



BAD AZZ DADDY SQUAD: RAGNAR

Jeanie Johnson and Jayha Leigh



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The Bible Scriptures quoted [Prov 13:24, 19:18, 22:15, 23:13, 23:14, 29:15, Hebrews 12:6-7; 1 John 3:17; 1 Corinthians 13:4; Amos 5:24] are from the King James version of the Holy Bible.

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CAVEAT

This work of erotica contains adult language and sexually-explicit scenes, which are smoking hot. This book is intended only for adults, as it is defined by the laws of the country in which the purchase is made. Keep this book out of the hands of under-aged readers.

Dedication

As always to our Mr. Me's, but also to the women out there in the world keeping it together amid the chaos.

Rev. Justice Harper is dedicated to Dréa's mom. Darioush is the official big brother of Dréa and Rev. Harper is her step-daddy in waiting.

To the men out there in the world who realize that sometimes a woman simply can't be all things to all people. That sometimes they need to be nurtured instead of doing all the nurturing. That sometimes they need to slip out of the cape (and sometimes it needs to be forcibly removed and hidden) and slip into arms strong enough to hold their burdens. And to all of the women who realize that it's okay to be vulnerable, to be female, and to not *have* to be everything.

BOOK I:
The Beginning of the Beginning

Darioush 1:1

Preoccupied with his search for anything that resembled shade, Darioush Jendayi made his way to a shadier part of hell. In reality, Cottonmills, South Carolina wasn't hell, but the combination of its heat and humidity made it damn close. For that matter, anything closer than sixty degrees on either side of the Equator was close to being hell. Bemoaning the heat index which was hovering around 100° F, he almost ran (okay, not ran but rather meandered, as it was way too fucking hot for anything that even remotely resembled a run) smack dab in the middle of a fight. Upon further inspection, it wasn't just a fight; it was an old-fashioned slobber-knocker ... a hopelessly lopsided one at that.

He didn't much mess in the affairs of locals but seven against one was just damn wrong. It was wrong unless that fellow had hurt a woman or some children and then he'd have no problem at all making it eight against one. Though he was simply passing through, he'd bet the man in the middle of that melee wasn't guilty of anything close to that heinous. It wasn't that he knew him; it was simply that he knew small towns and Cottonmills was all small town. If anything ass whipping-worthy had jumped off, he was sure he would've heard about it. Being that he hadn't, he was going to have to consider jumping in. Actually, there was no considering about it. Having been on the wrong side of a lopsided beating about ten too many times, he knew he was going to jump in. Dammit. It was way too hot for this shit.

Darioush couldn't help but admire the man in the center of the melee as he reminded him a little bit of him (the courage part; not the ass

whipping part). Despite being hopelessly outnumbered, the boy wasn't backing down an inch. Raising as much cane as all of the sugar plantations in Florida, his curses rent the air just as his blood splattered the ground. Sure he was losing but if he'd been thirty pounds heavier and facing two guys fewer, he might be winning. But he wasn't heavier and it wasn't five against one; it was still seven against one. From the look in his eyes – one which was already black; from the look of his nose, which was assuredly broken; from the look of his lip, which was split in several places; and, from the sound of the choppy cadence of his breaths, something inside was broken. The boy wasn't going to be able to hold on too much longer if not for a miracle. Much like a cool breeze and ice water in hell, he didn't see a miracle coming this way anytime soon (if he didn't look at himself).

In no mood to add to the river of sweat sluicing over his skin, he was all set to shift and deliver a few growls to give that man a much-needed reprieve. He'd just stepped from the cover of the forest when all of a sudden he was assailed by a familiar scent: female. The sun might be fucking with his vision, the heat might even be fucking with the rest of his body functions, and he might be in human form but nothing was going to convince him that he hadn't scented female. Looking around for the source of that scent that was filling his nostrils and seeping into his body, he made his way closer.

Caught up in his mission to locate the female, he stopped cold as realization hit him: The man in the center of the melee was female. Before he could finish his 'aw, hell no,' Darioush shifted and emitted a sound that he'd never made. A cross between a roar and a cry, it was ripped from the depths of his soul. The sound was so loud that it shook not just the ground he stood upon; it shook all of Cottonmills. Though there wasn't hide or hair

of a breeze, it looked like he was going to be her miracle. He hoped people in hell were going to enjoy their ice water because goodness knew that he was definitely going to enjoy whipping some ass.

Though his cry had alerted the males of his presence, the fight went on for a few seconds. It was a few seconds too long for him. Deep in fight/survive mode, she completely ignored him (which was hard to do even in his humanoid form). Keeping her shoulders squared and her attention squarely on the man in front of her, she had a focus that any boxing coach would admire, but she wasn't a boxer; she was a woman. And in the book of Darioush, women should never be in a position where they had to have textbook boxing form.

He knew that she wasn't seeing shit but the possibilities of what her attackers were intent upon doing to her. Aware that she was fast fading, she lost some of her form and threw everything at the mob but the kitchen sink. In that moment, she was more animal than he. He knew for certain that she was not the kind of woman to ever submit to what they had in mind. Instead, she'd make them kill her but he'd bet the bank that she'd take some of them sons of bitches with her. Later, he'd take time to admire her but first he had to help her. The sooner he helped her, the sooner he could see to those seven guys. Somewhere between his shift and roar, all of her attackers had fled. He wasn't concerned. They could run but they couldn't hide because their scent burned his nostrils and his need for vengeance burned in his soul.

Approaching her, he wasn't surprised when she didn't cower. Clearly, this was a woman who didn't cower before a damn thing. He was however surprised when she dragged her broken body up to her full height and faced him. Weighing close to fifteen hundred pounds, he was five feet when on

all fours and eleven feet when he stood on his hind legs and stretched out. Though this female was a good one hundred seventy pounds, she wasn't more than 5'7." Still, she faced him with dignity. That's when it hit him; she wasn't afraid because she was so busy being relieved. And she was relieved because this was the American south in the 1950s ... in a textile mill town in an unincorporated area. What those boys didn't finish today; they'd finish later and she knew it. Growing up had taught him that many black women preferred death to that and he figured she was no different. Too bad, he wasn't in a mind to let her die and if anybody put their fucking hands on her again, they'd lose that hand ... and the arm that it was attached to.

Reaching for her, he shifted and caught her as she passed out. He didn't for one moment think that she passed out from fear. She passed out from pain. Cradling her in his arms, he made his way deep in the woods. Emitting a roar, he waited knowing that Bering - his best friend - would heed his call. It irked him something bad to let her tormentors go without a reminder of why they should never harm a female but that was a temporary condition - a very temporary condition. He had their scents in his nostrils and there was no where that they could run where he could not find them. Once he had this female settled he and Bering would go hunting and together they would teach them a lesson they'd never forget ... not that they'd have long to remember it.

Ever since seeing her injuries, all he could think of was vengeance. No one did vengeance like him; and no one did stone cold anything like Bering. That's why they were best friends despite all of the reasons that they shouldn't be. Hell, they were each other's only friend. He didn't know much about Bering including his last name, where he was from, or what his

story was ... and he didn't need to know those things. He only knew that Bering treated him like a man, not a black man, not a southern man ... just a man. He smiled recalling their first encounter. Out of all of the uninhabited square miles in Alaska, trust that they'd both run to the same spot ... and neither of them was willing to give it up.

They'd battled but there was no clear victor. In the end, they'd shared it. They didn't have a flag, a treaty or even a gentleman's agreement (as neither one of them was a gentleman); they simply had a few snarls between them and a whole lot of respect. That (and about fifty square miles separating them) was all that they'd needed. In truth, they could've probably put a few more miles between them but being that they were the only inhabitants in the territory, they could make do with sharing.

Darioush wasn't exactly a fan favorite with anyone ... including his own family. Though he knew that they loved and respected him, they could only deal with him in small doses. A proud black man, he wasn't about to kowtow to anyone (and that included his daddy) much less accept the place that southern white males tried to put him in. He simply couldn't stomach being treated like a second-class citizen. For that matter, he didn't stomach being treated with first-class citizen all that well either. Being treated any kind of way meant that people were around and despite the human part of him, Darioush didn't much like people. There was just something about them and whenever he was in their proximity, all hell tended to break loose.

At 6'10" and 310 lbs, you'd think people would go out of their way not to fuck with him especially as nothing about him even hinted that he'd welcome conversation or company. Dark as night with a clean-shaven head, he was what people referred to as a work horse. While he didn't mind

working, he did mind working for slave wages and he especially minded being treated like a slave. The powers that be were always trying to put him in his place but in his opinion, his place was any damn where he wanted to be. That was not a response that the humans appreciated and they normally showed their displeasure with some kind of violence.

Always a big man, he'd never backed down from a challenge, never kept his eyes on his feet when he talked to his "betters", never ran from a fight. He was a giving man: anyone who wanted a fight got one. All they had to do was ask or intimate. Though he was big and had been since his mama had birthed him those many years ago, he wasn't bigger than a shotgun blast. Shot twice by the time he was twelve, worked over by lynch mobs more times than he could count, and having a back tore up due to his many meetings with the lash, his mother had shipped him north ... and north some more ... and north some more until finally he was living in Canada.

For a man like him who could hold a grudge like nobody's business, Canada was still too close to the south and as soon as he'd reached his majority he made his way to Alaska. Once there he kept going until he was deep into the wild. He'd finally stopped once he reached 65° North latitude. He hadn't stopped because he was tired; he'd stopped because he'd finally found a place where he felt free. There was nothing out there in the wilds of Alaska – no people, no noise, no nothing ... and he liked it. Dropping to his knees in the thick snow, he'd closed his eyes and for the first time thanked the Creator. This wasn't heaven, but it wasn't the south so it might as well have been.

Despite the fact that the move had probably saved his life, the necessity of the move had amped his anger up until it was a full blown rage.

He'd been angry for as long as he could remember and it'd only gotten worse when he'd been expelled from everything he knew. The backwoods of Georgia might not have been much, but it'd been his home. Though he didn't visit, he'd vowed to return one day and finish the job that Sherman had started back in 1864.

He wasn't going to be content to keep his destruction confined to Georgia; he was going to burn the whole fucking south to the ground. To say that he despised the south was an understatement. There wasn't a Yankee anywhere who hated the south more than he did. And though they weren't in 1856, he'd bet that Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts couldn't have summoned up the kind of hate that he had for the south.

He hated the south but he had a special, limited edition, deep-seeded, one-of-a-kind hate for Atlanta and the surrounding areas. He wasn't even in the state yet he could feel his anger rising. Only the mewling of the female in his arms tamped it down. Readjusting her, he held her closer. Shutting off his memories, he waited for Bering.

Justice 1:2

Rev. Justice Harper had learned many things in his twenty-two years. He'd learned wisdom at the knee of his grandfather. He'd learned discipline at the business end of his daddy's belt. He'd learned the exact distance society would let a black man go. From many hours listening to older men talk, he'd learned that those boundaries were bullshit.

Still, for all of the knowledge that he'd been exposed to, nothing had prepared him for Songs Sorghum –not even his top-notch education at Voorhees College. No exhibit at any museum had prepared him for her beauty. No sermon had prepared him for her truth. No disappointment would've prepared him for her 'hell no.'

Songs was an amalgamation of polar opposites. Named for one of the most moving books in the Old Testament, Songs had to be dragged kicking and screaming to church. Not given the opportunity to go to school past the fourth grade, she was still one of the most brilliant individuals that he knew. Stunningly beautiful, there wasn't a thing soft about her beauty as Songs was one of the hardest individuals he'd encountered.

People thought that Songs was hateful, but she wasn't. She was simply direct. Rarely raising her voice, Songs got her point across with minimal effort. She was succinct in her speech, specific in her requests, and strong in her convictions. While she wielded the truth like a sword and her no's like a shotgun, she went into battle knowing that as vociferous as her no's were and as strong as her convictions, she was going to pay for her defiance. And though she'd given more than a pound of flesh to cover the cost, she continued to say no (despite the fact that she was often overridden) and despite the odds, she continued to endure.

While he'd respected her, he hadn't loved her when they got engaged but no one seemed to care about that small fact. The powers that be had decided that he needed a wife and what better wife for a preacher than a woman named Psalms? Since she was available, a marriage was contracted. Neither he nor Songs was consulted about the matter. If they'd bothered to ask him, they would've realized that he wasn't ready to start a family. But they didn't ask him. His father, grandfather and mentor had simply clapped him on the back and told him it was time that he started a family. He hadn't objected (aloud anyway) because he owed them. He owed them for keeping him out of the fields. He owed them for allowing him to get an education. He owed them for moving the family to Denmark, South Carolina. He owed them for paying for his tuition at Voorhees College. He owed them and he always paid back his debts regardless of what the cost was to him personally.

He didn't even have to ask Songs for her hand in marriage. It was his for the taking after her grandfather had accepted on her behalf. Short of killing herself or running off there wasn't much that she could do about it. If they'd bothered to ask Songs they would've discovered that a husband was the last thing that she wanted to be saddled with – regardless of how handsome and educated he was. But they didn't ask her. In fact, they didn't tell her until the morning they got married.

As soon as the announcement of their pending wedding left the preacher's mouth, all hell broke loose within that woman. A change came over her. Never happy to be in sitting up in anybody's church, her anger changed to rage within seconds. A firestorm lit her eyes and anger flushed her cheeks. Her nostrils flared and she clenched her jaw so tight that he'd wondered if she'd inadvertently ground down the tops of her teeth. Though

impossible, he imagined that he could hear the beating of her heart a half a church away and recalled worrying about whether or not it'd literally beat out of her magnificent, magnificent chest.

Songs was the angriest bride he'd ever seen. For that matter, she was the angriest person he'd ever seen. She wore rage like brides wore white. Rising from her seat to join him in his pew, she didn't say anything for the whole of the service – not that she ever did. She didn't even say 'Amen' after prayers although she always thanked God when the service was over. Silent, Songs looked straight ahead without blinking. If it hadn't been for the tic in her jaw or the rage that wafted off of her he might've thought she was made of stone. Despite knowing how angry she was, he'd wanted to take her hand. He didn't though because he'd enjoyed having two of them.

As soon as the service was over he rose to go to the Altar. He was surprised when she rose without being summoned and accompanied him to the front without doing him physical damage when it was clear that she objected to their union. Regardless of her reasons, she stood beside him as the preacher said the words to make her his wife. When the preacher prompted her to say 'I do' she didn't say 'I do'; instead she announced that not only did she not love him, she could hardly stand him and wouldn't even waste a second mourning if word arrived that he'd been trampled to death by a herd of thundering horses. While everyone understood her upset at having a husband sprung on her, everyone was appalled by the fact that she'd publically object. Everyone else might've been appalled but he couldn't help but smile.

As soon as they'd arrived at their new home, Songs had stomped to their room ... and he'd let her. Removing his suit jacket, he sat heavily at the kitchen table wondering if his bride would come out. Not five minutes

later she did come out but she didn't sit with him. Instead she marched outside and set the dress she'd been married in ablaze. He couldn't blame her. Why would you want to save the clothes that you were taken prisoner in, especially when you knew the only way to be set free was for you to die? Of course she could wish for his death but her grandfather would simply find her another husband.

When she came back in, she took a glance around noting that everything in their house was waiting for them to make use of it. The kitchen and pantry were stocked and the table was laden with food. Not even sparing him a glance she fixed herself a plate and sat down and spoke her first words to him as his wife.

'You don't ever have to love me but you better spend every day of the rest of your life respecting me. I don't give a good hot damn what the preacher said or what the good church-going folk of this town or any other says, but you better act like you know. Just in case you don't know, I'm going to tell it to you this one time: You better respect me, our house and any children we might have. If you don't I will leave your ass and I will not leave it intact or alive. And then I will head to Canada even if I have to get there on my back.'

Finishing her piece, she ate without bothering with grace. He knew two things about Songs in that moment. First, she meant every word. Second, she meant every word. Later that night, he'd learn the third most important thing about Songs: despite her strength and courage, she wasn't made of stone. She felt so hard that it sometimes hurt her. Lying in bed with her, he couldn't help but feel her tremors. She shook so badly that he feared that she was having some kind of fit.

“Just do it. Just get it over with,” she’d said when he’d frantically asked if she was okay.

Though she was the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen, her words had been like ice water. Despite being her de facto kidnapper; and legally having the right to her body, he would never be her or any other woman’s de facto rapist. He didn’t want her to consider their lovemaking as something she had to endure. Pulling her to him, he simply held her to his chest.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Just holding you.”

“Why?”

He didn’t want to tell her why. He was hardly able to admit it to himself. Instead he countered her question with a question of his own.

“Why didn’t you want your grandfather to give you away?”

She went silent – even more so than she had been. Still, he waited for her to respond in her own good time knowing that she wasn’t the type of person to dodge questions ... or the truth.

“When he decided that I was marrying you whether or not I wanted to, he gave me away right then. No need for him to do it twice.”

Her words slew him. Holding her to him, he waited for her to drift off to sleep and when she did he took his suit and went outside and burned it not wanting a reminder that he was her captor and marriage was her prison. As he watched it burn, he made several vows. First, he’d never give his daughter away. Never. If a man wanted her, he’d have to come get her and she better be wanting to be got. Second, he’d tear down the iron rods of marriage that served as Song’s prison. She’d never have to set foot in a church again despite the fact that he was a preacher. She’d never have to

work in anybody's field again, clean anybody's house again, never have to mind anyone's children but their own ... even if that meant that he had to work from sunup to sundown. In being a coward, he'd taken everything from her... an everything that her grandfather had no right to give and that he had no right to accept.

He'd spent the next full year doing what he should've done in the first place: he grew a pair. Like most twenty-two year olds, he'd spent the last few years thinking that he was a man but having a big dick and hair on it, a diploma, and the affirmation of the community didn't make him a man anymore than the laws of the land made his blackness a legitimate reason for second-class everything. Girding his loins he came right out and asked her where she got her courage so he could venture there and get some for himself.

It took courage to befriend a woman like Songs. One didn't merely see their reflection in her eyes, one saw the truth. And as righteous and eternal as the truth may be, one doesn't want to look in the mirror and see all of their shortcomings and failures reflected back at them. If only the emperor had looked into Songs' eyes he would've known he was naked. He'd looked into her eyes and glimpsed her acceptance (not of him but of her own situation), then he looked at that slim wedding band on her finger and was taunted by his own cowardice, his own thievery, and his hand in this injustice. He'd taken it off swearing that one day he'd earn the right to slide it back on her finger.

He got to know her during that year. It wasn't enough to know what she liked and what she disliked; he needed to discover what fortified her and make sure it was always plentiful. He needed to know what she feared and then crush it.

When he'd discovered those basic things about her he delved deeper and discovered what she longed for and who else besides him had let her down. He kept that information tucked away in his heart and worked to bring her dreams within reach. And then he worked harder to insure that he was never again the reason for her disappointment or her longing.

When he'd passed the course on Songs Sorghum Harper, he did the second thing he should've done: he courted her. Even though she was legally his wife, he needed to earn the right to give her the Harper that was now part of her name. It wasn't enough to say that she was beautiful when she had so much more to offer than her beauty. It wasn't shit to bring her flowers when she longed for freedom. Even though he hadn't been ready for marriage he'd married her and in doing so promised to love, honor and cherish her. He wasn't sure if he'd ever grow to love her but he would always honor her for sharing his life and cherish her as much as he cherished his own manhood. Though she'd promised to love, honor and obey him, he didn't hold her to any of that. He simply hoped that she'd grow to respect and trust him ... and perhaps even like him. He may one day want more, but for now respect would do.

Bering-Darioush 1:3

Bering No Last Name Given was an enigma not only to those he allowed to know him but also to his own family and the only thing that was known about them was that they had to exist for him to exist. All that anyone knew of him was that he was big, quiet and cold. As big as he was (6'7", 275 lbs) it wasn't his size that people recalled-it was his coldness. It was usual for people to shiver in his presence regardless of the temperature. It wasn't usual for people to look him in the eye or for that matter to make eye contact at all. Darioush told him it was because he had freaky eyes. Ice blue in color, Darioush called them glacial ... which matched his personality. Whatever.

His demeanor kept everyone away and that's the way he liked it. Well, it kept everyone away except for Darioush but being that Darioush didn't expect conversation or fellowship they got along just fine. Darioush was fire to his ice. His favorite response was a fist to the jaw; his second-favorite response was the uppercut that followed it. His third-favorite response was Old Testament-like in its wrath. Darioush wasn't mean (well not in his opinion, then again everyone considered him to be a cold motherfucker so what did he know); he was just particular about anyone and anything in his space. Having known Darioush for a handful of years, he'd bet that the population (a whole four-hundred people) was grating on his patience as much as the heat was fucking with his big body.

Darioush had promised never to come back to the south unless it was to burn it to the ground like Sherman did Atlanta in 1864. Yet here they were - in the south and going further south with each leg of their trip. They'd stopped due to the heat. Neither of them was big on heat but

Darioush was especially sensitive to it. Anything above 55°F was hell on him. Then again he was a polar bear shifter- a big one even amongst other polar bear shifters.

He couldn't help but laugh about the incongruity of it all. It wasn't every day that one ran across a black male polar bear shifter from the south but five years ago, he'd did just that –ran across him. Luckily, they were both in their humanoid form else Darioush would've probably attempted to take him down – attempted being the key word. He might not be as big as Darioush but he was still powerful.

As it was, they'd ended up fighting in humanoid form. They weren't angry; it was simply a territory thing. Neither of them wanted anybody or anything in their space. Between the two of them they were like Jack Sprat and his wife: Darioush didn't like anybody and he didn't trust anybody. Fighting to a draw they'd snarled at each other ... a lot. Still, they were both too fucking bull-headed to concede a damn thing so they'd ended up sharing the territory. The two of them split a thousand square miles of pristine tundra, yet sometimes it felt crowded.

He was on his way to the forest to get some much needed rest when he heard Darioush's roar. Not even bothering with questions or being concerned with ramifications, he did something he'd never done outside of his home in Alaska: he shifted out in the open. Racing through the dirt roads and fields and nothingness he made his way to the forest. He didn't know what was going on but whatever it was had to be hella bad in order to rip *that* sound from Darioush. Though he wasn't there he knew for certain that the sound was ripped from him. He wasn't sure how fast he ran but from the burning in his lungs he knew that he'd never run faster. Calling

out to let Darioush know that he was near, he slowed when he heard his returning growl. Darioush was safe but all was not well.

Of all of the scenarios that Bering envisioned, Darioush with a human in his lap was not one of them. Darioush hated humans so much that he couldn't be bothered to speak to them. As it was, Darioush hardly spoke to most shifters. That left him to do the talking for them and he only spoke when absolutely necessary.

Softly approaching, he stood back awaiting for Darioush to speak. He didn't know who the female was but from the look in Darioush's eyes he knew not to get too close unless he was ready to fight to the death. On any other day he and Darioush were evenly matched but today was not any other day, the female in Darioush's arms was not any other human, and his anger was not his usual level of deadly.

"What do you need me to do?" he asked.

"She needs help and I don't know where to get it or even who she is. This is a mill town. Whole families live here so someone should be looking for her."

Taking a look at her, all Bering could see was a medley of bruises. He had no idea what she looked like under the blood, filth, and Darioush's bulk, still what he was able to see would have to be enough. Nodding to his friend, he headed towards town knowing that somewhere someone was losing their mind over that female ... and that deep in the woods a polar bear shifter had already lost his mind over her.

It didn't take long to find out who she belonged to. In fact, it didn't even take ten minutes. Before he was out of the woods good he was met by a frantic momma and the business end of a big fucking stick. He didn't even

bother with introductions. He simply threw back his head, roared for Darioush and waited.

Songs (Whose Given Name is Psalms) 1:4

Ignoring her friends Songs marched through the forest like a woman possessed and dammit she was. She was possessed of one helluva temper, a whole bunch of indignation, and too much expectation. Determination lining her face, she double-timed it through the thick forest; slinging curses in time to the sling blade she swung to clear her path. She hadn't been this livid since the day that she was married. She hadn't been this frightened ... ever. Her baby - her only baby girl - was out there somewhere hurt and alone. It was the hurt part that filled her with rage; it was the alone part that shattered her.

Something was wrong and she didn't have to be told that; she'd felt it in her bones. Something was wrong and she was sure it had something to do with some man or perhaps men. She'd been wary of boys being close to her daughter. She'd been especially wary of the boys that had come to town with the mill owner's son. On break from some fancy college, they all had that look in their eye. Songs didn't know them but she knew *that* look. That was the look of a predator. Too many men looked upon black women as sport. Tasting a little bit of brown sugar was all good times for a lot of white males but it wasn't nothing but trouble and heartache for black women. It'd be one thing if they only messed around with women who said 'yes' but boys like them had never heard 'no' in their lives and weren't about to pay attention to a 'no' from a colored woman. Despite the laws they didn't have to. Though slavery had long been abolished women were still women and their 'yeses' was taken for granted; their 'no's' overlooked if not altogether ignored.

That's why she was so strict with Selah. Though it was warm, she always made Selah cover up. Even though she'd recently finished with her daddy's schooling, she only allowed Selah out during the day, and then only with one of those Harper males. She wasn't much on males but as far as males went them Harper men weren't half bad. They were bossy as all get out, but she could live with that. They protected their women and being a woman in the south she appreciated that.

As soon as she found Selah (she couldn't think of any kind of alternative) she was leaving this place even if she had to walk until her feet bled and swim the whole of the ocean. Her heart was already bleeding so what was a little more blood? She was tired of South Carolina ... had *been* tired. It didn't matter that she'd spent every one of her thirty-seven years here; she didn't want any more South Carolina. In reality, she didn't want any more of the south with its dog days of summer and dog days period. She didn't want any more being called 'girl' and hearing her husband addressed as 'boy'. She didn't want any more watching her husband work his fingers to the bone in cotton mills, in fields, or even in the pulpit.

She was tired of the south but where would she go? *Where could she go to escape Jim Crow?* The North (the supposed haven for black people) had discriminatory laws on their books way back in the 1860s. Though they didn't call it Jim Crow, blacks were systematically separated from the white population. She was tired ... just tired of this quasi-life and quasi-personhood to which blacks were relegated. For a while she'd harbored feelings of wanting to leave the south but she feared that there was no place north enough, no place big enough, no place just enough. But now she had *no* choice. She had to go even if meant that she'd spend the rest of her days being Moses wandering. She wasn't searching for the Promised Land; she'd

be content to find an Amos 5:24 [but let judgment run down like waters and righteousness as a mighty stream] land.

If only she could live in her husband's heart. She smiled thinking of her husband. If ever a man had earned the name Justice it was him. Justice Harper was a good man and it had nothing to do with his fancy education, his position in the church, or all of that fine-ness. It had everything to do with what was in his heart.

Though it'd been close to twenty years, she remembered her marriage like it was yesterday. She also remembered the mad like it was yesterday ... and the sense of betrayal ... and the pain. She'd wished so hard that she'd been born a man and not just any man but a white man somewhere else besides the supposedly God-fearing, Bible-thumping south. She didn't hate her blackness; she hated how society reacted to it. She didn't hate her femaleness; she hated the vulnerability her sex caused her, hated the way it diminished her opinion, and hated the way that it systematically eliminated her opportunities for everything from being able to learn to read to being able to say 'no'. She didn't hate God (but they'd had some pretty good squabbles), sometimes she just wished that God loved her as much as she was supposed to love Him/Her. She didn't hate the Bible; she hated the way women were treated in so much of it, and hated the way people used the Word to justify doing people dirty.

And as much as she'd wanted to hate Justice Harper, she wasn't able to hate him for long. She'd hated him something fierce in the beginning. When the preacher casually announced that she was to become his wife after the sermon she'd been so shocked she couldn't even breathe. Her heart had beat so hard she wondered if she'd have a heart attack – wondered, not feared. Though she'd almost died plenty of times, she'd

always wanted to live. Hell, she'd literally clawed her way back to the living defying all those who wished otherwise.

This time was different. There were no bleeding wounds, no broken bones. There was just her bleeding soul and her broken trust. And she hurt like she'd never hurt before. How could her grandfather allow this? How could he just give her away without asking? How could he not like her enough to treat her like a person? Wasn't it enough that she acted like his slave? Her fingers were naught but calluses she worked so hard. She cooked, she worked the fields, she kept his house clean, washed his clothes. She kept her mouth shut when he hired her out to white folk to do the same for them and mind their children. She kept quiet because despite the backbreaking work, she had a roof over her head, food in her belly, and a bed she could lie in without wondering if some man would come in and try to violate her.

Neither she nor her grandfather had ever pretended to love each other but she'd at least appreciated him. He'd never said that he loved her, never said thank you, never had any conversation with her that didn't have a directive in it. Still, his silence about this hurt her right in her trust. She felt betrayed ... all because she'd trusted him. She'd never make that mistake again. In fact, she vowed never to look at him again realizing that even after living in his household for going on six years, he'd never really looked at her and she'd never been a member of it.

She was there only because she had no choice. Hell, she'd never had many choices. For that matter, she never had the choice to have a choice.

She'd come to her grandfather by default. She was still alive because of guilt. They had a reason to feel guilty with the way that they'd ignored the beatings that were as regular a part of her life as hot was a regular part

of summer. No one asked why because finding out why meant asking uncomfortable questions that might beget uncomfortable answers and besides a daddy was allowed to beat his child and Proverbs backed him up. She knew all of the Proverbs that allowed it or alluded to it because he'd quote them while whipping her and she'd yell her objections whilst running and fighting back.

She'd got all the Church she could stand in those beatings. She got plenty of practice in call and response enduring them. She got plenty of scars for her fight.

"Proverbs 13:24 [He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes]," her daddy would yell.

"But I'm not a son," she'd gasp as the lash sent fire up her back.

"Proverbs 19:18 [Chasten thy son while there is hope, and let not thy soul spare for his crying]," he'd yell.

"What do you know about hope or a soul?" she'd ask while ducking.

"Proverbs 22:15 [Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him]," he'd thunder.

"All you're driving from me is any love I could feel for you," she whispered as she wondered what he knew about a heart although her bastard of a father knew all about foolishness.

"Proverbs 23:13 [Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die]," he'd spit.

"Why am I being corrected for defending myself against your drunkard friends who think my body is here for their pleasure? You beating me is not sparing me from death. You've been killing me for years," she weeped.

“Proverbs 23:14 [Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell (Shoel)],” the preacher would counsel her when she ran to him for help.

“There ain’t no Shoel you can scare me with considering the Shoel I live in now with a man who ain’t seen a peace he ever liked, a day he didn’t want to ruin, or life he didn’t want to crush.”

“Proverbs 29:15 [The rod and reproof give wisdom: but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame],” the good church-going folk would mmm hmm and Amen to.

“I can’t shame my mama by refusing to believe you because the rod already delivered my mama to death and even as she delivered me to this hell,” she whispered that last time.

That last time had been the worst because it’d almost broken her physically ... and the best because it’d liberated her. Already sick, she was slower than usual so she took more punishment than usual. Her daddy had swung that lash so hard it sounded like a hurricane coming. It’d hit her back with such force it drove her to her knees. She didn’t know where she got the strength from, but she’d grabbed the end of that lash and ripped it from his hands. And then she’d run wondering if she had any skin left on her back or any blood in her body. She ran, tearing up her feet in the scorching fields, tearing up her lungs with the exertion, tearing up any hope she had of her life ever being better. Though she ran without thought of where she was going, she wasn’t all that surprised to discover that she’d run to the church.

As she passed out on the church steps she thought about how no one had ever told her daddy not to beat her; they simply lectured her on how to submit and used the Word to back it up. She might not be able to read but

she could remember real good. When the pastor came to pray over her that last time, he didn't quote Proverbs so she whispered some scripture to him to save him the lecture.

"Hebrews 12:6-7 [...the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son. Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?]," she whispered as she slipped into unconsciousness. The Lord must love her a lot, she thought even as she wondered if the Lord was about to love her to death.

"I can't endure no more hardship, Lord; can't endure no more discipline. The only time I hear your name the Church is taking it in vain; the only time I hear the Word someone's saying it as they bring me some pain."

She was sure that had that last beating not been so bad, she would've spent the whole of her childhood receiving them. This time however she'd been too broken up for everyone to simply ignore like they usually did. So they'd taken mercy on themselves and put her broken body in somebody's wagon and drove her off to the woods to die. Though she couldn't speak, she could hear. They'd thought she was going to die (so had she) and wanted her to at least die somewhere pretty. *Nice of them*. She might've died but in the end she was just too damn contrary to do so ... or maybe the Lord wanted to love her some more.

She crawled, limped and slid her way through that forest until she found a small stream. She ate the fresh berries that grew there in abundance and sipped the clear water. Time had blurred. Filled with pain she couldn't keep track of the number of sunrises and sunsets. She simply remembered waking up one day and coming eye-to-eye with the biggest

pair of boots she'd ever seen. Tilting her head back she slowly looked up from those boots to the man who wore them.

Before she could finish her perusal, he'd spoken.

"Emery Sorghum."

Emery Sorghum was the biggest man she'd ever seen, the blackest man she'd ever seen, the most mannish man she'd ever seen. Later she'd learn that despite being the gruffest man she'd ever seen he was also the fairest. He didn't brook no nonsense nor any disrespect – from anybody. It didn't matter if you were black or white, rich or poor, young or old. You treated him with respect or you gave him a wide berth – a real wide berth. That's why he lived so deep in the forest. Even though he'd shot and killed plenty of people in the short time she'd known him, they'd all deserved it.

Though bigger and stronger than her he'd done what no other man ever had: he asked her a question, waited for her response and accepted her response. The first day he'd asked her if she wanted him to help her she'd shook her head no. Instead of getting mad, he simply asked her if she'd wanted to live. Of course she'd said 'yes' to that.

"This is going to hurt, girl, but I'm not going to hurt you," he said as he'd quickly stripped her, waded out to the stream with her and submerged her. Before she could even get enough breath in her lungs to say that she'd changed her mind, he was scrubbing her furiously. His touch wasn't creepy; it was purposeful. He scrubbed the filth and blood from her body, not caring that he was hurting her; only caring that she was going to stay alive. When he was satisfied her wounds were clean, he waded out of the water, gave her a small towel to hide her modesty, and briskly dried her off before slathering her back in some kind of sticky substance that she'd later

discover was honey, and wrapping her arm between two short sticks and some stiff cloths.

Cold, hurting like the dickens and hungrier than she'd ever been, he'd had her dressed in rough but clean men's clothes. He'd poured a lot of something down her throat that burned all the way to her stomach before exploding. Sitting her down, he pulled out a canteen filled with water and thrust it at her along with a tin plate, filled with food.

"You want to come with me?" he asked.

"No thank you," she responded.

Every day he came back with more of the burning liquid, more food, and the same question. Every day, she drank the burning liquid, ate the food and answered the same way. She was sure that he was frustrated at her stubbornness, but he remained respectful of her wishes. She slept a lot but she healed. Though he left her in peace, everyday she woke up there was something that made her life softer. A blanket, a pillow, a dog. She didn't know what kind of dog it was but it was very much like his master: big and black.

She'd needed his help and as bad as she wanted someone to swoop in and take care of her she'd had enough of everyone taking over her life. Emery Sorghum didn't take over her life. He gave her things she needed but left it up to her to decide whether or not to take it. She appreciated that. Finally, the day came that she said 'yes' to his question. She figured if he hadn't done anything to her by now, he wouldn't. He didn't gloat at her 'yes' he simply picked her up and carried her deeper in the forest to his home.

He'd sat her on his clean bed and told her to rest. Finally alert enough to smell something other than death, feel something other than

pain, and see something other than shadows, she realized she was a filthy, stinking mess. So ashamed over her condition, she cried. Emery was at her side before the first tear had a chance to hit the pillow.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m so dirty.”

“Is that all?”

“Yes,” she sniffed.

It wasn’t all but it was a whole bunch of the problem. Sighing and muttering something about females, he’d gently told her to wait for a bit. After a while, he gently picked her up and carried her to the kitchen. Giving her a large sheet he’d told her to remove her clothes and wrap herself in that. Being a decent man, he’d turned his back to give her privacy. Stoking up the fire, he spent the next hour hauling water to fill the tub. Her left arm useless, he’d spent the half hour after that scrubbing her clean. Not liking men around her, she’d felt safe with him and he’d done nothing to make her regret her trust.

It’d taken her a long time to heal but he’d been patient, gentle and welcoming.

“Little girl, how you feel today?” he’d ask.

And every morning she’d answer that she felt fine. He never believed her. The day came however when she really did feel fine. Finally passing the Emery Sorghum test for being healthy, he allowed her to do something other than lay about and heal. Over the course of the next year he taught her all kinds of things. He’d taught her how to hold a shotgun, taught her how to shoot it. He’d taught her how to hunt, how to fish, and the best way to prepare deer. He taught her how to listen to the woods, walk in nature, and how to hide herself if it ever became necessary. He taught her how to

take care of wounds and more importantly, he taught her how to fight. And finally, the day came when he taught her how to make a living: Emery Sorghum taught her how to not only make moonshine, but how to make the best moonshine in all of the known world.

She could've happily lived out the rest of her life in that forest making moonshine but one day she'd told him her name. There might be a lot of people in the world but not too many of them were named Psalms, which is why she went by Songs instead. Recognition had settled on his face and dread had settled in her stomach. He knew exactly who she was. Sighing, she rose from the table intent on leaving even without having any idea where she was going to go.

"Where you going, little girl?" Emery asked.

"Away. I can't go back," she said without any emotion in her voice but with eyes shimmering with pain and a back marked with the history of her time with her father and his lash.

"Little girl, sit down. This is your home too. You don't have to go nowhere you don't want to go. You stay here as long as you want to, little girl. Know this though: I'm a hellraiser. I live here because to live around anyone else with their churches full of sinners, their laws full of injustice, their hearts full of hate. I won't pretend to be a good man, but I'm a fair man. One day I might not come back or one day some bad folk might come looking for me. That happens; you go to your grandfather. He's a stern man but he won't put his hands on you. Understand me?"

She'd understood just fine. Eventually the day did come when some bad folk came looking for Emery.

"Are they here because of me?" she asked feeling guilty.

"No baby, they're here because of me."

“What if my father?” she began only to be cut off by his gruff voice.

“Killed that bastard soon as I found out who you were, little girl. You don’t have to worry about him again.”

It wasn’t what he said, it was the way he’d said it that caused her to pause. Emery said it like he’d say that dinner was ready. He said it like it was an expected fact. Thinking back on the way he always paused before touching her back, she realized that those marks on her back bothered him more than they’d ever bothered her. She also realized that she’d never loved anyone before meeting Emery Sorghum.

“I want to go with you,” she said.

“And as much as I’d like you to come, ain’t nothing but trouble where I’m going.”

“But they found you because of me. You never went out of the forest before I came here.”

“Never had much reason to. I can’t make you go to your grandfather’s but I’m asking you to go. I need to know that you’re safe, baby.”

Because it was Emery asking, she went. He’d never asked anything of her and she could not refuse him this one thing. As much as she wanted to stay and fight, she did what he said. Packing provisions, she ran hard and fast. Every step she took away from that cabin broke her heart but she loved Emery Sorghum too much to defy him in this. He’d made his peace about how he was going to live and she had to let him decide how he was going to die. She knew it’d be guns blazing and though it pained her she couldn’t help but respect him. Still, Emery Sorghum was too good a man to die at the hands of men who didn’t deserve to even be in the pens with pigs. Love for Emery Sorghum had her doing the one thing she’d always done:

wished he'd been her daddy. Concern for him had her doing the one thing she'd never done: pray. She prayed for his safety.

She'd never found out what happened to Emery Sorghum but she'd never stopped praying for that man. And she'd never stopped honoring him, which is why she had his last name instead of that fool who had sired her. Thinking of the fool that had sired her caused her to remember the man who had sired him. Malvolio Tace might've biologically been her father and Severus Tace might biologically be her grandfather but that was as far as it went. And after her grandfather's betrayal it didn't go any further after that very moment. She'd made up her mind that she was through with Severus Tace and that's why she'd kept her eyes on Justice Harper.

Hating all males for not being a quarter of what Emery Sorghum was allowed all of the hatred and disgust that boiled within her to light her eyes. Yet instead of looking at her with revenge; Justice had looked at her with regret and shame. Right then she'd been too incensed to care about how he felt. At least he'd known about it. He'd had a dick, which meant that he'd had a choice. He could've picked any other woman, could've said no, could've said 'hell no,' but he hadn't. Justice Harper spoke his 'I do' clearly and without hesitation. She spent the first hours being Mrs. Justice Harper wishing like hell that he had said anything but 'I do' but every day after that, she'd spent every day thanking God that he hadn't.

Justice Harper was a preacher but she wouldn't hold that against him, especially when he'd told her that she never had to go to church again ... and honored that vow. He wasn't Emery Sorghum but the years had proven to her that he was just as good a man as Emery. While he hadn't taught her all of the neat things that Emery had, he'd taught her things Emery

couldn't. First and foremost, he'd taught her how to read. Before that, he'd taught her to be glad that she was a female. While she learned to be glad that she was female, she'd learned to be really glad that she was Justice Harper's female.

She couldn't imagine any other man touching her so gently, loving her so fiercely, speaking so truthfully, acting so honestly. A man of great and hidden depths, he plumbed hers and learned all of her secrets. The fact that she'd let him alerted her that she was falling in love with him. Twenty years had only proven her hypothesis and given her more reasons to love him.

He loved her. And he loved their daughter. He didn't let Selah's sex sway him in his treatment of her. Honoring his family, he'd worked his fingers to the bone buying books for them to read. He didn't let the Church become his mistress. While he spent plenty of time there, he spent the bulk of his spare time at home with his family, teaching them everything he knew. While she wasn't all that knowledgeable about religion, except to know that she didn't want no more part of it, Selah's knowledge knew no bounds. There wasn't any subject she didn't know something about because Justice had taught her. She knew how to hunt, track and make moonshine because she'd taught her that. Her baby girl had choices because her daddy made sure that she did. She wasn't ever going to step foot in anybody's field, anybody's cotton mill, or just anybody's church. Selah was going to college so one day she'd be the boss. But before she could grow up to be the boss, Songs had to find her. And she would.

Spotting some kind of animal in the distance, she stopped dead in her tracks. Its roar sent shivers down her spine. She was frightened but she had a sling blade and a mission and not even that big ass thing was going to

sway her from it. She might not quote the Bible well, she might not be much of a preacher's wife, much of a citizen, much of a woman for that matter, but she was a damn good tracker and she *knew* that her baby was in this direction. If all that was standing in the way of her getting to her baby was that thing, well than it was on like a pot of neck bones. Facing it, she pulled her own lips back in a snarl and flung curses and her swing blade in its direction before stomping off.

The Reckoning 1:5

In all of his years Bering had never seen anything as crazy as the human in front of him. And he'd lived a long time so he'd seen a lot of crazy things. Still, this woman took the grand prize for crazy. Even if he'd been thinking of attacking her, he would've had to reconsider after seeing her bare her human teeth at him before stomping off. Slinking back in the woods (not because he was scared) he waited for Darioush to make an appearance.

Songs didn't know what to expect heading into the thick woods but she didn't expect what was coming towards her. A black man cradling her baby was the last thing she expected to see. Clean-shaven, black as night, and ripped with muscle, he was an impressive specimen but that wasn't what interested her. What interested her was her baby in his arms. She didn't know what had gone on but her baby was a hot mess (but alive!) and if he was the cause of Selah being a hot mess she was going to take great pleasure in killing him.

Approaching him she was about to demand that he handover her baby when he knelt before her and held Selah out to her.

"I did not do this, ma'am," he said as he held her out. "I know you want to hold her but if you would allow me to carry her she'll get help faster."

Touching her baby's swollen cheek, she choked back tears and shook her head yes.

"Come on then," she said as she grabbed hold of his elbow and dragged him along. "There's some kind of wild animal out here but I'll

protect you. If it comes near, you haul ass towards town. I'll stay and fight it."

With his long-legged stride and her momma double-timing it while dragging him along faster, they made it to her home in minutes. As soon as they'd walked into the house she directed him to a small room. Glad that he'd got this female home, Darioush hadn't wanted to leave her. The only reason he'd left was to secure the premises. He didn't think those boys would be back but just in case they tried it, he'd be there to make sure they never tried anything again in their short lives.

"Ma'am, my friend and I will stay here until your husband gets home just to make sure that nothing untoward happens."

Seeing the relief on her face brought on a fresh wave of rage. He didn't know much about this woman but he knew not a whole lot scared her. Despite her courage, right now she was scared for her baby, worried that those boys would come and finish what they started ... or silence her.

"Thank you. Can you stay in the house?"

"You're welcome and yes ma'am. I'm just going to stick my head out the door and tell my friend to keep his eye on the back. Right after that I'll be in the living room."

He was almost out of the door when he heard her whispering to her daughter.

"Selah. Oh, my baby, my baby, my baby."

Selah. He liked the way her name felt in his mouth, liked the way her scent filled his nostrils, admired the courage that coursed through her body, was glad for the strength that was an innate part of her. He simply liked her, which was a first for a man who didn't like ... anyone.

The years had taught Justice a lot of things. More importantly, time had taught him to do what nothing else had: time had taught him to love. He'd always respected Songs but the years had taught him to love her. It taken them many months to consummate their marriage but it'd been worth every minute. Having Songs turn to him with trust in her eyes and need in her being had broken him down and built him up. Having her wisdom had made him see the world in a whole new light. Having a daughter had made him more determined than ever to change the world. Selah was everything to him and every afternoon he baked in the hot sun doing field work, every night he cleaned up in the cotton mills, every Sunday he preached the Word didn't drain him, it invigorated him because he knew it'd make his family stronger, happier, freer.

The years had also taught him that he was never going to be the type of man to allow anyone or any law to make him sit back while his women were molested, disrespected, or treated in any way other than respectful. He might be a preacher, but the collar came off. The man under it did not. Admittedly, the man under the collar was flawed but he could live with that. He couldn't live with what had happened to his daughter. He didn't care how hard she tried to convince him that she'd tripped and fallen; he didn't care how doggedly she tried to convince him that she was okay despite the bruises and breaks; he didn't care how the colored folk advised him that payback would result in bad things; right now the preacher in him didn't care about Romans 12:19 or Hebrews 10:30. Vengeance was going to be his.

Vengeance *had* to be his, he thought as he considered the scars that criss-crossed his wife's back. Scars that were so numerous because the

Church had justified the begetting of them with their silence and their bible-waving. He knew Scripture but sometimes a man just had to say ‘hell no’ and back it up with more than just his words.

“I know. I know Songs. I know, but I am *not* going to let this stand. I *can’t* let this stand. I *won’t* let this stand. I know the risks. I know I might die ... know that we all might die. I know I might spend the rest of my life burning in hell but if that be the case, I’m going to take some of them sons of bitches with me. Now Selah can keep pretending ain’t nothing happen and not tell me the names of who was involved but all that’s going to do is cause me to kill every damn man I see,” he said as he grabbed his shotgun, and his pistol, and his machete.

Darioush never thought he’d meet a human he liked, yet here he was in complete fucking awe of one of them. Rev. Justice Harper wasn’t anything like he expected, which was a great thing. Rev. Harper didn’t forget that he was a preacher but he remembered that he was a man. It was clear that he took his context into consideration but it was also clear that all of that took a back seat to his title of husband and father. Rev. Harper wasn’t just angry – he was the kind of angry that Darioush understood. He was also the kind of angry that would get him killed ... or worse. Being in the south where lynching was still a hazard and playing with colored girls was still a rite of passage for many young bucks, there were plenty things a lot worse than death. He’d seen a lot of them and bore the bruises (and being how difficult it was for a shifter to bruise that was saying something) as proof of that.

Yeah, the preacher was past angry, had passed it long ago, perhaps decades rather than hours. Right now Rev. Harper was in a full blown rage.

Darioush couldn't blame him but he had to stop him. If he didn't, the preacher would be headed to straight to hell and take everyone to with him. He didn't have to know the preacher to know that he spoke the truth, didn't have to look in his eyes to see it; he could smell the indignation, the fury, the need for vengeance pouring off of Rev. Harper.

Darioush had never wanted to return to the south – unless he was destroying it but he was glad his momma had summoned him. He'd liked to say he needed to return to the south in order to save Selah. He'd like to say it, but it wasn't true. Selah was the type of female that tended to save herself and so was her momma. Despite what he would've liked the truth to be, the truth was that he'd needed to come back to the south to meet a man like Rev. Harper – a man who could understand his anger and respect it instead of merely brushing it aside and trying to fix it with a bible verse. He needed this human man and right now these humans needed him.

Clearing his throat, he looked at Bering who'd remained silent, and stepped forward.

“Rev. Harper, may I have a word?”

“Unless that word involves you and your friend needing some fire power to help us take these sons-of-bitches down, than no, you may not have a word.”

“Justice,” his wife pleaded. “You have every right to be angry and you know that I love you for it but you owe this boy a moment of your time. He took care of our baby and got her home alive.”

Humbled by Mrs. Harper's words, Darioush threw her a look of gratitude. Though he could see that it pained him to do so, Rev. Harper heeded his wife's words. Standing down, he gave him a moment.

Stripping off his shirt, he turned his back allowing the room full of Harpers to view the scars that covered his back. Turning back around, he addressed the room. "I know your rage."

"You wear a back full of scars from the lash and yet you're still friends with this white boy?" one of the Harper males asked.

"Ben, while I don't mind you being filled up with fire, you know I don't cotton to blanket racism," Mrs. Harper interrupted as she went over and stood by Bering. Once she'd learned that that 'strange-looking white boy' hanging about was his friend, she'd invited Bering in.

Smiling at her words, amazed that she didn't hate all white males after seeing the condition of her daughter, he paused to admire her. These women were fierce, so much so that he was surprised that they were completely human.

Making eye contact with the Harpers, he put his hand on Bering's shoulder and responded. "We're brothers, not friends. Bering's the first male I'd call when I need help, the last person I'd want to have as an enemy. I not only trust him with my life, I trust him with the lives of the females in my family."

Appealing to Rev. Harper, he continued. "Like the scars on my back, I am familiar with your anger but you need to hold on for a minute. You're looking for a fight and you'll get one but going out half-cocked, gunned-up, full of piss and vinegar ain't going to get you nothing but a brief thrill."

"You want me to run from them? You want me to allow *this*? Boy, I appreciate your words but the last time I ran from something I was twenty-two and almost ruined a woman's life with my cowardice," he said as he looked over at Songs. "I ain't never running from anything again."

“I’m not asking you to run *from* anything, sir. I’m asking you to run *to* something.”

“*What* is there to run to?” he asked.

“*Where* is there to run to?” Mrs. Harper sighed. “When I leave this town, I’m leaving the south altogether. I’ve hung on for a long time but I just can’t do it no more.”

“Then don’t do it anymore,” he answered. Taking a deep breath, he continued. “Come to Alaska with me.” *And bring Selah so I won’t have to take her. That thought would have alarmed him hours ago, but right now all it did was feel right.*

“Alaska?” the whole room seemed to ask.

Though he read surprise in Bering’s eyes, he also read his approval.

“Yes, Alaska,” he answered.

“What’s in Alaska besides snow and white people?”

“Freedom. Space. Life.”

That last part wasn’t exactly true anymore. His life *had* been in Alaska, now it was two rooms away recovering from her injuries.

“What are we going to do in Alaska?”

“What are you going to do *here*?”

“This is our home,” someone slid in.

“Cottonmills, South Carolina ain’t your home. It’s hardly South Carolina being so close to North Carolina. Cottonmills is where you work. It’s where you reside. It’s not your *home*. Your home is the family that calls you ‘husband’, ‘wife’, ‘father’, ‘mother’, ‘uncle’, ‘aunt’, ‘cousin’, ‘friend’. Home ain’t a place where you have to look over your shoulder every fifteen minutes wondering if someone’s going to pay you a night visit. That ain’t no way to live.”

“What you know about living, boy?” another Harper male asked.

“Didn’t know a damn thing about it until I got to Alaska. All I knew here was anger – endless anger, disappointment, imprisonment, and other bad things.”

“You’ve been in prison?”

“I was in prison every day that I was here ... every time someone thought that I should avert my eyes, use the back door, and accept the second-class place reserved for me.”

“Oooh-wee. Sounds like somebody’s preaching up in here,” a female voice called out.

“I’m not preaching; I’m just telling what I know.”

“I don’t give a damn what you call it. Boy, you shonuff preaching.” she said.

They’d talked well into the night, planning and such. After Mrs. Harper made it clear that Bering had her seal of approval, he’d been instantly included. It might be the 1950s but it was clear that her word was law. Seeing that there wasn’t about to be any bloodshed, she left them to their own devices presumably to see to her child. Though injured, Selah had been sleeping well. Darioush hadn’t realized that he’d been so attuned to Selah until that moment.

It was well into the night when Rev. Harper called a stop to their planning. “We’ll talk more about this tomorrow morning,” he said.

Darioush stood only to be waylaid by the preacher.

“A word, Darioush.”

Though the preacher appeared nonchalant, Darioush knew that he was anything but.

“You’ve come in here and told us where our home is. Tell us where your home is.”

Taking a deep breath, he kept his gaze firmly on the preacher when he answered. “My home’s in that bedroom recovering from a fight that no woman should ever have to fight.”

By the frost that entered his voice and the caveat entering his eyes, he knew that he had the preacher’s full attention. From the chorus of gasps the rest of the room emitted, he knew that he had everyone else’s. Though Rev. Harper had asked for a moment, obviously everyone present considered themselves family and had no qualms about eavesdropping. Hell, what they were doing couldn’t even be considered eavesdropping; they were outright listening. They watched them like audiences had watched Jack Johnson box in his prime.

“I don’t give a damn if you come in here offering me the White House, Congress and all of Capitol Hill. Ain’t nothing you say going to be tempting enough for me to simply give my baby girl to you.”

“Sir, I’m not asking you to give her to me. I’m simply asking you to give me the chance to earn your daughter. I’m not trying to take her; I want for Selah to choose me.”

“And what if she never chooses you?”

“Then obviously I’m not trying hard enough,” he answered.

“What can you offer her?”

“Not a whole lot. Oh, she’ll have a roof over her head, food in the pantry, and clothes on her back, but the truth is that I’m not much company. Most of my own family can’t even stand to be around me.”

“But you’re a good man,” the same woman who’d declared that he was shonuff preaching said.

“And that’s the truth,” Mrs. Harper said as she came in the room with two blankets and two pillows.

Darioush was startled by their words and it must have shown. “But,” he began only to be cut off by Mrs. Harper.

“Didn’t Mama Oberlin say you were a good man and didn’t I ‘Amen’ her words?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Then don’t contradict us. Contradicting Mama Oberlin ain’t good for anybody’s health. Contradicting *me* isn’t a good start to impressing your potential mother-in-law. Now stretch out and go to sleep. We got big plans ahead of us,” she said as she swished out of the room wrapped up in one of her husband’s shirt and a whole bunch of ‘mmm hmms’.

“What my wife said, do it,” the preacher said as he followed her.

The Adventure 1:6

The next day was indeed filled with planning. The first thing that he'd learned was that not all of the Harpers were Harpers even though they all had the same way about them. Filled with a whole lot more 'let me people go' than 'we shall overcome' they were a feisty lot ... the women equally so.

Intermixed with the Harpers were some Joneses, some Bailey's, some Winston's, some Oxendine's, some Oberlin's, some Livingstone's, some Adamases, and some Forrester's. Not related by blood, they were related by a common cause. They'd come together out of necessity and stuck together out of mutual respect and love. All members of Rev. Harper's church, which he guessed was quite progressive judging from the man, they'd decided that if he thought it was time to move on, then they were shonuff going with them.

Though a few of them were going to head to Alaska, they were all going to head to Delice-Patrale, Georgia first. They'd left Cottonmills early Sunday morning and arrived in Atlanta late Sunday evening. Deciding that Atlanta would serve as their temporary base camp until they decided how they liked Delice-Patrale, they'd had a good rest before journeying three hours down the road to Delice-Patrale.

He didn't know why he'd worried that Delice-Patrale might not be to their liking as they took to Delice-Patrale like ducks took to water. It'd only taken them a few minutes to fall in love with the city and a few days to decide what was going to be what. It should've taken a month of Sundays for that to happen, but the Harper clan was a resourceful and skilled bunch. Where others saw problems, they saw possibilities. They didn't mind the

middle-of-nowhereness that was Delice-Patrale, didn't mind the weird feel of it, weren't scared off by the things that went bump in the night ... and the occasional overcast day.

Sixty percent of Delice-Patrale was dense forest. Ninety-five percent of the "city" was uninhabited thanks to the five percent that did inhabit it. Of course those five percent all had Jendayi blood running in their veins. Although it wasn't much, he was deeding over three-hundred of his thousand or so acres to the Harper clan along with about twenty thousand dollars (ten from him and ten from Bering) to get them settled.

The Harper clan had argued about accepting so much money, especially as he'd already flat out refused their offer to buy the land, he'd found himself arguing with them once again.

"We just can't accept all of this," Rev. Harper had said.

He'd told them that he'd accept fifty cents an acre for the land (payable in twenty years) but only if they accepted the money.

"I could quote 1 John 3:17 [But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?] but I can't pretend that I've ever had any love for humans. Instead I will remind you of 1 Corinthians 13:4 [Love is patient and kind; it is not jealous or conceited or proud]. I can't pretend that I'm loving, patient or kind – at least not yet. If y'all can teach me to love, and help me not be jealous or conceited, perhaps I can help you not to be proud. You can pay me back but don't pay me back in money that I don't need or by purchasing land that I could've happily spent the rest of my life never setting foot on. Pay me back by raising families that send their children to college rather than the mills, factories, or the fields that line the south."

“Like I said, you shonuff preaching, boy. Shonuff preaching,” Mama Oberlin shook her head along with her bible.

He couldn’t help but smile at that woman. She was a feisty something. She’d probably get along with the females in his family like she’d known them all of their lives. He still wasn’t trying to preach. He was simply telling them the truth. It wasn’t that he didn’t value money. He’d worked all of his life and had plenty of money. Even if he hadn’t worked a day in his life he would’ve had plenty of money. Being that shifters spent so much time in animal form, they could forgo most human entrapments such as the fleet of Chevrolet Suburbans that carried them along on their adventure on the way to their new lives.

Leaving four of the Suburbans in Delice-Patrale, they’d decided to rest a day and begin their adventure. He was willing to wait longer but Rev. Harper was past ready to get going. Having given Mr. Bailey charge of his congregation, Rev. Harper hugged the women, shook hands with the men, tucked his wife and daughter up in the truck and never looked back. It wasn’t that he didn’t love the people he was leaving behind; it was a) that he wasn’t leaving them any place that they didn’t want to be; and, b) he’d needed to go. The south was choking him.

While they could’ve taken the southern route to Alaska, that would’ve involved trekking through Alabama, Mississippi, and Arkansas, which was a hell no in Rev. Harper’s book. Instead, they took the northern route. Since Mrs. Harper hadn’t ever been out of South Carolina, he decided to get to Alaska via Canada, which meant that they either had to go through North Carolina and Virginia or Tennessee, Kentucky and West Virginia on their way to the Mason-Dixon Line. Opting for the North Carolina-Virginia route, he plotted out the route that would allow Mrs. Harper to see as much

of North America as possible. He wanted her to experience a world that was something other than white, southern, and protestant. The experiences wouldn't all be sweet potato pie, but they wouldn't all be bitter either.

A history buff, he mapped out his own Underground Railroad. While he shared a vehicle with the Harpers, Bering shared his Suburban with their belongings, as he needed his space. There were times (especially in the southern states) when Bering had to use his whiteness to stave off trouble and though it rankled them all (Bering the most because underneath his frosty exterior and frigid interior, he had a burning love of justice), those incidents were tempered by their excitement over the journey.

With Atlanta as their starting point, Darioush took them on a tour of Atlanta's Historically Black Colleges. Continuing the tour of HBCUs, he took them to Greensboro, North Carolina to see the campus of The Agricultural and Technical College of North Carolina and Bennett College. Going westward they took in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, before going northward on the Appalachian Mountain chain and stopping at Shenandoah National Park in Virginia. They paused in the nation's capital where they took in Capitol Hill before going to Maryland where they took a look at the Naval Academy and paused to consider what it was like for Wesley A. Brown - the first black Midshipman to graduate - when he received his diploma.

Heading North to Dover, they visited the campus of Delaware State University before going to New Jersey's Atlantic City and walking the Boardwalk. In Pennsylvania they trekked to the City of Brotherly Love and got a glimpse at the Liberty Bell and had a rousing discussion about

Pennsylvania's history which included a strong opposition to slavery. In New York they visited "the Crossroads of the World (Times Square) and marveled at the skyscrapers. They toured the Ivy League campuses of Yale in Connecticut, Brown in Rhode Island, and Harvard in Massachusetts.

Slowing down their pace a little, they took their time in New Hampshire, admiring their beautiful seacoast before making their way inland and visiting quite a few of their waterfalls and fishing for large-mouthed bass. Crossing the Connecticut River and going into Vermont, they hiked the woodlands where they reveled in the sweet-smelling air, the panoramic vistas, and abundant wildlife before indulging on pancakes drowning in New England gold (maple syrup). Doubling-back into New Hampshire, they made their way north to the White Mountains. They took their time and hiked and camped in White Mountain National Forest on both the New Hampshire side and then the Maine side.

Once they got out of Maine's mountain area, they went white-water rafting in Moose River Valley and watched moose and deer in the Maine Highlands. Traveling eastward, they watched the tides of Cobscook and Passamaquoddy Bays and admired the many lighthouses for which Maine was famous. Finally, they crossed over into New Brunswick Province, Canada.

Deciding that they might as well see most of Canada's Provinces, they veered off to Nova Scotia and enjoyed the sandy beaches before doubling back to New Brunswick where they went to the Bay of Fundy and caught glimpses of whales. In Québec they took in the cultural diversity of Montréal's melting pot. In Ontario they spent an afternoon being amazed by Niagara Falls before touring Toronto - Canada's largest city. In Manitoba they spent the day bird-watching in Churchill. In Saskatchewan

they watched bison and picnicked in a boreal forest. In Alberta they took in the beauty of Lake Louise and Banff Hot Springs before heading to British Columbia and experiencing the ecological diversity of the Cariboo Region, which included watching salmon fight their way up river to spawn. They watched caribou in the Northwest Territories, canoed Kluane Lake and marveled at a sunset in Yukon Territory before finally crossing into Alaska.

Darioush enjoyed getting to know each and every one of the Harpers but he and Bering both appreciated getting to know Rev. Harper. The man was a fountain of wisdom. He was a man that they could both relate to. A candid man, he was like no preacher they'd ever encountered, no human they'd come across. Rev. Harper had the intellect of men of the cloth, but he had the passion of a blues guitarist.

He couldn't help but wonder why of all of the professions Rev. Harper could've chosen, why he'd chosen to go into religion ... but then he'd heard him preach and he knew why. Rev. Harper made the religion relevant and the Word a vessel of justice rather than a vessel of oppression. He didn't use a lot of thee's and thou's, big words or fancy phrases because he didn't need to. He simply used plain speak and the truth. While his truth often included some cussing, some threatening, some eyeballin' that dared someone to come test him, it was still the truth.

If ever there was a person who was naked in the truth it was Rev. Harper. Rev. Harper didn't try and pretend that he was beyond reproach or exempt from being human. He didn't hide his humanity behind his collar. He didn't try to disguise his faults or conceal his shortcomings ... and that was just one of the many things that impressed him and Bering.

After knowing the man, neither Bering nor himself felt the need to hold any part of themselves back and that included *what* they were. While they hid their shifter heritage to the world, both of them had felt that doing so was akin to lying to the preacher. The preacher had been nothing but honest with them and they could do naught but return the favor. Showing him proof of what they were, Rev. Harper hadn't even blinked. He'd simply said 'damn' and gone right back to drinking his moonshine.

"You don't have any questions?"

"Who am I to question God about His or Her creations? Asking why you're a shifter is just as pointless as asking why mountains are rocky and water is wet. They simply are."

"You're not scared?"

"Even if I was scared what would you like me to do about it? Though you're part animal, you're more human than most humans-whether you want to be or not. All you've done is treat my people like people, treat my wife and child with respect and treat me like a man. Why should I be afraid of that? Why should I shrink away from that? Shrinking away from what you are is just as much of an affront as people shrinking away from my blackness."

Both he and Bering had been shocked and humbled by Rev. Harper's words.

"I was wondering why of all of the things you could've been you decided on being a preacher, but now I know. The Creator knew what He was doing. You were made to be a preacher," Darioush said.

"Glad one of us thinks that. The truth is that I'm not a good preacher. I drink wine, spirits and beer. The first thing I did to Songs was play a part in taking away her choices. The second thing I did was told her that she

never had to step foot in a church again. The third thing I did was vow to kill any man who put his hands on her. The first thing I taught Selah was how to throw a punch. The second thing I taught her was how to kill a man. I never even taught her to pray. Songs taught her that while she was teaching her how to make moonshine. No, son. I'm not a good preacher. I've just got good people willing to put up with a flawed man."

"I respectfully disagree, Rev. Harper," he said.

"Me too, sir," Bering chimed in. "If you don't mind me asking why did you become a preacher?"

"To escape the fields. Those who showed aptitude in religion got trained in reading in debate instead of being taught how to pick and haul."

"You didn't want to be a preacher, so what did you want to be?" Bering asked.

"A man. I just wanted to be a man."

Selah 1:7

Selah couldn't believe that they were leaving the south. She thought she'd live out her whole life south of the Mason-Dixon Line. It'd taken the prospect of leaving to make her realize how glad she was to be going. She said that even after having traveled to the big city of Atlanta. Nothing like the towns of Denmark or Cottonmills, it had a bunch of colleges for colored folk, a part of town where well-to-do colored folk lived, and lots of tall buildings, but it was still the south. It was still surrounded by too many places that reminded her of Cottonmills and still too close to the slavery that had been a long time abolished.

Though they were leaving most of their family in Georgia, she was glad that they were leaving. She needed it, but so had her mama and daddy. They'd sacrificed all of their lives to make a better way for her, putting all of their hopes and dreams in her – not because they wanted to live their lives through her but because she was everything that they'd wanted in a child. She loved them, oh how she loved them mostly because she knew how much they loved her.

They were leaving the south and running to a place where she hoped and prayed that her parents could find dreams that would not only come true but surpass any dream they'd dreamed before. Alaska sounded like the kind of place where that could happen (and Darioush was there). All it'd taken was her getting into a fight ... and her daddy finding out about it. Her daddy didn't cotton to no man hitting on a woman for no kind of reason. He especially didn't cotton to a man hitting on his women. She smiled thinking of the many ways her daddy was so different from most men.

Despite living in the south, she'd always known that her daddy wasn't going to let any kind of insult to her slide by, especially an insult *that* big.

Selah had never lied to her daddy ... until that day but she hadn't been ashamed of doing it; she'd been angry that she had to. She'd tried to convince her daddy that nothing had happened but not even Sidney Poitier acted good enough to convince her daddy of that. When he refused to believe her lie, she'd tried to convince him that she couldn't remember who she fought. All that had gotten her was her daddy's promise to kill every white male that he came across.

She'd been beside herself with pain (not just physical, but emotional) at the prospect that her daddy was going to go off and make her momma a widow and make her an orphan. She didn't know what to do and then she'd heard *his* voice. She didn't know his name but she knew *that* voice. It was the voice of the man whose arms she'd woken up in. Even though she was swamped with pain and going in and out of consciousness, that voice had done something to her. It'd soothed her much like his arms that held her so securely and his hands that had stroked her so gently.

Though she enjoyed his touch (which was a first), it was his voice that she'd been drawn to. The steady cadence was filled with reassurance; the deep timber was laced with honesty. Even as he whispered reassurances to her she couldn't help but recognize the commanding tone. He commanded her to stay alive even as he promised her that help was coming.

She'd held onto his voice as tightly as she'd held onto him and not simply because his voice had promised revenge on her behalf. And oh, the revenge it promised. A lifeline, she trusted it to keep her until she heard the voices that would assure her that all would be well: the voices of her mama and daddy.

She'd felt relief when she'd finally heard her mama's voice (and all the pissed off, someone's going to die up in it). The relief however wasn't because she felt safer; the relief was due to her mama's relief. Even as she fought for her life she'd been concerned about her mama knowing she'd be worrying herself sick. If she didn't make it, she knew that her mama would worry herself into three or four felonies before being killed by the authorities and her daddy would be pissed off into committing uncountable acts of vengeance before killing the authorities.

Though she felt relief, she hadn't felt any safer. The man who held her might be a stranger to her but nothing about him felt strange. Everything about him felt right. When he'd finally laid her down, she'd immediately felt the loss of his presence. Regardless of how hurt she was, she was going to get better because a) like her mama, she was too damn contrary to die; b) she had some revenge to get; and, c) she wanted to see this man in focus.

She sighed, knowing that even if she got her revenge, that the man who held her was the type of man who could have any woman he wanted- regardless of her eligibility. Unless a woman was married to Rev. Justice Harper, she'd leave her man for this man. She sighed again knowing that despite her wishes, that's all they were: wishes. Though she had some beautiful hair and a clear complexion, she was a big girl-bosomy, with a whole bunch of hips and thighs and ass. On her best day, she was just average-looking, nowhere near beautiful enough to stand next to this man.

The Talks 1:8

Being that Selah was still recovering from her injuries, which consisted of a black eye, a broken nose, a few busted ribs, and a medley of cuts and bruises, they couldn't go as far as he and Bering would've normally gone in a day but that was okay. It gave Darioush time to get to know Selah ... although he was so nervous around her all he could do was stare. Though neither of them said much, he still learned a lot about her. Selah had a healthy sense of humor, a big intellect and an amazing beauty. Damn, she was some kind of good woman. *And he was going to work to make her his.*

Her daddy kept a close eye on her just waiting for him to set a foot wrong. When it became clear that Selah didn't mind his company, her daddy gave him the look just to make sure he remembered that he'd kick his ass all over Creation and back again. He didn't need to be reminded and even if he lost his mind and forgot Rev. Harper's threats, Selah's momma was right there letting him know all the ways she knew how to kill a man even as she kissed him and Bering good morning or hugged them good night. And if that wasn't enough Mama Oberlin (whose first name nobody knew) and her beautiful, young daughter (whose first name was Ain't I) flat out told him that she'd killed plenty times before to keep Ain't I safe and she'd kill again to keep Selah the same way.

Soon after their journey began, Selah's momma had told him to pull over.

"No point in us leaving the south if all you're going to do is drive us off the road. You ain't stopped turning around looking at Selah even

though she ain't doing nothing different than she did the last two hundred times you turned around to check," she said as she slid behind the wheel.

That's how he found himself in the middle seat. Being so big, he was forced to turn sideways so he could stretch out his legs. It was a bit cramped but being that the scenery was so beautiful he couldn't complain. Selah wasn't just good to look at; she smelled good. Her scent intoxicated him. She was the Pied Piper and he could do nothing but follow her.

They hadn't even gotten out of North Carolina before her daddy decided that he needed to have a word with her. Lifting Selah off of the blanket that she laid on while they ate their lunch he took her off for some words. He'd immediately tensed. He wasn't afraid that her daddy would harm her; he simply didn't appreciate her being away from him. He also didn't appreciate the fact that her daddy might be angry at her. He didn't realize that his anxiousness was showing until Mrs. Harper's words washed over him.

"Be calm. He loves her. It's obvious that despite your best intentions y'all going to get in trouble in a man-woman way being in such close proximity."

"Ma'am, she's still too hurt for me to touch her in the man-woman way. And if I did get her in the family way, I'd do the right thing."

"If you got her in the family way, Justice wouldn't make her marry you, boy. He'd just love her even harder than he does now. He's always vowed that when his daughter gets married it'll be because she *wants* to, not because she *has* to. As far as Justice is concerned a baby is not a reason in itself to get married. Love should always be the primary reason for marriage. Justice won't marry anybody who doesn't profess to love each other and make him believe that they mean it. Right now he's just

reassuring Selah about that. But let me warn you now: if Selah decides that you'd make good company, you're going to do right by her or I will kill you a little bit before Justice finishes the job."

After seeing the way that boy couldn't keep his eyes off of his daughter, Justice decided that now was the time for a talk ... with his daughter. He knew that Songs was in that truck giving that boy what for. He smiled knowing nobody gave 'what for' like Songs Sorghum Harper.

Adjusting his daughter in his arms, he kissed the top of her head and looked out at the beautiful Appalachian Mountains. "That boy likes you, baby – a whole lot."

"I don't think he sees well, Daddy," she whispered as she ducked her head.

Startled at that admission, he placed a finger under her chin and gently lifted her head up so that he could look in her eyes.

"What makes you say that, baby girl?"

"I'm a big girl and I'm covered with bruises and..."

That second 'and' was as far as he let her get. He'd always spoken to his daughter in gentle tones, always regardless of what mischief she'd gotten into, but this wasn't about mere mischief. This was about her self-image. Giving her the look he gave boys who got too close to her and speaking in the tone he used for males who looked like they were thinking thoughts that he didn't appreciate, he said his piece.

"If you ever again hint that you are anything less than a beautiful young woman I'm going to be real unhappy."

"But-, "she began.

“No, I don’t even want to hear no buts, Selah. You look like your momma and I know you ain’t fixing to try and tell me that *my* wife ain’t the most beautiful woman you’ve ever seen. And I know you ain’t telling me that me and God made anything less than a beautiful baby.”

“Daddy,” she said.

“No, Selah. You listen to me. Those bruises that cover you are a testament of your strength and courage ... and how well you learned the self-defense that your mama and I taught you. I’m proud of you for earning those bruises because it meant that you fought. You didn’t simply sit back and let those boys violate you just like your mama don’t sit back and let life violate her. Now you might not see it but you’re beautiful. Beauty is more than long hair, fair skin, and hips. You are a big woman but that boy is a big man and he likes those hips and other things that he better never tell me about. But what he likes more is the woman beneath those hips and hair and bruises. You’re a good woman ... just like your momma.”

Selah looked at her daddy and was glad that he was her daddy. A man of the cloth, he’d had lots of criticism about the way he’d raised her yet he simply brushed it off. It didn’t matter how many people left his church because of the free hand he gave her momma and her. She’d always heard people remark about how them Harpers were a strange lot but she simply smiled because the gossip was well-deserved. They were a strange lot and she liked it that way. Her momma was known for making moonshine, she was known for throwing a good left hook, and her daddy was known for not giving a damn. As much as people attempted to convince her daddy that being stricter would make him a better preacher, he’d say that he never claimed to be a good preacher. Her daddy might say that he wasn’t a good

preacher but that wasn't true. While their church didn't have many people, the people it did have were all that they needed.

There weren't too many times that Selah had cried but she couldn't help the tears that poured from her eyes. Her daddy had always treated her good. Always. He'd always been gentle with her, loving with her, and honest with her. She'd always known that no matter what she did, he'd love her. He'd talked to her about sex even before she got her menses and let her know the ways of men even before she was interested. More importantly, he'd let her know that if she ever did get in trouble she was staying right there in the bosom of their family – her and her baby. He'd love her no matter what. That in itself had made her cry, but what really made her bawl was when he'd said she was a good woman like her momma. There just wasn't any higher praise from Justice Harper.

“Thank you, Daddy,” she said.

“Thank you for being my daughter,” he said as he hugged her tighter. “You like that boy, baby?”

“Yes,” she said honestly.

If her daddy had said that Darioush liked her than he did. If her mama had let him anywhere near her, than he was undoubtedly a good man. If Ma Oberlin hadn't killed him, then he hadn't done anything worthy of her doing so. Bering (who was nothing but gentle with her) trusted him and her family (of which Bering was now a part) liked and respected Darioush and that was good enough for her.

“You ready to be his wife or you need more time?”

“I might need a little bit more time but when I'm ready he's going to be *my* stuff, I'm not going to be his stuff.”

“Spoken just like your mama.”

“That’s good, right?” she’d asked.

“The best. Alright then, let’s get you back to that boy before he wears a hole in the earth waiting for me to bring you back. Even when you are his wife, remember that you’re *my* baby. He don’t act right, you let me know. Okay?”

“Kay, daddy. You’re the best daddy ever.”

“Well it’s hard to be anything but with you as my daughter and Songs as my wife,” he said.

She smiled again knowing that he meant those words with everything in his soul.

Love 1:9

As soon as they'd gotten back to the others, Darioush was at her side. Her daddy gently handed her over mumbling something about killing him if he fucked up. She sighed at how good it felt to be in Darioush's arms, how right.

Selah had always hated being cooped up anywhere for a long time – especially an automobile- but Darioush had made the car ride fun, not merely bearable. He didn't say much but he'd planned an exciting and informative adventure. Though she couldn't wait to get to Alaska, she was glad that they were taking their time getting there. She liked the America that he showed her – even the parts in the south.

Their relationship had changed after she and her daddy had their talk. Darioush still didn't talk much, but he was always holding her hand, and holding her. Her daddy's eye twitched whenever he saw Darioush hold her but after her mama hushed him a couple of times, and Mama Oberlin hushed him a few more, it still twitched but at least he didn't grit his teeth as hard. Having spent the last few days in the mountains, they'd stopped at a hotel outside of Washington, D.C. where they were going to spend a few days. After the rigor of the last few days a good rest was definitely in order.

Her mama had found a reputable hairdresser and all of the women in their group had scheduled appointments. Though she was in sore need of a good hair wash, she hated, despised and hated some more the ritual involving her hair. If it wasn't for the fact that Darioush would get a chance to see her looking half-way decent (her black eye and split lip had healed and her nose, though a little sore, was back to normal size), she would've

gone for some cornrows. Still, her vanity caused her to suck it up and spend three hours being made into a cheaper image of her mama.

Her mama was hands down the most beautiful woman she'd ever seen and most people she ran across attested to that fact. Despite spending many hours in the dirt gardening and in the forest making moonshine, her mama's hairdo always looked fresh and her dresses always perfect. Songs Sorghum Harper wasn't just beautiful though, she was one of the smartest people she knew and one of the bravest. She might not ever be anywhere near as beautiful as her mama, but she hoped one day that she'd equal her mama in integrity, in intelligence, and in bravery.

Darioush hadn't wanted to let Selah out of his sights but her mama and a handful of Harper women were going with her. While they might look like a refined group of church-going women, wasn't a thing refined about none of those women. Each of them packed a pistol in her purse, and had a 'try me' in their eyes (and at least two of them packed some felonies along with that). They could take care of almost anything that came their way, not that they'd have to being that the barbershop was across the street from the beauty shop.

Though he'd been shaving daily, it wouldn't hurt to have a professional do it. Besides, if Selah was getting all dolled up, he could do no less. After getting his head and face shaved he damn near wore a hole in the street waiting for them to get finished, much to the amusement of Bering and Rev. Harper. What took ladies so long he wondered?

When he'd gotten his first glimpse of her he hardly noticed anything except that she was back. Sweeping her up in his arms, he held her to him

and breathed in her scent. Selah was beautiful, especially when she was in his arms.

“How do you feel?” he asked, concerned about her health.

“Fine,” she’d assured him.

“Good,” he said before taking her lips like he’d been longing to since he’d known that she was going to be okay.

They walked around the capital hand-in-hand. It was clear that she was enjoying herself just as it was clear that her hair was getting on her nerves and that she wasn’t the least bit pleased about wearing that dress or the low-heeled pumps that went with it. After watching her swipe at her hair for the umpteenth time he finally asked why she didn’t just pull it back.

“Pulling it back would defeat the torture that I spent three hours undergoing,” she spat.

“Then why do you do it?” he asked. Sure her straightened hair looked pretty but it was just hair.

“Because it’s about the only feminine thing about me. Though I’m not vain I do want to look like a woman.”

Her words stopped him in his tracks. *Was she kidding?* She truly thought that her hair was the only feminine thing about her? Obviously, he needed to correct her misconceptions but before he corrected her he was going to have to marry her good and proper because there wasn’t nothing good and proper about the thoughts his body was having. Pulling her closer to him, he corrected her.

“Obviously, you haven’t looked in a mirror,” he said before dropping to his knees and asking her to marry him right in front of the Library of Congress.

As soon as she'd said her yes, he'd offered up a prayer to the Creator and asked Rev. Harper to marry them. Rev. Harper didn't have the authority to marry them in Washington, D.C., but being a pastor he had connections and that afternoon they were married by a friend in Howard University's Rankin Chapel. A simple ceremony, all he remembered of it was how beautiful she looked saying 'I do.' He couldn't remember her dress, or even taking her out of it. He simply remembered how glad he was to have Bering as his best man, Selah as his wife, Mrs. Harper and Rev. Harper as his in-laws and the Harper clan as part of his clan.

That night instead of making love to her as soon as they got to their room, he picked up a pair of scissors and asked her if she trusted him. She offered up her 'yes' just like she did her wedding vows- without any hesitation. Sitting her on the bed, he cut off all but two inches of her hair. Placing the two feet of hair he'd cut into a pillowcase, he took her to the bathroom where they shared a shower. Gently massaging her scalp as he washed her hair he told her that he loved her with his hands. When they finally made it to bed, he rubbed his hands through her short afro and told her the words he'd had locked up in his heart.

"You're beautiful not because of your hair, but in spite of it. I don't know why you don't understand just how feminine you are but I assure you there's not a damn thing mannish on you- not these hips," he said as he held them in between his big hands. "Not these thighs," he told her as he caressed them. "Not this ass," he said as he cupped it. "Not these breasts," he said as he suckled the plump mounds. "Not these lips," he said as he took her lips. "Not the heart that beats in your chest," he said. "Not the courage that flows through your veins, not the knowledge that fills your head, not the truth that falls from your luscious mouth. You're all woman

Selah Harper Jendayi and I'm proud and humbled to be able to call you mine. I'll gladly shout that you're mine to all of the world whether you're wearing a ball gown and heels or dungarees and brogans ... whether or not you have long, straight hair, short, kinky hair, or no hair at all. And I'll thrash anyone who says you're anything less than beautiful and kill anyone foolish enough to try and take you away from me."

Home 1:10

A lot had happened on their adventure. He rediscovered the reason that he'd never been tempted to leave America permanently despite having traveled all over the world. America was a good place, a beautiful place, full of wide open spaces, cities teeming with all kinds and colors of people, and possibilities ... and it had Canada –with its abundance of splendor, natural wonders, space, and its rich history of harboring African-Americans and their dreams-as a neighbor.

Besides rediscovering his love for America, their party had grown by one. Somewhere right around Delaware, a spunky woman no older than his own Selah had come out of nowhere. Before anyone was any the wiser, Selah had claimed Prea as a best friend, his in-laws had claimed her as a second daughter, and the assembled Harpers had claimed her as part of their family.

He'd also discovered that his wife (he liked the sound of that) could out fish him (in human form anyway), and given the opportunity out hunt him (again in human form). Luckily, he wasn't intimidated by her skills or her intellect. And even if he had been intimidated, she simply would've told him to stop whining and get over it. Hopefully, she'd say that right before demanding that he bring his fine ass over there and pleasure her. Though he'd had to be extra gentle being that she was still recovering from her injuries, he'd been pleased to discover that Selah rather enjoyed taking her pleasure from his body. That was a good thing because he rather enjoyed her doing so.

When they'd stepped foot on Alaskan soil, he'd breathed out his relief. There was something about being in Alaska even though they had another

week of traveling before they reached Rabershell- the territory that he and Bering shared. Tucked between Fairbanks and Denali, it was wild territory, pristine territory, beautiful territory. It wasn't until he got on his home turf that he realized that he'd been holding his breath. He wondered how the endless wild appeared to the Harper's, especially Selah. Would anyone besides Mama Oberlin and Ain't I want to stay here?

Though he and Bering spent most of their time in their animal forms, they had large homes as they were large males. Being summer, they had time to build a few more for the other Harper's that came with them but they'd wait until next summer before building just to make sure that they were content to stay in Alaska. Well, everyone except Mama Oberlin and Ain't I who had assured them that they wanted to be anywhere that was far away from South Carolina and the murders that they'd committed there. Being curious he couldn't help but ask Mama Oberlin if it was self defense.

"It's only self defense in the heat of the moment. I hunted those bastards down and gave 'em what they deserved," she said with a smile.

He couldn't help but smile back. His smile grew bigger with her next words.

"I didn't want to say nothing about it back in Cottonmills, but I heard about them boys that hurt our Selah. Seems they ran into something real put out. They seemed to have all lost different parts of themselves," she cackled. "Shame."

"That's only partly true. They later all lost their entrails. Shame."

Mama Oberlin laughed her ass off at that. She was his kind of woman – mean as hell. He sure was going to enjoy having her living here.

"How big you want your cabin Mama Oberlin?"

"Real big. I got lots of guns," she said.

Yep, his kind of woman and he was liking her more with every passing moment.

With Bering and the rest of the Harper clan helping, he'd have her cabin up in no time. Until then, they'd stay at the Jendayi Mystery Lodge (Jendayi for him and Mystery for Bering, whose last name he still didn't know) with the rest of the clan. Luckily, the lodge didn't have any visitors because than Bering would definitely have to put some of them up in his cabin. Though Bering's cabin was plenty big, he already had to share it with Selah's new best friend. The spunky Prea might be small, but she took up a lot of space. He couldn't help but laugh at the way that little bitty girl had Bering tripping all over himself. Though he'd just discovered love, he'd swear that Bering was a male in love ... and he was sure that Prea would give him a run for his money. That was going to be all kinds of fun.

Darioush had hoped that the Harpers would take to Alaska and all of his hopes had been exceeded. Not only had Mama Songs doubled the size of the lodge and declared that she and Rev. Harper were running it; she'd become a fixture in the territory, which wasn't hard to do when one was the dog-sledding champion three years running. Not only did her cooking and moonshine draw many a shifter to the Jendayi X Lodge, Mama Oberlin's poker-playing drew even more, further fattening his and Bering's coffers.

She'd also decided that Rabershell was going to be Shifter Central being that he was shifter royalty. Since Bering was his brother he too was royalty as far as she was concerned. Even though American shifters didn't use titles after the War of Independence, she'd insisted that he and Bering were kings simply because she wanted her daughters to be queens. Mama Songs had decreed it and Mama Oberlin had backed it up with her muscle

thus, that was the way things were going to be. Being that the other shifters wanted to continue being in their good graces they went along with it.

Mama Oberlin had also declared that they needed a shindig every year involving the Harper clan and the Jendayi shifters to insure that the bond between them was never broken. As if that could happen. Once a shifter claimed you, you were claimed. Looking at Threat - the twelve ton arctic elephant that came equipped with lethal tusks, the heavy armor and spikes which identified its ancestor the Ankylosaurus, and venom - that Mama Oberlin had decided would make a great husband for her daughter, he conceded that the claiming thing might've been a southern thing. He laughed recalling her interview, which had consisted of one question: "So, you can basically fuck shit up, right?"

Though he ran the lodge along with his wife, Rev. Harper wasn't allowed to retire his collar. Not having a preacher in the territory, they needed him -not because they'd needed more religion, but because they'd needed more wisdom, more truth and more fellowship. Rev. Harper may not have thought he was preaching because he often had on boots, jeans and a heavy sweater instead of a three-piece suit and wingtips, but nevertheless he was. The men that came each week for their talks may not have considered themselves a congregation or the lodge a church but they continued to show up each Sunday getting their Amens on right along with their soul food.

BOOK II:
The Beginning

Ragnar 2:1

Early 1970s

“Woo wee, check that chickie baby out!” Wieland said.

Ragnar was pulled from his musing by his cousin’s less than subtle comments. Sometimes it was truly hard to believe that Wieland was actually older than him. Rolling his eyes, he went right back to ignoring his cousin, which was challenging as he’d added sound effects to his cat-calls. For some reason the group of women that had caught Wieland’s attention (and when had there ever been a group of women who didn’t catch Wieland’s attention?) found his antics ‘cute.’ He wondered if they’d find his behavior charming or cute if Wieland didn’t have Deonté as a surname, the Deonté looks (intense blue eyes, fair hair, built like a Mack truck) or a bank account full to brimming with a shameful amount of Deutsche Marks.

Probably not. Still, despite not knowing shit about the man under the money, royal title and runway looks, women still flocked to Wieland who on his best day exhibited the bearing of a court jester. That was the very reason that Ragnar relegated the whole of the female gender to one type: leeches. He relegated the leeches to three subcategories: subtle, shameless, and evil.

Subtle leeches consisted of elegant women. Their hair was always perfect, their smile always in place, their wardrobes timeless. They wouldn’t dream of having a single hair out of place (even during sex), raising their voice (even during sex), or getting their hands dirty (even during sex). They might look like they should be in the company of royalty but beneath the veneer of pearls and classically-styled wardrobes were women who scrapped like bare-knuckled fighters. They wouldn’t hesitate

to stomp their soft leather heels into the eyes of another female whom got in the way of them 'getting their man.' After getting their claws into their man, they'd run them ragged with their 'requests.'

Shameless leeches were women who didn't do class but would do any male that could take them where they wanted to go: not simply to the A-list, but to the top of the A-list. They flaunted their cosmetically-enhanced bodies like they were part of the *Antikensammlung Berlin* (Berlin Antiquities Collection). Their hair was always some color that was just a little too perfect to be theirs, their lipstick always the brightest red, their clothes always fresh off of the runway, and their demands uncloaked. Many males often made the mistake of thinking that they could 'handle' these women only to discover otherwise. Often it wasn't until they discovered their dignity in the rubbish (right along with the leech's outdated wardrobe) that they admitted (albeit quietly) that they'd been the one's who'd been handled. Even then, some males didn't want to let go and ended up getting a stiletto to the head as they walked away on the arm of a richer, loftier-titled male.

Evil leeches often came in under the radar. They weren't the overly anything or under-ly anything – they were just right ... at first. They had Sunday morning personalities-easy. They slipped through a male's defenses until they were snuggled right up to his heart and him thinking about family. It wasn't until after the ten-carat diamond was on her finger, her name under yours on your checking account, her Mercedes parked next to yours at the castle, and two or three of your progeny sleeping in the nursery that you realized that she was snuggled right up to your heart ... with a knife poised at your throat. Evil leeches were the worst of all. They

were sneaky, conniving, and low-down but that wasn't their worst sin. No, their worst sin was the fact that they'd one-upped you all the way.

The fact that his own mother was a combination of the last two types was not lost on him. This is why Ragnar preferred the fourth category of woman: one that was taken. By taken, he didn't mean that she was mated. He might be a bastard (well, actually he wasn't and he had the pure blood to prove it) but he didn't like any female enough to fight somebody for her. By taken, he meant one that already had something else she was in love with. A female in love with something else didn't have the time or inclination to love you, and thus didn't have the motivation to try and worm her way into your life, thus tearing it all to hell.

One day he'd find a woman that he could tolerate. It'd be nice if she could cook him a meal (sans poison for that huge fucking insurance pay out, complete control of his assets, and permanent HRH status), but not necessary as he had an entire staff to see to those things. It'd also be nice if she could make him feel welcome as he took pleasure from her body, but also not necessary as he planned on retaining several mistresses. His wealth would insure that he had the most beautiful and skilled mistresses; his stature would insure their silence; his name would insure no one got in his face about it-not even his mate.

During his musing's Wieland had managed to entice the women he'd been busy cat calling to their table and as a result, their table was now wall-to-wall blonde and busty - exactly the type of woman his cousin loved. Though he didn't know these women he'd bet good money that they fell right into Wieland's favorite category: B4-Blond, Busty and No Brainers, but good with Boners. Wieland certainly had a way with words. Wieland's next outrageous comment and the ladies' reaction to it only served to drive

home his point. He cringed at their giggling; hating the way the sound grated his nerves. Apparently, the blondes didn't have an off button and while that might be good in bed, it was not good in conversation. Women had mouths but they really shouldn't waste them talking when they could be using their mouths to orally pleasure him. Not interested in Wieland's castoffs or in being in their company for even another minute, Ragnar stood. Ready to leave, he didn't see the person attempting to get past his table until he ran smack into them knocking them completely on their ass.

Turning his entire body to look at the person he'd inadvertently knocked over, Ragnar was horrified to realize that it was female. Just because he'd never met a female that he'd like didn't mean that he'd ever physically harm one. Immediately on his knees beside the woman (whose clinging shirt did a fine job displaying the most amazing breasts he'd seen in ever), he watched in fascination as she pushed her hair off of her face. When her face was revealed, Ragnar suddenly felt like he'd been kicked in the solar plexus by a team of Clydesdales. He felt short of breath and ... pain and lots of it radiating from his groin.

Aviva 2:2

Despite the fact that she was her sister, Aviva was going to kill Karimia when she found the bitch. Having spent the day seeing to their daddy's politely-phrased demands, she was less than amused to have seen to them without any help at all from her older spawn. Hot, bothered and hungry, she was definitely going to kill Karimia. Swatting away yet another groping hand in the upscale club, she was going to make sure that it was a painful death too. Not only would she pull her hair out then she'd melt all of her favorite shoes. Only after she was on her knees weeping blood would she deliver the coup de grace. She'd rip the pages from her program of what became known as the first true Star Trek Convention. Autographed by individuals who were big deals in the sci/fi industry, she could just see the horror on Karimia's face as she ripped out the pages one by one ... and burned them. Yes ... yes ... yesssss!

So involved in plotting her sister's demise, and distracted by a table that was filled with too much peroxide and not enough brain cells, she missed the man in front of her. She might've missed him but what she didn't miss was the big, hard body that didn't move when she walked right into it. That body might not have moved but it knocked her right on her ass. If she wasn't so busy falling on her ass, she might've taken the time to concentrate on how fine the owner of that hard body was and tempting he smelt but she was falling on her ass, so she didn't think of that.

Landing hard, she found herself once again pushing her heavy mass of hair out of her face. Staring up at the reinforced concrete wall that she'd hit, she found herself looking into eyes that reminded her of Lapis lazuli rock, a jaw that reminded her of the hard angles of her home state's Mount

Denali, lips that reminded her that she liked receiving cunnilingus, and a body that reminded her that she was a woman. Too bad all of that fineness belonged to the wrong man at the wrong time in the wrong damn place!

Finding the arrogance in his eyes warranted (the man did have a lot to be arrogant about) but nevertheless annoying she gritted her teeth. Before she could get up she found that he'd moved in way too close. Aviva didn't mind a fine male between her thighs but not without an invitation. Seeking to remedy his uninvited closeness, she slammed her knee into his groin with a skill that would have done her daddy and uncle proud and a 'fuck you' that would've brought a tear to the eyes of her grandmamma and mama (and a wild cackle from her Aunt Oberlin). Part of the Jendayi-Harper clan, she'd spent countless hours in the freezing cold learning how to 'fuck shit up' as her Aunt Oberlin called it.

Satisfied with his decent grunt of pain, and sure that he'd be down for a while, she got to her feet and walked away. Having such extensive training she wasn't concerned about lingering effects, and being in a bad fucking mood she wasn't concerned about his pain-she was just concerned that he had some. Unfortunately, while she was busy being all unconcerned, she forgot the damned notebook that had been in her hand. Containing her daddy's "baby, please" list, it'd had a list of stores she and her evil sister *had* to visit and a list of items they just *had* to purchase.

While the first twenty items on the list had been easy to procure, it'd been that last item that'd been the bitches of all bitches (if one didn't count her sister). She sighed recalling the pain in the ass-ness of hauling ten boxes to that tiny box the rental agency assured her was a car. After stuffing herself and the boxes in the car, she'd had to haul ass to the delivery company and fly through filling out the million forms (in triplicate)

to insure that her daddy's packages would arrive in Alaska overnight. Barring some unfortunate incident, the packages would definitely get to Alaska overnight, but that was only half the battle. Being that they lived in Rabershell, which was about a hundred miles past anything remotely resembling civilization, she had to arrange for delivery from Fairbanks to Rabershell.

The extra handling of the precious cargo was the reason why she had to see to it personally rather than her daddy simply calling the store and arranging it himself. *She* had to inspect the goods to insure they were in prime condition. *She* had to pack them in cotton wool, then another layer of cotton wool, and more cotton wool after that. *She* was the one that had to have her ass out in the cool air. It wasn't even seventy degrees out here. Granted, she was from Alaska but she was cold-natured-just like her mama, which is why she was always bundled up from head-to-toe.

With all of the cloak and dagger going into the begetting and packing of the boxes, one would think that they contained something valuable like gold bullion, but no. The boxes held the chocolate that her father had wanted and had spent twenty minutes of everyday reminding her to pick up. Not that money was an issue but her daddy certainly hadn't needed to spend so much time on international calls to remind her about his dessert. It wasn't like she'd forget it anytime soon and even if she did it wasn't like she was going to return to the US without it. Her daddy would have a royal fit. His wife wanted chocolate (and not just any chocolate but those chocolates) and if Darioush Jendayi knew how to do one thing besides fuck people up, it was please his wife. She loved her mama but damn if Queen Selah wasn't a spoiled somebody.

Wieland 2:3

Despite being a Deonté, Wieland had a healthy sense of humor and an even healthier sense of starting shit. And right now he was mid-starting shit. He couldn't help it; it's what he did. Besides, the situation demanded that he not only start some shit, but start it off Deonté style (grandest).

Looking over at Ragnar, who stood just a shimmer away from seven foot and weighed in the neighborhood of three-hundred pounds (depending upon how much arrogance he was packing on a particular day), his grin stretched wider. Not many beings anywhere in the world had ever managed to truly get the drop on Ragnar Deonté, the Crown Prince of the Royal Family Deonté – and this included other beings with the Deonté last name, the numerous guards and 'minders' stationed around the numerous palaces, and the droves of females that had hoped to be the crown princess in waiting. Yet, Ragnar had just been dropped by a female who not only didn't know who he was, by the way she dug her knee into his groin, didn't care who he was. Not only had the female managed to drop him, she'd strutted out without so much as a 'fuck you.' The way she'd looked encased in those ass-hugging jeans (and what an ass it was) and a whole bunch of indignation, she'd already stopped thinking about Ragnar as soon as she'd gained her feet.

Though Ragnar was pissed, Wieland was still having a good time. He hadn't had this much mirth in ... ever. Already having laughed for a good half hour, laughter still threatened to spill over every time he so much as looked at his cousin. Ragnar had been in a filthy mood ever since the incident. Here it was dinner and his mood still hadn't improved. Though the female had done a little damage, he knew Ragnar wasn't still feeling

pain (although his ego was still hurting). No, Ragnar was pissed because not only had he met his match, his match didn't give a flying fuck about him.

Hearing Ragnar emit another growl he only smiled wider as he inhaled his food. Yep, Ragnar was good and pissed. No shifters did pissed quite as spectacularly as polar bears and no polar bears did it as well as royal polar bears. No royal family out-pissed Deonté royals and from the looks of things, no royal anywhere in time was doing pissed like Ragnar. Not even able to hold it in, he guffawed.

"C'mon bro, enjoy the food. It's delicious," Wieland said in an attempt to draw his cousin out of his filthy mood.

A scowl and snarl was all that he received for his efforts. Instead of being pissed at his cousin's startling lack of manners, he simply laughed some more and went back to his food. He had to maintain his strength as he had scores of ladies to please. Later, he'd worry about Ragnar's payback but not right now. Ragnar might want to brawl with him but he was sure he'd stay mad with dignity for a Deonté Prince did not embarrass the family at any public event unless they wanted to see the queen unleash her claws. Sure, he could take her in a brawl (maybe) but he didn't hit women regardless of how much of a bitch they were and Ragnar's mother might be queen of polar bear shifters but she was the emperor of being a bitch. Those who crossed her woke up missing parts of themselves and a whole bunch of their dignity. He really wasn't trying to go through life with one nut just for the opportunity to scuffle with his cousin. Besides there were twenty-four hours in a day and over three hundred of them in a year, which left him plenty of time to scuffle with Ragnar.

Looking over the table that easily sat a hundred but sat only four – the queen and king at one end and he and Ragnar at the other- he wondered why the grandiosity of the formal dining room (and for that matter the palace itself) had never managed to impress him. Perhaps it was because he didn't see the imported marble, the gold leaf, or the priceless furnishings and art that filled it. All he saw was rules, more rules, and rules on top of those. Half of the rules didn't make sense and the other half were obsolete.

Regardless of what he thought, the fact remained that wars were fought for the right to wear that crown. It was an impressive crown and came with impressive things but when all was said and done, the castle, the money, the luxury cars, the yachts as nice as they were ... were just things. Though he didn't see the sword of Damocles suspended in the palace, he completely understood why his parents elected to spend the bulk of their time secluded in their mountain retreat high up in the hills of Greenland, and the rest of it anywhere but here.

Having left Germany in the 1930s over a dispute with the royal family over their *laissez-faire* policy with the Russian Polar Bear royals over the genocide of the Sibirga Nation in Siberia, Prince Hygebeorht and Princess Kunigunde ("Hugh" and "Kuoni" to their friends thanks to some southern Americans who'd decided their given names were too damn ridiculous to use) had gone on an extensive walkabout. Trekking all over Europe, they'd finally settled in Denmark as they respected the politics of the Danish Royal Shifters. They came to respect the human Danes when they witnessed their collective resistance against Hitler's order to have the Jews arrested and deported. The righteousness of the Danes had earned the country and its people a special place in their hearts, but Denmark was simply too close to

Germany. Going northward, they'd settled on Greenland, an autonomous country within the kingdom of Denmark.

As always, thinking of his parents made him homesick. He'd come to Europe to get his formal education. Along with his masters in history, he'd also received a top-notch education in the ways of royalty courtesy of the queen. Finished with his education almost a decade ago, he'd stayed for Ragnar (okay, and also the women being that Northern Greenland wasn't exactly teaming with anyone else). Being an only child, he'd enjoyed having a brother, especially one as uptight as Ragnar. The fun he'd had yanking Ragnar's chain, brawling with him in bear form, challenging him in the girl-getting department. Ragnar's growl pulled him from his musings.

"Are you going to laugh all day?"

Finally, he speaks. The stick up his ass must've come loose. "Nope, just every time I think about it," Wieland said around his smile.

"Did it ever occur to you that instead of sitting on your fat ass and laughing your time could've been better spent helping me?"

"It never occurred to me that you needed help handling *one* female. No wonder you're losing to me in the women department."

"I'm going back to ignoring you."

"You're just pissed because the blondes preferred me," Wieland said knowing that that particular comment would needle Ragnar into an argument that would hopefully get them both excused from the dining room. Done eating, he was ready to go get into some new shit ... and between another willing woman's thighs ... or a couple of willing women. Having a healthy sexual appetite he was damn glad that shifters were impervious to disease. Wieland wasn't disappointed as a few seconds later Ragnar's snarl was accompanied by his partially shifted hand at his throat.

“Boys!” the deep growl echoed in the almost empty dining hall.

The queen’s threat brought Ragnar to his senses. Though he too could take his mother in a battle (probably), like him that was one battle he was not trying to get involved in. Taking what he considered to be a moment too long to release his throat, Ragnar finally did.

“My apologies, Queen,” Ragnar said. “Please excuse me,” he said as he rose from the table “accidentally” elbowing him in the head as he did so.

“Excuse me too, Aunt Brunhild and Uncle Ingwaz,” he said knowing that the queen would flinch at such informality while the king would ignore it (just like he did everything else that didn’t threaten his bank account). Tucking his chair under the table before the staff could do it he bowed and quit the room. Watching Ragnar slam out of the castle he thought about the interesting evening they had ahead. Interesting because unlike Ragnar, he’d noticed the notepad the angry female had left in her haste and anger. Luckily for him, he’d picked it up and had one of their babysitters follow her. Having both the notepad in his possession and the knowledge of where she was staying, Wieland was simply waiting for an opportune moment (one where Ragnar was only being ninety percent arrogant prick instead of his usual ninety-nine point nine percent) to give it to him. Glancing in the mirror to test out his ‘vulnerable’ look, he smiled then dashed out the door hoping his acting skills were up to par. It wasn’t always easy acting like he didn’t want to brain his cousin, and yet everyday he pulled it off. If only the royal guards knew how many times he was on the brink of outright killing Ragnar, he would’ve been executed for treason the first day he’d set foot in the castle.

The Oh Shit 2:4

Aviva had her head buried beneath a pillow and her body beneath a mound of blankets when the banging on her door began. Tired, she ignored it for a full six minutes and twelve seconds before she realized that whoever was knocking had a desire to be beaten. Snarling, she jumped off of the bed. Grabbing her trusty lead pipe (a present from her favoritest uncle), she answered the door. Leaving the security chain in place, she opened it as far as the chain would allow.

Teeth bared, she politely asked. “Who the fuck are you and what the fuck do you want?!”

The last thing Ragnar had wanted to do was anything involving being nice to his pesky ass cousin. And that would’ve been the last thing he did if not for the way Wieland played his heartstrings – not that he was admitting to having such an organ. Wieland hadn’t asked him to do anything but he’d done the one thing that always made Ragnar put someone other than himself first: he was vulnerable. Wieland might act like he was nothing but a jet-setting ne’r do well, but under his nails-on-a-chalkboard personality was a man of deep passions, a strong sense of justice and one of the most decent individuals he knew. The last being to ever intentionally hurt anyone Wieland was everybody’s best friend – especially if they had breasts.

That’s why he was in his slow-moving elevator instead of between some model’s thighs. He was on his way to see the bitch who’d intimidated that Wieland wasn’t a real Deonté. Knowing that he was going there to finish the fight that the bitch had started, he’d told the guards to ignore any

screaming that came from the room. Oh, he wasn't going to put his hands on the woman that had treated Wieland so carelessly, but he was going to scare her into leaving the European continent. She could do as he *suggested* or he could let his mother know that someone had besmirched the Deonté name. In that case, the bitch would be leaving the European continent, but not alive. Sometimes his mother had her uses. Nobody did revenge like the queen.

Only Wieland's slip had alerted him to this. He'd finally distracted his cousin from his hurt after many hours of plying him with ale and throwing blondes at him. Snagging the notepad that Wieland had held onto like a lifeline, he noted the hotel and room number written in Wieland's distinctive scrawl. Ordering the guards to watch over Wieland he made his way to the five-star hotel.

Flipping through the notebook, he noticed what appeared to be a 'to do' list. He hated lists, especially the 'to do' kind. The only kind of to do list he'd want was one that bore a list of models that wanted him to do them. From the shops and items listed it was clear that someone had expensive tastes; from the way that the list was organized (alphabetically by country and then by city), it was also clear that someone had a touch of OCD.

Stepping off of the elevator he noted that the guards automatically peeled back. No doubt they'd already swept the floor before he rode up. Noting their smirks he guessed that they assumed that he was visiting the hotel for a tryst with a tourist. If only that were so he thought as he knocked on the door none too gently. At first there was no response but he kept knocking as his shifter hearing confirmed that the room was indeed occupied.

The longer he knocked, the angrier he became. When the door finally yanked open after six minutes and twenty-three seconds he was in no mood for any kind of pleasantries. Planning to tell the bitch to get the fuck out of Europe and have the guards insure that she did, he was in no way prepared for the woman that answered.

It was *her*! The one he'd been trying to help up (after he'd finished ogling) and who'd used his nuts as a launch pad before leaving him in a puddle of his own pain. Just like she did when he first laid eyes on her, she left him feeling breathless.

Having heard her eloquent greeting, Ragnar knew that he should attempt to form some sort of reply but he was too stunned to do anything but stare at the beautiful woman before him. Dressed in a light blue tank top and a pair of frayed denim shorts, she wasn't anything like the expensively-clad females to which he was accustomed. Then again, the female before him wasn't like any female he'd ever encountered. Thank goodness, he thought as he attempted to drag air into his lungs. For some reason he was having a hard time remembering why he was here ... and his name ... and how to breathe.

"What's wrong with you? Did you do some drugs before knocking on my door?"

Later, he'd be amused by her questions but right now he had to finish drinking in her essence.

"I am—" Ragnar began but he was cut off by someone walking up behind him.

"Ooh, he's pretty," the new voice said.

"You fucking bitch, you are so dead!" *she* seethed.

Though her voice was low, he clearly heard the menace it. Before he could react, he was yanked into the room right along with the visitor. He was slammed up against another female. Normally, he'd enjoy being crammed between two voluptuous females but not when one was using his body as a shield (ripped with muscle it was a good shield though) and the other was wielding a lead pipe, and both were whispering threats back and forth. He tried to interject some common sense and civility into their hushed argument but all he got for his efforts was a double-blast of getting told off. Ordered to both 'mind his own damn business' and to 'shut the fuck up' he didn't get a chance to do either because the two females started pushing and shoving at each other around him. Besides getting pushed, prodded, and poked, he took a stray elbow to the jaw, a stray fist to the back of the head, a foot to the stomach, and finally a lead pipe to the temple. He saw it coming but before he could react everything went black.

Second Part of the Oh Shit 2:5

“Oh shit, you killed him, Aviva,” Karimia accused.

“If I did, it’s your fault. You should’ve stood still and taken your ass whipping like a real woman instead of ducking and weaving like a bitch. Dammit, I don’t even know who he is.”

“Check his wallet,” her sister said all nonchalant like she knocked people unconscious every day.

“Shouldn’t we check to see if he’s still alive before we riffle through his wallet?”

“Use your shifter senses, chick. He’s still breathing.”

“How many times before have you done this?” she asked as she watched her sister retrieve his wallet without even turning him over.

“I’m not the one who brained him into unconsciousness so don’t be worrying about how many times I did it, she said as she flipped through his wallet. Karimia stopped talking mid-sentence. “Oh shit.”

“What?!” What?!” Aviva asked.

“Ah, you’re going to need to call daddy.”

“Why?”

“Because you just assaulted the Crown Prince of Polar Bear Shifters.”

“Oh fuck. Oh fuck, fuck, fuck. Oh damn. Okay, here’s the plan. You get the fuck out of here. I’ll hide the body.”

“Again, he’s not dead.”

“I’ll still hide him,” she said as she ran to the bathroom and came back with the shower curtain.

“Okay, why the shower curtain?” Karimia asked.

“I’m going to roll his body up in it. You know, in case he starts leaking fluids.”

“What is wrong with you?”

“Nothing I saw this on a show before.”

“Okay, you’re not allowed to watch television anymore. Just help me get him on the bed.”

“This is your fault,” Aviva said as she grabbed an arm and leg. Damn, this motherfucker was heavy.

“Exactly how is it my fault?” she asked.

“You should’ve been here to help get dad’s stuff than I wouldn’t have been tired, and cold and sleepy. I’m telling mama.”

“Before or after I tell daddy you’ve got a half-naked boy in your bed?” Karimia asked.

“He’s not half naked!” Aviva spat.

Karimia took his shoes off and threw them across the room. “He is now,” she said. “Half-naked boy in your bed trumps anything I did. Also possibly killing off a European royal trumps *anything* I’ve ever done.”

“Maybe, but I tell you one thing it doesn’t trump and that is *anyone* you’ve ever done. Remember that chipmunk shifter you fucked?”

“I did not fuck him. We were just friends,” Karimia huffed.

“That’s not what he said,” Aviva sing-songed.

“What did he say after daddy heard that mess?” Karimia asked.

“He didn’t have a tongue anymore or a throat to go with it so he didn’t say shit.”

“Oh yeah. Poor Chip,” Karimia said.

Their bickering was interrupted by the sound of a groggy and somewhat put out polar bear shifter coming to.

Stunned after being hit in the head with a lead pipe, (why the hell was she in possession of a lead pipe?), Ragnar slid to the floor in a disgraceful heap. Dammit, this was the second time in less than twelve hours that he'd kissed floor after being in her presence. She was a dangerous little something. He would've picked himself up off of the floor but he needed a minute. Though he was a shifter (and thank God he was else he'd be being mourned), he simply healed fast – not instantaneously. Plus, his head still hurt like a bitch. Before he could convince his body to pick all three hundred of his pounds up, he heard the words “shower curtain”. Apparently, the words ‘shower curtain’ worked like smelling salts because as soon as Ragnar heard it, all of his good sense came back to him, not that the two women paid him any attention.

Listening for another moment, he realized that they were sisters. Oh my goodness, there were two of them? There poor sire. He could only imagine the hell that man had gone through raising these two lunatics although the one with the too-short shorts and all of the curves was going to be his lunatic as soon as he could get in a word edgewise.

What the hell had they been watching on television he wondered a moment before they picked him up and unceremoniously tossed him onto the bed? He'd wanted to be in her bed, but this wasn't the way that he'd planned to go about it. Those two were just like him and Wieland, which meant that soon there was going to be another fight. The start of the first one was why he had a knot on his head. Obviously his woman was going to hit her sister with the pipe and just as obviously she wanted to hurt her, not kill her. The comment about the chipmunk had him opening his eyes. He didn't need to hear anymore about that because soon the other sister would

say something about some male in his woman's past and he'd be obligated to kill him ... that is if their daddy hadn't beat him to it.

Grabbing her hips, he rolled her under him. "Half-naked boy would top whatever your sister did, however I haven't been a boy in many years."

"How fucking old are you and why are you taking her side?" the other sister asked. "Your license says that you're supposed to be twenty-eight."

"I am, now might I have my wallet?" he asked.

"Fine," she said and tossed it at him.

Snagging it out of mid-air, he didn't even have to look at it to know that everything wasn't in it. "And my license please?"

"No, I need it for collateral."

He wasn't even surprised that she'd told him 'no.' It seemed that 'no' was her favorite word –right behind the word 'fuck'. "And why do you need collateral. I'm not asking you for a loan."

"Yeah but your dick is very close to my sister's woman area and it looks like you're one good push away from being all up in that, so yeah. I'm keeping the license until you get off of my sister."

Smart woman.

"Hey, what about me?" his woman asked. "I'm right here."

"Shh, grown people talking," her sister said. "I'm trying to get you laid being that you're on the precipice of either being a nun or a lesbian and last time I checked you didn't munch carpet."

He wasn't quite sure how he felt about the other sister but he liked her suggestion. He was all for giving Aviva some. *A-vi-va*. He liked the way that her name sounded in his mouth. He also liked her scent ... and the way she felt in his arms he thought as he buried his nose in her shoulder. There wasn't anything thin on her and he found that he liked that.

Her response interrupted his explorations. "I hate you. Get out."

"Are you going to put it on him?"

"No, but still get out."

Sensing another fight brewing, he interrupted the sisters although he was glad to hear that his woman didn't sleep around.

"If you don't mind, I need a favor. If you could simply stick your head out the door you'll find some men milling about. Please tell them to send Wieland here."

"Whose Wieland?" both of them asked.

"My cousin."

"Is he hot?"

"I'm not gay," he responded.

"I didn't say you were; I simply asked if your cousin was hot."

"He never suffers from lack of female company."

"Well that's probably because he's rich. That doesn't mean he's hot."

"Wieland and I look like brothers."

"Yeah, but is he the cute brother or the 'are you sure that your mama wasn't cheating' brother?"

Realizing that subtle wasn't something she was going to listen to, he tried another tactic. "Liking females, I'll have to let you judge Wieland's looks for yourself. One thing I do know about him however is that he's a man's man."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that he won't let you ride roughshod over him," he said knowing that his words would rile her.

"So while he might be the troll-looking brother, he's the take-no-shit brother."

“That’s one way to put it.”

“Doesn’t matter if he’s a circus strongman; I’ll still put him on his back,” she said.

“And I’m sure he’d enjoy that.”

“Oh yes, he would.”

“While I’d love to exchange barbs with you all evening, we do have some business to discuss,” he said.

“Ugh, you’re going to be an asshole over being knocked unconscious aren’t you? Just like a bitch.”

Did she just call him a bitch? “I am the Crown Prince of Polar Bear Royalty,” he said in a tone so imperial his mother would have applauded.

“And we give a fuck why?” she asked.

“Because my family is the law in these parts and you’re in it.”

“You leave my sister alone,” his woman said from beneath him.

“Give me a reason to,” he purred in her ear.

“Karimia, can you leave us for a few minutes.”

“Fine,” she huffed. “If I’m going to German prison, you better at least get some,” she said as she quit the room.

“And close the door.”

While Aviva had to admit that the man atop her was pretty to look at, he didn’t ask her permission to be there. So fucking what if he had a title, good looks, and a big dick. She was the daughter of Darioush Jendayi, husband to Queen Selah, the granddaughter of *the* Rev. Justice Harper, the great-granddaughter of Emery Sorghum-BMF (bad mother fucker), the niece of Oberlin Sorghum (also a BMF) and related to the Jendayi-Harper clan. Good men was the norm and all this man on top of her was, was male.

He hadn't proved shit to her with the exception that he could bang on doors real loud and slide into unconsciousness real fast.

Shoving him off of her, she got up. Pacing in front of him, she took a few moments to consider her words wanting to get them just right. Karimia might be a pain in the fucking ass, shit starter extraordinaire but she was her sister. She was part of the Jendayi-Harper clan same as she was, which meant that she didn't have no bitch in her at all. Just because Karimia went out of the room without much of a fuss didn't mean that she was simply going to sit quietly and wait for something to happen to them. No, she was out there planning. She might call Ragnar's brother for him, but she'd probably already decided how she was going to kill him.

Deciding on the subtle approach she turned and faced him. "You're going to leave my sister alone or I'm going to kill you and then the rest of your fucking family. Are we clear on that? And before you think I can't do it or won't do it, consider the fact that you have a bevy of guards milling about and you still got dropped by a hit that wasn't even all that hard. You might've had some boxing lessons or even some martial arts but we're Alaskan-southern and we don't fight fair or pretty; we fight to fucking win. We don't leave anybody standing after a fight. In fact, we don't leave them breathing."

She didn't know what to expect but it damn sure wasn't what happened next.

Ragnar was already planning their date in his head when she shoved him to the side. Surprised at her strength, she was able to slip from the bed before he could stop her. Despite him not knowing her two things were evident: First, she was angry. Second, she was getting ready to tell him off.

Pulling himself to a sitting position he reclined against the headboard and made himself comfortable. Never having been told off in all of his twenty-eight years he didn't want to miss this.

It was a good thing that he was in a comfortable position. Aviva was beautiful in her anger but she was fantastic in her love. She loved her sister-not that surface kind of love but that down to the core love.

Without a word he rose from the bed. Taking her hand, he dropped to his knees in front of her. Before he could stop himself he asked,

"Marry me."

"Get away from me," she said as she attempted to pull her hand from his.

Another response he didn't expect.

"Marry me," he repeated.

"A- You don't know me, b- you don't have anything to offer me, and c- I don't want you."

Three responses he wasn't expecting. He'd never had a woman refuse him. *Never*. He was the Crown Prince. He was handsome. He was rich.

"I'm the Crown Prince, if you married me, you'd be queen one day."

"I might not be married to you but I grew up with males who treat me like I'm a queen every day so I don't need your little proposal."

Damn. He'd never been turned down so spectacularly or so honestly. Looking into her eyes he knew that she wasn't playing hard to get. Sighing, he rose. Backing her against the wall he breathed in her scent. Nipping her ear, he asked. "At least have dinner with me."

"Will it be poison-free?"

Chuckling, he kissed a path down her neck, a little taken aback that she didn't seem to be affected by his touch. Females always trembled when he touched them like that.

"Of course," he assured her.

"And you're not going to bother my sister?"

"Are you still threatening to kill my entire family if I do?"

"Yeah, that offer is like gold - it never goes bad."

"Well can you kill my cousin now?" he joked.

"Not unless he warrants killing. Remember, you hurt my sister and your family dies ... painfully and quickly. You should also know that your little country might be razed to the ground."

"Sounds like you're going to be awfully busy," he said.

"Oh, I won't get a chance to raze it. The country remodel will be courtesy of my mama or my aunt ... or my grandmamma. They don't put up with any mess."

"I see."

"You won't if you have two black eyes. Now get out. I'm still sleepy. Come back in three hours and bring food. I can't bother getting dressed to go out."

Karimia 2:6

Karimia Jendayi was the eldest Jendayi girl. Besides inheriting her mama's cold-natured-ness (along with her hips and ass) and her daddy's hot temper, she'd also inherited a free spirit that led her to being all kinds of politically incorrect. Though her sister pegged her as a troublemaker – and she did her best to live up to that moniker- she knew that there were bounds (she just liked to test them). Even with her ways, she'd never set out to purposefully insult the Royal Polar Bear Family of Europe. She didn't even remark that they were only the royal family because the Jendayi-Harper's couldn't be bothered going over there and kicking their ass for a crown that they didn't even want in a land that they didn't need.

Despite them not being all hoity-toity, they were royals, just like they were and if they had a problem with that, they could tell it to their grandmamma ... and be eradicated from the face of the earth. Songs Sorghum Harper might be pushing sixty but there were four things she still reigned supreme at: 1) rocking her granddaddy's world (eew); 2) making moonshine; 3) laying down the law (Rabershell Territory might belong to her daddy and uncle but make no mistake about it, Songs was the law there); and, 4) whipping some ass – in no particular order. Her grandmamma did all of those things equally well. From the south, she'd experienced too much Jim Crow to be putting up with any mess from ... anybody and that included those damn imposter royals, as she liked to call anybody else claiming to be Polar Bear Royalty.

Like she said, despite her shit-starting ways, she hadn't set out to insult the royals. Of course some people might consider a lead pipe to the head of the Crown Prince an insult –but this time she didn't do it, but she

would take the blame. The European royals just needed to loosen up. As far as she was concerned, he owed her sister an apology for banging on her door like he was heading up a lynch mob and for dirtying up her floor with his presence.

Waiting for the second Prince of the Royal Family Deonté to arrive she wondered if she would be tortured for this insult ... and what her daddy would do for revenge. Would he torch all of Europe or be content with just Germany? She sighed feeling a twinge of guilt for the destruction that was about to kick off. It was, after all, her fault that the Crown Prince had even crossed paths with her little sister in the first place. She was meant to go with her sister to get their father's dessert. Her mama might've liked the chocolates but it was their daddy that received the most enjoyment from them as chocolate he always tasted it (from his wife's lips of course), which according to their mama made him 'too damn frisky'. That was just wrong on so many levels. A- she didn't need to know about what her mama and daddy got up to and b- did she mention that she didn't need to know what her parents got up to; and c- her mama was so hot for her daddy that she was the one always tripping him to his back and having her way with him. Did she mention that she really, really, really didn't need to know what her parents got up to?

Karimia was pulled from her musings by a soft, but firm knock on the door. Opening the door, she looked up ... and then she looked up some more. She looked up so far that she had to step back in order to take in the whole man. That was a whole lot of man standing in her door.

This had to be Wieland. It took a special kind of male to look so damn good for no damn reason at all. She bet he rolled out of bed looking that good, and damn, if she didn't want to test out that theory. She didn't

just like what she saw, she likeddddddd what she saw ... and so did her pussy. Staring up into a face that could only be described as ‘hot damn!’ she couldn’t help but lick her lips the man was so good looking.

“Miss Jendayi?”

Good gravy even his voice sounded like it’d melt all of the polar ice.

“HRH Wieland Deonté?”

“Yes, but Wieland will do,” he purred.

He *purred*. He motherfucking purred and the sound went straight to her pussy and spread everywhere in her body. Karimia decided then and there that she was going to fuck him all night. If he fucked as good as he looked than she’d be so exhausted that she’d be on an orgasm high when the army (because it’d take one) led her to her execution.

“Won’t you come ... in?” *me*, she added silently and waved her hand indicating that he should take a seat.

Taking her own seat on the chaise lounge, Karimia ogled him. She’d been hoping that he’d sound whiney and annoying and look like something she could kill without wanting to fuck him before she did, but now she was glad that he didn’t look anything like the picture she had conjured. If she had to die she should at least have the pleasure of having something good to look at before she did. Thankful she was looking her best (like there was ever a time when she didn’t) she looked into his eyes and licked her lips again.

“Please, there is no need for formalities. Call me Karimia,” she said hoping he’d pick up on her mild flirtation.

Before she could throw a proper pass at him, he lowered knelt down (actually got down on one knee!) and smiled. And dammit the man looked a thousand times hotter when he did. She didn’t know how the hell that

was possible but he was. Eye-to-eye, he brought his face closer to hers filling her nostrils with his scent. Ensnared by his intoxicating smell, the intense look in his eye and the overwhelming need to impale herself on his cock, it took her a moment to realize that he was speaking.

“Good, because it’d be odd if I went around calling my future mate, ‘Miss’ all of the time as it’d expose our BDSM lifestyle.”

His words made her hot. Okay, technically, she was already hot, but besides making her pussy wet his words did something she totally didn’t expect: they made her laugh. She liked men with healthy senses of humor.

“Not only will I have something good to look at before I die, I’ll have something to smile about before I do,” she said.

She stopped laughing when she felt him gently wrap his big hand around the column of her throat. Tensing, she wondered if he was going to attempt to kill her right here. Sure, that’d look kind of bad but this was his country and these were his people.

“Is there a reason that I might have to kill you?” he asked in a low voice.

“Probably but it’s not because your cousin is dead,” she said as she wrapped her leg around him and used her strength and pulled him closer. She might act all nonchalant and shit about him possibly killing her but she was a Jendayi *and* a Harper and they didn’t surrender shit. If he wanted her dead, there was going to be fur all over this motherfucker.

A few shades lighter than midnight, she was all black ... and it showed. With way more than a handful of titties, and having a whole lot of hips, thighs and ass, and a brain that outdid all of that, she was all woman ... and it showed. With her non-regional accent, her penchant for denim, cowboy boots and her Star Trek t-shirt on, she was all American ... and it

showed. What didn't show was what was beneath her blackness, her femaleness and her American-ness: her polar bear.

There were only a few black polar bears in existence ... and they all had Jendayi somewhere in their name. No one was quite sure where their name Jendayi came from, but they were sure where the polar bear came from. It came from the man who owned her great-great-great grandmother.

While she couldn't bring herself to thank her great-great-great paternal grandfather for raping her great-great-great grandmother because her great-great-great-great grandmother had opened up his chest with an axe, cracked open his rib cage and pulled his heart out. She wasn't a polar bear shifter but she was a mama and no one hurt her children with impunity. Of course she'd been put to death for such an offense, but they'd had to shoot her as no one was chancing getting close to the woman who'd baptized her two children with blood from the master's body. Legend was, she didn't even run, just sat right there waiting for them to come kill her. Family lore also said that the only thing she'd said when they'd come with guns and dogs was "leave my children be." Obviously, everyone left her children be because she was the last adult on her daddy's side that ever knew slavery. So despite how she came about being a polar bear shifter, she wasn't ashamed of her polar bear. She embraced the polar bear.

Jendayi polar bear shifters were different. It wasn't there blackness that made them different; it was everything else. They didn't smell like polar bear – even to other polar bears. They could walk undetected amongst other shifters which came in real handy in battle –not that they'd had too many battles being that there weren't usually any survivors from altercations with Jendayi.

Knowing that she had the advantage over Mr. Fine, she didn't shrink away. She got closer, daring him with her body to 'try it'; tempting him with her words to bring it.

"Whatcha got, HRH Wieland?" she purred directly in his ear, mocking his title, his manhood and his polar bear.

"A lush woman in my arms, Karimia. One that I know can handle me," he said as he laid her back and rocked his groin into hers.

"Don't get accustomed to talking when we're in bed. You won't have enough air in your lungs to call out my entire Christian name much less my title," he said as he kissed her.

Wieland had been smiling since the moment Ragnar took the bait. All he'd had to do was bide his time and there'd either be fireworks and lots of them or fireworks and lots of them. Aviva Jendayi (interesting name) was a passionate woman. She'd either fuck Ragnar up or fuck him full stop. Either way it was going to be an interesting night ... and Ragnar was going to owe him.

When one of the royal guards had summoned him to the hotel, he could only guess what had transpired. A Karimia Jendayi had summoned the guards. Either she was pissed at Ragnar or ... He didn't want to consider what might be on the other end of that 'or'. The possibilities were infinite but considering the fact that neither the *Polizei* or medical had been summoned it couldn't be life or Kingdom threatening.

His knock was answered with all due haste but it took him several moments to answer. The woman who'd answered his knock threw him for ... several loops. Wearing only a neutral tone lipstick and a 'what the fuck do you want' in her eyes, she was simply stunning. Never would she see a

size six unless it was in a movie because this woman was all curves and ‘power to the people’ and damn if he didn’t want to be the people in that equation because without a doubt this woman was bringing the power.

If she’d done something to Ragnar, he needed to know later because he wanted this woman. He might have to have his aunt kill her (he didn’t hit females) but he’d definitely fuck her before he did. More than once.

Formalities over and done with and the flirtation in full swing, he almost came in his pants when she licked her full lips. Karimia. Damn, even her name tasted good in his mouth. Dropping to his knees, he wondered how she’d taste in his mouth. Damn, he wanted her but first he really needed to know if Ragnar was safe.

Ascertaining that he was, which was confirmed by his sensitive hearing, he focused the whole of his attention on her. Later – much later- he thought, he’d find out the particulars of what had gone on that required that he be summoned, however right now, he needed to concentrate on getting to know the lovely Karimia Jendayi. Feeling her wrap her thick thigh around him, his cock jumped to immediate attention and saluted her.

Hearing her words, he knew that she was flirting even as she was challenging him. That was new (the challenging not the flirting) but he discovered that he rather liked it. He liked a feisty woman but he was the male and he planned on doing any dominating that was going to go down. Throwing back his own bedroom lines, he was surprised (and pleased) when she asked him what he had. For real? Did she just ask me what he had? Tempted to answer her question with a question he pushed her back on the chaise lounge.

“What do I have, Karimia?”

“Yeah, whatcha got?”

“Besides good looks, a title and lots of money?”

“Yeah, besides that. Fine men are a dime a dozen-so are arrogant men. I’m not interested in your title unless its ‘creative director’ for Star Trek. You might have more money than me, but I don’t need it. So yeah, whatcha got besides that?”

He knew one thing in that moment: Karimia Jendayi wasn’t just throwing him a line trying to sound tough. Karimia Jendayi was tough. She meant every word she said ... and all of the ones that she didn’t say. Though her body might be inviting him to give her pleasure, her eyes were daring him to fuck up.

Spreading her legs wide, he looked in her eye before asking his next question.

“You mean besides this big, hard cock?”

Hearing her moan turned him on. He’d heard scores of women moan (sometimes in a single evening) but it wasn’t her moan that caused his cock to go harder. It was the fact that he knew it took a certain type of male to pull that sound from her. He was glad that he was that kind of male because she damn sure did a whole lot of something to him.

“I also have this talented tongue,” he said.

He’d expected her to shiver ... and she did but she also arched her back, grabbed his hair and commanded him to pleasure her.

“Eat me, now.”

Pushing up her skirt, he ripped her panties off and dove in her pussy growling as he ate. His growls surprised him. Even though there were no other polar bears in his territory waiting to encroach, he felt the need to emit a warning. He was not about to share this woman ... with anyone ...

for any reason. Dipping his head he lapped up her essence enjoying the musky smell and sweet taste.

Fellowship 2:7

Aviva was pulled from her sleep by the ringing of the phone.

“What’s this that your sister tells me about some half-naked boy in your bed?” her daddy’s voice thundered in her ear.

She was going to kill her sister right after she convinced her daddy that she wasn’t whoring her way across Europe.

“Daddy, Karimia was just mad because I tried to brain her with a lead pipe.”

“So there’s no half-naked boy in your bed?”

Trust her daddy to ignore the lead pipe comment and focus on the supposed naked boy in her bed comment. “No naked boy in my bed, daddy, but I did send your chocolate today,” she said.

“Thank you baby, your mama will be pleased. You know how she likes her chocolate.”

Yeah, she did and her daddy was the chocolate that her mama liked the best-not that she wanted to think about that. “I know daddy. We’re having dinner tonight with the Crown Prince and his cousin,” she said in an attempt to appease him.

“Isn’t it a little late for dinner?”

“Not if it’s good enough and besides I missed lunch.”

“Hmm,” he growled. “They get out of line with you; I’ll be on the first plane over.”

“It’s just dinner, daddy.”

“It’s not just dinner. It’s dinner with *my* babies who look like their mama and I know you aren’t about to say that my wife isn’t the...”

The most beautiful woman in all of Creation, she said along with him. As always she smiled whenever her daddy said it-and he said it at least three times a day. And it wasn't a line; her daddy meant it ... every single time he said it. Her and Karimia might tease her daddy about how infatuated and crazy in love he was with their mama but they were impressed with it. Darioush Jendayi wasn't just any male. He was the best kind of male and they didn't think that simply because he was their daddy; they said it because it was the indisputable truth. A love so pure, a friendship so strong, the way their daddy loved their mama should've been somewhere in the New Testament because it was shonuff the truth.

Their love was the 1Corinthians 13:4-8 kind of love ... and then some. Her Granddaddy and Grandmamma's love, her Uncle Bering and Aunt Prea's love, and her Aunt Oberlin and Uncle Emery's love should be right there in that same book, because they had that same kind of forever, do anything for you, fight the world for you, bring social change for you, not just die for you but live for you, worship at your knees because your heart is my temple, praise God all the time kind of love. And she wanted the same thing, couldn't take nothing less. Besides neither the men nor women in her family would allow her to do so.

She couldn't speak for Karimia but she was humbled every time she witnessed the love between her parents. *Every* woman should be loved the way the women in her family were loved. Every man should love their woman like that. *Any* man that was going to be her man was going to have to bring more than a big dick, a fat wallet and a fancy title to the table because she had the Jendayi-Harper males as an example of manhood.

"We're find, daddy. The Crown Prince and his cousin have been properly threatened with our fearsome daddy."

“Yeah, but I’m so much more fearsome in person. I can be there in a few hours.”

Aviva couldn’t help but smile as she listened to the impassioned words from her father who was always ready and willing to go anywhere in the world to insure that they were treated with respect.”

“That you are but your chocolate will be there tomorrow and you *know* how mama likes her chocolate, daddy.”

“This is true,” her daddy said. “But you’re my babies.”

“And we’re also the daughters of Darioush Jendayi and Queen Selah Harper Jendayi. We know how to handle ourselves and if we also know how to pick up the phone and call our daddy if we get in over our heads.”

“I love you, baby.”

“And we will never doubt that, daddy.”

“You know if your mama sees me crying, she’s going to come over here and ask me what’s wrong,” he sniffed.

“Tell her you’re crying for joy. Those boys aren’t getting fresh with us but I have to tell you that the Crown Prince’s cousin mama might have to have a word with Karimia. She’s already threatened to make him her bitch.”

“Well that’d be an upgrade. They might be royals, but they’re second-rate royals in a third-rate territory,” her daddy laughed.

“When did they rise to the level of a third-rate country?”

“I was grading on a curve.”

“But then they’ll think that they’re better than they really are.”

“Enjoy dinner, baby.”

Aviva didn't fall for that tone of voice knowing that it was usually followed by her mother's screaming orders that someone was going to die that day. Smiling, she waited for the rest of the sentence.

"And even though you've assured me that you're safe, you know that I'm going to call you tomorrow."

"You wouldn't be my daddy if you didn't."

"I love you baby. Hug and kiss your sister for me."

"Eww, daddy, I don't know where Karimia's lips have been."

"Being that she's virtually a nun, they've probably been between the pages of a Bible."

Coughing, she squeaked out her words between her laughter. "I will, Daddy. I love you too. Enjoy that chocolate," she said as she went to sleep.

Dinner went great. She and Karimia demolished a few New York strip steaks, two loaded baked potatoes and half of a German chocolate cake with ice cream. Moaning around a mouthful of dessert, she had no idea what her method of eating was doing to the Crown Prince ... and even if she did, she wouldn't have cared. She did however care about that cake.

"This cake and ice cream is the reason we don't wipe your little territory from the face of the earth, even though a Texan invented it," Karimia said.

"Thank goodness for Texas, the second-biggest state in the US but the football-playingest one," Aviva said. "The Germans might not have invented German chocolate but they did invent coffee filters, tea bags and toothpaste."

"Actually, Sam German was an Englishman," Wieland said.

“Texas claims him that makes him Texan,” Karimia said. Germans did invent coffee filters and tea bags but the Egyptians invented toothpaste, Aviva. The Germans just came in and made it better,” Karimia said.

“We Germans are like that. We make a lot of things better.”

“Well how come y’all don’t use deodorant?” Karimia asked.

“That’s the French, not the Germans,” Ragnar said.

“Grown people talking, Raggie baby,” Karimia said to him.

“Let her bandy about her stereotypes, Ragnar. She’s not happy unless she’s going over the line. See why I usually don’t let her talk when we go places where people don’t know our daddy? A world war just waiting to happen.”

“Whatever, it’s not like I’ve offended the Germans.”

“I’m not even German and I’m offended, Karimia.”

“Whatever. You’re just sensitive. Woman up, it’s not the 1920s. We know the secrets of coffee filters and tea bags, we can go ahead and eliminate them now,” Karimia said.

“This is true, but it’d be wrong. I really like tea so I say they get a lifetime pass from being fucked up by you.”

“Okay fine then. You’re such a spoil sport. Next time I plan a good pillage, I’m not inviting you along.”

“I didn’t know that we were here to pillage Germany; I was under the impression that we were on vacation.”

“We can multi-task.”

“You multi-task; I’m going to bed. Thanks for dinner, guys. Now get out and remember what I said Ragnar,” she said before flouncing off to bed leaving a stunned Crown Prince and his cousin in her wake.

“Maybe I want to play with Wieland,” her sister whined.

“Play quietly and if you can’t be quiet, get the fuck out with them, but remember two things. One, don’t come back bitching if he’s a two-minute man and two, if you get hurt, it’s going to be real fucked up having people answer that the origins of WWII revolves around my sister being a whore, her one-night stand being a lousy lay, and my mama being crazy.”

Aviva knew that she was dreaming. She was in the biggest library in the universe and she was the only person with a library card. So far she’d finished half of the classics section before she felt the pull of wakefulness. She tried to ignore it but then the snores of Crown Prince Ragnar intruded. Why was he in her bed and more importantly, why was he taking up most of it? Seeing that they were both fully dressed, she simply shoved him over, snatched her covers back and went back to sleep. She still had books to read in her dream.

First Time Redux 2:8

Wieland had never seen women enjoy their food so much or so much of it at one time. They ate like they meant it. From their moans, they meant it ... a lot. When they swallowed their first bites of German Chocolate Cake and ice cream, he wanted to fall to his knees and pray for Sam German, regardless of whether he was English, German or whatever. If there was a charity founded in his name, he'd give money to it for the pleasure he got from watching Karimia eat that damn dessert. He enjoyed bantering with that woman ... and being instructed to eat her pussy. He really enjoyed eating her pussy. Tonight he'd finish what he'd started. It wasn't enough to make her come; he needed to make her come so hard she screamed herself hoarse, tore his back up with her nails, left her bite marks on his shoulders, left part of herself in his soul. Despite being a shit-talking troublemaker, Karimia was the type of woman who got in a man's soul ... and stayed there. He'd never wanted a woman there before but then, he hadn't met Karimia Jendayi. Now that he had, he didn't plan to be anywhere except for at her side.

Having merely picked at his earlier dinner, Ragnar was ravenous. Tearing into his t-bone steaks, he smiled noticing Aviva tearing into her food with an enthusiasm that equaled his. It was rare to make the acquaintance of a female whose anything was equal to his and that included appearance and sexual prowess. Aviva was different from not just other women but everyone ... in every way.

Her personality was without artifice. Her smiles were genuine, full lips stretching wide showing an expanse of white teeth and double dimples in her right cheek. Her laughter was a rich tapestry of guffaws, high-

pitched squeals, with some woo's, 'Oh Lord's' and a few snorts bringing up the rear. Even her 'fuck you's' fascinated him. While the 'fuck you's' she hurled at him were delivered with icy precision hitting her intended target (his ego) before splintering into a million 'Didn't I tell you's'. Conversely, the 'fuck you's' that she lobbed at her sister didn't have any real heat, her threats to tell their daddy were said with a well of passion.

Everything she did surprised him so much so that it was like discovering woman for the first time. And in a way he was because he'd spent his life dealing with one-dimensional females, ones that had no substance, a whole lot of give, and not enough backbone to even consider saying 'no.' He made a practice of staying far away from the few females he knew that did exhibit backbones (like his mother) finding it difficult to digest the challenge to his desires.

Aviva not only had a backbone; she was *all* backbone. She didn't mind telling him that he wasn't shit and the ego-crushing part was that she told him without ever uttering a word. Despite his education, she didn't consider his word infallible. Despite his sexual prowess, his touch didn't move her. It didn't make her eyes light with passion, didn't make her breath catch, didn't elicit throaty moans. She had no consideration at all for his ego. Despite his status she didn't let who he was or who he would one day be prejudice her opinion of him. To Aviva, he was simply a male – a lesser one at that.

It was clear that the males in her lineage played a large part in shaping her opinion of males. The word 'daddy' was a big part of her vocabulary. A prayer, she smiled every time she said it. Though he'd never given any real thought to his future progeny, he could only hope that they

said his name the way that Aviva said her father's (with a love you could feel) instead of the way he said his father's name (with rigid formality).

Whatever her father did, he'd fashioned a helluva woman ... and he wanted her. He didn't want her simply because she was a new toy that he wanted to add to his collection. It went deeper than that. He needed her. Those few hours he'd been away from her had crawled by, every second mocking him, every minute seeming to stretch far longer than sixty seconds. He'd never been so glad to be in the presence of ... anyone. Being in Aviva's company soothed him. He discovered that he didn't even need to be the focus of her attention probably because she wasn't fickle in her hate, or apathy or her love. Watching her with her sister and cousin, he decided that he'd take her hate over her apathy. Aviva felt deeply and he wanted to be able to wrap his strength around her passion.

Aviva thought that he was joking when he'd asked her to marry him. So had he, at first. But the longer that he thought about it, the righter it'd felt. He wanted Aviva for his wife. Whether or not she'd ever accept him as a husband was yet to be seen. He might be a Crown Prince but he was a male first.

Seeing her rise, he wasn't even surprised when she summarily dismissed him. Knowing that his cousin and her sister were busy getting into their own shit, he leisurely finished his steak needing to give her time to finish her toilet. Clearing the table and calling room service to come get the mess, he washed his hands and waited. Finally hearing her crawl into bed, he walked towards her room. Already having checked the lock, he strolled to her room only to find her star-fished on top of the covers. Smiling, he unbuttoned his shirt and shrugged out of it, toed off his shoes and joined her.

That night, Ragnar did something he'd never done: he held a woman. Her lush body tempted him on all levels. As much as he wanted to make love to her, he discovered that he wanted to do so many other things first. He wanted to protect her, he wanted to earn her trust, he wanted to get to know Aviva Jendayi. After all, she was going to be his mate.

BOOK III:
The Third Beginning

Home 3:1

While their trip to Europe had been fun, Aviva was ready to go home. She needed to go before she went and did something stupid like fall in love with that arrogant ass Crown Prince Ragnar Deonté. Unlike most males, Ragnar hadn't given her any reason to run him out of town. Okay, so Germany was his country and Rabershell, Alaska hardly qualified as a town but still, he hadn't done anything ass-whipping worthy. Ragnar had been the perfect gentleman ... and she couldn't stand it. Nor could she trust it. He was the Crown Prince. He had aspirations and those aspirations didn't include splitting time between Rabershell, Alaska and Delice-Patrale, Georgia.

There were things she knew, things she didn't know and she didn't blur the lines between them. One thing that she knew was that she was not going to live outside of the US, not even for a little while. She didn't even have to see the rest of the world to know that. She liked her home and loved her family. Not only were her roots in the wilds of Alaska and the backwoods of Georgia; her soul was right there with them.

She couldn't imagine waking up and not being surrounded by the love that her family blanketed each other in. She couldn't imagine hearing so much noise all of the time. Ragnar's Europe was noisy and crowded and superficial ... just like Ragnar was (at first). But Ragnar belonged in Europe. He was all sleek lines, tailored clothes, and pinky-raised warm tea drinking royalty. Conversely, she was a jeans and flannel shirts, iced-tea (or the occasional sip of shine) from a Mason jar type chick. The only thing sleek about her was the machete that her grandmamma had given her for her sixteenth birthday.

She'd never ask Ragnar to give up his life for her, especially when she wasn't about to give up her life for him. Couldn't do it; wouldn't do it; end of discussion. Next subject. That's what her brain said but her heart sighed. Her heart wanted Ragnar. So did her body.

After getting to know him she'd discovered a lesser grade of arrogant prick under the arrogant prick, as Wieland would say. Thinking of Wieland brought a smile to her face. If there was ever a male that could handle her wild ass sister, it was Wieland Deonté with his unconventional outlook on life, his passion for justice, and his ready smile. Now he could make it in Rabershell and Delice-Patrale because he didn't need ready-made fun. He was a male who made his own. And from the shouts and roars coming from him and her fast-ass sister, they knew how to make some fun ... and some babies if they weren't careful. A part of her wanted them to make some babies because she instinctively knew that Wieland and Karimia would make some kickass parents despite both of them being three-quarter wild child and one-eighth crazy.

Ragnar Deonté was not amused and it showed. His visage left no doubt of this categorical fact. His balls were blue; his blood like molten lava under his skin; his heart ... in tatters. His eyes flashing ice storms, every one (even the queen) gave him a wide, wide berth. Even Wieland didn't fuck with him – not because Wieland was suddenly afraid of him but because Wieland was busy with his own cauldron of emotions.

Aviva had left. She'd left. She'd left him and taken everything good in his life with her. She'd taken away her wide open smiles, her sassy comebacks, her 'fuck you's', her raucous laughter, her endless supply of 'my daddy this...my daddy that' stories, her ... her.

She'd left him taking their friendship with her, taking his color with her, taking his heart with her. She'd left and taken all of the good things with her and in its place left an endless expanse of mundane. Dammit. *How could she do this?* While his heart was hers as it was freely given, all of those other things including the 'fuck you's' she was so fond of belonged to *him* ... and he wanted them back, wanted the woman back ... *needed* the woman back like he needed his next breath.

Aviva. Aviva. Aviva. Even her name on his tongue got to him. Her name was addictive, just like the rest of her. The name in his mouth was intoxicating. Like the finest chocolate, it melted on his tongue. It wasn't just a name; it was *her* name. Her name on his lips humbled him for it was the name of the one being made just for him.

Aviva was the one being who didn't put up with his bullshit. She didn't tolerate him giving half of his personality-not that she'd particularly liked his personality. He was an arrogant prick. Instead of attempting to change him, she'd encouraged him to embrace his inner arrogant prick-ness and when he did, she never settled for him being anything less than the male he was. She demanded all of that arrogant prick-ness and hurled her fire, her truth, her everything at it.

Looking out of the window of a palace that was a national landmark over a vista that was postcard perfect all he could see was the superficial everything that had made up his world. Germany had been his home for twenty-eight years but he knew that it was no longer that. A beautiful land, it was just a land, a place where Aviva was not. He no longer wanted to be anyplace that she was not. He couldn't be anyplace that she was not. Her absence actually caused him physical pain. If the pain had been centered in

one place he might could've handled it but Aviva's absence hurt all over, especially in the vicinity of his heart.

He'd never even kissed her properly. He'd simply held her in his arms, yet he'd been content. She'd slain him and they hadn't even made love yet. Love. He wanted to love her, not just fuck her. He recalled asking her why she wasn't moved by his touch. He wasn't being arrogant; he'd truly wanted to know being that his sexual prowess was off the charts.

"I'm told that I'm a skilled lover," he'd said.

"I don't doubt it. Your mechanics are probably unsurpassed, but sex in itself doesn't move me."

"What moves you?"

"That's for the man I love to discover," she'd said as she ran over to where her sister was and hip-checked her to the ground starting one of their inevitable fights.

Pushing his pain just far back enough to give him room to breathe, he took one last look at the vista. It was then that he realized that he'd never loved it. He'd simply like possessing it. Maybe that was the crux of his problem: he'd spent his life possessing rather than loving.

Picking up the alligator briefcase holding his important papers he walked down the hall to Wieland's quarters. Holding the heavy parchment in his hands, something stopped him from sliding the 'Dear John' letter under the door. Crushing the letter that he'd spent all of last night drafting, he realized that it'd taken him so long to pen the letter because he didn't want to say goodbye to Wieland. Despite being an only child and despite spending the first year and a half of their acquaintance hating his cousin,

Wieland had become his brother. He loved Wieland. His only friend for so long, Wieland deserved more than a paragraph on paper. Knocking on his door, he was surprised when Wieland immediately answered.

"I was wondering how long you were going to stand out there," he said wearing an arrogant expression.

"Me too. I wasn't even going to knock," he admitted.

"I'm glad that you did."

"I'm leaving Wieland."

"Where are you going?"

"To Rabershell, Alaska, wherever the hell that's at."

"What if she's not there?"

"Then I'll make my way to Delice-Patrale, Georgia."

"And if she's not there either?"

"Then I'll stay there and wait for her."

"Ragnar, Aviva might visit Germany but she'll never live here."

"I know. That's why I'm going. It's beautiful here but it's lonely here," his voice broke. "It's lonely here," he thumped his chest, "without her," he said unashamed of the tears that rolled down his face.

"You're really going to give it all up for her?"

"What exactly am I giving up?"

"A kingdom."

"So be it, because look what I stand to gain."

"But there is no other heir, Ragnar. Only you are the Crown Prince."

"There's you. You're the most fearless male I know and despite your wildness you're a Deonté male."

"The queen won't like this."

“My mother plans to live forever. She’ll wrestle Death if it attempts to take the Crown from her.”

Clapping his cousin on the shoulder, he was surprised when Wieland pulled him in for a hug. Despite their brotherhood, they’d never hugged. While he wouldn’t miss Europe, he was going to miss Prince Wieland Deonté.

Wieland Deonté hurt – not for himself but for his cousin. Ragnar’s pain was there for all of the world to see, not that they were looking at his eyes. Too busy looking at the cut of his suits, the length of his hair, and the swagger that a nearly seven foot, three-hundred pound male in his prime had, they didn’t see him struggling to take his next breath, didn’t see the pain that tinged his blue eyes.

Aviva Jendayi had done what no other being was able to do: she’d felled Crown Prince Ragnar Deonté ... and she hadn’t even been trying. Not only had she felled him; she’d *changed* Ragnar. Instead of turning him into something that he was not, she’d demanded that he simply be what he was. Too busy being who she was, she didn’t have time to be put off by who Ragnar was beneath all of that arrogance (which was more arrogance).

He liked Aviva, not that she gave a damn. Smiling, he recalled the way she casually threatened to cut off his balls if he hurt Karimia.

“Isn’t that a form of lynching?”

“It would be if I stuffed them down your throat, hung you by the neck from a tall tree, and wrote a racial slur on your chest. But I don’t plan to lynch you. Where I’m from, we eat balls. I’d fry your balls up in hot grease, pour gravy on ’em and eat them right in front of you. Of course, I’d cauterize the wound so you wouldn’t bleed to death and give

you enough painkiller to keep you from passing out. After I finished your balls, I'd wait until I shit them out. Now that, I'd stuff in your mouth to keep you quiet while I harvested your organs. I told you that little story so you understand not to fuck with those I love. Okay?" she'd asked before kissing him on the cheek and finishing her Porterhouse like she'd hadn't just threatened him with death.

Yes, he liked that woman ... and respected her. He might've even been a little bit scared of her. Ragnar deserved her because he couldn't even think of any other male who could handle her. He didn't know what Mr. Jendayi was like but he sure as shit raised some kind of daughters. No wonder Ragnar loved her. No wonder he was willing to give up a Kingdom for her.

He'd known that Aviva was going to leave as Karimia had told him so.

"Aviva can't stay here, Wieland. She *won't* stay here," she'd said as they watched Aviva making the Crown Prince piggyback her.

Deep down, he'd known that but he wasn't in love with Aviva; he was in love with her sister. Turning to her he asked, "What about you Karimia? Can you stay here?"

"Well, it the choice was Germany or death, I'm sure I could choke it out but truthfully, as cool as Europe is with all of its castles and history, I wouldn't like it for very long. Eventually, I'd find reasons to hate it so I wouldn't feel guilty about leaving."

He could respect that answer. How could he not? It was the truth.

"Would you find a reason to eventually leave me?" He asked.

"If you ever give me a reason to be with you, Wieland, there wouldn't be any leaving ... on either of our parts. I mean you would be free to try and leave but I doubt you'd get very far on two broken legs."

“Damn, that’s harsh.”

“That’s truth. Love is forever. My daddy loves my mama. My granddaddy loves my grandmamma. My uncles love my aunts. All the time, not just when it’s convenient. I like how they love the males in our family love their females and I won’t accept anything less.”

“I wouldn’t love you so much, if you would,” he said as he leaned in and drank from her lips.

He’d never even tried to pretend that he didn’t love Karimia. An honest male (albeit a tiny bit domineering), to deny what he felt for her would be the worst kind of lie. It’d be a cardinal sin against his soul. He loved Karimia, loved her fire. She gave him everything she had whenever she touched him and he returned it ten-fold. They never did gentle; their lovemaking was always brimming with passion that threatened to spill over. Her touch scorched him. Traveling down deep inside of him, it ignited his soul.

He planned on giving Karimia a reason to accept him but he also knew that he had to give her time to come to grips with the fact of who and what he was. He was more than a Deonté male; he was his father’s son. Hygebeorht Deonté was a man of strong passions and even stronger convictions. He hadn’t simply tossed his prince hood away for his beliefs; he’d gone all United Nations and refused to recognize it as a legitimate government. Any government that fell short of his high standards quite simply wasn’t a government. This is why he lived in virtual isolation, but this is why he loved and respected his father so much.

He loved Karimia, and he would prove that to her. Karimia, Karimia, Karimia. She matched him in every way and exceeded him in others. Now

that he knew she was amenable to having him as a husband, he had to show her who he was inside. He was a male who didn't quit ... anything.

"There is no place that you can go that I won't come for you," he promised between kisses knowing that she would return home with her sister.

She'd responded with her body, flipping him onto his back and vigorously riding him. He didn't push her for a response, not really expecting one. However, having superb hearing, he caught her words she whispered moments before she succumbed to slumber.

"You say that now without really knowing me. What if follow me and realize that you don't really want me; you simply wanted the adventure?"

He didn't know everything about her but he knew the most important thing he thought as he crushed her to his chest and bit deeply into her shoulder: she was his, and she was staying that way.

These last few days had been hard on him. He'd wanted to wait for Ragnar to come to his senses but he wasn't sure that he would. In that case, he'd simply leave without him. He loved Ragnar, but he'd leave without so much as a goodbye. As much as he loved Ragnar, he loved Karimia like nobody's business.

He'd suspected that Ragnar loved Aviva just as deeply not simply because he hadn't made love to her, but because he hadn't. Still, when he'd let her leave without using his position to stop her, without having first marked her, he was worried that his cousin might not be the male he thought he was. Seeing him at his door had given him hope. Hearing his words had deepened that hope. Feeling the conviction in Ragnar's voice

and witnessing his tears as he vowed to give it all up had let him know that his hopes were well-placed.

Pulling him into the first hug they'd shared, perhaps the first hug that Ragnar had ever received that wasn't part of a photo op, he held onto his brother needing to give the hug as much as Ragnar needed to receive it. Sometimes he forgot that he was actually two years older than Ragnar. It was times like this that reminded him of that fact. Pulling back, he looked his cousin in the eyes with a new kind of respect shining in his own.

"Have room for one more where you're going?"

He smiled noting the surprise on Ragnar's face. "You should know that Aviva threatened to kill the entire royal family if I hurt her sister and I asked her if she had time could she kill you first."

"Love talk. I considered braining you to death every day for that first year and a half," he said as he gathered his own personals. "I see we're traveling light."

"Not much call for tailored suits in the wilds of Alaska or the backwoods of Georgia ... or a Mercedes for that matter being that I'm not sure that they even have roads."

"Goody, we get the privilege of building our own," he said as he picked up his satchel and waited for Ragnar to walk out of the door.

Traveling light no one thought anything of their travels. There was no way that the Deonté princes could go anywhere without an entourage. Good thing that neither of them were princes anymore. Heading to the car, neither of them looked back as they sped away from the castle. There was no point in looking back when their futures lay ahead of them.

The Journey 3:2

Delice-Patrale, Georgia was experiencing a little bit of a heat spell. While the locals weren't too much bothered by it, knowing how to keep cool and stay inside, everyone else was bothered by the scorching heat, especially outsiders. Neither Ragnar nor Wieland envisioned ever having the opportunity to visit someplace where the temperature was hotter than actual Hellfire, yet here they were. Smack dab in the middle of another sun that no one knew they had.

Surrounded by forests, one would be hard-pressed to realize that two towns lay somewhere in the midst. Still, they waded in, cranking the air-conditioning as high as it would go. The air thick with the heat, secrecy and the smell of magnolia, gardenia, and wildflowers rent the air.

Many things set these twin towns apart from the Deonté estates. There was the unbearable heat, the lack of palaces and servants to fill them, the unbearable heat, and also the unbearable heat that was hovered a smidge above the hundred degree mark. Despite the heat, the primary thing that set Delice-Patrale apart from the Deonté estates was the fact that it was home to Aviva and Karimia Jendayi. And then there was the heat, which had surpassed the temperature of hell about ten degrees ago. It wasn't even noon yet ... or summer.

Turning to Wieland he spoke. "If Aviva ever gives me any trouble in our mating I'm going to remind her of this day and the fact that I literally came to hell to get her."

"And knowing her she's going to remind you that she didn't ask you to come."

“True, but then I’ll lay her on her back and spend the next few hours coming.”

“In this heat?”

“There’s no heat hot enough to dissuade me from touching my mate.”

“That might be so but can you pull over and ask for directions so that we can find them and perhaps talk them into going someplace slightly cooler than the core of Hell? Damn, I hope they’re in Alaska,” he said.

“Stop whining, it’s so un-Deonté like of you,” Ragnar scolded. “On the plane you were all like, ‘I’d follow Karimia anywhere.’”

“This is true, and then I’d drag her luscious self somewhere cool before I ravished her.”

“Didn’t she make you, *her* bitch?”

“She did and I enjoyed every delicious minute,” Wieland sighed.

Finally glimpsing a structure after what seemed like hours of driving, Ragnar pulled over. Walking in the small convenience store, he approached the older gentleman behind the counter. The gentleman didn’t even bother to acknowledge his presence. Neither did any other of the store’s patrons.

“Is this Delice-Patrale?” he asked.

“Whatcha want, boy?” he asked without even bothering to look up from the small television that broadcasted a baseball game.

Not allowing the gentleman’s dismissive manner to deter him, he continued. “We’re looking for Aviva and Karimia Jendayi.”

The presence of two big white males of means didn’t do shit to garner them any attention but Aviva and Karimia’s names got them more than they’d been counting on. Not only did he look away from the television, he pulled a gun on him, as did the elderly lady beside him ... and every adult in the store. Okay, this was not going well.

“Perhaps you need to be asking another question like ‘*how do we get back to the highway?*’” the gentleman suggested.

“Or you can ask something along the lines of ‘*can you direct us to where the white people are?*’” the older woman chimed in.

“Or they can ask directions to the emergency room over in Azod,” someone else suggested.

“See boy, there’s all kinds of questions you can ask, but that one about them girls ... that ain’t one y’all should be asking.”

“Are y’all the pigs?” someone asked.

“What are ‘the pigs?’” he returned.

“Obviously they’re not, Mrs. Harper. Put that rifle away before you hurt somebody.”

“That’s why I got it out - to hurt somebody or a couple of somebody’s she said.

“That’s why everybody thinks you’re crazy.”

“They should, because it’s the truth.”

“Nevertheless put it away. Why you have a rifle that can take down an elephant I don’t know.”

“Just in case. One never knows what’s lurking in these woods. Could be ninjas, could be lions, could be a couple of white boys poking their noses into business that don’t need minding by nobody.”

“A, stop watching Kung Fu Theater; b, lions aren’t native to Georgia; and, c; I’m telling your son.”

“Tattle. Morgan knows who the boss is.”

Ragnar listened to the back and forth with a look of utter confusion clouding his face. That lady holding the high-powered rifle might act like she was crazy, old lady but right the ‘old lady’ bit was a ruse and right up

under the crazy was the piercing glare of a hunter. A predator himself he *knew* that look and he wasn't trying to trigger it. He also knew rifles and knew that rifle wasn't for show; it was for hunting big game. Instinctively knowing that she was the one to whom he should appeal, he turned and introduced himself.

"Ma'am, I am Ragnar Deonté and this is my cousin Wieland Deonté."

"Ain't never heard a name like Ragnar before but Wieland's an alright name. Popular name for country singers."

Having no idea what she was talking about but glad that she wasn't squeezing that trigger, he continued. At least he tried to.

"Where you from, boy. You talk funny like you from one of them places where you drink warm tea with your pinky sticking out."

"We're from Germany, ma'am."

"Oh, where Hitler's from?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

"You a Nazi?"

"No ma'am, we're not Nazi's."

"That's good because I'd kill you if you said 'yes.'"

"Not that I'm trying to tempt you-anymore so than you may be now-to kill me but how do you know that I'm telling the truth?"

"Uh, Ragnar, stop talking. That very thing is why Karimia always shushed you from talking. You're not helping the situation," Wieland threw in.

"I was just asking."

"Well, don't. I don't feel like being shot to death today," Wieland said.

"Hey, both of you, stop arguing," Mrs. Nanny Harper commanded.

"Yes, ma'am," he and Wieland snapped.

“Hmm, obviously you’ve spent a great deal of time in their company. I know you ain’t lying now for sure. If you’d been a Nazi, either one of them girls would’ve killed you, maybe harvested your organs and sold them on the black market, used your skulls for ashtrays.”

“Are you their grandmother because Aviva did explain a rather gruesome scenario involving the involuntary removal of my organs before killing me,” Wieland said.

“What did you do to her?”

“Nothing, that was just her warning me,” Wieland said.

“Ahh, so you must be the girls’ friends because they shonuff don’t warn their enemies. Now what you want with them- not that we’re admitting to knowing them or anything,” she said.

“We want to marry them,” Ragnar answered without shame.

If these people were Aviva’s family, than they were going to be his family too. From everything she’d told him, their family was a close-knit bunch. While there might be secretive, they obviously didn’t have secrets amongst them.

“Where’s the rings?” Mrs. Nanny Harper demanded.

Pulling the thick, embossed gold bands from their pockets, they held them out for her to inspect.

“Why no diamonds in those rings?”

“Aviva hates everything I choose so I wouldn’t even presume to pick out a ring she has to wear, plus she doesn’t seem the type to be impressed by diamonds.”

“Karimia already carries my mark, an engagement ring would be redundant at this point however if she wants one I will certainly get her the finest there is available.”

“You marked her?” Ragnar asked along with everyone else in the store.

“Absolutely, that woman is my mate!” Wieland said unrepentant.

“Don’t know how her daddy’s going to feel about that boy. What you got to offer her?”

“Just me, ma’am, just me,” Wieland said.

“You think that’s enough?”

“It’s going to have to be because I love her. I need her.”

“What about you, Blondie?” she asked as she pointed her rifle at him.

“I didn’t mark her but I’m not going to let her go.”

“Pretty words but whatcha willing to give up for her?”

“I already gave it up,” he answered.

“Hmm. Well, they ain’t here. In case you ain’t noticed it’s hot. Because I’m feeling generous, I’ll tell you where they are,” she said. “And I’m going to tell you something else. You hurt them girls and there ain’t no where you can go that we can’t get to you. You got that?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Good, now I’m going to tell you something else. Their daddy ain’t as easily impressed as I am. You go to this address and no further. You do not step on Rabershell Territory without an invitation. You try it; you’re going to wake up dead. Her daddy is real particular about his territory. He’s got women and children there and the quickest way to die is to go there uninvited.”

Turning to the man at the counter, she instructed him to write down the address. Handing it to them, she gave them one more piece of advice. “Don’t forget what I said: any of it. Tell their daddy that Nanny Harper gave you the address.”

Taking the paper, he looked it over surprised to see coordinates rather than an address. “Coordinates, ma’am?” he asked not wanting to assume anything.

“Yep, and if you can’t find it then you don’t deserve them girls.”

Bowing, he thanked her. “You’re right ma’am. Thank you,” he said as he grabbed Wieland who was busy digging around the cooler for snacks.

Family 3:3

With their wives ensconced on their laps, Bering and Darioush remained silent as the rocking motion of the chairs lulled their wives to sleep. They could do without the porches, without the rocking chairs that adorned them, and the heat that hovered around sixty degrees but their wives were enjoying themselves and that was that. Sharing a look with Bering over their wives' heads, both males smiled.

The silence was broken by his wife's words. "There's someone coming."

Bering looked down into his wife's dark brown eyes and was again struck by her beauty. He was also struck by her senses. Despite being human, both she and her mother tracked just as good as most shifters. They also instinctively knew when someone was coming although that could've been a southern thing as all of the Harper women seemed to know when visitors would be arriving. Sure enough a few moments later the walkie talkie blipped.

"Boys, there's some white boys here asking for y'all," their mother-in-law's voice came over.

"Good evening, Mama Songs. How are you doing?" he asked. The visitors could wait until after he'd inquired about her.

"I'm doing just fine. I like my new toy," she said referring to the snowmobile that he and Bering had purchased her.

"You're being careful with it, right?" he asked knowing how she liked speed.

"Boy, I'm the mama here; you're the baby. I'm the one who should be asking if you're being careful."

“Yes ma’am,” he said.

“How’s my other baby doing?” she asked.

Looking over at a smiling Bering, he mouthed “human lover” to which Bering responded with his middle finger.

“Your baby’s doing fine, Mama Songs. All three of them are.”

“You must be forgetting how to count, Darioush. All y’all are my babies and that includes y’all’s babies so don’t act new.”

Darioush frowned watching Bering mock him with silent ‘ha ha’s.

“Yes ma’am,” he said knowing that he’d been properly reprimanded.

“You want to know about these visitors or not? I ain’t got all day to be fooling with y’all youngins. I got stuff to do.”

“You aren’t even thinking about going hunting are you?”

“Maybe,” she said quickly.

That ‘maybe’ caused everyone on the porch to snap to attention.

“Mama, you know you aren’t supposed to go hunting. If you need something you’re to tell us and we will send someone over with it,” Bering growled.

Bering was right particular about Mama Songs.

He could practically hear Mama Songs smile. She liked it when Bering showed emotion-not that he did much.

“Y’all never let me do anything,” she whined.

“We let you do plenty, Mama Songs, but we want you around for a long, long, long time, so you’re not allowed to do certain things. You can’t take care of your spoiled, little son if you’re rotting away in prison for shooting a bunch of people,” he teased.

“Fine, then. Damn. Y’all are some mother hens if I ever saw any. What’s your name again boys,” she asked.

“Some German boys here sounding like they should be on Hogan’s Heroes. Ragnar and Wieland. What kind of fucked up names are those?”

He couldn’t help but smile hearing the boys’ perplexed responses.

“Those are the names our parents gave us ma’am.”

“Well, if you’re going to be out here, you’re going to have to be called something else. “How about June bug and Pookie?” she teased.

Everyone on the porch smiled imagining the looks of horror on them boys’ faces. Mama Songs had run the Jendayi Mystery Lodge for over two decades and she was still trying to get anyone of the visitor’s to agree to being called those ridiculous nicknames.

Suddenly the porch became a real crowded place. Turning the radio up, their children wandered out onto the porch. Automatically, his eyes went to his girls. They wore ridiculous looks. Obviously, the Crown Prince and his cousin had made strong impressions on them. Just as obvious, his girls had made even stronger impressions on the princes being that they’d not only trekked to Delice-Patrale, but to the wilds of Alaska to see them.

“Okay,” they agreed without hesitation.

“I get to be Pookie,” one of them called in the same fashion his girls called ‘shotgun!’

“Fine! Stop touching things. Those cookies aren’t yours.”

“But they’re sitting right here in a basket that says ‘help yourself.’”

“Fine, just be quiet. I want to see Aviva and you’re holding me back from that.”

Scratch that. His girls hadn’t simply made a strong impression if they’d agreed to the nicknames, his girls were about to get proposed to. Those boys had better be baring proposals if they thought to set foot on Rabershell Territory.

“What do you think, boys? Should I give them the keys to the snowmobiles?”

“They’re polar bears. Give them the directions and let them find their way here on foot. Any boys thinking to keep company with my nieces have to prove themselves.” Bering said like the overprotective uncle that he was.

“And tell them to be prepared for battle when they get here,” he added for good measure.

“That’s hardly fair making them fight after trekking all the way there on all fours,” Mama Songs said.

“It’s not meant to be fair Mama. No boy gets to simply waltz in here and take our baby girls simply because they want them.”

“Alright then. I’ll let them know. Hold on.”

She came back on a few minutes later. “How long should it take them to get there on foot?”

“Polars can run about five and a half miles per hour so if they walk it; it’s going to take them a good ten hours. They run at about forty miles per hour, so if they sprint the whole way a little over an hour. If they’re not here in two hours they can forget it though,” Darioush said.

“You’re a hard man, Darioush.”

“I got a reason to be Mama Songs. Just like Daddy taught us, I’m not giving my daughters away. A man wants them, they have to earn them. I had to earn Selah; Bering had to earn Prea; and can’t nobody doubt that Emery earned Oberlin.”

“Y’all are good boys. We’re proud of you, you know.”

“Thank you, Mama,” both he and Bering said.

Looking over at Bering he noticed some wetness in his eyes. “Are you crying?” he asked.

“I’m sweating so shut up, Darioush.”

“Boys, don’t make me come out there. Now act like you got some sense. Soon as I gave Pookie and Junebug the directions they sprinted out of here like someone was after them.”

Turning to his daughters, he summoned them over. Thankful that they’d made the rockers so large and sturdy (they were more like rocking benches than chairs), he sat a girl on each of his thighs. Of course that meant that he had to pretend to lose feeling in his legs. And of course they ‘oh daddy’ed him and hugged him. Kissing the tops of their heads and pulling them close, he asked them the one question he knew that he’d have to someday ask.

“You love them boys?”

“They’re alright,” they both answered.

Both he and Bering laughed their asses off. Damn, if Aviva and Karimia weren’t just like their mama and aunt. Feisty, for no damn reason at all. He didn’t have to worry about his daughters settling. It was obvious that they had no plans to do any such thing. Oh, those poor Crown Princes. He couldn’t wait.

The clock hadn’t even hit an hour when he heard the crashing sounds of two polar bears in a dead run. Whatever else they were, those boys were in good damn shape, which was a good thing being that they were about to be tested further.

“Are you ready to test these young bucks, brother?” Bering asked.

“Indeed,” Darioush.

“You going to hurt them, daddy?” Aviva asked.

“Do my best to,” he answered truthfully.

“Yay!” Karimia cheered.

“Don’t hurt them too bad, okay, Daddy?” Aviva asked.

“I can’t promise you that, baby. Those boys need to prove that they can protect you. At least don’t let Menace jump in,” she asked.

“Menace will not be jumping in,” Selah promised.

Hearing *that* tone in his wife’s voice, he knew Queen Selah was talking.

Sighing, he spoke. “I love you but you certainly know how to take all of the fun out of a good maiming,” he said as he kissed her then quietly shifted.

Of course his shifting didn’t stop Selah from speaking. Sidling up real close to him, she whispered in his ear all loud and whatnot. “That might be true but I shonuff know how to bring a whole lot of fun in the bedroom.”

He was so hot for her he momentarily considered delaying the maiming, but he couldn’t. Gently nicking her collarbone, he drew the tiniest bit of blood. Licking the wound, he growled at her letting her know what was in store for her as soon as he was finishing learning these boys something. It was going to have to be fast because he had a woman to bed ... all night long.

Ragnar and Wieland took off running as soon as they received the directions. Oblivious to everything except for getting to their women, they didn’t waste time walking or even running. They sprinted full out. Though Mr. Jendayi gave them two hours to get there, they made it in under one. Crashing through the forest they were met by two polar bears. One was midnight black and the other was neon white ... and both of them were

furious. Well fuck that, they were furious too. Despite the fact that both bears were close to eleven feet on their hind legs, despite the fact that this was their territory, and despite the fact that neither he nor Wieland had slept in the past twenty-four hours and had just finished sprinting over fifty miles, they didn't come all the way to Rabershell Territory only to watch some other polars move in on their females. Standing on their own hind legs, they answered the challenging growls with challenges of their own and charged.

Featuring sharp teeth, deadly claws, and raw power, the battle was bloody and intense. Both he and Wieland had spent countless hours sparring in both human and bear form but it soon became clear that they were overmatched. Despite that unfortunate fact, they didn't know how to quit, not when their mates were the reasons that they fought. As the battle waged on, it became clear that the other polars were simply toying with them. They didn't go for kill blows; they merely settled for blows that hurt like hell but did no real damage. If they weren't going to kill them they needed to get out of their way. Digging their heels in, he and Wieland doggedly fought, pushing back, wanting, needing to get to their mates.

Not sure how long they battled, but tiring, he and Wieland found themselves swatted into a row of ancient hardwood trees. From their size it was clear that they'd weathered many winters and wild animals. Two more polar bears weren't going to fell them; still, it would've been nice if the row of trees had some give in them. Dazed, they picked themselves up with every intention of going back to the fight. Instead of a fight, they got an earful of angry females.

“Darioush, Bering, stand down! You’ve had your fun with those boys now leave them be. Your daughters are in here worrying that you’re going to kill them and that’s a pleasure that they want for themselves.”

With a growl of discontent their challengers backed off and shifted into human form. Too tired to do anything besides shift themselves, both he and Wieland simply lay sprawled in the snow trying to catch their breath. Once they caught it, they’d crawl around looking for their dignity.

They didn’t get a chance to catch their breath or look for their dignity. Aviva and Karimia came running out of the cabin full of fire. They might be tired but it didn’t take a rocket scientist to realize that their anger was directed at them.

Making the mistake of attempting to catch them in their arms, both he and Wieland received a face full of fist for their efforts.

“I can’t believe you hit my daddy and uncle,” Aviva screamed right before executing a back flip.

If he hadn’t been so surprised by her back flip, he might’ve had time to react when he saw her shift midair. As it was he’d been so busy ogling her that by the time he realized that she was a polar bear shifter, he had six hundred fifty pounds of female polar bear growling in his face. Despite the inherent danger, he was turned the fuck on. Shifting, with every intention of taking her down (albeit gently), he simply wasn’t prepared for so much fight. Female polars generally weren’t so aggressive unless their cubs were nearby.

Trust that his mate would go against the grain of general polar bear behavior being that she went against the grain of general human behavior. Though he had no intentions of hurting her, he also had no intentions of getting another face full of hardwood tree. Growling in response, he used

his superior size to cage her in. Well, that was his intent, but Aviva wasn't having that. Eluding him, she danced around him swatting him with her heavy paws, slashing at him with her lethal claws. Standing on his hind legs, he loosed a mighty roar, telling her without words that he was tired of her aggressiveness. Instead of backing down, she stood on her own hind legs and roared back ... right before charging him.

Despite being female, it was clear that Aviva wasn't intimidated by his larger size. It was also clear that she had spent many hours training. Receiving yet another slap from her that had his ears ringing, it became clear that she was a first rate student. There was no way that he could fight her without hurting her and the last thing he'd ever do was hurt Aviva whether in human form or bear form. Shifting back to human form, he appealed to her.

"Aviva, I do not want to fight you," he said.

Watching her shift back, he smiled when she answered. "You should've thought about that when you hit my daddy and uncles. Didn't I tell you about messing with my family? Did you think that I was lying?"

"Does it matter that your daddy and uncle are perfectly capable of defending themselves. You may have missed it but they were handing me and Wieland our asses."

"Don't care. Don't mess with my family!" She screamed and jumped up and kicked him in the face.

Going sprawling in the snow from the force of her kick, he guessed that Wieland was facing a similar situation. When Wieland landed a few feet away from him courtesy of an uppercut from Karimia, he knew that he was facing the exact situation.

"What should we do?" he asked.

“I guess that we’re going to have to take another ass whipping because there’s no way we can subdue them without hurting them. And quite frankly, I’d rather fight their daddy and uncle some more than hurt one hair on Karimia’s head.”

“Same,” he said. “Then again, maybe we can outrun them?”

“That’s a possibility.”

Their conversation was interrupted by the sound of a snowmobile making its way to them. Seeing the rifle strapped to the rider’s back, all rational thought fled. Leaping up, he sprinted over to the rider intent on ripping the rifle from its shoulder when the rider removed her helmet revealing Mrs. Harper. Pushing him out of the way, she went over to the girls and started cussing.

“Y’all leave Pookie and Junebug alone! They’re good boys, now act like you got the sense that God gave you. And all of y’all put some damn clothes on. If I wanted to see naked ass all damn day, me and your granddaddy would have naked day in our bedroom.”

“Are you still having sex?” Aviva asked a picture of pure horror crossing her face.

“Girl, I put it on your granddaddy every chance I get,” she said.

Her proclamation was met by a chorus of groans by most present and a ‘damn right’ by her husband. All of them were drowned out by Karimia’s contribution which consisted of whatever she’d eaten. From the size of the pool of vomit, it was everything she’d ever eaten.

That got everybody’s attention, especially when Mrs. Harper threw in her comments.

“Look like somebody’s pregnant. From the way Pookie’s looking at you, obviously someone’s been humping like bunnies. Dibs on the great grandbaby,” she said as she turned to him.

“Come on Junebug, their daddy and uncle going to want to have a “talk” with Pookie. Don’t hurt that boy too bad, boys,” she said as she marched into the house.

Seeing the flash of white and black fur zoom past him, he gritted his teeth feeling bad for Wieland who was getting ready to have a rough rest of the day.

Welcome 3:4

In the past thirty-six hours Ragnar had abdicated the throne, experienced hell-like heat in the backwoods of Georgia, been threatened with all manner of weapons by people who had no problem using them, trekked to Alaska where he'd been nicknamed Junebug, ran a marathon in record time, had his ass handed to him by Darioush Jendayi and Bering No Last Name Given (who by the way told him in no uncertain terms that he hated his father), discovered that his mate was a polar bear shifter and royalty, been smacked around by his mate- Aviva Jendayi, and learned that he was going to be an uncle. Damn. Yet, lying in a bed recovering from his "Welcome to America" experience, he was the happiest that he'd ever been because his future was under the same roof as him. She still wasn't speaking to him but she was still here. Now all he had to do was convince Aviva to mate with him and he'd be complete.

After meeting the man, he understood exactly why every other word out of Aviva's mouth was about her daddy. The male was impressive ... in every way as was his wife, not that he was looking at her being that he was interesting in keeping his eyes in working order. While he'd only known King Darioush for a few hours, he knew exactly what Queen Selah meant to him. She wasn't just a mate to him; she was life to him. An Alaskan bush pilot, Queen Selah was the very embodiment of the Alaskan Frontier. Wild, untamable, and breathtaking, she exuded confidence not because she considered herself above everyone else (like his own queen) but because she was so well-loved.

The males here were different and he found that he wanted to be like them. Looking over at Wieland, who had to be carried to this room after

Mrs. Harper had told Kings Darioush and Bering that they were finished with him, he sighed. He hated to do this but Wieland was going to have to drag his ass up.

“Wieland, get up,” he ordered.

“Maybe you missed it, but my body doesn’t exactly work anymore,” Wieland gasped out.

Hearing the sound of his voice, Ragnar involuntarily winced. Damn, it sounded like Wieland’s voice didn’t work either. Still, he was going to have to get his ass up, even if that meant that he had to carry his ass.

“I didn’t miss it but being that you impregnated the King’s daughter, be lucky that you are alive enough to work. Didn’t you hear what Queen Selah said?”

“No, because my ears were filled with blood at the time.”

“Well, yeah. “Normally, when the Kings battle, they don’t leave their opponents alive.”

“Yay, for me,” Wieland said sarcastically. “Although I’m sure that there were some moments that I wasn’t alive.”

“Well, that being the case, we need to go talk to the Kings.”

“How the hell did they end up with two kings?”

“Apparently, Mrs. Harper decreed it.”

“Well that explains it. Grandma rocks!”

“How’d she become your grandmother? If she’s your grandmother, she’s my grandmother too.”

“She became my grandmother the moment she made her sons stop whipping my ass. Plus, she gave me a nickname, that makes me hers,” Wieland said proudly.

“Well, I have a nickname too,” Ragnar said.

“Yeah, Junebug, you do.”

“Well, Pookie,” he said as he dragged him up. “Get up and prove that you’re male enough to deserve that nickname.”

Darioush was not happy to have the ass whipping that he was giving that boy interrupted. He’d never left an opponent even a little bit alive. If anyone other than Mama Songs had told him to stop, he would’ve killed them too, but it was Mama Songs who’d told him to stop and that boy was the father of his daughter’s baby. Filthy boy. How dare some boy look at his baby?

“Sweetheart, you need to calm down,” Selah’s sweet voice slid through his anger.

“And don’t even think about dragging those boys out of bed and beating them some more,” she said with that look that advised him to heed her words ... or else.

He never wanted to find out what the ‘or else’ part entailed although he’d come damned close a time or two before. All it’d taken to bring him back from the brink of his stupidity was for her to threaten to leave. Of course Selah didn’t threaten, she just did. The one thing that she couldn’t stomach was him putting himself in danger. The last time he’d done it, he’d come home to an empty house. As good a tracker as he was, it’d taken him a long time to find her ... and that was only because she’d wanted to be found so she could fuck him up.

“If you’re so gung ho to make me a widow than, I don’t need to be here!” she said as she hit him with a cinder block.

“I’m calm, my Queen,” he assured her.

“No, you’re not.”

"They're my babies, Selah," he said.

"And I'm my daddy's baby, but you still put your filthy boy hands on me," she said.

"Only after I married you!"

"If my parents had elected to stay in Cottonmills, you would've simply come back to Alaska and forgot all about me?" she asked.

"That's not fair, Selah. You know damned well that I would've taken you with me. Don't do that to me, baby. Don't ask me to imagine life without you when you are my life."

"Those boys came all the way from Europe, gave up everything to come here. Do you doubt that they love our babies?"

"I don't have to like it."

"But you have to like the way that they stood against you knowing that they didn't have a hope in anybody's Heaven or Earth of winning."

"They're greenhorns."

"But they're strong and determined and if you and Bering taught them, think how safe our babies will be."

"They're safe now."

"Is there any such thing as them being too safe?"

"I hate it when you use all of your fancy logic," he pouted.

"And we're going to have some grandbabies," she purred. "And they moved here, which means you get to continuing spoiling your babies *and* you get to spoil your babies' babies."

"Okay, fine. I won't kill them."

"And you can't let anyone else kill them."

"Fine."

"Thank you, Darioush."

His shifter ears picked up the sounds of those boys coming out on the porch. Growling low in his chest, he forced himself to be still.

“King Darioush,” Ragnar said.

“I don’t use the title.”

“Very well, Mr. Jendayi, we deserved everything you put us through. We love your daughters. We can buy them anything they want but the only thing that they really need is the one thing we can’t buy. Can you teach us how to be like you? Like the males here?”

Whatever Darioush had thought that they’d say or ask, that wasn’t it. Turning to look at his mate, he touched his forehead to hers and took a deep breath. Kissing her, he lifted his head and looked into the eyes of his boys knowing that they were going to be a part of his family ... and not hating it so much now.

“If you ever hurt them, I’ll kill you,” Darioush said.

“And I’ll stand beside my brother and help him,” Bering said from the steps. “And I don’t use my title either, but you will call my mate by hers and my nieces by theirs.”

“We understand,” both boys said.

Respite 3:5

Aviva loved the dawn in Rabershell Territory. Okay, the truth was that she loved Rabershell Territory period. Already a special place because it was Jendayi land, it was extra special because it was named for her great-great-great grandmother. Her great-great-great grandmother's given name was Rabi'a but southerners had a long and storied history of fucking up people's names. Southern pronunciation of foreign names combined with low literacy rates back in the day led to her great-great-great-great grandmother's name being pronounced as 'ray-burr' instead of 'rrrah-bee-uh'. After her little wild out that ended with her master's murder, her execution, and her great-great-great grandmother's pregnancy, her curse came to be known as Raber's Hell especially when it seemed that all males in the ex-master's line came to be hunted to extinction. Shame.

Raber's Hell was also what Jendayi females were known for bringing when males got out of line, which thankfully wasn't often. Learning about the legend of Rabi'a, the Harper women had incorporated it into their lives just as they'd incorporated so many of the Jendayi ways – with a style and grace that was unmatched. The women in their family were strong and nobody did 'fucking shit up' like they did-not even the Jendayi males or Harper men. Her grandmamma and momma only had to act like they were about to bring it and things settled down quick, fast and in a hurry.

Wrapping her hands around her mug of hot chocolate, she began her morning ritual, which involved doing a whole lot of nothing, but she was allowed. Her daddy had said and her mama had backed him up. So there. Taking a deep breath, she slowly released it. Oh, she loved it here. The sweet scent of pine perfumed the air and apart from the sounds of wildlife and the land waking up, it was silent. She tended to like her quiet

preferring it over the sounds of too many cars, too many people going places they didn't want to go, too fast ... going through life too fast.

It was days like this that she really liked the weather. Not too cold, not too warm, it was just right. Unlike in Patrale, the heat was nonexistent, but the winters were harsh, which is why she, Karimia, and their sidekick Ain't I found their way to Patrale during the winter months.

Taking another deep breath, she stretched out on the rocker and got her relaxation on. Unfortunately Aviva's early morning ritual was ruined by the sound of Ragnar who was not only singing but singing in German of all damned things. Exactly *what* he was singing only the big Guy or Gal knew and she said that having a working knowledge of German.

"Are you going to do that all morning or do I need to get my daddy to "convince" you to stop making that infernal racket?"

"I'll stop if you give my lips something else to do," he said as he settled his large form next to her.

"You are so incorrigible. You know my daddy's just a few rooms away and considering what he and my uncle already did to poor Wieland, who is now known as 'Pookie,' touching me should be the last thing that you want to do."

"And still, it's the *only* thing I want to do," he said as he pulled her in his lap and gently kissed her.

"Ragnar," she sighed.

Yes sighed, dammit but how could she do anything else. Though she could feel Ragnar's power, he touched her with nothing but gentleness. Her mug of chocolate all but forgotten, she wound her arms around his neck and kissed him like she'd been dreaming of. That is, she kissed him like Jendayi and Harper females kissed their men- like she meant it.

Straddling him, she ground her breasts and hips into him, grabbed a handful of his hair, and put it on him. There was nothing chaste about the way that she kissed him. If it got any hotter, a film crew would be in the background and there'd be a movie with 'does Ragnar' somewhere in the title.

Regardless of how she'd tried to pretend that this male didn't affect her, regardless of her best intentions to harden her heart, Ragnar just got to her. There was just something about Ragnar and his fineness, and his intellect, and the way he humbled himself before her daddy, and his everything. She might've tried to ignore him but her body couldn't ignore him. Heat emanated from between her thighs, her nipples puckered, her breath came in short gasps, her heart pounded.

Ignoring Ragnar's attempts to dislodge her, she kicked her seduction into overdrive.

"Aviva, we have to stop, baby," he rasped.

"You have this much female on your lap and you want me to stop? If I stop, I'm going to find another male to finish this with," she threatened.

"And I'll kill him and leave his rotting corpse for your daddy to find and kill some more," he thundered.

"Well then shut up and let me finish what I was doing. Hold on tight if you can't handle," she said.

"I can handle, Aviva, I just don't think now is the time to be doing this."

"Whatever, my territory, my rules. Now shut up," she said and silenced him with her tongue and lips.

She was so deep into that kiss that she didn't realize that her daddy and uncle had stepped onto the porch until she heard her daddy's command.

"Aviva, go to your mother so that she can help you select something to wear at your wedding!"

Before she could get her bearings, she was gently extricated from her perch atop Ragnar's lap by her Uncle Bering and Ragnar was unceremoniously kicked (literally) off of the side of the porch-right through the railing.

"And stay the fuck off of my niece," Bering thundered.

"Um Uncle, I was on him," she tried to reason.

"Not caring," he said as he went to teach Ragnar some more manners.

Smiling because he was "fixin' to get hitched" as Grandmamma Songs had said, Ragnar took his beating like a man, meaning he fought back as hard as he could. Instead of making his in-laws angry, his defense actually brought a smile to the faces of the kings.

"Alright, that's enough for this morning," King Darioush said. "He needs to look halfway presentable at the wedding or Queen Selah will have a royal fit and Queen Prea will help her."

Dragged into the kitchen, a heaping plate of everything was set before him.

"Eat boy," his Grandmamma instructed.

Ragnar ate. As they ate they discussed wedding plans. Though he doubted the king and queen would come, he called them anyway. Experiencing the Jendayi-Harper, who despite welcoming them to the

family with a series of beatings and threats, made the formality that was the norm in the Deonté household, painfully obvious.

The Third Oh Shit 3:6

The sun was shining brightly. The sky had never been bluer. The stream that ran through the area had never been clearer. The snow had never been whiter, nor the forest so green, nor a day so absolutely beautiful. It was a perfect day for a wedding, a perfect day. Then again, any day, when Aviva was willing to stand before God and agree to be his mate was a perfect day. He hadn't wanted to wait another second, much less, three days but he did because the rest of the Jendayi-Harper clan had to get there and more importantly, they'd needed time to let the 'que age, whatever the hell that had meant. Still, he'd needed something decent to get married in so the short flight to San Francisco had been warranted. While there, he established an American bank account and purchased some gifts for his bride and the women in her family. Thinking about the custom-detailed helmet for his new Grandmamma, the t-shirts proclaiming that tail draggers do it best for his soon to be mother-in-law, the high-powered rifle for his soon to be sister-in-law, and the deed for the bookstore in Fairbanks for his mate, he couldn't help but smile. Strange gifts for some extraordinary women.

Queen Brunhild was not amused. She hadn't spent the last twenty-nine years expanding her empire just so that her one and only offspring could fuck it up by breeding some little (well, maybe not "little" per se as she'd seen the pictures of that girl), backwoods nobody and taint the Deonté bloodlines or mar her legacy. It was bad enough that her brother-in-law had turned out to be a bleeding heart liberal with a conscious (it was so outdated, just like the appendix) but at least he had the decency to marry

someone of impeccable breeding, not that she had any respect for his tree-hugging, hippy mate. But this, this was beyond the pale and she simply wasn't going to accept it. This girl had nothing, no status, no class, no hope in hell of her letting a union between her and her son happen.

Re-reading her offspring's letter once again, she zeroed in on the line that had her blue blood boiling. '*I love her.*' Ha! Love. Marrying for love was foolish, which is why she'd married for status. Already a princess, she'd had title and money, but she didn't have that title, which is why she'd married Ingwaz. Ingwaz had the Deonté looks, that wonderfully blue blood, and that beautiful, sensuous, gorgeous, lovely title-Crown Prince, which meant that one day he'd be king ... and she'd be queen. And that in a nutshell was the only reason that he had her.

Lucky bastard (well not literally, or she wouldn't have even given him a second glance despite all of his other pluses). Ingwaz had his uses and they all centered on that title because he wasn't shit as a mate. A virile man, Ingwaz spent his time between the thighs of any woman that would have him. Oh, she knew about his many trysts but she quite frankly couldn't bring herself to give a damn. She'd never give a damn unless he got one of them with cub, and then she'd not only give a damn, she'd dish up copious servings of hell to go with it. Ingwaz had his mistresses and she had the reins of power.

Trekking through this backwoods that masqueraded as a state in this land that masqueraded as a country, Brunhild couldn't keep the disdain off of her face or the disgust out of her voice. Regardless of how much Ragnar professed to love this girl, there was *no* way that he could want to be here.

Obviously, he was not in his right mind and neither was his cousin. She so didn't appreciate having to be ... anywhere that wasn't Europe.

They'd landed in Fairbanks hours ago only to be told that they'd have to take a train to some place called Denali and then hire a bush pilot or tail dragger to take them to the edge of Rabershell. Brunhild didn't know what a tail dragger was but after seeing the small Cessna she knew that she didn't want to know anymore.

"I am *not*. Getting. Into ... *that*," she'd said.

"Well, that's a good thing because with that attitude the pilot that owns these planes wouldn't fly your uppity ass to the edge of hell much less anywhere in her territory," some yahoo whose name she couldn't even bother learning said.

"Ugh, if we were in my kingdom, I'd have you executed," she said as she flounced off.

"Well, this ain't your territory so you can't do shit and in case you thinking about starting somethin' don't. You don't know these glacier or forests or snow drifts ... or the people and things that inhabit them. Now git."

Brunhild got not because she was afraid but because she didn't want to be there another second. She'd deal with that hillbilly later ... after she got the princes. Having no choice but to shift to polar form, she did so and made her way to Rabershell.

"Nervous?" Wieland asked.

"How can I be anything but excited as I'm marrying Aviva?"

"You think your mother will make an appearance?"

“The Queen might make an appearance- but I doubt it. My mother, however hasn’t made an appearance since she birthed me.”

“Congratulations, brother,” Wieland said and hugged him.

“Thank you and congratulations to you ... whenever you can get Karimia to say yes to all of that begging that you’ve spent every moment doing since you stepped foot in Alaska.”

“Not every moment, remember my voice didn’t work for the first bit of it.”

“Amongst other body parts.”

“Whatever, and I haven’t been begging; I’ve been pleading. There’s a difference.”

“It must be subtle like the difference between beige and cream.”

“Lucky you’re getting married today else I’d thrash you.”

“Gee, thanks. Are you going to wait for your parents to arrive before going through with your own mating?”

“As soon as Karimia says ‘yes’, the marriage takes place right then. I don’t give a shit who is present as long as my Karimia is there.”

“Shame to see such a powerful bear so completely whipped,” Ragnar said.

“At least I can see again,” Wieland said.

“There is that...” Ragnar started.

Their banter was interrupted by the sound of a chorus of *‘oh hell naws.’* Neither knew what triggered the ‘hell no’s and neither cared. They were both too concerned with getting to their mates to consider anything else. Shifting they ran full speed to the ruckus and stopped and shifted back when they came fur-to-fur with the one scene they didn’t want to see: the Jendayi facing down not just some of the Deonté Royal Guard but the

entire Deonté Royal Guard. Putting his body in front of a hopping mad Aviva, he zeroed in on the queen. The look on her face said more than she'd ever said to him in the whole of his life: she was royally pissed and she was sparing no expense to exact her revenge.

He'd never had a ... relationship ... with the queen (or the king) but he'd never wanted to stand against them, never thought he'd have to. Yet, he was going to go against not just the queen and king, but all of Europe. It was a battle that he'd gladly fight for Aviva.

Looking in the queen's eyes, he realized that she'd left him *no* choice. And as always the king went along with whatever his queen wished. Ragnar could almost feel his father's eyes straying over to Queen Selah and instead of being offended on her behalf; he found himself being scared for the king. Though it was difficult to kill a shifter, there were many ways a shifter could die ... and fucking with King Darioush's Queen was the leading cause of death in these parts.

Thinking of King Darioush and Queen Selah, he couldn't help but compare and contrast them with the couple who had sired him. Whereas his king gave in to all of the queen's wishes, the king didn't do it out of love for his queen. The king did anything she wished in order to continue his lifestyle. Whereas the queen accumulated power, the king accumulated mistresses and toys.

No point in wishing for a different past because he had a whole new future mapped out. The queen was who she was, as was the king. And he was no longer the boy he was before coming here. His musings were interrupted by King Darioush's warning.

"Do not step foot on this territory. This is Rabershell Territory and we will defend it."

“Well then you shall defend it to your deaths and then I shall take this territory and add it to all of the territories I already possess.”

“You can try,” Queen Selah taunted. “My husband has already warned you. Do not step foot on this territory.”

“That’s right because trespassers will be shot,” Grandmamma yelled out from her perch on her snowmobile.

“And survivors will be shot again,” Rev. Harper added.

“And deep-fried,” Oberlin finished.

Ragnar knew that they meant every word, felt every word. Looking over at the Jendayi-Harper clan, he looked at those he already loved, and those whom he had come to know ... and love. He knew they’d fight, knew that they were among the best fighters probably in all of the world. Still, they were sadly outnumbered ... but one thing gave him hope. The Jendayi-Harpers outgunned ... everybody and that included the royal guard.

Stepping forward, he asked his queen the only thing that he’d ever asked her.

“Queen, do not do this.”

“Return, Ragnar ... without that girl and I will leave her alive.”

“I cannot do that, queen nor will I allow you to harm her while I live.”

Ignoring his answer (just as she did everything that she didn’t like or agree with), she turned to Wieland. “You too, Wieland,” she began.

“You do not have the right to command me! If you touch Karimia I will...” he began.

“Not do shit, because I will straight fuck that trick up,” Karimia yelled.

“Return, now!” the queen said.

“I will not.”

“Obviously, you are not in your right mind because there is no way you would choose *this* piece of dirt over the beauty of Europe, *these* people over your own, *that* woman over the princess I have selected for you.”

“I’m in my right mind.”

“You abdicated, there is no way you could be in your right mind to give the crown up,” she screamed.

“My father gave it up,” Wieland interjected.

“Your father was and still is a fool! Return and I will spare this village.”

“No,” he said.

“You might want to reconsider your answer,” she said and stepped aside.

The ground shook. No, it literally trembled beneath the sound of shifters coming. These weren’t just any shifters; these were the most dangerous shifters in all of Europe. Tears filled his eyes, pain filled his heart. They might’ve had a chance against the Deonté Royal Guard, but they stood no chance against these mercenaries. These fighters did not know the meaning of mercy or honor. Turning to Aviva, he pulled her close and touched his lips to hers. He poured everything he had into that kiss, everything he was, everything he ever hoped to be. He loved Aviva, he loved her and he told her so with that kiss.

“I love you, Aviva, and as such I will never allow harm to come to you,” he began.

“I love you too,” she said. “Granddaddy, bust out that bit from the Bible so we can get to the ‘I do’. We got a war to kick off.”

And before he could say ‘stop’, Rev. Harper asked Aviva if she took him to be her lawfully wedded husband and before he could stop her she

shouted out her ‘hell yeah.’ Her ‘yes’ got him right in his heart. It felt like everything he ever wanted. When Rev. Harper asked him if he took her, he said yes without hesitation.

“I do. I love you. I will go to Europe and miss you every day for the rest of my life,” he said as he marked her.

“I don’t know why you think that you’re going to get the chance to miss me when you’re going to be wherever I am.”

“I will not fight the queen. As much as she deserves it, I do not hit females.”

“And that’s just one of the things that makes you a good man. You might not hit women but we ain’t got no problem with it,” Mrs. Nanny Harper said as she strolled up with a posse of Harper females bearing white flags, which they handed to Queen Selah.

Though he couldn’t help but smile at the Harper females, he couldn’t help but hurt at the flags that they carried knowing that ‘surrender’ was not simply a foreign word to the Jendayi-Harpers but a foreign concept as well. He hated that he was the cause of them having to do something so distasteful to them. Hated it, and was shamed for being the catalyst of that, especially glimpsing the queen’s smile of triumph.

Before he could interject his queen spoke. “Ah, I see you’ve ordered your *army*,” she sneered that word, “to bring white flags.”

“Bringing white flags to battle is standard procedure for any war that the Two Kings engage in.”

“I see that you’re accustomed to losing.”

“You misunderstand. We bring the flags for our opponents as they usually forget to bring their own,” Queen Selah finished.

“I was going to be merciful, but your insolence has eliminated mercy as a possibility,” his queen said.

Knowing his queen as he did, he knew that she meant those words. Queen Brunhild would not show mercy. She wouldn’t outright kill the females; she’d leave them widows, fatherless, and writhing in pain. He could not allow that, could not allow his desires, his ego, his anything to be the reason his mate was hurt.

“I cannot let you die especially when I’d be the cause of your death,” he said as he pulled away from her and walked towards his queen.

He didn’t get a chance to even get his pinky toe off of Jendayi territory. Snatched back by King Bering himself, he was thrust into Aviva’s arms.

“Menace, Peril, please escort our daughters and *our* two sons to safety. Aviva has a honeymoon to begin and Karimia has to put her young man through his paces some more,” King Darioush said.

“They will speak a long time of this war that we shall win today,” Queen Selah said. “They will speak of your foolishness Brunhild, and *your* weakness Mr. Brunhild.”

“You are foolish if you think you can stand against my army.”

“And you are a damn fool full stop,” his Aunt Kuoni’s voice cut in.

“Kunigunde?” the queen asked.

“In the flesh and about to whip your ass,” the former princess returned with a whole lot of southern up in her voice.

How the hell did his aunt get here? When did she get here?

“Has power made you so warped that you thought that I’d allow *anyone*, much less a bitch like *you*, to hurt *my* son or *my* nephew,” his aunt asked.

“They might be your boys, but they’re my Pookie and Junebug,” Grandmamma threw in.

“Looks like your day is going from bad to worse, Helga,” Queen Selah said.

“My name is Brunhild, *Queen* Brunhild to you!”

“And obviously you think that I give a damn *what* your name is or recognize your right to rule a damn thing. You can’t even rule yourself. Now be silent when a real woman is talking. And while you’re busy shutting up, take a look at the men who stand with us so you know that the insipid male at your side is no kind of ruler and even less of a male.

How dare you come to *my* home with ill intent? How dare you threaten the Jendayi-Harper clan, our allies, or our territory? How dare you think to stand against us with only your arrogance as a shield, this group of glittery boys you call a royal guard as a backup, and these mercenaries as your sword? Oh, you silly, silly, misguided woman.

The Jendayi-Harpers are about to make you the Napoleon of shifters. Like his ridiculous decision to invade Russia in winter, your ill-fated challenge will go down in shifter history. Shifters the world over will laugh at your foolishness even as they shudder at how we dealt with you. Males will speak in hushed whispers about the army of the Two Kings. Stand down, so that our army will not have to hold back in order to make identification of the carcasses a possibility. Stand down so that we don’t have to kill our sons-in-laws closest relatives. Stand down or move aside so that we can finish what you tried to start. We’ve got a shindig to kick off, barbeque to eat, and shine to drink,” Queen Selah said.

Before Queen Selah finished speaking, the ground literally came alive and the territory was overrun with shifters-the likes of which he’d never

seen. Led by what he guessed were Jendayi polar bears baring the flags of the Two Kings, they were followed by a pack of arctic war elephants covered in spikes, fourteen-foot tall grizzlies, saber-fucking-toothed tigers, a whole bunch of shit he'd never seen anyplace (but he knew were dangerous) and a sea of Harpers on four-wheelers, snowmobiles and on the backs of shifters all armed to the teeth. They had shoulder rockets, Tommy guns, and someone rolled a fucking canon- a fucking canon. Damn. He looked at the flags of the two kings again and laughed. They were so appropriate. One bore an ass with a kiss mark on it; the other bore an ass with a booted foot kicking it. There would be a massacre, but it wasn't going to be the Jendayi-Harpers being massacred. Not even bothering to look back (as he didn't need to), he scooped his mate into his arms and kissed her.

Having a family who loved and embraced her, and a husband who loved her even harder, Selah had never needed the title 'Queen'. But in this moment, she was glad to have the title, not because she needed it to stand toe-to-toe with this witch in front of her masquerading as a queen. Despite her money and position, Broomhill or whatever her name was, would never be woman enough to stand toe-to-toe with her or any of the women in their family. She didn't need her title for the Deonté queen; she needed the title because it allowed her to do things like make the Deonté boys princes.

Turning to her with as much disgust as she could muster (which was a lot considering the kind of mother she was -*none at all*, the kind of woman she was - *the worst kind*, and the kind of human she was - *which thankfully wasn't all that much*), she spat at her feet. With the children out of the way, she could really let loose.

“Game on, bitch,” she said as she punched Helga in the throat and followed it up with a blast to the ribcage.

Loving 3:7

Following her directions, Ragnar trudged through the wilds. Though the cabin wasn't far, when he spotted the simple structure, he couldn't the relief that coursed through his body. He wasn't worried that they were in danger out in the open (hard to fear much when you were being escorted by twelve-ton war machines named Menace and Peril); he was worried that he wouldn't be able to hold off from making love to Aviva for as long as it took to reach their destination. Already temptation, she was even more appealing wearing his mark.

Closing the door of the cabin, he sat her down on the bed and fell to his knees overcome by ... everything. Though many of today's events moved him, what moved him most was Aviva. He was overwhelmed by the fact that Aviva claimed him, would fight for him, willingly loved him even though he'd given away everything of value that he'd possessed.

Looking up at her the only truth he'd known fell from his lips. "Aviva, Aviva, Aviva."

Aviva looked down at the male at her feet and couldn't help but love his crazy ass.

"You've tied yourself to a broken male."

"Ragnar, I'm yoked to a good man so shut up."

"But all I have is what you see before you."

"And that is all that I need. Do you think that my daddy, uncle or anyone else would spend so much time whipping you and Wieland's asses if you weren't worthy? Do you really think my Grandmamma would allow you to keep the nickname 'Junebug' if you weren't worthy of it."

"What can I give you that you don't already have?"

“More of it. How can one ever have too much love?”

Aviva's words warmed him, comforted him, and made him feel invincible. She warmed him. He was helpless to do anything but love her, crave her, fall deeper in love with her with every passing moment. She was his destination, her body a beacon, and he was a traveler looking to find his way to his heart ... to the only home he'd ever known.

Oh, that woman, that body, that heart. All of her affected him. He couldn't help the way that his heart thundered in his chest, the way that his skin tightened over every inch of his body, or the way that his soul sighed in her presence. With her hair wild around her shoulders and without a hint of artifice, Aviva had never looked more beautiful. Though she was wearing a Clark College hoodie, cargo jeans, and a pair of leather and mesh mid-boot style footwear, he was hard for her. It didn't matter that he'd never seen what was under all of those clothes; he knew the female under the outerwear. He knew her, was awed by her, humbled by her and in love with her ... deeply in love with her ... deepest in love.

Watching as she stood and started tearing off clothes, he forced himself to remain where he was. With every bit of skin that she bared, more of his bear surfaced. He took a step back ... and then another because Aviva was stepping to him with every piece of clothing she removed. When she was down to her delicate white lace bra and panties she was all up in his face. Ragnar kept himself still, not because he didn't want her, but because if he didn't get a rein in his bear, he was going to be balls deep inside of his mate without anything resembling foreplay.

“Step back, Aviva,” he growled.

“Or what?” she sassed.

Ah, he loved her sass, but he was he male and she best realize that.

“Or I’m going to run my hands over those tiny, lace panties that barely cover that pussy - that now belongs to me. And then I’m going to kneel before you and rip those panties off with my teeth and spend long moments looking my fill at your delectable body – that also belongs to me - that will know only me as its giver of pleasure,”

Ragnar said as he ripped off his own clothes. Never one to wear tight-fitting clothes, nevertheless, everything felt too tight -everything, including his skin. Finished removing his clothes he felt his mate’s body temperature rise as his words registered. She might be standing before him like she owned him (and she did) but he was created to bestow pleasure upon her and he could do naught but fulfill his destiny.

“Is that supposed to scare me?” Aviva challenged.

Ragnar responding laugh was dark even to his own ears but he suspected that his eyes were bright with the thrill that coursed through his body at his mate’s words. Knowing that he was on the edge, his bear was close to the surface, and he was so hard for her that he ached, Aviva had still thrown down the gauntlet. And predator that he was, he caught it before it even had a chance to hit the ground.

“I never want to scare you,” he said as he ran a hand through her wild hair. “I just want you to know how you affect me,” he said as he caught her hand in his and brought it to his thick cock.

Leaning down he whispered in her ear. “I want you to know what your voice does to me.” Leaning in closer, he sniffed deeply. “I want you to know how your scent intoxicates me.”

Grabbing a handful of her ass, he pulled her closer and continued.

“Do you know what I long to do? Make love to you until you’re covered in my scent, make love to you until I’m as much a part of you as the heart that beats beneath such magnificent breasts, and make love to you until you’re ripe with my cubs.”

He was interrupted from his truth by Aviva’s gasp. That sound went straight to his cock. Smiling, he continued.

“Do you know what I’ll do if you allow me? I’ll put you on your hands and knees and spank your ass until your skin is stinging. Then, I’ll thrust my fingers in your tight pussy and fuck you until you beg me to let you come ... but I won’t. You will not come until I tell you that you can ... and that will not be for a very, long, time. Perhaps, in two days time, perhaps in three.”

Despite her formidable stance, Aviva’s bottom lip quivered slightly at his words. She held her ground as was her way, but not before sinking her teeth into her lip in an effort to stop the tell-tale sounds of the effect his words were having on her body, on her desire. Scenting his mate’s arousal, he smiled knowing that she could more than handle him, and the dominating way that he wanted to make love to her.

“Ragnar,” his mate purred.

“Aviva,” he growled as he laid her on the bed.

They were a mesh of arms and legs and desire. He nipped, she nipped back – but a lot harder. He palmed her ass, and she palmed his back. He suckled her breasts and she scratched her name in his back. He growled loving the way that she marked him, needing her to want him as he wanted her; needing her to need him as he needed her.

“Aviva,” he growled a moment before he thrust his tongue in her sweet mouth and swallowed her groans.

Ripping her mouth from his, Aviva commanded him. “Fuck me, Ragnar ... now!”

Her words washed over him like glacial ice. Though he was moments from entering her, he not only pulled back, he rolled off of her.

Aviva was so turned on she was nothing but a throbbing orgasm waiting to happen. She was so close, so close, so close but Ragnar kept holding back. He kissed, he licked, he nipped, he palmed, he grinded, he caressed, he dirty-talked her, but he did not enter her. Ripping her mouth from his, she shouted her demand.

“Fuck me!”

And instead of thrusting his thick cock into her welcoming pussy, he ... stopped.

Concerned that she'd turned him off with her baseness, she closed her eyes so that she wouldn't see the disgust in his eyes. She'd played hard to get but under her discretion lay a wanton slut ... but only for this male.

Gathering her courage, she chanced looking at him and called his name. “Ragnar.”

“Aviva,” he called her name and pulled her into him.

Noting his pained expression and now soft cock, she gently touched his lips with her fingers. “What's wrong? Is it me? Is it the way that I want you to fuck me?”

“Yes. I fucked other females. I fucked them Aviva but I don't want to fuck you. I want to love you.”

“Then make love me.”

“It's not that easy.”

“Don't you want me?”

“Never think that I don’t.”

“Then what’s the problem,” she said as she traced the strong lines of his face.

He was beautiful. As much as she hated his arrogance, she hated his uncertainty even more. Wanting to see that arrogance return she resorted to teasing. “Scared?”

“Yes,” he admitted. “I’m more frightened then I’ve ever been.”

“Ragnar, why? You’ve been with plenty of females.”

“My cock’s been with plenty of females but that was the only part of myself that I ever gave any other female, Aviva.”

“You’ve always given me more,” she said.

“Because you demanded it, would accept no less.”

“Just do what you’ve been doing,” she said.

“It’s not that easy. I don’t just want to do what we’ve been doing. I want to do more. I want to love you like your father loves your mother, like your uncle loves your aunt. You’ve seen my king. He taught me how to select a good tailor, a fast car, a good sword. He taught me nothing about how to love a woman, how to touch her with tenderness.”

“Well somebody taught you how to be a good man, Ragnar because you are or my family would’ve killed you before you got anywhere near Delice-Patrale much less out of it.”

“All that I know about loving a woman, I learned from the males in your family. I’m new at this. I’ve only known how to love anyone for a few days. I’m scared to fuck it up. I’m scared that I’ll run off the only female I’ve ever loved in the whole of my life.”

“Well, I’m scared too.”

“Aviva Jendayi scared?”

“Aviva Harper Jendayi-Deonté, and yes I’m scared.”

“You’re not scared of me, the entire royal army or the mercenaries that came with them. What are you scared of?”

“I’m scared that I won’t please you.”

“You see how hard I am for you, how desperate I am for you. Why would you think something so foolish? Something so wrong?”

“Because I’ve never had to please any male before, never wanted to,” she admitted.

“Males should be pleasing you,” he said.

“This is true, but what I’m saying is that I’ve never made love ... ever ... to anyone.”

Ragnar had never had a sentence floor him like the sentence that Aviva had just uttered. A virgin? Aviva was a virgin?

Looking at her, his heart exploded. She looked so vulnerable in that moment.

“Why didn’t you tell me earlier? I could’ve hurt you,” he said as he cradled her to him.

“You’d never hurt me.”

“I don’t deserve the gift of your virginity,” he began.

“Well fine then, I’ll go out and find a male who wants it!”

“And get him and any other male around him killed. You’re mind Aviva, and I will not give you up.”

“You were going to try and give me up earlier,” she spat.

“I was overcome by stupidity, but I don’t know if I could’ve done it, Aviva. Just saying the words made my heart bleed even though I thought those were the very words that would spare your life.”

“Well you’re right. They were stupid. And you’re stupid, get off of me.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Why?” she sneered. You don’t like virgins. You don’t know how to love me!”

“Is every argument we have going to go like this?” he asked as he nipped her lips.

“With me winning and you losing?” she asked.

“Uh, I meant with you looking so damn beautiful, so damn tempting even as you’re being so unreasonable?”

“If it leads to me winning, then yes. I like to win, Ragnar.”

“And so do I, Aviva,” he said as he spread her beneath him.

“What are you doing?” she gasped as he kissed his way down her curves.

“Taking my time. After all, this is a gift that I’ll only get to open once,” he said as he very gently slid into her.

Linking his hands with hers, he kissed her, catching her gasp in his mouth.

Aviva didn’t like feeling vulnerable-ever. But she especially didn’t like Ragnar feeling as if he wasn’t good enough. If showing him her vulnerability was all it took to bring back his smile, she’d flash it like tourist flashed titties at *Mardi Gras*. She’d do it because she trusted Ragnar Deonté. She trusted him with her heart, her body, her virginity, and even her vulnerability. As arrogant as he was, he was a good man- a good, good man. He’d given up ... everything. He gave up everything for her and by everything she wasn’t talking about that bullshit title; by everything she was

talking about his pride, his homeland, that impenetrable force field that he had around his heart.

When Ragnar pulled her into the shelter of his body, she went without hesitation. When Ragnar covered her with his body, she arched into his strength. When Ragnar linked his hands with hers, she grabbed onto them trusting him to never let her go. When he slid into her body, he caught her gasp in his mouth and she held onto the 'thank you' that he whispered.

There was no pain when he breached her hymen. There was only the most beautiful feeling of completeness. She loved this male, she loved him, she loved him, she loved him and she was never letting him go.

That night as she fell asleep in his arms, she smiled. She couldn't help it: she liked to win, and she had. She won the heart of Ragnar ... and of course she'd won their argument just as she would every argument they had. She'd allow him to think he was comforting her when in fact; it was her, who was comforting him.

Males, they thought they knew everything.

****J and J****

Thank you for reading. We hope that you enjoyed the second story in the Bad Azz Daddy (BAD) series.

NB: The first story in the BAD series is: *Original Gangsta Daddy: Cadillac* which is a short story in the **Shara & Friends Naughty Bites, volume one** and can be purchased at: <http://www.lulu.com/content/paperback-book/shara-friends-naughty-bites-volume-one/7197234>

Jeanie Johnson and Jayha Leigh

Besides being intelligent divas who pen kickass prose, Jeanie (the shagalicious wordslinger) and her momma, Jayha (the ninja master of prose), are dessert-eating, take-no-shit, tell-it-like-they-feel instead of tell-it-like-people-want-to-hear-it women. They are women who have brains and aren't afraid to use them; feelings and aren't afraid to express them; and, middle fingers which they'll happily use to salute out of line peeps. Independently, both are forces of nature that leave you begging for mercy or begging for more.

A kickass tag team duo bound together by the pen, they plan on ruling the world side-by-side. Jeanie will be ruling in her favorite hoodie and her Chuck Taylors; Jayha will be wearing her Crocs, a blue t-shirt along with her halo. Of course, all ruling will be done swiftly as Jeanie is always out getting into sh*t and Jayha is busy indulging in her torrid affair with ESPN.

Praises, compliments, adulation and the like for Jeanie and Jayha can be left at:

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