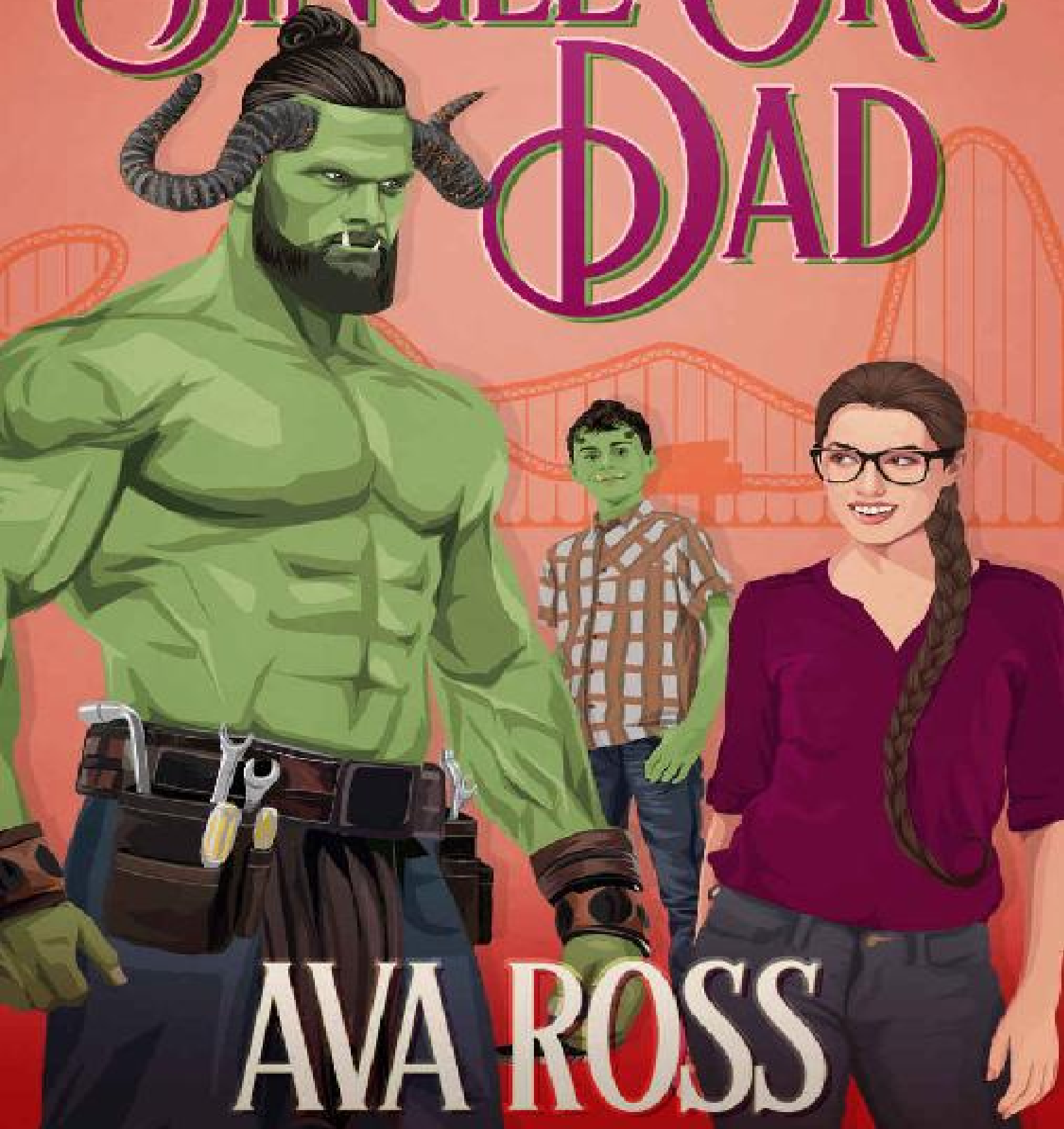


SWEET MONSTERS TREATS



SINGLE ORC DAD



AVA ROSS

SINGLE ORC DAD

SWEET MONSTER TREATS & LOVE AT FIRST ORC

AVA ROSS

ENCHANTED STAR PRESS

SINGLE ORC DAD

Sweet Monster Treats Season 2

A Love at First Orc Companion Story

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Cover Art: [Mariah Sinclair Book Covers](#)

Editing: JA Wren and [Owl Eyes Proofs & Edits](#)

Special thanks to Sydnee for giving this book a final polish!

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*For my family who
always believe in me.*

ALSO BY AVA ROSS

Mail-Order Brides of Crakair

Brides of Driegon

Fated Mates of the Ferlaern Warriors

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Holiday with a Cu'zod Warrior

Galaxy Games

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A Sci-Fi Holiday Tail

Monsterville, USA

Monster on Board

(co-written with Alana Khan)

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Monster Mate Hunt

Third Galaxy on the Left

You can find her books on [Amazon](#).

SINGLE ORC DAD

Will my roller coaster romance with my hunky orc neighbor fly off the rails or ignite our hearts forever?

After inheriting my estranged dad's defunct kiddie amusement park, I turn in my corporate badge and return to my old hometown. Despite the issues I had with my dad, I rediscover the fun I missed out on while I lived ten years in the city. I'm determined to turn Quirky Kingdom into the showpiece it used to be. Problem is—more than just the rides need fixing. It's way more than I can handle on my own.

I tap my new neighbor to help—Rexin, a hunky orc handyman who's also a single dad extraordinaire. Since it's summer, he brings his twelve-year-old son to the job with him. As we grease wheels on the purple turtle ride and get the elephant carriages running again, sparks ignite between us. I begin to believe moving home was the right idea.

But my past makes me gun shy, and I'm not sure if what we've started will make me want to live in this town forever. His son playing matchmaker is cute, but it sure isn't helping.

Only time can tell if our rollercoaster relationship will clickety-click its way to something special or veer off track forever.

Single Orc Dad is part of Ava's Love at First Orc Series and it's part of the

Sweet Monster Treats collection.

Each Sweet Monster Treats book is a standalone, containing its own Happily Ever After, and they can be read in any order. Be sure to explore the other titles in the collection.

Expect size difference, plenty of spice, falling for a neighbor, a single dad (ha, right?!), his endearing matchmaking son who desperately wants a mom, laugh out loud moments, moving home and finding the “one,” a handyorc who’s handy in many ways (wink), and a happy ever after.

Check out the rest of the [Sweet Monster Treats](#) World!

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Companion Stories

Single Orc Dad

CHAPTER I

ADELINE

“What are you doing?” a squeaky voice asked from nearby.

I’d been so lost in trying to get the purple turtle ride running again that I hadn’t heard anyone come up behind me.

Whirling, I caught the heel of my new work boot on a stick and nearly toppled.

The hand of a tall orc boy with green skin and two-inch horns jutting from his forehead caught me before my knees hit the ground.

“Careful.” He frowned, making sure I was steady before releasing my arm.

“Thanks.” I slid my glasses back up my nose and kicked the stick out of the way. As if that would make a difference? I tried not to get discouraged as I scanned the grass long gone to seed all over the park and the vines and debris littering everything. Cleaning up was another of the many tasks I’d have to complete before I could reopen Quirky Kingdom, the kiddie amusement park my dad ran throughout my childhood.

The place had fallen into disrepair long before he died a year ago and left me trying to figure out what to do with it.

“What are you doing here?” the orc boy asked. Only a hint of suspiciousness came through in his voice. “No one lives here any longer.”

“I do.” For now at least. We’d see how I felt if and when I got the park back in order.

His dark eyes widened. “You’re his daughter, Abrina.”

“Adeline,” I said. “And yeah, that’s me.” I wiped away the trickle of sweat etching down the side of my face and shot a glare at the relentless sun. For an early summer New England day, it sure was hot. I’d become soft over

the past ten years, leaving my air-conditioned apartment for my air-conditioned office, then back again. I'd rarely paid attention to the weather unless it kept me from getting to my corporate job on time.

"Why are you here?" The boy peered around.

"My father died."

The boy nodded. "A while ago. He was a nice guy."

To strangers. To his only child? Calling him stern would be kind. He hadn't abused me, he just . . . hadn't shown he loved me.

Not even in the stilted letter I received from his lawyer.

The place is yours.

Do with it what you want.

Even then, he couldn't tell me he loved me. Maybe because he hadn't. Not since Mom died.

But that was the past. Fixing this place up was the future—for now.

"I'm going to get the park running again." My voice shook with unease. While sitting in my cushy corner office, the idea of running the park had sounded fun. It was a way to reconnect with the good parts of my roots while banishing the bad.

My mom would be so proud.

"It needs a lot of work," the boy said.

"I'm not sure how he handled all this by himself." Actually, it was clear he hadn't, not for a very long time. I'd heard through the grapevine he'd closed it, but assumed he'd kept it in the pristine shape it was in when I was young and he and Mom ran it together.

Shrugging, the boy I gauged to be about twelve years old peered toward the top of the hill in the center of the park. A path wove across the broad ridge and when you rode the Ferris wheel up there, you could see the entire town nestled in the valley below.

"I'm Brear," he said. "The old human guy talked about you a lot."

"Oh, yeah?" Saying only bad things, I was sure. Although, he'd left me the park and the small house he'd lived in, so he must've found a scrap of softness for me before he died. Or there was no one else he could leave the park to. Neither of us had any other family.

"Yeah, he said he missed you."

His statement stabbed through my chest. Dad hadn't missed me enough to reply to my Christmas cards, had he? I sent them with hope in my heart the first few years after I left town. I sent Valentine's cards each of the years I

struggled to get through college while working full time. By the time I'd worked my way up the corporate ladder to VP and a corner office, I only sent holiday cards by rote.

Hope you're well. I'm doing fine.

The last time Dad spoke to me, he told me good riddance, not to come back. I guess he meant it.

"Are you sure you can get the park running again?" Brear asked with skepticism, taking in the now-gleaming tracks that would carry the purple turtle ride, plus the center area cleared of debris.

"Sure, why not? Next up, I'm working on the elephant coaches." Only fifteen rides left to repair after that. Then I had to clean out the swan pool where people and orcs could paddle bird boats for fun. Repair and paint the vendor buildings. Plus tidy up everything else. Hire staff. Lure in food vendors. The website was the only thing running as it should, optimistically announcing Quirky Kingdom would reopen mid-August. I could do everything in two months, right?

Actually, the task was nearly overwhelming.

Forget Dad. I couldn't let go of the good memories I clung to from when Mom was alive and the three of us worked on the park together.

That crashed long before I fled this place a naïve girl of eighteen.

Brear shrugged. "It might be fun."

"It *will* be fun." I grinned to soften the sharpness in my voice. I was hot. Tired. And beginning to wonder if giving up that corner office in the city had been a big mistake.

"Fun for *little* kids."

"That's the whole point. Older kids and adults can go to the enormous parks. This place caters—*catered*—to the under ten crowd. They like stuff like this." Or they used to. Would today's generation feel the same?

He grunted.

"I inherited the place, and I'm going to make it something again." I hated the tears stinging in the back of my eyes.

Brear scratched the side of his neck. "I'm the only one who comes here."

"And that will change once it's open. How old are you?" Sometimes, it was hard to tell with orcs, because they were so much bigger than humans and this one stood at eye level with my five-six.

Years ago, a bunch of orcs marched out of a previously hidden cave in the side of a mountain in the range beyond this town, announcing they wanted to

join human society. Since then, they'd seamlessly taken jobs and even found human mates.

"I'm twelve." Freckles dusted his medium green cheeks, though freckles were rarely seen in orcs. Did he have human blood? No, that would be impossible. Orcs hadn't lived among us that long.

He was bulkier than me. Standard orc, I supposed, though I'd met few of them while living in the city.

"Do you know how long the park has been closed?" Sad that I had to dig information out of a twelve-year-old boy. Maybe a trip into town was in order. I could stop by the diner and glean information from the locals.

"Four years or so," he said. "From what I heard. I've only been coming here since we moved to town. We bought the house on the other side of the park." He pointed to the overgrown path leading to it.

"When did your family buy the place next door?"

He started to speak but froze.

"Brear," someone called from the road winding beyond the parking lot in the front of the park. "Where are you?"

Worry filled the boy's eyes. "It's my dad."

"Does he know you come here?"

"No." Brear spun on his heel and started running down the stone path weaving through the bedraggled park. He paused and turned back; his face filled with concern. "Please don't tell him."

"Why?"

"Because he asked me not to come here again."

While I wasn't one to lie to parents about their kids, there wasn't much harm in him haunting this place. Better him than the ghost of my dad.

"I'll keep quiet about it for now."

Brear grinned, showing off pearly white tusks jutting up from his lower jawline. "Thanks."

"Brear," his dad called again, sounding more irritated than angry, though how would I know? It wasn't like I'd met his father.

"I'll be back tomorrow," Brear said before disappearing over the hill. He rushed out through the rickety front gate and across the overgrown parking lot—something else that needed work.

Shaking my head, I returned to the purple turtle ride.

Hours later, I straightened and rubbed my aching lower back. The turtle ride ran like it should, and the first of five mechanical pink elephants could

lift its trunk and pull one of the carriages.

This was probably why Dad left me Quirky Kingdom. After Mom died, I'd worked by his side in her place.

Before I turned eight, I knew how to repair small engines and grease tracks. I'd learned everything by his side. My skills might be rusty, but a motor was a motor, and the shed was still full of spare parts.

Why had he let Quirky Kingdom get so run down? Four years wasn't long enough for everything to fall into disrepair. The trees sprouting on the path had to be six or seven years old.

What happened in the last years of my dad's life?

Gathering my tools, I placed them in the same old leather pouch Dad kept in the shed along with bits of this and that used to repair rides, the fence, and the concession buildings he'd leased to local food vendors when the park was open.

Before walking to the shed, I paused to stroke the life-size pink elephant hitched to the carriage adorned with enough gilt to feature in a Bollywood film.

"Hang in there, Fluffy." Funny how I still remembered the names I'd given each elephant when I was little. "You too, Flossy."

The elephants gazed at me solemnly.

Hefting the bag over my shoulder, I started down the path.

The house I grew up in waited beyond the park, stark, lonely, and in equal disrepair.

Stark and lonely was nothing new. Too long in the past, the house had echoed with Mom's cheerful voice and Dad's sweet murmurs.

He hadn't always been stern and demanding. Mom dying in the crash when I was ten stole his joy. As far as I could tell, he'd never found it again, especially with his daughter.

I dropped my tool bag inside the shed and secured the lock.

I'd turned to trudge toward the back door of the three-bedroom, two-story cape style home when I smacked into someone.

Clutching his forearms, I looked up, up, up at the enormous, brawny orc wearing a blue shirt with the sleeves rolled up and dark jeans. It should be a sin for guys to expose their forearms like his.

I took in the four-inch horns jutting off his forehead, his rich green skin, his prominent tusks and full lips, and his dark hair pulled back in a man—err, *orc*—bun.

Hot guy alert. I'd never had a thing for orcs, but maybe I'd yet to meet the right one.

"Are you Adeline?" he snarled, his blacker-than-coal gaze meeting mine.

My jaw still unhinging, I could only bob my head and wish I was wearing something other than cut-off denim shorts and a scruffy t-shirt I found in my bureau drawer.

"I have one thing to say." His glare deepened.

I continued to bob my head; thankful I'd at least closed my mouth.

It should *also* be a sin for a guy to have such delicious thighs encased in snug jeans.

He leaned in close enough I could catch his yummy scent—pine, cotton, and an unknown spice I had the urge to lick.

To my embarrassment, he tapped a claw between my eyes and pointed to his own, guiding my gaze in that direction.

Yup, caught gawking. My cheeks stung with embarrassment.

A growl ripped from his substantial chest. "I want you to stay away from my son."

CHAPTER 2

REXIN

I'd caught Brear—again—fleeing the rundown amusement park next to the house I bought when I moved to town a year and a half ago. I'd told him over and over again that it wasn't safe to come here. The place was a mess, and he could get hurt.

Still, something kept luring him back.

I was more mad at him than this woman. I'd spent nearly an hour calling and searching for my son, followed by trooping all over the neighborhood with worry clawing down my spine. Only to find him scooting out through the entrance of this decrepit place.

And after I'd told him at least ten times never to come here.

This time, he babbled something about talking with a woman named Adeline and how she was cute.

She *was* cute, but that wasn't the point. A lot of human women were attractive, though I wasn't interested in dating any of them.

"Excuse me?" Adeline asked with one delicate eyebrow lifting. "What did you say?" Her brown hair hung in a thick braid halfway down her back, and I struggled not to give into the urge to lift the end and sniff it.

What was wrong with me?

"I asked you not to lure my son over here." I felt foolish about this already. It was clear she didn't have any idea what I was talking about. I'd stormed over here thinking she could be doing something she shouldn't with Brear—*not* sexual.

My son was naïve and wonderfully innocent for a twelve-year-old. It would be so easy for someone to take advantage of him.

Now I took in someone whose grease-stained shorts and raggedy t-shirt

suggested she'd been working all day, not filling my son with wild ideas.

"You think I lured Brear here?" Pivoting on her booted heel, she stalked around me and toward the back door of her house.

Silly me; I didn't retreat.

I followed.

"He could get hurt running around here," I told her delectable backside. "The place is falling apart."

"For now." She wrenched open the outer screen door and unlocked the inside panel, shoving it open.

"Each day it looks worse."

She stomped inside, and I followed her into her tidy kitchen, as lured as my son—though I'd already realized Brear came here under his own volition and not to see her.

"Go away," she said.

I took in the gleaming, though old, countertops, the bouquet of wildflowers sitting on the island.

All the houses in this neighborhood had been built from the same plan back when the paper mill was big in town. Other than different colored siding, my own matched this one parked at the end of the dead-end road with the amusement park taking up the enormous open area beside it.

She grabbed a glass from a cupboard and poured herself water from the faucet, draining it in a couple gulps. After placing the cup in the sink, she turned and leaned against the counter. "Why are you still here?"

"I'm sorry."

Her eyebrows lifted. "For what?"

"Coming on strong."

She snorted. "Kissing me would be coming on strong." Her hand slapped over her lush mouth, and she spoke around her fingers. "I didn't say that."

For whatever reason, I couldn't turn around and leave. My legs dragged me across the kitchen and right up to her. I was one-and-a-half times her size, though that was common with humans and orcs.

If anyone should know, it would be me.

I braced my palms on the edges of the counter beside her hips and loomed over her, delighting in the spunk still lingering in her pretty brown eyes.

This female could be dangerous to my soul. I couldn't seem to back away from her fire.

"Did you say you want me to kiss you?" I asked, my voice huskier than I

liked.

I was daring her when I shouldn't.

Inhaling her luscious scent when I shouldn't.

Why wasn't I fleeing as fast as Brear must've when he heard me calling his name?

Because something about her locked my knees in place. That same forbidden urge made me lift her chin until her eyes met mine.

It also made me lean over and claim her mouth with my own.

CHAPTER 3

ADELINE

I was kissing an orc, and I didn't know his name.

He tasted good. He smelled amazing. And he was a phenomenal kisser despite his tusks.

My pulse ignited. With a moan, I abandoned the counter, pressing my body against his.

Wait. He was Brear's father.

He was probably *married*. Yuck, yuck, yuck.

I wrenched away from him and scooted beneath his arm, racing across the kitchen and around the island separating the kitchen and the dining room. Bracing my hands on the smooth surface, I glared at him. "Why the hell did you do that?"

His face darkened. "I'm sorry. Again. I . . ." Frowning, he scratched the back of his head, making his orc bun jiggle. "I don't know why I kissed you."

"Don't do it again."

"Believe me," he growled. "I won't."

I gave him a pert nod. "Good."

His gaze shot to the back door he'd left open when he stalked in behind me. "I need to go."

"Yes, you do."

With a grumble, he stomped to the door and grabbed the wooden panel. Turning back, he sighed. "I'm sorry I accused you of doing something underhanded. When I couldn't find Brear, I was worried. I've told him a thousand times not to go to the park for a variety of solid reasons, but he can't seem to stay away. I took out my irritation on you."

"Apology accepted." I tugged a stool from beneath the island and sat

before my shaky knees gave way. One simple, puny kiss should not make my entire body long for more.

“I’m Rexin Tavalog, by the way.” Thankfully, he remained in the open doorway.

“Does everyone call you Rex?”

He scowled. “Why would they do that?”

“Rexin it is.” I doubted I’d be wearing it out.

“I’m not going to apologize for kissing you, however.”

“Oh really?” Perturbed, I slid off the stool and stalked over to him. “That’s a bold statement on your part.”

His eyes sparkled with humor. “I’m a bold guy.”

“When you shouldn’t be.”

His snort of laughter rang out. “You’re probably right.” Pausing, he frowned at the floor.

Yeah, I got it. The tiles needed regrouting and sealant. But I wasn’t going to do more than keep the house clean until I got the amusement park running.

“I was going to stop by anyway,” he said.

“To kiss me?” I blurted out. Jeez, what was up with my mouth today?

“To extend an offer of my services.”

For some reason, my mind took his words in a steamy direction, picturing us entwined on my bed, him “servicing” me.

Heat roared through my veins and centered in my core.

His head lifted, though his gaze took longer, traveling like a caress across my body and landing on my mouth. His nostrils flared. “My services as a *handyman*.”

At least I’d mastered an impassive face. “Why?”

Finally, his gaze locked on mine. “Because you need help, and I want the park either closed and the land cleaned up or running. Sure beats watching it rotting into the ground.”

I squirmed my gaze away from his. “I don’t know why my dad didn’t keep it as pristine as I remember.”

“He didn’t tell you?”

“We haven’t spoken in ten years.”

“Hmm.”

I huffed and crossed my arms on my chest. “You sound judgy.”

He rubbed his arms. “Orcs care for their families.”

“Do *not* think I didn’t care,” I croaked, my throat clogging with pain.

“You don’t know me or what happened before I left, and I’m not going to share, let alone beg for your understanding.”

“I wouldn’t ask it of you.” The calmness in his voice sunk through me. Comforted me.

The fact that he could soothe my sadness with just a few words showed me his kiss wasn’t the only dangerous thing about him.

“For a species who treasures family, you have an odd way of showing it,” I said with a twist of my lips.

“What does that mean?”

“You kissed me when you’re married.”

“We call it *mated*, and I’m not.”

“Who’s Brear’s mother?” I really shouldn’t be pressing this. His business wasn’t mine.

His nose scrunched. “Brear’s mother and I weren’t true mates.” He turned back toward the door, sending his final words over his shoulder. “She was human, and she’s dead.”

CHAPTER 4

REXIN

“Let’s go home,” I told Brear who stood on the ground below Adeline’s small back deck.

Listening in? Probably.

Other than the kiss, which I hoped he knew nothing about, we hadn’t discussed much he didn’t already know.

There was no way he could know about the flare of my hormones for Adeline. If I didn’t know better, I’d think . . .

“Is she going to take your offer of help?” Brear scooted along beside me as I strode down the driveway and out onto the road. I slowed my pace, so he didn’t have to run to keep up with my bigger strides and put my hand on his shoulder. Back in the orc kingdom, I would’ve nudged him, a knuckle rub on another guy’s shoulder to show affection or greeting. No matter what, I loved my son more than anything.

He was why I’d come to the surface and bought our small home.

He was why I remained here despite missing the world I’d grown up in.

Should I have told Adeline that Brear’s mother was human? Orcs had only joined this world a few years ago. Brear was twelve. She could count and speculate as much as anyone else.

“I didn’t wait to find out if she wants help,” I said.

“We need to go back and ask her again.” Brear stopped, blinking up at me with his mother’s eyes. She hadn’t been my true mate, but she’d been a big part of my world when we were together. I’d cared for her even though it hadn’t worked out between us.

“It’s not up to us.” I started walking again, pausing to look back when he didn’t keep up. “What?”

His head tilted. “She’s nice. She’s working hard. She needs our help.”

“*Our* help?”

“You know what I mean.” His gaze drifted to the broken-down fence encircling the edge of the park on our right. “I love the park. It needs to be what it was long ago.”

“You don’t know what it was like. We moved here after it closed. Maybe it was a mess even when the rides were running.”

“Don’t you want kids in town to have fun?” He picked up his pace, passing me.

“There are other things they can do in town for entertainment.”

“Nothing like Quirky Kingdom.”

The slump of his shoulders made my heart clench. Brear was anything but a manipulator. He felt everything too much. Fates pray he wouldn’t have his innocence stomped flat before he was old enough to handle it.

Although was there ever an age that would be old enough to handle something like that? I hadn’t been ready for it at eighteen.

“Hey,” someone said from behind us.

I turned as Adeline jogged close, stopping about five feet away from us.

“Did you mean it when you offered your help?” she asked.

I nodded.

Brear scurried back to stand between us. “We meant it. We want to help restore the park.”

“You’re twelve,” I said. “You’re legally not allowed to work.”

“So I don’t need to be paid. Doesn’t mean I can’t grease tracks or paint buildings for fun.” He heaved a big sigh. Oh, the drama of being young. “You were just saying the other day I need to find a way to keep busy this summer. Quirky Kingdom’s going to be amazing when it’s cleaned up and running.”

“That’s why I keep pushing myself to fix it,” Adeline said, grinning at my son with an openness I wished she’d direct toward me.

I shouldn’t give into my heart’s longing.

“I want to bring the park back to what it used to be,” she said. “I *need* to do it for my own sake if not for the memory of . . .” Blinking fast, her eyes shimmered. “My mom loved the park so much.” Her spin stiffened, and her earnest gaze shot to me. “If you meant it, you’ve got a job. I’ll pay you your normal wage, of course.”

I only worked to keep busy. Like many orcs, I emerged from the

mountain with bags of gold and jewels, enough to support me and my son in a comfortable lifestyle for the rest of our days and beyond.

“I did mean it,” I said, though now I was having doubts. This female upset my equilibrium, and I didn’t like it.

After she brushed stray strands of her brown hair off her face, she thrust her hand toward me. “Do we have a deal then?”

I took her fingers in mine, marveling at how tiny she was compared to me. Size wasn’t everything, however. I’d already seen she was strong.

For better or worse, it looked like I was going to be busy for the next few months.

I shook her hand. “You’ve got a deal.”

CHAPTER 5

ADELINE

The next morning, after coffee and a quick breakfast in my kitchen, I grabbed my tool bag and took the trail behind the house to Quirky Kingdom. Today, I'd assign my handyman (handyorc?) duties and then make a solid list of what needed to be done. I always got a thrill when I could check things off a list.

There were so many things left to do before I got the park up and running again, but a spark of hope had been lit in my heart. I wasn't doing it alone any longer, and there was a good chance I could complete everything on my list by my deadline. In a few weeks, once I was sure everything could be ready in time, I'd put up fliers around town announcing the grand opening. I'd also stop into the restaurants to see if they'd be interested in renting food booths.

As I forded the overgrown grass between the blue donkey ride and the pink elephant carriages, bangs rang out ahead. Was someone sabotaging one of the rides?

With a growl ripping up my throat, I dropped my tool bag and mug of coffee and raced toward where I'd heard the sound.

I skidded to a stop when I reached the row of food stands and found Rexin on the roof of one of them, replacing shingles. Brear worked with a rake nearby, creating a pile of downed brush and leaves between two of the small buildings.

"Oh," I said, blinking at him through my glasses. "You're here early."

He'd removed his shirt and man did he have muscles. Sure, he was an orc. They were all big and bulky, or the ones I'd encountered so far were—even the women. But Rexin appeared almost godlike kneeling on the roof, an

oversized hammer in his hand, his green skin glowing in the early morning sunlight.

“Mmm hmm,” he mumbled. He held a few roofing nails between his tusks. Pulling them out, he dropped them into a metal container beside his knee. “You weren’t here yet, so I decided to start working on this building. The roof leaked, and the inside has sustained some damage.”

My snort rang out. “Everything has sustained damage.”

“It’s all fixable. What’s your timeframe for opening?”

“Mid-August.”

“Ambitious.”

“That’s me. It’s close to the time kids go back to school, but I don’t believe I can be ready before then. After the kids are back in school, I plan to keep the park open in the afternoons at a discount price, then go full swing on the weekends. I’m calling it a test run. If I’m still around, next year will be seven days a week from Memorial Day to Labor Day.”

“Still around?”

“I haven’t decided if I’ll keep running the park or sell it.”

I’d also thought of opening part of the park to the holiday crowd if I could find enough crew to keep the snow cleared. Assuming I was still living in town.

It might be fun to decorate the park to fit the holiday theme and hire someone to play Santa.

Rexin grunted. Turning, he sat on the roof, his gaze traveling down my front. I’d fretted while standing in front of my bureau this morning, droplets from my wet hair trickling down my spine. It was all I could do to override my urge to wear something that made me look pretty instead of something I needed to wear while digging inside a cobweb-filled shed. I’d settled for another pair of fairly clean jean shorts and a nicer t-shirt. Nice meaning no holes or paint stains—yet.

What I looked like shouldn’t matter. I’d hired Rexin to work, not admire me.

Jeez, I wasn’t interested in him that way, was I?

Maybe.

Time to nip that thought off before it sprouted.

“Would you like me to do something other than finish this roof?” he asked.

“No, the roof is good.” I frowned, taking in the other small buildings.

“How about me?” Brear paused in his raking. “I’ll use the wheelbarrow to take this brush and junk to wherever you want it. You can burn it.” His eyes gleamed with excitement. “I’m gonna build a big, giant pile of leaves and sticks, and the fire will roar and shoot toward the sky.”

“We’ll have to talk to the fire department about that first,” I said. “It may make more sense to take it out back and mulch it.”

His shoulders sagged, but he shored them up quickly. “Still. I’ll get it all cleaned up. Then you can tell me what to do after that.”

“You’re not supposed to work,” I said.

“What should I do instead?”

“Read a book? Play?”

“Playing’s boring.”

At least he didn’t say reading was boring. Escaping to new worlds through someone’s words was amazing.

“Pretend I’m not working.” He started raking again.

I frowned at Rexin. “You tell him.”

“I have, but it doesn’t seem to stick.” He nudged his head to the row of buildings. “They’re small. I’m sure I can get all of them reroofed by lunchtime.”

“That would be amazing. I’ll, um . . .” I scooted sideways. “Go work on the elephants. None of them were running, but I’ve repaired one.”

“You have mechanical skills?”

“Hard to believe since a month ago, I sat in a corporate office pushing papers, huh?”

He shrugged. “I’m sure you’re capable of doing a wide variety of things.”

“Before I left town to pursue a different dream, I helped my dad here at the park. From the time I could carry a wrench, I worked by his side, keeping everything running smoothly.”

“You said you don’t know why he let it get so run down.”

“Yeah.” I sighed. “He was such a stickler for keeping the place pristine. I can’t imagine what happened to change that, though it doesn’t matter. It’s mine now, and I’m going to return it to the condition it used to be.”

“And run it.”

“Like I said, maybe I’ll sell it.” The thought had sunk into me more than once.

“You said you and your dad kept it going together. It was something you shared. Could you really bear to sell it once it’s fully restored?”

“My mother was the glue that held all of this together, not the nonexistent bond between him and me.”

“Ah.”

I tilted my head, watching his impassive face. “What does that mean?”

“Yesterday, you suggested you and he didn’t get along.”

I lifted my chin. “We didn’t.”

“So maybe you just need to find new glue?”

I grunted, noncommittal. I couldn’t imagine such a thing existed. Fixing this place gave me a purpose, but I was doing it for Mom, not my father.

Would running the park give me the same sense of satisfaction I’d found when Mom was around? Somehow, I doubted it.

As far as I was concerned, there was no glue in the world that would bind me to the dad who’d driven me away.

CHAPTER 6

REXIN

“I want you to go home and make some sandwiches,” I told Brear. After cleaning up the brush around the row of buildings and wheelbarrowing it to the parking lot, creating a big pile he still hoped to burn, I told him to take a break. He’d sat in the shade of one of the buildings and read a book.

At my words, he leaped to his feet and tucked the book into his back pocket. I slung my tool bag over my shoulder and jumped off the final roof, landing squarely on the ground. I’d hunt down Adeline and ask her what she wanted me to work on next, though painting the outside of the buildings and restoring the inside would take me a week or more.

How in the world did she think she’d get this place running in such a short time?

Well, she was my boss, and that wasn’t a question that needed asking. I was here to work, not give directions.

I also was not here to stare at her pretty face or note the way her brown hair gleamed with bits of red and gold in the sunlight.

“How many sandwiches should I make?” Brear asked. “What kind?”

“There’s lunch meat and cheese in the fridge. Make three for me and however many you want for yourself.”

“How many for Adeline?”

“I imagine she has her own lunch to eat.”

His thick brow so like my own scrunched together. “Maybe.” Whirling around, he raced for home.

“Don’t forget to refill the water jug and bring it back,” I called out to him.

While he was gone, I looked for Adeline, finding her with her upper body buried inside the belly of an elephant, her legs dangling in the air.

Rather than admire the view of her backside, I strode up to her and leaned against the bright pink beast, noting the fresh coat of paint on the others, plus the newly restored carriages. Maybe she *would* be able to get this place running over the next eight plus weeks. If she worked 24/7. And if she had enough drive. I was beginning to suspect she did.

“Need help?” I asked.

She shifted quickly, smacking her head on something hard, making a bang echo inside the beast’s belly.

Her legs scrambled, but she appeared to be falling into the creature rather than out.

I caught her heel before she tumbled inside. Reaching into the elephant, I grasped her thighs, lifted her up and out, and deposited her on the ground.

She swiped her hair out of her eyes and stared up at me; her face ruddy from exertion. A swatch of pink paint streaked across her right cheek.

Damn she was cute.

“Thanks.” Her brown eyes sparkled with humor. “It almost ate me.”

Heat flared across my skin. I shouldn’t be thinking about eating anything but the sandwiches Brear would soon deliver.

“I finished the roofs,” I said. “Is there anything in particular you’d like me to work on next? I thought I could scrape and paint the outer walls, then work on the inside of each building. I assume from the grills and refrigerators inside that they’re used for vendors to make and sell food.”

“They are, and sure, that sounds like a great way to spend the afternoon. Many afternoons, actually.” Her sigh chugged out, making her bangs flip into the air. “My goal for the next few weeks is to get the rides in tip-top shape, then work on the landscaping.”

“Did you remember to include the big bonfire Brear’s salivating to light?”

She grinned. “It does sound fun. We’ll see what the fire chief has to say about that. As long as it rains, and we keep it controlled, I imagine we can do it.”

Brear would be thrilled.

“I’ll get started on the buildings after lunch, then,” I said.

She frowned. “Is it that time already?” At my nod, she stared down the path. “I’ll go raid my kitchen cabinets. I also need a drink.”

“And you also need to remove this.” Catching up with her, I ran my claw down the paint on her cheek.

Her face flushed, and she backed away so fast, she ran into a green and

white striped tiger lined up with others. From the looks of them, they'd race back and forth across a track, roaring.

"I'm sure I'm a mess," she blurted out.

"Not too messy." I couldn't keep my eyes off her curvy form.

More color flooded her cheeks. "It doesn't matter what I look like, I suppose." She started to stride away.

I called after her. "To me it does."

She froze but didn't turn. "You don't . . ." She shook her head and started walking again.

I admired her ass. Did she realize the bottom of her butt cheeks peeked out from beneath the denim?

I'd have to be dead not to notice how the pale blue fabric molded her hips and how the cut off shreds teased her upper thighs.

"I don't what?" I asked.

"You are not interested in me in that way."

"What way would that be, Adeline?" I was pushing, though in a teasing way.

After that kiss, she'd given me the impression she wasn't interested. And while I told myself I shouldn't be interested in her, I couldn't seem to hold myself back.

I'd stepped all over her toes—figuratively—when I kissed her yesterday. I wouldn't make another move without her giving a clear indication she wanted it.

"What if I am interested in that way?" Why wouldn't she turn around so I could read her thoughts on her face and in her eyes?

"If you are, you might want to reconsider." She paced down the hill again, continuing along the narrow trail winding through deep grass. The trail exited in the parking lot, and it was only a short walk from there to her place.

I caught up to her, walking behind her. Protecting her, I told myself. Not gazing at her ass.

Too much.

"If you want me to back off completely, tell me now," I said. "I won't take it personally."

When we reached the big open area between the main park and the gate—which also needed repair—she came to a halt, turning to look up at me.

"I . . ." Her huff rang out. "I have so much to do here, Rexin. Between getting this place running and dealing with the loose ends my dad left behind,

I don't have time for a relationship."

"That isn't telling me you're not interested." My heart flopped behind my ribs. That hadn't happened in . . . never. I'd cared for Brear's mom, but we were only together for a short time. We were also only seventeen. Kids, really. Certainly not old enough for lasting love, let alone having an orcling.

"Where do you want to take this?" she growled.

The sound made flames lick across my skin. I glanced down, flipping my arms back and forth but finding nothing to cause the feeling.

If I didn't know better, I'd think she was . . . Nah, humans couldn't be true mates to orcs, could they? We were sexually compatible, and our genetics mixed well if Brear was any indication, but true mating came only from within our species.

"I guess I want to see where it can go," I said.

Her eyebrows lifted. "You *guess*?"

"No guessing." I stroked her hair off her face, savoring how silky the strands were. Orc hair tended to be as coarse and rough as the orc sprouting it. "I *do* want to see if there can be something between us."

"I guess I feel the same—when I shouldn't."

"Guess?" I teased.

Her lips curved up in a way that made my pulse flip. "I know."

"Alright then," I said. "We can—"

"I've got everything set up, Dad," Brear called out from behind me. "You should come eat too, Adeline."

How had I missed the two chairs parked in the shade with a tall wooden box between them?

"Right this way," my sly son said, waving to the seats.

"What's up?" Adeline asked, her smile holding true.

"It looks like my son has made us lunch."

CHAPTER 7

ADELINE

“Please sit,” Brear said formally as we approached the chairs and box in the shade. “And I’ll serve your meal.”

“You fixed all this?” Pausing beside him, I gave him a quick hug. “Thank you.”

His face darkened, and he grinned at me with the innocence only a sweet boy like him could possess.

When I released him, he shuffled his boots and stared at the ground. “It’s just a simple meal, my lady.”

My lady, huh?

I held in my laugh. He was taking this seriously. The last thing I wanted to do was embarrass him.

After I sat, he laid a paper napkin on my lap. He frowned at Rexin. “Sit, *please*.”

Rexin’s lips trembled, but he did as Brear asked, having a napkin deposited in his lap too.

Brear lifted a draped cloth off the top of the box between us, revealing two plates holding piles of sandwiches.

My belly snarled, reminding me I hadn’t finished my coffee this morning, and I’d forgotten all about the donut I’d brought with me to eat as I worked. Since I’d left it on a stone wall near the side entrance, ants had probably found it by now.

“Water or water?” Brear held up a big flask. He placed paper cups beside each plate.

“I’ll have water,” I said in all seriousness.

Rexin grunted. “I’ll have the same.” He frowned at his son. “What’s the

meaning of all this?”

I had my suspicions, but I wasn't going to name them.

“You asked me to make sandwiches.” Brear filled each cup. “I made sandwiches and brought them back.”

Rexin shook his head slowly, a frown scrunching his thick brow in a cute way. He lifted one of the sandwich halves off his plate and took a big bite, eating around it. “Tastes great. We could've sat on the ground and eaten, however.”

“Personally, I'm grateful,” I said cheerfully. “I was going to go home and heat up a can of soup.” I really needed to go shopping. The box of baking soda in my fridge was lonely. I'd always enjoyed cooking and even if I was tired at the end of a long day, I could prepare something decent. “Instead, I can savor this lovely meal and the shade. It's hot out today.” I frowned at Brear, who watched us intently. “Are you going to eat too?”

He nodded. “I already ate at home.”

I ate two of the sandwiches and waved to the third, speaking to Rexin. “Feel welcome to eat this one too.”

He grabbed it.

“What are your plans for the afternoon?” he asked in between bites.

“I'm almost done with the elephants. The turtle ride works well.” I winked up at Brear, who watched us both intently. “Would you care to try it out? I need to make sure it's fun. I know you're a big kid and all, but maybe you could pretend you're seven or eight while you ride?” Thankfully, the rides were big. Some parents opted to join in on the fun, so adult orcs could ride as well. Brear would fit just fine.

“I'll do it,” he said gruffly. “Wouldn't want the little kids to be disappointed.” He might pretend he wasn't excited, but the gleam in his eyes gave him away.

“I need to work on the fluorescent yellow llama ride after that, though I might take a break from small engines and help you with the vendor buildings, Rexin. Once they're in solid shape, I can start advertising in town. I hope those who rented in the past will be eager to do so again.”

“That sounds wise.” Brear removed the empty plates and dropped a package of cookies between us, refilling our water cups.

I ate a few, then stood. “Before you do anything else, Brear, will you come with me to the turtle ride?”

Rexin stood. “Do you mind if I check it out too?”

“Sure, why not?”

We headed across the park to the ride.

CHAPTER 8

REXIN

“You’ve done a lot of work since I was last here.” I surveyed the gleaming track and the freshly painted purple turtles. The grass in the center had been neatly cut and groomed. If I kept my gaze trained on this ride alone, it was easy to picture how nice the park would look once we’d finished.

We’d.

Adeline had hired me to help, but when did I embrace the full challenge of getting the park ready to open by mid-August?

“It looks good, doesn’t it?” Adeline beamed up at me, her cheeks pink and loose strands of hair swirling around her face. “Some of the rides operate well already; I just need to clean them up and repaint as needed. The turtle and elephant rides needed the most work.” She nudged her chin to the grinning turtles. “Why don’t you get in, Brear, and I’ll start the ride.”

Brear strode over and climbed into one of the double turtles designed for a child and an adult to ride together.

Adeline followed and dropped the bar over his lap. It clicked to lock, though I doubted she was worried he’d try to leap out. It was standard procedure.

“Insurance,” she whispered when she returned to me. “I needed to remember to line that up before we open.” Her gaze sought mine.

We.

Something was changing between us, and it wasn’t only the heat that kept flaring across my skin.

“Ready?” she called out to Brear.

“What about Dad?”

Her grin shook something deep within my bones. “Are you up for a spin

on the turtles?”

“Why not?” I settled in the one behind Brear.

He frowned at Adeline. “Aren’t you going to ride?”

“I need to run the equipment.”

“Could you teach me how it works?” he gushed. “Maybe when I’m old enough, I can work here, running one of the rides.”

“I bet you can,” she said.

“My son loves anything mechanical.” Leaning forward, I nudged his shoulder.

“When you’re sixteen, definitely apply for a job.” She strode over to a post with switches to engage and halt the ride.

“Really?” Brear breathed, wiggling with excitement.

“Of course. A park like this is always looking for good staff.”

“Cool.”

“Ready?” she asked, her finger hovering over the switch.

At his nod, she engaged the ride. Watching, she winced as if she thought it might not work.

The turtles were connected together like a mini-kid rollercoaster, and the track wound around a large area landscaped with flowerbeds and a spindly grove of trees. It climbed up a low hill along the back and I assumed it would “rush” down the other side, then wind through the twisted track on its way back to the starting point.

With a subtle squeak, the ride started moving.

“Yay,” Brear shouted, lifting his hands overhead like he rode something much more exciting than a ride made for little kids. In some ways, he behaved fully grown, while in others, he clung to the innocence of youth. I hoped he could hold onto the latter for as long as possible.

As long as his mother’s family didn’t make another threat. Assuming it had been them and the threat was intended for me and not someone else.

That was a year ago, however. When nothing further came of it, I shoved the worry aside.

The ride chugged along at the perfect speed for children. Just enough thrill while keeping it tame for those who might get scared. When the ride came to a halt, the bars unlocked, and Briar leaped out.

“Your turn.” Before Adeline could protest, he dragged her over to the car I still sat in. “Maybe you should try it out together? I can run the equipment.”

Matchmaking, was he? The thought pinched something deep within my

chest. My son had hinted for years he wished he had a mother. When we lived in the orc kingdom, my sisters did what they could to fill in, and they were wonderful to him. But it wasn't the same as having a mom living with him.

I'd considered mating. I'd even attended a few match events, but no one had sparked my inner fire.

When I came to the surface, I'd decided to give up on the thought of mating. Brear was enough.

Now I wasn't so sure.

"Let me show you first." Adeline strode over to the post and talked my son through the process, though it was simple. Lift the plastic cap to expose the buttons. Green for go and red for stop. The ride went so slow, I could hop out and jog beside it if there was a need.

She strode back over to stand beside my turtle car.

"What do you think, Rexin?" Her knuckles rose to prop on her jutted hip. Her eyes sparkled with happiness, and she couldn't stop smiling. It must be rewarding to see her hard work paying off. "Should we ride together?"

"There's plenty of room." I scooted to the side, making a place for her, patting it.

My gaze sought hers.

I didn't know what I was looking for in this tiny human, but I suspected if I let Adeline in, I'd find it.

CHAPTER 9

ADELINE

I dropped down onto the seat beside Rexin, and Brear carefully lowered the bar, clicking it into place.

He remained beside the car, his tusks gleaming in the sunshine as his grin slid from me to his dad and back again.

He shouldn't get his hopes up about us. Sure, we'd suggested we might see where this led, but as of now, there was nothing going on. And even if I gave into the urge to lean into Rexin's side, to snuggle even, nothing could come of it.

It would be unfair to begin a relationship I couldn't finish. I hadn't decided yet if I'd sell the place once it was running or remain in town to continue the family tradition.

The ride began, and Rexin laid his arm on the seat behind me. It wasn't a date-like thing. There was no other place for him to put his arm.

I tried not to snuggle. He smelled like sunshine and hot guy. Not sweaty at all despite working on roofs all morning.

I was pleased with how the ride performed. I'd already tested each of the elephant carriages. They also rode on tracks, and when guests sat inside the roofless carriages, the elephants "pulled" the vehicles up a hill to a small, fake Taj Mahal. Guests could go inside where they'd be given a tiny gift from the person portraying the emperor—a plastic ring, but kids ate that stuff up. They could either take the path downhill meandering through pretty gardens or ride a coach back to the start before moving on to the next ride.

"You said your mother died when you were young?" Rexin asked over the clinkety-clack of the metal wheels riding the rails.

"I was ten. A freak accident. She was gone very fast." Despite the

eighteen years that had passed since, my belly still hollowed out at my final memory of her when she kissed my cheek and told me she was going for a run. “She was hit while jogging on the side of the road by a driver not paying attention.”

“I can only imagine how awful that must’ve been for you.”

Terrible, but I didn’t want to talk about it. That was when Dad changed from the loving, kind father to the stern man who appeared to have aged fifty years overnight. “Are you going to tell me what happened to Brear’s mother?”

“I already mentioned she was human.” He stared forward as the turtle ride chugged up the final hill.

“Only his freckles give him away. I don’t believe I’ve seen another orc with them.”

“Just like hers.” He didn’t sound devastated, though he must be. “Orclings of mixed species tend to take after their orc parents.”

“I’ve only met a few half-orc children—orclings.” One couple in town, both teachers at the high school, had a son who looked exactly like his dad.

“Brear’s mother and I met when we were seventeen.”

Brear was twelve. “And you’re . . .”

“Thirty.”

Ah, so they were pretty much kids. “Orcs didn’t come out of the mountain to live among us until a few years ago.”

“Some snuck out, like me. That’s where legends of orcs came from. A few mingled with humans or spied until we could learn the language. How else do you think we could make this transition so seamlessly?”

“I assumed you had some sort of tech that translated or that you already spoke our language.” I hadn’t thought too hard about it.

“We learn fast.”

“I’m impressed.”

“Some speak your language better than others. Brear’s mother and I were together for a few months before we ended it.”

“I’m sorry. You must’ve been devastated.”

“I cared about her but . . .” He stared forward, his jaw tight. “Damn, we were so immature back then. Things went sour fast, and we decided we didn’t want to meet up anymore.” He shrugged. “We were too young to know what we were doing.”

“You were old enough to have Brear.”

“I didn’t know she was pregnant. I also didn’t know she’d died a few months after giving birth.” A tic bloomed on his temple. “Someone left him at the entrance to our cave. They abandoned him there where a creature or a horrible person could’ve hurt him.”

If children tended to take after the orc parent, whoever helped deliver Brear must’ve been shocked when he was born.

“How did your people know he was your son?”

“Whoever left him pinned a note with his and his mother’s names. They said no one in the human world wanted him.”

My breath caught. “He was just a baby.”

“The final line of the note said Brear should be raised by his father, Rexin Tavalog. I was the only orc with that name. I was stunned. Sad to hear about his mom dying. But grateful I’d have the chance to raise my son.”

“You stayed in the orc kingdom.”

“Until a year and a half ago when we moved here.”

“Why not stay there forever?”

His gaze shot away from mine. “He’s comfortable with orcs and our culture, but I wanted him to learn his mother’s.”

“I’m sure it was quite a culture shock for him.”

“I tried to share as much about his mother’s world as I could.”

The ride started slowing, approaching the boarding location. Brear hopped around the control post in excitement. His happiness was contagious, but I couldn’t drum up a smile after what Rexin just shared.

“I’m sorry she died,” I said.

“I didn’t forget about her.” His hands tightened on the bar. “If I’d known she was pregnant, I would’ve helped her financially. I would’ve been there with her no matter what.”

He must still mourn her loss.

Could another woman compete with the memory of the woman who gave him a child?

CHAPTER 10

REXIN

It felt good to share my past with Adeline. I watched her face, curious to see how she'd respond. No sign of distaste, which was good.

When the ride came to a stop, we got out.

"I'll go work on the buildings," I said.

"I'll help."

"Me too." Brear skipped over to walk with us along the path. "I can paint and clean and do whatever."

"Maybe go home for the afternoon and relax?" Adeline said.

He grimaced at her. "There's so much to do, and it's fun here."

"You're twelve," Adeline said. "Legally, I can't employ you."

"And legally, you can tell me to leave, but that won't keep me from coming back. I'll rake in areas where you can't see me. Weed gardens." His infectious grin made me shake my head. "I might even sneak over at night and do some painting."

"Do not come here at night," I said, adding to Adeline, "I promise he won't." I gripped my son's shoulder. "It's not safe for you to be here alone."

"Adeline works late a lot. She's alone then. If I help her, she won't have to do it all by herself."

"I work late because I want to." She huffed out a sigh. "I feel like you should spend your summer doing kid things."

"They're boring." His grin rose further, reminding me of myself. "Tell you what. I'll just . . . roam around and stay out of your way, and you can pretend I'm not working."

"No, you'll stay within eyesight." That might be the best we'd get from him. If he was determined to help, I couldn't hold him back short of making

demands, and I didn't want to do that. I loved my son. I wanted to see him happy. And he was enjoying helping get this place in order.

"Alright," he said, as if he made a great concession. "I'll stay where you can see me."

"At all times," I warned.

He nodded, his head bobbing up and down in an exaggerated movement.

"I'll add more to your pay, Rexin." Adeline's hands splayed out away from her sides. "What you do with it is up to you, but he can't work here for free."

He wouldn't work much. Like most kids his age, he'd tire of a task and sit in the shade, as he should. Leaving him at home was an option. He was old enough to be by himself for a few hours at a time. I could check on him during breaks.

But he got his stubbornness from me. If he wanted to be here, he would find a way. Better to keep him busy and where I could see him, and make sure he still did things like reading or playing with a hand-held game.

If nothing else, being here taught him skills and kept him out of trouble.

We went to a big shed located outside the main park and grabbed buckets of paint, brushes, rollers, and scrapers. Returning to the vendor buildings, we got to work, one of us scraping off the old paint—that Brear cheerfully collected, placing it in a garbage can—the other putting on the first coat of white paint.

By the time the afternoon wound to a close, we'd painted two buildings.

"I'll see you on Monday?" I asked after we'd returned the tools and supplies to the shed.

"Thank you." Satisfaction came through in Adeline's voice as she squinted at the buildings in the late-day sunshine. "We'll finish them next week and get started on another area."

There was still a lot to do, but we just might have the park ready to open by her deadline.

"The fence is next, I think." She nibbled on a fingernail. "I need to be able to lock the gate at night to keep people out."

"You're worried about sabotage?"

She shrugged. "Not too much, but who knows how people will behave? We live in an odd world."

"Yup."

As Brear and I walked home, he was strangely quiet. Maybe he was tired.

He'd lounged in the shade some of the time, alternating that with completing grunt tasks that would've slowed me and Adeline down.

I put my arm around his shoulders. "You don't need to go with me on Monday. You can stay home if you want. Watch TV, enjoy the AC."

"I like helping." He grinned at me. "Adeline's nice."

"She is."

"Pretty too."

"Are you developing a crush?" I was only joking. After he'd served us lunch, I suspected where this was going.

His face scrunched. "She's old."

"Not even thirty yet, I don't believe. About my age."

"You're old too."

My laughter rang out, startling a bird pecking on the side of the road. It soared up into one of the trees and chirped as we passed.

"Once you get a bit older yourself, you might form a new opinion about the age of those around you."

"I can't imagine being twenty," he said. "That's super old too."

I just shook my head and grinned.

We reached our home and went inside, where I started dinner while he played a video game while sitting at the island.

After eating, we sat in the living room and worked on a puzzle. Sometimes we watched movies, but we were both raised as orcs and found many of the human films odd. Orcs had started creating their own movies, and I looked forward to seeing what they came up with.

"Can we have a picnic at the park tomorrow?" Brear asked from the hall before he went to bed.

I looked up from my book. "Sure."

"How about one in the afternoon?"

Strange that he wanted to schedule it, but he could be worried I'd get busy and forget. "Alright. One it is."

"We'll make lots of yummy food to bring."

"Of course." I smiled, happy he wanted to spend time with me. Not many kids felt the same, but Brear and I had been close from the moment I first saw him and kissed him on his forehead. Sadness had shot through me after hearing his mother died, but I was grateful I had the chance to raise our child. Her family might not want to show him love, but I had more than enough to give.

“Can we bring a pretty blanket to lay on the grass?” he asked, leaning against the wall, watching me. “And a vase for some flowers?”

“Sounds like a special picnic.”

“Very special.”

“We can do whatever you want. I don’t have plans this weekend other than tidying up the garage.” One half held the lawn mower and tools, and I crafted wooden objects in the shop I’d set up on the other side. Eventually, I’d expand the structure to fit the huge truck I bought that didn’t fit. Orcs couldn’t drive regular human cars, but the industry had caught up, building larger ones for us.

“Okay.” He grinned. “See you tomorrow morning, then.”

Rising, I strode down the hall and kissed his forehead. Each time I did it, it reminded me of all the phases of his life. My squalling orcling had grown into a sturdy toddler who got into everything. The toddler years gave way to an earnest kid who excelled in school, especially the classes in human language. When we came to the surface, he fit right in with the children in seventh grade, though he was the only orc in his class. Eventually, those being born now would mix into all the classes.

Was bringing him to the surface the right idea? I wanted him to understand not only orc culture but that of his mother.

I sensed she’d approve.

CHAPTER II

ADELINE

That evening, as I was settling into a chair on the front porch with a glass of wine and my e-reader, my phone rang.

Rexin's number?

I swiped into the call. "Hello?"

"Hello, this is Rexin. Rexin Tavalog." His voice sounded croaky, but maybe he was coming down with a cold.

"Hi."

"Yes. Rexin Tavalog."

Or maybe he'd had his own glass of wine. I wasn't sure how orcs handled alcohol.

"What can I do for you, Rexin?" A loaded question, but he'd been nothing but professional since he suggested he was interested in me. Had he changed his mind?

"I was wondering if, um, you'd be willing to meet me at one tomorrow at the park for a picnic." The words rushed out of him. "For a nice picnic. The special kind. Like with food. Sitting on a blanket. Maybe I'll bring some flowers. Put them in a vase."

Did he feel awkward calling? It sure sounded like it.

"That sounds like a nice way to spend the afternoon," I said, hoping he'd feel reassured hearing my answer.

"Great!" He released a breath in a big whoosh.

Aw, he could be nervous about asking me out. From what he said while we rode the turtle ride, he hadn't dated much since he was with Brear's mother and that was over ten years ago.

"What can I bring?" I asked.

Silence echoed in the line until he swallowed so hard, I could hear it. “Oh, well . . . We’ll—I’ll . . . It’s fine. Delightful of you to offer. I’ll bring everything.”

Delightful, huh? I held in my chuckle.

“Why don’t I bring a dessert and the drinks?” I said. “I’m happy to contribute.”

“Sure! How about cookies and brownies and . . .” He trailed off, and his voice deepened. “Whatever you’d like to bring would be extra delightful.”

He must be very nervous.

“I’ll make a variety of things. One at the park, you said?”

“Yes, one. Don’t be late.”

“I won’t.”

The call ended, and I stared at my phone a second before taking a long swallow of my wine.

I sort of had a date with Rexin tomorrow. And while I should’ve turned him down—I could be leaving town this fall—I decided to relax and let this go wherever it was supposed to.

Lifting my e-reader, I sunk into my book.

THE NEXT MORNING, I rose early and made brownies. While they cooled, I went to the amusement park and started working on the engine that ran the Ferris wheel. This was the pièce de résistance for the park. Kids and adults alike lined up all day long to soar into the sky and catch the stunning view of the forest and the mountains beyond.

Thankfully, the issue was a quick fix. I spent the rest of the morning painting the individual cars. When I left at noon, a feeling of accomplishment soared through me. The ride looked and ran as it should. All that was left in that area was to tidy up the grassy section around it.

I loved seeing it all come together. My mom would be proud.

Dad?

I still wasn’t sure what to think about him. Why had he left the park to me when he cut me out of his life the second I walked through the front door?

It still hurt that he hadn’t reached out to my tentative messages. Not even one Christmas card in reply. Had he been that angry that he wanted to sever

me completely from his life? If so, it made no sense to leave the park to me unless he had no one else to give it to.

I wasn't even sure I wanted the park when his lawyer initially reached out. That was how I learned Dad had been sick, that he'd died. He hadn't even called when he found out he was dying. I'd included my phone number in each card.

"Enough," I told myself as I showered and tugged a sundress over my head, slipping my feet into sandals. "Stop thinking about it."

If only I could let go of the pain in my chest. Funny how the mind and heart could communicate, but when it came to deep emotions, neither could get past the big wall erected between them.

I wasn't going to fix what had been broken years ago. Too much time had passed, and he'd closed and locked the door behind me when I left.

Unfortunately, it still hurt more than it should.

I DROVE into town and parked in the lot adjacent to the park. With my tote holding the container of brownies and a jug of water, plus sunscreen and a few other things I thought I might need, I left my car, striding along the crushed stone path to the tree-covered area where they'd set up picnic tables.

Not seeing Rexin, I placed my bag on a table and peered around.

That's when I spied him sitting on a blanket in a shady area, his feet stretched out in front of him, and an odd look on his face. I didn't see Brear, but maybe he was playing on the swings.

I grabbed my bags and walked over to him. When I stopped in front of him, I tried not to drool. He wore shorts that revealed his muscular green legs. They were lightly hairy, and he'd exposed his bare toes with short claws instead of nails. He wore no shirt and his oodles of muscles just begged to be stroked. He'd pulled his hair back in his usual orc bun, and all I wanted to do was tumble onto him, release his hair so I could stroke it, and give him a big, steamy kiss.

Would that be allowed?

"Hey." I placed my bags on the edge of the blanket. "Is Brear here?"

"He stayed home." Sitting up, he crossed his legs beneath his thighs. His thick brow lifted. "It appears we've been set up."

CHAPTER 12

REXIN

“I, um, I’m sick,” Brear said when he dragged himself into the kitchen a few minutes before we had to leave for the park.

I lowered the basket back onto the counter. “Then we’ll go another time.” I placed my palm on his forehead, but he didn’t feel hot. “Is it your belly or a headache or . . .”

“Everything.” He sighed dramatically. “I can’t go on a picnic. I’m afraid I’ll throw up.” He punctuated his words with a rub on his abdomen, groaning loudly.

“What’s going on, Brear?” I asked with a frown.

“Nothing. Must’ve been something I ate. You go to the park.” He waved to the basket. “I hate for you to miss out on the delightful day we planned.”

Delightful?

I was still convinced something was going on here, but I wasn’t sure what it could be. “I don’t want to go without you.”

“Please? I’ll feel bad if I ruin your day.”

“We can go next weekend instead. I’ll put the food in the refrigerator to eat for dinner tonight or tomorrow.”

“No!” He leaned against the counter, lowering his voice. “No. I want you to go. I’ll feel worse if you stay home.” He handed me the basket and my phone. “Take this with you. Call me if you get concerned. Check on me all you want.” The last came out a bit too cheery, but I couldn’t read anything from his face. “I’ll just lounge around here, resting. I’m sure I’ll feel better by the time you get home.”

“I’ve got plenty of things I can do here instead of picnicking alone in the park.”

“Please, Dad?” He shot around the counter and gave me a hug. “I’ll go lay down, and I’m sure I’ll feel better soon, especially if I know you’re having a nice time at the park.”

So weird. Usually we spent all our free time together. But my son was growing up. It was natural he might want some time alone at home every now and then. I could take my fishing pole with me and toss the line into the river a few times.

I could enjoy some alone time myself.

“You’re sure?” I asked.

His breath shot out. “Yup. Very sure. I’m sure I’ll feel fine in no time.”

Hmm. I studied his face, but he turned partway away from me.

“What did you do?” I hadn’t emerged from the orc cave yesterday.

“Nothing. Nothing at all.” He scooted across the dining room and started up the stairs. “I’ll go lay down now.”

I lifted the picnic basket off the counter. “Call me if you run into any problems at all. I mean it.”

“I will, Dad.” He sounded much too cheerful about this. I suspected he was recovering already. But I’d respect his wish to be alone for a bit. I wouldn’t be gone for more than an hour.

“Keep the door locked. Don’t let strangers inside. And don’t operate any heavy equipment.” What else should I tell him?

His huff rang out. “Dad.”

I walked over to stand at the base of the stairs, staring at him standing on the landing above. “I love you. I don’t want you hurt.” Taking the stairs three at a time, I nudged his shoulder and ruffled his hair. “Don’t go to the amusement park. Leave Adeline alone.”

“I don’t plan to go to the park until you do on Monday. Don’t need to.”

Maybe he was getting his fill and would choose to stay home a few days next week.

“Call me if you start feeling worse.” I returned to the first floor and hooked the basket over my arm. “And call me if you have any concerns at all, okay?”

“Okay.” He flicked his hand my way. “Don’t worry about me at all. Spend all the time you want at the park. Have fun. Enjoy yourself. Relax. Make this day special.”

He was gushing a bit, but I wasn’t sure why.

With a frown, I left, waiting on the front step until I’d heard him secure

the lock.

I grabbed my fishing pole, planning to stop in town on my way to buy bait, and put everything inside the back of my truck. The engine rumbled as I drove down Main Street. At the park, I took my things to a shady area where I spread out the blanket. The vase with flowers felt silly, so I left it inside the basket.

I'd sat, wondering if I wanted to nap before fishing or eat some of the generous lunch I'd made, when a familiar curvy figure walked down the path in my direction.

Adeline.

And that's when I knew what Brear had been up to.

CHAPTER 13

ADELINE

“Brear is playing matchmaker,” I said, realizing right away what was happening. I should’ve been clued into the idea after he’d served us lunch yesterday.

“I believe so too.” Rexin got up off the ground. “If you’d like to end this right now, I understand.”

Did he want to end it right now? I wasn’t sure I wanted to hear his answer.

While I should take him up on his offer and leave—I had plenty of things to do that didn’t include picnicking at the park—I huffed out a sigh. “I’m hungry. I imagine you’re hungry. We could sit and eat, relax for an hour or so.”

“It’ll only encourage him.”

“Or dissuade him if he thinks it didn’t work.”

His head tilted. “Why wouldn’t it work?”

“Well, it isn’t like *you* asked me on this date.”

“What if I did?”

Oh. “I should remind you that I’m not sure I’ll remain in town after the park is open and running smoothly.”

“You mentioned that.” He frowned. “Where would you go?”

I shrugged. “Back to my old job in the city.” The big bosses told me I could step back into my corner office whenever I wished.

The problem is, I was tired of the fast pace and fakeness. I was enjoying settling back into my roots and doing things with my hands like I’d done when I was young.

Let’s face it. I was enjoying reconnecting with my past. Each time I got

another ride running, I felt my father's hand on my shoulder, patting me in congratulations—not my mother's touch like I longed for.

I wasn't sure what I felt about that. I didn't need his approval; I hadn't since Mom died.

Or maybe I did, at least in this. The park had been his baby. Mom and I enjoyed working by his side, but he was always the first person there in the morning and the last to leave at night.

“Heavy thoughts.” Rexin nodded to the cute picnic basket sitting on the equally pretty quilt. “Truly, I won't be offended if you tell me to enjoy my lunch alone.”

I dropped down onto the blanket. “I'll stay. I'd be a fool to reject a meal I didn't have to cook.”

He chuckled as he joined me. “Don't get too excited. It's simple stuff.” He pulled out big bulky rolls and containers of chicken salad and coleslaw.

My belly said it was quite excited about sandwiches and slaw.

I laid the container of brownies on the blanket next to a bag of chips, my mouth started salivating already.

After he placed a vase and flowers on the blanket between us, he peered at me through his long lashes.

“You've discovered my downfall,” he said.

I held up the base. “Flowers?”

“Nope, those are for you.”

“Sweet, but you didn't know I was coming to the park today.”

“Still for you.” He grinned, showing off his long white tusks. “I meant the brownies.”

“I get it. They say chocolate's the way to a woman's heart, didn't you know? This woman anyway.”

He studied my face, his own going pensive. “Would you like me to pursue your heart?”

My heart fluttered around like he'd released a charm of hummingbirds behind my ribs. He was too sweet. Too solemn. And too appealing. “For now, let's just pursue sandwiches and coleslaw.”

He lowered a paper plate onto my lap. “Deal.”

We ate, enjoying the sunshine and the light breeze. Summer had arrived in full force, bringing with it a sweltering heat that soon made sweat trickle down my spine.

After finishing our meal, we put the chicken salad and remaining

coleslaw inside the cooler, packed everything else into the picnic basket, and left the plastic container holding the brownies out for now.

“Chocolate, or would you like to take a walk?” he asked.

“How about a walk to work off the meal, and then we can eat them?” I rose from the blanket, stretching out the stiffness still haunting me from all the work I’d done over the past few weeks.

His gaze glided down my body as I moved, appreciation clear in his eyes. Was this just the natural effect of a couple chatting together while enjoying a meal, or was there more to his attention than just casual interest?

Like with my future, I wasn’t sure what I wanted from Rexin. He appealed to me in a way no one else ever had. Being with him was like slipping into my most comfy pair of slippers and cuddling up on the sofa wrapped in a super-soft blanket.

Being with him was also like leaping off a cliff without a parachute. He made my core ache for more. I enjoyed sex as much as the next person, but it wasn’t something I sought for more than scratching an itch—and most of the time, I took care of that by myself, because I could do it better than anyone else.

I sensed Rexin might give my vibrator stiff—no pun intended—competition.

He put a t-shirt on, covering up his gorgeous torso. A sin right there.

We left our things—totally safe in this small town where everyone knew everyone else—and took a trail into the woods.

“Lovely.” I spread out my arms, letting the cooler air within the forest coast across my skin. It felt good to be up and moving, striding along a narrow path behind Rexin. “Where are we walking to?”

“I heard there are falls at the end of this trail.”

I frowned. “I’ve come to the park basically since I could walk, but I don’t think I’ve ever heard of falls.” Mom would bring me after a long day at Quirky Kingdom, saying it was important for girls to have fun together every now and then. Dad usually remained behind, working.

“The falls feed the river at the head of the park.”

Only a small section of the river flowed across the top of the big open area. The rest churned through a culvert located beneath the road heading into town, exiting out the other side and meandering along the other side of town until it reached the lake.

“I haven’t actually found it yet myself.” He shot a grin over his shoulder.

“I thought we could do some exploring if you’re up for the walk. I read it’s a two-mile hike to reach it.”

I waved his way. “Lead on.” It might be hot, but it was fun watching the shift of his ass beneath his shorts.

CHAPTER 14

REXIN

I was hyperaware of Adeline walking right behind me. But then, I'd been completely aware of her closeness the entire time we ate. Did she know she licked her utensils after each bite? The swirl of her tongue across the plastic made my cock perk up and take notice. I kept picturing her sucking on me while I held on with her braid wrapped around my hand.

When had I developed such a dirty mind?

When I met Adeline.

I might tell myself I was here in the human world solely for my son, that I didn't need anyone in my life but him, but Adeline had started to slink into my heart when I least expected it. Did I want to let her all the way inside?

Decisions like that didn't need to be made fast or based on the mood of the moment. I'd help her finish getting the park ready, and then I'd decide.

"Tell me more about the orc kingdom," she said. "I'm curious. I don't believe many humans have traveled there. I've only heard a few vague details."

"One of the high school teachers traveled there, though only for a short time. As you know, orcs have matebonded with some of the local women. She and her fiancé were visiting his family."

"Yes, I think I read about that. They're happy together."

"Orcs are pretty sweet, as you can already tell." I smiled her way again, and when the trail widened, I urged her to walk beside me.

Her grin joined in with mine, making my skin heat up more than could be explained away by the steamy day. "I've gotten that impression."

"The male orcs mated with the women are also teachers. They completed the necessary certificates to educate both humans and orcs. Everyone wants

this integration to go well and the best way to do that is to show everyone that orcs can be trusted, including children. As orc families move to this area, more orclings like Brear will attend school.”

“I’ve seen a few orc families in town.”

“One bought a bakery. You should stop in sometime to try the treats they’re making. Orcs love their sweets as much as humans. Ours are different from what I’ve bought in the human stores but just as tasty.”

“I will. Do you have something similar to chocolate?”

“We grow beans in the hills surrounding the city. Coffee beans too, plus tea. If you visited the kingdom, you’d find we’re very similar in manners and tastes.” Not in mating, but I wasn’t going to bring that up at the moment. Nothing may come of this, so why share the intimate details?

“You said one of the teachers visited the kingdom?”

I held a branch back along the edge of the trail so she could pass without it scraping her tender skin.

“It was a few months ago. Her name’s Kassia. She and Jarum have married, and I understand his brother plans to come to the surface soon. He’s a well-known Gromgret player, and he’s going to work with humans and orcs to form combined teams. You’d love the sport. It’s similar to soccer and football.”

“Sounds like a lot of fun.”

“It’s the orc national sport, and Brogis is the star gromet, which is a position similar to a goalie.” I paused while she walked ahead of me on a narrow place in the path before joining her when it widened. “They’ll host exhibition games at first. Maybe we could go to one sometime.” I said it casually, though I watched her face and posture.

She didn’t tense up. Her face didn’t close off. If anything, it opened to me further.

“I’d love that.”

“Then we’ll do it.”

“Do it, huh?” She winked and kept walking.

I stared after her, my jaw ajar. Was she flirting? Before I started dwelling on what it might mean or how I should behave if she was, I shrugged away my uncertainty and took off after her.

Laughter spilled into her voice as she picked up her pace to a light jog. “Let’s get movin’, huh?”

I only had to walk at a normal pace to keep up with her, but my own

chuckle rang out. “You’re going to wear yourself out before we get there.”

“I’m good for more than a few miles.”

Damn, but my mind was dirty today.

“Is that so?” My words came out husky.

“Yup. I’ve trained for road races in the past.”

“Only races on the road?”

Her smile simmered, making her eyes sparkle. “What kind of race are you teasing me about, Rexin?”

She knew very well what we were—and weren’t—discussing.

We left the trail, stepping out into full sunshine, and came to a halt in a pretty meadow. The river flowed across the right side, entering the woods. Straight ahead, water tumbled down a small mountain, a fall that had to be a hundred feet tall, though it wasn’t wide. The falls broke into a big pool at the bottom and cool steam clouded the air.

“Gorgeous.” Adeline strode across the flower-speckled meadow and through the tall grass to the edge of the big pool. “It’s so clear.” Stooping, she dipped her hand into the water, looking up at me. “It’s just the right temperature. Would you like to take a swim?”

CHAPTER 15

ADELINE

“Did you bring a swimsuit?” he asked.

“Do orcs swim in suits?”

“Only what you’d call a birthday suit.” His voice had deepened, and there was no missing the press of his cock against the front of his shorts.

He was turned on, and the feeling was echoed inside me. What did we want to do about it?

I came to town to wrap up my old life in a bow and give it away, but maybe it would be nice to explore what else this small town had to offer, starting with one delectable orc.

I wasn’t sure if he wanted a long-term relationship, and so far, we were just friends. Maybe we could add some benefits to the equation?

Stop overthinking this, I chided myself. We could set boundaries, and neither of us would cross them.

“It’s just a swim,” I said, though even I heard the dare in my voice. I reached for the hem of my sundress, watching his face.

His eyes smoldered and that should’ve shut down all thoughts of ripping off my clothing and splashing into the pool. It might be wiser to bolt from the meadow. I wouldn’t stop until I’d reached my car.

“You’re right.” His smile widened—and grew sly. “Just a swim.”

Huh, we’d see about that.

I tugged off my dress and tossed it aside, revealing my bra. Nothing risqué about that. Plenty of women wore less at the beach. Even my underwear was average.

His soft groan rang out.

Watching my face, he tugged off his shirt, revealing endless muscles and

a complete map of green skin I wanted to traverse with my fingertips.

“Behave,” I whispered.

His unibrow lifted, and his eyelids hooded. “Maybe you don’t need to.” His growl ripped out. “You’re killing me.”

“Then don’t look.” With a saucy sway, I pivoted and stepped down into the water, squealing at how cold it felt to my feet and calves. My fingers lied when they told me it was perfect for a swim.

As I paused waist-deep to let my body adjust to the temperature, I peered over my shoulder at Rexin.

His attention was focused on my ass, and a significant bulge pressed against the front of his shorts. “Orcs don’t wear boxers.”

“What do you wear?”

“Nothing but these shorts.”

“You can get them wet or . . .” I stepped in deeper, water trickling across my belly and then my breasts. Turning, I lifted off, floating into the deeper section. “Or you could take off your shorts to keep them dry.”

His claws slid beneath the waistband. “What would you like me to do?”

“Don’t put it on me. If you remove your shorts, it’s because you want to, not because you think I want you to do it. Same if you don’t. Free will and all that.”

“You’re right.” His nose scrunched. “Sorry.”

“Not a problem.” I swished my hands through the water, playfully splashing, though the droplets didn’t reach him. “It feels amazing.”

“What would you say if I told you I wanted to make you feel even more amazing than you do right now?”

“I’d tell you to make up your mind about your shorts and get the hell into the water.”

CHAPTER 16

REXIN

I was playing with fire as the humans liked to say. Heat coiled deep within me, and it wouldn't take much to set me ablaze. I'd scorch across a vast plain, consuming everything in sight.

Including Adeline.

As if she didn't want to make me feel uncomfortable or force a decision, she turned to face the falls, showing me the slender curve of her shoulders and her gorgeous, braided hair. Like always, she'd bound it, though in a more intricate weave today, one that she'd coiled up on top of her head like a crown. It wasn't hard to picture myself releasing it from its constraints. I'd wrap it slowly around my palm, drawing her closer, then kiss her until she never wanted to leave my embrace.

What would she do if I did something like that?

I'd like to find out.

These thoughts were taking me into dangerous territory, but I couldn't hold myself back. Something had changed between us, and I needed to see where this trail led.

I stood near the edge of the pool, watching her swim in the shimmering water to the base of the falls. She was beautiful, graceful, and strong, and I couldn't help but feel a rush of adrenaline as I prepared myself for what I was about to do.

The sun beat down on my skin, warming me in all the right places as I began to remove my shorts. My fingers fumbled with the waistband, anticipation building quickly.

As I stripped my shorts off and tossed them aside, I let my senses take over. The cool mist from the falls hit my face and bare chest, awakening my

skin to all the sensations around me. The sound of the water splashing against the rocks and her laughter filled my ears, urging me on. I couldn't wait to feel the water against my skin.

With my clothes now lying crumpled on the rocks, I hesitated a moment, feeling exposed and vulnerable. Would I be good enough for her? Would she enjoy my company as much as I enjoyed hers?

My heart raced with the possibilities.

Gathering my courage, I stepped onto a big rock and dove into the crystal-clear water. The cold shock rushed over me, connecting my synapses like an electrical jolt. I surfaced, gasping for air, and looked for her. She stared my way with a smile on her face, appreciation in her eyes.

"I hope it's okay that I peeked," she said softly.

"I hope it's okay that I stared at your ass longer than I should."

We grinned.

I swam closer to her, my muscles working to propel me through the invigorating water. With each stroke, my confidence grew. I wanted her, and I was going to do everything in my power to win her.

As we swam and played in the water, her eyes followed my every move. I had her attention, and I wanted to make the most of it.

In that moment, I knew I was falling in love with her. I couldn't wait to see where the rest of this adventure would take us.

I dove down at the base of the falls, the churning water enveloping my body. I surfaced and wiped the water from my eyes, scanning the area for Adeline. I spotted her a short distance away, treading water in the deepest section.

I swam over to her, little waves from the falls lapping against my chest.

"Hey there." I flashed her a grin and traced my fingertips along her shoulders.

She smiled back, her eyes sparkling. "Hey yourself. What took you so long to get into the water?"

"Maybe I'm shy."

Her laugh snorted out.

"And maybe I was admiring the view." I nodded towards the falls, though she must know I meant her. "The local view is even better."

Chuckling, she flicked water at me. "You're such a flirt."

"Is that okay?" My voice had deepened as my emotions consumed me.

"More than okay."

I swam nearer to her, and she eased against a big smooth rock that jutted from the sandy bottom below and above the water. I leaned my palms against it on either side of her shoulders, pinning her in place.

She bit her lip, her eyes glancing down at my bare chest. "Where do we go from here?"

"Where would you like to go?"

She licked her upper lip. "Pretty far, I believe."

I chuckled, my cock thrusting against my abs. I leaned in, whispering by her ear. "I'm glad I don't make you nervous."

"Why would you?"

"I'm an orc. You're human."

"I've never been afraid of orcs."

"We're not all the same," I said.

"You're definitely not all the same. There's something special about you, Rexin."

"Special enough to explore fully?"

"Definitely."

Desire rushed through me. "Is that so?" My voice had long since dropped into a deep gully.

She nodded, her gaze flickering down to my lips. "Yes."

I couldn't resist any longer. I kissed her, savoring the shock of energy shooting through me. The sensation was like nothing I'd felt before, though I'd heard about it from other orcs all my life.

Could she be my fated mate?

We kissed for what seemed like hours, lost in each other and the beauty of the waterfall and the forest surrounding us. It was a perfect moment, one that I knew I would treasure forever.

I kept my hands to myself at first. This wasn't my first time, naturally, but if we took this in a steamier direction, I knew what would happen. They didn't make condoms that fit orcs, not yet anyway. She could get pregnant. While I loved my son more than life itself, and I'd love to have other orclings just like him, I wasn't sure I was ready to be a father again.

It wouldn't be fair to put Adeline in that position either.

Moaning, she pressed herself against me, our skin sliding together in the cool water.

I traced my fingers down her arm and then over to her side, skimming across her lush belly.

She arched closer, clinging to me like I did her.

When I stroked my knuckles across her bra-covered nipple, her groan ripped out. She pulled her face away from mine and looked up at me, her eyes blazing with a heat that matched my own.

She pressed her breast into my hand, encouraging me, watching my face.

I nudged her bra up and dove beneath the water, finding and sucking her nipple into my mouth. Who cared about breathing when I could give Adeline pleasure? I sucked and tugged, my limbs coiling around her.

She clung to my horns, running her fingertips across them while pressing her lower body against me.

Finally needing air, I bobbed up above the surface. She moved in close, pressing herself fully against me.

"I want . . ." she said in a languid voice.

The falls echoed around us, and the setting sun cast a golden glow on everything, though she was the true jewel in this meadow. Her skin gleamed, and her eyes were filled with the same feelings rocketing around inside me.

Taking her hand, I urged her to the edge of the falls and a big smooth rock warm from the sunshine. I lifted her up easily and she lay back, her gaze locked on mine.

"I want you," I said. "So much. But . . ."

"It's too soon. I know."

"I can touch you. I want to taste you."

She shimmied out of her underwear bottoms. "I'm yours."

For now at least. Decisions about the future would have to wait. This moment meant everything, and I didn't want to spoil it by telling her that I sensed she'd one day come to mean the world to me.

She was my fated mate. There was no denying the feelings soaring inside me.

My mating heat roared across my heart, insisting I claim her fully. Giving her pleasure would subdue my looming frenzy. It would keep rising, driving me to be with her all the time, but for now, I could mostly suppress the feeling.

I parted her legs and rose from the water, resting between them. As I began to lick and suck her, she moaned, her hands gripping my horns feverishly. Her taste was as sweet as the honey I'd tried once, and I became more aroused by the second, my pulse thundering at the same rate as hers as if our bodies were in tune.

My cock was on fire, the nubs along the sides humming. I could sink within her, love her for hours.

I continued to tease her clit, alternating between gentle licks and fast, hard strokes with my tongue. Her body writhed beneath me. Her gasps rang out, punctuated by the call of birds deep within the forest.

I drove my tongue inside her while rubbing her clit, twisting it between my fingertips as I licked her inner walls.

With a cry, she came, her passage pulsing around my tongue. Plunging my fingers into her, I rode her orgasm like I wanted to do so with my cock. She continued to shudder; her gaze locked on mine.

We were heading in a direction I'd never imagined.

There would be no turning back now.

CHAPTER 17

ADELINE

After swimming some more, our fingers teasing across each other but not taking it farther, we dressed and returned to the picnic site. By then, sunlight slanted across the sky in thin waves, and the heat of the day had fled.

We ate the rest of the food he'd brought, then devoured the entire container of brownies.

Orcs had tremendous appetites. So did women who'd had an amazing orgasm courtesy of one particular orc.

After, we sat back on the blanket side by side, sated. Parents arrived after work with their kids who raced toward the playground area and climbed slides or sat on swings, calling out for someone to push them.

"What do you have planned for tomorrow?" he asked.

"I need to complete a few projects around the house." The lawn was desperately in need of mowing, and if I didn't tackle the overgrown flowerbeds across the front of the house soon, they'd engulf the structure.

"I need to do the same thing." The skin around his eyes crinkled when he smiled. "But I also promised Brear we'd go fishing and if I know my son, he'll be knocking on my door at five in the morning, dressed and ready to go."

"After the way he served lunch the other day, he'll probably have the cooler packed and drinks waiting in the car. And he'll point to a container full of worms he dug in the garden."

"Exactly." His grin widened. "You know him well. Thanks."

"For what?"

"For being nice to him. Not many adults are."

"He's a sweet kid. I enjoy spending time with him."

“When we lived in the orc kingdom, my mom looked after him while I worked. He adored her, but she died six months before we left to come to the surface. My dad’s been gone since I was two.”

“I’m sorry.” Brear had lost so much already in his short life. So had Rexin.

“Mom was everything.”

“And now you’re everything for Brear.”

“Unless . . .”

Sitting upright, I crossed my legs beneath me.

He watched my face. “Unless I end up with someone, then he’d have two parents.”

“Have you thought about that much?” I kept my words light. Was he considering dating or finding an orc wife?

My silly heart shouldn’t flounder, hoping he’d say, *I’ve picked you. Want to mate with a burly orc who . . .?*

Jeez, I didn’t want him to love me, did I?

I suspected I did.

The idea scared me even after what we’d done at the falls. That almost felt like a dream, though it was right at the time.

I was leaving town within the next year.

Wasn’t I?

“I didn’t start thinking about a mate until recently,” he said, watching me.

What did he see? A potential mate or a woman he’d had a little fun with at the falls?

Grr. I hated that I wanted to cling to him already.

Rising, I started gathering up everything, placing the trash in the bag he’d provided. “I should go.” I kept my tone neutral. “I need to get up early, and you’ve got a date with Brear and a bunch of fish.”

He rose and helped. “Would you like me to bring some of our catch over late tomorrow? I promise I’ll clean it. I’ll even grill it if you’ve got one.”

It would be so easy to say yes.

“Brear would love to see you,” he added.

Maybe this was about giving his son a friend. Despite us growing closer, Rexin may not be thinking of me and mating in the same equation. We were friends, and that could be enough.

My nervous guts settled down.

“Sure, why not?” I lifted the picnic basket.

“Got it.” He took it from me, and we walked to the parking lot, pausing because our vehicles sat quite a distance apart.

“Five okay?” he asked.

“Sure. I’ll make sides.”

“Thanks for the lovely day.”

I didn’t want to read the hope mixed in with sweetness in his voice, but I couldn’t seem to stop it from sinking into my bones for the long haul.

“Thank you. And thank Brear.” My laugh rang out. “He’s quite the matchmaker.”

He nodded. “I’ll ask him to stop if you want.”

Only a fraction of me wanted to tell him to lay down the rules with his son. The rest of me wanted to tell him to let Brear loose.

“You don’t need to.”

We could see where this took us.

CHAPTER 18

REXIN

I spent the next day fishing with Brear at the river, and there wasn't anything better than a day casting hooks into the water with my son.

Well, making Adeline come with my tongue the day before was equally amazing.

I had to face it. The moment had been fantastic. I wanted to do it again and so much more.

I'd thought of inviting her to go fishing with us, but I'd needed time to think. My urge to mate had waned, making me doubt she was my fated one.

By the time we'd returned home, showered, cleaned the fish and were walking to Adeline's, I hadn't come to a decision.

Other than the solid realization that I wanted to see her any chance I could.

What should I do about us? A year ago, if asked, I'd firmly tell myself to put plenty of distance between us. Forget about her. The last thing I wanted to do was get involved with a woman. I couldn't bear the thought of causing another human pain.

But Adeline was strong and resourceful. So different from Paige, though I didn't compare them. Paige had meant a lot to me, but we were so young back then. I could see that now, though I couldn't years ago.

Adeline and I had quickly jumped from an employer-employee relationship to friends and then to lovers—at least orally on my part.

Did she want to take this further?

Excitement beat like a drum in my chest as we drew closer to her home.

Perhaps tonight, I'd find out.

She greeted us at the door. "Come on in, guys." As Brear passed her, she

ruffled his hair.

I was proud of my tall son. He looked pure orc, something we were learning was common with human-orc matchups.

Though he had Paige's eyes.

"Did that older couple find you?" Adeline asked, peering around us toward the road. "They stopped by about an hour ago, thinking this was your place. I gave them directions to yours."

I frowned. "I don't believe so." There was no note on our front door when we got home and no messages on my phone. "Did they say why they needed me?"

"Nope." She shrugged. "Maybe they wanted to hire you to do some work."

"That must be it." If that was the case, they'd catch up with me next week or they could leave a message on my phone. All the notices in town advertising my handyorc services included my number.

Her grin widened as she closed the front door. "I thought we could sit on the back patio, but I'll warn you right away, it needs weeding." She led us through her cozy house and through the back door in the kitchen.

As we stepped out onto the small deck and took the stairs to the patio, I looked around.

"Yeah, I know," she said with a rueful twist of her lips. "It might help if I mowed the lawn before the grass went to seed. I planned to do it but got tied up with the flowerbeds across the front of the house."

"I can mow right now if you want," Brear said. "Rake the mulch too." He peered toward a small building at the back of the lawn. "Is your mower inside the shed?"

"Mow right now? No way." Her smile took him in. "Tonight, you and your dad are my guests."

I held up the bag I'd carried. "Guests who brought the main course."

"I made a potato salad and a cake."

"Yum," Brear said. "What kind of cake?"

"Chocolate of course. Is there any other kind?"

He shook his head. "Chocolate's the best."

"Exactly. Can I get you guys anything to drink?"

I suggested a beer and Brear asked for soda.

She took the fish inside to prep and brought back our drinks, setting them on a table in the middle of four chairs. Her frown took in the chairs. "I'm

afraid they're not orc sized."

"No problem." Removing a cushion, I dropped it onto the stone patio and sat, my drink in hand.

Since he wasn't fully grown yet, Brear would've fit, but he did the same, leaning against the wall of the house beside me.

Adeline's grin swept across us. "Now I feel silly in a chair." Dropping a cushion on the other side of Brear, she sat, her beer in hand. "So, any adventures today other than what you'd expect from a fishing expedition?"

While Brear regaled her with tall tales about the fish that we almost caught, I watched her, adoring how she focused on his every word, how she made him feel that whatever he had to say was important.

I'd been unable to get what we did at the park out of my mind. The way she relaxed into my touch, the trust she'd placed in me, and how she came so beautifully. She'd fallen apart with bliss on her face and the smile she sent me right after had stabbed through me.

My skin flamed, and this time, I couldn't nudge aside the feeling.

Tingling of the skin was the first sign of a true mating.

While I would give almost anything to be with her fully, I couldn't let my every action be driven by an overwhelming need to consume her—the heat males fell into when they met their fated one.

I wanted to pursue her. A fated mate was a gift, and I couldn't turn my back on it.

But after what happened in my past, could I trust my heart to another?

CHAPTER 19

ADELINE

We cooked the fish on my gas grill and ate the hearty meal while sitting on the cushions, savoring each bite.

“It’s like camping,” Brear said with joy as he scooped up the last bite of the enormous slice of chocolate cake I’d served him.

“Have you been camping?” I asked.

“No.”

“Maybe we could go sometime.” My gaze sought Rexin’s. He hadn’t said much during the meal. Was he upset with me or just tired after his busy day?

I kept thinking about our swim in the pool and what we’d done there. His touch had felt amazing, and now that I’d had a taste, I wanted more. If I asked, would he want to spend the night with me?

There I went again, taking this in a direction I shouldn’t be. It would be best to keep him at arm’s length, but I couldn’t seem to stop my silly heart from getting all squishy whenever he was around.

“That would be amazing.” Brear looked back and forth between me and Rexin. When we’d taken our seats to eat, he’d shifted over to my cushion, leaving his open between him and Rexin. Poor kid. He wanted a mom. I just wasn’t sure I was the right person to fill the spot, assuming Rexin wanted to be with me.

The thing was, I liked him. I wanted him in my bed and beside me. But how long could it last?

Maybe instead of worrying about the future, I should pay attention to now and let everything else fall where it should.

“I don’t have any camping equipment,” Rexin said.

“They’ve got some at the store in town,” Brear gushed. “We could get

tents and mattresses or sleep with thick blankets on the ground.”

Rexin watched me. Was he taking his cue from my comments?

“Maybe on a weekend,” he finally said.

Brearr sat forward; his face full of eagerness. “Next weekend!”

Rexin nodded slowly. “I don’t believe we have anything planned.”

“It can be buggy while camping, so you might want tents,” I said. And since Rexin appeared okay with this idea and, frankly, my heart was thumping around at the prospect of doing something else with him, I plunged onward. “I have some tents in my garage. We’ll probably want air mattresses in addition to sleeping bags and blankets, however. When you sleep on the ground, the cold creeps into your bones and you wake up shivering.”

“They’ve got orc-sized stuff at the store,” Brearr said.

“How do you know all this?” Rexin’s eyes sparkled with humor.

“What do you think I do while you take forever picking out which vegetables to buy?” Brearr’s lips twisted, though from the equal sparkle in his eyes, he was teasing. “Would you want to go camping with us?” he asked me.

Rexin cleared his throat. “She might have other—”

“Do you?” Brearr asked.

Actually, no. “Just working on the amusement park.”

“Everyone needs a break.” Rexin’s soft words lulled me, making me want to do whatever he asked.

“So you’ll go with us?” Brearr hopped around on his cushion.

“Sure. It’ll be fun. There’s a great spot for camping in the woods behind the park. I used to go there with my . . .”

I’d forgotten all about that. My sigh of sadness slipped out.

“What’s wrong?” Rexin took our plates and placed them on a table. He dropped down beside me, close enough our sides brushed together.

“I was just thinking about how my family used to camp on the side of the stream in the woods behind the house. We camped a lot before Mom died. She loved sleeping in the open air and sitting around the campfire at night. Dad and I . . .”

“Did you and your dad go after your mom died?” Brearr patted my arm.

“A few times.” I shrugged through my unexpected tears. “It wasn’t the same without her. I’m also remembering how Dad tried to make it fun the first few times, how he kind of stopped trying once I told him I didn’t want to go any longer.” Back then, I couldn’t see that he might’ve been trying to build a bridge over a cavern left gaping and raw after Mom’s death. “He also

urged me to help him at the park, and I did, but by the time I was seventeen, I couldn't bear to go there any longer. All I could see was Mom working with us. It was the same with him and me cooking together. We used to barbecue like this before she—”

I pinched my eyes shut, unable to keep talking. Feelings churned inside me, an angry swarm of bees. It stung. So much.

“I imagine it was hard doing those things without her,” Rexin said.

“I don't know my mom, but my dad has told me a lot about her.” Brear sounded pensive, and I felt bad that I'd brought sadness into our fun evening. His chin lifted. “She loved me, though. I know it.”

I put my arm around his shoulders. “I know she did.” How could she not? She'd chosen to have him.

“I wish I could remember her.” Brear's voice croaked. “But I've got my dad, and he's all I need.”

“And I've got you.” Rexin's gaze was full of love for his son. “You've got your aunts and uncle too, plus their orclings, your cousins. We've got a big family who loves each other.” He leaned around me to nudge his son's shoulder with his knuckles, something I'd seen other orcs do as a sign of affection.

“I didn't realize you still had family in the orc kingdom,” I said.

“Would you believe I grew up with one brother and four sisters?”

“That's a big family.”

He shrugged. “It's common in orcs.”

“Have they visited you here?”

“They plan to.” He released an easy grin. “We talked the other day, in fact, and I mentioned the park and how you were making sure orc children can fit on the rides. My brother isn't mated yet, but all my sisters are, and they have orclings varying in age from newborn to eight. They plan to come to the park's grand opening.”

“How fun. I can't wait to meet them.”

“My cousins are babies.” Brear might try to sound all grown up, but his voice still squeaked on occasion, like now. Because I could tell he liked thinking of himself as one of the adults, not one of the “babies,” I held in my smile.

“As for camping,” Rexin said, “how about Friday and Saturday night?”

“Yay.” Brear leaped to his feet. “I can't wait. How about you, Adeline?”

“It sounds fun.” I hoped it would be fun. How would it feel to return to

the camping spot where I'd gone with Mom and Dad?

Perhaps this could be a way for me to find peace with my past.

"We can go someplace other than where you and your parents camped." Rexin's gaze held so much understanding, it made my heart ache. "There must be plenty of camping spots in the area."

"If it's okay, I'd like to camp there." Maybe I could chase away the ghosts of my past by revisiting the places I'd enjoyed when I was young. Kind of like I was doing at the amusement park. Fixing each ride grounded me in the things I'd done when I was young. "We can cook chicken strips on the open fire and make s'mores."

"What are s'mores?" Brear asked.

"Treats made with graham crackers, marshmallows, and chocolate."

"If they've got chocolate, I'm going to eat them all." Brear's laughter rang out, and his gaze fell on me. "I'll share with you, Adeline, though. Dad's on his own."

Rexin chuckled as we got up off the cushions. "Why don't you take the plates into the kitchen and wash everything, Brear?"

"Sure." Brear shot us a subtle grin as he loaded everything onto the tray I'd used to bring the food outside. "I'll take a while. Why don't you two . . . I don't know. Build a fire in the pit?"

The pit hadn't seen a fire any more recently than the tents had been used for camping. Until I told him I didn't want to work at the park anymore, Dad and I had sat out here on warm summer nights, staring into the flames. I hadn't been able to see past Mom's empty chair beside us.

Could I do so now?

Brear bustled up the back steps, juggling the tray in one hand while opening the screen door. "Don't feel like you need to wait for me to do anything. Like, you could take a walk, sit together and chat, or even . . ." He wiggled his eyebrows.

Rexin shot me a look that told me he knew very well what his son was suggesting.

As if I'd make out with his dad while Brear was washing the dishes?

Not a bad idea, actually. However, the last thing I wanted to do was dive into sexy times with a kid around.

"I'm really going to take a long time," Brear called out as the screen door banged closed behind him. "Really!"

I released a low laugh.

What a cute little orc matchmaker.

CHAPTER 20

REXIN

Adeline and I built a fire. However, we did not fall to the ground where I could do everything I ached to do with her.

My son was playing matchmaker, but it was clear he didn't need to try very hard.

I wanted her, and I'd decided I was going to pursue her.

Heat flaring across my skin at the thought only reinforced what I'd already realized.

Since she was my fated mate, I couldn't do anything less than claim her.

Well, assuming she was willing to be claimed. I lived on the surface among humans, and it was as important to follow their traditions as my own.

I'd sound her out over the next week, and if I thought I stood a chance, I'd ask her to mate with me. It was clear Brear would leap around with joy if she said yes.

So would I, come to think of it.

However . . .

"If you'd rather not go camping with us, speak up now," I said. "I'll make up an excuse for Brear."

"I want to go camping . . ." She stepped closer to me. "With Brear but also with you."

"Adeline," I breathed. "Really?" I wasn't even sure what I was asking her. It was too soon to suggest we mate. She needed more time to get to know me.

Biting her lower lip, she nodded. She followed her hesitant agreement with words. "While we're away camping, we could . . ." Her eyes pinched shut before opening again, and my breath caught when I saw the need there.

“We could share a tent.”

Fuck, yeah.

She'd smudged soot on her face while we got the fire going, and it only made her cuter. I ached to run my fingers over her lush curves, to toss her over my shoulder and bolt into the woods with her like orcs did with their fated mates.

Wetting the edge of my t-shirt in my water glass, I curled my finger toward her, and she sidled closer. I swiped away the soot, then let my fingers wander down her neck. She heated me up with a single glance. Being this close to her only made me crave her like no other.

“I'd like that.” My voice had gone husky.

“And.” She sucked in a breath and released it. “I could sneak over to your place later tonight if you want. After Brear's gone to bed.”

Double fuck yeah. “I do want.” My inner talk about waiting flew away like a wild bird. I was more than willing to solidify our relationship any way she'd take me. “They don't make condoms that fit. Just sayin'.”

Her head tilted. “Do you want more orclings? You come from a big family.”

“My brother's the oldest, but I spent half my growing-up years helping raise my younger sisters. I've always thought Brear was enough, but I'd be open to more with the right person.” With her, actually. Only her.

“I'd like a child or two myself, though I wasn't sure when I'd ever fit children into my life. Between my fast-paced career in the city and now getting the park ready, I put the idea off. I've got a few years left to decide.” Her lips curled up. “But I've got an IUD, so for now, we don't need to think about orclings.”

“I'm not sure what an IUD is.”

“It prevents pregnancy, and I've read it works just as well for orcs as it does humans. So, if you're still open to the idea, I'll come knocking on your window later.”

I traced the pad of my thumb across her lips and tugged her fully into my embrace. “I'm very open to that idea.”

Maybe I could ask my brother to come to the surface early. He could stay with Brear while Adeline and I took off for a week or so.

I might've chosen to finish raising my son here in the human world, but I was orc all the way through. Our traditions mattered to me.

With my mother gone, no one could give Adeline the mating tests—

though that wasn't necessarily a bad thing—but I still wanted to follow the rest of the traditions, including constructing a nest somewhere in the woods where I could take my mate to solidify our bond. There, I could let my heat rule and consume her.

Tilting her chin, I kissed her softly at first, but deeper and harder as need blazed through me.

Her arms wrapped around me, and she pressed herself closer.

I couldn't wait until Brear was asleep.

CHAPTER 21

ADELINE

We toasted marshmallows over the fire, pointed out constellations in the starry sky, and told ghost stories until Brear was yawning. By then, it was after ten, and I was beginning to think I'd be creeping into Rexin's room at dawn.

Heat smoldered inside me as the fire died down.

What would it be like to be with him in such an intimate way? Oral sex was one thing, but full sex was another.

When Brear yawned for a third time over a space of a few minutes, Rexin stood. "Time to get home, orcling."

"Dad, I'm twelve."

He ruffled Brear's hair. "Still my orcling."

"Do we have to go?"

"It's late." His questioning gaze sought mine.

I nodded to show I still planned to come to his house. Come. Ha. I suspected there would be plenty of coming in my future.

My body felt languid, as if I'd drunk an entire bottle of wine, though I'd only had one beer before dinner. I couldn't wait to remove all my clothing, climb into bed with him, and touch every inch of his body.

"Tomorrow's Monday, a workday," he added.

Brear groaned but got up. "All right."

"You can sleep in tomorrow," Rexin said. "And you can lounge around at home all day if you want."

"The park needs a lot of work." Brear's words echoed those in my heart. At times, I worried I wouldn't finish everything in time for my grand opening.

“I’ll help Adeline while you relax.” The grin Rexin sent me told me how he truly wanted to help me. Was he thinking of what happened at the falls? Whenever I remembered his mouth on my clit and his tongue driving inside me, my body throbbed.

“Yes, he’s going to help me, and I’ll help him.” I continued the teasing game along with him. “We’re both going to be equally satisfied with our progress at the end of the day.”

Rexin snorted.

Brear walked around the fire and gave me a hug.

I savored how wonderful this kid was. If me and his dad continued in the direction we were headed, would he see me as a mom figure? I couldn’t think of a higher honor.

And . . . There I went again, dreaming of a future that would keep me in town. Did I still want to leave?

I wasn’t sure about that any longer.

Stepping back, Brear grinned. “I’m gonna help too. I’ll get up early and be here by the time you start working.”

“Don’t get up too early.” And definitely don’t stroll into your dad’s bedroom at five a.m. “I plan to lounge around myself before getting started. Have a few cups of coffee.” Leap all over his father—not saying that.

“I doubt I’ll do much lounging before I get started, but we’ll see.” Rexin’s grin matched mine.

I loved the game we were playing. It was heating me up, making me crave him, and I suspected it was doing the same for him.

I walked with them around the side of the house and out onto the road, then watched until they’d nearly reached their own place.

Rexin glanced back, his hand lifting, and I waved back.

Inside my house, I slumped on the sofa. How long should I wait before creeping over there? Kids dropped off to sleep fast, didn’t they? Brear was almost a teenager, and they had a reputation for sleeping all the time and deeply. I would’ve invited Rexin to come here, but neither of us would want to leave his son alone at night. An hour or two during the day when he was awake was one thing, but anything could happen with a slumbering kid at night.

After putting out the fire and tidying the patio, I brushed my teeth, poured a glass of water, and took it to the living room where I sat and kicked my feet up on the coffee table.

I read a book for an hour or so, then put it aside. Should I wear something slinky?

Yeah, just imagine me *slinking* over to his house and stumbling into someone on the path or road. *Oh, yes, I'd say. I always walk around in a crotchless red jumpsuit.*

Ha ha.

I doubted I'd be wearing my clothing for long.

I waited another half an hour. Anticipation coursed through my veins like lava, centering in my groin as if Rexin were here right now, his fingertips gliding across my skin.

I took a quick shower, keeping my hair out of the spray, and made sure to put on deodorant before dressing. The heat of the day had generated some natural curls, so I left my hair alone. I hoped Rexin would soon mess it up.

After giving myself a peptalk in the mirror, I left my house, taking the narrow path between the park and his home.

When I arrived at his place, only one light was on—on the second floor.

Hold on. How was I going to sneak into his bedroom?

CHAPTER 22

REXIN

“Lost, pretty lady?” I whispered by Adeline’s ear, coming up behind her. I ran my fingertip across her lower back.

She twirled around and looked up at me, a sultry smile on her face. “Would you be so kind as to point me in the right direction, good sir? I was looking for my date for the evening, and I feared I’d have to scale the side of his house to reach his second-floor bedroom.”

“I could give you a boost.” If she stood on my shoulders, she could reach.

“Sounds dangerous, and I don’t want to risk an injury. See, I’ve got some hot plans for the evening, and they don’t involve lying around moaning.”

“Maybe they should.”

Her head tilted. “Unless the guy I’m meeting up with is interested in playing doctor.”

I frowned, not sure what she meant.

Her smile widened. “When couples play doctor, one will take the doctor role and the other will play the patient or maybe the nurse assisting the doctor. Sometimes, people will even dress up.”

“Do you like to play games like that?”

She shrugged. “I haven’t been in a relationship long enough to try. In all honesty, it’s been over a year since I slept with anyone.”

“Why so long?”

“Because I was busy and . . .” Her breath huffed out. “I believe I held myself back after what happened with my father. And after losing my mom, I’d avoided getting deeply involved to keep from being hurt. It’s so silly, it’s almost a cliché.”

“I understand. I withdrew after what happened with Paige. Sure, we both

wanted to end it, but it still hurts.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It was years ago.”

“Time isn’t always the biggest factor. You were busy with Brear.”

“I’m not so busy now. Tell me.” I sucked in a breath and released it. “Do you see what’s between us as casual, something you’ll walk away from easily?”

“No.” She compressed her lips with her teeth. “And that’s what’s so scary about it.”

Pleased that she was sharing her innermost thoughts, I stepped closer to her, stroking her gorgeous hair off her cheek and sweeping it over her shoulder. I loved how soft it was and how it gleamed in the sunshine.

“Why scary?” I asked.

“You know why. We haven’t talked about where this is going or what either of us wants from whatever’s between us. I mean, we both want sex, or I wouldn’t be here tonight. But what about tomorrow, a week from now, or in six months? I’ve told you I might sell everything and move back to the city.”

“Do you think you can rebuild the park and just walk away?”

She looked pensive. “That’s what I need to figure out.”

“I’ll help you all I can and not just with the physical work of getting the park ready.” Would she also accept emotional help? That would take our relationship to a different level. I felt ready for that, but did she?

“Thank you.”

“As for what you want to do when the park’s running, let your heart guide you. If selling is what you need, then sell. If moving to the city is the way you envision your future, then you need to do that too.”

“That’s the thing.” She shook her head. “I can’t see myself in that office any longer. When I close my eyes, I see the hard work we’ve put into the park. I feel pride in how it’s turning out and how wonderful it’ll be when it reopens. This town needs a business like this. It’s good for both the community and kids who’ll make memories at the park.”

“What about Adeline? What’s good for her?” I held my breath as I waited for her reply, and I appreciated that she took a moment to think before speaking.

“You know what I want?”

I nodded with encouragement.

She took my hands and squeezed them. “I want to finish the park and run

it. I want to ride the rides and eat a funnel cake. I want to stroll through the park in the summer, fall, winter, and spring and take in the beauty of each season. I want to remember how much my mom loved that place.” Shadows flitted across her face. “I want to figure out what happened with my dad and see if I can find a new way of looking at it. No, I want to lay his memory to rest with my mother’s and forge new memories, ones that make me smile and feel joy.”

“Then you should do it. It’s all possible.” I tugged her into my arms and held her.

“And just as much . . .” She looked up at me. “I want to build something with you.”

CHAPTER 23

ADELINE

I was baring myself to Rexin, and it felt amazing.

I came to his home to take our relationship further, not knowing where it might wind up after we'd become intimate. But my heart lay wide open. Would he hold it gently in his hands, or would he tell me he didn't feel the same?

After what happened with my parents, it wasn't easy to expose myself to possible pain. Yet I trusted Rexin. If he didn't want me, he'd be frank about it. He wouldn't intentionally hurt me.

"I need to be honest too," he said, still holding me gently.

His hands were incredibly warm. And the feel of his chest muscles beneath my palms was unlike anything I'd felt before. I'd come here for sex, let's be frank, but I'd also come here to see if he and I could start something special.

"When I came to the surface with Brear, I didn't intend to remain here forever," he said. "I thought I'd give him a chance to get to know his human side, the customs and traditions his mom enjoyed. I thought he'd go to college or start a trade, then choose where he wanted to live most. If it was here, I might stay or I might return to where I grew up. And if he chose to live in the orc kingdom, I'd go with him."

"How do you feel now?"

"I want to give *us* a chance, Adeline."

"Rexin," I breathed.

"I'm *not* going to tell you I'm remaining here on the surface no matter what, solely to be with you."

I tried not to frown. "Okay."

He grinned. “I’m saying that because I don’t want to scare you away. I think it’s wise to take this slowly. Not that going to bed is taking it slowly since we met not long ago. I’ve also been burned by my past experience. I also lost my parents, but what happened with Brear’s mom makes me hesitant to try again. In all honesty, I’ve only been with a few females since her, and like you, none for more than a year ago. I’m just not into being with someone casually.” His voice deepened. “That includes you, Adeline. What we’ll do tonight will change our relationship. I want to make it better, not make things complicated.”

“So do we do it or don’t we?” I asked, watching his face.

“I can’t imagine not doing it with you now, but you need to know something else.”

I bit down on my lower lip, waiting. “Okay.”

“I think you’re my fated mate, my true mate, the only woman I’ll ever love.”

Whoa. Adeline of a month ago would’ve spun on her heel and bolted. When she got home, she would’ve called Rexin and told him to stay away from her forever.

The new Adeline grinned. “I’m not exactly sure what that means, but I’m going to take it as something positive.”

“When an orc meets his fated mate, the only one he’ll ever love—”

“You love me?”

“I could.”

The idea thrilled through me. “What else happens?”

“His skin tingles like flames are licking beneath the surface. It doesn’t hurt, however.”

“That’s good.” I tilted my head. “So, fated mates, huh?”

“Yes. I’m certain of it now.”

Wow. “Are you falling in love with me?”

He swallowed. “I think I am. Have I scared you away yet?”

“Not so far, strangely enough. If you’d told me all this when we first met, we wouldn’t be standing here now.” Or would we? I’d liked him from the start, and there was no denying that he made *my* skin tingle.

“I’m glad I waited.” His low laugh rang out. “All of a week.”

I stroked his chest. “It’s okay. I wasn’t ready then, but I am now. Tell me more about orc mating rituals.”

“I’m not a complete traditionalist like some orcs. For example, while I

thought of it, I wouldn't ask my sisters to give you mating tests."

I frowned. "Tests? Like the kind someone might have to take to get a green card?" I pictured myself telling them what his favorite food was. Colors. And what he liked to do in his spare time.

"Sometimes. It depends on the matriarch of the family. Since my mother's dead, my sisters could step into that role. Tests can be physical, or they may just be questions. The idea is to prove she's a worthy mate."

"I'm not sure if I'm glad or sad you aren't going to ask your sisters to administer tests. It might be fun."

"You could still have your chance." His easy grin lifted. "My sisters could test you when they come to the surface for the park's opening."

"It'll be nice to meet them, but I think I'll skip a test."

"Tests. Multiple."

Definitely better we weren't heading in that direction. "No tests."

"As for the rest . . ." His warm palms stroked up and down my arms. "When an orc has found his fated one, he tells her he's interested."

"After the skin tingling stuff."

"I'm still tingling."

"And I'm here to take care of that tingling," I quipped, clutching his arms. Damn, he had amazing muscles. I hadn't gotten a good enough view of them at the falls.

"If she believes she feels the same way, he throws her over his shoulder and bolts into the woods. Usually, he prepares their destination point prior to his proposal and they remain there for as long as it takes."

"In the woods."

"Not on the forest floor, though in ancient times, the mating rituals often included a race through the woods with him chasing her. Rutting with her wherever he caught her."

Heat blazed through me at the thought of him tracking me down, stalking me (in a good way). We'd tear at our clothing and fall onto the ground that would conveniently be covered with a blanket or very soft grass—and insect-free.

"You're aroused," he said.

"My imagination's working overtime."

"Picturing . . ."

"Your ancient orc traditions and how fun it might be to let you chase and catch me."

“Perhaps we can live out your fantasies this weekend.”

I grinned. “Perhaps we can.”

“By then, I’ll be in full heat.”

“Heat like, um . . .” I could only think of animals.

“Male orcs fall into heat, and this is when our bodies are most fertile.”

“How often does a heat happen?” While women didn’t go into heat, we were more easily aroused when we were most fertile.

“Once a year, usually in the spring.”

“You can only impregnate a female once a year? Now I wonder how orc families have so many orclings.”

“We’re fertile all the time, but during our heat period, we’re extra fertile. We produce . . .” He coughed. “A lot of cum. And during that time, we have a voracious appetite for sex.”

“How long before your heat starts to wane?” You’d think talking about this would make my body cool down instead of heat me up further. “I assume it might take more than a few minutes.”

“It can take a week or more.”

A week of almost constant sex with Rexin? Sign me up. “We don’t have that kind of time.” If for no other reason than that we couldn’t hump each other all day long while Brear was around.

“It surges and releases once I’m initially satisfied. Then it builds all over again. I can control it, though.”

“So you’re saying I’ve triggered your heat, your mating urges, and that this means we’re fated mates?”

“We call them true mates and yes. Have I scared you away *now*?”

“Not one tiny bit.” Which solidified how committed I was to him already. Maybe I was coming into my own version of heat in response to his.

“From the tingling and the way my soul aches for you, I know you’re my fated one. My heat is rising inside me. It’s only going to get worse.”

“Or better.”

“So much better.” He kissed along my jaw, making my body go melty. “I want to be with you all the time, and that won’t go away soon.”

“Oh, my.” Now when I clung to him, it was to keep myself upright. Frankly, it might be nice to lie down in the grass. Drag him down with me.

“As for orc customs, if the proposed mate isn’t interested, the male will back away.”

“What happens to their heat?” I pictured the orc guy jerking off a lot

—*really* a lot.

“It’ll fade. If the male lives in the orc kingdom, he’ll go to one of the caves set aside for this to wait it out.”

“There are no caves around here that I know of other than the one in the mountain you guys emerged from.”

“I’m sorry I’m thrusting this on you right now.”

“When instead, you’d rather thrust this into me right now.” I traced my fingertip down his engorged cock straining against the front of his pants.

“More than once. More than a hundred times.”

I swallowed, and it went down hard, my throat choked off with lust. “If the female says yes, what does that mean besides lots of rutting?” This conversation was heating me up, wetting my panties. I kept picturing us entwined on the ground—or in bed—while he satisfied his heat. Over and over. I’d be sore, but man, what a way to spend a week or more.

“If he satisfies her, and I’m telling you right now, I’ll make sure you’re more than satisfied, then that’s it. We’re fully mated.”

“This sounds like being married.”

“Orcs don’t perform ceremonies like humans do, but yes, we’d be considered married by my people.”

“For a lifetime.”

“It’s rare for a couple to divorce like humans do, though I suppose it’s possible.” Leaning back, he looked down at me. “Tell me, Adeline. Would you like to take this to the next step—to see if I can satisfy you enough that you’ll say yes?”

CHAPTER 24

REXIN

I held myself still. She didn't appear frightened by orc mating rituals. Her scent told me she was clearly aroused.

Sex was one thing. Would she consider her lifetime by my side?

A week ago, the idea of proposing a mating to anyone would've made me run for the orc kingdom. I'd willingly hide out in a cave and wait out the heat. That was before a person was attached to the idea of mating.

Now I couldn't imagine asking anyone but Adeline to be with me always.

Her fingers traced up and down my arms, making my skin flame further. I swear it glowed. "How did I go from running from any hint of feelings to telling you I want to mate with you more than anything?"

My heart surged up into my throat, making me croak when I wanted to sound smooth and sophisticated. Inside, I was just a regular orc male, eager to impress her.

"It's my special charm." My grin came easier than my voice. "You can't resist me."

"I can't, Rexin. Truly." She looked up at me with her heart in her eyes, and I'd never seen anyone prettier than this female baring her soul to me. "Are there special words a female uses to tell her potential mate she wants to be with him?"

"All I need to hear is yes."

"Yes!" She laughed but it quickly dissolved, her face going serious. "Yes."

"If only I could take you to the woods right now. I can't leave Brear."

"I'd never want you to. Can we make this work in another way?"

"What do you mean?"

“Claim me tonight, and we’ll find ways to keep your heat satisfied until it wanes.”

“That means a lot of sex.”

She grinned slyly. “Do you think I’m not up for it?”

Frankly, I wasn’t sure. Yes, I suspected her drive would match mine; that was common during times like this. But damn, she was so much smaller than me.

Other orcs had found a way with humans, however, and I would too. Nothing I’d heard around town suggested the size difference mattered when it came to the final act.

“I also haven’t prepared a special spot for you,” I growled, my need rising inside me now that I’d set it free.

“I think your bed will do for now, won’t it?”

“I’m going to fuck you hard.” Unleashed, the heat was driving my thoughts and words.

“I like that idea.” She slipped her finger beneath my shirt and traced it across my belly. “Tell me one thing?”

“What?”

“Why are we still standing outside?”

“You’re right. We’re wasting time.” With another growl, I swept her up and tossed her over my shoulder. I smacked my hand down on her ripe ass.

“Stay there, would you?”

Her laugh rang out, low and husky. “Only until we get to your bed.”

That light she’d mentioned earlier? It was on in the bathroom.

I bolted for the back door, grateful Brear slept upstairs, and I’d taken the first-floor bedroom.

CHAPTER 25

ADELINE

Half-running, he carried me inside his house and to his bedroom. Inside, he shut the door and locked it.

A twist of his impressive body, and I landed on the bed on my back. He pounced before my body stopped bouncing, landing on top of me, though bracing most of his weight over me.

“You’re mine,” he growled, and I’d never heard a headier sound than the possession in his voice.

“Last I heard . . .” How was I finding the brain power to speak? “An orc male had to satisfy the female before they were fully mated. So back up there, buddy. Get the satisfaction going, and then we can talk about me being yours and you being mine.”

When he looked down at me, he almost appeared feral. His eyes seemed to glow, and I could feel the heat pouring off him. Flames licked across my shoulders where our skin touched.

“Mine,” he snarled, his mouth capturing mine.

He was acting like a beast caught in a heat, and I thrilled at the thought of being with him fully at a time like this. He was losing control, and I couldn’t wait for it to snap, for him to consume me.

His mouth moved from mine to my neck, his lips kissing and tenderly biting in a way that made me quiver beneath him. Mating marks?

His fingers worked at the buttons on my shirt for only a moment before he ripped into it with his claws. He peeled the shreds away, exposing my upper body to his gaze.

With naked hunger in his eyes, he took in the sight of me, his gaze sliding across my breasts and belly like he wanted to drink up every inch of what

was before him until it fused completely with him.

Using one arm as leverage, he skimmed his free hand over my curves, his hands hot and needy. A twist, and he sliced through my bra.

Should I protest that he was destroying my clothing?

Nah. I wanted to feel him pressed against me, for him to slice through the threads of my self-control just as easily.

With a grunt, he tossed aside what was left of my bra. He leaned back and studied my breasts before dropping his head. He sucked one nipple into his mouth and groaned in appreciation.

Electricity shot from my nipple to my groin, and I bucked my hips up toward him, as overcome by the heat building between us as he was.

As he sucked and glided his tongue across my nipple, his other hand captured the second and rolled it. Tugged on it.

I whimpered; overcome with a need I couldn't explain. I sensed only he could give me complete satisfaction.

My breasts tingled with pleasure. His muscles flexed as he held his weight off me. I ran my fingertips along his neck to his shoulders, then found his chest beneath his shirt and groaned. He felt even better than he looked, and this guy was chiseled from the finest granite.

Moving back to my mouth, he gave me a kiss so hot, my body melted into the bed. His teeth caught and tugged on my lower lip, then his tongue invaded as his hands dragged through my hair, messing it up as easily as he was messing with my heart. The feel of him holding my face in place sent quivers through my bones.

He sliced through my shorts, and I lifted my hips so he could toss the shreds aside.

With a twist of his wrist, he nudged my legs apart. He kissed down my body, pausing to stroke his tongue across my belly, making my skin quake and my moans grow louder.

Easing down farther, he pushed my legs wide and crawled between them. When he looked up at me, his gaze *had* gone feral. I welcomed his heat, his joy in this moment, because it was magnified within me.

I laid back and close my eyes so I could take in all the sensations, giving into the pleasure he'd given me already. His hands caressed my thighs in easy circles, slowly coming closer to my core. He growled when his fingers encountered my panties. A few quick slices and they were gone, joining what was left of my clothing on the floor.

I groaned when his hands returned to my overheated skin. I was as on fire for this as he was, as if his heat had left his skin and sunk into mine.

Cool, welcome air glided across my hypersensitive flesh, and then his tongue was on me. I lost all track of everything but his touch. His mouth was soft, wet, and hot, and the feel of him gliding his tongue through my folds made my heart speed up to a mad rush. His mouth moved up and down, his tongue exploring deeply, and when he returned to my clit and circled it with his tongue, I belted out a shriek.

He looked up, studying me as he sucked my clit into his warm wetness. Fire licked behind his eyes and for one second, I was being loved by a wild, untamed orc from his past, not just the guy I'd come to adore.

When I cried out again, he released my clit. "Good thing the house is old." He gave me a tusk-filled smile. "Great soundproofing."

Jeez, I'd forgotten there was someone in the house other than us. "I hope he's a heavy sleeper because I'm not finished yet."

"No, you are not, mate. I'm going to make sure you rock the roof off before we're through." He shook a finger my way. "Now stop distracting me. I need to feast." He sucked my clit back into his mouth and rubbed the scratchy tip across it.

He retracted his claws and slid his fingers through my folds. On each stroke, he glided them deeper inside me.

Shit, I was going to come, and I couldn't seem to stop it. It crept up on me all the sudden and pounced.

I tipped my head back and filled the room with my groans.

CHAPTER 26

REXIN

It was all I could do to control my inner fire. It kept roaring through me, burning through the shreds of my self-control.

My body trembled as I loved her with my mouth, and I was rewarded with her first climax of many. I did promise complete satisfaction. My mate may not walk easily tomorrow, but she would feel fully loved.

I released her clit and stroked her body, reaching greedily for her nipples, rolling them while she slowly returned to the ground.

“You’re killing me here, Rexin,” she breathed.

“In a good or bad way?” My grin made my face ache.

“Totally good.” Her smile joined in with mine. “Keep going.”

“I intend to.”

When her body stopped quivering, I stroked her inner walls with my fingers slowly, savoring the inner quake as the last of her orgasm rippled through her.

My heat was only temporarily satisfied by her pleasure. It would take more orgasms on her part and at least one on mine before it would settle back to a low simmer. Would she be able to take all I needed to give her over the next week?

In my heart, I knew she could. She was my mate. Fate wouldn’t gift her to me if she couldn’t handle everything. I wouldn’t impregnate her—not this heat, that is—but my body didn’t know that. It would rise up to fill her over and over. This was how my species survived so many generations deep below the ground.

When her body started tensing again, I grinned. Leaning near her, I sucked in her heady scent, a glorious musk uniquely her own. I needed to

taste it once more.

As I moved my fingers faster inside her, I teased a claw across her clit, watching the emotions flicker across her face. Her breath caught before she exhaled on a moan. Her body arched off the bed, her hands clenching the blankets.

I milked and stroked her inner walls as she started pumping her hips up to meet me.

“Yes, like that, mate. Do you want to feel my cock buried deep inside you?” My control threatened to snap, but I held the reins to the beast tightly. I wouldn’t release him unless I was sure she was with me fully.

“Rexin. Please,” she groaned. “Yes.”

I hitched her leg up, bracing her thigh on my shoulders so I could lick deep. I nipped at her clit, twisting my head to run my tusks across it while pumping my fingers faster.

“Come for me again, mate.”

“Cock, Rexin. Give me your damn cock!”

Her demands made my beast rear up and roar. It was all I could do not to impale her. But she was tight. Small. And I was big.

She grappled with the blanket, and if she’d had claws, she would’ve torn it. When her body started quaking, I backed away, climbing off the bed.

Damn, she looked well loved. Time to love her even more.

Her gaze remained locked on mine as I ripped off my shirt.

“You are so hot,” she said. “Take off those damn pants and let me see your cock. Feel it. Everything.”

“You’re taunting me, daring my beast, and it won’t take much for me to snap.” My words came out full of warning.

“Let your beast go,” she said with a lift of her chin. “You’re mine, so the wildness inside you is mine too. Give. It. To. Me. Now!”

My heat bellowed through me, and I shredded my pants in seconds, tossing the bits and pieces aside. I climbed onto my bed, climbed *onto her*, and flipped her over.

Her lush ass stared up at me as did she, looking over her shoulder with pleasure-infused excitement. She rose to her knees and parted her thighs, showing how wet and eager her body was for me.

“Mine,” I growled again, clinging by a thread.

She smirked. “Prove it.”

CHAPTER 27

ADELINE

His wildness had generated something similar inside me. I'd gone feral, and I relished the feeling. So freeing. In the past, I'd always felt constrained.

Now I felt unleashed.

I barely remembered my name or his. All I knew was that he had a huge knobby cock with nubs on the sides. It was bent at the tip, and I suspected that would make the head rub my G-Spot with each thrust.

And damn, he had a spur. I wouldn't feel it from the backward position, but at this point, I was going to come the first time he thrust his glorious cock inside me anyway. Spur exploration could come next.

He'd placed the head of that yummy shaft at my opening, and I couldn't wait to feel it pumping fast.

"I not," he said suddenly.

I frowned, struggling to think. What did he mean? "Are you . . . reciting a very short passage from Shakespeare?"

"No," he growled. "I not."

Oh, now I knew. He meant *knot*. My pulse surged. What an intriguing notion.

"I'm going to knot inside you and fill you with my cum. None will escape."

My laughter bubbled up, but I suspected it would come out giddy if I released it.

"Get to it, then," I said. "Now. Well, don't knot too quickly. Make this last." Knotting would come at the end, and I wasn't ready for that yet.

"Watch me. Feel me." He braced my hips, holding me steady, and pushed forward.

So big. It stung. Each time he pulled back, he glided the end of his shaft through my wetness, coating his length. Each drive forward seated him a tiny bit deeper.

It felt so good, I was going to come before he bottomed out inside me. Since I didn't want to feel spent before the pumping inside me stuff started to happen, I pinched my eyes closed and acted like I'd heard guys did, thinking of all the things I had to do at the park. Anything to distract my mind and body from the wonderful feel of him pulling out and pushing forward again.

He curled himself over my back and reached underneath, his fingers finding my clit.

My brain shot back to the present, abandoning the amusement park rides that still needed fixing. All I could focus on was my clit throbbing from his strokes, plus the stretch of him pushing deeper.

I moaned into the pillow, biting back the urge to shriek. If I kept it up, I'd wake the entire town.

My inner muscles tightened as he kept circling my engorged bundle of nerves with his fingers. His hips moved side to side and then forward, urging his cock deeper until the head found the perfect fit.

He groaned. "You're too damn tight."

I snorted. "You sound mad about it."

"Not mad. Your body's driving me out of my mind. So tight. So wet." His growl ripped out. "I can't hold back."

"Don't. I can take anything you want to give me."

"Tight!"

"Yeah, so stretch me out." I was taunting him, but my orgasm hovered on the edge, trying to lure me over to the other side. I suspected once I started sliding, I'd keep going for days, and I couldn't wait to feel it.

He drew back and plunged forward again. Rising over me, he held my hips, keeping me in place. Something continued to stroke my clit, but it couldn't be his hands since both held me steady.

"I need to do this." He slid his cock out and shoved it deeply again. "And this." Over and over, he pumped into me, highlighting each thrust with a groan.

My brain spiraled, focused solely on the exquisite sensations coursing through my body.

The tantalizing drag of his thick tip up made my stomach flip in pleasure, each pass reaching every bit of the inner surface area. It created such friction;

I couldn't hold back. Electric sparks flew through me, followed by a heavy feeling of love.

Waves of bliss rocked across my core, building to one big crescendo as if they were detonating deep within me simultaneously.

On and on, he moved faster, groaning and growling above me; a beast unchained. I drowned in the sensation of his hot body gliding into mine with uncontrolled abandon.

My orgasm burst through me, shooting out to my fingers and toes. I moaned into the bedding.

With a hefty groan, he came as well, moving faster, milking out both his and my pleasure until we were one.

Seamless.

Mated.

CHAPTER 28

REXIN

I claimed her body two more times before dawn started creeping into the room, telling us the world was about to awaken.

Or she claimed me. The second time, she climbed over me and slid down, burying my length within her welcoming body. She rode me like I'd done her, her head tipped back, her hair streaming along her spine, and her cries of pleasure echoing around me.

The third time, I dragged her into the shower, lifted her up while the spray deluged us both, and took her against the wall.

I was contemplating giving in once more, maybe doing it from the front with her heels locked on my shoulders, when footsteps rang out in the bedroom above mine.

Adeline sat bolt upright. "Brear's awake." Her hair was an untamed mess, her cheeks were pink, and she had bite marks on her right shoulder.

I'd marked her. Claimed her as mine for the whole world to see.

I'd never seen anyone prettier than my mate.

Ah, yes, my mate. We'd solidified our bond.

With my heat backed off a bit—for now—I could remind myself she belonged to no one but herself. But in my heart, I could call her mine. I expected her to do the same with me.

She scrambled to the edge of the bed and slipped off. "I've got to get out of here." She held up a few shreds of her clothing. "Shit, I can't run home naked." Her head snapped around before she raced to my bureau and rifled through the drawers, pulling out one of my t-shirts. "This'll do. I'll get it back to you sometime. Maybe."

"Why only maybe?" I asked in a lazy voice. My body felt amazing. I

wanted to make it feel even better.

She quirked one hip and gave me a perturbed look. “Because I might want to keep it.”

“Everything I have is yours, mate.” Sitting on the side, I scratched my groin. Stretched.

“Don’t do that,” she snapped.

I peered at her over my shoulder. “What?”

“Look sexy. I can’t leap all over you again. I need to shower—”

“We took one.”

“We got wet.”

“In many places.”

Shaking her head, she smiled at my antics. “You know what I mean. I need to wash everywhere and get dressed. Go to work.”

“I can lick you everywhere. That’ll be the same thing, right?”

She shook a finger at me. “Don’t do that either.”

“Do what?” I asked in all innocence. I adored our play. I wanted to tease her like this every day and night forever.

She sauntered over to me, and despite being covered with my shirt that comically hung to her knees, she looked even sexier dressed than she had naked. And that was saying something. Nudging my knees apart, she stepped between them, leaning into my embrace. “I can’t stay any longer. But if you’re a good orcling, I’ll give you a treat later.”

My cock surged upward.

She stared down at it. “You sure have a lot of vigor. We just had sex, maybe an hour ago.”

“I’m a needy orcling. A *good*, needy orcling.”

Her fingertip teased down my neck to my chest. “Then I promise you’ll receive your treat.”

She stepped back before I could lift her up and plunge her down onto my cock. We could take care of business before my son made his way to the first level.

Giggling, she evaded my touch. “No stealing your treat early.” She raced to the window, lifted it, and swung her legs over, dropping to the ground outside. “Don’t forget to show me how good you can be!”

I growled, though it was just pretend.

Laughing softly, she raced away.

WE WORKED ALL MORNING, getting the last rides running.

“We can finish the snack shacks after lunch,” Adeline said with satisfaction. She looked around the park. “So much work left to do, but I think we can get it done in time.”

“I’ll work all day and night to make sure it’s ready.”

“You’re wonderful.”

“No, that’s you.”

Frowning from where he sat in the shade of the snack shack on the end, Brear looked back and forth between us.

Shading her eyes with her hand, Adeline looked up at me. “I don’t think we need to work all the time. We can finish this during normal work hours. Once everything’s close to ready, I can do a press release, have newspeople come in for pictures, and let the vendors loose to set up. That’ll get us closer. Come late August, we’ll push open the gates and invite everyone inside.”

“I’ll help too,” Brear said. Adeline refused to let him work, saying he was a kid, and he needed to relax during the summer. He could get back to work when school started in the fall.

“Only a little help,” she said.

“I’ll go get lunch,” he said proudly. “Wait here.”

We grinned as he bolted across the park, aiming for our house.

“I noticed that gleam in your eyes,” she said softly. “You’re getting feral again, and it’s turning me on.”

It was all I could do to keep my cock in line. My son didn’t need to know about this, though we’d discussed heats and mating plenty of times in the past. It would be different if the discussion included his father.

My grin turned sly. “Do you think I’ve been a good enough orcling yet?”

“I don’t know.” She sauntered closer. “Perhaps we should discuss this inside one of the sheds.”

“I believe we should.” I picked her up, tossed her over my shoulder, and bolted for the finished one. Inside, I kicked the door shut and made quick work of her clothing, though I didn’t slice through them. I wanted to, but she couldn’t run around naked with Brear here.

“Time for fast and furious?” she asked as I pressed her against the wall.

“Furious, yes. Fast, no.”

Her gaze shot to the door. “We don’t have a lot of time.”

“I believe we do.” I scooted lower, keeping her upright, and hooked her legs on my shoulders. “You ran away before I could lick you this morning. You were very naughty.”

“I believe you need to show me the error of my ways.”

“I plan to.”

She clutched my horns as I began to lick her. Her head pressed back against the wall, and her eyes closed.

With one hand supporting her, I used the other to find her clit and pinch it between my thumb and finger. I rocked it, rolled it, all while driving my tongue inside her delicious passage.

Soon, she was moaning and bucking against me, riding my mouth while I satisfied my craving.

Her fingers tightened on my horns. Was she aware she was yanking on them? No harm. I had tough horns. And the slight tugs made my cock surge upward.

I eased out from beneath her, though I kept her lifted against the wall.

She blinked at me, her pupils blown and her breathing ragged. “Don’t stop now.”

“How could I? I still haven’t finished savoring my treat.” Unfastening my pants, I centered my cock at her opening and pushed hard, burying myself inside her.

We both groaned.

Then I rode her until she came once.

Twice.

And three times.

CHAPTER 29

ADELINE

All that week, we alternated working on the park with sneaking away for privacy to work on his heat.

And mine. The more we were together, the more my appetite for him grew. There was no way I was going to be able to let him go after his heat was finished.

I almost wished I wasn't on birth control and that I could get pregnant.

He called me his mate, though not in front of Brear yet. We'd talked about announcing it to him this weekend while we were camping. From the way he kept trying to push us together, we suspected he'd be quite happy to hear the news.

We hadn't discussed moving in together, but we had time for that. This was new for both of us, and for now, we were enjoying exploring each other.

On Thursday, we tackled the front section of the grounds, ripping weeds and dead growth from the planters and replacing everything with blooming annuals and thick loads of mulch that smelled amazing. We redid the walkways during the afternoon, fixing the overgrown edging and removing the weeds growing between the large paver stones. We'd tackle the middle and back of the park over the next few weeks.

"Everything's coming together," I said with joy as I took in all the work we'd accomplished in such a short time. "Opening late August was an ambitious goal, and I wouldn't have gotten it done without you two."

Brear grinned.

"It looks wonderful already." Rexin put his arm around my shoulders. That feral look I savored was back in his eyes. We hadn't found a time to sneak away today. If we didn't feed his itch soon, I suspected we'd be

humping each other all night long—something we'd done all week. My eyelids stung from lack of sleep, but I wouldn't trade our time together for anything, not even a solid night's rest.

"I've got an idea for dinner," Rexin said, nodding to Brear. "Why don't you run home and order us pizzas? Once they're delivered, you can bring them over to Adeline's place, and we'll sit on the patio while we eat them."

"Yay," Brear said. "I love pizza." His head tilted as he looked between us. "What kind should I get?"

Rexin looked at me.

"I love pepperoni with pineapple—"

Brear grimaced. "Yuck."

"But I'm open to anything," I finished with a smile.

"I think pepperoni with pineapple sounds great," Rexin said.

I imagined anything sounded great if him leaving to order and wait for it would give me and her half an hour of alone time.

I nudged his son's shoulder; a gesture I'd learned was impolite to use among females but common among males. I loved doing it, so I was ignoring the "no females nudging" rule. "What do you like on your pizza, Brear?"

"Mushrooms and ham."

"Why don't we get three large pizzas, one of each? Then you can reheat the leftovers for us tomorrow," Rexin said in all seriousness, making it sound like an insurmountable task. "Can you handle that for us, Brear?"

"I sure can." He held out his hand, and Rexin gave him a card to pay the pizza delivery person.

"I can pay too," I said.

"Our treat, right Brear?"

Brear nodded as he slipped the card into his pocket. "What are you two going to do while I'm gone?" His gaze took in the work still needing to be done in this section of the park.

"I'm going to take a shower," I said. "I'm done working for the day."

"I'll . . . find something to do and meet you both at your place." Rexin's gaze pinned me in place. "Is it okay if I use your shower once you're done?"

I suspected I wouldn't be showering alone. He'd taken to leaving a few changes of clothing at my house for times like this.

"Of course."

"Be back soon." Brear bolted for the path leading to their house. As soon as he'd crested the hill, we raced for my house, holding hands.

We stripped quickly and jumped into the shower.

“Allow me to wash you, mate.” He lathered soap between his hands. He started at my shoulders but soon was massaging my breasts.

I went limp against the wall, and when he nudged my legs apart, I spread them wide.

He took care not to get soap where he shouldn't, but it wasn't long before I was moaning from his touch.

With a grin, he lifted me and stepped between my thighs, centering his cock at my core.

In no time, we were sort of clean but equally satisfied.

He knotted, and we laughed as we got out of the shower and somehow dried. Fortunately, he released quickly, and we were able to dress long before Brear got back. I wasn't sure what we would've done this week if Rexin was someone who knotted for hours.

We grabbed beers from the fridge and took them out to the patio, bringing a soda for Brear.

We'd just sat in chairs with our feet up when footsteps rang out on the path beside the house.

I expected Brear, though this was fast for delivery pizza.

To my surprise, the older couple who'd stopped by looking for Rexin joined us.

“There you are.” The woman stalked toward him; her finger extended. The scowl on her face didn't make sense. Her gaze swept along his form. “We've been looking for you everywhere, Rexin Tavalog.”

“Why?” He rose to his feet.

“We're Paige's parents,” she said.

The older guy cleared his throat. His sharp gaze traveled between us. “We've come to take custody of Paige's son. She begged us to take care of him before she died, and we've got a court order stating he belongs with us.”

CHAPTER 30

REXIN

Breiar walked around the side of the house and onto the patio at that moment, the pizza boxes in his hand. His jaw dropped, and he gaped at Paige's parents. "What? I live with my dad."

"There you are," the woman gushed. She stormed over to Breiar, took the pizzas from his limp hands, and placed them on a table. She engulfed him in her arms, her body comically smaller than his.

The male with her grinned and looked from Breiar to us. "We've got baby pictures. While he's obviously orc, there's a bit of Paige—and us—in our grandson. I'm Greg, by the way, and my lovely wife is Joyce."

"What are you talking about?" I struggled not to bellow. I'd never met them. Paige and I were together a short time, and then we broke up. Whoever abandoned Breiar at the opening to the mountain hadn't identified themselves.

"While Paige was pregnant, she worried something tragic would happen." Joyce stepped away from Breiar, though she kept a tight grip on his hand until he wrenched it away. Unperturbed, she kept talking. "She knew, Greg. She knew!"

"She sure did, love."

Breiar scooted around them and tucked himself behind me. I wanted to grab him and run, but we lived in the human world, and when we first arrived, we were told we needed to obey the rules set forth in the treaty.

How could the court agree with Paige's parents and take my son away?

Adeline put her arm around me, lending support. Concern filled her face. She was clearly as upset about this as me.

"Here's the thing." Greg strode closer. "We have paperwork proving Paige wanted us to assume custody if something happened to her."

“I’m raising my son.” I’d shared what happened all those years ago with Brear, and he’d shrugged it off. To him, I was his dad, and we had a happy home together. How that came about didn’t seem to matter to him.

Joyce’s chin lifted, and her lips trembled. “You only raised him because we didn’t know where he was. Paige wasn’t living with us when she died, of course.”

“Why not? She was only eighteen when she had him.”

“I should punch you right now for getting my daughter pregnant,” Greg snarled. “But I won’t. Women are present, and I won’t show our grandson violence, especially toward his father.”

“I’m not going to live with you,” Brear cried. “Please, Dad. Tell them to go away. I live with you.”

I reached toward him, but he backed away, his terrified gaze shooting from me to them. Before I could say anything, he bolted for the path leading to our house.

“Now you’ve done it,” Joyce told me, scowling.

“I’ve done nothing. You’ve come here with demands you have no right to make. I’m Brear’s father, and he’ll remain with me.” I wanted to go after him, to reassure him, but I had to deal with them first.

Adeline nodded to me as if she could hear my thoughts. She stepped back and rushed into the house. Not long after, I heard the front door shut and steps rushing away. She’d find Brear and reassure him as much as she could. She’d protect him.

I’d never loved her more than I did right now.

“Tell you what.” Greg gazed toward where Brear had fled. “We’re not heartless. You appear to have done an amazing job with our grandson.”

“My son,” I grated out. “*My son.*”

“Yes, yes, of course. By blood if not by law.” He took Joyce’s hand, squeezing it. “We’ll give you the next week while we’re in town to get him used to the idea he’ll be living with us from then on.”

A week, huh? I shook my head. “He’s my son, and you’re not taking him away from me.”

“That’s up to the law, now isn’t it?” Greg said with a slick smile.

“No, it’s up to me.”

But would those in power agree?

CHAPTER 31

ADELINE

I sat with Brear in his living room, though we didn't say much. I couldn't make promises I wouldn't be able to keep. But I wanted him to know he wasn't alone. His father would do what he could, and I'd do the same.

We would not allow them to take him.

When Rexin walked in through the back door, I'd never seen anyone who looked more defeated. He lightened his expression when his gaze fell on Brear.

Brear leaped up from the sofa and raced to his dad, wrapping his arms around him. "They can't take me. You're my dad. I love you!"

"I love you too, Brear." Rexin's sorrow-filled gaze met mine. "I talked with a lawyer in town on my way here. He said he'll squeeze us in tomorrow afternoon for an appointment to come up with a plan. We can work tomorrow morning."

"I'd never expect you to work at a time like this."

"It'll be a welcome distraction."

Brear nodded.

I walked over to them, and if there was ever a pair who needed a hug more, I hadn't seen them. I wrapped them as far as I could with my arms, and we remained there together.

"Here's the thing, Brear," Rexin said when we separated. Taking his son's hand, he led him to the sofa where they sat.

I sunk into a recliner.

Rexin put his arm around Brear's shoulders. "They have paperwork from your mother that gives them rights."

"I don't want to live with them. I don't know them," Brear said. "I'll run

away and hide where they'll never find me."

"Please, don't." Rexin pinched his eyes shut, then opened them. "We're going to make this work within the boundaries of the law. From the little bit I told the lawyer, he said I might have a good case."

Might. My heart was crushed for them both. Surely the powers that be wouldn't take a boy from his dad?

"So I'm going to go into town tomorrow and talk to the lawyer."

"I'm coming with you." Brear clung to his dad.

"I imagine the court will want to speak to Brear," I said. "His wishes will play a role in this too."

"Would you come with us?" Rexin asked me.

"I will."

WE WORKED in the park the next day, but the cheery atmosphere had fled. I couldn't stop thinking about them taking Brear, and they felt the same.

After lunch, we sat in the shade and chatted about inconsequential things. Tension coiled up my spine, and Brear kept sighing.

We cleaned up at our own homes and dressed for the appointment.

Rexin picked me up in his truck, and he drove into town, parking outside the lawyer's office on Main Street. Inside, we were ushered into the lawyer's office.

"Let's get right to it, shall we?" she said, giving us a reassuring smile. "I've obtained a copy of the paperwork Brear's grandparents brought with them, and I'll note they have a solid case. However, the court takes other things into consideration in situations like this. You've raised your son for twelve years, Rexin, and the judge will give that fact substantial weight." She nodded to Brear who clung to Rexin's hand. "They'll want to speak to you, too. Do you feel up to talking to a judge?"

"I'm staying with my dad." Brear's voice choked off. "Please don't let them take me away."

"I'm going to do all I can." Her confident smile held. "I've put a call into the county judge, and she's fair. Please trust us to make this work out as it should."

"How long will this take?" Rexin asked.

She shrugged. “Usually, something like this could take months, but I’ll see what I can do.” She rose. “For now, you should relax and leave this to me. It’s almost the weekend. Do something fun together.”

Make lasting memories, she meant.

One glance into Rexin’s face told me I wasn’t the only one who worried this might be the last weekend they’d spend together.

We’d barely made it back to Rexin’s home and gone inside, sitting in the living room, before the lawyer called. When he hung up after speaking with her, Rexin turned his gaze my way. “We got an injunction. Joyce and Greg can’t take him unless the judge makes a formal decision in their favor.”

“When might that be?” I squeezed Brear’s hand. I’d sat beside him on the sofa.

“The judge said she’ll see if she can move this up and fit the case into her schedule sometime during the next month.”

“Alright.” At least Brear would remain with his dad until then. And if we were lucky and the court decided as they should, this would be settled, and Brear would remain with his dad forever.

“I have an idea.” Rexin smiled, though it didn’t ring true to me.

Brear’s stiff posture loosened, however, which was Rexin’s purpose. For his benefit, we’d keep our stress inside and pretend everything was going to be okay. How could we do anything less?

Rexin’s grin widened. “Why don’t we leave for our camping trip right now?”

CHAPTER 32

REXIN

We packed up the tent and air mattresses, plus enough food for an army—some in coolers, the rest in totes. With everything loaded in the old Jeep parked in Adeline's barn, we headed out, taking the wood trail leading away from the field behind her house.

It was a tight fit for me, my head nudging the roof, but I slouched and it was okay.

As we drove down the winding dirt road through the dense forest, Brear chattered about all the things he wanted to do once we reached the campsite. It was bittersweet to see him so happy, and I was glad I could give him this weekend if nothing else.

Adeline was quiet, though she sent me soft smiles. She must be thinking of the times her family traveled this road to go camping, plus how that ended with her mother's death.

Late-day sun slanted through the trees, casting long shadows across the forest floor. The air was thick with the scent of pine needles and damp earth. As we drove deeper into the woods, the sounds of civilization fell away, replaced by the rustling of leaves and the occasional bird call.

"Are we almost there?" Brear asked for the hundredth time, bouncing in his seat.

Adeline glanced back at him with a true grin. "We'll be there soon."

I caught her eye and felt a pang of affection. She was so good with Brear, always patient and kind. I was grateful to have her in our lives, especially now.

She turned my attention back to the road, navigating the twists and turns with ease. We were getting close; I could feel the tension in my shoulders

easing as we neared the riverbank.

"Look." Brear pointed out the window. "A deer."

A doe had emerged from the trees and was grazing in a small clearing to our right. We slowed down to watch her before continuing on.

Despite the turmoil in our lives, a sense of contentment settled over me. This was what mattered, spending time with my son and Adeline, enjoying the simple pleasures of life for as long as I could.

Adeline reached over to squeeze my hand, and I gave her a smile. Despite the looming threat of Brear's grandparents trying to take him away, I felt a glimmer of hope. Maybe, just maybe, things would work out as they should.

We emerged from the logging road, the dense forest giving way to a vast meadow. Slanted sunlight bathed everything in a warm golden light.

After she parked near the river, I stepped out of the Jeep and took a deep breath, savoring the fresh air. The scent of wildflowers mingled with the mossy, wet smell that you only found near a large body of water. Birds chirped, and the sound of rushing water filled my senses.

"I used to love it here," Adeline said with a hint of sadness, peering around. "I haven't been here in too long. The meadow is growing. The small trees are taking over."

"We can come back another time with a bushwhacker and clear it."

Her smile rose. "And camp again together."

"We'll make good memories." Hopefully enough to carry us through whatever might come next.

She nodded slowly. "And replace the old."

"Brear, what do you think?" I asked.

"It's amazing. Can I explore?"

Adeline ruffled his hair. "Soon. Let's set up camp first."

We got to work, pitching tents and unloading supplies. Adeline and I teased each other, stealing kisses whenever we thought Brear wasn't looking. He watched us with a knowing grin, clearly suspecting there was more going on between us than we'd let on during the week.

The mood was somewhat solemn as we finished getting everything ready, but we didn't dwell on how the case might come out for long. We had a weekend of camping ahead of us, and we were determined to make the most of it.

"Okay, everything's set up," Adeline said finally. "Who's hungry?"

"Me," Brear exclaimed, and we laughed.

We sat by the fire, roasting chicken on sticks and enjoying the simple pleasure of each other's company. After eating the piping hot chicken, salad, potatoes roasted in foil on the coals, plus a complete pan of brownies, we washed the utensils in the river and burned the paper plates.

Then we settled in chairs around the fire.

"Who wants to hear a funny story about a family of llamas?" Adeline asked.

Brear frowned. "What's a llama?"

"You don't know what llamas are?" Adeline shook her head in mock dismay. "They're a bit like cows, only not. Like goats, only not. Like deer, only not." Her low laugh rang out. "I'm not making this easy on you, am I? Anyway. They're wonderful creatures. As for their story, well, you're going to be amazed. Once upon a time . . ."

She told the tale of the llama family who got lost in a cave and had to find their way free. Along the way, they discovered a magical treasure. They completed a series of tasks, and the treasure was theirs.

Brear watched her raptly. So did I, for that matter.

As long as we remained together, things were going to be okay.

I had to trust in that.

CHAPTER 33

ADELINE

Breiar was yawning as I finished my long story about the llama family.

"I think you, my son, need to go to bed," Rexin said, rising. "Do your tusks with water from the gallon on the folding table and come back for kisses before you climb into your tent."

While Breiar was a kid—like all others—who protested things like doing tusks and kisses, tonight he was solemn and well-behaved. He was as worried as us about what would happen with his grandparents.

When he had done his teeth and changed into PJs inside the smaller tent, he emerged and rushed over, tumbling into Rexin's arms like he must've done when he was little.

"Love you, Dad."

"I love you, Breiar. I always will." Rexin's teary gaze met mine, and I could tell he was struggling greatly. They both were. Hopefully this would be settled soon in Rexin's favor.

"I'll walk with you to your tent," Rexin said. "Zip it up for you."

Breiar paused before stooping down to enter, his eyes lingering on the only other tent. "Hey, Dad, where's Adeline going to sleep? We set up your tent but . . ."

Rexin looked at me before speaking, and I nodded. Before his grandparents arrived, we'd talked about telling Breiar we were together over the weekend. There didn't seem to be any reason to hold the information back.

"Actually, buddy," Rexin said, his voice husky. "She and I are sharing a tent."

Breiar's frown deepened. "But it only has one air mattress." His eyes

widened, and he slapped his hand over his mouth. “Oh. You two . . .”

Rexin stiffened. Did he worry Brear would be upset about it?

“Adeline,” Brear cried. He rushed across the open area and stopped in front of me, grinning. “My plan worked.”

“Plan?” I was only teasing.

“Well, you may not have been able to tell, but I was matchmaking. It worked. It worked!”

“It sure did.” I rose, and he barreled into me, nearly knocking me over with his hug. I held him, my heart turning to complete mush.

“So, um, does that mean you're moving in with us?” he asked as he stepped out of my embrace.

“We're dating. We haven't talked about anything like that yet.” Rexin grinned at me. “But she *has* agreed to be my mate.”

“Adeline!” Brear nearly knocked me over again, and we were soon laughing together, shoving aside our sadness to live in this happy moment.

My mom would've been thrilled to see me building joy in this place that used to hold only happiness.

My dad?

I suspected he'd approve as well. My heart had softened to him. I didn't know why he'd pushed me aside when I needed him so much, but remembering the good times helped. I had that, and I'd decided to cling to the smiles rather than the tears.

Brear climbed inside his tent and Rexin zipped it shut.

“Goodnight, Dad,” Brear called softly.

“Goodnight, son.”

“Goodnight, Adeline.”

That made my heart explode. “Night, Brear.”

I'd not only fallen in love with Rexin, but I'd also fallen for his son.

THE NEXT MORNING, we cooked breakfast in a skillet over the fire, devouring it all.

After washing the dishes, we went fishing. Well, Brear and Rexin fished. I pattered around the meadow admiring the flowers.

In the afternoon, we swam in the river.

“It’s cold,” Brear squealed, his face wreathed with a big smile. “I love it here. Can we come here every weekend?”

“Not every weekend,” Rexin said. “But maybe a few more times before the end of summer.”

“Yay.”

We cooked the fish they caught for dinner, laughing when we nearly burned it, chasing it down with chips and vegetables dipped in ranch dressing.

Finally, as the sun started to set, we built a fire. We sat around it for an hour or so, talking softly.

“Tell us another story?” Brear asked, rocking in his chair. Chocolate and marshmallow speckled his cheeks from the s’mores he’d devoured.

“Last night’s story was about a llama,” I said. “Maybe tonight, your dad would like to tell us an *orc* story.”

“Yeah, Dad.” Brear stuffed a marshmallow onto the end of his stick for toasting. “Tell her the one about how the orcs discovered the stelladon plant.” He looked my way. “It’s a black plant with teeth. It gets really big, and it eats meat.”

My eyes widened. “My goodness.”

“Thankfully, they only live in one cave in the orc kingdom,” Rexin said. “And they tend to remain there.”

Tend to, huh?

He regaled us with a story that must be made up, though he assured us it wasn’t.

Finally, we went silent, staring into the flames. The coals started dying down, and Brear kept yawning.

“Time to do your tusks, Brear,” Rexin said.

“Do we have to leave tomorrow? I want to stay here forever.”

“We’ll come back again soon.” Rexin’s gaze met mine, and I nodded.

Somewhere between building fires and picking wildflowers, I’d found my peace with this place and my dad. I wasn’t sure it would translate to my feelings about the park, but this was a start.

After Brear went to bed, we sat by the fire again, whispering about the work still needing done at the park.

Finally, I felt confident Brear was asleep.

“How’s the . . .” I lowered my voice to a whisper. “Heat?” We’d clung to each other the night before, but we hadn’t had sex. There was no way we

could do that with Brear lying close by.

“Beginning to wane. I thought about chasing you this weekend,” he whispered. That feral look was back in his eyes.

“We shouldn’t leave Brear.” What if he woke, and we were gone?

He nodded in agreement before rummaging around in a tote near where he sat, pulling out a blanket. His smile held hints of promise—sexual promise. “There’s plenty of area nearby where we can escape.”

“How about I run a short distance down the logging road?” Funny how I could still get turned on despite everything going on in our lives.

Excitement coiled deep in my belly.

His eyes lit up. “If you ran, I’d give chase.”

“If I ran, I suspect I’d let you catch me.”

“It needs to be a good run. Don’t make this easy for me.”

Ha. We’d see about that. I got to my feet and shimmied out of my panties, tossing them aside. No need to shred them. That left me wearing only a sundress that could be flipped up and out of the way. And my sneakers, but there were lines I wouldn’t cross even in play. Gouging my feet on sticks and rocks was one of them.

I sashayed around Rexin while he looked up at me with growing lust. Pausing, I traced my fingertip down the bulge in his pants.

His hands landed on my hips, stilling my sway. “A quarter mile. No more.”

“I wonder what my orc lover plans to do with me when he catches me?” I said in a low voice.

“Run and you’ll find out.”

Bracing his shoulders, I kissed him.

Then I backed away and raced toward the opening to the trail.

CHAPTER 34

REXIN

My heat burned through me, unleashing my cock and a strong urge to mate. We could only do this close to the meadow, but as long as we stayed within shouting distance, we could have the time together we needed.

As Adeline reached the logging trail, I stood. She paused and glanced back at me, grinning and curling her finger my way.

This wasn't how chases usually took place. The female would truly try to get away. That was the fun of it. Chasing. Catching. Claiming pleasure for them both.

I ripped off my shirt as her quick footsteps receded. Shucking my shorts, I tossed my clothing onto the chair.

Naked, I took off after her, my bare feet making almost no sound on the grassy ground.

My cock smacked against my abs as I rushed onto the trail. I spied her ahead, running fast.

I was faster.

Bolting down the trail, it didn't take me long to reach her. Orc strides were at least twice the length of a tiny human's. When I reached her, I wrapped my arm around her waist, lifting her off her feet.

I flung the blanket on the ground, and somehow, it spread out enough for our needs.

"Mine," I growled in her ear.

She struggled, but her grin gave her away. "Not yet. I think you still have something left to do to me before you can make a claim like that."

Lifting her, I slanted my mouth across hers hard. I released my mating lust, giving it free rein.

She writhed against me, clinging to my shoulders, her legs wrapping around my chest.

We tumbled on the blanket, rolling until she lay on top of me.

“I want you.” She nipped at my neck, branding me as her own. “You caught me, but I’m going to do the claiming.”

“I’m already yours, mate.”

She nodded pertly. “Exactly.” Scooting down my body, she stopped when she straddled my thighs. She grabbed my cock. “This is mine.”

“What do you plan to do with your new possession, mate?”

“This.” She licked up the length.

When she took me into her mouth, my eyes rolled back in my head.

It didn’t take long for her to bring me close to climax. With a heady smile, she rose over me, her legs spreading wide.

“I need to suck on your clit,” I said with caution. “Get you ready before we—”

She held my cock steady and centered it at her core.

Before I could say anything further, she dropped down onto my length, burying it inside her.

She rode me until we both exploded with pleasure.

CHAPTER 35

ADELINE

I woke with the sun the next morning, lying in Rexin's arms. After having fun in the woods, we crept back to the campsite, finding everything as we'd left it. We did our teeth and crawled into the tent, snuggling together all night long.

Rexin rolled me onto my back and rose over me. That feral look might not be in his eyes, but his cock felt ready for some fun.

His hand slid between my legs, but before he could do much of anything, sounds echoed in the campsite.

"Who wants breakfast?" Brear called out.

With a muffled groan, Rexin rolled off me, flopping onto his back. He cupped his face with his palms.

I rose onto my elbow and studied his cock. If only there was time to sneak away and ride him once more. But we'd come here for all of us to have fun, not necessarily to savor his heat.

"I want something," I said in a lifted voice. "I'm very hungry." Smiling Rexin's way, I ran my tongue across my upper lip. "I've got a voracious appetite."

Rexin nodded.

"I bet your dad's hungry too," I added.

His nod speeded up.

"What would you like to eat for breakfast?" I asked.

Rexin mouthed *you*.

Damn, he could make me wet with just a glance.

"Can we have pancakes and bacon?" Brear banged around in the tote, pulling out pans.

“We sure can.” I tapped Rexin’s lips and leaned over for a quick kiss, whispering after. “Let’s eat food, and we can find a way to sneak off for a different meal later.”

Rexin heaved a sigh. “Yep.”

I dressed quickly and emerged from the tent, closing it to give Rexin time to regain control of his cock.

We ate and took a walk along a meandering deer trail, stopping to pick and eat berries. Despite finding no opportunity for me and Rexin to sneak away for some wild rutting, we still had fun.

As we were cleaning up the campsite to go home, Rexin’s phone rang.

He pulled it out of his pocket and answered, listening to whoever was speaking on the other end. When he hung up, his worried gaze met mine. “That was the lawyer. The judge will settle the case this coming week.”

CHAPTER 36

REXIN

We worked on the park the next week, our anxiety growing as Friday approached. The judge had squeezed us in for three in the afternoon. What if she said my son had to leave with his grandparents? They lived about a five-hour drive away. I'd see him all I could—and as much as they allowed—but it wouldn't be the same.

“How are things going between Brear and his grandparents?” Adeline asked me on Tuesday. Brear had gone to the house to watch TV for a while, and we were alone.

I wanted to make love to her—I needed her even more than I had when my heat was at full force. But the thought of losing Brear was ripping through my insides like acid. It was all I could think about, worry about.

“It's going as well as it can. He likes being with them.”

“I'm glad.”

Despite my grief, I was glad too. I couldn't imagine handing my son over to people he didn't know or care about. “He enjoys being with them. They take him for ice cream, out to dinner, the movies, and they're talking about taking him to Disney during an upcoming school break.”

Frowning, she paused in her work. We'd almost finished painting the fence spanning the front of the park and up half of each side. A rail fence encircled the back section of the park to keep people from sneaking in, though anyone could get over it if they tried. So far, no one had. It was a small, honest community, which was why I'd decided it would be the perfect place to raise my son.

“He'll love Disney.” She laid down her paintbrush and wrapped her arms around me. “I'm sorry. I'm sure you're pleased he enjoys being with them

each evening, but I can tell you're sad. I wish I could fix it for you."

"Just being with you helps." I cupped her pretty face. Kissed her.

"Brear's not here," she said when we broke apart. "Your heat's waned but ..."

"I crave you just as much now as I did then." It was hard to shove the sorrow from my mind to focus on us. "I'm in love with you. You know that, don't you?"

Her smile bloomed, so beautiful. "I suspected you did, but I love hearing you say it. I love you, Rexin, and I'm here for you in any way that'll make you happy."

Not much could beat the fiery heat of a new relationship, but knowing this precious woman loved me made me want to scoop her up, twirl her around, and kiss her until she could only moan my name.

Why not now?

When I lifted her and laid her over my shoulder, she laughed.

"Off we go, huh?"

I raced to the top of the hill and into a small grove of trees, setting her on her feet in the tiny open area.

Her gaze smoldered. "Gee, I wonder what we can do here in this lovely meadow that's sheltered from prying eyes?" Her fingers traced along the waistband of my shorts. I'd skipped a shirt, partly due to the heat but also because Adeline couldn't resist touching my exposed skin.

We stripped for each other fast, tossing our clothing aside, then sunk down onto the lush grass.

I captured her mouth with a growl, eager to love her until I couldn't think of anything else.

CHAPTER 37

ADELINE

We kissed and rolled until I lay on top of him.

I wanted to make him feel good, to help him forget, if only for a moment. Kissing across his jaw, I marveled all over again at how amazing he was. He was a wonderful father and a kind person in general. I hated that he was in pain.

As our bodies entwined, I kissed him deeper, our lips and tongues exploring each other's. Our bodies blazed. Who needed a heat to generate sparks between us? His hands roamed my skin, tracing every curve and dip, igniting every sense within me. I craved him like no other and I would until my dying day.

As he touched me, I closed my eyes and let out a sigh, feeling the warmth of his fingers on my skin. It was all I could do to focus on what I wanted to give him.

I moved lower, my nose brushing against his skin as I kissed across his chest and down to his toned belly. His cock called to me, so stiff and erect. Holding it in place, I took as much of him into my mouth as I could. He shuddered and groaned, slowly pumping up toward me.

He wrapped my braid around his hand, and it was all I could do not to grin as his eyelids slid shut and his face creased with pleasure.

“I’m going to come,” he snarled. “Want to do it inside you.”

I wanted that as well, but this moment was for him, for his escape and pleasure.

When he tried to urge me to release him, I shook my head, mumbling around his thick cock.

With wonder filling his eyes, he sunk back to the ground and gave in,

moving toward me faster, his groans echoing around us.

He came suddenly, and I drank him down, taking everything he had to give until spent, and he collapsed beneath me.

When I released him, he looked up at me with so much love and satisfaction, I knew I was the luckiest woman in the world.

“Your turn, mate,” he said with a smile, urging me onto my back. He spread my legs and devoured me.

And there was no better way to spend our break time than that.

WE SPENT the afternoon and the next few days slowly making our way through the park from the front to the back, weeding and finetuning flowerbeds as needed.

“I still can’t believe it,” I said as we finished early Friday morning. “The park is going to be ready in time for my grand opening.”

Rexin came over behind me and wrapped his arms around me. Brear watched with a big smile. I swear, he was purposefully disappearing during the day to give us alone time.

Yeah, I didn’t want to dwell too long on what a twelve-year-old might think about his dad and me sneaking off to be together.

We had lunch—delivered sandwiches eaten in the shade and washed down with soda.

“We should go home and get ready,” Rexin said about one-thirty in the afternoon. “We don’t want to be late.”

A shadow passed over Brear’s face, and he suddenly went serious. “Okay.” His head tilted. “Maybe the three of us can just run away.”

Rexin left me and went over to his son, pulling him into his arms for a hug. “Sounds like an amazing idea but sometimes in life, you have to stick things out even if you might not like the outcome. Like Adeline and the park. It’s going to be amazing. We made sure it would be. But maybe for some reason we don’t know, the community won’t visit.”

“Oh, they will,” Brear said. “Everyone at school was talking about it.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Yeah.” The word puffed out of Brear, and he sagged. “I hate it. I mean, I love my grandparents. I’m happy they found me. But it’s not fair for them to

take me from you. I told them that last night.”

“What did they say?”

“That they understand, but that they love me too. I’m all they have left of their daughter.” He looked up at Rexin with tears in his eyes. “It’s not fair of them to put me in this position. I don’t want to be forced to choose.”

“Of course you don’t.” Rexin’s shimmering gaze met mine. “You’re right that this is a horrible position to be in. I love you. I want you to live with me, but sometimes, courts make decisions for reasons other than love.”

“What can be better than a family loving each other?” Brear asked in all seriousness.

“Nothing, actually, but laws don’t always consider things like that. The judge may decide that your grandparents can better provide for you than me. Or that they can give you what I can’t. The judge will decide based on what’s best for you.”

“That’s me staying with you, Dad,” he said sadly. “And Adeline. We’re a family.”

“We are, son.” Rexin held his hand out to me and tugged me into the shared embrace when I joined them. “We are.”

Everything he’d done since Brear was abandoned at the opening of the cave had revolved around what his child needed.

And around love. That was clearer than anything else.

I bet Rexin had adored Brear from the moment he first saw him, and that feeling had only grown stronger.

But life wasn’t always fair, and I needed to remember what he’d just told his son. It was up to the judge to decide what was best for Brear, not us. If that was with his grandparents, we’d have to find a way to accept it.

They left, though we still had a few hours before we had to be in town.

Because I felt unsettled, I didn’t go home yet. Instead, I went to the only place in the park I hadn’t visited since I returned to town—Dad’s office in the small main building. Since I’d dreaded going there, I’d avoided it. But I was beginning to make peace with my past, and this was the final rock I needed to turn over and expose to the sunlight.

A light mesh of cobwebs greeted me when I unlocked and pushed open the door. That and Dad’s desk. I could still picture him sitting in his big old leather chair, working diligently on the accounting ledger or sometimes, if I snuck in without him hearing, him reading a book. Reading was his greatest pleasure other than Mom, and there wasn’t a genre he hadn’t tried.

With my arm lifted to cut through the webs, I walked slowly around his desk. I dusted off the seat of his chair and settled there, feeling stiff at first, but slowly relaxing into the well-worn cushion.

Dad's accounting book lay in the center of the blotter like it always had, and if I opened it, I was sure I'd find his neat rows of numbers. I did everything online, but Dad had scorned computers, saying the written word was the only thing worth studying.

The book he must've been reading the last time he was here lay on top of the accounting ledger, and I lifted it, studying the spine.

Candy For My Orc Boss? My snort rang out. Dad loved all genres, even romance, but orcs? Who would've thought?

With a shake of my head and a sad smile, I started to lay it back on the ledger. I'd return here next week and clean everything out. Make the office my own. Maybe then I could reconcile the last of this in my mind.

A scrap of paper fell out of the book. His bookmark? No, it was folded, and a hint of writing shone through.

I opened it, and my heart pinched tight. He'd left me a letter . . .

Dear Adeline,

I imagine you're finding this note as you clean out my office either to claim the room as your own or to sell the whole damn park. I wouldn't blame you if you did the latter, though I'd rather picture you sitting here adding new numbers to the ledger.

Funny how when life catches up to you, you can put things into perspective.

The doctor says my days are numbered. I have maybe a week left. I told him I don't want to take their medicine any longer. My heart failed when your mother died. It's just taken this lump in my chest a while to catch up.

It's only now that I can finally see all the mistakes I made with you. I was wrong to treat you the way I did, and all I can say is I'm sorry. I wallowed in my grief, and whenever I saw you, I saw your mother. So I pushed you away when I should've held you tight.

Then you left, and that only made me angry. I wallowed in that emotion, too, longer than I should have. By the time I realized I'd made a colossal mistake, you'd sent your last card.

Maybe that would've been the time to reach out, to try to rebuild the bridge between us, but you were happy in the city. You were happy living without me. How could I drag the past back into the present and wreck the

joy you'd finally found?

*I can't ask for forgiveness, but I hope you can find peace. Please know I love you. I imagine my last thoughts will be for your mother—
—and for you, my precious daughter.*

Dad.

My guttural cry rang out in the small room.

I jerked the letter forward, and it landed on top of the book.

Cupping my face, I sobbed.

CHAPTER 38

REXIN

We rode into town together, parking in front of the courthouse. Our lawyer met us there, and we went inside, taking seats to wait until it was time for the case.

Adeline shared the letter her dad left her, and I held her, Brear patting her back and murmuring how much he loved her. If nothing else, the letter told me to live for now or I'd live with regret.

After a short break, the court resumed.

With a sniff, Adeline carefully placed the letter in her pocket. Her watery smile told me she was putting aside the past to focus on the present.

The judge entered the courtroom from a room behind the bench, her robes billowing around her like a dusky cloud. She took a seat behind the bench, her eyes surveying the room with a stern and thoughtful gaze. A hush fell over the court, and the clerk called our case.

With a nod to the clerk, the judge's voice cut through the room like lightning, commanding attention. "This case has been brought before me today to resolve the issue of the custody of a minor child, Brear Tavalog. Before we begin, I'd like to recognize the parties involved in this case."

The judge paused and looked at each of us in turn. I sat with Brear and Adeline on either side of me, and across the row, Joyce and Greg held hands. Joyce shot me a look I couldn't define, though it could contain sympathy. Did she know something I didn't?

Frankly, no matter who "won" today, we'd all lose.

"On the plaintiff's side, we have Mrs. and Mr. Ridgefield, the deceased mother's parents, and on the defendant's side, we have Mr. Tavalog, the boy's father." The judge nodded in acknowledgement of each of us in turn.

She sighed before continuing. “We’re aware that the mother of the child passed away years ago and that the child was abandoned at the entrance of the passage leading to the orc kingdom.”

“We didn’t do it,” Joyce said. “Her friend took him and left him there. She said—”

“Shhh,” Greg said, tapping Joyce’s hand.

The judge frowned. “She said what?”

“We have to be honest, Greg.” Joyce shot me a sad look. “We and our daughter did not always get along, although we were making headway in repairing our relationship when she discovered she was pregnant. She was nearly eighteen.” She sniffed and wiped her eyes. “She lived with a friend, not us. Emancipated adult, they call it.”

“Please, Joyce,” Greg groaned. “Stop.”

She shook her head. “Since honesty is the most important thing to me, I need to say that before she delivered Brear, Paige told me . . .” She pinched her eyes shut, then opened them again. “She cared for you, Rexin. She said you were a good person. And she asked her friend to take Brear to you if something should ever happen to her.”

I gaped at her. They’d specifically told me Paige requested they raise Brear.

“You must understand. Back then, no one knew orcs existed! When she told us she’d met up with one, we thought she was out of her mind. We . . . I won’t forgive myself for suggesting she should be committed. If I could take that back, at least I’d know my daughter died knowing I loved her.”

Orc genes dominated. I could only imagine how surprised the doctor was when Paige delivered Brear.

“Well,” the judge said, her eyes wide. “Please know I must take your statements into consideration.”

Joyce nodded.

“Do you need a moment to compose yourself?”

“No, your honor.”

“Alright, then.” The judge made a note on paper. “To continue. The grandparents are seeking custody of the boy. However, the father has been raising Brear since his mother's passing and thus my decision today must take into consideration the current living situation of the minor child.” She paused and glanced over to Brear, who squirmed in his seat, his face a mask of apprehension and uncertainty.

Adeline squeezed my hand. We hadn't expected Joyce's comments. How might they impact the case?

"I'd like to hear from each of you first," the judge said. "Please, Mr. Tavalog, you may begin."

I stood and cleared my throat. "Your Honor, as Brear's father, I've worked hard to make sure he has a stable and loving home. I raised him in the orc kingdom until a year and a half ago when we moved to the surface. He'd learned about orc culture from me, my sisters, and my older brother, but I felt Brear also needed to live among his mother's people to learn about her culture. My intention is to remain here on the surface, to help him grow into the best male he can be. Thus, I believe I'm the best person to provide for his needs."

The judge nodded thoughtfully before turning her attention to Joyce and Greg. "Mr. and Mrs. Ridgefield, would either or both of you like to share your perspective of the situation?"

Greg shook his head.

Joyce stood with tears in her eyes and a quavering voice. "Your Honor, my husband and I were devastated by the loss of our daughter. That was compounded by the loss of her child who we'd only met once. He was gone, and her friend wouldn't tell us where she'd taken him. I spoke with the police, but they didn't believe me. Our daughter gave birth to Brear in their apartment, I believe fearing how a doctor might react to a half-orc child. So there was no official record that he even existed. Paige was the light of our lives, and we miss her more than words can express. We understand the bond Brear has formed with his father, and we would never seek to disrupt that. However, we feel that, as Brear's grandparents, we can provide him with the emotional support he needs." She took Greg's hand. "Your Honor, we feel it is in Brear's best interest to live with us."

The judge exhaled deeply and addressed the court. "I appreciate the perspectives that have been shared here today. Before I make my decision, I'd like to speak with Brear in private. The court will take a recess while we're out of the room."

She motioned for Brear to join her, and they stepped out of the courtroom, leaving us sitting in tense silence.

"It's going to be okay," Adeline said, leaning into my side. She squeezed my hand. "I'm with you no matter what."

I kissed her, so grateful I had her in my life.

Seconds ticked by in agony until the judge and Brear reappeared. Brear joined us again.

The judge cleared her throat and addressed the court. "I've spoken to Brear, and I've taken into consideration all that has been said here today. I've reached a decision."

I closed my eyes and braced myself.

"I believe that Brear should remain with his father."

Joyce sobbed, and Greg sniffed as the judge continued to speak.

"Brear's father has done an admirable job of providing for his son in the absence of the child's mother, and I'm confident he'll continue to do so. Furthermore, I believe that Brear will be better able to thrive by remaining in his current living situation."

She addressed Joyce and Greg. "I understand that you're grieving and that you wish to be a part of Brear's life. I'm granting you visitation rights, and I do hope that you'll continue to develop a positive relationship with your grandson." She banged her gavel. "This court is adjourned."

"Congratulations," my lawyer said, rising. At my nod, she left the courthouse.

I sagged against the wooden bench, tension leaving my body.

Joyce pressed her face into Greg's chest.

With joy in my heart, I turned to Adeline and Brear and gathered them close.

Brear broke away and leaped to his feet. He rushed to the bench and gave the judge a hug. Turning, he went to his grandparents.

"We love you," Joyce told him. Her gaze met mine. "We'll do our best to show you a fun time when you visit us."

Brear hugged them both, then sat on the bench holding Joyce's hand. He shot me a happy grin. He never knew his mother. I was grateful he could have both me and his grandparents in his life.

"Congratulations," Adeline said, snuggling into my side. I lifted her onto my lap and held her. She wiggled around until she faced me. "I love you."

I gave her a quick kiss. "I love you."

Was now the right time?

Why not?

I pulled the box from my pocket and held it out to her. "Will you be my forever mate?"

"I already am," she said with a grin. "For a lifetime, so don't think about

backing out now.”

“Never,” I vowed. I nudged the box closer.

She opened it, gasping when she saw the contents. “It’s beautiful.”

“Orcs don’t get engaged, but humans do. This is a combination of both.”

Removing the simple gold band with diamonds and opals mounted across the top, she held it out to me. “Will you put it on my finger?”

With my heart on fire with love for her, I did so. We kissed again. Actually, we kept on kissing until Brear came over and tapped on my shoulder. Her shoulder. Finally nudging mine.

We broke apart, grinning at each other.

“Dad. Adeline.” Brear rolled his eyes. “Can you two please stop? Jeez. Kisses are so disgusting.”

“You might change your mind about that one day,” Adeline said, pressing her forehead into my chest.

Brear grunted. “Doubt it.”

“Give it a few years,” I said.

Turning, Adeline nudged Brear’s shoulder. “I’m going to remind you of this when you’re eighteen.” She shook her finger at him. “No kissing until you’re *at least* eighteen, by the way. Maybe twenty.”

Brear rolled his eyes again. “Can I go to dinner with Grammie Joyce and Grampie Greg? They’re feeling kinda sad.”

“Of course.” I nodded to Joyce, who gave me a watery smile. “Have fun, Brear.”

He raced over to join them again.

As they left, I pulled Adeline close. “What would you say if I threw you over my shoulder and raced into the woods?” The woods were quite a ways from here, but I’d reach there faster than she could imagine.

Adeline grinned. “I’d say you’d better do it ASAP.”

CHAPTER 39

EPILOGUE I

ADELINE

Two Weeks Later

We stood in the gorgeous gardens at the top of the hill in the center of the park. An arch covered with flowers had been placed in the center of the tiny grove in the middle of the small forest.

“Do you, Adeline, take Rexin to be your lawfully wedded mate, plus Brear as your lawfully joined stepson?” the judge who’d recently decided our fate said with a soft smile.

She’d agreed to marry us in the human way.

In my heart, he and I were already mated, and that was all we needed, but Rexin wanted to continue sharing human *and* orc traditions with Brear. That included our marriage.

I shot Rexin and Brear standing next to him a smile. “I do.”

“Do you, Rexin, take Adeline to be your lawfully wedded mate?”

He squeezed my hand. “I do.”

“And . . .” The judge drew out the word. “Do you, Brear, take Adeline to be your lawfully appointed stepmother?”

“Yup, yup, I do,” Brear squeaked.

I shot him a grin.

“Then I now pronounce you husband and wife.” She gave us both a benevolent smile. “Please kiss to seal your vows.”

While Brear watched us with excitement, Rexin swept me up and gave

me a long, lingering kiss.

I clung to his shoulders, and when I lifted my head, I swore I saw that feral gleam in his eyes that sparked an answering need within me.

Maybe we'd ditch the birth control the next time he came into heat . . .

CHAPTER 40

SECOND EPILOGUE

ADELINE

Late August

Finally, the day we'd anticipated for over a month was here.

In less than ten minutes, we'd sweep open the gates to Quirky Kingdom and let kids and adults stream inside.

"The parking lot's full," I told Rexin in a jittery voice. We stood in the shade just inside the gate with big cups of iced coffee in our hands. Brear waited nearby at one of the ticket offices, eager to "supervise" our new staff.

I'd moved in with Rexin while we fixed up my dad's place to live in together as a family. We were taking our time. I wanted to hold onto some of what my parents enjoyed while bringing in new. We expected we'd move in by the holidays.

"I think we've emptied the town and all the ones around it." Rexin tugged me into his arms. We watched as cars lined up on the road and more guests stood in the queue to buy tickets. We'd opened online advanced sales to give us an idea of how many guests might come, but it appeared we'd double that number. And on our first day.

"It's going to be amazing. My . . ." I closed my eyes for a second, not surprised to feel them stinging with tears. After swallowing back the lump in my throat, I opened them again. "My mom *and* my dad would be so proud of me."

"They would be," he said. "Orcs don't have much centralized religion,

but we believe the spirits of those who came before us linger for a time after they pass. They watch over us until they're sure we're able to go on without them."

"Do you think my dad's watching?"

"I sense he is. And he's smiling. He's happy with what you've done with the park and your life."

All this time, I thought I was fixing it up to preserve my mom's memory. But each time I worked on a ride or weeded a flowerbed, I also thought of my dad. He rejected me, but I was confident that through it all, he'd still loved me.

I'd found peace with him and that was all I'd ever needed.

Rexin turned me in his arms. After placing our iced coffees on a tree stump, he held me, kissing the top of my head.

I sucked in his warmth, his comfort. This guy could love me like a feral beast, but he was also very gentle. He cared for me like no other, and I was grateful he'd come into my life.

"It's okay to feel sad at a time like this." His voice came out rich and rumbling. "You've worked hard, and your hopes have risen all the way to the stars. But you know what?"

Sniffing back my tears, I shook my head.

"The magic you've created here is just beginning." He kissed my cheek tenderly. "Let's go enjoy the park, shall we?"

"What are you two doing hiding in the shade?" Cruger said, striding over to join us. Rexin's older brother and younger sisters—plus their mates and orclings—had showed up in town two days ago, eager to attend the grand opening of Quirky Kingdom. His sisters were sweet, as were their mates, and thankfully, his sisters had decided not to give me the infamous orc mating tests so common in orc culture.

His brother was quiet, so I didn't quite know what he thought about his younger brother mating with a human. But he hadn't given me the impression he disapproved, and that was all that mattered.

"The surface is amazing," he said, speaking more words at one time than he had since he arrived. "I still can't believe the color of the sky and vegetation."

Rexin leaned forward and playfully nudged his brother's shoulder. "I don't need to be the only Tavalog living among humans. Or mating with one, for that matter."

Cruger frowned, his head tilting. "I hadn't thought of moving here."

Their sisters loved visiting, but they'd made it clear they enjoyed living within the orc kingdom. They'd leave in a few days, though they'd promised to come to the surface again.

"You don't need to decide right now," Rexin said.

"You're right." Cruger's expression cleared, and he shot me a smile that made me see he *did* approve of me. And when his grin widened, his dark eyes sparkled. Damn, he was as hot as Rexin. "I have plenty of time to think about it."

Rexin nodded wisely. "Exactly."

Brearr waved his arm in the air, and I checked the time. Eeek!

"We need to open the doors, mate." Rexin squeezed my hand. "Ready?"

"So much." I shot Cruger a grin, and he actually blushed. Ha. I couldn't wait to see how things went for him if he decided to move to town.

As we approached the gates, the waiting crowd roared with excitement.

Brearr also waited, his feet fidgeting on the pavement.

His grandparents had left, but they'd be back in a few weeks to take Brearr on a camping adventure. He couldn't wait.

And while I'd miss him fiercely, Rexin and I were looking forward to some alone time. We'd delayed our honeymoon until January, when the park would be closed, and we were talking about going to Mexico. I couldn't imagine what he'd think about the beach and ocean.

"Can I open the gate?" Brearr asked.

"I believe you should do the honors," I said with a grin. "On three?"

"Yay." He rushed over to the wide double doors, and one of our staff joined him to handle the second panel.

"One," I said.

"Two," Rexin bellowed.

Brearr jumped around. "Three!" He undid the inner lock and latched onto the panel, hauling it open and securing it to the inside of the fence.

Orcs and humans of all ages streamed in through the opening, their faces alight with anticipation.

Some kids raced for the elephant coaches, others, the purple turtle ride. Brearr and Cruger ran down the path together, jostling each other and shouting about who'd reach the orange alligator cups and saucers ride first. Cruger had volunteered to keep an eye on Brearr today so me and Rexin could manage any problems that might come up on our opening day.

“I think we should ride the Ferris wheel, don’t you?” Rexin said by my ear. His arms were wrapped around me, and he held me close.

“Yup.” Taking his hand, I raced up the hill, him laughing as he paced beside me.

The orc staff member running the ride smiled when we appeared. We scooted over to the first open orange and black flower car and climbed inside.

Instead of sitting beside my mate, I climbed onto his lap, facing him.

Cheery music erupted as the Ferris wheel started turning, and we slowly made our way up into the sky.

While it was awesome to gaze around the park, taking in how gorgeous it looked now that it had been restored, my eyes were only for Rexin.

I cupped his shoulders and snuggled into his chest.

“Every beat of my heart belongs to you,” I whispered.

He kissed me deeply. “There’s an old orc saying about true mates and the love they share. I think it applies to us.” His voice came out husky. He swallowed hard and cupped my face, our gazes locking together. “When true love is found, heart flames burst free without ending. The couple’s love ignites the night, and their flames shoot in all directions, setting the world ablaze with beauty. That’s how I feel about us, Adeline.”

We kissed as the ride slowly soared back up into the sky.

I hope you enjoyed Adeline & Rexin’s story!
If you haven’t read *Orc-us Pocus* or *Orcishly Ever After*,
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ava Ross is a two-time *USA Today* Bestselling author who has written numerous titles, all of them featuring sweet and steamy romance. She fell for men with unusual features when she first watched *Star Wars*, where alien creatures have gone mainstream. She lives in New England with her husband (who is sadly not an alien, though he is still cute in his own way), her kids, and a few assorted pets.

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Love at First Orc

Monster Mate Hunt

Third Galaxy on the Left

You can find my books on [Amazon](#).

ORC-US POCUS

An orc science teacher is determined to give me a lesson in chemical reactions.

I've crushed on my fellow high school teacher, Thraal, since we first met up in the staff lounge. He's a big, brawny orc, and when he scowls at me through his thick glasses, I pretty much ignite. Sadly, he doesn't realize I exist.

When we're trapped inside the janitor's closet during a Halloween dance, I take the opportunity to show him I'm special. A few spontaneous kisses suggest he might like me too.

Until we're rescued, and he goes back to ignoring me. Well, other than when we get stuck beneath the bleachers or when we're locked inside the field hockey supply shed overnight.

Can I find true love with a geeky orc science teacher?

Orc-us Pocus is a spicy monster romcom and Book 1 in the Love at First Orc Series. Each book is standalone but expect cameos.

Expect size difference, plenty of spice, falling for a co-worker, an awkward, geeky, glasses-wearing orc who loves science and has a creative tongue, laugh out loud moments, fated mates and heat, and a happy ever after.

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CHAPTER I

AUTUMN

I stood along the wall in the high school gym, doing my best to chaperone the Halloween dance, but mostly checking out the muscular ass of our high school science teacher, Thraal.

A few years ago, orc males marched out of a previously unknown tunnel on the side of a huge mountain and announced they were seeking mates.

Humans said, okay, sure, we'll give it a try. Treaties were formed, and they now lived among us.

Thraal took a job as the high school's science teacher and started after Labor Day.

"He's so cute," I sighed to my best friend and fellow teacher, Kassia.

Kassia stabbed her finger toward two kids on the dance floor. "Hey, no making out. Megan? Sam? Stop it!" She huffed, sending strands of her strawberry blonde hair shooting up from her forehead. She turned to me. "*Who's* so cute? Because there are a couple of options."

She and I had shared a room in college, graduating with our education degrees seven years ago, and because we were besties, we'd applied to the same school district. Thankfully, Baneroot Academy hired us both.

Kassia taught social studies and world government classes, and I taught math, plus oversaw the Math Club.

"Thraal," I breathed. Per usual, he had a flock of groupies clustered around him, a mix of single teachers and a few students. Also, per usual, he didn't appear to notice their attention. Unfailingly polite and formal (except for his outfit tonight), he appeared oblivious to everyone around him. His steely black eyes scrutinized the room through his Clark Kent glasses.

He was the sweetest guy, completely opposite from my controlling ex.

“You’ve got it bad,” Kassia said.

“Yeah,” I said. “Would it be crass to go over and ask him if he’s dressed in ceremonial clothing or if the sorta Viking outfit is a costume?”

“Do it,” Kassia said, punctuating her words with a nudge of her elbow into my side. She’d dressed as a fairy, complete with sheer wings and a glittery ballerina skirt and bodysuit, and frankly, she looked amazing. Why Jarum, an orc she was crushing on, didn’t notice was beyond me.

“I don’t know if I dare,” I said with a cringe.

“Do it!”

Her low laughter followed me as I started forward, the tulle skirt of my black witch skirt swishing across my fishnet stockings, trying to hold my head steady so my tall, pointed black hat wouldn’t slide off my head.

I turned back and scurried over to her, my heels clicking on the wooden gym floor.

“What should I say?” I asked, my voice high pitched and thready.

“Start with hello?” Her gaze locked on Jarum, the school’s orc Phys Ed teacher.

“Ya think?” I said with a wry twist of my lips. “It’s what comes after hello that I seem to have a problem with.”

“You should’ve stomped over to Wanda and hip-checked her away from him at lunch the other day. Then you’d be past hello already.”

I’d started toward him, determined to sit with him while we ate. Talk with him. Adore him from up close. Only to have another teacher claim his attention with a sly smirk sent my way.

“If I fumble my words, he’s going to think I’ve got a problem with social skills,” I said. “Give me some tips, oh sophisticated one.”

“If I had great social skills, I’d be chatting up Jarum right now.”

“Let’s make a pact,” I said. “I’ll go over to Thraal and offer to cast a spell on him.” I lifted my witchy wand to punctuate my words. “And you go ask Jarum to dance.”

“We’re chaperoning. We’re not allowed to dance.”

“You can help him hold up the wall.” He was leaning just like her.

“Alright, it’s a deal,” she said, nudging me toward Thraal. “Go on. He won’t hurt you.”

Unlike my controlling ex who’d thankfully had moved to a new town and was leaving me alone.

As I skittered along the outside of the big open gym, lights ricocheted off

the disco balls hanging from the rafters, and orange and black streamers fluttered in the sweltering air. The summer heat had held for weeks, and we were all praying for a break. Thunder clouds rumbled on the horizon, but so far, the promise of a heavy rain—and cooler air—hadn't arrived.

Because I knew I'd chicken out if I thought too hard about it, I half-ran over to Thraal. Stopping a few feet away, I swallowed to hold back my sigh of adoration.

The coarse fabric of his dark blue vest shifted, giving me peeks of his medium-green skin. His abs went on for miles, a rugged terrain I'd kill to explore. The intricate gold embroidery on the front of his vest glowed and the fur trim gave his costume a claim-me-now warrior feel.

A leather belt encircled his waist, adorned with silver stars and strapped with both a blunted silver sword and short blade. He wore fur boots and a metal helmet, with the thick golden horns jutting out at his temples.

"Just carry me away and ravish me now," I whispered, my fingers twitching.

His gaze sought mine. Shit, had he heard me? From the way his eyes smoldered as they traveled down my curvy frame, I suspected he had.

Before I could spin and hide my overheated face, he stomped toward me.

"You're in charge of clean-up, aren't you?" he asked in a neutral voice.

So much for thinking he might be eager to ravish me.

"Yeah, why?" I asked.

"Someone spilled punch all over the floor."

"We could call the janitor."

He scowled, never a good sign. "She's not on call, which means you, assigned clean-up, will have to take care of this."

"Okay. I'll get a mop. And a bucket. Water. And anything else I can find in the janitor's closet."

"I'll go with you."

I twisted my lips. "Do you think I'm going to ignore this?"

"I didn't say that."

"No, but you implied it."

He frowned, creating creases on his heavy orc brow. "I'm going with you because you're a tiny human."

"I'm tougher than I look." I lifted my arm and made a fist, but I lost some kick while holding a witch's wand.

Grunting, he crossed his arms over his sizeable chest. "Do you want my

help or don't you?"

"I'd be foolish to turn down such a delightful offer."

He grunted again.

"This way." I passed him, aiming for the other side of the gym. There were janitorial closets all over the high school, but the closest one would be inside the locker room.

He followed me to the door and inside, where we passed rows of lockers and approached the door to the closet in the back.

"Inside here," I said, holding up the master key I was given by the principal this afternoon—with a warning not to lose it.

I unlocked the door and stepped inside the tiny room.

Thraal followed, the door shutting behind him.

Three steps took me to the sink where the janitor had left a bucket. Mops and various housecleaning tools hung from hooks on both walls. I turned on the water, added a few squirts of a solution sitting on a shelf, and grabbed a mop, plopping the rag head inside the foaming water.

Thraal hovered behind me. If I stepped backward, I'd brush against him. The thought of pressing myself against his muscular frame made me close my eyes. I sunk into the dream where I rubbed my butt against his rising cock, his arms eagerly wrapping around me. His hands cupped my breasts and—

"Why are you moaning as if you're wounded?" he asked, his voice low and raspy in my ear. Reaching around me, he turned off the water.

While I was lost in Thraal-land, the bucket had filled. Water sloshed over the lip.

"You're not paying attention," he said in a gruff, grumbly voice.

"Are you always this impatient?" The words popped out of me.

He just chuckled, the husky sound tickling down my spine. "What makes you think I am?"

I turned to face him, my boobs brushing against his upper abs. He was so much taller than me. My five-six to his seven-feet put my lips at nipple height.

His abs twitched, and a vein throbbed in his chiseled temple. Tusks jutted from his lower jawline, and from the moment I met him, I'd wondered what it would be like to kiss his full, dark green lips, to run my tongue along his tusks. I'd grasp his horns and hold on while he . . .

He grunted. "Why do you smell aroused?"

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