip outside through the kitchen door, careful not to let it bang shut behind me. The night air hits my face like a wet cloth—humid and heavy with the promise of rain. Typical Karona summer. I inhale deeply, filling my lungs with the scent of salt from the harbor and the ever-present aroma of spices from the market quarter. Even at night, the city carries its distinctive perfume.

My hooves click against the cobblestones as I make my way to the small courtyard garden. It's nothing elaborate—just a patch of green with a stone bench beneath a tiphe tree—but it's mine. A quiet place where trade negotiations and ledgers don't follow me. Tonight, though, ledgers would be a welcome distraction from the chaos in my head.

I drop onto the bench, the stone cool against my thighs. The bronze rings adorning my horns catch the moonlight, casting tiny reflections onto the garden wall. My mother insisted on the rings when I was younger—"A *mark of distinguished heritage*," she'd said, even as she lamented my choice to become a merchant. "*At least you'll look like a proper vakkak, even if you refuse to act like one.*"

The memory brings a wry smile to my face. She never understood why I chose commerce over combat. Why I preferred to battle with my mind rather than my body, despite being built like a warrior—massive even for a minotaur, with shoulders broad enough to carry crates that would take two humans to lift.

My fingers trace the curved edge of one horn, the metal rings smooth and familiar. What would Mother think of me now? Sitting in a garden, mooning over a human woman like some lovesick calf. She'd be horrified. Father would've been amused, at least. He always did appreciate irony.

"You're a fool, Ironhoof," I mutter to the night air. "A complete and utter fool."

The worst part isn't the physical attraction—though Lady knows that's strong enough. I could handle simple lust. Could chalk it up to proximity and gratitude and the fact that Maya is undeniably beautiful in her practical, no-nonsense way.

No, what terrifies me is how I catch myself imagining her staying. Not just tonight or tomorrow, but next week. Next month. Her silver-blond hair catching the morning light as she works in this very garden, planting herbs that would make her shop inventory even more impressive. Her dry laughter filling the rooms that have been too quiet since my parents died. Her clever



mind challenging mine over dinner conversations that stretch long into the night.

I want her in my bed, yes—the thought alone makes my blood run hotter—but I also want her at my breakfast table. Want to see her roll her eyes at my jokes while fighting a smile. Want to watch her hands, scarred and capable, teaching Ellis about herbs and healing when he's old enough.

I scrub a hand over my face, feeling the rough texture of my fur against my palm. The copper highlights catch the moonlight, reminding me how different we are. Human and minotaur. Healer and merchant. Woman who can walk away and man who's suddenly terrified she will.

A low rumble of thunder rolls across the sky, and I glance up at the gathering clouds. The rain will come soon. I should go inside. But the thought of those walls, of being so close to her while fighting this growing ache in my chest, keeps me rooted to the bench.

"No one's ever going to choose you, not for keeps," I remind myself, echoing the words Arekia said when she left. Her face had been cold, dispassionate as she explained that while I was a suitable match on paper, she couldn't imagine spending her life with someone so... common in his ambitions. Someone who cared more about fair trade than family honor.

I believed her then. Still do, if I'm honest. Maya deserves someone extraordinary. Someone whose idea of rebellion isn't choosing commerce over combat. Someone whose hands aren't stained with ink instead of glory.

The first drops of rain hit my shoulders, cool against my fur. I don't move. Let it come. Maybe it'll wash away this ridiculous hope taking root in my chest—this dangerous, foolish idea that Maya might see something in me worth staying for.

The rain falls harder, plastering my fur to my skin, streaming between my horns and down my face. And still I sit, eyes closed, trying to remember that I'm a merchant. I deal in certainties, in contracts and agreements. Not in maybes. Not in the wild, terrifying gamble of offering my heart to someone who never asked for it.



## DEX

I stand with Ellis tucked into the carrier strapped across my chest, watching Maya work. She's worn a dress today instead of her usual practical tunic and trousers—some flowing thing in a deep green that makes her eyes look more silver than gray. It's not fancy by wealthy merchant standards—no embroidery or excessive layers—but it suits her. Simple, elegant, with a fitted bodice that accentuates the curve of her waist before flowing outward.

Too damn well, if I'm honest with myself. I've been trying not to stare all morning.

"You're hovering again," Maya says without looking up from the crate of dried herbs she's sorting through. Her fingers move with practiced precision, separating rirzed from its near-identical poisonous cousin, numiscu. To my untrained eye, they're the same bright blue petals, but Maya never hesitates.

"I'm not hovering. I'm strategically positioned to catch Ellis if he decides to make a break for it." I adjust the carrier where my nephew dozes against my chest, his tiny hands occasionally twitching in sleep.

Maya snorts. "He's two months old. The only thing he's breaking is your sleep schedule."

I grin despite myself. "Fair point."

Her shop smells like a hundred different plants at once—sharp, sweet, earthy, medicinal. Bundles of herbs hang from the rafters, drying in the warm air. Tables covered with mortars, pestles, and measuring scales line the walls. It's organized chaos, everything exactly where Maya needs it to be.

I've spent the morning helping her fill orders while Ellis naps. It feels good to be useful, to do something with my hands besides bouncing a crying infant. I may not know zabilla from bluefrost, but I can lift crates and count measurements and keep the fires at the right temperature. Simple tasks that don't require me to make life-altering decisions.

"That sack of cryots needs to go in the storeroom," Maya says, nodding toward a burlap sack near the door. "Then could you bring me the fortisia from the drying rack? The dark green leaves, not the light ones."

"I know what fortisia looks like," I say, though we both know I learned the difference yesterday after nearly ruining a batch of fever remedy.

I heft the sack onto my shoulder, careful not to jostle Ellis. His gold eyes—so like mine—flutter open briefly before closing again. The weight of him against my chest still feels foreign, terrifying. This tiny life that depends on me completely. On us, really, since I'd be lost without Maya's help.

The bell above the door jingles as I'm returning from the storeroom. A minotaur strides in—broad-shouldered with steel-gray fur and a confident gait. His horn rings are simple iron, marking him as zotkak—merchant class, just like me. But there's something in his manner that suggests he thinks otherwise.

"Maya!" His voice booms through the shop. "You're looking particularly lovely today."

Maya doesn't pause in her sorting. "Hello, Torven. Your usual order?"

"Plus some extra goligan oil, if you have it. The wife uses it for her joints." He leans against the counter, watching Maya work. "Though I must say, if I'd known you'd be wearing that dress, I'd have brought you flowers."

I roll my eyes, moving to the drying rack to retrieve the fortisia Maya requested. Torven comes in every week, apparently. Always with the same heavy-handed compliments. Always met with the same polite deflection.

"The goligan will be ready by tomorrow," Maya says, ignoring the flowers comment entirely. She moves to another crate, pulling out bundles of dried herbs with practiced efficiency. "I'll have everything else ready in a moment."

I gather the fortisia, eyeing Torven over my shoulder. He doesn't acknowledge me—common enough when dealing with other minotaur merchants. We're always sizing each other up, deciding if the other is competition or potential alliance material. Apparently, I don't rate either category in his assessment.

"I don't know how you're still single, Maya," Torven says, leaning in with a grin that shows too many teeth. "Beautiful and smart? That's a rare combination."

My hand tightens around the bundle of fortisia, crushing the brittle leaves. Maya's told me how rare it is for humans and minotaur to form meaningful connections in Karona, despite the city's relative tolerance. How healers like her who treat minotaur patients are often ostracized by their own kind. Torven's words make it sound like she's a curiosity, a novelty. Not a

person.

Maya laughs—casual, light—but it burns in my ears because I know that laugh. It's her professional laugh, the one that doesn't reach her eyes. The one she uses when she's tolerating something for the sake of business.

"I'm too busy for romance," she says, scooping dried herbs into a small pouch. "Between the shop and the farm, I barely have time to sleep."

Torven doesn't stop there. "If you ever need a night off from all this work, I'd be more than happy to take you somewhere nice."

Something hot and tight coils in my chest. I don't even realize I've stepped forward until I see Torven's eyes flicker up to me, cautious. Suddenly aware there's another minotaur in the room—one with significantly broader shoulders and a look that could curdle milk.

"She said she's busy," I say flatly, my voice a low rumble. Ellis stirs against my chest, sensing the tension in my body.

Torven raises his hands in mock surrender, chuckling as he backs off. "No offense meant, friend. Didn't realize the lady was spoken for."

The bundle of fortisia in my hand is completely crushed now, the pungent scent filling the air around us. Maya's eyes dart between us, a slight furrow appearing between her brows.

"Dex is helping me with the shop while I help with his nephew," she explains, though she doesn't owe him any explanation. "And I'm not 'spoken for.' I'm just busy, as I said."

I set the crushed fortisia down on a nearby table, flexing my fingers to release the tension. Maya shoots me a look that clearly says we'll discuss this later. Great. Something else to add to my growing list of failures.

The rest of the afternoon passes in strained silence after Torven leaves. Maya keeps herself busy with customers, and I occupy myself with restocking shelves and minding Ellis when he wakes, hungry and disgruntled. By the time the sunset paints Karona's white stone buildings in shades of amber and gold, my neck feels tight with unspoken words.

"I think that's everything," Maya says, tying a string around a bundle of dried zabilla. "Unless you want to crush more of my inventory with your bare hands."

I grunt, adjusting Ellis in his carrier. "The fortisia was already dry. It would have been ground up anyway."

"Mm-hmm." She doesn't sound convinced.

We lock up the shop and head toward my house, walking the cobblestone streets of the merchant district. The evening air carries the scent of salt from the harbor, mingling with spices and smoke from cooking fires. Craftsmen and merchants are closing their shops, nodding respectfully as we pass—to Maya as much as to me, I notice. She's earned her place here despite being human in a predominantly minotaur city.

Ellis babbles against my chest, tiny fingers reaching for one of my horn rings. I gently redirect his hand, stroking his tawny fur. He's finally putting on weight, looking less fragile than he did two weeks ago.

"He's going to be reaching for everything soon," Maya observes, her voice softer now. "You'll need to move anything breakable to higher shelves."

"I'll add it to the list," I sigh. "Right after 'figure out how to be a father overnight' and 'stop terrifying potential customers.'"

Maya's quiet for a moment, then I catch her looking at me from the corner of her eye, a smirk playing at her lips. The streetlamps are being lit by city workers, casting her in a warm glow that makes the silver of her hair shine like actual precious metal.

"You were jealous today," she says, the declaration landing between us like a challenge.

I exhale sharply as we turn onto my street, the familiar shape of my house coming into view. Two stories of white stone with a red-tiled roof and arched windows—modest by Vakkak standards but spacious for a merchant. A house that suddenly feels too empty and too full at the same time.

"I wasn't." The denial comes automatically, my ears flicking back in irritation.

She tilts her head, studying me like I'm one of her herbs that isn't behaving as expected. "You growled at him, Dex."

My jaw works. "He was annoying."

The words sound pathetic even to my ears. I've faced down shipping rivals and negotiated with ornery trading partners from every corner of Milthar without flinching. Yet here I am, fumbling for words like a schoolboy caught passing notes.

Maya steps closer as we reach my front door. Close enough that I can smell the faint scent of herbs on her skin—rirzed and zabilla and something else uniquely her. Her gray eyes seem to see right through me, past the bluster and bravado.

"If you want something, Dex, you have to say it. No one can read your mind." Her voice is teasing, but there's something beneath it—something challenging. An invitation, maybe. Or a dare.

I don't move, don't look away. My jaw clenches, hands flexing at my sides. I want to deny it. I should deny it. Maya's made it clear from the beginning that this arrangement is temporary. She's helping with Ellis until I find a permanent solution. Getting attached would be foolish for both of us.

But standing here in the fading light, with Ellis warm against my chest and Maya looking at me like I'm a puzzle she's determined to solve, I can't bring myself to lie again.

I stand there, stuck to the spot as Maya turns away toward the door. Ellis picks that moment to squirm against my chest, making soft cooing noises that break the tense silence between us.

"We should get him inside," Maya says, her voice practical again. "He needs to be fed and put down for the night."

I exhale slowly, fishing for my keys in my pocket. The weight of what just happened—of what almost happened—settles over us like an invisible fog. My fingers feel clumsy with the lock, the simple task suddenly requiring all my concentration.

"Right," I manage, finally pushing the door open. "After you."

Maya steps inside, moving through the entryway with the familiar comfort of someone who belongs here. Her green dress sways with each step, the fabric catching the lamplight as she moves to light the lamps in the main room. It's a dance we've perfected over the past weeks—she handles the lamps while I close up behind us, securing the locks and checking the windows.

I follow her inside, watching as she moves efficiently around the space. The house feels different with her in it. Before she came, it was just walls and furniture—a place to sleep and eat between business trips. Now there are herbs drying by the kitchen window, soft blankets draped over chairs, and small touches that make it feel like a home rather than just a house.

Ellis fusses against me, his tiny hands gripping at my shirt. I gently untangle him from the carrier, cradling him in my arms. His gold eyes—so like mine, so like Iris'—blink up at me sleepily.

"Hey there, little one," I murmur, my voice automatically softening the way it always does for him. "Ready for bed, are you?"

Maya glances over, a small smile touching her lips as she watches us. There's something in her eyes I can't quite decipher—something soft and maybe a bit sad.

"I'll warm his milk," she says, heading for the kitchen.

I nod, unable to articulate the gratitude I feel for her simple competence, for the way she's stepped into our lives and made everything function when I was drowning. Instead, I focus on Ellis, rubbing my thumb gently over his soft fur, marveling at how someone so small can have such a powerful grip on my heart.

The tension between Maya and me still crackles in the air, unspoken and electric. I want to break it. I want to cross the room and pull her to me. I want to thank her properly for everything she's done. I want to see if her lips are as soft as they look. I want to know if she tastes like the herbs she works with all day.

I want Maya in ways that terrify me, because wanting means risking. Risking rejection. Risking her walking away. Risking Ellis losing yet another person he's come to depend on.

When did I start thinking of us as a family? When did Maya become essential rather than convenient?

She returns from the kitchen, bottle in hand. "Here we go," she says, reaching for Ellis.

Our fingers brush as I pass him to her, and the contact sends heat racing up my arm. Her eyes flick to mine for the briefest moment before focusing on Ellis, who eagerly reaches for the bottle. I watch as she settles into the rocking chair by the window, cradling him with practiced ease.

"He's getting stronger," she observes, her voice soft. "Look at how he grips the bottle now."

I lean against the doorframe, arms crossed over my chest. "That's all your doing. He was wasting away before you came."

"Don't sell yourself short, Dex. You're learning fast." Maya's fingers gently brush Ellis's cheek as he drinks. "Most people would have panicked with a newborn dropped in their lap."

"I did panic. That's why you're here."

A small smile curves her lips. "True enough."

I push away from the doorframe, moving to stand beside her chair. The scent of her fills my senses—herbal and clean, with something underneath that's just Maya. I want to bury my face in her neck and breathe her in. I want to run my hands through that silver-blond hair and see if it's as soft as it looks.

I want Maya desperately, completely, in a way I've never wanted anyone before. And I have no idea how to stop it. But I can't lose her either.

I don't know what to do.



## MAYA

I open the door to Ellis's room just a crack, watching as Dex lowers the baby into his crib. Seven weeks of this arrangement, and I still find myself mesmerized by how those massive hands—hands that could crush stone—can be so impossibly gentle with something so small.

"Sleep tight, little one," Dex whispers, his deep voice barely audible as he adjusts Ellis's blanket.

The domesticity of it all hits me like a physical ache. This isn't mine. None of this. I'm just here until Dex finds someone permanent, someone who makes sense for his life. Not an herb farmer with dirt perpetually under her fingernails and a family history better left forgotten.

I step back, waiting in the hallway's shadows as Dex backs carefully from the room. He's learned to avoid the creaky floorboard by the door—a small triumph we celebrated with awkward high-fives three weeks ago. The memory makes my chest tighten.

When he emerges, closing the door with practiced precision, his green eyes find mine instantly. Surprise flickers across his face, followed by something darker.

"Maya? Everything alright?"

Instead of answering, I step forward. My body moves before my brain can stop it, closing the distance between us. Dex's fur rises slightly—a minute tell I've learned means he's caught off guard. I need to say something. Explain why I'm standing here, invading his space, breathing in the scent of him—something earthy and warm that's become as familiar as my own herbs.

But words fail me completely.

My hand lifts, seemingly of its own accord, pressing against the broad expanse of his chest. His heart thunders beneath my palm. I slide my fingers up, through the coarse outer layer of his fur to the softer down beneath, feeling the heat of him.

"What are you doing?" His voice drops an octave, a rumble that vibrates through my fingertips.

What *am* I doing? Breaking every rule I've set for myself. Jeopardizing an arrangement that works. Setting myself up for inevitable heartbreak because this—whatever this is—has an expiration date.

Yet I can't stop.

Something in Dex's expression shifts, patience crumbling like a dam giving way. One moment he's standing perfectly still, muscles tight with restraint; the next, he's in motion, backing me down the hall toward my room with the unstoppable force of an avalanche.

My back hits the doorframe, then I'm stumbling backward as he guides me inside with one hand splayed across my lower back. The other pushes the door closed with a decisive click.

"Tell me to stop," he says, but it sounds more like a plea than a command.

I remain silent. I've made my choice.

The backs of my knees hit the mattress, and I sink down, Dex following, his massive frame caging me in. The bed creaks under our combined weight as he settles between my legs, green eyes never leaving mine.

"I've wanted you," he admits, voice rough. "More than I should."

No kiss follows the confession. I feel a pang of disappointment mixed with relief. Kissing would make this something else—something with promises neither of us is in a position to keep. This way is safer. Cleaner. It's all physical, which is really what it should be.

His hands push at my dress, bunching the fabric around my waist with surprising deftness. I lift my hips to help, practical as always, even in this most impractical moment.

"Let me," he murmurs, sliding down my body until his broad shoulders spread my thighs wider.

I barely recognize the sound that escapes me—needy, vulnerable—as his breath warms my inner thigh. Those careful hands that cradle Ellis with such tenderness now grip my hips with possession, thumbs pressing into my skin with just enough pressure to mark, to claim.

Then his mouth is on me, and the practical, level-headed woman I pride myself on being dissolves completely. His tongue moves with deliberate precision, like he's cataloging every reaction, learning what makes my breath catch and my back arch.

One broad hand splays across my stomach, holding me in place while he tastes me like I'm some rare herb worth savoring. My fingers find his horns, curling around the polished bronze rings adorning them for purchase in this storm.

I grip his horns tighter as the pressure builds, sensation shooting through my body like lightning. My heels dig into his broad back, thighs trembling against his cheeks. I've always prided myself on control—in my herb shop measuring precise amounts, in my life keeping everyone at a safe distance—but Dex strips it away with each deliberate stroke of his tongue.

"Dex," I gasp, a warning or a plea, I'm not sure which.

He responds by gripping my hips more firmly, the slight prick of his nails against my skin sending another wave of heat through me. His tongue moves with devastating precision, finding the exact rhythm that makes my vision blur.

I'm unraveling, coming apart under his ministrations. Logic and reason scatter like seeds in a storm. I arch against him, my body tensed like a bowstring about to snap. His name falls from my lips again, more desperate this time.

When I finally break, it's with an intensity that startles me. Wave after wave of pleasure crashes over me, my body pulsing against his mouth. I cry out, not caring who might hear, fingers clutching his horns for dear life as the world fractures into brilliant fragments of sensation.

Dex groans deeply, the vibration extending my pleasure, his hands gripping my thighs harder as he continues to taste me through my climax. The sound he makes is primal, hungry—like he can't get enough. Like he could do this for hours and never be satisfied.

The moment feels perfect, suspended between heartbeats—me sprawled breathless across the bed, him between my thighs like he belongs there. For one fleeting moment, I imagine what it would be like if this weren't temporary. If this room were truly mine, if Ellis were—

The thought disappears as Dex suddenly pulls away. His breathing comes in sharp, ragged bursts, chest heaving beneath the soft golden fur. When he looks up at me, something flickers in his expression—something almost pained, conflicted.

I reach for him, wanting to chase away that shadow, but he's already moving. Rising to his full height, he towers over the bed, running a hand over his horns—where my fingers had just been moments ago.

"I should go," he says, voice rougher than I've ever heard it.

Before I can form a response—before I can even sit up—he's turning away. The soft click of the door feels as final as a thunderclap.

I lie there, staring at the ceiling, heart racing beneath my ribs like a trapped bird. My body still pulses with aftershocks, skin hypersensitive, but a chill slowly creeps through me despite the warmth of the room. What just happened? And why did it feel like so much more than just physical release?

I know better than this. I've always been the practical one, the one who sees things as they are, not how I wish them to be. This arrangement with Dex was supposed to be straightforward—I help with Ellis, he pays me, and eventually, he finds a proper nanny. Someone who makes sense for his life. Someone who isn't me.

Yet here I am, getting attached to both of them. Ellis with his curious eyes and tiny hands that clutch at my hair. Dex with his gentle strength and unexpected moments of vulnerability. They're becoming my world, these two, filling spaces in my heart I'd walled off after my family cast me out.

My fingers trace the scar on my right hand—the permanent reminder of why I shouldn't get too comfortable. Of why I don't belong in fancy houses with prominent merchants. My family made that perfectly clear when I chose to heal that minotaur child instead of letting him suffer.

I roll to my side, pulling my knees to my chest. This will end in heartbreak. Dex will find someone suitable—someone from his own world, someone who can navigate minotaur society without causing whispers. And I'll go back to my herbs and my solitary farm, pretending I never knew what it felt like to be part of something that mattered.

The worst part? I can't even blame him. He's doing what's best for Ellis. What's best for his future.

I just wish, selfishly perhaps, that I could be part of that future too.





## DEX

The morning sunlight pierces through the curtains, forcing me awake with its intrusive brightness. Ellis is still asleep—a small miracle I should be grateful for—but my mind can't focus on gratitude. It's too busy replaying last night.

Maya's skin beneath my hands. The taste of her. The sounds she made when I—

I scrub my face with my palms, my horns catching the edge of my pillowcase. The bronze rings jingle softly, a cheerful sound at odds with the knot in my stomach.

Gods, what have I done?

I swing my legs over the bed, my hooves making a soft thud against the wooden flooring. The quiet house surrounds me like an accusation. Somewhere down the hall, Maya is waking up. Or maybe she never slept at all. Maybe she's been lying awake all night, regretting every moment.

The thought is like a knife between my ribs.

I move through my morning routine like a minotaur possessed. Water from the basin splashes over my fur as I wash my face, dripping down my chest. I don't bother drying it. The cold is clarifying, at least.

In the kitchen, I start the kaffo brewing. The rich aroma fills the space as I stare at the pot, willing it to brew faster, as if the bitter liquid might wash away the memory of Maya's thighs trembling beneath my mouth.

"Stop it," I mutter to myself, ears flicking in irritation.

A floorboard creaks behind me. I know it's her before I turn. Her scent—herbs and honey and something uniquely Maya—reaches me first.

"Morning." Her voice is quiet, controlled. Nothing like the breathless way she called my name last night.

"Morning," I echo, my own voice too loud in the stillness. I keep my back turned, focusing on pouring the kaffo. "Sleep well?"

Stupid question. As if either of us slept.

"Fine."

One word. Just... fine.

I turn, finally forcing myself to look at her. She's wearing the same practical clothes she always does, her silver-blond hair freshly combed, her gray eyes carefully avoiding mine. The scar on her right hand stands out stark against her skin as she reaches for the mug I offer.

Our fingers brush. She flinches.

The gap between us yawns wider.

"Ellis still sleeping?" she asks, taking a step back, creating physical distance to match the emotional one.

I nod. "Miracle of miracles."

In the silence that follows, I can almost hear the unspoken words hanging between us. I want to reach across the divide, to tell her that last night wasn't a mistake, that I want more—all of her. But the words stick in my throat.

She's leaving. She made that clear from the beginning. This arrangement was always temporary. And what did I do? I complicated it. Made it messy.

Maya sips her kaffo, her eyes focused on the window behind me. "I need to check on my shop today. Make sure everything's in order."

Translation: I need space away from you.

"Of course." I force brightness into my tone, the jovial mask I've worn for years slipping easily into place. "Take whatever time you need."

Her eyes finally meet mine, and there's something in them—hurt? Regret? I can't read her the way I thought I could.

"Dex—"

Ellis's cry interrupts whatever she was about to say. We both turn toward the sound, relieved for the distraction.

"I'll get him," I say, already moving past her.

She nods, stepping aside to let me pass. The space between us feels like leagues.

In Ellis's room, I lift my nephew from his crib, cradling his small body against my chest. "Morning, little one," I murmur, brushing my snout against his soft fur. He quiets almost instantly, his tiny hands reaching for one of my horn rings.

At least someone still feels comfortable with me.

I change him and dress him, taking more time than necessary. The longer I stay in here, the longer I can avoid facing Maya again. Avoid facing what I've done.

But I can't hide forever.

When I finally emerge with Ellis, Maya is washing her mug at the sink, her back straight, shoulders tense. The morning light catches in her hair, turning the silver-blond strands almost luminous. My chest aches at the sight of her.

I want her. I want her to stay. I want more nights like last night, and mornings where she doesn't look at me like I've broken something precious.

But she's not staying around. She made that clear.

And now I've gone and made everything worse.

ELLIS FUSSES IN MY ARMS AS I HEFT HIM ONTO MY SHOULDER, ATTEMPTING MY THIRD LAP AROUND THE KITCHEN IN AS MANY minutes. The little one refuses to settle, just like the churning thoughts in my head.

"What is it, little one? Missing her too?" I murmur, my large hand patting his small back. My bronze horn rings jingle softly with each step, a sound that usually soothes him. Not today.

Four days since that night. Four days of careful politeness, of Maya slipping from rooms when I enter, of conversations that never venture beyond Ellis's feeding schedule and her shop inventory. Four days of torture.

I pause by the window, looking out at the garden Maya started planting last week. The sight of the little green shoots struggling upward sends a painful throb through my chest. She's put down roots here, however temporary.

"Your mom would know what to do," I tell Ellis, the mention of his mother making my throat tighten. "She was always better at these things than me."

Ellis babbles something incoherent and tugs hard on one of my ear tufts.

"Ouch! Watch the merchandise, little one." I pry his fingers loose, my lips quirking despite everything. "You're right. Self-pity doesn't suit me."

But gods, do I miss her. Even though she's been here in my home, it's like she's gone. It's killing me not to have her.

Not just the physical—though my body aches with wanting her again—but the easy companionship we'd built. The way she'd roll her eyes at my jokes while fighting a smile. The surprising depth of her laugh when I finally cracked through her serious exterior. The smell of her hair when she'd bend over Ellis's crib, that strange mixture of herbs and something uniquely... Maya.

"Hopeless," I mutter to myself. "Absolutely hopeless."

Ellis finally dozes off against my chest, his small weight warm and trusting. I should put him in his crib, but I linger, savoring the quiet moment. These are becoming precious commodities.

Eventually I place him in his bed, tucking the blanket around him with more care than my large hands seem built for. I stand there watching him sleep, putting off the inevitable return to the stilted atmosphere waiting downstairs.

When I can't delay any longer, I make my way to the kitchen. Dinner needs preparing, and Maya mentioned she'd be working late at her shop today. One more silent meal to look forward to. At least with Ellis asleep, I can drop the pretense of being my usual jovial self.

I grab bread from the pantry, cheese from the cold storage, and pull out a cutting board. The knife sits heavy in my hand as I stare down at the loaf, my mind elsewhere. How did we get here? One moment of weakness—no, not weakness. One moment of giving in to what we both wanted. And now this... this chasm between us.

I'm still standing there, knife in hand, when I hear the soft footfalls behind me. Her scent reaches me first—those familiar herbs mingled with the earthy smell of her garden work. I don't move. Can't move.

Maya steps up beside me, close enough that I can feel her warmth, though we don't touch. She says nothing at first, just watches me stare at the bread like it contains the secrets of the universe.

Then, softly, she bumps her shoulder against my arm. The gentle contact sends a jolt through me.

"Stop looking like you've been through a battle," she says, her voice low.

I blink, startled out of my stupor by both the touch and the words—the most direct she's been in days. I turn to look down at her, and what I see makes my breath catch.

Her gray eyes hold something different today. The careful distance is still there, but behind it, something softer, less guarded.

"I—" My usual quick words desert me, leaving nothing but honest confusion in their wake.

She slides the knife from my grip, her fingers brushing against mine deliberately. "You're useless in here. I'll handle it." She gestures for me to move with a flick of her wrist, her expression bemused rather than dismissive.

For the first time in days, I feel my face crack into a small, tentative smile. The tightness in my chest eases just enough to let me breathe properly again. She's still here. She hasn't pushed me away completely. The wall between us has a hairline crack now—small, but real.

"You're probably right," I concede, stepping aside to give her room at the counter. "Ellis and I would likely starve without you."

Her lips twitch and it warms my chest. I know she won't be around long and I shouldn't have crossed that line. I just need to figure out how to fix this.

"Good thing I'm here." But the words are tinged with words we both don't speak.

*For now.*



# MAYA

I sit cross-legged on the plush rug in Dex's living room, watching Ellis wiggle his tiny hooves in the air. The morning sunlight filters through the tall windows, casting a golden glow across his tawny fur. After weeks of fussing and crying, these calm moments feel like precious gifts.

"Who's the strongest little minotaur?" I tickle his belly gently. "Is it you? Is it Ellis?"

His gold eyes—so like his uncle's—widen with fascination. He's growing more alert each day, those eyes tracking everything with an intelligence that sometimes catches me off guard. His baby horns are coming in strong through his forehead fur, soft little nubs that I've learned to carefully avoid when cradling him.

I wiggle my fingers over his chest, watching his small hands bat at the air. My practical silver-blond hair falls forward, and he immediately reaches for it. I've learned to keep it pulled back most days, but this morning I'd forgotten.

"Oh no you don't, little one," I chuckle, tucking the strands behind my ear. The movement exposes the jagged scar across my right hand—a permanent reminder of the price I paid for my principles. "We've been down that road before."

Ellis kicks his legs excitedly, his eyes locked on mine. I tickle under his chin, and something magical happens—his mouth curves into a smile and he lets out the softest little sound, halfway between a coo and a laugh.

I freeze, my heart skipping a beat. "Was that...?"

I tickle him again, and this time there's no mistaking it. A giggle—tiny but unmistakable—bubbles from his throat. His eyes widen at the sound of his own voice, as if surprised by what he's accomplished.

"Ellis!" I gasp, warmth blooming in my chest. He laughs again, this time reaching for me with both hands, tiny fingers grasping at the air between us. The sound is like bells, pure and innocent.

My face splits into a grin I couldn't contain if I tried. "Did you hear that, Ellis?" I whisper, voice soft and full of wonder. "You laughed."

The moment feels sacred somehow. After weeks of tears and sleepless nights, this small victory feels monumental. I want to preserve it, memorize the way his eyes crinkle at the corners, how his little snout wrinkles when he smiles.

Movement at the doorway catches my attention. Dex stands there, massive frame filling the space, one hand resting against the doorframe. I hadn't heard him come in. His green eyes are fixed on Ellis, who's still making happy gurgling sounds.

"Dex! Ellis just laughed. Actually laughed!" I exclaim, expecting to see my own joy mirrored in his expression.

But something else flickers across his face—a shadow that doesn't belong. His jaw tightens slightly, the bronze rings on his curved horns catching the sunlight as he shifts his weight. He's smiling, yes, but it doesn't reach his eyes completely.

"That's..." he starts, then clears his throat. "That's wonderful."

I recognize it immediately, that complicated tangle of emotions. Pride in his nephew's milestone, happiness at seeing Ellis content—but threaded through it all, unmistakable jealousy. Jealousy that Ellis reached this milestone with me, not him. That after weeks of Dex's best efforts, it was my hands that coaxed out that first precious laugh.

I keep my face neutral, though my chest tightens. I understand his feelings better than he might think. Dex has been trying so hard, pouring everything into caring for this child thrust suddenly into his life. Yet despite his efforts, it's often my presence that soothes Ellis, my voice that calms his cries.

Ellis giggles again, oblivious to the complex emotions swirling around him, and Dex's expression grows more complicated still.

I SETTLE INTO THE WORN ARMCHAIR BESIDE ELLIS'S CRIB, MY FINGERS TRAILING OVER THE INTRICATE KNOTWORK DEX CARVED into the wood himself. Each swirl and ridge tells a story of care—of late nights spent sanding edges smooth, of hours poring over designs to create something beautiful for his nephew. The little details speak volumes about the kind of uncle—the kind of father—Dex is trying to be.

Ellis sleeps peacefully now, his tiny chest rising and falling beneath the soft blanket. Tawny fur catches the gentle glow of the night lamp, making him look almost golden. His face, screwed up in frustration so often lately, is finally serene.

Dex stands at the crib's edge, his massive frame somehow managing to look both powerful and vulnerable in the dim light. The shadow of his horns stretches across the nursery wall like protective sentinels. He's barely moved in the last ten minutes, just watching Ellis with an intensity that makes my heart ache.

I recognize that look. I've seen it on the faces of healers who've lost patients despite doing everything right—that questioning, that doubt that gnaws at your confidence until there's nothing left but raw uncertainty.

His green eyes reflect the soft light as he reaches down to adjust Ellis's blanket, movements surprisingly gentle for hands so large. The bronze rings on his horns catch the light as he leans forward, creating tiny flashes that dance across the wall like fireflies.

"He finally looks peaceful," I whisper, keeping my voice low enough not to disturb Ellis. The silence between us feels heavy with things unsaid.

Dex nods but doesn't respond. His jaw works silently, the muscles tensing beneath his copper-highlighted fur. I've learned to read his body language over these weeks—the way his shoulders stiffen when he's worried, how his left ear twitches slightly when he's holding back words.

Right now, every line of his body screams of doubt.

I rise from my chair and move beside him. Despite being tall for a human woman, I still barely reach his shoulder. Without thinking, I place my hand on his arm, feeling the warmth radiating through his sleeve. The rough scar across my right hand stands stark against his dark fur—two very different marks of our separate journeys.

"You know he loves you, right?" I offer him a gentle smile when he turns to look at me. "You're enough for him, Dex."

His gaze drops to my hand on his arm, then back to Ellis. Something flickers across his face—vulnerability so raw it nearly takes my breath away.

"Am I?" His voice comes out rougher than usual. "He laughed for you, Maya. After weeks of me trying everything—funny faces, tickling, those ridiculous songs my mother used to sing—nothing. But you..." He trails off, looking down at his hands. They clench into fists, then relax, then clench again, as if he's trying to grasp something just beyond reach.

"You're his blood," I remind him softly. "His family. That bond runs deeper than a few weeks of figuring things out."

"Blood didn't help me get him to eat. Or sleep." Dex's eyes remain fixed on Ellis. "Blood didn't stop him from crying every time I picked him up those first days."

I watch the conflict play across his face. For someone known throughout Karona for his boisterous laugh and easy confidence, this uncertainty seems to carve valleys into his usually jovial expression.

"Babies aren't merchants, Dex. You can't negotiate with them or charm them with your sales pitch." I bump his arm with my shoulder, trying to coax out the smile that's been absent since this morning. "They just need patience and consistency—both things you've given him in abundance."

Dex nods, but the tension remains coiled around him like a physical presence. His shoulders stay rigid, horns tilted forward slightly in that defensive posture I've noticed when he feels challenged.

"One laugh doesn't erase the weeks you've spent learning to be exactly what he needs," I say, my voice firm but gentle.

Ellis stirs in his sleep, tiny hooves kicking once before he settles again. Both of us hold our breath until his breathing evens out.

I gently guide Dex away from the crib, my hand still on his arm. "Come on," I whisper, nodding toward the door. "He's finally asleep. Let's not waste this miracle."

Dex hesitates, his eyes lingering on Ellis's sleeping form. I can practically see the battle happening behind those green eyes—the desire to stay vigilant warring with his own exhaustion. Finally, he nods, allowing me to lead him from the nursery.

We move through the hallway in silence, our footsteps muffled against the thick carpets. Dex's home is a strange contradiction—built to accommodate his massive minotaur frame, yet filled with unexpected delicacy. Merchant's sensibilities, I suppose. He has an eye for beauty that surprises those who only see his imposing exterior.

In the sitting room, I head straight for the cabinet where he keeps his liquor. "You need a drink," I state matter-of-factly, not bothering to phrase it as a question. "And frankly, so do I."

"Maya—" he starts, but I'm already pulling out a bottle of amber liquid and two glasses.

"Don't 'Maya' me." I pour generous amounts into both glasses, measuring by eye rather than with precision. Precision is for my herbal tinctures, not for moments like this. "When's the last time you actually relaxed?"

He accepts the glass I hand him, his massive fingers dwarfing it. "Define relaxed."

"Not thinking about feeding schedules or diaper changes or whether you're ruining your nephew's life." I take a healthy swallow from my own glass, feeling the liquor burn pleasantly down my throat. It's strong—like everything in minotaur culture.

A ghost of a smile flickers across Dex's face. "So... sometime before Ellis arrived."

"Precisely." I settle into one of his overstuffed chairs, tucking my legs underneath me. The chair, like everything else in his home, is too large for me, making me look even smaller than my average height would suggest. "Now drink. Healer's orders."

"Is that what this is? Medical treatment?" Despite his skepticism, he takes a drink, his throat working as he swallows.

"Absolutely. I'm treating a severe case of new-parent anxiety combined with stubborn minotaur pride syndrome." I keep my tone light, but my eyes hold his steadily. "It's a particularly nasty combination."

He barks a surprised laugh, nearly choking on his drink. "Has anyone ever told you that your bedside manner leaves something to be desired?"

"Only those who don't appreciate honesty." I take another sip, savoring the warmth spreading through my chest. "And you, Dex Ironhoof, have always struck me as someone who values truth over comfort."

His expression turns thoughtful as he contemplates the liquid in his glass. "Truth, huh? The truth is I have no idea what I'm doing."

"None of us do." I shrug, my practical nature asserting itself. "First-time parents fumble through it all. The difference is they usually have nine months to prepare, not a sudden tragedy and a newborn dropped in their lap."

Dex's shoulders slump slightly. "You make it look so easy."

"It's not easy. I just have experience with children from my healing work." I run my finger over the scar on my right hand, a habit when I'm thinking. "And I'm not trying to measure up to someone's memory."

His head snaps up, eyes widening slightly. "What do you mean?"

"You're not just trying to care for Ellis—you're trying to be what Iris would have been for him." I level my gaze at him, unflinching. "That's an impossible standard, Dex. You can't be his mother. You can only be his uncle—his family—who loves him enough to try."

For a moment, he looks like I've physically struck him. Then something releases in his expression—like a knot finally coming untied.

"How do you do that?" he murmurs, taking another long drink.

"Do what?"

"See through people like they're made of glass."

I laugh, the sound unexpectedly light in the heavy atmosphere. "Years of practice. You can't heal people properly if you don't understand what's really hurting them."

Dex shifts in his seat, the furniture creaking slightly under his weight. "And what's hurting me, Healer Maya?" There's a teasing note in his voice that's been absent for days, a glimpse of the jovial minotaur I first met.

"Fear." I answer without hesitation. "You're terrified of failing him. Of failing Iris. Of not being enough." I soften my words with a small smile. "Which is ridiculous, by the way."

"Oh? Enlighten me why that's ridiculous." He leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees, his expression caught between amusement and genuine curiosity.

"Because you're already more than enough. You dropped everything to take in an orphaned infant. You're learning skills that terrify most grown men. You carved him a crib with your own hands when you could have bought one." I count off on my fingers. "You're enough and then some, Dex. Ellis is lucky to have you."

Something shifts in his expression—a lightening, a clearing, like storm clouds parting. He drains the rest of his glass and sets it down with a decisive thunk.

"You know what's truly ridiculous?" His voice has regained some of its natural resonance. "That I needed someone half my size to remind me of my own worth."

I raise my glass in mock salute. "The best medicine often comes in small packages."

That draws a genuine laugh from him, deep and rumbling. The sound fills the room, warming it more effectively than any fire could. I find myself smiling in response, pleased to have coaxed that sound from him after days of tension.

The rigid set of his shoulders has finally eased, his posture relaxing into something more natural. It's like watching a mountain settle after an earthquake—still imposing, but no longer in danger of collapse.

Something eases in my own chest too, a knot I hadn't fully acknowledged until it began to untangle.





# MAYA

The tiny bell above my shop door jangles with unexpected enthusiasm, jolting me from my concentration over a particularly stubborn herbal compound. Looking up, I'm immediately assaulted by a cacophony of childish giggles and the rapid patter of small hooves against my wooden floors.

"Maya! Maya! Look what I found!" A silver-white blur races toward me, Mira's tiny form barely visible behind an enormous purple flower clutched in her small hands.

Right behind her, Kai follows with more restraint, though his young face betrays excitement as he carefully navigates around my display shelves, his emerging horns catching the morning light.

And then there's Lyra, copper-red hair gleaming as she steps through the doorway, her practical green dress dotted with travel dust, a knowing smile playing at her lips.

My heart sinks to somewhere around my ankles.

Not today. Any day but today.

My hands tighten around the mortar and pestle I've been using for the past three hours. The shop is in complete disarray—half-filled jars line every surface, bundles of drying herbs hang from the ceiling beams, and I have six separate orders due by sundown. My silver-blond hair is falling from its practical knot, and I haven't slept properly in days.

This time, not because of Ellis.

"Surprise!" Lyra calls out, her green eyes bright with mischief. "We thought we'd come see Auntie Maya while Theron handles some business in town."

"Did you now?" I manage, setting down my tools and wiping my hands on my work apron. I pat Mira's head as she bounces beside me, careful to avoid her delicate horn buds. "What an unexpected pleasure."

My voice doesn't quite hit the right note of enthusiasm, and I know Lyra notices. She's always been too perceptive for comfort—it's what makes her such a good healer and such an inconvenient friend when you're trying to hide something.

"Maya, Maya, Maya!" Mira tugs at my apron, thrusting the purple flower toward me. "This is for your medicines! Daddy says you make the best medicines in all of Karonia!"

I kneel to her level, forcing a smile that I hope looks genuine. "Thank you, little one. This is a beautiful fialon blossom." I take the slightly crushed flower, its fragrant petals already wilting. "It'll make a wonderful addition to my sleep tincture."

Kai steps forward, his serious nature evident in how carefully he surveys my workspace. At nearly eight, he already carries himself with the dignified bearing of someone much older. "Are you making medicines now? Can I watch? Father says I should learn useful trades."

"I am indeed, but it's rather boring work," I say, standing to my full height—which isn't saying much compared to the minotaur children who will soon tower over me. "Perhaps you'd prefer to see the new shipment of sweetgrass candies I got in yesterday?"

Both children's eyes widen at the mention of treats, exactly as I'd intended. Distraction is a healer's best friend when dealing with curious youngsters in a shop full of potentially dangerous substances.

"In that basket on the counter," I point to the far side of the shop. "Take two each, not more."

As they rush off, Lyra approaches, her petite human frame navigating the cluttered space with practiced ease. The way she moves—confident yet gentle—speaks volumes about how she's learned to carry herself in a world built for creatures twice her size.

"Working yourself to the bone, I see," she remarks, casually picking up a half-labeled jar of burgona root powder. "Six orders? Seven?"

"Eight, actually," I correct her, taking the jar from her hands and setting it in its proper place. I move between shelves, trying to look busier than I already am. "The summer solstice festival has everyone wanting healing tonics and beauty elixirs."

Lyra perches herself on the edge of my worktable, completely ignoring my unspoken signals that this isn't a good time for a social visit. Her copper braid falls over one shoulder as she tilts her head, studying me with those unnervingly direct green eyes.

"And how's Dex?" she asks, her voice deceptively casual.

My hands falter slightly as I reach for a bundle of drying fortisia leaves. "Fine, I imagine. Busy with trade matters."

"You imagine?" Her eyebrows rise slightly. "I thought you were practically living at his house these days."

"I help with Ellis when needed." I shrug, focusing intently on measuring fortisia into a jar, though I've done this particular motion so many times I could do it blindfolded. Like I'm not lying through my teeth. "But I've been busy here. Lots of orders."

"Mmm-hmm." The knowing hum in her voice makes me want to throw something at her. Preferably something sticky and difficult to wash out.

Instead, I move to another shelf, grabbing empty jars with more force than necessary. The glass clinks loudly together, almost drowning out the sound of the children giggling over their candies.

"You know," Lyra continues, apparently oblivious to my desire for her to drop the subject, "Theron mentioned seeing Dex yesterday. Said he looked like someone had stolen his favorite trading route."

"The summer season is stressful for merchants," I respond automatically, focusing on pouring a carefully measured amount of golden liquid into a series of small vials. "Everyone wants everything delivered yesterday."

"Maya." Just my name, but spoken in that particular tone Lyra has perfected—equal parts compassion and stubborn insistence.

I ignore her, crossing to another shelf where I begin rearranging jars that don't need rearranging. The scar on my right hand feels particularly prominent today, a reminder of all the times I've chosen difficult paths.

"Maya," she repeats, this time standing and following me. "What happened?"

"Nothing happened." I thrust a bundle of dried meqixste bark into a storage bin. "Nothing at all."

Behind us, something crashes—likely one of the children bumping into a display—but I barely register it. My mind is too busy constructing walls against Lyra's gentle probing, walls I know from experience will ultimately prove useless.

"You know what I can't understand," Lyra continues, absently smoothing a hand over her herb-laden braid, "is why Dex hasn't found another nanny yet. It's been, what? Almost three months?"

The question lands like a physical blow. My hands freeze mid-motion, the delicate glass vial I'm holding suddenly feeling as heavy as an anvil. A familiar ache unfurls in my chest—that peculiar mixture of hope and dread that's been my constant companion for weeks now.

"We've just been busy," I manage, my voice barely audible over the cheerful chatter of children across the shop. "The summer trading season for him, festival preparations for me. There hasn't been time to interview proper candidates."

Lyra's eyebrows arch skeptically. The small gold flecks in her green eyes catch the sunlight streaming through my shop windows, making her gaze even more penetrating.

"That's interesting," she says, tapping her fingers against my workbench. "Because Theron mentioned that Dex turned down three perfectly qualified minotaur nannies just last week. Highly recommended ones, too."

I nearly drop the vial, catching it at the last moment with fumbling fingers. My scar—that jagged line across my right palm from the time I'd saved a minotaur child from a magical accident—tingles uncomfortably.

"He... must have had his reasons," I reply, focusing intensely on securing the cork stopper into the vial, avoiding Lyra's gaze. "Ellis is particular."

"Ellis is a baby," Lyra counters softly. "You're the one who's particular."

I shake my head, silver-blond hair falling across my face, providing a momentary shield from her scrutiny. "That's ridiculous. Why would I—"

"Because you care about them." The simplicity with which she delivers this truth makes my throat constrict. "Both of them."

"I'm just helping him out," I insist, moving to a different corner of my workshop, putting physical distance between us as if that might somehow weaken the impact of her words. "It would have been criminal to leave him alone with that baby."

Behind us, Kai is explaining something to Mira about the different herb bundles hanging from my ceiling. His serious, patient tone reminds me so much of his father that I can't help but smile despite my discomfort.

Lyra follows me, herbal skirts swishing against the floorboards. "Maya Silverleaf, you've never been a convincing liar. Not when we were children stealing rirzed herb from old Healer Grenton's garden, and certainly not now."

I busy myself with reorganizing a shelf of perfectly organized jars. "It doesn't matter what I feel. Dex is..." I trail off, unsure how to articulate the complex tangle of emotions that surround that particular minotaur.

"Dex is what?" she presses. "Stubborn? Thick-headed? Terrified of being rejected again?"

The accuracy of her assessment makes me wince. He's told me, in the briefest terms, about Arekia and it seems Lyra knows about her too. I turn to face her finally, shoulders sagging in defeat.

"It's complicated. After what happened last week..." I swallow hard, the memory of that night—his touch, his abrupt departure—still raw enough to make my cheeks flush. I continue before she asks what happened because I am not ready to go there. "I don't think he wants what I want."

Lyra's expression softens, and thankfully she doesn't push. She reaches out, taking my scarred hand in her smaller one. "It's okay to want him, Maya. It's okay to want to be in Ellis' life permanently. What's going to get everyone hurt is if you keep

denying it to yourself."

The truth of her words pierces through my carefully constructed defenses. I exhale shakily, feeling suddenly exposed, as if she's stripped away layers of protection I didn't even realize I'd built around myself.

"What if I'm wrong?" I whisper, giving voice to my deepest fear. "What if he only sees me as convenient help? A temporary solution?"

Lyra leans forward, her tone dropping to an almost-whisper. "If you want him, you have to make him see it. Before someone else does."

The thought of someone else stepping into the life I've begun to think of as mine—caring for Ellis, sharing meals with Dex, filling that grand house with warmth—creates a hollow ache in my stomach that no herbal remedy could cure.

I don't answer. Instead, I pull my hand away and return to filling tiny vials with meticulous precision, my movements deliberate and focused while my mind races in disorganized circles. Each cork I push into place feels like another seal on the emotions threatening to overflow.

My heart is heavy with uncertainty. I'm a practical woman—I've built my entire life around practicality after being disowned by my family. I analyze, I observe, I make calculated decisions.

But there's nothing calculated about the way I feel when Dex looks at me across the dinner table, or when Ellis falls asleep against my shoulder, his tiny horn buds pressing into my neck.



# MAYA

I return to Dex's house long after my shop is closed, my arms heavy with parcels—completed orders for tomorrow's delivery and fresh herbs I'll need for the morning. The familiar path up to his door feels different tonight, weighed down by Lyra's words that have been echoing in my head all day.

*"If you want him, you have to make him see it. Before someone else does."*

My practical mind rebels against the sentiment. I don't chase after people. I've spent my entire adult life being self-sufficient, building my reputation as a healer and herbalist after my family cast me out. Opening myself to rejection now feels like willingly walking into a trap I can clearly see.

Ellis is already asleep when I arrive—the household staff having managed his evening routine. I quietly check on him, my heart swelling at the sight of his tiny form curled beneath blankets, little horn buds barely visible against his pillow. His sleeping breaths come in soft puffs that stir something protective and fierce within me.

I gently close his door and pad downstairs, expecting to find the main rooms empty. Dex is usually in his study at this hour, poring over ledgers and trade contracts.

The house settles around me, creaking and sighing as old homes do. I've grown accustomed to its noises over these past months, learned its particular language of wooden beams and stone foundations. There's something comforting about its solidity—a stark contrast to the uncertainty swirling inside me.

I move to the main sitting room where embers still glow in the hearth. Without thinking, I add another log, poking at it until flames lick upward, casting dancing shadows across the walls. The warmth feels good against the evening chill that's settled into my bones.

Standing by the window, I look out at the blanket of stars covering the night sky. My reflection stares back—silver-blond hair falling loose from its practical knot, gray eyes shadowed with exhaustion and indecision.

*"It's okay to want him, Maya."*

I press my scarred palm against the cool glass, tracing constellation patterns with my finger. How did I get here? When did this arrangement—this temporary solution to a crisis—become something I couldn't bear to lose?

The air shifts behind me.

I feel him before I hear him, his presence heavy and consuming. Something in the atmosphere changes when Dex enters a room—like the air itself makes space for him, acknowledges his power. Not just his physical size, though at seven and a half feet he commands attention, but something more elemental in his nature.

I don't turn immediately. Instead, I watch his reflection join mine in the window glass—those massive shoulders, the proud curve of his horns with their bronze rings catching firelight, the unmistakable tension in his stance.

The silence between us feels charged, thick with unspoken words.

When I finally turn, he's standing just inside the doorway, as if uncertain whether to advance or retreat. His copper-highlighted brown fur looks darker in the firelight, his green eyes watchful.

"I thought you'd be at your farm tonight," he says, his deep voice unusually hesitant. "You said you had early deliveries."

"I do." I take a step toward him, abandoning the safety of the window. "But Ellis might wake. He's been fussy with those new teeth."

It's partly true, but we both know I've stayed far more nights than Ellis's teething requires. The excuse hangs between us, flimsy and transparent.

"Maya—" he starts, then stops, running a hand over one of his horns in that frustrated gesture I've come to recognize.

Something Lyra said gives me courage. "Why haven't you hired someone else, Dex?"

He looks away, jaw working beneath his fur. I can see the muscles tensing, the way his massive frame seems to brace against an invisible force. For a terrible moment, I fear he's going to pull away again—retreat behind jokes or business concerns as he's done so many times before.

"Lyra mentioned you turned down three qualified nannies last week." I press forward, my practical nature demanding answers even as my heart races. "Ellis is thriving now. He's past the difficult stage. Any competent caretaker could—"

"I don't want any competent caretaker," he interrupts, his voice low and rough.

My heart thunders in my chest. I take another step toward him, close enough now that I have to tilt my head back to meet his gaze. "What do you want, then?"

When he doesn't answer, something breaks loose inside me—all the carefully constructed walls crumbling under the weight of feelings I can no longer contain.

"I don't want you to hire someone else," I whisper, the words pushing past the tightness in my throat. "Can't you see that?"

I watch him struggle with the vulnerability of this moment, his massive chest rising and falling with each breath. The air between us feels electric, charged with whatever this is that we've been dancing around for months.

"What do you want, Maya?" he finally asks, his deep voice barely above a whisper, rough with emotion.

I don't think. I don't analyze or weigh consequences as I normally would. For once, I surrender to impulse and cross the room to him in three quick strides. My heart hammers against my ribs as I reach for him, my scarred hand against his chest. He bends instinctively, intuitively, meeting me halfway.

Our lips meet, and the world falls away.

The kiss is nothing like I imagined—it's better, fiercer, like a storm breaking after months of threatening clouds. His mouth is warm and demanding against mine, and I pour everything I've been holding back into it. All my doubts, my fears, my growing attachment to both him and Ellis—everything I've carefully kept contained bursts forth in this kiss.

His massive hands find my waist, gentle despite their size, pulling me closer until I'm pressed against the solid warmth of him. I thread my fingers through his coarse fur, feeling the powerful muscles beneath, and deepen the kiss. He tastes faintly of kaffo and something distinctly him—earthy and wild and perfect.

I've never been one for sentiment, for romantic notions. I'm the practical one, the survivor, the woman who rebuilt her life from nothing after being cast out. But this—this feels inevitable, like two plants that have been growing toward each other despite all obstacles.

His low groan vibrates through me as I trace the line of his jaw. For these precious moments, all the uncertainty falls away, replaced by the raw, undeniable truth of us together, of what we could be.

But then something shifts.

His hands tighten slightly at my waist, and he pulls back, breaking the kiss. His breathing is ragged, eyes dark with desire—but there's something else there too. Hesitation. Doubt.

"Maya..." he starts, voice rough.

I don't let him finish, don't let him retreat behind excuses. My practical nature takes over, cutting straight to what matters.

"I'm not going anywhere," I tell him, my voice thick with emotion I rarely allow myself to show. "Not...if you don't want me to."

The vulnerability of those words leaves me feeling exposed, stripped of my usual armor of self-sufficiency. The scar on my right hand—my permanent reminder of choosing compassion over family loyalty—throbs slightly, as it always does when my emotions run high.

But Dex doesn't answer. Instead, he steps back, putting distance between us. His green eyes, usually so full of mischief or warmth, are unreadable as he runs a hand through the thick fur between his horns. He looks almost lost—this massive, confident, jovial minotaur suddenly uncertain and withdrawn.

I watch him, feeling something heavy and cold settle in my chest. I've faced rejection before—my family made sure I knew exactly what that felt like—but this hurts in a different way. Deeper. More personal.

The practical healer in me catalogs the physical symptoms: quickened pulse, tightness in the throat, a hollow feeling spreading beneath my ribs. The rational part of my mind understands I've just changed everything between us, upset the delicate balance we've maintained.

But my heart? My heart is a different matter entirely.

I stand there, feeling the heat of the fire at my back, watching him wrestle with whatever demons keep pulling him away from connection. I don't know what just happened, but I know with absolute certainty that it changed something.

Even if he can't say it.





## DEX

I balance Ellis in the crook of my elbow, gently bouncing him as I finish the bottle of warm milk. The little one stares up at me with those wide gold eyes—Iris' eyes—making my chest ache. He's getting heavier by the day, growing faster than I can keep up with. Three months old now, and he's already developing that sturdy minotaur frame.

"There you go," I murmur as he grabs for the bottle. "Hungry today, aren't you?"

The house feels emptier when Maya isn't here. She left at dawn for her shop, something about a special batch of gankoya root that needed processing before it lost potency. I miss the way she moves through these rooms, adding life to spaces I never knew were vacant. Things are easier between us, but I want her so much that I know it's keeping tension there that I want gone.

I don't know what to do.

Ellis makes a gurgling noise, milk dribbling down his chin. I wipe it away with my thumb, studying the soft tufts of tawny fur covering his cheeks. My sister's son. My responsibility now.

"Your mother would've been much better at this," I tell him. "She knew what she was doing."

A sharp knock at the door breaks the quiet. I frown. It's midmorning on a trading day—not when I'd expect visitors.

"Coming," I call, shifting Ellis into a more secure position against my chest. His tiny fingers clutch at my shirt as I make my way to the entrance.

The moment I pull the door open, a female minotaur sweeps past me into the foyer. She doesn't wait for an invitation, doesn't pause for introductions. Just walks in like she owns the place, her black and white fur impeccably groomed, her horns polished to a gleam and adorned with silver bands that probably cost more than a month of my earnings.

I recognize her from Iris' descriptions. Varina. Ellis's paternal grandmother.

"So this is where my grandson has been hidden away," she says, her voice cool and precise. Her dark brown eyes flick over my modest home, cataloging every detail—the toys scattered across the floor, the half-finished bottle on the side table, the cradle in the corner of the sitting room visible through the doorway.

Ellis squirms against me, as if sensing the sudden tension in my muscles.

"No one's hiding him," I say, struggling to keep my voice even. "And you might want to try a greeting before barging into someone's home."

Varina sniffs, her nostrils flaring with distaste. "I shouldn't need to introduce myself to family, should I? Though it seems the courtesy of informing me about my daughter-in-law's death was beneath you."

The accusation stings more than it should. "Iris and Treon weren't exactly close with you before he died. I assumed you'd been told."

"By whom? The servants? The gossips at market?" She steps closer, her gaze sharpening on Ellis. "I had to hear about it third-hand, months after the fact."

Something like guilt twists in my gut. I'd been so consumed with adjusting to raising Ellis that I hadn't thought about Varina at all. Iris rarely spoke of her, except to mention her disapproval.

Varina's eyes finally settle on me, taking in my worn house clothes, the spit-up stain on my shoulder, the dark circles I know are etched under my eyes. Her lip curls.

"Not that it matters. I'm here for my grandson. You're not fit to raise him," she declares without preamble. "This house is not suitable. You are not suitable."

My pulse spikes, blood rushing in my ears. Ellis must sense my distress because he whimpers, his little hands clenching tighter in my shirt.

"I'm his uncle," I manage, voice rougher than intended. "Iris wanted him with me."

"A merchant with no wife, no experience with children?" Varina's laugh lacks any warmth. "My grandson deserves better than to be raised by a bachelor fumbling his way through parenthood. He belongs with family who can provide structure, connections, a proper future."

"I am his family."

Varina circles the room, running a finger along a shelf. "Look at this place. Toys everywhere, dishes unwashed, and—" she

sniffs the air, "—when was the last time you bathed him properly? With proper oils? His fur needs special treatment."

For the first time since Iris died, I feel completely unmoored. Each word strikes true, feeding doubts I've been battling since I first held Ellis. I've been learning, yes, but the reality is I'm still lost most days. What if she's right?

My protective instincts flare, but the gnawing doubt in my chest is harder to shake. "Ellis is well cared for," I say, even as I wonder if that's true enough.

"By whom? You?" Her eyes narrow as they scan the room again, lingering on a woman's shawl draped over a chair—Maya's. "Or have you hired some common help to do what you cannot?"

I draw myself up to my full height, towering over Varina despite her imposing presence. "You've made your point. Now I think it's time for you to leave."

But as Ellis begins to fuss in earnest, I can't help wondering if I'm fighting for him or for myself—and which of us truly has his best interests at heart.

Varina ignores my request as she continues to look around. I hold Ellis tighter against my chest as Varina continues her tirade, her words slicing through the home I've tried so hard to make safe for my nephew.

"Look at this place," she sneers, gesturing to the blanket draped over the side of the cradle. "A merchant's house is no place for a child of Treon's bloodline. He should be in a proper home, with servants and tutors preparing him for his future."

Ellis whimpers, tiny fingers clutching at my shirt. I stroke his back gently, trying to soothe him while my own heart hammers against my ribs. I want to roar back at her, to defend what I've built here, but doubt creeps in with each pointed comment.

"When was the last time you discussed his future with the temple elders?" Varina picks up one of Ellis's toys—a carved wooden taura Maya made for him—examining it with disdain before setting it down. "Has he been presented to the Lady of Light? Does he have the proper blessings?"

"I've been focused on keeping him alive and happy," I counter, but my voice lacks conviction even to my own ears.

Varina's eyes narrow, her nostrils flaring. "Food and shelter are the bare minimum, Dex. Any barn can provide that. Ellis is the last of Treon's line, my only grandchild. He deserves excellence, not... adequacy."

The word stings more than it should. Adequacy. The story of my life—never quite measuring up to what others expect, never quite good enough for those who matter. First my warrior father, disappointed in his merchant son. Then Arekia, walking away when a better match presented itself.

"You can't do this alone," she continues, her tone dismissive as she circles the room like a predator. "That much is clear. You're just a merchant. You have no idea what you are doing."

Just a merchant. The same words Arekia had thrown at me when she broke our engagement. Not good enough for her family's lineage. Not good enough for anything that truly mattered.

I clench my fists, anger and doubt mixing into a toxic brew in my chest. Only Ellis's warm weight against me keeps me from shouting.

"I think you should leave," I say, my voice low with restrained fury. This time, I'll forcibly remove her if I have to—not that it matters. Her words have already done their damage, seeping into my skin and burrowing in my chest.

Varina sniffs, adjusting her silver-banded horns with practiced dignity. "I'll be back," she warns. "When you've had time to consider what's truly best for Ellis. For now..." She reaches into her robes and pulls out a small velvet pouch, placing it deliberately on the table. "Some proper horn oil. The kind his father used. At least attend to that much."

She sweeps out as imperiously as she arrived, leaving the door open behind her in a final display of contempt.

I stand there, Ellis fussing against my shoulder, staring at the small pouch. Such a simple thing, yet it hammers home everything I don't know, everything I haven't provided.

After closing the door, I walk through the house in a daze, Ellis still cradled in my arms. Everything I've built here suddenly looks shabby, inadequate through Varina's eyes. The crib I spent weeks crafting—is it truly good enough for Ellis? The clothes Maya helped select—too common for a child of Treon's lineage? The carefully arranged feeding area, the toys scattered about, the bathing basin—all suddenly suspect.

I pause at the window, looking out at the modest garden where Maya has planted healing herbs alongside decorative flowers. In three months, this house has transformed from my bachelor quarters to something else entirely. Not perfect, certainly, but comfortable. Warm.

Or so I thought.

"Is she right, little one?" I whisper to Ellis, who's calmed and now watches me with those intelligent golden eyes. "Am I cheating you out of the life you deserve?"

I think of all the nights I've paced this floor, trying to soothe Ellis's cries. The first weeks of complete helplessness before Maya came. How even now, I rely on her guidance for so much. The simple truth is, I don't know what I'm doing most days.

I try to imagine Ellis in Varina's grand house—with tutors and servants and all the advantages of wealth. The proper oils for his developing horns. The right connections for his future. Everything a mother and father would have wanted for their son.

Everything I can't provide alone.

"Maybe she's right," I murmur, sinking into the chair by the window. "Maybe I should let her raise you."

The thought tears at something deep inside me, but I can't deny the fear that's been lurking since the day I took Ellis home—that I'm not enough. That I'll never be enough.

And I want what is best for him. Even if it's not me.



# MAYA

I step through the threshold of Dex's home, my shoulders aching from a day of grinding herbs and mixing tinctures. The scent of dried rirzed herb still clings to my clothes, its sweet lavender-like fragrance usually soothing, but tonight it feels out of place in the tense atmosphere that greets me.

Dex paces the living area like a caged ursain, his massive frame making the spacious room feel suddenly small. Each heavy footfall seems to vibrate through the floorboards. His copper-highlighted fur catches the fading light slanting through the windows, but there's no warmth in how he holds himself—all coiled tension and radiating distress.

I close the door with a soft click, watching him for a long moment. His green eyes are unfocused, lost in some internal struggle. The bronze rings adorning his curved horns catch the light as he turns, creating brief flickers that match his erratic movements.

"What's going on?" I ask carefully, setting down my satchel of leftover herbs by the door.

Dex continues pacing, as if he hasn't heard me. His tail swishes in agitation, knocking against an end table. A small ceramic figurine wobbles dangerously but doesn't fall. Seven feet of frustrated minotaur in a confined space is like watching a storm gather strength.

When he finally speaks, his voice is tight, strained in a way I've never heard before. "Ellis' grandmother came by."

I frown, confusion creasing my brow. "His grandmother? But I thought—"

"Not my mother," Dex clarifies, finally stopping his relentless pacing to face me. "She's gone. Ellis' other grandmother. His father's mother."

My stomach drops as understanding dawns. "And?"

"She wants custody of Ellis." The words hang in the air between us, heavy and ominous. "She wants to take him away."

I take an involuntary step forward, my hand reaching out before dropping uselessly to my side. "What did you say to her?"

Dex's broad shoulders slump, his usual jovial demeanor nowhere to be found. "She's right. I'm not... I'm not fit to raise him."

My breath catches in my throat. "Dex, that's not true." I step toward him, the practical, no-nonsense part of me ready to shake some sense into this enormous, self-doubting fool.

He holds up a hand, shaking his head. His palm could easily cover half my face—a reminder of how different we are, yet in this moment, he seems so small. "I can't do this. She's right. I don't have what it takes. There's so many things I should have done that I haven't, and I should let him go to a home where he can get proper care."

My heart aches watching him surrender without a fight. This is the same minotaur who defended his friend against bullies, who chose his own path despite his warrior family's disapproval. The merchant who deals with difficult customers and hagglers daily with that signature smile. Where is that Dex now?

"You're his blood too and you've been taking care of him!" My voice rises despite my attempt to stay calm. I gesture toward the nursery where Ellis sleeps peacefully—something that wasn't happening before I arrived. "You have to fight for him, Dex. You can't let her just take him away."

His jaw clenches, the muscle twitching beneath his fur. Those expressive green eyes—usually dancing with humor—are dull with defeat. "I'm not sure I can give him what he needs. She's right about that."

I stare at him, speechless. The scar on my right hand—my permanent reminder of standing up for what's right despite the consequences—suddenly aches. This isn't the man I thought I knew. Not the Dex who charmed me with his determination to care for his orphaned nephew, who looked at me with such gratitude when Ellis first settled in my arms.

My gray eyes narrow, my practical nature taking over. I've rebuilt my life from scratch after being disowned. I know what it means to fight for what matters.

"So you're just giving up?" The words come out sharper than intended, slicing through the heavy air between us.

His jaw works. "I'm doing what's best for him, Maya."

And I fear I can't change his mind.

I SCRAPE THE LAST OF THE DRIED ZABILLA LEAVES INTO A SMALL CLOTH POUCH, TYING IT WITH A TIGHT KNOT. THE SUCCULENT'S healing properties should help with the teething pain Ellis has been experiencing. His tiny horns are just starting to peek through, causing him discomfort that keeps us all up at night. I tuck the pouch into my pocket, looking forward to getting home to him.

Home. The word catches in my mind like a burr. When did I start thinking of Dex's house as home?

The morning sun streams through my shop windows as I gather my things, casting long shadows across the worn wooden floor. My little herb farm outside the city and this shop have been my sanctuary since leaving my family's prestigious healing house. The Silverleaf name might open doors throughout Karona, but not for the black sheep who dared treat minotaur patients.

I lock up and begin the walk to Dex's house, enjoying the bustle of the market. Vendors call out their wares, the scent of fresh bread mingles with exotic spices, and children dart between stalls playing chase. It's a perfect day, which makes the sight waiting for me all the more jarring.

A sleek, polished carriage stands outside Dex's home, bearing an elaborate crest I don't recognize. My steps falter, a sense of foreboding washing over me. I pick up my pace, practically jogging the last stretch.

I push open the door just in time to hear a sharp, cultured voice cut through the air.

"It's decided then. I'll take him now."

The scene before me freezes my blood. Dex stands near the entryway, his massive frame somehow diminished, shoulders hunched as he watches a regal minotaur woman with black and white fur step forward. Her dark brown eyes don't even acknowledge my presence as she moves toward Ellis, who's bundled in a blanket in Dex's arms.

Ellis's tiny face peeks out, his eyes wide and confused as he's shifted from the familiar warmth of his uncle to this stranger's embrace. His soft baby horns catch the light, and I notice with a pang how much they've grown in just the past week.

"Dex?" My voice comes out smaller than intended. "What's happening?"

His green eyes meet mine, but there's something missing in them—the usual spark, the fight. He looks away quickly.

"Maya, this is Varina. Ellis's grandmother. She's... taking him."

The woman—Varina—finally turns to assess me, her muzzle pulled into a perpetual sneer. Her gaze slides over me like I'm something unpleasant stuck to her hoof.

"And you are?" she asks, though her tone suggests she couldn't care less about the answer.

"I'm Maya. I've been helping care for Ellis."

"The hired help, I presume." She dismisses me with a flick of her tail, turning back to Dex. "I've brought everything he'll need for the journey. My home is prepared for his arrival."

I step forward, my practical nature demanding answers. "Wait—you're taking him away? Today? Just like that?"

Dex doesn't meet my eyes. "I think it's for the best," he says quietly, his voice distant and hollow. "Maybe this is the way it's supposed to be."

My chest tightens as I watch Varina take Ellis from Dex's unresisting arms. Ellis makes a small, confused sound, his tiny hooves kicking slightly as he's transferred.

"But—" The word dies on my lips as I watch Dex step back, already surrendering.

Varina cradles Ellis with practiced efficiency rather than warmth. She nods curtly to Dex. "I'll send updates on his progress. You may visit when it's convenient."

Like he's a business arrangement, not family. Not the baby we've been pouring our hearts into for months.

Without another word, she walks out the door, taking Ellis with her. The click of the latch echoes through the suddenly empty house.

The silence that follows is deafening. I stand frozen, the pouch of zabilla leaves heavy in my pocket. Useless now.

"You really want this?" I finally ask, my voice trembling despite my efforts to control it. The familiar ache in my scarred right hand flares—my body remembering what it feels like to stand up for something that matters, to face consequences for doing what's right.

"I'm doing what's best," Dex answers, but I can hear the hollow uncertainty in his words. He won't look at me, just stares at the closed door.

"Best for who?" I snap, unable to hold back the anger bubbling up inside me. "You're giving up on him. You're giving up on us."

The words hang in the air, exposing feelings I hadn't meant to voice. Dex steps back as if I've struck him, his expression shutting down, closing like a door being slammed.

"You shouldn't have gotten so attached," he says coldly. "You're just the nanny."

My world tilts, the words cutting deeper than any knife. All those nights caring for Ellis together, the shared looks of triumph when he finally took his bottle, the way Dex's eyes softened when he watched me rock his nephew to sleep—was that all just convenience to him?

"I can't believe that's what you think," I whisper, hurt blooming inside my chest like a bruise spreading beneath the skin.

But when I look at him, searching for any hint of the Dex I thought I knew—the one who laughed too loudly and protected fiercely—I see nothing but coldness. The wall between us feels insurmountable.

Anger flares, hot and protective, burning away the hurt. I storm past him, my shoulder bumping his arm as I go. The contact sends a jolt through me—one last physical reminder of what I'm walking away from.

I slam the door to my room, the sound echoing through the empty house where a baby's cries should be.





# MAYA

I wake with swollen eyes and an aching heart. The soft light of dawn filters through the curtains, casting shadows across the room that has been mine for these past months. Not truly mine. Never truly mine.

My fingers trace the indent on the pillow where my tears soaked through during the night. In the stillness of morning, the memories of yesterday hit me with renewed clarity—Varina walking out with Ellis, the coldness in Dex's eyes, the words that sliced through me.

*"You're just the nanny."*

I sit up slowly, my body heavy with exhaustion. A quiet house greets me, no baby cries, no sounds of Dex moving about. The emptiness feels pointed, deliberate, like a message written in the silence. He's gone. Probably couldn't bear to face me after what happened.

Fine. That makes this easier.

I pull my travel trunk from under the bed, the scraping sound harsh against the floor. The trunk opens with a creak, and I begin methodically folding my clothes, placing them inside with precise movements. Each item represents a memory—the shirt I wore when Ellis first grabbed my braid with his tiny fingers, the pants stained with burgona puree when he knocked over his food bowl.

My practical nature has always been my shield. Even when my prestigious Silverleaf family cast me out for treating minotaur patients, I didn't crumble. I rebuilt. I established my herb shop. I survived.

I can do it again.

The scar on my right hand catches the light as I fold a tunic. The magical accident that gave me this mark also marked the beginning of my exile. I'd saved a minotaur child that day, refusing to turn them away despite my family's prejudices. The irony isn't lost on me—here I am, forced to walk away from another minotaur child I've grown to love.

My silver-blond hair falls forward as I bend to retrieve my boots from under the bed. I push it back impatiently, making a mental note to cut it shorter again when I get home. Practical. Always practical.

I place my mortar and pestle carefully wrapped in cloth into the trunk, alongside jars of tinctures and salves I'd made for Ellis. The zabilla pouch still sits in my pocket, unused. I pull it out, staring at it for a long moment before placing it on the nightstand. Maybe Dex will find use for it, if he ever visits his nephew.

The thought sends a fresh wave of pain through me. How could he give up so easily? The Dex I thought I knew would have fought tooth and horn for his family.

But I was wrong about him. Wrong about us.

I close the trunk with a decisive snap, securing the latches. Standing in the middle of the room, I let my eyes wander one last time, taking inventory of what I'm leaving behind. My gaze catches on the empty crib in the corner.

The sight of it nearly breaks me.

I cross the room, running my fingers along the smooth wooden rails. Ellis should be here, swaddled in his blankets, making those little grunting noises as he sleeps. His absence feels like a physical wound, raw and throbbing.

My throat tightens as I remember his wide golden eyes, the way his tiny horns felt against my cheek when I held him close. How could Dex let him go? How could he surrender without a fight?

I pick up a small stuffed iypin—the toy I bought for Ellis on market day. Its three-toned indigo fur is soft against my fingers. Ellis loved to grab at its bushy tail, his eyes lighting up with fascination. I squeeze it once, then place it back in the crib. Another piece of my heart left behind.

With a deep breath, I pick up my trunk and satchel. Each step toward the door feels heavier than the last. I pause in the doorway, half-hoping to hear Dex call my name, to see him rush in and tell me he made a terrible mistake.

The house remains silent.

I make my way through the living area, past the kitchen where we prepared Ellis's bottles together, past the couch where Dex and I sat side by side during late nights when Ellis wouldn't sleep.

*"You shouldn't have gotten so attached."*

The memory of his words steels my resolve. My gray eyes narrow as I reach for the door handle. I've been alone before. I survived. I'll do it again.

I step outside into the morning light, closing the door firmly behind me. I don't look back, though every fiber of my being screams to do so. My shoulders straight, my steps purposeful, I walk away from the house that almost felt like home.

I don't say goodbye to Dex. I can't. The risk of one last look at his face—those green eyes that might soften just enough to make me doubt myself—it's too great. Better a clean break than another wound that won't heal properly.

The morning air hits me like a splash of cold water as I step off the porch. The weight of my trunk pulls at my shoulder, a physical reminder of how quickly life can change. Three months ago, I was simply a herbalist with a shop and a small farm. Now I'm... what? A woman with a broken heart and memories that will haunt me.

I make it exactly seven steps from the door before my legs refuse to carry me further. My practical nature battles with something deeper, something that feels like roots being torn from soil. I set my trunk down on the path, the thud it makes against the stone seeming to echo the heaviness in my chest.

Ellis's laughter rings in my ears—that magical moment when I tickled under his chin and he responded with a sound of pure joy for the first time. How Dex had frozen in place, watching us with an expression I couldn't decipher. Now I understand it was jealousy, not wonder. Jealousy that I could connect with Ellis in ways he couldn't.

"You fool," I whisper, unsure if I'm talking to Dex or myself.

The morning breeze carries the scent of rirzed herb from a nearby garden, its sweet smell unable to mask the bitterness of this moment. My gray eyes sting as I stare at the house that never belonged to me. I press my scarred hand against my mouth, willing the trembling to stop.

I remember Ellis's tiny fingers reaching for me whenever I entered a room, the trust in his golden eyes as if he knew I would never let him down. But I have let him down, haven't I? By leaving, by not fighting harder for him. By allowing him to be handed over to a grandmother who sees him as a possession rather than the beautiful, observant little soul he is.

*"You're just the nanny."*

The words echo, cutting freshly each time. Three simple words that defined my place in their lives with brutal clarity. Not family. Not loved. Just hired help with an expiration date.

A capuchos chatters in a nearby tree, its red eyes watching me curiously. I glare back at it, irrationally angry at its freedom to come and go as it pleases.

"What are you looking at?" I snap, my voice breaking on the last word.

The creature scampers higher into the branches, leaving me alone with my misery once more.

I should move. I should pick up my trunk and walk away from this house and everything in it. My shop needs tending; the gankoya roots need harvesting before they grow too woody. Life continues, with or without Ellis's warm weight in my arms or Dex's deep laughter filling a room.

Yet I remain frozen, caught between what I know I must do and what every fiber of my being wants.

I close my eyes, remembering how Ellis would calm immediately when I held him, how his tiny horns would press against my cheek as he snuggled close. I can almost feel his weight in my arms, smell that sweet baby scent that no amount of zabilla cream could mask.

My life has never felt more empty than it does right now. The void left by Ellis—and yes, by Dex too—feels cavernous, echoing with possibilities that will never be realized. No more late-night feedings where Dex and I would talk in hushed voices about everything and nothing. No more watching Ellis discover the world with wide-eyed wonder. No more pretending we were something we weren't—a family.

And yet, I know there's no place for me here. Not anymore. Not when Dex made his choice so clearly. He chose his pride, his fears, his insecurities over what we could have been. He let Ellis go rather than admit he needed help, needed me.

The practical part of me—the part that survived being disowned, that built a life from nothing—knows it's time to move on. This chapter is closed. There's no rewriting the ending.

I pick up my trunk, adjusting it against my hip. This time, my legs cooperate as I turn away from the house, away from the memories, away from the life I briefly thought might be mine.

Each step feels like walking through deep water, but I keep moving. One foot in front of the other. The way I've always survived.



## DEX

I sink into the hand-carved chair at the kitchen table, my horns feeling heavier than ever as I stare at the empty seat across from me. Maya's chair. Always pushed in at that peculiar angle, never quite flush with the table—just like how she never quite fit the mold of what I thought she would be.

"Damn it all," I mutter, my voice echoing through the silent house.

Two weeks. Two weeks since I've heard another voice besides my own in these walls. Two weeks since I made the most colossal mistake of my life.

The morning light filters through the kitchen window, illuminating dancing dust motes where there should be the scent of brewing kaffo and Maya's humming. I drum my fingers against the table's surface, the rhythmic tapping only emphasizing the absence of Ellis's little babbling sounds or his hungry cries at dawn.

I've faced down cutthroat merchants and survived backroom deals that would make most traders blanch, but this silence? This emptiness? It's crushing me from the inside out.

"Brilliant move, Ironhoof," I growl at myself, pushing away from the table with enough force to send the chair skidding backward. "Give away your nephew, chase off the only woman who's ever..." My voice trails off before I can finish the thought.

I wander into the sitting room, where Ellis's little blanket used to be spread across the floor. My eyes automatically search for the scattered toys that should be there—the carved wooden likar Maya found at the market, the little bell she'd tie to his ankle to track his squirming movements. Gone.

The windowsill catches my eye—barren now, but for weeks it had been lined with bundles of herbs Maya was drying. Rirzed herb, zabilla leaves, goligan oil in little clay pots. She'd explained each one's purpose as she arranged them, her gray eyes bright with knowledge. I'd pretended only mild interest while secretly memorizing every word.

"*This is gankoya root,*" she'd said once, holding up a gnarled, aromatic root. "*Perfect for settling little stomachs.*"

I'd made some joke about its smell, and she'd flicked water at me from her fingertips, laughing.

Now there's just... nothing.

My hooves make hollow sounds against the floorboards as I drift through the house like a ghost. I pause at the doorway to the room she'd occupied, my hand hovering over the doorknob before I force myself to push it open. The bed is made with military precision—Maya never left a thing out of place. But her scent lingers faintly, that mixture of herbs and something distinctly her.

The small desk where she'd write letters to her herb suppliers sits empty. No more little jars of ointments carefully labeled in her neat handwriting. No more scarves draped over the bedpost, waiting to be grabbed as she rushed out to her shop in the mornings.

I back out, unable to stand it another moment.

The front door offers escape from the suffocating emptiness, and I find myself on the porch, staring at Maya's garden. She'd started it almost immediately after moving in, claiming Ellis needed fresh herbs nearby. Now, the little patch flourishes without her—the one thing that hasn't withered in her absence.

"You've left your mark," I murmur, eyeing the neat rows of plants I can't even name, though she'd patiently taught me each one.

A breeze rustles through the leaves, and for a moment, I can almost hear her voice explaining which plants need more sun, which ones attract the lumiolas at dusk. I drop my head into my hands, my rings clicking softly against my horns.

When exactly did I fall for her? Was it the first time she calmed Ellis when I couldn't? When she fell asleep at the table after staying up all night with him? Or was it simpler than that—the way her face lit up when she walked through the door, as if coming home rather than to a temporary arrangement?

I don't know. But now that she's gone, everything is colder. The days stretch endlessly before me, hollow and meaningless. And I know—gods, do I know—she was never just Ellis's nanny. She was the heartbeat of this house. She was my chance at something I never thought I deserved.

I was a fool to believe she was temporary. Because without her, I'm the one who feels impermanent, insubstantial—a shadow moving through rooms that used to hold life.

A knock at the door startles me from my brooding. I consider ignoring it—whoever it is can't possibly have anything important enough to warrant peeling myself away from my misery. But the rapping continues, more insistent this time.

"Coming, damn it!" I bellow, yanking open the door with enough force to make the hinges protest.

Theron stands on my doorstep, his amber eyes taking in my disheveled state with that calculating merchant's gaze of his. I haven't shaved in days, and my normally polished horn rings are dull with neglect.

"You look like shit," he says bluntly.

"Did you come all this way to insult me?" I step back, gesturing him inside with a half-hearted sweep of my arm. "Because if so, mission accomplished."

Theron ducks his head to avoid scraping his horns on my door frame. He's always been slightly shorter than me, but he carries himself with the confidence of someone twice his size. Today, he's dressed casually—unusual for him, as he typically maintains appearances even in his downtime. Must be one of his rare days away from the trading house.

"Lyra went by the herb shop earlier," he says, voice carefully neutral as he settles his bulk onto my couch. "Saw Maya."

Her name rips through me like a blade between my ribs. I turn away quickly, pretending to busy myself with finding drinks.

"Is that so?" My voice sounds strained even to my own ears. "And how is the flower girl doing?"

Theron doesn't answer immediately. When I turn back, two ceramic cups of aged fialon wine in my hands, he's studying me with that penetrating gaze that's made him a formidable negotiator.

"What happened, Dex?" he asks quietly.

I hand him a cup, then stand by the window, unable to sit. "Nothing happened. Arrangements changed. That's business."

"That's taura shit." Theron sets his untouched cup down with a decisive thunk. "Maya's shop is half-empty because she hasn't been tending her garden properly. And you—" he gestures at me "—you're a walking disaster. Where's Ellis?"

The question hits like a physical blow. I drain half my cup before answering.

"With his grandmother," I manage. "Varina came by. Said I was doing everything wrong. That I couldn't raise him properly." I laugh bitterly. "She was right. What the fuck do I know about babies? I'm a merchant, not a father."

"So you just... gave him to her?" Theron's tone holds no judgment, but his eyes narrow slightly. "Just like that?"

"I want what's best for him," I snap, pacing now, my hooves clacking against the wooden floor. "She knows how to raise a minotaur of proper standing. She has the bloodline, the connections. She can give him everything I can't."

Theron watches me for a long, uncomfortable moment. Then he shakes his head slowly.

"The best for Ellis," he says deliberately, "was a home where he was loved."

I stop pacing. "I do love him."

"Then why isn't he here?" Theron stands, his bulk seeming to fill the room. "And Maya? Did you want what was best for her too?"

I swallow hard, the wine turning sour in my stomach. "She was temporary. She always said so."

"Did she?" Theron steps closer. "Or did you decide that for her because you were too afraid to ask her to stay?"

His words hit home with unnerving accuracy. I stare at him, unable to form a retort.

"You're an idiot," he continues, his deep voice softening. "You had a family forming right under your nose. Ellis. Maya. You. A little family that made sense, that worked. And you just needed to let them in."

"It's not that simple," I protest weakly.

"It is." Theron clasps my shoulder, his grip firm. "I've known you since we were fifteen, Dex. I watched you defend every underdog, champion every lost cause—except yourself. You've never believed you deserved happiness."

I brush his hand away, but there's no force behind the gesture. "What if I'm not good enough? For either of them?"

"What if you are?" Theron counters. "What if you're exactly what they both need? Ellis is your blood. And Maya—" he pauses. "Maya looked at you the way Lyra looks at me. Like you're something precious."

The thought sends a sharp pain through my chest. Could he be right? Has my fear of inadequacy cost me the two people I've grown to love more than anything?

"You think I can fix this?" I ask, hating how vulnerable the question makes me feel.

Theron's expression softens. "I think you have to try. For Ellis. For Maya." He gives me a pointed look. "For yourself."

I let his words sink in, feeling something stir within me—something that feels dangerously like hope.

My friend might be right. I've faced countless risks in business, but in matters of the heart, I've always played it safe. Too safe. And now I stand to lose them both.

Ellis. Maya. My family.



## DEX

I wake before dawn breaks, before even the first songbirds—do they have those things called consciences?—start their morning chorus. Sleep had been fitful at best after Theron left, my mind churning with regrets and possibilities. Now, I lie in bed, staring at the ceiling, my friend's words echoing in my head.

*"You had a family forming right under your nose."*

The weight of my mistake settles on my chest like a physical thing. I've lost people before—my parents to the Red Fever, Iris to childbirth—but this time, the loss is entirely self-inflicted. That makes it harder to bear.

"Enough," I growl to myself, throwing off the covers. "Enough wallowing."

My hooves hit the floor with purpose. Today, I reclaim my nephew. Tomorrow...well, Maya might be a harder battle, but I'm going to fight for her too. One impossible task at a time.

I don't bother with breakfast. Don't even pause to polish my horn rings, though I do take a moment to splash water on my face and fix my fur. Varina would see any dishevelment as further proof of my unsuitability. The old woman always was a stickler for appearances.

Outside, the morning air carries the scent of dew-dampened earth and rirzed blossoms. I touch a blue petal gently, making a silent promise to bring her back to tend it.

The journey to Varina's estate takes longer than expected. Or maybe my impatience makes the hours stretch by as I sit in the carriage. Her home sits a little farther than Karona, toward central Milthar, a sprawling testament to old money and older prejudices. The kind of place where servants probably dust the dust.

I don't knock. Don't announce myself. Don't give her the chance to prepare her defenses.

I push open the ornate front door, the hinges protesting with a dramatic creak that suits the occasion. The entry hall stretches before me, all polished marble and needless grandeur. Everything gleams with wealth and privilege—and loneliness. This house may be teeming with servants, but it lacks the warmth of a true home.

Then I hear it—the sound that's haunted my dreams since I handed him over. Ellis's cry, high and distressed, echoing from somewhere deeper in the house.

My heart constricts, and I follow the sound like it's a lifeline, hooves clacking against marble, then expensive carpets. I find him in what must be the nursery, a room that reeks of too much money and too little love. Everything is new, pristine, untouched—except for Ellis himself, who thrashes in an ornate cradle, face ruddy with effort as he wails.

"Little one," I breathe, crossing the room in three strides.

His cries pause at the sound of my voice, his tiny wet eyes blinking up at me in recognition. His little arms reach up immediately, grasping for me, and something in me breaks and mends simultaneously.

"I'm here now," I murmur, scooping him up. His small body feels right against my chest, like he belongs there. Always has.

The moment I hold him, his crying subsides to hiccupping little breaths. His tiny hands clutch at my shirt, and he buries his face in my neck. The relief in his posture is palpable—he knows who I am. He remembers. Two weeks apart, and he still knows his uncle.

A throat clears behind me, sharp and deliberate.

"What do you think you're doing?" Varina's voice cuts through the room like a blade. She stands in the doorway, her black and white fur immaculately groomed, horn rings polished to a mirror shine. Her face, as always, is fixed in that permanent sneer of disapproval.

I turn to face her, cradling Ellis protectively against me. "Taking my nephew home."

"You can't simply barge in here and take him," she says, her voice tight with indignation. "He's my grandson."

"And he's my nephew." I stroke Ellis's back gently, feeling his little body relax further against me. "Look at him, Varina. He's miserable here."

"He's adjusting," she snaps, but there's uncertainty in her eyes as she watches how quickly Ellis has calmed in my arms. "Children take time to settle into new environments."

"He had settled. With me." I stand taller, drawing on every inch of my considerable height. At seven-foot-five, I tower over

her. "He belongs with me. Iris wanted me to raise him, and I'm not letting you tear him from me."

Varina crosses her arms, her sneer deepening. "You're not fit to raise a child. I thought you had accepted that. He needs someone who knows how to be a proper parent—"

"I am the only one that knows how to parent him," I snap, the words feeling right as they leave my mouth. "I've raised him. And I'm taking him home."

Ellis coos softly against my neck, as if affirming my declaration. His little hand has found one of my horn rings, fingers curling around the familiar bronze circle. Varina watches this interaction, her expression hardening, but I can see the calculation behind her eyes. She's noting how immediately Ellis settled in my arms, how naturally he turns to me for comfort.

"You're making a mistake," she says, but her voice lacks conviction. "What about his education? His standing in society? His future?"

"I'll handle it," I state firmly. "All of it. And you know what? He'll grow up loved. Not just well-dressed and well-connected. Loved."

I move toward the door, and Varina steps aside, perhaps too tired to fight. The dark circles under her eyes tell me Ellis hasn't made these two weeks easy for her.

"You can visit him. But don't come after us again," I warn, pausing at the threshold. "I won't be so polite next time if you try to take my *son* from me."

Varina's shoulders slump slightly. "He cries all night," she admits grudgingly. "Nothing I do soothes him. Nothing."

I nod, understanding the unspoken truce in her words. She won't fight me on this—not because she agrees, but because the reality of raising an infant has proven more challenging than she anticipated.

"He knows what he needs," I say, gentler now. "And it's not fancy cradles or prestigious addresses. It's his home."

I leave without waiting for her response, Ellis nestled securely against me. With each step away from Varina's cold mansion and toward my carriage, my stride grows more confident.

Ellis shifts against my chest, his little body finally relaxed, his breathing steady. No more screams, no more tears—just a contented warmth pressed against my heart where he belongs.

"We're going home, little one," I murmur, pressing my lips to the top of his head. His fur is soft, the tiny nubs of his baby horns just barely poking through. The scent of him—milk and innocence and something uniquely Ellis—fills my nostrils, and I breathe it in deeply, letting it wash away the sterile smell of Varina's house.

My chest expands with a long, slow exhale. The relief flowing through me is so profound it almost makes my knees buckle. I hadn't realized how tense I'd been until this moment, with Ellis secure in my arms again. It feels like I've been holding my breath for two weeks, and only now can I finally breathe.

"Your grandmother means well," I tell him, though his gold eyes just blink up at me curiously. "But she doesn't understand what you need. Not like I do."

That's the truth of it. I may have doubted myself—gods know I've made enough mistakes—but standing here with Ellis settled contentedly against me, I know with bone-deep certainty that I made the right choice. This little calf is mine to raise, mine to protect. My nephew. My son.

Ellis makes a soft cooing sound, his tiny fingers finding their way to one of my horn rings again. He's always been fascinated by them, the way they catch the light. I smile down at him, feeling my usual jovial nature returning after weeks of absence.

"That's right," I chuckle, adjusting my grip to make sure he's secure. "Those are still there. Some things don't change, even when everything else does."

Once we get to the carriage, we begin the journey home, and I can't help but notice how different everything looks today. The same streets I passed this morning now seem brighter, full of possibility. The weight that's been crushing me these past weeks has lifted, and with each step, I feel more like myself.

I've always been the optimist, the one with the ready joke and easier laugh. It's how I survived my family's disappointment when I chose commerce over combat. How I weathered losing Arekia to Marcus Steelhorn's manipulations. How I endured the deaths of my parents. But these past weeks without Ellis, without Maya—I'd lost that part of myself. Lost the ability to see the bright side of anything.

"We'll get her back too," I promise Ellis, who coos as if he understands. "Maya belongs with us just as much as you do. I just need to figure out how to convince her of that."

A merchant at heart, I know all about negotiations, about finding the right price for the right goods. But Maya isn't a business transaction. She's something infinitely more valuable, and the currency she deals in isn't gold or silver but trust and honesty—things I've been too afraid to offer.

Ellis yawns against me, his tiny mouth opening wide to reveal pink gums. The simple trust in the gesture makes my heart clench. He doesn't doubt me, doesn't question whether I'm worthy of his affection. He just gives it freely, knowing somehow that I'll catch him if he falls.

"I'm learning from you, you know," I tell him softly. "About taking chances. About letting people in."



I kiss Ellis's head again, feeling the rightness of this moment settle into my bones. "No one's going to take you from me again," I promise him. "You're my son now, in every way that matters."

And as Ellis snuggles closer, his gold eyes drifting shut in peaceful sleep, I know with absolute certainty that I've made the right choice. This is what family feels like—not obligation or tradition, but this fierce, protective love that would move mountains to keep him safe.



# MAYA

I stare at the dried rirzed herb bundles hanging above my workbench, but I'm not really seeing them. My fingers move automatically, stripping leaves from stems, crushing petals into my mortar. The rhythmic grinding of pestle against stone fills the quiet shop, but it's not enough to drown out the thoughts circling my mind like hungry rodans.

"You need two more bundles of gankoya for the morning sickness tonic," I mutter to myself, trying to focus on the task.

My shop smells the same as always—earthy, green, with hints of sweet and spice mingling in the air. Sunlight filters through the front windows, catching dust motes that dance in golden beams across my wooden shelves lined with glass jars, leather pouches, and ceramic pots. Everything is exactly where it should be, meticulous and organized.

But everything feels wrong.

I reach for a jar of dried meqixste bark and accidentally knock over a small wooden toy—a carved equu with a broken leg. Ellis had grabbed it from my workbench last week, his tiny fingers surprisingly strong. I'd promised to fix it.

My throat tightens as I pick it up. "Damn it," I whisper, quickly setting it inside a drawer where I won't have to look at it.

The silence is what gets to me most. I never realized how much noise a baby makes—not just the crying, but the little coos, the breathing, the rustling. The shop used to feel peaceful. Now it's just... empty.

A customer enters, the bell above the door jingling. I straighten my shoulders and force a smile.

"Morning, Maya," Talek, one of the farmers from the outskirts, nods. "My wife's hands are cracking again from the fieldwork. Got anything?"

"Zabilla salve," I reply, reaching for a small tin on the shelf. "Works better than anything else for rough skin."

My gray eyes meet his, and I can see the moment he notices something's off. His bushy eyebrows furrow.

"You alright? Look like you haven't slept in days."

I haven't. My bed at home feels too big, too cold. I've gotten used to a small cot in a room next to Ellis's nursery, where I could hear his breathing, where Dex would poke his massive horned head in to check on both of us.

"Just busy," I lie, busying myself with wrapping the tin in paper. "Spring brings all sorts of ailments."

"Heard you were working for the Ironhoof merchant. Helping with his sister's youngling."

My hands freeze midway through tying the string. "Not anymore."

I don't elaborate, and something in my expression must warn Talek not to push. He pays, thanks me, and leaves with a concerned backward glance.

I return to my work, but the silence presses in again. I grab a knife and attack a pile of cryots, chopping the carrot-like vegetables with unnecessary force. The rhythm of the blade hitting the cutting board is almost therapeutic.

"You shouldn't have gotten so attached. You're just the nanny."

Dex's words echo in my head for the hundredth time. The practical, no-nonsense part of me—the part that got me through being disowned, that built this business from nothing—knows he's right. I was hired help. Temporary. It was a job.

Then why does it feel like I've lost my family?

I miss Ellis's weight in my arms, the way his gold eyes—just like his uncle's—would stare up at me with complete trust. I miss the triumph I felt the first time I got him to laugh, that bubbling sound that made even grumpy vendors in the market smile. I miss the way his tiny fingers would grab my silver-blond hair, the warmth of his little body against my chest as he finally fell asleep.

And Dex... I miss his massive presence filling a room, his deep laugh that vibrated through the walls. I miss our late-night conversations about nothing and everything. I miss watching his large, capable hands fumbling with impossibly tiny baby clothes.

I set down the knife before I cut myself, realizing my vision has blurred with unshed tears.

"Enough," I scold myself, wiping my eyes with the back of my hand. "This is pathetic."

But the shop feels wrong without Ellis's bassinet in the corner. My days feel wrong without planning meals for Dex, without the joy of returning to their home—to what had started to feel like our home.

I pick up a jar of fylvek grass and stare at the healing herb. Ironic that I have remedies for every physical ailment but

nothing for this hollow ache in my chest.

After work, I walk the familiar route to Lyra's house, my hands buried in the pockets of my practical dress, unable to sit alone in the silence again tonight. The afternoon sun beats down on the city, warming the cobblestone streets and making the air shimmer above them. Normally, I'd appreciate the weather, the break from the morning chill that makes my joints ache as I tend my herb gardens. Today, I barely register it.

My right hand absent-mindedly rubs the distinctive scar that marks my palm—the permanent reminder of the day I chose compassion over prejudice. The price was my family's rejection, but I've never regretted it. That choice led me here, to this city where humans and minotaurs at least pretend to get along, where I built something of my own.

I pause at Lyra's gate, hearing the chaotic symphony of children's laughter spilling from the open windows. My friend has become a mother to more than just her own. Since bonding with Theron, she's embraced his children as hers, transforming a once-quiet healer's cottage into a home bursting with life.

Drawing a deep breath, I push open the gate. Before I can knock, the door swings wide, and Lyra's copper-red hair catches the sunlight as she pulls me into a fierce hug.

"You're right on time," she says, her green-gold eyes searching mine with that healer's intuition that cuts through pretense. "The children just finished their lessons."

Inside, the house buzzes with activity. Two of Theron's children chase each other through the sitting room while a third sits quietly reading. There's a basket of herbs half-sorted on the table, abandoned when I arrived.

"Sorry for interrupting your work," I gesture toward the basket.

"It's never an interruption," Lyra says, her hand resting briefly on her slightly rounded belly. "Besides, I need breaks these days."

She leads me through to the kitchen garden where we can watch the children through the window while having some semblance of privacy. It's a small, practical space filled with culinary and medicinal plants—many provided by me over the years. A space where two healers can breathe easier.

I lean against the stone wall, arms crossed tight against my chest. "How's the morning sickness?"

"Better with that gankoya tea you made. I couldn't stomach breakfast without it." Lyra pours us both cups of water from a clay pitcher. "But you didn't come to talk about my pregnancy."

The sounds of the children playing filter through the open window—shrieks of laughter, the pounding of small feet, playful arguments over whose turn it is. I close my eyes briefly, the noise piercing through me. Just last week, I'd imagined Ellis growing into that—running, playing, his little voice joining others in laughter.

"You're not okay," Lyra says quietly.

There's no judgment in her tone, just the same compassionate directness that drew me to her when we were both young healers learning our craft. She doesn't waste words or dance around truths—one of the many things that makes her an excellent healer and friend.

I don't answer. What's there to say? That I feel like I'm wandering through my familiar routines like a ghost? That the herb shop I built with my own hands after losing everything suddenly feels empty, purposeless?

I watch through the window as one of the children trips, scrapes a knee, and is immediately surrounded by siblings offering comfort. The ache in my chest grows unbearable. I long for Ellis's small hands reaching for my face, for the weight of his little body against my shoulder as he drifts to sleep. For Dex's rumbling voice reading reports in the study while I mix tonics at the kitchen table, the quiet domesticity we'd fallen into without discussion.

"Talk to him," Lyra urges, her voice gentle but firm as she follows my gaze to the children. "You can't let this go. Not when you know what's real."

I shake my head, hating the tears that well in my eyes. My hand moves automatically to brush them away—I've never been comfortable with this kind of vulnerability. I'd rather focus on practical solutions, concrete actions. Emotional wounds are messier than physical ones.

"It was always supposed to be temporary," I say, the familiar words sounding hollow even to my own ears.

"But it wasn't, was it?" Lyra asks gently.

I look down at the scar on my hand again, tracing its familiar pattern. Another moment when following my heart cost me dearly. The parallel isn't lost on me.

I swallow, the lump in my throat growing. "No. It wasn't."



## DEX

The house is quieter than it should be. I pace back and forth across the living room floor, Ellis nestled against my chest, but the weight of the silence presses on me like a physical thing. The floorboards creak beneath my hooves—a sound that used to be drowned out by Maya's humming or the soft murmurs she'd direct at Ellis. Now it's just me, the creaking wood, and the hollow echo of emptiness.

"Well, little one," I say to Ellis, my voice sounding too loud in the quiet, "just you and me again, huh?"

Ellis coos softly in response, his tiny fingers wrapping around my thumb. His grip is surprisingly strong for such a small thing. I run my thumb over his hand, feeling the softness of his new fur, still downy and tawny-colored like mine was at his age. His gold eyes—so like my own—stare up at me with what I can only describe as confusion.

He misses her too.

"I know," I tell him, as if he's asked a question. "I miss her too."

Three days. Three days since we've been home without her, and it feels like three years. I've faced down angry merchants, haggled with the stubbornest traders in Karona, shit, I've even stood my ground against Varina's withering stare, but coming home to a house without Maya? That broke something in me I didn't know could break.

I move to the window, adjusting Ellis so he can look outside too. The view is the same as always—the garden she started, the footpath she would take each morning to her shop. I half expect to see her silver-blond hair catching the sunlight as she comes around the corner, that practical, no-nonsense stride of hers carrying her back to us.

But she doesn't come.

"I really messed this up, didn't I?" I ask Ellis, who responds by trying to stuff my knuckle into his mouth. "Yeah, that's what I thought too."

The problem with being known as the jovial one—the friend who's always ready with a joke or a booming laugh—is that admitting when you're heartbroken doesn't come easy. People expect you to bounce back, to find the humor, to keep smiling. But there's no humor in this. There's just the ache in my chest that grows heavier each day.

I walk past her room—Maya's room—and pause at the door. I haven't been able to bring myself to look inside since she left. The sheets are probably still rumpled the way she'd leave them each morning, too practical to waste time on what she called "pointless tidying." There might still be a hint of her scent—herbs and earth and something distinctly Maya—lingering in the air.

"I told her she was just the nanny," I confess to Ellis, my voice dropping to a whisper. "After everything... after she was the first one to make you laugh... after she stood up to Varina for us... I told her she was just the nanny."

The memory of the hurt in her gray eyes haunts me. Not anger—that I could have handled. But hurt, deep and wounded, like I'd confirmed her worst fears. That she wasn't truly part of what we were building here. That she was replaceable.

When the truth is, she's anything but.

"I love her," I tell Ellis, the words feeling strange and right all at once. "I love her, and I don't know how to fix this."

Ellis makes a gurgling sound and pats my chest with his free hand.

"You're right. Simple but not easy." I sigh, tracing one of his tiny horns just starting to peek through. "She never meant to stay with us, though. That was the deal. Temporary help until I found a permanent solution."

But somewhere along the way, Maya became the solution. She became essential—the missing piece that made us feel like a family. The way she'd roll her eyes at my jokes but laugh anyway. The way she knew exactly what Ellis needed before he even cried for it. The way she'd argue with me about the right way to fold baby clothes or the best herbs to help him sleep, never backing down, never intimidated by my size or my horns or my occasional stubbornness.

Ellis yawns widely, his tiny mouth forming a perfect circle. His eyelids droop.

"Time for your nap," I murmur, heading toward the nursery. "Though I warn you, my swaddling technique isn't nearly as good as Maya's."

As I lay him down in his crib, I can't help but think of the first night Maya stayed over. How terrified I was, how out of my depth. How she showed me how to wrap Ellis just right, her hands sure and confident as they tucked in corners and smoothed

wrinkles.

"I miss her, little one," I admit, watching Ellis's eyes close. "And I don't know if she'll ever come back to us."

Once he's settled, I move to the living room and stare out the window, staring out at the garden Maya planted. Tiny green shoots struggle upward between rows of stone markers, each labeled in her precise handwriting. Sunlight winks off the collection of glass jars she'd arranged on the windowsill—once filled with dried herbs, now empty like the rest of the house.

The hollow feeling in my chest expands. When did these walls start closing in? When did silence become so deafening?

I press one hand against the cool glass, my reflection staring back at me—a massive frame with slumped shoulders, bronze rings in my curved horns catching the light. The minotaur in the window looks lost, nothing like the confident merchant who can charm customers with booming laughter and quick wit.

"This isn't working," I mutter to myself, my breath fogging the glass slightly. "None of this works without her."

The realization settles over me like a physical weight. It's not just that Ellis misses her—though he does, the gods know he does. It's not just that she made things easier—though she did, with her practical efficiency and unwavering calm. It's that this house, this life I'm trying to build for us, feels fundamentally wrong without Maya in it.

I've been a fool. A stubborn, proud, terrified fool.

Terrified of admitting how much I need her. Terrified of giving someone else the power to leave me. Just like Iris left. Just like my parents. Just like Arekia. But in trying to protect myself from that hurt, I've caused a deeper wound—for her, for Ellis, for myself.

A knock at the door pulls me from my thoughts. Three light taps, followed by a pause, then two more—Lyra's signature knock. I almost don't answer, not feeling up to company, but Lyra isn't one to be deterred by silence.

When I open the door, she's standing there with a knowing look in her bright green eyes. Her copper-red hair is braided as usual, woven through with some kind of small white flowers that smell faintly medicinal. One hand rests protectively over her slightly rounded belly, a habit she's developed since her pregnancy began to show.

"You look terrible," she says bluntly.

I snort despite myself. "Good afternoon to you, too, sunshine."

"When's the last time you slept?" She steps past me into the house without waiting for an invitation, her eyes tracking around the room, taking in the scattered toys, the unwashed dishes, the general air of disarray.

"Ellis went down about fifteen minutes ago," I say, dodging the question. "Should be out for an hour at least."

Lyra doesn't reply immediately. Instead, she makes a slow circuit of the living room, straightening a blanket here, picking up a toy there. When she finally looks at me, her expression is gentle with understanding.

"I'm here to babysit," she says simply, as if reading my mind. "Go get her."

For a moment, I just stare at her, processing the words. Then the dam breaks, and everything I've been holding back comes rushing out.

"Maya thinks I don't want her. That I just see her as—" I run a hand through the fur between my horns. "She put her heart into this family and I pushed her away and—"

Lyra steps forward, putting her small hand on my forearm, the size difference between us almost comical. "Dex," she cuts me off firmly. "I know. She's told me everything."

"Everything?" I wince.

"Everything," she confirms, the corner of her mouth twitching upward. "Including some details about that night that I really could have done without, to be honest."

Heat rushes up my neck and into my ears at the memory of that night, of Maya's skin under my hands, the sounds she made when I—

"Focus, Dex," Lyra snaps her fingers in front of my face, bringing me back to the present. "The point is, she's miserable. You're miserable. Ellis deserves better than two miserable guardians. So go fix it."

I nod, a wave of relief flooding through me. The decision crystallizes in my chest, solid and certain.

"There are bottles in the—"

"I can find where everything is," Lyra interrupts, shooing me toward the door. "I've been taking care of babies while you were still learning to count trade goods. Now go, before you overthink this too."

I don't say anything else, but the decision is made. I leave Ellis with Lyra, determination settling in my chest like a physical weight. I'm going after Maya. I'm not losing her again.





## MAYA

I'm pressing mortar against the pestle when the door crashes open so hard the frame rattles. My hand jerks, scattering green gankoya root across the wooden counter. In the doorway, silhouetted against the afternoon light, stands Dex. His massive frame fills the entrance completely, chest heaving as if he's run all the way from his home.

"Dex?"

My voice sounds small in the quiet shop. The customers left an hour ago, leaving me alone with my thoughts and my herbs. The same thoughts that have circled my mind for days—memories of a baby's laughter, of large hands awkwardly folding tiny clothes, of a gruff voice softening while reading bedtime stories. Of a night I can't forget, no matter how hard I try.

He steps inside, letting the door swing shut behind him. His green eyes lock onto mine with an intensity that roots me to the spot. His copper-highlighted fur catches the light streaming through my shop windows, and there's something different about him. Something I haven't seen before.

"I love you, Maya."

The words hang between us, impossible and enormous. My pestle clatters to the counter.

"I don't know when it happened," he continues, moving closer, careful steps for such a large being. "But it's real. I need you." His voice breaks slightly. "I want you to be a part of our family."

The scent of herbs surrounds us—dried fortisia leaves, burgona powder, the sharp tang of bluefrost. I've built this shop from nothing, crafted this life with my own scarred hands after my family cast me out. Independence has been my shield, my comfort.

And now this minotaur stands before me, offering something that terrifies me more than being disowned ever did.

"What about Ellis?" I manage to ask, my practical nature asserting itself even as my heart pounds painfully against my ribs. My fingers press against the counter edge, seeking stability.

Dex's serious expression breaks into a grin so wide I can see the points of his teeth. "I pulled my head out of my ass and brought our son home."

Our son.

Two small words that send a flutter through my chest, warming me from the inside out. I've held that boy, rocked him to sleep, been there for his first laugh. Somewhere along the way, I stopped thinking of him as a temporary charge and started thinking of him as—

"Ellis was miserable. Varina wasn't happy," Dex adds, rubbing the bronze rings on his left horn—a nervous habit I've come to recognize. "I told her she could visit but Ellis stays with me." He steps closer, close enough that I can feel the warmth radiating from him. "With us. If you want."

I look away, focusing on the scattered herbs on my counter. "You told me I was just the nanny." The words taste bitter. "You pushed me away and gave Ellis up."

"I never should have pushed you away," he says, the rumble of his voice gentler than I've ever heard it. "I was scared. Everyone I've ever—" He stops, squares his massive shoulders. "I didn't think you'd want to stay. With me. For real. But I should have given you the option to decide for yourself. And I want to."

My head snaps up. "What?"

"Can you give me the chance to earn your forgiveness?" His eyes—those green eyes I've thought about every night since I left—search mine. "I know I messed up. But Ellis misses you. And I..." He swallows hard. "I can't sleep without listening for you moving around the house. I keep making your damn rirzed tea in the mornings before I remember you're not there to drink it."

I take a deep breath, inhaling the familiar scents of my shop—my sanctuary, my independence. Then I look at Dex, really look at him. Behind the imposing frame and merchant's confidence, I see uncertainty. Hope. And something that looks a lot like love.

Without thinking, I close the distance between us. My hands reach up to grab the front of his shirt, pulling him down to my level. Our lips meet in a desperate kiss, one that carries every unspoken word, every lonely night, every moment I've spent

missing him and Ellis. His mouth is warm against mine, his lips surprisingly soft beneath the roughness of his stubbled chin.

Dex responds instantly, a rumbling sound vibrating through his chest where my hands press against him. His massive hands come up to cup my face, so large they cradle my jaw completely, yet so gentle I could cry. The contrast of his strength and tenderness undoes me. I rise onto my toes, pressing myself closer, letting my body say what words couldn't—that I've missed him too, that I've been just as incomplete.

The scent of him—leather and spice and something uniquely Dex—surrounds me, replacing the herbal smell of my shop. His horns brush against my hair as he tilts his head, deepening the kiss. I run my fingers through the copper-highlighted fur at the nape of his neck, feeling the surprising softness there.

This kiss is raw, untamed—everything we've both been too afraid to say out loud. The longing, the wanting, the fear of rejection. I pour it all into him, and he answers in kind, his arms wrapping around my waist and lifting me slightly off the ground. My practical nature disappears, replaced by nothing but feeling.

When we finally break apart, we're both breathless. Dex still holds me close, resting his forehead gently against mine. His eyes remain closed, his breathing ragged. I study his face—the proud line of his nose, the curve of his mouth now softened into something vulnerable.

"I'm not letting you go again, Maya," he whispers, his breath warm against my lips. "Not this time. I love you."

His declaration settles in my chest, filling empty spaces I hadn't realized were there. My fingers trace the curved path of his horn, feeling the smooth bronze rings decorating it. How strange that this is where I feel most at home now—not in my carefully cultivated independence, but here, in the arms of someone who sees me completely.

"I'm not going anywhere," I reply, my voice steady despite the emotion threatening to overwhelm me. A smile breaks across my face, my heart soaring with a lightness I haven't felt in weeks. Maybe ever. "Because I love you, Dex."

My practical side tries to remind me of all the reasons this could fail—we're different species, I have my shop to run, I've built my life around needing no one. But for once, I silence that voice. Some herbs can't be categorized neatly on a shelf, some remedies can't be measured in precise doses. Some things just work, despite all logic.



## DEX

I follow Maya up the narrow staircase that leads above her shop after she locks up, my hooves clopping against the wooden steps. The space feels different now—more intimate, more purposeful than when I've been here before. Her scent surrounds me here. Clean herbs, sun-warmed skin, and something uniquely Maya.

Maya turns to face me as soon as we are in her small apartment, gray eyes studying mine with that direct gaze that always sees right through me. No more walls between us. No more holding back. When she steps forward and pulls me into a kiss, I surrender completely.

Her lips are soft but insistent against mine. No hesitation now, no uncertainty. Her hands slide up my chest, fingers working at the clasps of my vest.

"I want to see you," she whispers against my mouth.

I run my hands down her sides, relishing how small she feels beneath my touch. So fragile and precious, yet stronger than anyone I know. She steps backward, pulling me with her until her legs hit the edge of the bed.

"Wait," I say, my voice rough. "Let me."

I lift her easily—gods, she weighs nothing to me—and lay her gently on the bed, my hands lingering on her hips. Her silver-blond hair fans out across the quilt, her eyes steady on mine as I hover above her.

"I'm sorry," I say, trailing a finger along her jaw. "I've been a fool."

"Yes, you have." Her smile takes the sting out of her words. "But you're making up for it now."

I lower my head to kiss her neck, breathing in her scent. "I promise you, Maya, I won't let anyone come between us again. Not Varina, not my own stubborn pride."

My fingers work at the laces of her bodice, surprisingly nimble despite their size. Years of merchant work have given me dexterity most wouldn't expect from a minotaur my size.

"No more pushing me away?" she asks, lifting slightly to help me slide the fabric from her shoulders.

"Never again." I kiss the newly exposed skin of her collarbone. "You and Ellis are my family now. I was too afraid to admit it."

Her tunic follows her bodice, and I drink in the sight of her. Pale skin marked with a few scars—stories I want to learn. The practical, no-nonsense Maya who bandages wounds without flinching, who stands up to a minotaur twice her size, who coaxes my nephew to laughter when I couldn't—she's all soft curves and warmth beneath me.

My hand finds the scar on her right hand, the one she got saving a minotaur child. I bring it to my lips.

"You mean everything to me," I murmur against her skin. "Everything."

She shivers, her free hand reaching to pull me closer, but I resist. There's more I need to say, more I need to prove.

"I'll never let you go again." I trail kisses down her sternum, between her breasts, across her stomach. "I'll spend every day showing you that."

I work my way lower, sliding her leggings down her legs. She lifts her hips to help me, her breathing quickening. When I settle between her thighs, I look up to find her watching me, her eyes dark with desire.

"Dex," she whispers, reaching down to touch one of my horns.

I turn my face to place a kiss on her inner thigh, then the other. "Let me take care of you."

I take my time, learning what makes her gasp, what makes her fingers tighten in the quilt beneath her. She tastes like sunlight and herb gardens, like coming home after a long journey.

Her practical nature disappears here—she doesn't hold back her responses, doesn't try to be quiet or restrained. When she threads her fingers through my hair, careful around my horns but urgent in her need, I feel a surge of pride.

"Don't stop," she breathes, her hips rising to meet me.

I have no intention of stopping. Not until she falls apart for me, not until I've shown her with actions what I tried to say with words. That she's mine. That I'm hers. That the journey that brought us here—through grief and duty and misunderstanding—was always leading to this.

When she finally comes, my name on her lips like a prayer, I feel something lock into place. Something that had been loose

and uncertain within me is now secure, anchored by her.

I rest my cheek against her thigh, watching her chest rise and fall as she catches her breath. Her hand finds mine, fingers interlacing.

"Come here," she says softly.

I feel her fingers trace up my arms, urging me to move. When I lift my head, Maya's eyes are luminous, her cheeks flushed. She tugs me upward, and I follow willingly, careful not to crush her with my weight as I move over her body.

"Come here," she whispers again, pulling me down for a kiss.

This kiss is different. Slower, deeper, with purpose rather than urgency. Her tongue slides against mine, and I groan into her mouth. Her fingers work at the ties of my shirt, then move to my belt. I help her, shrugging out of my vest and pulling my shirt over my horns with practiced ease.

Her hands explore my chest, fingers threading through the coarse fur there. I've never felt self-conscious about my body—minotaurs aren't known for shame—but under Maya's gaze, I feel both proud and vulnerable. She traces a scar on my shoulder, a souvenir from a trading expedition gone wrong.

"You're beautiful," she says.

I laugh, the sound rumbling up from my chest. "That's my line."

"I beat you to it." She smiles, hands continuing their exploration downward.

When her fingers find me, I inhale sharply. No hesitation in her movements, just like everything else she does. Direct and purposeful, yet gentle. I'm already painfully hard, have been since I first tasted her.

"Maya," I whisper, my voice rougher than I intend.

She guides me between her legs, lining me up against her entrance. The heat of her nearly undoes me before we've even begun. I hold myself still, afraid to rush, afraid to hurt her. I'm not small, even for a minotaur, and she's so delicate beneath me.

Her eyes find mine, holding my gaze steady. "I love you, Dex."

The words hit me like a physical blow. Three simple words that I've never truly heard directed at me—not like this. Not with this meaning, this certainty. My mother's love came with conditions, my sister's with obligation. But Maya's love is a choice, freely given.

"I love you too," I whisper back, the words inadequate but necessary.

I push forward slowly, watching her face for any sign of discomfort. She takes a sharp breath but nods for me to continue. The feeling of sinking into her is unlike anything I've experienced—not just physical pleasure, but a sense of rightness, of completion.

"Gods, Maya," I breathe when I'm fully seated within her.

Her legs wrap around my waist, pulling me impossibly deeper. "Don't hold back on me now."

I begin to move, establishing a rhythm that has her sighing beneath me. My large hands find purchase on her hips, guiding our movements together. Always the trader, always the negotiator—finding the perfect balance between give and take.

But this isn't a transaction. This is a joining, a merging of two lives that have somehow found each other despite all odds. A human healer cast out by her family for helping my kind. A minotaur merchant who chose commerce over combat, disappointing his own family. Both outsiders, both stubborn in our convictions.

"You feel incredible," I murmur against her neck, increasing my pace slightly.

Her fingers dig into my shoulders, her body arching to meet each thrust. "So do you."

I've never been a believer in fate—too much time haggling over prices and negotiating contracts to trust in cosmic plans. But as Maya moves beneath me, her body accepting mine, her lips forming my name like it's sacred, I find myself reconsidering. Perhaps some things are meant to be, not by chance but by choice. By the thousands of small decisions that led us both here, to this moment.

The pleasure builds between us, her movements growing more urgent. I can tell she's close again by the way her breathing changes, by the flush spreading across her chest. I adjust my angle, driving deeper, wanting to watch her come apart again.

When she does, clenching around me, calling my name, I follow her over the edge. The release is shattering, my vision blurring as I spill inside her. For a moment, I forget everything—my worries about Ellis, my business concerns, even my own name. There is only Maya, only this connection between us.



## MAYA

Dex holds me for a while, and I have never felt so perfect as I do in his arms. The sun spills in through my window, warm against my skin, a contrast to the coolness I've felt these past few days away from Ellis. Away from both of them.

"I'm ready to come home," I say, the words rushing out before I can overthink them. My fingers tighten around his, and I look up to read his expression.

Dex's green eyes light up, brightening his entire face. The bronze rings on his curved horns catch sunlight as he turns to me, a smile spreading across his features.

"Really? You're sure?" His voice carries a fragility I've rarely heard from him, like he's afraid to hope too much.

"I miss Ellis." My voice catches on the little one's name. "And I miss you. I don't want to be apart anymore."

Dex pulls me close, holding me like I am precious to him. It warms my heart. "The house doesn't feel right without you. Ellis keeps looking around like he's searching for something. For you."

The thought squeezes my heart. I'd grown so attached to that baby, his little tawny fur and those curious gold eyes. Walking away had felt like tearing off a piece of myself.

"Then take me home," I say against his chest.

The walk back to Dex's house—our house now, I suppose—passes in a blur of anticipation. Dex chatters about how Ellis has been, filling me in on missed moments, his usual jovial manner returning with each step closer to home.

"Lyra actually came by to watch Ellis," he explains. "She told me she was babysitting and basically kicked me out of my own house."

I laugh. "That sounds like Lyra." Practical, protective Lyra, who never let her own pregnancy slow her down or diminish her sharp sense of humor.

When we reach the front door, Dex fumbles with the key, suddenly nervous. I place my hand over his, steadying it.

"It's okay," I tell him.

He pushes the door open. The familiar scent of herbs and spices washes over me—my own additions to the house that somehow lingered despite my absence. But it's what I see that makes my heart leap in my chest.

Lyra sits in the rocking chair by the window, her copper-red braid falling over one shoulder as she holds Ellis. The baby's eyes—those beautiful gold eyes just like his uncle's—widen as he spots me. He makes a soft cooing sound that seems to bubble up from his tiny chest.

"Look who's here," Lyra says softly to Ellis, her green eyes meeting mine with understanding.

I cross the room in quick strides, bending down toward them. Ellis's little arms wave excitedly, his gold eyes never leaving my face. When I scoop him up, the familiar weight of him settles against me, and a wave of warmth I've desperately missed washes over me. His fur is soft against my skin, and he smells of milk and the herbal soap I'd made for him weeks ago.

"Hello, little one," I whisper, pressing my face into his neck. "I missed you so much."

Ellis makes another happy sound, his tiny fingers finding my short silver-blond hair as they always do. The tug is gentle, familiar, like he's making sure I'm really here.

Behind me, I sense Dex watching. I turn to find him wearing a soft smile, his massive frame somehow looking vulnerable in the doorway. The sight of us together seems to have struck him speechless—Dex Ironhoof, momentarily without words.

"Come here," I tell him, my voice warm. "He wants his family together."

Dex walks over slowly, crouching beside us. His size makes the movement deliberate, careful. Ellis immediately spots him and reaches out with tiny arms, making urgent little noises.

For a moment, Dex hesitates, glancing between Ellis and me with an expression of wonder, like he can't quite believe this is real. Then he picks up his son, cradling the small body against his massive chest. Ellis looks even tinier against Dex's broad form, but the sight seems right somehow—complete, whole.

"There now," Dex murmurs, his usual boisterous tone replaced with something softer. "That's better, isn't it, little one? We're all home."

I notice Lyra quietly slipping out of the room, giving us this moment together. Before she goes, our eyes meet, and she gives

me a knowing smile—the smile of someone who understands exactly what's happening here, what's being built.

I step back, watching them. For a moment, the world feels perfectly still, as if time has slowed just for this. The sunlight streaming through the windows catches on Ellis's tawny fur, highlighting the tiny nubs of horns just beginning to peek through. My chest tightens with an emotion so powerful it's almost painful.

Ellis snuggles against Dex, his head resting against his father's chest. The contrast between them—Ellis so small and fragile, Dex so massive and strong—creates a tableau that steals my breath. Ellis's tiny fingers grip the fabric of Dex's shirt, and his eyes begin to droop, content in the security of his father's arms.

My heart swells as I watch them, the family I've always wanted finally coming together. It's strange how clear everything becomes in this moment—how all my doubts seem to dissolve like morning mist. I've spent years building walls around myself after my family disowned me, convinced that independence meant isolation. I created my herb shop, my small farm, my ordered life, keeping everyone at arm's length.

But standing here now, I understand that true independence isn't about standing alone—it's about choosing who to stand with.

"Look at him," I whisper, not wanting to break the spell of the moment. "He's falling asleep."

Ellis's eyelids flutter, fighting the drowsiness that's claiming him. His little chest rises and falls in a rhythm that's becoming more even, more peaceful. I've never seen him settle so quickly.

"He knows he's home," Dex replies, his voice uncharacteristically soft. The usually boisterous minotaur is gentle now, one massive finger carefully stroking Ellis's cheek.

I want to memorize every detail of this moment: the warm, honey-golden quality of the afternoon light, the faint scent of the herbs hanging from the kitchen rafters, the way Dex's massive form seems to soften as he cradles his nephew. No—his son. That's what Ellis is now, what he's always been meant to be.

My practical nature typically keeps my emotions in check, but right now, I feel tears prickling at the corners of my eyes. I've spent so long convinced that family wasn't in the cards for me. After being cast out by the prestigious Silverleaf healers for treating a minotaur child—the very act that gave me the distinctive scar on my right hand—I'd closed that door in my heart.

Dex looks up at me, his gaze soft. The green of his eyes reminds me of fresh herbs in spring, vibrant with life and possibility. Behind that jovial exterior he shows the world, there's such depth, such capacity for tenderness.

"We're a family, Maya." His voice catches slightly on my name. "I love you both and I won't ever let you go."

The words wrap around me like a warm blanket on a cold night. How different they sound from just days ago when he'd told me I was "just the nanny." I can see in his eyes that he regrets those words as much as I'd been hurt by them.

My smile feels radiant as I step forward, wrapping my arms around both of them. My practical, shorter haircut brushes against Dex's arm as I lean in. My arms can't fully encircle Dex's massive frame, but it doesn't matter—what matters is that we're connected, the three of us, in this perfect moment.

"And I love you," I say, my voice steady despite the emotion behind it. My gray eyes meet his green ones, no walls between us now. "Both of you."

Ellis stirs slightly between us, making a contented little noise before settling deeper into sleep. His tiny hand uncurls from Dex's shirt and reaches outward, finding my finger and grasping it in his sleep. The connection—small but perfect—brings fresh tears to my eyes.





## DEX

The sun blazes overhead as Maya, Ellis and I make our way down the cobblestone path to Theron's home. Karona is beautiful this time of year, with the tiphe trees stretching their branches toward the sky and rirzed herb blooming in fragrant patches along the road. I adjust Ellis in my arms, his weight a comfortable presence against my chest.

"Someone's excited today," I say as Ellis squirms, his tawny fur catching the sunlight. At eight months, he's already showing the Ironhoof family's trademark size—larger than most minotaur calves his age.

Maya walks beside me, her silver-blond hair shimmering in the sunlight. "He knows we're going to see his friends." She reaches over to tickle under his chin, and Ellis rewards her with a delighted gurgle. "Don't you, little one?"

My chest swells watching them together. Maya's gray eyes meet mine over Ellis's head, and that familiar warmth spreads through me. Seven months since she came into our lives, three months since I finally admitted I loved her, and every day I wonder how I got so lucky.

"You think Kai and Mira have grown since we saw them last week?" I ask, adjusting the bag of toys slung over my shoulder.

Maya's hand finds my arm, resting there with casual intimacy. "Children that age always seem to grow overnight. Especially Kai—he's shooting up like a weed."

We round the corner to Theron's street, and I can't help but smile at the impressive structure ahead. My best friend has done well for himself, though the home is modest compared to what his merchant status could afford. Practical, like the minotaur himself.

Before we even reach the front steps, the door bursts open. Kai charges out first, his horns jutting out from his black fur, growing exponentially at this age. Mira follows more carefully, her unusual silver-white coat gleaming in the sunlight.

"Uncle Dex! Aunt Maya! Ellis!" Kai skids to a stop before us, bouncing on his hooves. "Can Ellis play with us today? We made a fort!"

I lower Ellis to the ground, keeping a steadying hand on his back. "He's been practicing his crawling. Haven't you, little one?"

Ellis immediately pushes forward on all fours, moving with surprising speed toward the children. Mira kneels down, her amber eyes wide with delight. "Look, Kai! He remembers us!"

Theron appears in the doorway, his imposing frame filling the space. Despite his size, there's a gentleness to him now that wasn't there before Lyra. "Are you three planning to stand in my yard all day, or are you coming in?"

"Just enjoying watching the little tyrant escape," I call back, gesturing to Ellis who's now trying to grab Mira's dress with determined fingers.

Inside, Lyra greets us with a warm smile, her copper-red hair braided down her back with sprigs of gankoya woven through—probably to help with her morning sickness. Her pregnancy shows more prominently than Maya's, only two weeks away from giving birth, her belly rounded beneath her practical earth-toned dress.

"About time you all arrived," she says, hugging Maya. "I've been dying for some adult conversation that doesn't involve trade routes."

Theron huffs. "My trade routes put food on this table, woman."

"And fascinating dinner conversation," Lyra says with a wink, patting her mate's arm affectionately.

We settle in their sunlit sitting room, watching as the children play on the rug. Ellis has become the center of attention, with Kai carefully showing him a wooden equu toy and Mira clapping her hands when Ellis manages to sit up on his own.

"He's getting stronger," Theron observes, leaning forward in his chair.

"Takes after his uncle," I reply, unable to keep the pride from my voice. "The little one's going to be breaking hearts before we know it."

Ellis crawls toward a colorful ball, determination in his gold eyes—so like my sister's that sometimes it steals my breath. He bats at it with a chubby hand, sending it rolling, then laughs with pure delight.

The room fills with the sound of children's laughter. I watch Maya's face as she observes them, a warm smile playing on

her lips, her hand resting on my arm. The simple gesture grounds me, reminds me how far we've come.

I lift Ellis high in the air when he crawls back to me, his small hands reaching for the sky as he giggles. "Look at you go! Soon you'll be running circles around all of us."

Lyra catches my eye from across the room and smirks knowingly. "Guess he's not the only one who's enjoying himself," she teases.

I laugh, the sound rumbling deep in my chest, contented in a way I never thought possible. "I think being a dad looks good on me." My eyes drift to Maya, to the small bump visible beneath her dress at three months pregnant. A new tenderness washes through me. "I just hope he enjoys being a big brother."

I watch as Lyra rises with some difficulty, her hand bracing her lower back. "Let's move to the dining room, shall we? I've been cooking all morning."

"You shouldn't be on your feet so much," Theron rumbles, instantly at her side.

Lyra rolls her eyes, but her smile is fond. "I'm pregnant, not incapacitated. Besides, Maya helped with the preparations earlier."

I glance at Maya, surprised. "You did? When?"

"This morning before you woke," she answers, a mischievous glint in her gray eyes. "Some of us don't need to sleep until midday."

"I was up with Ellis half the night," I protest, but there's no real indignation in it. The truth is, I'd happily stay awake for a hundred nights if it meant keeping the little one content.

The dining room is warm with afternoon light, the large table already set with mismatched plates—evidence of Theron's bachelor days before Lyra arrived to bring order to his chaos. The scent of roasted taura and herbs fills the air, making my stomach growl appreciatively.

"Smells incredible," I say, helping Kai into his chair while Maya settles Ellis into a special seat Theron crafted, with straps to keep the wiggly calf secure.

"Lyra makes the best phenson stew," Kai announces proudly. "Even better than Mrs. Bramble's."

Theron chuckles. "Don't let Mrs. Bramble hear you say that."

"It's true though," Mira pipes up, her small voice earnest. "Mama puts in extra frisse."

I catch the way Lyra's face softens at hearing Mira call her "Mama." It hadn't been an easy road for any of them, but the family they've built is stronger for the journey.

Maya helps Lyra bring the last of the dishes to the table—a steaming bowl of phenson stew, roasted cryots glazed with honey, and freshly baked bread that makes my mouth water. Ellis bangs his small hands on the wooden tray of his chair, clearly sharing my anticipation.

"Patience, little one," I say, ruffling the soft fur between his baby horns.

As we settle around the table, there's a moment of comfortable silence as we each fill our plates. The happy chaos of meals at my parents' house had been missing from my life for too long. Now, watching Kai help Mira cut her food while Theron fusses over Lyra's portion size, I feel that familiar warmth return.

"More cryots for Ellis?" Maya asks, already mashing some of the soft, yellow vegetable for him.

"He'll eat anything you give him," I reply. "Must be your touch. Remember when he wouldn't eat for me at all?"

"He was just being stubborn," Maya says, but her pride shows in the careful way she feeds him, waiting patiently as he smacks his lips with each bite. "Like his uncle."

"I prefer to call it 'determined,'" I counter, which earns snorts from both Theron and Lyra.

The meal progresses with easy conversation. Theron discusses a promising new trade route while Lyra shares gossip from her patients. All the while, the children create their own little world at their end of the table, with Kai telling elaborate stories that make Mira giggle and Ellis stare in wide-eyed fascination.

When Maya rises to help clear the dishes, I notice the way her hand instinctively moves to protect her barely-visible bump. Such a small gesture, yet it fills me with fierce protectiveness. I remember my panic when Ellis was first placed in my arms, how inadequate I'd felt. Now, watching Maya with him, seeing the natural way she anticipates his needs, I can hardly reconcile those early fears with the contentment I feel today.

"You're staring," Maya whispers as she sits back down beside me, close enough that her shoulder presses against my arm.

"Can't help it," I admit, lowering my voice so only she can hear. "You're beautiful with him."

A flush creeps up her cheeks, and she tucks a strand of silver-blond hair behind her ear. "You're not so bad yourself, Dex Ironhoof."

Around us, the room hums with life—Theron's deep laugh at something Lyra said, Kai's animated voice as he explains some game to Mira, and Ellis's happy babbling. Maya looks around, her eyes taking in each face, a soft smile playing on her lips.

"What are you thinking?" I ask, drawn to the quiet joy in her expression.

"Just that..." She pauses, her gray eyes meeting mine. "For the first time, everything feels right. Like this is exactly where

I'm supposed to be."

I pull her into my arms without thinking, my large hands gentle against her back. "You are exactly where you're supposed to be," I say before kissing her playfully. She tastes like honey and home.

Ellis lets out a delighted squeal at our display, which sets off Mira and Kai into peals of laughter. The sound rings in my ears like the sweetest music.

Against my chest, Maya's heart beats steady and sure. We're finally whole—all of us, together in this moment. Family, not by blood alone, but by choice and by love. And as I look around at these people who have become my world, I know without doubt that I would face down armies to keep them safe.

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