

L EVELAND



LASSOS AND LACE

MONSTER
IN MY BED #4

LASSOS
AND LACE

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DEAR MONSTERFUCKERS,

THIS BOOK IS FOR everyone who has wished for a jackalope sugar daddy, which is probably like two people on the planet, but I see you, and I get it. This book is for you, and me because I want one too.

Lassos and Lace contains some triggering conversations about conversion therapy, abuse by a former romantic partner, homophobia, childhood bullying, limb loss, and war-related PTSD. The dragons in this book do not pass the Harkness test, and therefore, are not fuckable. But they are cute and make great friends. Absolutely no dragons die in the book, although there is a reference to having to put one down due to animal abuse. There is a happy ending, even for the dragons. I promise.

Please note that instances where Robert is referred to using she/her pronouns while in drag are intentional and not a typo.

This book contains explicit scenes and is intended for audiences 18+.

Trigger warnings:

Homophobic parent

Mentions of physical abuse by a former romantic partner

Mentions of conversion therapy

Double and triple amputee characters

War-related PTSD

Flashbacks of limb loss

Childhood bullying

Gun violence

Mentions of animal (dragon) abuse

Non-human genitalia

THE SERIES SO FAR:

*THIS NOVEL IS A standalone monster romance, but it is also part of the Monsters in my Bed series. As the fourth book in the series, it references many events that took place in previous books. It is highly recommended that you read the previous books. However, in case you haven't read it and want additional context, below is a summary of the events that take place in the first 3 books. Obviously, **beware of spoilers ahead.***

When Robert Smith was eighteen, he left his job working as a hot dog salesman in a sports stadium to join the Army. While struggling through Basic Training, he became close friends with Christopher Kringle and Charlie "Chappie" Cavallero. He also earned the nickname "Hotdog" due to his past employment.

While deployed in Iraq, Hotdog's convoy drove over an IED and his legs were severely injured in the resulting explosion, leading to double below the knee amputations.

After his discharge from the military, Hotdog moved to northern Michigan where he rented a small, handicap

accessible house with his roommate and former army buddy, Charlie. As time went on, however, Hotdog became increasingly withdrawn, preferring to remain in his home rather than venture out and endure people's stares. He found his prosthetics annoying and difficult to wear, and preferred to stay in his wheelchair, especially since he rarely left the house.

Roughly eight months ago, Hotdog stopped leaving home altogether and endured a period of agoraphobia. His friends Charlie, Chris, and Axel helped him through this tough time in his life, and he assisted them from a distance as both Charlie and Chris found and fell in love with their monster mates.

While staying with Hotdog, Charlie's mate, a four-armed winged monster named Cupid, learned that Hotdog enjoyed dressing in drag, as it helped him with his anxiety. While in drag, he was able to leave the house and assist Cupid in Charlie's rescue from a priest, who had stolen Cupid's Halo, and was holding Charlie captive. In the aftermath of Charlie's rescue, Cupid decided he would resign his position working for his empress to be with Charlie, which would require him to travel through the tear between the human and monster worlds.

After hearing that there would be real dragons present near the tear, Hotdog asked to accompany Charlie and Cupid as far as the ranch just outside the tear. The plan was for Hotdog to stay at the ranch and wait for Charlie and Cupid to return from the other side of the tear, which Cupid claims should only take about a week.

Rumor has it that Jackalope Ranch is run by a rather sour, human-hating jaqeroi monster named Hopper Meadows, but Hotdog is sure he can handle the grumpy old ranch hand for a week...

PLAYLIST

Hopper's Love Songs

Hurt—Johnny Cash

Crazy—Patsy Kline

Wonderful Tonight—Eric Clapton

Shallow—Lady Gaga and Bradley Cooper

Wicked Game—Chris Isaak

Wonderwall—Oasis

Hotdog's Playlist

Boy with Luv—BTS (Featuring Halsey)

Just Dance—Lady Gaga

Rude Boy—Rihanna

Work Bitch—Britney Spears

Queen—Todrick Hall

Old Town Road—Lil Nas X

Tank! (Cowboy Bebop opening)—Seatbelts

ONE

ROBERT

“I COULD BE A vegetarian if it weren’t for dick.” I shoved the last two greasy French fries in my mouth.

The priest next to me stared at the side of my head in offended silence. His fingers twitched around the cardboard container of onion rings he’d barely touched. My wheelchair rattled against the straps holding it in place and I winced. If the road got any rougher, we might have to stop just to tighten up the straps so I didn’t go rolling around.

“Do you think that counts?” asked my roommate, Charlie, from the driver’s seat.

I licked the salt from my fingers and tossed the cardboard container into the bag on the floor. “Of course it counts. It’s meat, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but technically, you’re not swallowing it,” Charlie argued.

I snorted. “I don’t know how *you* do it, but I always swallow. It’s just polite.”

Charlie's himbo angel boyfriend—aptly named Cupid—shifted in his seat, his big white wings moving aside to let me see the miles and miles of empty road ahead. “Actually, he has a point. Vegetarians don't consume animal products, as I understand it. Humans are animals, and technically speaking, cum is a product of the human body. Therefore, any ejaculate produced is an animal product, and thus non-vegetarian.”

“I can't believe I'm listening to this,” muttered the priest next to me, rubbing his temples.

We ignored him, just like we'd been doing for the last twelve hundred miles. The only reason he was with us was because he was supposed to heal Cupid's pet dragon when we got to where we were going. After the shit he pulled, he was lucky that was all Cupid wanted from him.

Charlie frowned and looked over at his boyfriend. “Yeah, but cum doesn't count as food, does it?”

Cupid shrugged.

“So now you're telling me vegetarians can't swallow?” he asked, aghast. He shook his head. “Ay, I'm glad you're not a vegetarian, Cupid.”

“For goodness' sake!” Father Lott insisted loudly, lowering his hands from rubbing his bald head. “How is this conversation appropriate in any context?”

“I'm just saying.” I pointed to his onion rings. “Are you going to eat those?”

He huffed and shoved them at me with a mumbled, “Here. I’ve lost my appetite.”

Finally, my evil plan to steal onion rings from the priest paid off. The funny thing was, I didn’t really even want them. I was just bored out of my mind. We’d been on the road for days, driving from Michigan to Wyoming, all so Charlie and Cupid could go through some magic portal and heal angel boy’s dragon pet. I hadn’t been interested in the road trip, not until I heard there’d be dragons. After spending two days in the back of my van next to Father Sourpuss, I was starting to think I’d made a huge mistake. We’d passed into Wyoming a few hours ago, and ever since then, my legs had been itching to get the hell out of that chair and into a hot bath.

Charlie had promised I’d get to see a dragon. It’d all be worth it if that were true. Call me a nerd, but I had a thing for dragons. Not a sexual thing. I just thought they were awesome. I used to collect figures of them when I was a kid. At least, until my sixteenth birthday. That was when my father decided it was time for me to be a man. I came home from school one day and he’d thrown away every last one.

Speaking of the old man... I got out my phone and scrolled through the text conversation from earlier in the day, frowning.

Sperm Donor: *Robert, after reviewing last month’s credit expenses, your mother and I have decided we will no longer support your lifestyle.*

It's time for you to come home and make something of yourself. Call us.

I squeezed the phone in my fist, staring at the words on the screen. It wasn't the first time they'd cut me off. After a few days, I could usually get Mom to relent and soften him up, but she wasn't answering my texts. I'd probably crossed a line, letting Cupid use their credit card to buy a butt plug and a baker's dozen of rose bouquets for Charlie, but dammit, Charlie deserved it. I'd bought worse with their money. Why had that set them off? Wasn't like they weren't loaded.

My family was old money, having made their fortune generations ago investing in the railroad industry. I mean, they weren't Vanderbilts, but they had tea with them. I'd grown up being dragged to endless social functions with the expectation that I'd go into a respectable industry like politics or banking.

Instead, I left home the day I turned eighteen and took a job selling hot dogs at Ford Field for a year before I joined the army. Getting my legs blown off and an early discharge was honestly one of the best things that'd ever happened to me. Don't get me wrong. It sucked—a lot. But I was a poor fit for the army. I've never been much for following orders. I only signed up for the free eye candy. Two good legs were a small price to pay to fill the spank bank for a decade or two.

I mean, not really... But, hey, silver lining, right?

The van suddenly screeched to a stop and my chair jerked forward. Father Lott's arm shot out in front of me as if he

needed to shield me.

For a minute, I was fifteen again and sitting in the front seat of my dad's car in my school uniform, sweating after playing *Born This Way* for my dad. The steering wheel creaked as he tightened his grip as if he were trying to choke the life out of his Lexus. "Are you trying to embarrass this family, Robert?"

"Sorry." Charlie's apology pulled me back into the present. "Almost didn't see it in time."

I shook my head and leaned to the side, trying to glimpse the reason we'd come to a screeching halt. There was a stoplight. Weird. We'd been driving along the highway for hours, and even when we rolled through the few small towns along the way, they hadn't had stoplights.

Cupid turned his head, his long silver hair shifting where it fell down his back. "We've reached Eden already? Must have made better time than expected."

I frowned and brought up my GPS app, but couldn't get a signal and had to use the offline version. "I don't see any town called Eden on the map."

"You won't," Cupid said. "This town is a closely guarded secret. Anyone who takes a wrong turn off the highway and is unlucky enough to make it this far is quickly sent on their way. There's nothing here that would interest humans, despite the pleasant façade."

The light changed, and we started moving forward, albeit at a slower pace. I turned my head, gawking at a town that

looked untouched by time. Tall buildings with wooden rails and square tops lined either side of the dusty street. There were horse hitching posts outside of every doorway, and people on horseback everywhere, all giving us funny looks as we crawled by. There were only a handful of cars sitting along the side of the road, looking disused and abused. We passed a hardware and feed store, and an old-fashioned general store. People walked by in their worn blue jeans, boots, and ten-gallon hats. A tumbleweed rolled by, racing us to the next crossroads.

It was like we'd accidentally driven onto the set of an old spaghetti western. I was half expecting two cowboys to step into the street for a quickdraw duel.

"Pull over here," Cupid instructed, and pointed toward the saloon.

"You sure?" Charlie said with a worried frown.

Cupid nodded. "We're supposed to meet Hopper in there."

Normally, I'd have been excited about meeting another monster, but everyone had warned me that Hopper was a mean son of a bitch with a chip on his shoulder the size of Texas. While Cupid and Charlie went through the tear between our world and the monster world, I was supposed to stay at Hopper's ranch and wait for them to come back. Meanwhile, Father Lott had arranged transportation back to Michigan by plane. If I hadn't been broke thanks to being cut off, and so damn interested in seeing the dragons, I might've done the same.

Charlie parked the van and reached to flip the switch that would lower the wheelchair lift.

“Wait,” I called.

Everyone in the van turned to look at me. My face colored slightly, but I stared past them at the yawning mouth of the saloon, nerves half choking me. The last thing I wanted was for this asshole to look at me and see an invalid and think he was going to have to look after me. I could take care of myself just fine. If I rolled in there in a wheelchair, though...

I swallowed and met Charlie’s eyes. “Would you mind waiting for me to get my prosthetics on? I think... I think I’d rather walk.”

Charlie’s forehead wrinkled with concern. “You sure?”

I nodded. I’d be sore when I took them off later, but it was a small price to pay to guarantee he’d see me and not the chair.

“I’ll get your legs,” Cupid said cheerfully, and opened his door.

Charlie gasped. “Cupid, you can’t. Your wings!”

Cupid paused and gave Charlie a curious look.

Charlie sighed. “People will see.”

Valid point. Most of the rest of the world didn’t have a clue monsters existed. They’d take one look at Cupid with his eye-covered wings and four arms and faint dead away. It’d be all over the internet by the end of the day, and then we’d never have a moment’s peace. That was if the government didn’t

come sniffing around to capture and torture us all... and not in the fun way, either.

But Cupid let out a carefree laugh. “Silly Charlie. Monsters make almost three quarters of the population here in Eden. Everyone else is in the know.”

I blinked quickly. “Seriously? So this is what? A monster haven?”

He nodded. “This is the last stop before the tear, so it’s where a lot of them wind up seeking refuge. That’s why it’s not on any maps.”

Cupid hopped out of the van and came around the back to open both doors. Father Lott opened the sliding door on the side and climbed out, stretching, while Charlie opened the lift door for me. Cupid passed him my legs while I slid on the liners. I tried not to feel like everyone was staring at me, but it was impossible because they *were* staring at me. I was holding everyone up, and I hated it.

But I knew I’d hate fighting with that stupid chair more.

I carefully slid the socket over my limb and secured the sleeve. Charlie offered me his hand. I didn’t like having to take it, but the ground was slightly uneven, and I wasn’t going to risk falling. That’d be even more embarrassing. I winced as my feet hit the ground, the change in pressure slightly uncomfortable. My first few steps were stiff, so I held onto Charlie’s hand until I found my stride.

Some country song was playing inside and drifted out to meet us. Cupid drew a few curious looks as he made his way toward the saloon. The man sweeping the walkway looked up as we approached, and I noticed for the first time that he had bright yellow reptilian eyes. If I looked closely, I could just barely make out the shimmer of scales under his skin. I pulled my eyes away as Cupid pushed through the batwing doors and followed him.

The bar was dark, and everything was made of wood. It wasn't quite a replica of the old west saloons since it had electricity and a jukebox, but it was pretty damn close. Round tables were scattered around in a seemingly random pattern, only a few of them occupied.

There was a pair of men at the bar having a hushed conversation. One of them turned away, and I couldn't help but give him a quick up and down because, damn, he was fine, especially from behind. Broad shoulders, good strong arms straining against the tight confines of a red flannel shirt, a nice, tight pair of distressed Levi's, and of course the boots and a sexy black Stetson. When he turned his head to the side, I noted the dark stubble covering his chin. Most of the rest of him was covered in a fine chestnut brown fur, but his hands were hidden in a pair of leather gloves. A pair of antlers poked up from in front of his Stetson.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about him, though, was the fluffy ball of white fur that stuck through the back of his jeans. Was that... Oh, God. It looked exactly like a cute little bunny tail.

The other guy with him wasn't near as fine. He was in a leather vest over a bright blue shirt and skinny as a rail and wore a trucker cap.

Trucker leaned in to say something to Stetson, who promptly turned and caught the skinny guy with a mean right hook. Trucker hat guy stumbled back a half step and shook his head while Stetson ignored him in favor of his drink. That should've been the end of it if Trucker was smart. Apparently, he wasn't because he took a swing at Stetson. The cheap shot connected hard enough to knock Stetson's hat off, revealing a pair of bunny ears. Stetson grabbed Trucker by his ugly shirt and pummeled him before letting him fall.

Holy Gunsmoke, I think I'm in love.

I didn't think my cock could get any harder until Stetson picked up his hat, sliding it casually back onto his head. The smooth movement and the way his shirt strained to contain all that raw sex appeal really did it for me. And the way he drew his thumb over his bloody lip like a certified sexy god of badassery? Oh, that was definitely going into the spank bank.

Stetson hesitated at the sight of us, his sky-blue eyes jumping to Cupid. "Well, I'll be damned. 'Bout time you showed up. I was startin' to think you were dead."

Cupid sprouted a smile and extended both hands. "Hopper! Still getting into trouble, I see."

My heart stuttered. Oh, shit. *This* was Hopper? Why didn't anyone tell me he was a *sexy* asshole? Screw riding a dragon.

Save a dragon, ride a cowboy was about to become my new motto.

Cupid and Hopper shook briefly before Hopper glanced back at us, lips twitching with irritation.

Cupid wrapped an arm around Charlie and yanked him close. “Hopper, this is my mate, Charlie.”

Charlie offered an embarrassed wave. “Howdy.”

“And this is Father Lott and—”

Hopper spat blood on the floor, interrupting him. “Which one am I stuck babysitting?”

“I don’t need a babysitter.” I crossed my arms.

“Of course it’s the loud one.” Hopper gave a dismissive snort.

Oh, sweetie. You have no idea just how loud I can be. “You need to work on your people skills, Brokeback Bunny.”

“Scuse me? What’d you call me?” He moved to take a step forward, but Cupid put a hand on his chest, holding him back.

“Robert is a friend,” Cupid said. “I can’t let you hurt him, Hopper.” He shot a warning look at me.

Hopper spat on the floor again and gave me a disdainful look up and down that said he wanted to chew me up and spit me out. “Not worth my time.”

My stupid cock decided that was apparently foreplay and twitched annoyingly. *Damn thing. Can’t take you anywhere, can I?*

“Listen here, Princess...” Hopper stepped past Cupid and poked a finger into my chest.

I recoiled. “*Princess?*”

“You’re going to spend the next week sitting around eating my food and sleepin’ under my roof rent free. I ain’t even allowed to make you work to earn your keep, so if the glass slipper fits—”

“Hopper...” Trucker hat groaned and pulled himself up off the floor, blood leaking from his nose. “I ain’t done talkin’ to you.”

“Hold that thought.” Hopper sighed and stood up, towering over me. He turned around. The leather gloves he wore creaked as his fingers flexed into fists. “We’re done, Leroy,” Hopper said firmly. “We were done last month when I gave you your severance. Now, if I see you down around the ranch again, I won’t bother callin’ the sheriff next time, and I’ll break more than just your nose. Got it?”

Leroy glared up at Hopper for a long moment before glancing over at us. “Fuck you.”

Hopper snorted. “I’d rather feed my dick to a khetch. Now, get the fuck out of my town.”

Leroy adjusted his bent trucker cap and slinked toward the door, breaking into a run the minute he was past us.

“Now, where were we?” Hopper asked, hands on his hips. He eyed me.

“Hopper...” Cupid said. “I know you don’t care for humans, and this is an inconvenience to you, but this is important to me. If it makes it easier for you, I’d be happy to compensate you for the cost upon our return.”

My face burned. I didn’t want to be a burden to anyone, least of all Cupid, and I wasn’t used to being in a position where I didn’t have the finances to look after myself. Otherwise, I’d have said fuck it and put myself up in a hotel for a week.

Hopper snorted again. “I’ll hold you to it, Dominion. Well then, suppose you’re eager to check on your friend. We better hit the trail if you want to be at the ranch before dark. My pick up’s out back. Try to keep up. I ain’t the type to go slow.”

He swaggered past and my eyes went straight to that fluffy bunny tail, watching it wiggle back and forth. I sucked in a breath through my teeth.

Oh, boy, was I in trouble. Why was it I had to want everything that was bad for me?

TWO

ROBERT

“IF YOU’D RATHER, WE could still drive back up toward Lucerne and get you a hotel, Hotdog,” Charlie offered.

I said nothing, keeping my arms crossed over my chest and glaring out the window. The way we were bouncing around, I hoped the struts on the van would hold. The old van wasn’t meant to take dirt roads at fifty-five, but Hopper’s pickup didn’t have any trouble.

My father’s voice echoed in my head. “I’ll never understand why you insist on being called by such an insulting nickname. You’re a Smith, not an Oscar Meyer.”

He didn’t understand that you don’t get to pick your nicknames in the military. The minute the guys found out I’d spent the previous summer working the stands, shouting “hotdog for sale” that became my name. I didn’t care. It was better than Robert Smith. Robert Smith was nobody. At least Hotdog meant something.

Charlie glanced at me in the rearview. “Are you sure you’ll be okay, Hotdog?”

“I’ll be fine,” I mumbled. “It’s only a week. Besides, it’s not the first time I’ve had to live with a domineering asshole.”

“Hopper isn’t really as bad as he seems,” Cupid promised, not for the first time. “Mostly, he keeps to himself.”

I finally peeled my attention away from the window. “What kind of monster did you say he was?”

“A jacqeroi,” Cupid said, flicking his wings slightly. “They’re native to a mountainous island, the same place dragons originate. They seem to have a special kinship with the animals. There aren’t many of them, and as far as I know, he’s the only one on this side.”

“Why does someone need to have a dragon ranch on this side of the tear?” I asked.

Cupid shrugged, his wings rising and falling. “I don’t know. I assume it has something to do with these mountains. Dragons eat rocks, and these have a unique composition that’s very different from the ranges on our side.”

I looked back out the window and up at the rocky peaks in the distance, listening to Cupid’s explanation in silence.

“They don’t stay on this side all the time,” he said. “In the late spring and early summer, they have to be driven back to the other side to mate. I’m not sure why they won’t do it here. You’d have to ask Hopper.”

Fat chance of that, I thought, settling sullenly further into my chair.

Regardless of my dick's insistence otherwise, I wasn't interested in getting involved with Hopper. He might've ticked all the right boxes aside from his toxic masculinity bullshit, but I was only going to be at Jackalope Ranch for a week. I could last a week without fucking anybody, especially if there were dragons.

My plan was to outline a new adventure for our gaming group. They'd really liked the campaign against Jasper Nox, the dark cleric. I'd packed my rule books and all my notes. I just needed to come up with a new premise and a villain, one as interesting and complex as the last one. No pressure, right?

My phone buzzed as we moved into service. I picked it up and opened a text from Axel.

Beefcake: *How's your Brokeback Monster experience going?*

I moved my thumbs quickly over the screen, typing back.

Gaymerboi: *Sucks ass so far. And not in the fun way.*

Three dots appeared while he typed out a response.

Beefcake: **sad face emoji* No dragons?*

Gaymerboi: *Not yet. WYD?*

Three dots danced on the screen, disappeared, and then came back twice.

Beefcake: *Date.*

Gaymerboi: *Work date or fun date?*

Beefcake: *My work is fun. But I'm getting paid for this one, so I guess it's work.*

Gaymerboi: *Is he hot at least?*

Beefcake: **She* is gorgeous AF.*

Gaymerboi: **cringe emoji* Ew. *cat emoji*
*vomit emoji**

Beefcake: *Says the guy who eats chicken flavored crackers.*

Axel and I'd maintained a friends with benefits arrangement until shortly before I left. It was a good arrangement, especially since he usually charged people for what he gave me for free, but Axel was too nice a guy for me, and we knew

each other too well. He couldn't decide if I should be treated like a client out of his little black book or a friend, so we'd called it off. No hard feelings over it. I'd known from the start it was a temporary arrangement. He had a crazy high sex drive, and I was bored, so it'd worked out... until it didn't.

The service bars in the corner of my screen suddenly disappeared, replaced by a big red x as we drove out of signal. I sighed and lowered the phone. This was going to be a really long week if I couldn't even get service on my phone. A place that far out probably didn't have Wi-Fi either.

"Brace yourselves," Cupid warned.

I looked up from my phone in time to see a faint blue shimmer pass over Hopper's gray pickup. Whatever it was hit us a moment later, shimmering over everything. It felt like we'd just driven by a live wire. I shuddered and then gasped at what I saw.

The sky, which had been empty just moments ago, had come alive with dark, winged shapes too large to be birds. I plastered my face against the window to get a better look.

The dragons came in every color and shape I could've imagined. There were blood red dragons with spikes running down their backs and long tails, slithering green dragons with delicate wings like silk, feathered dragons the color of a sunrise. A blue dragon swooped low, its back legs long and front legs short, and another dragon with pearly white scales fell in next to Hopper's truck. Most of them were about the

size of a large house cat, but some of them were as large as a cow or a horse.

I watched them in awe, a chill of excitement running through me. Whatever else happened while I was there on the ranch, this moment would make it all worth it. I had seen dragons! Real dragons!

I couldn't stop the excited laughter that bubbled up out of my chest. "Look at them! They're beautiful!"

"They are, aren't they?" Charlie agreed.

"God's work is truly great," agreed Father Lott next to me, and for once, I didn't want to argue with him.

Ahead, the ranch sprang into view as an outcropping of several buildings. There were a handful of large barns, the same type I'd seen in the Midwest for cattle and some large pens full of dragons. Piles of rocks in various sizes dotted the landscape, as well as pits that dragons were climbing out of. They raked the dirt with their claws before taking to the sky.

We drove up to a large single-story house with a wraparound porch. A few well-maintained shrubs outside were the only landscaping I could make out, except for some smaller rock piles. Dragons perched atop them and looked up when we parked.

Charlie came around to help me get out. I winced at the dull throb in my knee when my right foot came down, but quickly recovered when I heard Hopper's voice. I didn't want him to

see me like that. Charlie tried to steady me, but I let go. Leaning against the van was better than leaning on him.

Dragons were all over Hopper, making small trilling and chirping sounds. Some of the smaller ones crawled up his back to perch on his shoulders and the top of his head. He approached, moving as if they weren't even there.

Cupid gasped. "Archimedes!" He rushed forward.

The feathered red dragon on Hopper's shoulder screeched and immediately swooped toward Cupid. They met in the middle, a tumble of wings, claws, and arms, falling to the ground. The dragons squealed with delight, nipping at his clothes.

Cupid laughed and rolled onto his back. "I missed you too, my loyal friend." He sat up, scratching the dragon under the chin like a cat. "Archimedes, this is my mate, Charlie, and his friend, Hotdog."

"Hotdog?" Hopper lifted an eyebrow.

I flushed with irritation, still hearing my father's voice in Hopper's disapproval. "It's Robert," I corrected quickly.

Hopper snorted and leaned against the bed of his truck. God, it didn't matter what he did. The guy oozed sex appeal and I couldn't look away, even though I hated him already.

"And this," said Cupid, gesturing to Father Lott, "is Father Lott. He's going to help us make you better."

"Hello," Lott said quietly, extending his hand.

Archimedes leaned forward to sniff the priest's offered hand. The dragon screeched and snapped at him, over-extending his neck. He lost his balance and tumbled to the ground before getting back up and shaking his head as if he were dazed.

Cupid scooped the dragon up with a concerned expression and turned him over. I noticed he was missing a large patch of feathers on his back. The dragon chirped happily and climbed up to sit on Cupid's shoulder.

"He's mostly been in a pen by himself," Hopper reported. "I was worried a couple of the bigger males might try to take a bite, especially when he molted prematurely. I've got a cream I've been putting on that raw patch, and some hot water bottles in his enclosure to help with the joint aches."

Archimedes hopped over onto Charlie's shoulder and nuzzled up against him. Charlie giggled like a schoolgirl.

"Hopefully, he won't need that any longer." Cupid lifted his halo off his head. The dull glow that was always present faded as he presented the halo to Father Lott. "I'm trusting you to return it this time."

Father Lott frowned at the halo a moment before reaching for it. "Trust me, I didn't like who I became while it was in my possession, either." He winced as his hand closed around it.

"Hold still, Archimedes." Cupid grabbed the dragon from Charlie's shoulders and held him the same way I'd seen farmers hold chickens.

Archimedes coughed and squawked, but stilled when the halo started to glow in Father Lott's hand. His eyes widened, black pupils expanding and shining. He made a happy little trill sound and tilted his head, letting the healing magic of the halo wash over him.

God, all that wholesome content was about to give me a stomachache.

My eyes traveled past the dragon to where Hopper leaned against his truck, his thumbs tucked in his pockets. The flannel button up he wore was just tight enough across his chest that a few small tufts of fine chestnut fur poked through around the buttons. I glanced down, staring at the worn brass belt buckle. It was ridiculous sized, and I never would've thought something that tacky would look good on anybody, but he was owning it like a king.

I wondered what the rest of him looked like, especially downstairs. Years of consuming hentai had given me *expectations* when it came to monsters. Maybe unrealistic expectations, but God, I hoped not. I really wanted to believe a guy that looked like that had some impressively large equipment. If not, was life even worth living?

I was suddenly aware of the weight of eyes on me and tore my eyes away from Hopper's crotch to look at his face. He was staring at me like he could burn a hole through my forehead with laser vision. He arched a dark eyebrow in some unspoken question.

What the fuck are you staring at, fucker? I looked down at myself and almost choked when I realized it was my t-shirt. It was bright pink and had a cartoon cheeseburger on it in the style of a popular fast-food joint. Instead of a burger patty, it had letters in the middle that said Bottom King: Have it Your Way.

Of all the days to wear *that* shirt... Might as well have a neon sign over my head saying shameless bottom in desperate need of a rough fuck.

I crossed my arms as if I could hide the logo and looked away.

Archimedes let out a long, low howl and collapsed.

Cupid panicked, pulling the dragon against his chest. “Archimedes!”

“Let’s have a look,” Hopper said calmly and pushed away from his truck bed.

Cupid was practically vibrating and on the edge of tears as he handed the limp dragon over. Charlie strained for a better look, but Hopper ignored the sudden attention, carefully shifting the dragon onto his back. The little dragon’s taloned feet stuck straight up in the air.

“Easy, fella,” Hopper mumbled, and started rubbing the dragon’s chest with a firm hand. “Breathe, little one. Come on, now. Breathe for Daddy.”

Maybe it was stupid and insensitive, but Hopper’s tone of voice, the choice of words, sent an involuntary shudder

through me.

Archimedes chirped weakly and his feet relaxed.

Cupid let out a relieved sigh and threw his arms around Charlie. “He’s okay!”

“Course he is,” Hopper said, turning the dragon right side up. “Kizzlykians have a faint reflex. He just had a good restart, ain’t that right, little one?”

Archimedes trilled happily and flew straight up to Cupid’s shoulder.

“He looks better,” Cupid observed as Father Lott passed the halo back.

Hopper grunted and picked up the dragon, much to Archimedes’ displeasure. “Have to run some tests to be sure.”

The little dragon hissed and fought, trying to get back to Cupid.

“It’s all right, my loyal friend,” Cupid cooed, patting the dragon’s head. “Just a little while longer and then we’ll be back together.”

“Gonna have to sedate him,” Hopper grumbled and tucked the struggling dragon under his arm like it didn’t have two-inch claws capable of ripping him open. He turned and started back toward the house. “Find Noah. He’ll feed ya supper and show ya around.”

THREE

HOPPER

I SWALLOWED A SHOT of whiskey to steady my hand. Archimedes struggled and screeched in the leather restraints. I hated strapping the poor critter down, but there was no help for it. To get a good blood sample, I had to go under the scales, and I knew better than to do that with them awake.

“Easy, fella. It’ll be okay.”

I opened the cold box and brought out the sedative, adding two drops to the surface of a two-ounce hunk of rose quartz. To encourage him to eat it, I added a light dusting of ground fire opal before I placed it in front of him. Even restrained, it was too enticing a treat for him to ignore. He gobbled up the rock eagerly. Now, all that was left was to wait for it to kick in.

I drew my hand over his head in a comforting gesture. “I know, little one. Just a little longer. I promise ol’ Hopper’ll have you fixed up and back with your pa in no time.”

Dragons were simple creatures. All they wanted was food, affection, and space. They weren’t motivated by greed or jealousy. They didn’t lie. Most of ‘em didn’t have an ounce of malice in their bones.

Not like people.

Humans, monsters, it didn't matter. They were all the same, all greedy and superficial liars. Half of them'd rustle their own mother for a speck of gold, and the other half would look the other way, sayin' it was too much trouble to intervene. Weren't nobody left in the world with true grit.

Wasn't to say there weren't good ones scattered throughout, but good rarely equated to grit. Good people were soft, spineless. When pressed, they'd break.

I thought about the human... *Robert.*

I hadn't been happy when the Dominion asked me to look after him for a week while he did gods only knew what. Only reason I agreed to it was because the Dominion were my best customers, and if trade broke down with them, wouldn't be much use for an old dragon rancher like me.

There was a sudden twinge of pain in my left wrist. I cringed and lifted my hand, flexing the fingers, but the pain didn't go away. Carefully, I stripped off the leather glove, revealing the mechanical prosthetic underneath. Some days, I forgot where I ended, and the prosthetics began. They were as natural now as spit. Other days, the old stumps ached so bad I could scarce get through the day without a few extra painkillers.

I twisted the sleeve going over my wrist, wincing at the slight pinch. The twinge died off, though, so I must've fixed whatever was wrong.

Archimedes was finally still, not quite unconscious, but a lot more cooperative than he'd otherwise be. I re-affixed my glove and drew out the blood sample I needed. While he recovered, I put the vial in the centrifuge.

Poor little fella had an inoperable tumor on his brainstem. It was affecting his sense of direction, gravity, and sometimes his ability to eat. I'd been able to stabilize him with a strict regimen of experimental treatment, drugs, and a special diet, but there was nothing I could do to reverse the growth. Best I'd been able to manage was to slow it. If this cure of Cupid's had worked, it'd show in his blood almost immediately.

While the centrifuge spun, I sat down in the rickety old office chair in my workroom and absently started rubbing one of my antlers. It didn't itch. I just liked the way it felt.

Robert... Well, he wasn't much to look at with his tiny, delicate body, his prominent collar bones, and that smartass mouth. Yeah, I was glad he was only there a week, and I wouldn't have to look at this big brown fuck-me-daddy doe eyes every day.

I froze, realizing I'd gone from scratching my antlers with my hand to rubbing them on the cabin wall. Not only that, but fuck-me-daddy doe eyes? Since when did I ever think anybody had eyes like *that*?

I slapped myself. *Get your shit together, Hopper.*

It was Leroy's fault. When he'd asked to meet in town, I never should've gone. It was stupid, believing he might have some reasonable explanation for what he'd done to Ephith. It

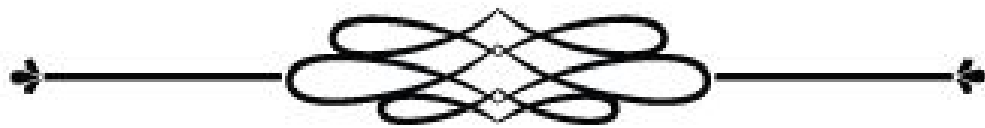
was a miracle she'd pulled through. The bout of dehydration had nearly killed her, all so he could line his pockets. That ain't no way to treat a dragon. I had to cut him loose.

And then the fucker had the gall to call me a useless cripple to my godsdamn face. Bastard was lucky all I did was break his damn nose.

The centrifuge stopped running. I got up with a sigh and prepared the slides. My heart was in my throat as I put the first sample under the microscope. If the healing hadn't worked, I didn't know how I'd break it to the Dominion. I didn't know how I'd handle losing another dragon so soon after what Leroy'd done. They were more than a payday to me. They were my children. The only children I'd ever have.

Steady, Hopper. Don't get attached. You remember what happened last time. I took a deep breath, and let it out slow.

Then I leaned down for a look through the microscope and smiled just a little.



WHEN I BROUGHT THE news to the Dominion, he threw all four of his arms around me and squeezed me so hard, he might've popped a rib out of place. I went rigid and did my best to rein in my scowl. I really hated being touched, especially false gestures of *affection*. The Dominion didn't actually care for me, nor I for him. He was just happy for his friend.

For supper, Noah grilled some bison burgers for everyone else while I had a black bean burger with avocado and a fried egg. The Dominion and his human ate happily, chatting between them about their plans to leave the next day for the tear, but Robert...

I watched him picking at his food on the other side of the table, pointedly avoiding looking at me. He looked a little paler than before, and tired. I'd noticed him walking with a pronounced limp before, then saw them getting out a wheelchair for him, and assumed it was a pain I knew well. Sometimes, when I ached terribly, eating was a chore. Best thing for it was a long soak, rest, and a massage if he could stand it, but I didn't want to sound too concerned about this stranger. We'd already gotten off to a rough start. Wasn't my fault they'd walked in right at the worst moment of my day. Lady luck was a cruel mistress.

"Noah," I said roughly.

The blond human stood up a little straighter. He was a husky sort of person, strong as an ox even if he didn't look it. Blind as a mole, though. Always squinting at me from behind those thick glasses of his. "Yes, sir?"

"You show our guests their rooms for the night yet?"

"I did, sir," he said with a nod.

I scowled openly at being called sir. He'd been with the ranch for almost two years and I'd never been able to break him of it. Guess he came from one of those families where

they drilled it into him. At least he was good at his job and quiet.

“This is a really nice place,” the human called Charlie offered.

“Yep,” I replied and tucked back into my dinner.

I didn't miss the way Charlie elbowed his mate.

The Dominion cleared his throat. “Charlie and I were wondering if Archimedes would be well enough to travel with us tomorrow.”

I chewed on my burger for a minute and took my time, rinsing it down with some water. “Should be. I'll give you some of that salve, just in case.”

“We appreciate it,” Charlie offered.

Robert gave up picking apart his burger and sighed. “Do you have like wi-fi or anything around here?”

“Never had much use for it,” I said.

“Not much use for cell service either, I suppose?” He huffed his disapproval.

I shrugged. “There's a perfectly good landline phone. Don't need nothing else.”

“What do you do for fun around here, then?” Robert asked.

I looked up from my plate, using my handkerchief to clean my mouth. When I was done, I put my hands on the table and stared him down. That question only highlighted all the reasons we'd never get along. “I get up with the sun. I work. I

eat. I go to bed early, and then I get up and do it all again. I ain't got time for *fun*."

"I can tell," he mumbled.

"And I can tell you've never had an honest day's work in your life," I shot back, temper flaring.

A flash of anger lit up his face, the intensity of his expression sending a flutter of *something* through me.

"Hotd—*Robert* used to work in a stadium," Charlie offered. "And he was in the war, so that's not fair."

The Dominion put a hand on Charlie's arm. "*Mel meum...*"

"No," said Charlie, pulling his arm away. "I'm not going to sit here and let him talk to my friend that way! Robert knows how to work. It's just it's hard for him because..." He trailed off. "Well, it's just hard, and it's not fair for you to judge him since you barely know him."

I snorted and went back to focusing on my dinner. It didn't matter. None of it did. In a few days, they'd all be gone, and I'd see none of them again. It'd be back the way it was with just me and Noah until the time came to drive the dragons west to their summer grazing.

I knew I shouldn't start conversations with them, especially with Robert, who wouldn't stop staring me down with that *look*. God, why did it make me so angry? I couldn't think whenever he looked at me like that. I just wanted to...

Whatever I wanted to do, I wasn't going to do it.

Instead, I reached up and started rubbing my antlers again. The constant pressure was comforting and helped to clear my head.

Robert suddenly pushed away from the table, barely having eaten anything. He stood, but immediately lost his balance. Charlie reached to steady him, but Robert waved him off.

“I’m good,” he insisted, but when he went to take another step, his limp was severely more pronounced.

Stubborn idiot. If he was in that much pain, he needed to get off that leg, but he wasn’t going to listen to me, so I kept my mouth shut. “I can spare a pair of horses to take you to the tear tomorrow,” I offered to Charlie and his mate. “Probably some water and jerky, too. You need anything else, Noah’ll see to it.”

“Yes, sir,” Noah agreed.

I stood, leaning on the table for a moment and then started away.

“Hopper,” Charlie called after me, and I paused. “You’ll be nice to Robert while we’re away, won’t you?”

I snorted and reached to rub my antlers again without giving him a proper answer. Truth was, I couldn’t guarantee anything. Whatever he gave me, he’d get back, and that was just how it was going to be.

FOUR

ROBERT

CHARLIE SHIFTED ON MY bed, kicking at the floor while I lounged in my wheelchair to take the pressure off my legs. “So... It’s Robert now, huh?”

I eyed him. “Yeah, and?”

“Nothing,” he said with a shrug. “Just wondering why the sudden change. You seem a little... different since we arrived.”

I rolled my eyes and stretched out my leg, the prosthetics still attached. While I wanted to take them off, I wasn’t going to do it with Charlie right there. Not that I thought he’d judge me or anything. He was too good of a person to judge anybody. I just didn’t want him to worry about me.

“Don’t make a big deal out of it, Charlie.”

“I’m not,” he protested. “I’m just worried about you. I know you were apprehensive about leaving the house, and all this is new and... Well, this is the longest you’ve been alone for a long time.”

He wasn't wrong, and I was trying hard not to think about it. I already missed the familiar comfort of my shitty little rental house. Not that the ranch wasn't nice. It was, and they'd gone through the trouble of putting me in a comfortable and accessible room, which I appreciated. Actually, the whole ranch was way more accessible than I expected. There were ramps everywhere instead of stairs, handholds all over, and hallways that were easily wide enough to support a wheelchair without bumping into everything. Most places weren't built with that in mind. I didn't know if the ranch had been. It was more likely a happy accident, but I still appreciated it.

The venue aside, the idea of being alone for a week was still daunting. Charlie had been my roommate for months. While he didn't do much to help me, I'd always liked the company. Even before he moved in, either he or Chris would come by every day to check on me. I couldn't remember the last time I'd gone more than a day without talking to one of them. Now I had to be on my own for an entire week? It felt like the training wheels were coming off before I was ready, but what were the other options?

I guess I could've stayed back in Michigan, but as scary as this was, I needed it, and I needed Charlie not to worry.

I flashed him my best confident smile. "I'll be fine."

There was a knock at the door.

"It's open," I called.

Cupid carefully opened the door and poked his head in, Archimedes on his shoulder. "Sorry to interrupt, but if we're

going to have an early start tomorrow, we should probably turn in.”

“He’s right,” Charlie said, standing. He paused to look at me after a few steps. “Are you sure about all this, Robert?” he asked for the hundredth time.

“I’m sure.” I waved him toward the door, and he went. We said our goodnights, and I got up to close the door behind him, collapsing against it.

Finally.

My fingers slid down to the lock and engaged it. Nobody would probably bother me, especially since the house was huge, but I felt better behind a locked door. Growing up, that was one of the things I’d never been allowed. If any of us kids tried to lock our doors for an ounce of privacy, our father had them taken off the hinges as punishment.

I pulled out my phone and started scrolling through the music tracks I had saved. There was no service, but I didn’t need service to play any of the music I’d downloaded. I found a k-pop track I liked, cranked the volume, and went over to sit on the edge of the bed to remove my prosthetics. The skin under the sleeve on my right side was a little irritated, so I rubbed it down with a little of the healing salve I kept.

Then I stripped off my sweaty clothes. Normally, I’d go straight for a hot soak, but after spending the day with my balls wound up tight, I needed to take care of that first so I could relax.

When it came to jerking off, I had a specific ritual I liked to follow, especially when I had the time and space. It probably would've weirded some people out to know that I liked to put on lacy thongs and makeup for it, but I figured if I was going to spend time on myself, I might as well dress up for the event. I didn't do it for other guys usually. It was something I did just for me because I liked the way it made me feel.

The first time my dad caught me dressed up, he threatened to send me to military school to straighten me out. Joke would've been on him. Nothing but sweaty, sexy boys at military school.

I pushed thoughts of my family from my head and made the conscious decision to focus on myself, touching up my lip gloss before smacking my lips together at my reflection. The compact snapped closed. I set it aside and stretched out on my back in the bed, grabbing the bottle of lube.

That's it, little one. Breathe for Daddy.

Fuck, why was that what I'd fixated on? That and Hopper's stupid little bunny tail sticking through the back of his ripped-up jeans. Why did I have to like the way it bobbed back and forth when he walked away?

Fuck it. Let's go. If I had to put up with his bullshit, least I could do was use it to get off. Maybe that'd get it out of my system.

I shut my eyes and held the image of him leaning against the truck in my mind. There was something indescribably sexy about that pose, the casual way it just exuded raw masculine

energy. He owned every inch of space he took up, and he knew it. It wasn't the hat, the jeans, the boots that did it for me as much as the disgusting amount of self-confidence. He was sexy, and he knew it, and he knew that I knew it.

I took the fantasy of the image a step further and tried to imagine him pulling up his shirt to wipe sweat or dirt from his face. Not taking it off. Just tugging it up enough to show off those abs dusted with chestnut fur stark against that stupid polished copper belt buckle.

Holy fuck, why was that so hot? I wasn't even imagining him naked. It was like a private little tease that only got worse when I remembered the intense glare he kept giving me. Like he was trying to hate fuck me with his eyes.

And boy was I down for that.

I imagined him pushing me face down in the dirt, yanking down my pants to find... How would he react to finding a lacy thong there? He'd sneer and yank them aside before spitting on his fingers. No lube. I wanted it rough and raw. I wanted it to hurt tomorrow and the day after, too.

Take it like the dirty slut you are, he'd say. The stinging slap of his palm on my ass, the clawing bite of teeth in my shoulder. My mind was a war of pain and pleasure until it didn't fucking matter that he hated me and I hated him. Nothing mattered but getting there, and I wanted him to use me to do it.

That's it, little one. Come for Daddy.

I came hard, my muscles convulsing as if I'd been hooked up to an electric current. For a minute, everything was bliss and twitching pleasure. When I came back into reality, my limbs were trembling, and the only sound was my own rasping breath against the silence of the room. The playlist I'd put on had ended, but I couldn't remember when.

And dammit, I'd gotten cum all over the lacy underwear. Hazards of the activity, I supposed. I pulled off the dirty strip of cloth and used it to clean myself up before wadding them up and pitching them to the floor beside the bed to deal with later.

"Fuck," I muttered, staring at the blank ceiling.

My phone buzzed. I thought about ignoring it until I realized that meant I had service. I snatched it up, hoping it was another text from Axel, or maybe Ben. Anyone from the outside world where things were still sane.

Instead, it was a text from my twin brother, Ryder.

Wonderboi: *Bro, where are you? You alive? Grace and I swung by the house to see if you needed anything, and it was empty. Text me. Worried about you.*

I sighed and tossed the phone aside without replying. Nothing against Ryder, but he was the last person I wanted to talk to. Me and my twin brother couldn't be more different if we tried. He was respectable, successful, educated, married to

some June Cleaver type. He was even talking about running for public office. They had two kids and made cookies for school bake sales. Ryder Smith was good and wholesome, and he tried to look out for me, even though I was two minutes older than him. He was also the family darling who could do no wrong. Maybe Ryder meant well, but talking to him would make me feel worse.

I rolled over, putting my back to the phone. My family had cut me off, expecting me to come crawling back like I usually did. Well, not this time. This time, I was going to make them sweat until *they* relented. I'd show them I could live without them. All of them.

Even Hopper.

Especially Hopper.

FIVE

ROBERT

I GROANED AND ROLLED over in the dark at the sound of a truck starting up. My phone said it was a quarter after four in the morning and I'd missed two more texts from Ryder. I left them unopened and sat up, scrubbing a hand over my face.

My legs were throbbing, but that was my fault. I'd fallen asleep without soaking the night before. I was not looking forward to another day in those prosthetics, but I'd be damned if I was going to let Hopper look down on me with sympathy.

So, I dragged my naked twink ass to the bathtub and soaked until the water was cold. It was a little chilly that morning, so I threw on my favorite crop top sweater and a pair of cute hip hugger jeans. I liked the way they looked together, especially since it showed off my Legend of Zelda tramp stamp. Since I was in the chair most of the time, I didn't get very many opportunities to show it off. Today was the day.

I threw on a half-hearted face with a little eyeliner and some color on my cheeks. Then I brushed my fading teal blue hair to one side and frowned at myself in the mirror. Something was missing.

Ah, I know! I went to my suitcase and sorted through it until I found the distressed denim vest with fringe and put it on over the evergreen crop top sweater. Perfect. I put on my prosthetics and limped gingerly out the door.

Charlie and Cupid were in the dining room, cooing over each other and being generally disgusting, while Archimedes chewed on some rocks in the corner.

“What’s up, bitches?” I said, sounding a little tired, and flashed them a peace sign.

Charlie froze with a biscuit hanging out of his mouth, eyes wide as they rolled over me. He swallowed and lowered the biscuit.

“Morning, Robert,” Cupid said pleasantly. “You look—”

“Different,” Charlie finished.

“Hot,” Cupid added, earning a scowl from Charlie.

Cupid laughed and kissed Charlie’s nose.

I snorted and sat down at the table. “What? I’m not allowed to look nice? Oh, is that honey butter? I’m starving!” I scooped up a biscuit, slathering it in honey butter and strawberry jam before throwing an arm over the back of the chair to eat it. I glanced around. “Where’s the priest?”

“On his way to Casper to board a plane,” Charlie offered. “Hopper took him in town at like four this morning to catch a cab.”

Explained the loud roar of his truck coming to life at stupid o'clock. "Where's Hopper now?"

"Working probably," Cupid said. "A lot to do on the ranch, especially since it's just him and Noah."

"Speaking of Noah, we should probably get going so we can catch him at the stables." Charlie stood, frowned, and opened his mouth as if to ask the same question he'd been asking.

"I'll be *fine*," I promised. "Believe it or not, I can look after myself."

"If you need anything, don't be afraid to ask Hopper. He may seem abrasive, but he's not heartless." Cupid held out his arm.

Archimedes flapped his wings and flew up, landing on Cupid's elbow and climbing up to his shoulder.

I snorted and stood to put my arms around Charlie. "Not sure I believe that, but I figure I'm good for a week. Just don't take any longer or I'll have to come looking for you. And you..." I turned to Cupid. "You take care of him."

"Always," Cupid said, and pulled Charlie close for a kiss.

I walked with them to the front door and watched them walk away hand in hand, a sinking feeling in my stomach.

And so begins the worst week of my life, I thought, and went back to breakfast.

You wouldn't think passing time would be hard. I had a whole ranch to explore and there were dragons everywhere,

but I was too stiff to chance going out, especially alone. Sticking to the house and not wanting to move around too much meant there was hardly anything to do. I went back to my room and tried to work on the next campaign, but I couldn't come up with anything interesting.

Around noon, I wandered back out in search of something to eat. There'd been no sign of Hopper or Noah, and I didn't know where the kitchen was, so I went on a little adventure to find it, taking my phone and charger with me, just in case I found somewhere with a signal. When I found the kitchen, I plugged the phone in and scrolled through, searching for something to fill the silence. I decided on a classic Lady Gaga number and went digging for something to eat.

I wasn't much of a cook, but I managed to find some peanut butter and decided I'd eat that. I shoved a spoonful in my mouth and left the spoon between my lips, backing out of the fridge. When I closed the door and found Hopper standing there, I almost jumped out of my skin.

He was leaning against the cabinet, just watching me like a fucking creep.

My face warmed, and I yanked the spoon from between my lips. "God's balls, you scared the piss out of me!"

Hopper didn't even apologize. He turned his head, eyeing the screen of my phone. "This is what humans call music, huh?"

I snatched the phone up and shut off the music. "Listen, I'm willing to take a lot of shit from you, Hopper, but don't you dare diss Gaga in my presence."

He snorted. “Whatever.”

I backed away so I didn't get hit when he jerked the fridge door open. When he bent over, leaning into the fridge, I stole a glance at his bunny tail. It wasn't just a tuft of white like it'd looked from a distance. The top of the tail was speckled with gray, and the bottom was completely white. It wiggled back and forth before lifting slightly.

“You keep staring at my ass, I'm gonna think you want something, Princess.”

I flushed and turned away. “Oh, don't flatter yourself.”

“Didn't say I was offering.” He popped the top on a beer and set it aside before turning to me and stepping in.

My heart seized, and for a minute I forgot how to breathe as the air filled with the faint scent of dust and sweat, the scent of a man who'd been hard at work. And fuck if it didn't do things to me, things I didn't want it to.

His fingers closed around the jar of peanut butter, and he yanked it out of my hand. It was both a disappointment and a relief when he moved away to make himself a peanut butter sandwich.

He didn't talk to me, and I felt awkward standing there, so I turned to go.

“You got any supper requests, princess?” he called.

My temper flared. I turned around, fists clenched. “Stop calling me that.”

“Why?” He looked up from making his sandwich, completely unbothered.

“Because I know you’re only doing it to piss me off.”

“Seems to be working,” he said with a shrug.

I took a step forward. “Do you have a problem with me, *Hopper?*”

He slapped the second piece of bread onto the first, took a bite, chewed, and swallowed before answering. “Nope.”

That was an even more infuriating answer than the argument I’d been expecting. I threw up my hands with an exasperated growl and stomped away.

“Supper’s at seven!” he shouted after me. “No phones at the table!”

I flipped him off. “Eat a dick.”

Next thing I knew, he had ahold of my wrist and had backed me against a wall. Anger flashed in his eyes as he leaned in, pinning me in place. Apparently, my cock couldn’t tell the difference between anger and lust because it got hard. Damn thing.

Hopper flashed his teeth. “I don’t know where you get off —”

“Wherever and whenever the fuck I want,” I snapped back.

He blinked as if I’d given him a sobering slap. Then his mouth twitched, almost like he wanted to *smile*. Instead, he snorted and let me go. “Walked into that one, didn’t I?”

“We’re fighting, not flirting, asshole.” I didn’t know who I was trying to convince more, me or him.

He snorted again. “I don’t take kindly to insults, especially from tight-ass little twink with tramp stamps and big, fuck-me-daddy doe eyes. I am onto you, princess.”

“Excuse me?” I huffed.

“You think you’re the first human to come around these parts with a fetish for monster dick?”

I crossed my arms. “Honey, just because I’m a whole ass snack doesn’t mean you’re invited to the table.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” Hopper growled.

I leaned forward. “It means I wouldn’t ride your dick if you were the last monster on Earth or any other planet.”

“Then quit looking at me like you want to. It’s pissing me off.” He stepped back, drawing a thumb under his nose and giving me another look up and down. “I got work to do. See you at supper,” he said and stormed off.

SIX

HOPPER

ROBERT DIDN'T COME TO supper, and Noah was still working on something, which left me alone to eat my dinner. Suited me just fine. I'd been eating alone most of my life. What was one more day?

After supper, I thought about going back out to check on Layla. She was my only Abrakari after what happened with Leroy, and she had a clutch that was overdue to hatch. A bunch of the males had been sniffing around her enclosure, so I moved her to a new one, but she'd been flighty ever since. I was worried she'd abandon her eggs, especially after losing her mate. But my leg was sore, and I'd already looked in on her just before coming back to the house. She'd been antsy, but the eggs looked fine. If anything was amiss, Noah would let me know.

So I got out the old guitar and went to sit on the porch swing to pick through a few songs, trying to convince myself that it was all going to be fine. Keeping my hands busy helped me think, and I could do with some decent music after having to listen to whatever Robert had been playing earlier.

Robert... I sighed and shook my head. I hadn't meant to say all that earlier. He just had a way of drawing out the worst in me. It was like I couldn't think right when he was nearby. Everything about him was irritating, from the timbre of his voice to the way he ate peanut butter straight out of the jar. What had I been thinking when I agreed to let him stay there?

I'd been thinking I was tired of those lonely nights spent alone in a big, lonely house. What was the point of having literal mountains of gold if I didn't have anybody to share it with?

I'd long ago given up the idea of sharing my life with another, but I thought I had a friend in Leroy, at least. I took a chance, opened myself up, and let him into my life. How many countless evenings had we spent on that front porch drinking and bullshitting about dragons and monsters and men late into the night? We'd poured over ledgers together, worked the land together, raised dragons from egg to dirt together.

Thirty years of friendship, and he'd thrown it away for what? A handful of gold and some dragon eggs? The theft didn't hurt near as much as the betrayal. There was too much human in Leroy. Should've known better than to trust a human.

How monsters could pair with humans was beyond me. And some of them weren't just lovers. Some of them—like Leroy's folks—were having half-blood children. I just didn't understand how they could do that to their kids. The world

was hard enough on normal people. It'd be harder for someone who didn't fit in on either side of the tear.

That's why I'd given Leroy the job in the first place. Back in the day, it just wasn't as common as it was now, and nobody gave him a chance. Damn me and my bleeding heart.

There was a sudden bang near the front window and a muffled curse in Robert's annoying voice. My fingers stopped moving over the strings and I glanced toward the window. I'd opened them all to air the place out. Too nice an evening not to. Unfortunately, he was being an idiot and trying to pretend like he hadn't been leaning against the open window, spying on me.

I sighed and reached to adjust my hat. "You can come out, you know. I ain't gonna bite."

His face appeared on the other side of the screen, hands resting on the sill. "You sure? Seem pretty vicious to me."

I snorted and turned back to plucking the strings. "Don't know if you noticed, but I don't eat meat. Especially not questionable meats like hot dogs."

To my surprise, that drew a chuckle out of him. Might've been the first sound he made that wasn't utterly infuriating. Actually, it was almost pleasant by comparison.

"If you were looking for something to eat, I left some noodles in the fridge," I said. "Thought you'd be hungry, seein' as how you missed supper and all."

"Oh. That's... nice of you."

I acknowledged him with a grunt and just kept picking at the guitar. When I looked back up, he was gone. I figured he'd stay gone, maybe eat in his room. Instead, he came back and sat in the chair on the other side of the window with a steaming bowl of pasta.

"This is really good," he said after a few minutes. "What's the sauce?"

"Cashew cream. You blend 'em up with a little nutritional yeast, and a little pasta water."

"Nice. So you like to cook?"

I shook my head. "Nah. Takes too much time. I hire somebody to come in and make shit like that for me. I just defrost it and heat it up. I couldn't cook to save my life."

"Me either," he admitted and slurped up more noodles loudly. "Charlie's the cook at my house, but I doubt he knows the first thing about vegetarian cooking. He likes meat. Me, I can take it or leave it. Well, most of it."

I grunted. He liked to talk, Robert, probably just to fill the silence. I hated that. Wasn't no such thing as silence. The world was always making its own music, be it the howl of the wind through the mountains or the laughter of water in the creek bed. Talking over it didn't feel right.

"Johnny Cash, right?" he blurted.

I paused and frowned, trying to figure out what he was talking about. My fingers moved over the strings, retracing the last few notes I'd played and then I realized I was, in fact,

playing an old Johnny Cash song. I hadn't even realized. I was just playing.

"You know Johnny Cash?" I gave him a doubtful glance.

Robert huffed. "Of course I do. I've got taste, despite what you may think about me."

"You just don't strike me as the type," I said.

He turned his head and narrowed his eyes at me. "The type to have taste, or to like Johnny Cash?"

"Both, I guess." I picked through the next few bars. "Matter of fact, you don't strike me as the type to be out here at all. Seem like a spoiled city boy to me."

"You're not wrong. I grew up in D.C. Summer home in Vermont. Private schools. Vacations in Paris. All that."

I looked up from the guitar. "No shit?"

His eyes were distant as he nodded. "No shit."

"How's a rich boy wind up working in a stadium and going to war?" I asked.

"He has a homophobic jackass for a dad. That's how."

I stopped playing, fighting an instant spike in my temper. "They throw you out?"

Robert sighed. "No. Worse. Conversion therapy. They sent me to this camp for a week that was supposed to fix me. Joke was on them, of course. I lost my virginity at that camp." He was quiet for a minute before he sighed again. "Anyway, when I came back gay, we had this big fight, and I was just done. I

left as soon as I turned eighteen. Moved in with some guy I met online who was way older than me. That was a mistake. Got a job at the stadium. Also a mistake. And then I went to war and got my legs blown off.”

“Mistake?” I guessed.

He laughed bitterly. “Are you kidding? Probably the best thing that’s ever happened to me. When I came back, my folks couldn’t apologize fast enough. They set me up with a rental, gave me access to the family funds, hired the best people to help me... I was just fine until I started being used in my dad’s political campaigns. I was his sob story to win votes.”

“No offense, but he sounds like a piece of shit,” I said and went back to playing.

Robert snorted. “You’re not wrong.”

For a long time, there was just the quiet evening and the sound of the guitar. Crickets sang and off in the distance there was the occasional chirp or bray of a dragon.

“What about you?” Robert said at length. “What’s your story? How’d you get to be on this side of the tear in the world?”

I shrugged. “Somebody had to do it. Might as well have been me.”

There was a little more to it than that, but I wasn’t the type to bare my soul just because. He didn’t really care about it, anyway. Robert was just making conversation for the sake of conversation.

After another long silence, Robert stood and winced. I pretended not to notice.

“Well,” he said, “I better get going. Thanks for the noodles.”

“Yep,” I said and reached to adjust one of the strings.

After Robert walked away, I left Cash’s “Hurt” behind for a little Patsy Cline “Crazy” and thought, *You know, maybe this week won’t be so bad after all.*

SEVEN

ROBERT

I DIDN'T KNOW WHY, but I woke up early the next morning and felt better than I had ever since leaving Musing. The light of sunrise was just barely in the sky, but I knew I'd already missed Hopper, which left me... disappointed. After he'd been so civil the night before, I was starting to hope maybe he'd come around. Maybe he was only an insufferable asshole sometimes.

I put on a hoodie and yesterday's jeans instead of bothering to get dressed. Didn't matter. I still looked hot, just not slutty twink hot. More like walk-of-shame hot.

My legs were more sore than ever when I stood on them. I wasn't used to putting my weight on them for so long yet. Eventually, I'd develop some callouses that'd make it easier, but I wasn't there yet.

When I made it to the kitchen, I found a note on the fridge with my name on it.

Made you a peanut butter sandwich. Stop eating out of the jar. Or else. Hopper.

I let out a little snort and tossed the paper over my shoulder. “Or else what? What’s he gonna do? Spank me? I wish.”

Just because, I ate a big spoonful of peanut butter right out of the jar and tossed the spoon in the sink.

After breakfast, I stepped outside. I hadn’t come all that way to pout in the house. I was there to see dragons, and I’d decided that was exactly what I was going to do. Except I didn’t know where to go. The ranch was huge, stretching for miles.

Noah came around the side of the house, a big bucket of rocks on his shoulder.

“Hey, Noah. Glad I caught you,” I said.

“Me?” He paused and shifted the bucket so he could push his glasses up. “Did you need something?”

I shrugged. “Just bored. I was hoping to get a tour. Tag along. Maybe see how things run around here. I won’t get in the way.”

“Um, yeah. I guess.” He walked past, and I followed him over to a little golf cart that had several buckets of rocks in the back. “I was just about to run these down to the feed piles if you want to come.”

“Sure.”

He patted the top of the golf cart. “Then climb in.”

Noah said little as the little golf cart pattered down the dirt road. I got the impression he wasn’t much of a talker, which

probably made him the ideal employee as far as Hopper was concerned. Making conversation with Hopper had been an exercise in futility the night before. At least he was a decent listener when it suited him.

I turned my head, taking in the land to the right and left. Blue mountains rose in the distance, one after another, blocking the horizon. In the other direction, they were a little closer and a little higher, the peaks hidden in the clouds.

I glanced behind us, noting how far we'd gone. It was further than I expected. "So, if dragons eat rocks, why can't you just let them graze?"

"Oh, they do," he said, shouting over the hum of the cart. "Grazing will meet their basic nutrition needs, but certain mineral combinations net higher gold composition in the billet."

I stared at him. "Did you say gold?"

He grinned and nodded. "Dragons do, in fact, shit gold, but only when given the right diet."

"I'll be damned."

"Yep." Noah directed the cart toward a gate. "And different dragons need different percentages of different minerals. You go giving a Kizzlykian too much agate and they get constipated, but the Torquids almost never get enough. Canivviro need beryl like humans need fiber, but if you give it to a Torquid, they get sick. And you don't want to know what happens if any of them gets into the feldspar."

I frowned as the cart slowed to a stop. “I never knew feeding dragons could be so complicated.”

He grabbed the gear shift and put the cart in park. “Half my day is feeding dragons. The other half is collecting and processing dragon billets. That’s unprocessed scat if you didn’t know. We take it and put it through sanitizers and sorters to extract the gold. Be right back.”

He hopped out of the cart and went to open the gate before coming back, driving through it, stopping again and then going to close it.

“If you do all that, what does Hopper do?” I asked as he came back to the cart.

His shoulders rose and fell in a shrug. “Feeding and care mostly, plus now that Leroy’s gone, he runs the day-to-day operations like ordering supplies and stuff. This time of day, he’s probably out feeding the girls.”

“The girls?”

Noah nodded. “Layla, our Abrakari, and Ephith, our Norwegian Newt. They’re the two biggest species we have here, about the size of a semi-truck.”

“Can we go out there?” I didn’t even try to hide the excitement in my voice. I’d seen a few dragons around, but most of them were dog-sized or even smaller. Not that they weren’t impressive, but I really wanted to see one of the big ones.

“I don’t know,” Noah said, rubbing his chin. “I mean, they’re in isolation for a reason. But I suppose it wouldn’t do any harm just to look at them. Tell you what. Let me drop off this feed and then we can go. Need to make sure she’s rotating the eggs. Yesterday, I had to prompt her.”

We drove up to a large enclosure of dragons, most of them in muted brown or light gray scales. They were about the size of chickens and walked on two back legs like them. Though they had wings, they didn’t seem all that interested in using them. They crowded Noah as he came through the gate with his bucket of rocks in hand, making a weird gulping squawk that reminded me way too much of the raptor sound from *Jurassic Park*. He carried the rocks toward the center of their enclosure before dumping it. While they pounced on the rocks, he walked over to the edge of a shallow pit and peered down into it before eventually coming back, empty bucket in hand.

“One down, three to go,” he remarked as he deposited the empty bucket.

“What’s down in the pit?” I asked as he climbed back into the cart.

“Dragon shit, mostly, though sometimes they try to hide whatever they find down there. Those are Zezzirs. They like to roll in their waste, so gotta make sure they don’t get stuck in it. Not very smart, Zezzirs.”

“They don’t fly?”

He shook his head. “Only short distances.”

Next, we went to a Kizzykian enclosure, the same type as Archimedes. They were friendly and climbed all over Noah, more interested in cuddles than the food at first. When one of them started eating, though, the rest rushed in and they all started chirping happily while they ate.

Noah checked their shit pit and came back, making a note in a little notebook. “Might have to dig another pit this fall,” he said, and we moved on.

Torquid dragons were lazy and fat, lounging around on top of huge rocks with drooping wings. They stayed where they were when Noah came in, chewing on the rocks they sat on, uninterested until he whistled. Then a few of them crept down on all fours, slowly making their way over to the pile of rocks.

The Canivviros were my favorite. They had big, colorful butterfly wings, a bird-like beak, and a moon-shaped head crest. The males had a double beard that dangled from their long necks while the females were slightly more muted in color. Rather than lounging in big groups, they hung out in small families with the hatchlings clinging to the males for a ride.

“All right,” Noah said, piling the last empty bucket in the back. “Ready to go see the girls?”

I nodded excitedly.

We drove back onto the main thoroughfare through the ranch and headed toward a big red barn in the distance. I shifted in my seat, eager to get out of it. It was well into afternoon and I was feeling a little hungry, but Noah hadn’t

mentioned breaking for lunch. In fact, I'd never seen him eat anything. I eyed him, wondering if he were some sort of monster, but he didn't look it. Looks, though, could be deceiving.

“So, how'd you wind up working for a grumpy old monster like Hopper?” I asked.

“Kind of weird how it happened,” Noah said. “I took a wrong turn and wound up in Eden by accident, where my car broke down. Some locals started giving me a hard time to get me to leave. I didn't get it at first, being human, but they were probably just trying to look out for my safety. Anyway, Hopper gave me a place to stay and said I could work it off. When I realized what I'd be doing, I was floored. Of course I never wanted to leave. Who would?”

“Yeah,” I mumbled, looking out over the endless empty land. “Who'd ever want to leave this place?”

He pulled up to the barn and got out. When I realized he was coming around to offer me a hand, I hurried out of the cart so I didn't have to take it. Noah frowned, but he was too nice to say anything.

“Hang back, okay?” he said. “Dragons with egg clutches can be unpredictable, and the other one's injured and slow to trust. One wrong step, and you could be tomorrow's gold haul.”

I shuddered and followed him through the open barn door.

At first, it was too dark to see much of anything, but when my eyes adjusted, I frowned. I expected something like the horse barns my Aunt Betty had in Kentucky. After all, he'd said these were the biggest dragons and I couldn't imagine them getting that big. Instead, it was a huge open space, as high as two stories, divided into just four pens. There was a narrow walkway on one side with bits of hay strewn about, but no sign of dragons that I could see.

And then a terrifying roar echoed through the barn, making all the hair on my arms stand on end. Noah let out a curse and bolted, shouting back, "Stay here!"

I'd never been very good at listening to directions. I couldn't run, but I moved as fast as I could, supporting myself with one hand on the wall. Noah pushed through a set of double doors on the other side and disappeared. I stumbled to the doors about ten seconds later, pushing one open and squinting into the sunlight.

Another, louder and more desperate roar shook the walls. I lowered my hand from blocking out the sun and my heart skipped a beat. The dragon was massive, as tall as two horses standing on top of each other and as long as a school bus. She had shimmering purple scales and a white bony crest on her forehead like a crown. Her gigantic wings flapped, sending miniature whirlwinds through the large enclosure. Sharp talons gouged lines in the dirt and thin lips pulled back, revealing a line of razor-sharp teeth.

Hopper stood right in front of her, armed with nothing but a long length of rope tied in a lasso. The dragon let out another cry and charged past him. He tried to throw the lasso as if he could get it around her neck, but missed. Noah threw another, and it caught on the edge of her nose horn, but she shook it off and redirected her charge at him. He had to jump out of the way to keep from getting gored to death.

Then she saw me.

For a minute, I was numb with terror I'd only ever felt one other time in my life.

I didn't remember much from the day I lost my legs, but I remembered the feeling twisting deep in my gut, the absolute certainty that I was about to die. They say your life flashes before your eyes, but I never had that. I didn't see the faces of my loved ones or have a flash of regret for all the shit I didn't get to do. There was this strange sense of being disconnected from my body, as if my soul had been pushed out and I was watching myself in third person, acutely aware of just how frail I was. Nothing but a squishy bag of bones.

I had that same feeling when the dragon set its sights on me. I was going to die, but hey, at least I'd get to die in the coolest way possible.

She scraped her talons in the dirt and charged, head down like a raging bull.

EIGHT

ROBERT

I DIDN'T EVEN TRY to get out of the way. There was nowhere to go, and even if there was, I wasn't fast enough to get there. All I could do was close my eyes and wait for the big chomp.

The ground trembled, the dragon growing closer, and closer and...

And then it stopped. Hot breath rushed over my face, smelling like rocks baking in the summer heat.

"Whatever you do," came Hopper's voice, "do *not* move."

I cracked open an eye and immediately stopped breathing. She'd stopped maybe a foot in front of me, her head still down, giant red eyes focused on me. Her head weaved back and forth slightly, nostrils flaring. This close, I could see the rough texture of her scales, how regal they were in the afternoon light.

She looked at me and turned her head slightly, giving me a better look at her eyes. I couldn't explain what I saw there. It certainly wasn't any human emotion, but I swore I understood

what she meant when she lowered her head and leaned forward ever so slightly.

Slowly, I lifted my hand.

“Stop!” Hopper said in a panicked shout.

I barely heard him. He didn't matter. The risk didn't matter. I had to do this, or I'd regret it for the rest of my life.

My hand trembled as I laid it on the dragon's snout. She was cold, her scales slightly bumpy, textured like a rock. I ran my fingers along the ridge of her nostril, stroking gently. Time stopped, and the world shrank. For a minute, it was just me and the most magnificent creature I had ever seen.

Then, just as quickly as it happened, it was over. She shook her head and backed away, letting out a mournful bray. Noah approached carefully, but she made no move to attack as he slipped the rope loosely around her neck and guided her toward a large opening in the side of the barn. When they were near the opening, she turned her head to glance back at me and she just looked... sad.

Hopper's fists closed around my shirt, and he yanked me forward to snarl in my face. “What the fuck are you doing out here? Don't you ever fucking listen? You could've been killed just now!”

“But I wasn't,” I replied with as much coldness as I could muster.

“I should...” He made an exasperated sound through his gritted teeth and let me go. “Dammit! Dammit all!” Hopper

paced away, pulling off his hat and running his hands over his ears before reaching to scratch one of his antlers. There was a new white spot on the side of one from where he'd been rubbing it so much.

“What’s wrong with her?” I asked quietly.

Hopper sighed and carefully put his hat back on. “Layla’s mate, Cedric, died a month ago. At first, I thought maybe she didn’t understand. She kept looking for him, refused to sleep or eat or turn her eggs. Now...” He sighed again and shook his head, hands on his hips. “I was bringing her out here so Noah could collect them for the warmer. I just can’t trust her with them. Can’t trust her with anything. It’s like she’s given up.” He looked over at me. “I thought for sure you were dragon chow.”

I blew out a relieved breath and ran my hand through my hair. “Me too, for a minute.”

“You *should* be. Layla’s not stable. It’s sheer luck she stopped, though I wonder why...” He shook his head. “Never mind.”

Hopper started back for the barn, wrapping the rope around his arm as he walked. I bit my lip, enjoying the way it made his muscles bulge way too much to be healthy, especially in light of my near-death experience.

“Well? Come on.” He pulled open the door. “Or you gonna stand there all day takin’ in the view, Princess?”

I rolled my eyes. “Dream on, Brokeback bunny. You wish you could wrangle all this.”

I pushed past him and went into the barn, but I didn’t get far. After just a few steps, there was a whisper of movement and a loop of rope tightened around my middle, pinning my arms to my sides. I squeaked and tried to wiggle free.

He snorted. “Dammit, quit struggling or you’ll—”

I yelped again and lost my balance.

He spat a curse and yanked harder while I fought to find my feet. Somehow, I wound up landing in his arms bridal style. We stared at each other, both of us shocked and deciding how to handle the sudden awkward situation.

Usually, men tended to be worried they’d hurt me, as if losing my legs had suddenly made me too frail to live. Maybe I wasn’t six-six and made of muscle, but I sure as hell wasn’t going to break from a little rough use. I’d been manhandled my fair share of times, but never quite like that, never *literally* swept off my feet and held in someone’s arms.

It was definitely something I wanted to do again. Naked. With him.

A small twinge of color spread over Hopper’s face.

I blinked. “Oh my God. Hopper, are you *blushing?*”

He snorted and promptly dropped me on my ass.

Hitting the concrete—even with the hay padding—sent a shockwave of pain radiating up my back. I grunted and

immediately reached to rub my tender little ass as soon as the rope loosened. “Asshole!”

“Yeah, and?” He snorted and leaned on the door to one of the interior enclosures. He watched me struggle to get back up for a few seconds before he sighed and came back to offer me a hand.

I swatted it away.

“Quit being obstinate and let me help you. Stubborn little...” He gritted his teeth.

When I continued to struggle on my own, he grabbed me under my arms and lifted me like a child before depositing me back on my prosthetic feet. A big hand clamped down on my shoulder and my brain completely short-circuited as he leaned down and waved a scolding finger in my face. “Now, can you promise to behave yourself, princess? Or do I have to take you back to the house and put you to bed?”

My lips said, “Fuck off,” but my dick said “Yes, Daddy”.

His stern glare had me wondering if he really meant to drive me back to the house and lock me in my room. After a minute, he relented with a snort. “Don’t be such a brat. Come on.”

I crossed my arms. “Where are we going?”

“Layla obviously likes you, so I figured I’d give you a proper introduction,” he said, unlocking the pen. “But only if you promise to listen to me this time. I can’t have you getting eaten. The Dominion will have my head, and I’m pretty attached to all my heads.”

All his heads? My eyes traveled down his body. Just how many were there? Did that infer more than two or was I just reading too much into it? God, what if he had two dicks?

Two cocks, antlers, bunny ears, and an adorable little bunny tail that only wags when he's pissed off? Someone pinch me. I've died and gone to monsterfucker heaven. If only he weren't a complete asshole. But nobody's perfect, right?

Hopper whistled and snapped his fingers. “Hey, Buttercup. Quit daydreamin’ and let’s go! These dragon eggs ain’t going to incubate themselves.”

I let out a disgusted sigh. “And here I was just starting to get used to you calling me princess. You do know I have a name, right?”

He pushed the gate open wider and stepped back to make room. “Give me a reason to remember it, and maybe I will.”

“Later. Princess wants to see a dragon about a very different sort of ride.” I put a hand on his chest and gave him a slight push.

Hopper let out one of his cute little angry huffs. “Fuck, I hate you.”

“Feeling’s mutual, just so you know.”

He let the gate swing shut a second too soon, and it hit me square in the ass. I yelped and rubbed the sore spot, scowling at him. The look he shot me told me he knew exactly what he’d done.

“You can’t ride Layla,” Hopper said as we ventured further into the dragon enclosure. “She hasn’t tolerated a rider since she lost her mate. Not even me.”

I paused. “So you’re telling me you can ride dragons?”

“The big ones, sure, if they’ve got the temperament.”

Layla was lying in the corner of her enclosure, her wings folded over her back and her head down over her front paws. A circular pile of white rocks lay next to her. Three enormous eggs sat in the middle of the rock pile, emitting a faint gold glow.

Noah stood from where he was kneeling next to Layla, who was watching me with glassy eyes. “Gave her the sedative. Should be kicking in now, sir.”

“Good,” Hopper grunted. “Now we just need to get the eggs.” He elbowed me and handed me a burlap sack.

I frowned at it. “What am I supposed to do with this?”

“Very carefully put the eggs in it,” Hopper said.

I frowned at the dragon, biting my bottom lip until I felt the intense weight of Hopper’s gaze on me. No, not just on me. He was staring at my mouth. His tail flicked.

“Well?” he said roughly. “I ain’t got all day, Princess.”

Noah sighed. “I can do it if you’re not comfortable.” He put a hand on my arm.

Hopper made a deep grunting sound in the back of his throat and yanked Noah’s hand off my arm. “Don’t touch him!”

Noah stared wide-eyed at Hopper. A moment later, the most delicious scent wafted by. The smell itself was indescribable and barely distinguishable, but definitely there, like polished leather, sweat, and raw sex. Normally, that combo wouldn't have seemed sexy, not even to me, but it was like that scent had crawled right into my brain to zap all my pleasure centers. My cock stood straight up, suddenly incredibly uncomfortable in my too-tight jeans. It was like I was a teenager going through puberty again. No rhyme or reason for it that made any damn sense.

I didn't know if I should be concerned or even more turned on. Was I having a stroke? What the hell was even happening?

Hopper snapped out of whatever momentary rage had taken hold, his eyes darting back and forth while his face colored slightly. "Uh, I mean... Just let him do it, Noah. She likes him. Might be less stressful for Layla."

Noah glanced over at me and shrugged as if to say, "Sorry."

I took a deep breath. *Come on, Robert. Ignore your cock for five seconds and get this done. They're just dragon eggs. Think of Layla like an overgrown chicken. An overgrown fire breathing chicken with wings and very sharp teeth.* I shook my head and stepped forward.

Layla lifted her head as I reached into the nest, nostrils flaring.

"It's okay," I whispered to her. "We're just going to watch them for a little while so you can rest and get better. We'll take care of your babies."

She let out a sad huff and lowered her head, turning away. I felt bad for her, but I wasn't going to waste my chance. I carefully lifted the first egg and almost dropped it. It was heavier and warmer than I expected it to be, and I swore I could feel something moving inside. Lowering it one handed into the bag wasn't easy, and the second one was even harder. I had to make sure they didn't crack against each other. By the time all three eggs were in the bag, it weighed a ton.

Hopper carefully took the bag from me and nodded to Noah. The three of us left the dragon enclosure with Noah locking it up tight behind us.

I glanced over at Hopper, who was breathing a little hard and absently rubbing the raw spot on his antlers. "Are you okay?"

He froze, shoulders stiffening, before immediately dropping his hands to his side. "Of course I am. Why wouldn't I be?"

"You're just acting weird. Well, weirder than usual." I shrugged.

"Why don't you take the eggs back and relax, sir?" Noah suggested. "I can finish up out here."

"Yeah," Hopper muttered, rubbing his forehead. "Good idea. Come on, Princess. I'll take you back to the house."

NINE

HOPPER

MY HANDS TIGHTENED ON the steering wheel. I kept my eyes straight forward, attention on the road, but I couldn't focus on the destination. My good sense had suddenly been overwhelmed by his scent, and now I couldn't think.

Inwardly, I groaned. The last thing I needed was to go into a rut, but here we were. I should've known when I started getting the urge to rub my antlers on every damn thing. It'd been so long since I'd had one, and there was just so much going on that it'd been the furthest thing from my mind. I'd certainly never had this strong of a reaction to a *human*.

I needed to get away from him before I did something. Before he made me stupid.

Why the fuck was he staring at me like that?

“If you're still mad about the dragon—” he started.

“I ain't,” I growled. “I ain't mad. Just... need to get back.”

Four more days. That's all I had to last, and then the other human and his Dominion boyfriend would be back to take this

tiny human away. Then all I had to do was weather it and hope it subsided before we started the drive through the tear.

I sped up to the house and slid the cart to a stop, yanking the key out and shoving it into my pocket. Without a word to Robert, I stalked toward the front door. A curse and a crash behind me made me pause. I looked back and found Robert clinging to the side of the cart, arms trembling, a light sheen of sweat on his forehead. Pain flared in his eyes, and it made anger blaze in my chest. I immediately wanted to gore whatever it was that was hurting him, but there was nothing. He was hurting himself, the stubborn idiot.

And I'd just hurt him more.

For a moment, I stayed where I was, fingers flexing, torn between the screaming drive to go help him and the rational knowledge that would only lead to more pain. Instinct won out, and I stomped back to where he was desperately trying to push through the pain to stand on his injured legs.

He looked up at me, a very different kind of pain flaring in his eyes. The look of a wounded animal being approached by another. "What? What now?"

I swept him into my arms, mumbling, "Idiot. Shouldn't be on your feet this much."

He turned away, flushing, his expression belligerent, but he didn't argue as I carried him through the front door.

I could've set him down in the chair in the entryway and dealt with him there, but something in me was repulsed by the

idea that Noah could walk in while Robert was vulnerable, and I knew Robert wouldn't like that. I also knew I wouldn't have cared about any of that yesterday. Damn this rut. I had to get away from him before it was in full effect.

He squirmed in my arms as I turned down the hall toward his room. "I can walk, you know."

I ignored him and fought with his door to open it.

His room was a mess. Clothes strewn everywhere, papers on the desk, dice, books, and empty bowls... I ignored it as best I could, even though it angered me that he was staying in such a mess. Didn't he have any standards? Maybe I needed to hire a housekeeper in town.

Dammit, Hopper. He's only here a few more days. Let it go.

I carried him to the bed and set him down. He made a small, pained sound.

"You know that ain't supposed to hurt, right?" I rumbled.

He shifted back on the bed. "And what do you know about it?"

I lifted my right hand and peeled the glove off, revealing my prosthetic.

He gawked at it openly, enough that I almost growled at him. "I had no idea."

"Why would you?" I grunted and tugged the glove back on. "Now, what's goin' on with yours?"

“Nothing,” he blurted. “I’m just not used to wearing it this much.”

I snorted and knelt in front of him. “Getting tired when you ain’t used to it is one thing, but if you’re hurting, you got something else goin’ on. May I?” I gestured to his left leg, which I was pretty sure was the problem.

Robert chewed on his bottom lip, staring down at me. I hated watching him do that. The only one who should get to chew on that lip was me. Fuck, where had *that* thought come from?

“Yeah, I guess,” he said after a minute. “But I’m going to have to take my pants off, so don’t be weird about it.”

Me? He was the one who got a hard-on in the barn when I accidentally lassoed him. Maybe that was why I was having such a strong reaction to him. He was flooding the air with his stupid human twink pheromones, practically begging the nearest monster to breed him. He was lucky I was the only monster around. A lot of them might not have had my restraint.

“Whatever,” I grunted.

He kicked off his shoes, unbuttoned his pants, and shimmied out of them, tossing them aside. Underneath, he had on a bright red lacy thong that was tight enough I could see everything. Not that I was looking or anything. He tugged his t-shirt down, twisting it in his fist and blushing like some innocent thing. I wasn’t buying that act.

Focus, Hopper. You're here to look at his leg, not his tiny human dick. I glanced back up. *Okay, maybe not so tiny.*

“Probably need an adjustment,” I said, carefully helping him remove the prosthetic limb and all the padding. Sure enough, the stub was red and irritated underneath.

He flinched when I ran my hand over the angry tissue. “It’s not hot or swollen, so probably no infection. If I had to guess, you’ve got a padding issue. These types of legs aren’t made for walking around on uneven terrain. You got another pair?”

He shook his head. “Can’t get one out here either.”

I nodded. “You need to get seen as soon as you can. Until then, I’ll bring you some padded socks to throw on it. Other one better?”

“Doesn’t hurt as much,” he muttered.

“Well, you should stay off your feet a bit, in any case. If you ain’t used to it, it’ll take a while to strengthen up. Give it a week or two and you’ll be an old pro.” I stood.

Robert mumbled his thanks and reached to start rubbing the stub. He was doing it all wrong, pushing the fluid the wrong way.

I sighed and knelt again. “Here. You’re doing it wrong. Push up. And you gotta watch your salt intake or you’ll have water retention. Didn’t nobody teach you how to do this?”

He winced as I worked the tissue. “I went to PT. Now I can’t go back.”

“Why not?”

He rolled his head forward and looked at me like I was three rocks short of a mountain. “Because I fooled around with the PT guy, and now, it’s awkward.”

“That’s a stupid reason,” I said, even as my temper threatened to flare. I didn’t like the idea of anybody else touching him, especially not in that way. If anybody tried, I’d —

My thoughts broke off as he ran a finger over the rough spot I’d rubbed on my antlers. “What happened here?”

I couldn’t answer him. I was too busy trying to keep myself from launching myself at him to pin him to the bed. The way he was stroking that spot, he might as well have been sucking my dick with the way my body reacted. A lightning bolt of pleasure went through me, and it took everything not to give in.

“Don’t.” The word came out without any force.

“Why not?” He shifted forward.

My breathing quickened, and I pushed his hand away in panic. “I need to go,” I muttered and rushed out the door, letting it swing shut behind me.

Leaning against the wall in the hallway, I let out a breath. This was bad. Very bad. If I didn’t find some way to avoid him, I wasn’t going to last four days. It’d be one thing if it was anybody else, but Robert knew how to tease a reaction out of me with uncanny ease.

I wiped a hand down my face and my stomach growled. I needed to eat, but first, I needed to get the eggs in the incubator. I'd wasted enough time on Robert.

Scowling, I dragged myself to where I'd left the eggs in their sack, verified they were all there, and then went to my workshop. There was a large sixty-gallon terrarium in there I used to incubate eggs on occasion. I carefully put the eggs inside and switched on the heat lamp before synching the timer on my watch. They had to be turned every six hours to maintain an even heat of one hundred twelve degrees.

The eggs seen to, I went to the kitchen and yanked open the fridge. Levi hadn't been in yet that week, which meant I was running low on prepared meals, but there was always plenty of peanut butter. A little protein would calm me down. I pulled the jar out and unscrewed the lid only to have a new spike in my blood pressure when I saw the giant spoon hole in the center, and the dirty spoon sitting in the sink licked clean.

That little fucker! I'd told him not to eat the peanut butter out of the jar! I'd fuckin' told him! Gods dammit, that was the last straw.

I left the peanut butter on the counter and stomped back down the hall to give that human a piece of my mind.

TEN

ROBERT

HOPPER WAS BARELY OUT of the room before I had my hand thrust into my underwear. Something was wrong with me. I'd always been an insatiable slut, ever since I got out of high school and went to that conversion camp. My cock got hard for everyone all the time, at the slightest fucking breeze. I used to think that was a blessing. It sure made all the men I was with happy.

But getting older, getting shoved into that chair, hiding behind the walls of my rental house made it painfully obvious that it was just another symptom of something bigger. I had no self-control and a self-destructive nature, two dangerous traits. It was going to be the death of me someday.

I shouldn't have played that game with Hopper, but I couldn't help it. He was too easy to push, and I was too curious to find out how far he'd let things go. He seemed to be flirting back in his own way.

And he'd looked. More than once.

The stubborn asshole wanted to fuck me. He just thought he was too good to come down to my level. I was determined to

show him he wasn't.

That thought was the furthest thing from my mind, though, as I pulled the bottom hem of my shirt up and held it between my teeth, shoving my lotion-slicked hand down into the tight confines of that lacy red thong he'd been drooling over.

I held the image of him in my mind as he'd been earlier in the day, watching him wrap that rope around his arm and wishing it was me again. The fingers on my free hand traced over my bottom lip, trailing down the knot in my throat, over my chest and up my stomach, thinking of him. I put more lotion on my hand and shifted my focus to teasing my hole, inside and out, the way I imagined he would.

He wasn't special; just another unattainable hot guy to fantasize about. I just needed to get this out of my system, get through this week, and... I didn't want to think about having to do anything else. If I couldn't get what I needed, might as well get off.

The door to my room suddenly swung open and Hopper stormed in, looking even more pissed than usual, but he hesitated when he saw me. I must've looked a sight, my face flushed, shirt pulled up, my hard-on jutting up out of the lace. Whatever had pissed him off, he forgot all about it.

Dammit, the one time I didn't lock the door first...

But I wasn't ashamed to be caught. Men more frightening and powerful than him had already walked in on me and done worse to me than he'd ever do.

I let the shirt fall from between my teeth and stared at him from behind the veil of my messy hair. The air was full of electricity, invisible sparks igniting in the heavy silence.

I swallowed, trying to do something about the dryness in my throat. “Well? Either leave or help.”

It was meant to be a mocking jab to embarrass him into leaving. Something I could tease him about later to get a rise out of him. Instead, he took it as an invitation.

Hopper stepped in and closed the door behind him.

My breath caught as I considered calling his bluff. How far was I really willing to take this? How far did he want to go?

Come on, little one. Breathe for Daddy.

I made myself breathe.

He came closer, standing at the edge of the bed. Hopper wasn't that much taller than me, but since he was standing and I was kneeling on the mattress, it felt like he towered over me. There were barely inches between us, but it felt like miles. A slight blush colored his cheeks, but I couldn't tell if that was from being pissed or horny. His eyes raked over me, sharp as talons.

Fuck. I licked my lips. Why was he just standing there? Maybe he was expecting a show. Fine with me. I wasn't shy, and this was more entertainment than I'd had all week.

I avoided looking at him, reaching for the lotion next to the bed. His eyes tracked every movement of my hands, following as I slicked my palms with lotion and wrapped a fist around

my shaft. I moved my hand up and down with a few quick pumps, still avoiding his gaze.

“Slower,” Hopper said, his voice hoarse with desire.

My hand stilled. I chanced looking up into his intense, sky-blue eyes.

He was barely breathing, pupils dilated. A soft, pink tongue darted out to wet his lips. “Do it slower.”

Fucking hell, that was hot. I’d been told what to do plenty of times in bed, but not while jacking off. And here I’d thought I’d done almost everything.

I shifted on the bed so my weight wasn’t resting on my knees and spread my legs open as wide as the lacy thong would allow. Elastic dug into my hips, fabric straining to accommodate. I was too hard, too big for the tiny strip of lace to contain, the slick head of my cock jutting up from it. I leaned back, slowly running my fingers over the head and shuddering when a bead of pre-cum welled from the slit. With a groan, I spread it over the head and started working my fist up and down the exposed length, this time slower.

It didn’t feel real, what was happening between us. I was in a fever dream, a fantasy too good to be real.

He stared down at me, nostrils flaring, breathing fast, eyes fixed on the way I was moving my hand over my cock. Fuck, but there was something extremely hot about the intensity, the silence, not knowing exactly what he was thinking or exactly what effect I was having on him. It’d be one thing if he got his

cock out to show me just how much he was appreciating the show. Then I'd know how to treat this, whatever this was. But the lack of demand for reciprocation was... I didn't know. Freeing maybe. He wasn't demanding I suck him off or do anything other than enjoy myself for his entertainment.

The sound of my panting breaths filled the shadowy room. Dust danced in a beam of evening sunlight coming through the window. I gave up trying to understand him or what he wanted and just decided to enjoy the moment. My head tilted back, letting a stray bead of sweat trace down my chest.

“Fuck.” Hopper's voice sounded strangled.

When I glanced back at him from behind hooded eyes, he wasn't moving except for his fingers flexing at his sides. Did he want to touch me? God, I wanted him to. I wanted his hands around my throat, hot breath on the back of my neck, teeth in my shoulder.

I whispered a curse and dropped my hand into the panties to give my tight balls a gentle tug, staving off the inevitable just a little while longer.

Hopper shifted forward, planting his hands on either side of me on the mattress like a cage. Maybe he was finally going to make a move. But he didn't reach between my legs, or grab the back of my head to force me into a kiss. He leaned forward, his nose brushing against my throat, and my breath caught. I shuddered and bit back a groan as his tongue flicked out over my pulse. That sweet, heavy scent filled the air.

Breathing it in was like inhaling an aphrodisiac. I'd barely moved my hand, and I was already on the verge of coming.

"Fuck, Hopper." I was suddenly desperate to see him, to touch him, if only to get him back for what he was doing to me. I reached for that ridiculous belt buckle.

He caught my hands.

"I want to touch you," I protested.

His face flushed brighter. "No, you don't. I'm not like you."

"I don't care."

His throat worked. "I can't."

"But—"

He licked my throat again before looking down, hungry eyes taking all of me in. "Forget about me. Keep going, Princess."

I couldn't breathe. I needed space. Needed to not be pressed against all his heat. He was on fire, and I was afraid I'd catch. With a small groan, I leaned back, letting my shoulders hit the mattress. He didn't move, staying where he was, leaning over my body and watching me jerk off with rapt attention. I yanked my shirt up and out of the way, stomach flexing, and closed my eyes, losing myself to the pleasure of the moment.

Hopper's rasping breaths filled the air next to mine. My eyes fluttered open to the sound of metal clinking, and I watched as he unbuckled his belt and unbuttoned the top button of his jeans. His hand dove into his pants, moving

frantically up and down like he was stroking himself, but something about the movement was different, like he was a completely different shape. Fuck, I wanted to see him, touch him, but he kept himself hidden. Even I wasn't mean enough to force the issue if he wasn't comfortable with it.

“Don't stop,” he moaned.

I didn't, doubling down and shifting the pressure to the head of my cock while I watched him stroke himself inside his jeans. A weird tension vibrated between us, this sense that we were locked in a battle that neither of us could afford to lose. I just wished I knew the rules to this game we were playing.

“Hopper,” I heard myself say in a whiny, breathy voice that barely sounded like me. “Gonna come.”

“Fuck yes,” came his growling reply. “Me too.”

I held out as long as I could, sitting on the razor's edge until Hopper's body jerked. He spat a growled curse and cum shot up over his fist and started spilling over his belt buckle. I let out an anguished sound and followed him into bliss, coming so hard it hit my chin.

When I fell back into reality too soon, he was still leaning over me, breathing hard, the look on his face one of utter devastation. Something clenched in my chest and all I wanted to do was reach out and touch him, tell him everything was going to be okay.

He pulled away before I could, quickly turning to give me his back. Hopper's belt buckle jingled, and his zipper

whispered.

My temper flared. “That’s it?” I said, sitting up. “You’re just going to leave?”

He hesitated, looking back at me as if it’d never even occurred to him that he should do anything other than come in his pants and leave.

“Fine,” I grumbled and awkwardly slid my thumbs under the straps of my thong to pull it up. “Just go.”

His answer was a relieved grunt. “See you at supper. Stay out of the peanut butter.”

Footsteps retreated. The door opened and shut. Footsteps faded, leaving me alone.

I curled up on the bed, clutching a pillow to my stomach, feeling empty for no reason. What more could I have possibly wanted? A kiss goodnight? Wasn’t like we meant anything to each other. We were just a couple of lonely, horny guys having a mutual jerk off session. Nothing had changed. He was still a dick, and I was still me.

With a sigh, I reached for the comfort of my phone. There was no service, but I opened my texts anyway to read the messages I’d left unread.

Wonderboi: *Where are you?*

Wonderboi: *This isn’t funny, Rob. Really worried now.*

And then two from Ben:

Ben_not_BJ: *Turn on your phone! Or at least the news. Your picture's everywhere.*

Ben_not_BJ: *Also, send dragon pics.*

I frowned and sat back up, reaching to switch on the satellite TV. It didn't get many channels out there, but it did pick up a twenty-four-hour news channel.

The news was replaying a tape of my dad standing at a podium outside the capital building, my teary-eyed mother beside him. They had my army picture in a frame on the front of the podium. The news ticker along the bottom of the screen read: SENATOR'S SON MISSING.

"We will leave no stone unturned in our search," he was saying. "And the full force of the law is behind us. Anyone with any information should call the hotline ASAP."

My mother wrapped her arm around his and leaned in, dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief. "I just want my baby back."

I let out a long breath and collapsed against the bed. "Fuuuuuck!"

ELEVEN

ROBERT

MOM WAS CRYING, AND Dad was pissed. What else was new?

I spun the phone cord around my finger and shifted to keep my back to Hopper, who stood behind me with his arms crossed and being sexy and distracting. “No, Mom. I’m okay. Like I said, I was never missing. I just went on vacation.”

“But Ryder went to your house, and you weren’t answering your texts.” She sniffled, her voice tight. “What were we supposed to think? You know your father’s position means we all have to be extra careful.”

“Let me talk to him, Veronica,” Dad insisted in the background. “I’ll set him straight.”

I sighed and ran a hand through my hair, resisting the urge to snap that I’d never be *straight*, despite his best efforts. “Please don’t cry, Mom.”

“Just the thought of you stranded in Wyoming all alone...”

“I’m not alone. I’m on this ranch. It’s just remote, is all.” I threw a glance over my shoulder at Hopper and glanced away.

Other than my request to use the phone, we hadn't spoken since what'd happened yesterday. I probably shouldn't have left my family to sweat overnight, but I didn't want to be all over the morning news. I figured if I called mid-day, it'd just get swept under the rug and the national news would be its regular, depressing self instead of focusing on me.

"A ranch?" my mother screeched, distraught. "Oh, honey. That can't be good for your legs. Is there a doctor out there? Let me send someone."

"You're not sending him one red cent, Veronica," Dad growled.

The phone creaked as she put her hand over it. "Hush, George. If I'd known what was going on, I never would've agreed to cutting him off without a conversation first."

There was a loud sound, and I cringed, imagining Dad jerking the phone away from her. Sure enough, his voice was on the other end next.

"I've had enough of all this fooling around, Robert. You've put this family through enough. I've got a meeting with the party leader in an hour, and then the governor of Florida, but after that, I'm flying straight to Casper and we're going to have a talk."

I ran a hand over my face. Dad showing up at Hopper's ranch was the worst possible thing that could happen. "There's nothing to talk about, *George*. You've made your position regarding me and my *lifestyle* perfectly clear."

“This isn’t another Detroit, is it?” he huffed on the other end. “Son, those men don’t love you. They’re only using you for their twisted power trips.”

“Well, maybe I like being used, just not by you!” I shouted into the phone. “And if that means I’ve got daddy issues, you know who to blame!”

“Don’t you speak to me in that tone of voice, young man.”

“I’m not a teenager anymore. I’m a grown ass man. I should be able to go on vacation without calling to ask your permission first, and without you turning it into some three-ring political circus to generate sympathy votes! All I want is to live my life and be left alone like a normal person! Why can’t you understand that?”

“Because you’re not a normal person,” he snapped back. “You’re—”

“Broken?” I cut in, my throat tight.

“You’re a *Smith*.”

“Well, maybe I don’t want to be,” I said.

The other end was quiet for a long moment.

“Don’t bother calling me back. We’re done.” I swallowed the tightness in my throat and hung up, leaving my hand on the receiver. My chest heaved with breath, emotion swelling. *I’m not going to cry. Not over this.*

Hopper’s eyes weighed heavily on me and suddenly felt even worse. I spun on him. “What? You got something smart

to say too?”

He uncrossed his arms and walked away. I half expected him to leave the kitchen altogether and go back to whatever it was he'd been doing. I was sure he was busy. He was always busy. Instead, he opened a cabinet, got down two shot glasses and a bottle of expensive whiskey, pouring two glasses. Hopper offered me one.

I eyed it before pushing past him to retrieve the bottle. Without a word, I went back to my room. There, I turned my phone volume up all the way and set the playlist to random before sitting down in my wheelchair in front of a mirror.

The face that stared back at me wasn't one I recognized. It was tired, bland. Just another safe and perfectly satisfactory Robert Smith in a sea of Smiths and Joneses and Kennedys. Even the teal hair had faded, letting the brown bleed through.

I tore open one of my cosmetics bags, looking for something, anything, that would change the nobody staring back at me. When I didn't find anything that jumped out at me, I moved on to the next bag, and the next, until my hands closed on my shaving razor. It buzzed to life in my hands and I turned back to my reflection.

Running the razor over the sides of my head felt like vindication. The hair fell away in messy clumps of faded teal and underlying brown. I brushed it off my shoulders like dust and grabbed the scissors, touching up what was left. There were three bottles of semi-permanent hair dye in my cosmetics case. I selected the pink and went into the bathroom.

I spent the rest of the day alternating between getting drunk and doing everything I could to make myself unrecognizable. I painted my nails and put on my favorite dress. It was just a simple yellow sun dress, but I liked the way my bare shoulders looked under the thin straps. I put on a full face of makeup, took it off, put on another, dusted my chest and arms with a sparkling powder.

When the whiskey bottle was empty, I stared at my reflection again and saw nothing of Robert Smith left. *What would Hopper think?* I wondered, turning my face one way and then the other. *Why should I care what he thinks? My dad is wrong about a lot of things, but he's not wrong about the stupid men I've dated.* Why did I always want the wrong guys?

I thought of Charlie and Cupid with their big smiles, the way Cupid absolutely adored him, fawning over him night and day. Chris and Ollie, too, had something beautiful and special. Even Bud and Phoenix were good for each other. They all made each other better by being together. Why couldn't I have that too? Instead, I was always chasing men I knew would hurt me.

I'd tried. A dozen times over, I had tried to force myself to be like them. I dated nice guys with good jobs and stable lives dozens of times, even endured eight months of the worst vanilla sex of my life with some guy named Trey for a while, thinking there had to be something I was missing. I just had to give him a chance. He was a nice guy. A kind guy. I heard he was getting married to a banker or a baker or something.

Why did I want to be hurt?

Why couldn't I just be happy with who I was? Instead, I had to invent fake names and hide behind them like a shield, pretending I was okay underneath. I was fine on my own. Hotdog didn't need any help from anybody. Annie Mae, my drag persona, was smart and confident and loved the way she looked.

But Robert Smith... Who was Robert Smith but the sum of the parts everyone else had asked him to play? Son, brother, soldier, broken. That was the name I signed to all my medical forms, the name they called out at the VA, the name my family had given me. It was my name, but it didn't belong to me. It belonged to them.

There was no Robert Smith, and yet Robert Smith was all there was.

I crawled into bed drunk and feeling sorry for myself.

I was almost asleep when I heard the familiar strum of a guitar. After a few bars, I sat up, frowning. Even though I was woozy, I thought I recognized the opening bars. *That's not Johnny Cash.*

Maybe it was because I was drunk, but I got goosebumps when I realized he was playing "Shallow", the duet Lady Gaga had done with Bradley Cooper for that movie. I stumbled over to open the window so I could hear it better. When it hit the chorus, I started belting out the lyrics, but he didn't stop playing.

Yeah, I was definitely at the emotional drunk stage if I was getting so worked up over a dumb love song. It probably meant nothing, just something he happened to know how to play. Still, I wanted it to mean something. I wanted the night before to mean something. Somewhere deep down, I was still holding out hope he'd come back and kiss me and hold me and tell me he cared.

But he wouldn't. All we'd ever have were these evening serenades of other people's love songs, and that night we almost meant something.

TWELVE

HOPPER

THE DAYS FELL INTO a routine.

I got up at four every morning and made Robert a peanut butter sandwich. I left it in a plastic baggie in the fridge with a note reminding him it was there. He never thanked me for it, never acknowledged it, but it was always gone when I came back for dinner.

Every morning from just before dawn to around noon, I drove from enclosure to enclosure, noting which dragons needed what and getting it for them if I could. If there wasn't time, I left a note on the clipboard at each station for Noah when he got around to it.

At noon, I went back to the house for dinner, usually a pre-cooked frozen meal the cook had made. I split whatever there was with Robert, who never failed to join me. I'd sit and eat and listen while he talked about whatever he wanted. Mostly, he talked about his game, his music, his family sometimes. It hardly mattered to me. I just liked having something to listen to other than the silence.

What we didn't talk about was the night I almost lost control. While he'd seemed irritated with me at first, he seemed to have gotten over it. I still felt guilty. Not because of what we'd done, but because I couldn't give him what he wanted. For someone whose family didn't approve of his sexual partners, he was remarkably open about it, constantly bragging about his extensive sexual experiences. He never gave a number, but the names were hard to keep track of.

Every time he told me a new story about some guy he'd let fuck him, I gripped my fork so tight I nearly bent it. The stories were like talking about the weather with him, and he told them freely, clearly unaware that it made me want to hunt every one of those men down and beat them unconscious. I had this stupid idea in my head that because I'd watched him come, and he'd seen me do the same, I should take care of him. It really was a foolish idea. If he found out the truth about me, he'd laugh at me.

Every day, after dinner, I turned the eggs in the incubator before going back out to process Noah's collection from the day before. Production was down for that time of year, which was concerning, but it was probably the weather. It was getting unseasonably hot already, which had me thinking about taking them across the tear early for summer grazing. Maybe I'd go after Robert left. I'd probably need the long, hard days of dragon driving on the trail to distract me from the melancholy.

We ate supper every night, where Robert was generally less talkative. I figured it was because he was getting tired and sore. I'd given him a few extra padded socks, and that seemed

to help with his pain. I also made sure to keep the liquor cabinet stocked. He didn't drink every night, but he'd done it a few times that week, hiding in his room with his music loud, drinking up all my expensive booze. He was dulling pain of another sort with the whiskey, but it didn't feel right to push him to talk about it.

Instead, I tried to tell him I was listening in the only way I could. I'd sit outside his window and let the guitar do the speaking for me. Sometimes, he'd come to the window and sing along and I'd get a glimpse of him looking pretty in his dresses and his makeup. I wanted him to come out and sit with me, but I didn't know how to ask. Probably for the best. A week wasn't near enough time to know someone like him.

On the last day, I felt like playing a little Clapton. He didn't seem to know the lyrics to "Wonderful Tonight", or if he did, he wasn't singing along, so I decided to fill them in myself. I was never much of a singer, but with some songs, that didn't matter as much. Sometimes, the words could speak for themselves, no matter who was singing, even if it was a bitter old jacqeroi doing the singing.

When the song was done, I just sat there next to his open window, trying to think of something meaningful to say, but nothing came to mind. Truth be told, the shared silence was kind of nice. I mean, maybe he didn't think so. Maybe he was sitting on the other side of that wall, bored out of his mind. Maybe all my playing in the evening annoyed him and he'd be glad to leave tomorrow.

“Hey, Hopper?”

My heart jumped into my throat at the sound of his voice. I swallowed it and reached up to rub the raw spot on my antlers.

“Yeah?”

“You’re not... mad at me, are you?”

I turned my head, but even then I could only just make out the shadow of his shoulder and the bright red strap of whatever dress he’d put on. “Why would I be mad at you?”

He shrugged. The shoulder strap fell, and he left it. “Because of that night.”

He didn’t have to say anything more. We both knew which night he meant. There could be only one. As foolish as it was, I knew it was a night I’d remember for the rest of my life. It was probably just the rut talking, but something about it felt special, even if it hadn’t ended right.

“I ain’t mad,” I said at length, letting my head fall back against the wall.

“Oh. Good.”

I turned my face again to glance back at him. “You mad?”

“No,” he said quickly.

“That’s good.”

The quiet followed, broken by a cicada’s song and the distant bray of a dragon.

“You could’ve stayed though,” Robert said. “But I understand why, I guess. I’m leaving tomorrow, and you’ve

probably got other people you'd rather... spend time with."

I looked out at the bright orange sunset sky and shook my head. "Ain't nobody else."

I didn't know why I said that. My guts were tied in knots and it was making my brain stupid.

He shifted on the other side of the window. "I know you don't have internet or cell phones out here, but do you think it'd be okay if I called every once in a while? Just to check on the dragons?"

I nodded once. "I think that'd be real nice, Robert."

"You can call me Princess if you want," he mumbled. "I don't really mind that much."

I hesitated. "You sure you don't mind?"

"Yeah, actually. I kind of... like it." He sighed and didn't say anything for a long time. Then, he got up and put his hands on the window to close it. "Goodnight, Hopper."

"Night, Princess."

His lips twitched up in a reluctant smile even as a pale pink flush stained his cheeks. The window went down with a thud that could've been the final nail in a coffin. There'd be no more evenings out on the terrace, playing the guitar. No more quiet conversations through a wall. No more peanut butter sandwiches cut diagonally and left in the fridge where I knew he'd find them. Just me, the dragons, and the wide-open range, just the way I liked it.

Why, then, did I feel so empty?

Another Wyoming night fell, no different from the thousands of others that'd come before. Yet that great big sky felt a whole lot closer, like she was calling to me. I thought about going for a walk, just to clear my head, but decided against it.

I stopped by my workshop and did a quick check of the eggs, marking another day on the calendar. If the Abrakari eggs didn't hatch soon... The thought made my heart ache. Layla had been through so much. I didn't want her to lose her babies, too. Even if she couldn't look after them, I knew she'd be a good mother. Maybe it felt hopeless now because she'd lost her mate, but if she had her dragonlings, maybe she'd rally. Love was waiting on the other side of pain. I just had to get her through to the other side.

Before going to bed, I took a hot bath to ease my aching stumps. Losing the hand hadn't been so bad, but when the feet were amputated a couple years ago, I thought I was going to lose everything. I'd been so thankful for Leroy, the way he pulled through to keep everything going while I recovered. It really was a damn shame about him, but there's no help for some people.

I pulled on a pair of pajama pants and hung my hat on its usual hook on the wall before going to bed.

Normally, I was asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow. Sleep was precious, and I never got near enough. Something about that night kept me awake, though, tossing and turning

long into the dark. When I couldn't sleep, I got up and set to rubbing my antlers on the corner of the bed post, just for a little relief from those pent-up feelings. Of course, the rubbing only made my cock hard, which was worse. I had hoped the one night I'd been brave enough to do anything with the damn thing would have thrown me out of rut. Should've known better. I was stuck in it for a couple of weeks at least. Worst time of the year for it, too. At least if I left early for the Abrasokas, I could weather it up there away from people where I'd do as little damage as possible.

When the soft rap came on my door, I almost thought I'd imagined it. I quit grinding my antlers on the bed frame and lifted my hand off the stiff bulge in my pants.

The knock came again.

I mumbled a curse and yanked the blanket up to cover my erection. "Yeah?"

The door groaned open and Robert came in. Gods in heaven, it should be a sin for a man to look that good in a dress. He had on this long, silky nightgown, midnight blue. The top was all see-through lace and hugged his collarbones just right to make them stand out. All I could suddenly think about was dragging him to bed.

I blew out a breath, trying to calm myself. "You shouldn't be in here."

"I know," he said, stepping closer. "And if you want me to go, I will, but before I do, you're going to hear me out. I'm tired of dancing around this. I need to get it off my chest."

I swallowed. This was a bad idea. “I’m listening.”

He took a deep breath, running his fingers through what was left of his hair. He’d shaved the sides off the other day and left the strip in the middle behind coloring it pink. I hadn’t been able to stop wondering what all that pink hair would look like wrapped around my fingers ever since. “Okay, so... I think you’re hot.”

He paused, giving me room to stop him. I didn’t.

“And I’m at least reasonably sure you’re attracted to me given previous... interactions,” he continued. “I know we’re going to part ways soon, and I just thought... Well, I don’t want to go away always wondering what could’ve been.”

I frowned. “What’re you saying? Be plain, Princess.”

Robert sighed and came to the edge of the bed. He paused there again, giving me another look, daring me to stop him. When I didn’t, he put his hands on the bed and slid onto it. He crawled over my body and stopped to straddle my hips. My heart pounded in my chest, so hard I thought I was going to ruin everything by throwing up.

Robert put his palms lightly on my chest and gave me that intense doe-eyed stare. “I want you to fuck me.”

THIRTEEN

ROBERT

HOPPER'S HEART HAMMERED AGAINST my sweaty palms. The light fur over his chest was soft and warm and I couldn't help but sink my fingers in further to feel more of him. He stared up at me, his face a blank mask. I couldn't tell if he wanted to throw me out or flip me over. I was hoping for the latter, but if he said no, I'd go. No hard feelings unless he was rude about it. I knew how to take rejection on the chin like a pro.

But the hard-on I felt under the blankets made me hope even more for a yes.

"You want me to fuck you," he said flatly.

Maybe I wasn't being clear enough. "What I want is for you to shove my head into your mattress until I'm eating the springs and fuck me sore. If you'd rather do it the other way, we can negotiate, but the truth is, I really like bottoming more. Not that I can't top. I've done it. I'm meh about it generally, but I like you enough to try."

He looked me over.

I fought a shudder as he ran a hand over the exposed skin of my upper thigh under the silky fabric of the nightgown I'd put on. What if he didn't like it? He'd seemed into the lacy red thong before, but maybe I'd misjudged. Some guys were funny about the clothes. I liked women's lingerie—silk and nylon and lace, corsets cinched tight and cute little slippers. Wearing them made me feel sexy and confident, and I needed that to come to him, to take this risk.

Strong fingers twisted in the hip straps of the black thong I'd put on. "You like me?"

Something in his voice made my heart ache. I wanted to reach out and touch his face, but I didn't know if he was open to that kind of intimate touch. "Yeah, Hopper," I said, my voice strained. "I like you. I thought that'd be obvious by now." To drive home my point, I ground my semi-hard cock against his hard-on through the blanket. "We've only got one life, and I want this. I think you want me too."

His Adam's apple bobbed. "I do. It's just..."

"It's the dress, isn't it? I can take it off if it bothers you." I frowned.

His nose twitched, his face flushing pink. "What? No. I like the way you look, Princess. It doesn't matter to me if you're wearing a dress or jeans or nothing at all. I like *you*. I just... I've never... Never done this."

I blinked, trying to make sense of what he was saying. "You mean you've never slept with a human? Or do you mean with another man?"

Surely, he'd been with *somebody*. Ollie had inferred that Hopper was hundreds of years old. Everybody on this side of the tear seemed to know him, but he probably only had limited interactions with humans.

"I'm fine with either," I clarified. "I mean, if you are."

His cheeks flushed brighter pink. "No, I mean never with *anyone*. I've never had sex before, okay?"

Oh my God. Hopper was a virgin.

I hesitated. I almost exclusively went after older men, which had always meant they were more experienced than me. And Hopper was older than all of them. He was the ultimate daddy type as far as I was concerned. It'd never in a million years have occurred to me that was the reason he hadn't made a move. I thought he was just being an asshole.

But now that I knew he wasn't... Did I really want to do this? I still wanted him, but I also felt bad for wanting him. His first time should've been special, with someone he loved. Not some desperate quick fuck to satisfy my curiosity.

He looked away, expression hardening. Yet, even with that effort, he couldn't hide the glassy sheen in his eyes that said my reaction had hurt. "Go on. Laugh."

I jerked so hard I almost fell off him. "Laugh? What the fuck? Why would I laugh?" When he didn't answer me, I tipped his face back toward me. "Hey. I'm not laughing. It's not a deal breaker for me, but if you don't want to, I get it." I

started to shift my weight off him so I could slink back to my room where I belonged.

His hands closed on my ass and squeezed, holding me in place. “I didn’t say that.”

I swallowed, my heart beating hard in my neck. “Are you... Are you sure you don’t want to wait for... I don’t know. Somebody special?”

“Who says you ain’t special?”

I smiled, blushed, and turned away. “Come on, now. You know what I mean. I’m being serious.”

“So am I,” he said.

My heart fluttered as I looked down at him. No one had ever said anything like that to me before. It was silly how much I liked hearing that he thought I was someone special. Someone worth sharing such an important moment with.

Hopper shifted underneath me, sitting up, and my breath hitched. He seized my chin between two fingers and looked down into my eyes in a way that made my insides melt like butter. “I want to fuck you into next week, Princess. I’ve been wantin’ that for days. But before I do, there’s something else I want.”

I chewed on my lip for a minute before whispering, “Anything.”

He ran the pad of his thumb over my bottom lip. “I want to kiss those pretty lips of yours you keep chewing on and get a taste of that sharp tongue.”

“Fuck. Yes, please.” I groaned and leaned in.

His breathy laugh tickled my nose. “So, you *can* be polite.”

I was going to say something smart, but he pressed his lips to mine and that shut me up. The first kiss was tentative and achingly gentle, little more than the press of his lips to mine. It was grade-school level kissing and yet it sent such a flutter of lust through me that I nearly grabbed him.

We parted briefly before I went back in for more, this time a little more insistently. He kissed me back, matching my enthusiasm, so I took it further, nipping at his lip. His fingertips dug hard into my ass, and he groaned into me, pulling me closer, asking for more. I leaned in, bracing my body against his with my hands on his chest. The tips of our tongues met in a tentative dance and I shuddered at the foreign texture of him. He seemed to have raised tastebuds in a thick swirl toward the front of his tongue, and I couldn't help but imagine how that'd feel on my cock.

Another time, I thought. *Down boy*.

But there probably wouldn't be another time, and that hurt.

I pushed the thought down to focus on him, determined to do everything I could to make this an enjoyable experience for him. My first time had been an embarrassing disaster that'd ended in tears. I didn't want that for him.

I put a hand on his chin. When he leaned back, his lips were bright pink, shimmering, and almost swollen.

“Change of plans,” I said and kissed his chin. “How about I ride your cock until you come instead? How’s that sound?”

“Thought you wanted me to fuck you?” He sounded a little disappointed.

“I want to make sure this is good for you. If you’re up for more after, we can revisit railing my ass into next week.”

“Yeah,” he said, voice rough as gravel. “Okay.” Hopper tried to sweep in for another kiss, but I put a finger on his nose and pushed him back.

“Top is easier if I take the prosthetics off. Are you okay with that?”

His eye twitched. “Whatever’s more comfortable for you but...”

“You can keep yours on if you want. I literally don’t care.” I slid to the edge of the bed and quickly removed my legs, making sure to keep them within reach to put them back on. I left the sleeves on, though, more because it made sense logistically.

There had been a time early on when I hated the idea of taking those off in front of anyone. I wasn’t comfortable until I hooked up with a professional devotee and that helped. Some people thought devotees—who had a fetish for people with limb differences and prosthetics—were creeps, and sex workers got treated even worse. But this guy basically specialized in helping amputees feel sexy again, and it’d been an empowering and intense experience that really changed my

outlook on life. It wasn't for everybody, but bodies, sex, and desire were complicated. What worked for me might've been someone else's big ick, which was why I had no problems with Hopper keeping his on. It took a lot of confidence to be vulnerable like that, and he was already about to be in a vulnerable position.

I glanced over my shoulder and gave him a reassuring smile. "You want the gown off or on?"

"I..." He licked his lips. "You choose."

I shrugged and decided to leave it on for the moment. Crawling back to him, I pulled his lips into another kiss and asked, "Is there anything you don't want? Anywhere on your body you don't want me to touch?"

His breathing was fast, heart racing. "I don't..."

"You're in charge," I told him, kissing his upper lip gently.

His big bunny ears twitched, making me ache to run my fingers over them. I definitely wanted to touch his antlers, lick them if he'd let me. I had a feeling they were more sensitive than they looked.

Hopper swallowed, face flushing. "Just don't pull my tail."

I smiled and kissed his temple. "Sure. As for me, I'm good with anything. I don't care if you bite or bruise me. Just no marks on the face." I cracked a hand loudly against my ass right above his hand, watching his eyes flare wide with raw, fiery lust. "That means you can spank me all you want if I'm bad. I'll try to be good tonight, but no promises."

I ran a tentative finger over the raw spot on his antlers where he'd rubbed the outer layer smooth. Hopper let out a shuddering groan and leaned forward to rest his face against my chest. I didn't hear what he mumbled into my skin, but I felt his tongue dart out and run over my collarbone.

"Shit, Daddy, your tongue feels good. You're making me so hard for you. I want it all over me." To show him, I ground my hard cock against his body.

He closed a hand around the back of my neck and yanked the top of the nightgown aside, exposing my chest. His hot, textured tongue flicked over my nipple, teasing it. I sighed and arched my back, trying to give him more of me. My arms shook with the effort of holding onto him by the antlers as he sucked the nipple mercilessly.

His big hand found my cock where it was trapped inside my panties, and he started rubbing the head with a thumb through the lace. "Fuck, I love how thick your cock is," he muttered into my skin.

"Stop," I whined, even as I tried to thrust against his hand. "You'll make me come."

He hesitated, pulling back slightly to look up at me curiously. "I thought that was the point?"

"Well, once I do, you'll have to wait. I mean, I'm generally good to go a few times, but even I'm just human."

Hopper frowned. "You can only come once?"

I lifted an eyebrow. “Why? How many times can you come before you have to take a break?”

He blinked, eyes going unfocused. “I don’t know. I’ve never tried more than three in a row.”

Oh, fuck. I was in bed with the goddamn energizer bunny of sex. My cock jumped at the idea of breaking his record, and I decided that’d be my mission for the night. I smirked. “Wanna see if you can do four?”

His excitement seemed to falter. “I don’t know if you’ll want to once you see. I’m not... I’m not like you.”

He’d said that before, and I had yet to get a glimpse of his equipment, but from what I’d felt, he wasn’t small. Even if he was, I could work with whatever was down there.

I kissed his antlers, delighting in the shudder that went through him when I did. Then I slid down his body, kissing all the way. “Why don’t you let me be the judge of what kind of dick I like? Pretty sure I’m an expert on the subject.”

He snorted at that, but tensed when I gently pushed him onto his back and hooked a thumb around the waistband of his pajamas. Even without taking them off, I could make out a vague shape, and he was right about one thing. He wasn’t human shaped by any means. It almost looked like the head was shaped like a crescent moon. It didn’t look super long, but long enough to get the job done. What he lacked in length, he made up for in girth. Even through the fabric, I could tell he was thicker than most men. But then, I’d fucked Axel plenty

of times and that man had big dick game like nobody else I'd ever seen.

I glanced up at him. "You okay?"

His forehead wrinkled, some of his salt and pepper hair falling messily near his eyes. "Just do it. Get it over with."

I carefully tugged his pajama pants down. His dick immediately sprang up once it was free, and I held my breath. I'd gotten the shape and size generally right except for one thing. His cock didn't have just one head. It had two smaller heads extending from where they were joined on a single shaft. There was also a large knot of tissue near the base of his cock. It was pink and hairless, stark against the fine chestnut fur on his thighs and stomach. There was a stripe of darker, coarse hair trailing up the center of his belly, stopping just below his navel. God bless men with a happy trail. That was sexy as fuck, and I couldn't wait to bury my nose against it.

I had no idea how I was going to ride that, but damn if I didn't want to find out. "Fuck, that's hot."

Hopper licked his lips, betraying his nerves. "Yeah?"

"Hell yeah, it is. Can I suck you off first?" That'd help him relax and ease into deciding if he wanted more, plus give me a better understanding of how flexible certain parts were. That and I really wanted to see if he'd shoot cum out of both of them or just one at a time.

"*Fuck*. Yeah, Princess. Suck Daddy's cock." His sudden surge of confidence was the hottest thing I'd heard all night.

Despite my eagerness, I sat up and caught his lips again in another feverish kiss to put him at ease. I put his hand on my dick so he could feel just how much I wanted him, hoping that'd put the last of his insecurities aside. He was breathless when we parted, his dick twitching eagerly between his thighs.

“You got lube?” I asked. “For later.”

He nodded and yanked open the bedside table almost a little too hard. I nearly laughed when he got out the biggest bottle of lube I'd ever seen outside of a porno.

When he saw me holding back laughter, he snorted. “It's a pain in the ass to get stuff shipped here and bigger bottles are more economical.”

“So serious,” I teased, sinking back between his legs. “Sounds like Daddy needs to relax.”

His muscles tensed as I dipped lower and his breathing stopped. I put my hands on his thighs. They were trembling slightly. His cock twitched when I breathed on it, trying to decide where to start. The head on the right was dripping precum a little heavier than the left, so I went for it, pulling it between my lips with a hard suck.

“Holy fuck!” Hopper's hand shot out and closed on the mohawk of hair I'd left, giving it a hard tug.

“God, you taste good,” I muttered, moving to the other side.

He made a loud snorting sound, almost like an angry pig. That should've been the least sexy sound to hear, but for some reason, it drove me wild. I pushed my mouth further down his

length to the little v in his shaft where the heads split. The one I didn't have in my mouth left a sticky wet smear along my cheek as I bobbed up and down, giving the left side all the attention for a minute. Then I switched it up and started working the rest of him with my hand, trying to coax more of that sweet flavor of him out of his body.

“Fuck, Princess,” he panted. “You're gonna make me come.”

“That's the idea.” I slid my fist further up the shaft, forcing both heads together into one thick, beautiful fistful of dick, and swallowed them both at once.

I fought his grip against my hair to pull back enough to let the left head pop out the side of my mouth and gave the right a hard suck.

“Shit!” Hopper's hips surged up off the bed.

The dick in my mouth throbbed. The head resting against my cheek gave only a small trickle, while the one I was massaging with my tongue coated my mouth in thick spurts. Well, that answered that question. I closed my lips around the twitching right cockhead and sucked him clean before moving to the left. I'd barely gotten my mouth around the second head before he started coming from that one, too.

I watched his body spasm, the way his ruggedly handsome face was so wrecked with pleasure. How could he think I wouldn't want that? How could anyone not?

Hopper groaned and threw an arm over his face. “Fuck, sorry.”

“Sorry? For what?” I pushed up, drawing a fist over my cheek to clean the smear.

“I don’t even think I lasted three minutes,” he mumbled. “I swear, I ain’t usually this fast.”

I chuckled and slid up his body to tease his antlers again. “It’s not you. It’s me. I’m just too damn good at sucking dick.”

He shuddered beneath my touch, fingers kneading my ass. “Fuck yeah, you are.”

I tipped his head up and kissed him, running my tongue over his. He groaned at the taste of himself and shifted my hips down, rubbing his thick shaft between my cheeks. Despite my efforts, he was still incredibly hard. Actually, he might’ve been even harder than before, almost as if coming twice was practically foreplay.

“Your turn,” he insisted with a throaty snarl, ripping the thong aside to expose my ass. “I want to see you come on my cock, Princess.”

“You’re going to have to prep me first.” I licked his lips and reached for the bottle of lube.

There was the sudden loud screech of an alarm. Hopper immediately set me aside and scrambled out of bed, yanking his pajama pants back up with a curse.

“What the fuck is that?” I asked, dazed.

“Workshop alarm!”

I stayed where I was, unsure what to do. It took a minute to sink in that an alarm probably wouldn't be going off if something wasn't seriously wrong. Grumbling, I grabbed my prosthetics and slid them on before going after Hopper.

His workshop was at the end of the same hallway that contained his bedroom. The door was wide open, which I'd never seen before. I stumbled down the hall, still trying to tuck everything back away in a way that didn't leave me completely exposed.

“Hopper?” I put a hand on the door and paused at the sight.

The workshop was a wreck. There was broken glass everywhere, pieces of small machines broken apart and scattered around. His desk had been overturned, the papers lying all over the floor. Hopper stood in front of the big glass terrarium that held the incubating dragon eggs, or at least it used to. A chill went through me as I realized the terrarium was empty.

“What the fuck happened?” I asked.

He turned his head, eyeing a shotgun mounted on the wall. “Son of a bitch,” he growled through clenched teeth and yanked the shotgun down before storming out the side door. The glass had been broken, probably the source of the alarm.

“Hopper!” I shouted and chased after him.

An engine chugged to life. Headlights flashed just ahead.

Hopper shouldered the shotgun, pointing it into the dark. He fired once, the sound like thunder. I threw my hands over my ears as Hopper ejected the used shell and popped in another. Tires squealed and a pale blue truck swung around in front of us, racing for the exit. Hopper fired again, his shot shattering the back window. The truck didn't stop or slow down, instead speeding off into the night. Hopper shouldered the shotgun again, tracing the truck down the sights, but it was too far away.

With a curse, he lifted the gun and spat. "You better fucking run, Leroy! Gods dammit! That motherfucker stole my goddamn dragon eggs!"

FOURTEEN

ROBERT

IT WAS A SLEEPLESS night, and not in a good way. I dressed while Hopper and Noah had a quick meeting and quickly got to work, verifying the dragons had enough feed to make it through the morning. Then I followed Hopper to a small room in the back of the ranch.

It was still dark, the moon high and almost full. I'd thrown a hoodie on over my t-shirt since Hopper said it was cold out, but the temperature was the least of my worries. Once the adrenaline wore off, I realized how exhausted I was. My face was partly numb from lack of sleep and my shoulders ached.

A new flutter of excitement went through me when Hopper opened the back room and I stepped inside. I let out a low whistle, eyeing an extensive collection of guns, ammunition, and other things like bear traps hanging on the wall.

Hopper pulled down a bolt-action rifle and passed it to Noah, who immediately checked the sights and grabbed some ammo off the shelf.

He glanced at me. "Do you shoot, Princess?"

“Does a bear shit in the woods?” I replied.

He nodded and lifted a Magnum BFR in one hand and a classic Smith & Wesson in the other. “Pick your poison.”

I nodded to the Magnum. “Guns are like dicks. Go big or go home, right?”

He snorted. “I like the way you think.”

“So. What’s the plan?” I grabbed a box of ammo from the shelf, waiting for Hopper to answer.

“You do have a plan, don’t you?” Noah said. “Something other than go break down Leroy’s front door and go in guns blazing?”

Hopper took down another bolt-action rifle for himself. “We’re gonna check in with English first.”

“You know she ain’t gonna let you,” Noah said.

I glanced between them. “Who’s English?”

“Sheriff Edna English,” Noah explained. “Very by the book.”

“Not my biggest fan,” Hopper supplied. “But you leave her to me.”

We piled into the truck, me and Hopper in the cab and Noah in the bed. Dust flew up behind us as the truck rolled down the long dirt road. I leaned my head against the cool glass of the window, trying not to feel bad.

If anyone had told me a month ago, I’d be speeding down the road with a gun tucked in my belt, conscripted into a posse

to hunt down a dragon thief, I'd have laughed my ass off. Yet here I was. Unfortunately, I was too distracted to appreciate how damn cool it was.

All I could think about was how I hadn't been able to follow through with Hopper. Missing dragons or not, once Charlie and Cupid came back, we'd be leaving, which meant this was almost over. I wasn't going to get another chance to be with him.

It wasn't just about the sex, either. I'd realized that while I was getting dressed in my room. If all I'd wanted from him was sex, I would've bolted the minute I learned he was a virgin. I didn't fuck with virgins as a rule. Too many emotions to get tangled up in, and I was in it for the casual good times only.

Except when it came to Hopper, there was something else there. I could feel it all the time, a pull in my chest like there was a string running between us. The closer we were, the less it pulled. Leaving would feel like losing a part of myself, which felt odd to say, considering I'd only known him a week. Yet, in that week, I'd learned to look forward to the little things he did for me, the little things that meant something big.

When he told me he'd never been with anyone before, and that he wanted me... The last thin barrier that kept me from caring shattered like glass in a hailstorm. He didn't want Robert Smith, the senator's son, or the broken boy who'd been to war and back, and he didn't want the man who dressed like a woman. He'd seen all those parts of me and accepted them

all. Wanted the man behind them all. Me, the real me. And I wanted so badly to give him that. He was the only person in the world who deserved it, and here I was, getting ready to run away from the only good thing in my life.

“Sorry about the interruption,” Hopper offered.

I pushed away from the window and turned to look at him. “What?”

“About all this.” He waved his hand in the air before rubbing the back of his head. “I... uh... I had a good time.”

I smiled a small smile. “Me too.”

“I was thinkin’. I know you got your life back in Michigan, and people waitin’ on you back home, but... Well, I was wonderin’...”

“Maybe I could stay a few more days,” I suggested. “If you’re okay with it.”

He glanced over at me and put his hand down on the worn seat between us next to mine. “I think that’d be real nice.”

I scooted my hand over, just enough that our pinky fingers overlapped. It wasn’t holding hands—not quite—but it made me smile just the same. We drove down that old country road in the dark, touching just enough for it to be real. The empty black world could’ve been closing in on either side, ready to crush us, but I got the feeling that we’d be safe as long as we stayed just like that.

“So, what does Leroy want with dragon eggs?” I asked.

Hopper sighed and pulled his hand away to put it back on the steering wheel. I immediately felt that tug at my heart that said something was wrong, but I ignored it.

“Same thing he wanted with Ephith and Cedric, I expect,” he said. “He’s got this crazy idea about cross-breeding dragons to increase the percentage of gold byproduct in dragon billets. It works in theory. In practice... You ever seen a pug? You know how many health problems they have? Well, it’s the result of people fucking with their genetics to create them. Nature would never do that. Most of them die young. They suffer. You go breeding a Norwegian Newt with an Abrakari, you do get a dragon that’ll produce higher gold waste, but they have a lot of health problems. Spinal deformities. Stunted wings. Kidney failure. I’ve never seen one live past five years, and that’s with a lot of time intensive care. Leroy didn’t care, though. He ran the numbers. Said we could still turn a profit.”

Hopper shook his head. “When I put my foot down, he went behind my back. Took Ephith and Cedric up into the mountains and chained them up in a cave. Fed them hormones to get them to breed outside of season.”

I frowned. “I thought Cedric was Layla’s mate?”

He nodded. “And dragons mate for life. They’re sole partners. You can inseminate manually to get around that, but he didn’t have the equipment. I thought they’d gotten out of the barrier. Searched high and low for months. I was heartsick over it, losing those two, and for Layla who damn near gave up living. She rallied after the eggs for a while, but once she

realized Cedric...” His voice had grown tight. Hopper shook his head to clear it, antlers rattling against his hat. “The hormones really messed him up. Made him feral and dangerous. He tried to attack Layla. I... I had to put him down.”

“God, Hopper. I’m sorry. That must’ve been hard.”

He cleared his throat. “Harder on Layla. She’s been depressed ever since. Anyway, I fired Leroy. He’d been my partner at the ranch for thirty years. The day you all showed up, he’d convinced me to come to the bar and hear him out. Said he was desperate. Couldn’t find work since I let him go. He’s a pariah in town and can’t really leave because... Well, he’s half pomtuki.”

“What’s a pomtuki?” I asked.

“A pain in the ass, mostly,” he said with an annoyed sigh. “They’re monsters famous for three things. Their practical jokes, usually done at the expense of someone, their short attention spans, and their large... sexual organs.”

“Great,” I mumbled. “Now when I’m pointing a gun at him, all I’ll be able to think about is his giant cock. Not the image I wanted.”

Hopper smiled. “Well, he’s only half. Leroy’s from a time when the idea of humans and monsters cross breeding wasn’t accepted. A lot of people in Eden still look down on it, even though there are more human-monster couples moving here all the time.”

“I didn’t know monsters and humans could have kids.”

“Sure,” he said with a shrug. “Some types, anyway. Depends on biology.”

I was quiet for a long minute before I couldn’t help myself. I had to ask. “But you can’t, right? I mean, you don’t have like... secret egg implanting tentacles or something? Not that I’m against it. I’d just kind of like a warning first if you do.”

Hopper belted out a laugh. “No, Princess. No tentacles or egg implantation devices here. You saw all there was to work with. Afraid I ain’t that exciting downstairs compared to some.”

“I think you’re plenty exciting.” I batted my eyes at him when he glanced over at me.

Hopper snorted. “Now you’re just trying to butter me up.”

“Is it working?” I asked, leaning on an elbow.

He smiled at me, and my heart fluttered. “Maybe.” He turned his attention forward, spinning the steering wheel and turning us down another dirt road. “Anyway, Leroy bein’ part pomtuki might explain some of his behavior. He’s got to have a set the size of Alaska if he thinks he can get away with this. Guess he decided stolen eggs were better than nothing. Desperate men, desperate times.”

We pulled into the sleepy town of Eden just after sunrise. The streets were empty except for a few folks opening up shops or sweeping the wooden sidewalks. Hopper drove straight up to the little sheriff’s office, which was a tiny two-

story building with an attached jail, and parked in front of it. There was a beat up cruiser parked in the lot beside it, and an even more beat up wood panel pick up truck from the eighties in the space next to us.

A petite blond woman who might've been five-two was halfway through climbing out of the truck, a cup of coffee in her hand. She eyed Noah in the back of the truck with a frown.

“Hopper Meadows,” she said with a hint of disbelief as we got out of the truck. “As I live and breathe. That better not be the beginnings of a posse in your truck.”

“Mornin’ Eddie,” Hopper said, sounding uncharacteristically pleasant.

Eddie’s gaze shifted from Hopper to Noah with a frown.

“Open carry,” Noah said casually, and hopped over the side of the truck in a single leap.

“Take care to keep it pointed at the sky, son,” Eddie advised carefully. “There’s a fine line between exercisin’ your rights and a crime when a loaded gun’s involved.”

Noah nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

“What’s all this about, anyway?” The sheriff crossed her arms, eying me.

“Break in at the ranch,” Hopper explained. “Leroy smashed up the place and helped himself to four Abrakari eggs.”

Eddie sighed. “You sure it was Leroy, Hopper?”

Hopper shoved his hands in his pockets and shrugged. “It was Leroy’s truck I shot the back out of as he took off like a bat outta hell. Figure you can back up what I’m saying if you do a search of his house before he has time to relocate them.”

“Need a search warrant to do a search, Hopper, and no judge is gonna give me that at...” She glanced down at her watch. “... seven twenty in the mornin’ on a Friday. Besides, Hopper. You know the rules. Jackalope Ranch is out on the edge of the rez, which means sorting through miles of native treaties and red tape. Nobody’s gonna do that for what looks like movie props on paper.”

“Why do you think we brought guns?” Hopper said, deadpan. “Like it or not, Eddie, my ranch is half the industry in this town. If people start thinking they can just walk in and take my eggs because the law ain’t interested, how long do you think it’ll be before I’m losing money? Raising dragons is expensive. If my revenue dries up, might have to pull up stakes.”

“All right, no need to get dramatic. You’ve made your point,” she said, pushing off the truck with a hip. “Come on in and let’s get you deputized.”

FIFTEEN

ROBERT

I WISH MY DAD could see me now , I thought, staring down at the copper pin on my hoodie as we walked back outside the sheriff's office twenty minutes later.

Eddie joined us outside, shrugging on an EPD jacket. Apparently, being deputized didn't give us any special authority, even if it allowed us some legal wiggle room. End of the day, it'd fall to Eddie to arrest Leroy.

Unless he did something stupid, and Hopper or Noah shot him. Despite my insistence that I could shoot, I didn't plan to fire a single shot. This was Hopper's vendetta, and I was just there to play backup.

Rather than go back to the truck, we started down the street, fanning out slightly with our weapons at the ready. Hopper took the lead with Eddie at his side. Noah and I came behind them.

Doors opened as we walked through town, people coming out to see what was happening. The folks sweeping looked up from their work, concerned looks on their faces. A few of them quickly put their brooms aside and retreated to the safety

of their shops. Tension hung in the air like a piano wire stretched tight.

At the end of the main street through Eden, there stood a dilapidated laundromat. A yellowing sign in the window announced there was a room for rent out back and listed a local number. We rounded the corner and Hopper glanced over at Eddie. She nodded and drew her gun, going around the north side of the building. Noah went with her while the rest of us took the south side.

Leroy's truck was in the lot, the window busted out from all the shots Hopper had taken. The head rest on the driver's side was peppered with buckshot and dried blood, which meant Leroy must've been hit, but not bad enough to stop.

"Leroy Jenkins!" Hopper shouted, standing in the middle of the fenced in back yard. "We know you're in there. As a duly deputized volunteer member of the Eden Police Department, I demand you disarm yourself and come out with your hands up!"

I backed away from the truck, readying my gun in case he came out shooting.

We waited in tense silence for a long moment before Hopper looked over at Eddie.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," she muttered and stepped up to the door. "Leroy, we're comin' in. Don't shoot me!" She kicked the door clean off the hinges and slid into the darkened apartment.

I held my breath, waiting. A minute passed. Two. Nobody moved a muscle.

After what felt like forever, Eddie appeared in the doorway, her gun pointed at the ground. “He ain’t here.”

“What do you mean he ain’t here?” Hopper growled. “His truck’s here.”

Eddie shrugged. “I mean he ain’t here, Hopper. I don’t know what to tell you.”

“Let me see.” Hopper started forward.

Eddie blocked his entry by putting out her arm. “Can’t let you in there, Hopper. That’d be an unlawful search.”

Hopper scowled. “He’s a thief and my property is probably somewhere in there. If it ain’t, then some clue to his whereabouts is, and I mean to find it.”

“You can’t just go breaking into people’s houses to search for things, Hopper. Deputized or not, the law is still the law. Now, I can get a search warrant based on the firearm damage to the truck and the altercation at the bar last week, but it’s not going to go the way you want it to, Hopper.” She patted his shoulder.

He looked like he wanted to hit her.

I stepped forward, wrapping my arm around his and Hopper’s shoulders instantly relaxed. “We’ve been up all night. I know you’re worried about the dragons, and so I am I, but we can’t help them if we don’t look after us first. Why don’t we get some coffee and breakfast, Hopper? Just you and

me? We can talk it over and figure out where to go from here, okay?"

He sighed. "Yeah, okay."

Noah glanced between us. "I'll, um, check a few things off the to-do list before I come back and get you two, okay?"

"You want the Cowboy Café," Eddie said, and pointed it out onto the main road. "Two doors down from the station. Just don't ask for decaf."

SIXTEEN

HOPPER

THE CAFÉ WAS BUSY, as usual.

I usually tried to avoid the place on the rare occasions I was in town so early. No point in spending five bucks on a coffee I could make just fine at home. But Robert wanted coffee and breakfast, so he'd get coffee and breakfast. After last night, it was the least I could do.

His eyes darted around the café, taking everything in with a look I hadn't seen on him too often: uncertainty. When someone got in line behind us, he leaned into me, grabbed my hand in a death grip and pressed his nose against my shoulder with a small whimper.

I stared down at his fingers trembling in mine and found no desire to push him away or break contact. Odd, since I had always detested any displays of affection, even from my own mother. Especially in public. But I had bigger concerns.

“What is it?” I whispered to him. “You hurt or something?”

He shook his head, sweat glistening on his forehead, his breathing fast. “Too many people. Too close. Can't breathe.”

I turned around, glancing up into the stoic, rock-like face of a grinnie. They were gentle creatures, generally quiet and respectful, but big and intimidating for smaller critters.

“Scuse me,” I said, addressing the grinnie.

He lowered his head, looking down at me.

“You mind takin’ a step back, please? My partner here’s feeling a little crowded.”

The grinnie nodded slowly and took a big step back.

“Thank you kindly, friend.” I squeezed Robert’s hand. “Better?”

He nodded, but he was still stiff. His eyes were a little glassy as he lifted his head and gave me a nervous smile. “You said please and thank you. In the same day, even.”

I snorted and turned away. “I say that all the time. I can be polite when it suits me.”

When we reached the front of the line, Robert seemed to be feeling a little better. Of course, that might’ve had something to do with the vanilla rainbow sprinkle doughnut he saw. I told the barista to add two to my black coffee and whatever drink Robert ordered, which turned out to be a hot chocolate, of all things.

I walked him to the table furthest from the door and the line of people coming through it, and put him in the seat furthest from the cold air. That left me with my back to the door, which I didn’t like, but I’d suffered through worse.

“I guess no peanut butter sandwiches today,” he mused, digging into his doughnut.

“I can make you one later if you want,” I said with a shrug.

“No offense, but I might wind up sleeping straight through today. I’m pretty beat. You can wake me up when Charlie and Cupid get back, or if there are any developments with the eggs.”

I watched him absently lick vanilla frosting from his fingers, heart skipping a beat as I remembered last night. Before Leroy’s damn rude interruption, I’d been having the time of my life. Sure, I was nervous at first. I didn’t want to make a fool of myself, especially not with him. Robert had a way of putting me at ease, though, and a cocky little infectious smile.

I knew I should’ve been in a bad mood. I’d lost three eggs overnight, had a mess in my workshop, and then there was Leroy... I was definitely pissed about all that, but sitting across from him in the café, it was like there was a flash of clarity. All those things could be fixed, or dealt with later. There was only going to be one Friday morning spent in the café, watching him clean frosting from his fingers and sip his expensive hot chocolate, and I wanted to spend it there with him. Not just existing there, but present and fully attentive.

He turned his head away from the chalkboard menu he’d been examining and arched an eyebrow. “Unless you had other plans for the day?”

I let myself smile a little. “Nah. You get your sleep. I want you well rested so we can finish what you started last night once everybody else turns in.”

“What *I* started?” He put his cup down with mock offense. “Honey, you had me hooked the first time I saw you flick that fluffy bunny tail.”

My shoulders hitched, and I fought the urge to flinch at the mention of my tail, old voices echoing in the back of my mind.

“Hold him! Grab his arms! Hold out his hand!”

“Look at those stubby little antlers, all covered in peach fuzz. Barely even there. And that tiny little tail! You know what that means.”

“Short tail! Short tail! Hopper has a short tail!”

I could almost feel the phantom hands grabbing, pulling, yanking, pushing, the voices laughing...

“Hey.” Robert’s hand on my arm jarred me out of it. He frowned up at me. “You okay? You kind of zoned out on me there for a minute.”

I forced myself to smile. “Just tired.”

Robert pushed the paper bag containing the other sprinkle doughnut toward me. “You should eat something. Sugar makes everything better.”

“Keep it for later,” I said. “You can eat it when you wake up from your nap.”

Noah came back to get us at about ten o'clock. By then I was dead on my feet, but there was still so much work left to do at the ranch. As soon as we got back, I dragged myself through checking the pens and stopped to say hi to Layla, who barely looked at me.

When I walked by Robert's door at midday, I could hear him snoring softly on the other side, so I went on by to the kitchen, where I made two peanut butter sandwiches. I ate one and tucked the other away in a baggie in the fridge for him.

I tried to chase sleep after that. Between my worries and memories of the night before, I couldn't catch it. I was too tired to work on the books, so instead I went to triple check the almanac.

Usually, I drove the dragons up into the mountains and through the tear about mid-May. It was April now, but getting warmer than usual. Warmer weather meant tourists, which meant it'd be too risky to move them once the easterners started pouring into the area, getting lost on their way to Yellowstone. It was a delicate balance, though. If I moved the dragons too soon, it'd cut into the annual yield and make for a rough time next year. Plus, I might run into other herders with other schedules, and I didn't want that.

But I was one man down this year. I'd been sorely tempted to ask Noah if he was interested in driving the dragons with me, but he usually took courses in the summer, and I didn't want to interrupt his education. The more and more I looked at it, the more likely it looked like I needed to hire on a cowboy,

which I was not looking forward to. It was always a gamble taking on someone new, and when dragons were involved, that risk was even greater.

It was four o'clock in the evening when the telephone rang. I left my office to go answer it. "Jackalope Ranch. This is Hopper."

"Mr. Meadows," came the judgmental voice on the other end.

My jaw clenched. Robert's father. Again. "I told you he don't want to talk to you."

"That's just fine. I didn't call to talk to him," said the senator. "I want to talk to you about your intentions with my son."

I moved a hand to my hip. "My intentions?"

"Despite his insistence to the contrary, I know all about my son's proclivities. You, Mr. Meadows, are not the first wealthy older man he's shackled up with in an effort to embarrass his family."

"What Robert does with his free time ain't no concern of yours," I spat.

"I beg to differ," he replied calmly. "He is a Smith, and this is an election year. Every aspect of our lives is under a microscope and the other side will stop at nothing to dig up whatever dirt they can to cast a shadow over our good name. When my opponent hears—"

I didn't know what he said next. My temper flared, and the phone creaked in my hand as I considered crushing it. If I did that, though, this red tie asshole would probably fly out to shout in person. While I had no problem dealing with that my way, it'd put Robert through hell to have his father show up at the ranch. I wasn't having none of it.

I cut him off mid-rant. "Now you listen here, Senator. Robert is a good man with a good heart. How he wound up that way with a father like you and what you put him through, only the gods know. It's a testament to his strength that he's put up with you as long as he has. I sure don't have his patience."

"*Excuse me?*" the senator huffed.

"Yeah, excuse you! 'Scuse you for bein' a self-centered prick. If you smell shit, it's 'cause it's on the end of your nose, not because he's covered in it. Robert bein' out here don't got nothing to do with you and your campaign, so you can sit right down. He's out here 'cause he wants to be."

"He's using you," the senator growled. "Or you're using him. He's—"

"He's happy," I said. "And that's all that matters to me. It should be all that matters to you, but I guess that's too much to ask. As for these phone calls, you call me one more time and I'll be the one going to the news. I'm sure there's a paper out there that'd love to hear about you harassin' a hardworkin' private citizen with daily phone calls and veiled threats. And

in case it wasn't clear, you ain't welcome here. You set foot on my property, that's trespassing, and it will be treated as such."

"Listen here, you white trash pervert! I have rights."

"So does he. Thank you kindly for your call, Senator. Now kindly fuck right off and leave us alone." I slammed the phone receiver down to end the call with no small amount of satisfaction.

"Holy shit."

A tingle went up my spine at Robert's exclamation behind me. Dammit, I'd been trying to keep him from finding out about his family's harassing calls to the ranch. He'd said he didn't want to talk to them, but maybe I'd taken it a step too far by telling his dad to fuck off.

I cringed and turned around. "Robert, I..."

"I have never been so damn turned on in my life," he said and put his arms around my neck. He pulled me down into a kiss that was all fire.

His fingers threaded through my hair, his body pressed so hard against mine that there was no space left. That didn't stop me from trying. I put my arms around his waist and pulled him tighter, closer. Even though all the kissing was making me hard, and I could feel it doing the same to him, it wasn't the sex I wanted. I just wanted to be closer to him, to have more. It was a burning selfish need, but one he answered with a need of his own.

His mouth opened, and I seized the opportunity to taste more of him. Fuck, he tasted good, and he felt even better in my arms. He was right in a way nobody else had ever felt. Robert wasn't just a perfect distraction, he was *my* perfect distraction.

He leaned back, a tentative hand sliding from my hair to the root of my antler and tracing up.

With a grunt, I pushed him forward, pinning him to the wall with a low growl in the back of my throat. "You do that here and I might be sorely tempted to bend you over the dinner table, Princess."

He smirked and lifted an eyebrow. "If you're expecting that to stop me, then you don't know me very well."

The front door banged open and Noah's heavy footsteps came across the floor. "I got everything on the checklist. Is there anything else you..." He trailed off when he saw us, eyes darting between Robert and me.

"Go home, Noah," I said, and scooped Robert up in my arms. Robert let out an exaggerated squeak and threw his arms around my neck.

"But what if—"

"Go home, Noah," I repeated on my way to the bedroom. "Ain't no more work here for you today."

"Yes, sir," he mumbled, and I heard the screen door hinges squeak on his way out.

SEVENTEEN

HOPPER

MY HEART JACKHAMMERED AGAINST my ribs as I kicked the bedroom door closed behind me. I set Robert down on the edge of the bed and as I stood up, he caught my lips in a gentle kiss. He immediately reached to tug up the black skirt he was wearing and pull off his legs.

“Wait.” I put my hand over his, stilling his movements.

He gave me a questioning look. “Hopper, if you’re not sure...”

“That ain’t it.” I pushed up from the bed and stood, backing away a step. My chest heavy and my face hot, I carefully lifted my hat, careful of my antlers, and placed it against my chest without looking him in the eye. “I’ve seen pretty much all of you, so it’s only fair for you to know what you’re getting into bed with, too. And if you change your mind after what you see, well... I’ll understand.”

“I don’t think I’m going to change my mind,” Robert said. “But I’m not going to complain about finally getting to see you naked.”

I hung my hat on the wall hook. My fingers shook as I unbuttoned my shirt. I went to take it off, but realized I'd been so nervous I forgot to undo the buttons at my wrist and had to stand there awkwardly and fight with them. He'd seen me from the waist up, but it'd been dark. Maybe he missed the places where the fur had grown back patchy over my scars. Maybe he hadn't noticed there were places it'd started to go from the natural chestnut brown to silver. I wasn't as young as I used to be.

Robert knew about the prosthetic hand, but it was my feet I was most worried about. The night he'd come in, I had left the prosthetics on, planning to only get a few hours of sleep. I wasn't supposed to leave them on, but I always worried something would happen and I'd have to get out of bed quickly. They were easy enough to hide with shoes and socks, but I didn't want to feel like I was deceiving him. Not now, not ever.

So, I kicked off my boots, shed my jeans and, with shaky fingers, took off my socks.

Robert shifted to the edge of the bed, the weight of his eyes heavy as he looked me over.

I turned away, rubbing the back of my neck, and waiting for the inevitable rejection.

"That's what you were worried about?" Robert whispered. "A couple prosthetic limbs?"

"I got one good hand left," I mumbled. "I know it makes some people... uncomfortable."

“In case you haven’t noticed, I’m down two legs myself.” He gestured to his legs. “Why on Earth would you think I wouldn’t want you because you have a couple of upgrades?”

I looked at him for the first time since taking everything off. “That what you call it?”

He shrugged. “You’re still you. That didn’t change. And I still really want you to fuck me.”

I lifted my fake hand, flexing the fingers. “Even with this? It doesn’t freak you out?”

“Are you kidding? It’ll be like fucking the Terminator. Practically every sci-fi nerd’s wet dream.” Robert stood with a laugh and came over to where I was standing to plant a kiss beside my nose. “Now cum in me if you want to live,” he said in a terrible imitation of the movie line.

I had to snort. “You’re somethin’ else, Princess.”

“I’m horny is what I am, so quit stalling and take me to bed already.”

“All right. You asked for it.”

He gasped when I picked him up, but quickly forgot his surprise when I deposited him on the end of the bed again. He yanked his shirt over his head and I gave him a minute to remove his prosthetics before I pushed him back to lie flat so I could climb on top of him.

We kissed slowly, gently. I didn’t want to rush this, especially not with nerves fluttering like bat wings in my stomach. But Robert let me take my time, answering my

hesitant touches with tender kisses and patient, soft caresses. He didn't flinch or cringe when the cold metal of my prosthetic fingers trailed over his chest, and he didn't pull away when I curled my arm around behind his head to hold him with it. Gods, I wished I could feel the softness of his hair between my fingers, or the warmth of his smooth skin under my palm.

I ran my one good hand over his bare chest while we kissed, desperate to commit the sensation to memory. His heart thudded against my hand in answer, strong and steady. He was so smooth, so small under me, the taste of his kiss sweeter than anything I'd ever known. I needed to taste the rest of him.

He groaned and tipped his head back when I moved my lips to his neck. "Fuck, Hopper. That *tongue*."

"Yeah?" I flattened out my tongue and gave the side of his neck a long, slow lick. "You like that?"

His answer was a small, high-pitched whine of pleasure that sent a jolt of need straight through me. He'd made a similar sound when I watched him come, and I wanted to hear more of it.

I lowered my mouth to take one of his tiny pink nipples in my mouth and sucked hard.

"Fuck!" he exclaimed loudly, his back arching. His hands went to my antlers and my dick jumped as if he'd grabbed that instead.

When I released the nipple, it was flushed bright pink and shining, the pretty pale skin around it prickling. His grip on my antlers relaxed.

“Don’t let go,” I whispered, kissing my way across his rapidly rising and falling chest. “Keep holding onto Daddy, Princess.”

His cock twitched against my stomach, and I smiled before sucking on the other nipple to make it match the first. I’d never thought I’d be into the whole daddy thing, but it meant something when he said it. It meant he trusted me to take care of him, to protect him, and treat him right, all things I wanted so badly to do. All things he deserved.

It was ironic that he’d taken to being called princess, considering I’d originally leveled it at him as an insult. He’d taken it in stride, though, unfazed. Now I knew how well it fit, and how much Robert desperately needed to be treated exactly like the princess that he’d always known he was.

His fingers squeezed my antlers as I made my way down his body, hungrier with every inch to taste more of him. I tugged the hem of his skirt down enough to expose his hips and licked across them. He shuddered, hips canting up in a silent plea.

A new flutter of nerves worked its way through me as I carefully pulled his skirt down, letting it fall to the floor. He had on a pair of white satin panties with a pink bow and a little cutaway of lace in a v shape. His hard cock was pressed to one side against the upper elastic, straining against the confines of the fabric. There was barely enough of it to hold his balls. The

sight made my mouth water. As much as I wanted to get all his clothes off so I could see and taste more of him, there was just something damn sexy about seeing all that hardness trapped in something so soft. I lowered my mouth and ran my tongue over the outline of him through the fabric.

“Oh fuck!” His cock twitched as if it were trying to jump free.

I swallowed, heart fluttering with more nerves than ever. I wanted to. I wanted to taste all of him in every way, but I’d never done this before. He’d had a whole parade of experienced lovers, and I knew there was no way I could compare to them. What if I was bad at it? What if I started and then gagged? Worse, what if I tried and realized I didn’t like it? Don’t get me wrong, I liked Robert, but how was I supposed to know if sucking dick was for me? The only real way to know was to try, but I didn’t want to fuck this up. Not with him.

My face warmed as I looked up at his expectant face, hooking a finger in the top of his panties. “Will you... Will you tell me how to do it?”

He chuckled and folded his arms behind his head with a big grin, his beautiful face flushed strawberry pink. “Careful with the teeth.”

“Smartass.” I snorted and pulled his panties down. He yelped and his dick jumped enticingly when I let the elastic snap against his balls.

Robert had the prettiest pink dick I'd ever seen, which I suppose wasn't saying much considering the few I'd encountered in my long life. He had a nice thick head, flushed the same color as his face, the slit gleaming in the low light. A prominent vein ran up one side, practically daring me to trace it with my tongue. That seemed a safe bet, so I started there, gripping him by the base and holding him away from his body so I could reach it.

Robert let out a long, high moan and moved a hand to his forehead in dramatic fashion. "Yeah, Daddy. Just like that."

His words of praise put me at ease just a little, and I decided I was brave enough to try teasing the head with the tip of my tongue. He made another pleasant sound in the back of his throat and slid his hand down his body to rub his chest. His cock twitched in my grip and a shimmering drop of pre-cum welled. I swallowed the last of my nerves and let my tongue flicker out to catch it before it fell. The warm salty taste of him coating my tongue sent such a jolt of pleasure through me I was irritated at myself for ever thinking I wouldn't like this. I loved everything about it, and he must've been enjoying himself, too. He'd started teasing his fingers over his nipples while I ran my tongue over him. The sight of him enjoying his own body was as enticing as his taste. I closed my mouth around his thick head and he gasped.

"Fuck yeah," he whispered as I tried to work out how to get more of him without scraping my teeth over his length.

I almost immediately over-estimated my abilities and swallowed him too deep, triggering my gag reflex. I pulled away to recover and shot him a nervous look, worried I'd upset him.

Robert let out a light chuckle and caressed my antlers. "God, you're sexy when you blush."

"I ain't blushing," I lied. "You'd be red too if you were just gagging on a dick."

"Oh, honey. First, look at who you're talking to. I've gagged on more dicks than I'll ever admit to. Second, I think it's hot when you do it."

I blinked, face getting hotter. "You do?"

He nodded and used my antlers to pull me back up his body for a kiss. "But if I'm being honest, I'd rather suck dick than get sucked personally. Not that you're bad at it. You sure as hell aren't, but..."

"But what?"

He sprouted an impish grin. "How do you feel about rimming? I could suck you off while you eat my ass. I'm kind of desperate to know how that textured tongue feels on my hole."

Getting sucked off once or twice to take the edge off was a great idea. Once I got inside him, I didn't want to finish in thirty seconds. That'd be even more embarrassing than what'd happened before. Though he'd laughed it off, I did not want a repeat performance. While I was a little nervous about it, the

idea of being that up close and personal with such an intimate part of him made my dick throb. I wanted to pleasure him more than I cared about anything else.

“Sounds good.” I wrapped an arm around him and we rolled, switching positions. He giggled when I gave his ass a light swat. “Well, get to it. I promise not to come so fast this time.”

“I don’t care if you do,” Robert said, and turned himself around on top of me. “I like the taste of you, Daddy.”

I gripped his hips, pulling them back toward me and bit back a moan when he gripped the base of my cock. Damn, I hadn’t expected to enjoy seeing him this way as much as I did. His balls looked especially heavy and full from that angle. I pushed his cheeks apart and went in for a tentative lick, starting just behind his balls and going up.

“Fuck!” Robert panted. “Fuck, that feels good.” Then, to show me how much he loved it, he sucked both heads of my cock into his mouth at once.

I snarled and licked over his hole. When I felt him twitch beneath my tongue, I nearly broke my promise not to come immediately. The only thing that saved me was that he slid his mouth free with an audible pop and let out the most miserable whine.

“Oh, fuck, fuck, fuck...” The soft chorus of curses was a breathy prayer against the inside of my thigh. He wrapped his arms around me and held on, trembling. “Please don’t stop!”

How could I? I already knew I couldn't deny him anything he asked for. I flattened my tongue against his hole and licked it with more pressure before gently prodding at the opening with the tip of my tongue. He cried out so loud I thought I'd hurt him at first, but it was another choking sob of pleasure. He'd stopped giving me any attention, but I didn't care. Robert's reactions to this were so strong, so deliciously intense, I couldn't help but lose myself in him.

He twitched and gasped and trembled on top of me as I alternated fucking him with my tongue and licking over him. I was starting to wonder if he was sensitive enough I could make him come like that, but that'd have to wait for another time when I had the patience to draw this out.

I reached over to the bedside table to hit the pump on the lube bottle. Robert twisted to see what I was doing and my heart stuttered at the sight of him so wrecked, his pupils dilated and breathing rough. He watched with hooded eyes as I spread the lube over my left hand.

Robert's back arched when I ran my thumb over his hole, and when I carefully pushed a finger in, he rocked his hips back to take more of it. I used my prosthetic hand to cup his balls gently, mindful that I had to be extra careful not to squeeze with too much pressure or I'd hurt him. He moaned and tilted as if asking for more, so I slipped in a second finger.

"Fuck, Hopper!" He let out a high-pitched whine and started rocking his hips, letting my fingers slide in and out in a gentle glide.

Watching him fuck himself on my fingers was the single hottest moment of my life. All the nerves I'd had before vanished, banished by the need to wring more of those soft and high moans from him.

“That’s it, Princess,” I said, voice rough. “Show Daddy how you like it.”

He lifted his upper body, hands on my hips, and looked at me over his shoulder, sweat glistening on his forehead, his brows pinched and mouth open, panting. The change in position pushed a firm knot of internal tissue against my knuckle.

“Oh fuck! Right there!” He moaned and started moving faster.

I twisted my fingers as they went in, trying to time my movements against his.

“Hopper!” He gasped and pulled away suddenly and bent over, hole twitching around my fingers until I pulled them free.

“What’s wrong? Did I hurt you?”

He let out a shaky breath and laughed lightly before flashing me a blushing smile. “No, I’m fine. I almost came. Trying not to, but you’re not making it easy.”

Oh, right. He said he could only do that once before he had to take a break. “You... uh... What now?”

“I need a minute to cool off before we get to the main event,” he said with a wink. “Besides, I promised you a blow

job.”

He didn't give me time to protest, bending straight over to suck me back into his mouth, first one head and then the other. I grabbed a handful of his ass and ground my teeth, resolved to last longer this time. Meanwhile, he seemed determined to do the opposite. He stroked my cock while sucking on the heads, moaning around me. Watching him do it from that angle added a whole extra layer of heat to it. His cock bobbed up and down with the movements of his body, hard and slightly curved. A thin stream of pre-cum leaked onto my belly. When he reached to slide his fingers through the wetness, I lost the battle against my own body. My cock pulsed, smaller waves of pleasure quaking through me as I came into his mouth. Robert moaned at the taste and I cursed as he swirled his tongue around the sensitive head, licking up the last of it.

I was still twitching and high with bliss when he closed his mouth over the other head. For a flash, I couldn't decide if it was pleasure or pain I felt. Even though I hadn't come out of that one, it was still oversensitive. The knot at the base of my cock had started to swell, making the pressure almost unbearable. Robert's delicate fingers brushed over the knot, and that was it. I erupted a second time, thrusting further into his mouth.

I was already reaching for the lube when he lifted his head.

“Fuck, that made me so hard,” he moaned, drawing the back of his hand over his mouth. “I need you to make me come, Daddy.”

“Then come here.” I pumped more lube into my hand and coated my dick for him.

He turned and shifted on top of me, straddling my hips and hovering over me. With one hand, he gripped my cock and held it up. The right cockhead grazed his opening, and he moaned, but I panicked. I wasn't sure it would work. How was he going to take both of them at once?

But Robert knew what he was doing. He picked up the lube, which I'd tossed down on the mattress, and coated his hand, sliding more of it over me, enough that heavy drops raced down my length.

“Don't thrust,” he said, his voice rough. “Just... let me.”

“Fuck...” I bit my lip as his fist slid up my length, squeezing the two heads together tightly. Everything in me wanted to move, to fuck his fist, push up into the tight and waiting warmth, but I held myself back, letting him take me at his pace.

Robert groaned as I slid in just barely. “Oh God, this feels...”

“You don't have to,” I said quickly, my hands trembling where they rested on his hips. “I don't want to hurt you.”

“Fuck me, it doesn't *hurt*, Hopper.” Strangled irritation tinged his voice, but he flashed me an embarrassed smile. “It's like taking two dicks at once. I haven't done that in a while, so just bear with me, okay?”

I nodded. “We'll go slow.”

His eyes fluttered closed, and I sank a little deeper into his body briefly before he lifted himself, added more lube and tried again. It took him four tries to get the dual heads deep enough that he could move comfortably. By then, we were both coated in sweat and shaking. Pre-cum leaked freely from his cock and pooled on my stomach, making my fur glisten.

I waited for him to tell me it was okay to move, to stop, to do something.

Robert's fingers curled against the fur on my chest, and he lifted his head, eyes glazed with pleasure. He gave me one of his cocky smiles and leaned forward to kiss me. "Perfect fit." He grabbed my hands and moved them to his ass. "Support my ass while I work it, Daddy?"

"Anything, Princess."

He grinned a million-dollar smile and moved on top of me, shifting his hips. Every time he rocked back, he used my hands like a springboard to propel himself forward again so he wasn't putting too much weight on his knees.

After a few testing moves, he closed his eyes and wrapped his hands behind his head, still grinning. The position put all of him on display, from his arms to his full lips to his chest, hips, and that beautiful, leaking, hard cock. The way he moved, it was like getting a lap dance on my cock, and he must've known it, judging by that cocky grin. He looked like he was having the time of his life, but all I wanted was for him to wipe that arrogant smile off his face and go back to gasping and cursing.

I shifted how I was holding him slightly so I could thrust up into him. His face scrunched up and his mouth opened in a silent o, so I did it again, letting the swell of my knot press against his tight hole. I wanted to push it in, but I was too afraid I'd hurt him. Besides, asking him to take that was too much. He didn't want to be my mate. He just wanted to feel good.

I started thrusting into him, trying to alternate my pace based on his reactions to find what he liked. When I went fast, he fell forward, fingers clawing at my chest, but he begged me not to stop, so I didn't. After a few minutes of that, he sat back up, drenched in sweat, and grabbed his cock, stroking it mindlessly with lust glazed eyes.

"You going to come for Daddy, Princess?" I asked him, partly because I could feel my end rushing up on me.

He nodded absently, panting. "Please. Don't stop. Right there."

My fingers dug into his hips, my eyes glued to the way he stroked his cock while I fucked him.

An indignant, high squeak boiled out of his throat with my next thrust and he came, coating my stomach and chest in threads of white, his ass spasming around my length. His hand didn't stop pumping, but the look on his face... He looked at his cock as if it'd betrayed him, as if I had forced the orgasm on him unexpectedly, but he was enjoying it, nonetheless.

It was that look more than anything else that pushed me over the edge. I pulled him down on me and came hard, my

knot swelling. My whole body seemed to spasm uncontrollably. I'd had orgasms before by myself or with the occasional toy, but never like that. I'd never felt like I didn't want it to end.

When I came down from it, Robert was still on top of me, staring at me with that look of shock.

“Holy shit,” he muttered. “Holy fucking shit, Hopper.” His jaw trembled.

I took his face in my hands and brushed my thumbs along the faint, uneven stubble on his chin. He closed his eyes and leaned into me. That look, that feeling of getting to hold him after, was the best part. I could've held him like that even without the sex, without words, without anything. Just that simple touch was more pleasing than anything that'd come before.

My breath caught when his eyes opened again, and he flashed me another smile. It dawned on me then that I was falling in love with him, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

EIGHTEEN

ROBERT

I LAY IN HOPPER'S bed, staring awkwardly at the ceiling while he went to take a piss. What the fuck was I going to do? Sex with Hopper was one thing. I'd just wanted to show him a good time, have a little fun, and enjoy each other's company. Why not? He was hot, and I was lonely. When that's all it was, I knew how to handle it.

But that wasn't all it was anymore. I wasn't sure when, and I wasn't sure how, but something had changed, and I knew I couldn't treat this the same way I'd treated every other hookup.

I should go. Right now, before he comes back. The thought floated through my head, but I couldn't bring myself to get up and move. How would I feel if the first guy I'd slept with had just disappeared right after? He'd trusted me, bared himself to me in a way that he never had to anyone else. I'd do irreparable damage if I walked away and pretended like nothing had happened, and not just to him. I'd break something in me, too. I knew it, even as a part of me wanted to bolt out the door and just keep running.

Maybe I'll just go back to my room after he comes back, I thought. *Tell him I had a good time, but make some excuse to go sleep in my own bed.* I cringed at the thought. Even with my casual encounters, I didn't blow and go. It was stupid, but after sex was always the best part for me, the easy talking, the laughs, the cuddles. I rarely let people sleep over, and they usually didn't ask, but I wanted to enjoy the closeness.

So many people were afraid to touch me most of the time that sex was often the only skin to skin contact I got anymore. I didn't want to leave, but I didn't want to lead him on, either, and this could not become a *thing*. Charlie and Cupid were returning, and we were going back to Michigan, and Hopper was just going to have to move on. *I* was going to have to move on. The thought left an empty ache in the pit of my stomach.

The bedroom door opened, and I sat up, suddenly even more tense. Hopper backed in and my chest warmed when he turned around with two plates and a couple of bottles of water tucked under one arm. Best sex of my life, and he brought snacks after? Holy fuck, was I in trouble.

"I figured you might be hungry since we kinda skipped dinner," he said and came around to offer me one plate. It held a peanut butter sandwich and a banana.

"Thanks," I muttered and took the plate.

"Welcome."

While I peeled the banana, he walked around to the other side of the bed and sank down onto it. He'd pulled a pair of

pajama pants on when he went out to use the bathroom, but I hadn't bothered. Being naked didn't trouble me, and he'd brought me a towel to clean up with. I could use a shower, but that'd have to wait.

I broke the banana into pieces and peeled off the top layer of bread, adding it to make a peanut butter and banana sandwich.

Hopper tilted his head, watching me with interest. "That's one way to eat it."

"You've never had a peanut butter and banana sandwich?"

He shook his head and started doing the same thing I'd done. I smiled when he took a bite and made a surprised face.

"Good, huh? My buddy, Chris, turned me onto these. You want to fancy it up a bit, put just a light dusting of cinnamon, or you can grill it and it's like a fucking dessert sandwich. Axel taught me that." I took a bite and let out a happy sigh.

Next to me, Hopper squirmed, getting comfortable. "They sound like good people."

"The best," I agreed. "Though I don't see much of Chris these days. He moved to the South Pole to live with his boyfriend, Ollie. The Krampus?"

"No shit? I heard a rumor about that, but he doesn't come up this way very often."

I nodded. "And then this other guy I sort of know, Phoenix, is married to a verrid named Bud."

“I know them,” Hopper said, almost excitedly. “They came by a few months back on their way to Yellowstone. The human was a handful, but he was nice to have around. Helped with some of the fence repairs. The verrid was polite, but they generally are.” He finished off his sandwich and set the plate aside. “Did you know Phoenix from the war or...”

I shook my head. “We met after. Pretty recently. But that’s how I know Chris and Chappie. Uh, I mean Charlie.” I flashed him a nervous smile. “Sorry. Old army nicknames. That’s where Hotdog comes from, too.”

“Were they with you when...?” His eyes trailed down my body to where my leg stumps sat and back up.

I nodded and leaned back against the headboard.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. I’m just trying to get a feel for who’s who in your life.”

“Oh, it doesn’t bother me to talk about it,” I said, turning my head to look at him. “This might sound stupid, but losing my legs might’ve been one of the best things to happen to me. I wasn’t a very good soldier, and it gave me a good excuse to get away from my parents. My dad stopped hounding me so hard to settle down and marry, and now people can finally tell me and my twin brother apart.” I laughed, but Hopper didn’t laugh with me. I gave his shoulder a tap. “I’m serious. I can talk about it. Don’t worry about it.”

He reached up to rub his antlers, realized he was doing it, and dropped his hand into his lap. “How’d it happen? If you don’t mind my asking.”

“Our convoy hit an IED.” I closed my eyes, trying to remember that day.

A lot of people who had trauma from the war said they remembered their injuries with a strange amount of clarity. Not me. I remembered our marching orders, and that I was mildly hungover from the night before. Chris and I had swapped seats because he had a stomach bug. He’d always felt guilty about that, but I was glad it was me and not him. He was heavier than me, taller. If it’d been him in that seat, he wouldn’t have survived. Way I saw it, I saved his life. A few inches of leg was a small price to pay to do one good thing with my life.

“I remember the flash,” I said. “Thought it was a flashbang, that some idiot had set one off by mistake. Next thing I knew, I was on the road and my legs were a twisted mess. It didn’t really hurt. Kind of itchy at first. When they got me to the OR, that was worse. All the jostling, the movement, poking and prodding. They tried to save more of the left one, all the way down to the ankle, but the tissue necrotized, and they had to take it to just below the knee, like the other. Everyone acted like I should be pissed or bitter about it. I just wanted to get back to my life. Problem is, you lose your limbs, and everyone wants that to be all you are. Sometimes, it’s like I’m the limb, and all anyone cares about is the parts they cut off.”

Hopper nodded slowly. “Guess I can relate in a way.” He shifted his prosthetic feet. “I lost mine to frostbite. Was running the dragons back through the Absarokas one fall, but I miscalculated the date and we ran into an early storm. Up

there, you get snow as early as September. System came in fast and hard. I took a nasty fall. Got wedged between a couple of boulders in a blizzard. With the wind, it got down to about four degrees that night. I spent twelve hours out there before Leroy found me. This one was crushed, ankle bones pulverized.” He patted his right leg. “I was layin’ on the left and lost circulation. I’d have lost more if I’d fallen just a few feet away. Way I was wedged, rock face protected most of me from the wind. Really thought I wasn’t comin’ back from that, though.”

I stared at him. “Fuck, that’s badass.”

Hopper snorted. “Not really. All I did was lay there and try not to piss myself the whole time.”

“That how you lost the hand, too?” I asked.

His shoulders stiffened and his eyes flared wide for a second.

I winced. “Sorry.”

“No, it’s just...” He flexed his hand, frowning down at it. “That’s a harder story to tell.”

“You don’t have to tell me.” I put the plate on the floor so it’d be out of the way and then leaned over to put my head on his shoulder. He seemed to relax at the contact, but I looked up at him to ask, anyway. “Is this okay? If you want me to go...”

“No,” he said quickly and reached to put an arm around me. He pulled me tighter against him and leaned down to plant a

kiss on top of my head. “Sorry, I just never had a man in my bed before, you know. It’s new to me.”

It’s new to me, too, I thought, and nestled in against his chest, closing my eyes. “Thanks for dealing with my dad. Listening to you tell him off was hot.”

“Anytime, Princess.”

I yawned. “Any sign of Charlie and Cupid when you were out there?”

“Nah, but they could’ve been held up a day or two. I wouldn’t worry.”

I wasn’t worried at all. Charlie and Cupid could take their time getting back as far as I was concerned.

I must’ve dozed after that. I didn’t remember moving, but when I woke up next, I was still in Hopper’s bed, but I’d curled up facing the window. He’d pulled the blankets up over us and I could feel his warm fur against my back. One of his arms was draped over my side, one knee wedged between mine. I shifted slightly and felt his hard-on against my lower back.

I should’ve gone back to sleep and left him alone. Then again, I never should have been in that bed to begin with, but I was. I turned over onto my back, careful not to disturb him. Hopper barely moved. Maybe he was a heavy sleeper. He was even more handsome in his sleep, all relaxed. His eyelashes stood out, softening his usual rugged features.

His eyes fluttered open, sleepy and unfocused, as I touched the silver stubble on his cheek. For a minute, we just laid there, looking at each other with sleepy eyes. I wondered what he was thinking. Was he regretting sleeping with me? Letting me stay? Or was he feeling what I felt, that this was where I was supposed to be? For once, I was in the right place at the right time with the right person, and it was chance that it'd happened at all. All the hundreds of conditions that had to be just right for us to meet and be together at that moment made it feel less like luck and more like fate. I wasn't sure I believed in big things like fate, but if I did, I might've thought we were destined for that week, that night, that moment.

Hopper's calloused fingers ran along my jaw before he leaned in to kiss me. I kissed him back, but it wasn't the frantic, needy kisses I normally knew. There was no seductive heat in Hopper's kiss, no demand for anything more. That midnight kiss felt like a hello, like we were seeing each other for the first time in a new light.

Like we were both admitting this couldn't be a casual thing. It had to be more, because *we* were more.

He pulled back and looked at me, eyes glassy with a silent question. I pulled his lips back to mine in answer. His hand trailed down my side, the metal fingers just chilly enough to make my skin prickle. I reached behind me, gripping his hips and pulling him tighter against me. It wasn't a demand or even a request, just a need to feel more of him against more of me.

His hand moved back to my jaw, turning my head so he could move his kisses lower, peppering them along my neck. Every kiss was an unspoken promise. *I will hold you. I will keep you safe. I will take care of you, give you whatever you need. Just stay with me a little while longer. Love me and let me show you what love can be.*

Or maybe I was imagining it. If I was, I didn't want the fantasy to end. I held onto it with everything that I was, needing more than ever for it to be real. I had never thought I could be loved like that. Love didn't look like me. I had too many missing parts, too many oddities and strange bits that didn't quite fit together into what people thought a man should look like. I'd never seen someone like me in a movie, or a TV show, or even a game be treated as precious and desirable. I was an object, a plot device, the butt of a joke. A man in a dress, an equality box checked, an inspirational story. But never in love. Never *being* loved. I didn't have a narrative for what was happening, no script, no special cheat code to give me a map. That scared the shit out of me, but it also made my insides ache for something indescribable that I felt I'd missed all my life and only just now noticed.

Tears welled in my eyes, and I turned my face into the pillow so he wouldn't see me fighting them.

The bed creaked as Hopper moved so he could kiss my shoulders and the back of my neck. I shifted slightly, and he moved a little more, and a little more, and soon his weight was on top of me, and I was face down beneath him, his one good arm folded under my chest to keep me close. I felt the hard

shape of his cock against my thigh through the fabric of his pants and canted my ass back, unsure if it was a request or permission. I didn't know if he'd asked because we'd stopped speaking in words, and I was still trying to learn this new language of soft kisses and delicate touch. He must have understood, though, because a moment later, a lube-slicked finger brushed over my hole lightly before sliding inside. He didn't fuck me with it, just gently filled the space and kept kissing me slowly, lazily, deeply, as if he couldn't get enough of the taste of my skin.

The quiet was suddenly a dull roar in my ears that I needed to drown out. I didn't know what to do with the strange, heavy silence. "Hopper," I rasped into the dark.

"Shh," he said, breath tickling my ear. "I've got you, Princess. Daddy's got you. You just hold on to me and let me make love to you like you deserve."

I let out a choked sound, the words hitting in a way I never thought words could.

He added a second finger and more lube, still not being rough or demanding. It was just a gentle stretch, a sweet breath against the back of my neck, a soothing kiss to my jaw.

I reached back to squeeze his hip to tell him I was ready. There was a slight pause as he reached for more lube, getting ready, and then both heads pushed into me. Even though he'd readied me thoroughly, I still bit my lip and whimpered. It wasn't any rougher than taking some of my more well-endowed lovers in the past, but the shape was different, like

two smaller toys, but with more give. It was easier once he got the heads all the way in, even if the stretch was a little much when they parted. And God, that knot... I wanted it in me so bad, but I didn't know if it would be impolite to ask.

He didn't move at first, just rested inside of me for a long moment, kissing and licking my shoulders and neck. When he did move, it was with a lazy grace that left my cock aching. As if he could read my mind, he lowered his hand over my hip, but he hesitated. It was his prosthetic hand, so without tactile feedback, he'd have no idea how hard he was squeezing me.

Hot, panting breath tickled my ear before teeth nipped at the earlobe. "Touch yourself, Princess."

I sucked in a breath, shuddering at the command. Part of me bucked at the idea of obeying just because he'd ordered it, but I was so hard, I wanted to do it too bad. I grabbed my cock and started stroking it, trying to time it with his thrusts, which was maddening. He wasn't going fast enough for me to get off. All he was doing was getting me more and more worked up.

His hips thrust up hard just once, and he grunted in my ear. His cock kicked, spilling inside of me, and he stilled. I sped up, trying to finish, but he grabbed my arm gently and stilled it as his breathing evened out.

"Not done," he mumbled, kissed my neck, and started moving again.

Fuck, how had I forgotten he could do that more than once? Once probably wasn't even finishing for him. Even after a

third time earlier, he'd stayed hard for a while. What exactly would it take to fully sate him?

He kept going and came again with a grunt a minute later. The guttural sound of pleasure in my ear and the rush of wetness inside of me had my cock twitching and leaking, but he wouldn't let me finish.

Hopper nuzzled against the back of my neck. "You feel so good, Princess. Just one more time and then you can come."

I let out a low whine of need.

He released my hand. "Slowly."

I didn't want to go slowly, but I also didn't want to disappoint him. Maybe another time I'd push him to see how much I could get away with, but I was too desperate. At least I knew he wouldn't take long.

He started moving faster, thrusting deeper, letting out little grunts of effort that had me shuddering and my body throbbing for release.

I whined at him, hoping he'd relent. "Please?"

"Almost there. Just... *Ungh!*" His hips jerked up, slamming into me.

My cock jerked, sending a fresh rush of pre-cum leaking over the tip. I spread it with my fingers and started moving my hand faster. "Now?"

His breathing slowed, and I thought he was done, but he started moving again, faster, harder. There was so much cum

leaking out of my hole around him that there was a loud, wet sound every time his knot hit my hole. His teeth nipped at my ear. “Ask me to come like a good boy.”

I moaned, almost unable to make words. “Daddy, may I come?”

“Yeah, Princess. Come for Daddy.”

I squeezed my fist tight around my cock and worked it faster, focused completely on finishing. The feel of his release leaking out of my hole as he continued to fuck me, the hot lips on the back of my neck and his grunts of pleasure... It was all too much. I came with a shuddering shout, the sound almost like the cry of a wounded animal.

Hopper whispered a breathy curse in my ear and his hips stilled, his cock pulsing deep inside of me a fourth time.

For a minute, neither of us moved. Our rasping breaths filled the dark as we tried to find our footing again in reality.

I swallowed, my throat painfully dry. “Hopper... You beat your record.”

His body shook and laughter rumbled out of him. “So I did, Princess. So I did.”

NINETEEN

ROBERT

AN ALARM WENT OFF next to the bed at stupid o'clock. Hopper groaned, rolled over, and turned it off before kissing the back of my head and getting out of bed. I didn't move. If I wasn't so exhausted, I probably would have realized that was my cue to go sleep in my own bed. He didn't kick me out though and I was so tired, I didn't care about common decency, so I went back to sleep.

It was light out when I woke again, my head pounding. I let out an annoyed groan and sat up to find a bottle of water sitting on the bedstand next to me with a note in Hopper's handwriting that said: *drink me*.

"Okay, but not because you told me to," I muttered and tore off the cap.

I downed the whole thing before putting on my prosthetics and my skirt to make the walk of shame down the hall to the bathroom. I sat in the bathwater for a long time, trying to soak the soreness in my body away, and thinking about what I was going to tell Charlie when he got back.

He and Cupid had only been gone eight days, and in that time, I'd managed to fall for Hopper completely. I imagined his frown, the worry in his voice when he reminded me this wasn't the first time I'd said I was in love. I didn't fall often, but when it happened, it was hard and fast and always ended badly.

Like with Shane.

We'd met online in a forum. I was eighteen, desperate, and looking to escape from under my father's thumb, so when an attractive older guy gave me the time of day, I jumped. Less than a week after our first video chat, I decided I was moving to Detroit to live with some guy I barely knew. Of course, my family argued with me about it. Dad shouted. Mom cried. Ryder worried. But I couldn't be swayed. I was in love, and no one could tell me differently.

When I got to Detroit, everything was great for a few weeks. Occasionally, Shane would say something that gave me pause, or he'd snap at me, but I was so desperate to make it work, I overlooked all the red flags. The first time he shoved me, he apologized, said it would never happen again. I believed him. Believed him the second time, too. The third time, I got the hell out and moved in with a girl named Tracie, who got me that job at the stadium.

But fucking Shane wouldn't leave me alone, kept harassing me online and calling me a liar, stressing me out. Didn't help when my parents tracked me down to tell me "I told you so" and ordered me to move back to DC. I felt like an idiot. All I

wanted was to get away from it. That's what drove me to the Army recruiting station in the first place. Desperation.

Was I desperate now? What if Hopper had some hidden red flags I was completely missing? Sure, he was a gruff grump on the outside, but the last few days had proven there was more to him than he shared with the rest of the world. He was a monster who made peanut butter sandwiches for me and played love songs outside my window at night. He didn't just call me his princess; he treated me like one, too. I'd never felt so safe and cared for as I had in the last twenty-four hours.

I had to be missing something. Nobody was *that* perfect.

I needed an outside perspective, someone who'd give it to me straight, and Charlie wasn't going to be that guy. He was too good a friend for that. I needed Chris. He'd know what to do. Chris was like a big brother to me, hard on me when he needed to be and honest to a fault.

After my bath, I went back to my room and opened my suitcase, sitting in my wheelchair. My legs were too tired to do much more standing. Searching through my bag, I found the bell Chris had given Charlie. Charlie had left it with me, just in case. I hadn't thought I'd need to use it, but everything about this trip was a surprise.

I stared at the tiny bell, a new ball of nerves rolling around in my stomach. Once I said what I was feeling out loud, I couldn't take it back. Was that really something I wanted to get off my chest, especially knowing that I'd be leaving eventually? I'd never been very good at long-distance

relationships, and Hopper didn't exactly have an internet connection. What future did that leave for me and Hopper? Was I really thinking of moving out there with him? After eight days? Hadn't I learned my lesson the first time?

I sighed and put the bell back down. *One night in his bed and I'm ready to move in. I'm pathetic.*

For most of the rest of the day, I just laid in my bed, thinking about what I was going to say to Charlie. I should have been excited that my friend was coming back, but I wasn't. Even though I'd agreed to stay with Hopper a few more days, Charlie's return would still mark the beginning of the end.

The screen door banged closed. I glanced at the window. It was still too early for Hopper to be back. Maybe Charlie and Cupid had returned. My heart jumped into my throat and I sat up. A dull ache went through my leg and I winced.

Chair it is, I thought and slid into it, carefully maneuvering my way through the door and down the hall, only to stop in the kitchen doorway. There was a monster I'd never seen on the ranch before standing in the kitchen. I'd seen one like him in the coffee shop the day before and been too intimidated to ask Hopper what kind of monster they were.

He was massive, so tall he had to hunch over to keep his head from hitting the ceiling, and built like a mountain. Literally. Dude looked like his body had been carved out of granite—very muscular granite—which only made the frilly

pink apron he wore stand out more. He was bent over the sink, rinsing vegetables.

When he turned around, he started at the sight of me and nearly dropped his handful of carrots. “Lo, there friend. You gave me quite a start.”

I blinked. He had a noticeable accent, almost Australian, but something seemed off about it. “Um. Hi. Who are you?”

“Name’s Levidan Gholloc. I’m the chef.” He turned to the counter, pulling out a big wooden cutting board and started cutting the carrots into slices. “You must be Robert Smith. Glad to meet you. Hopper said I should ask you what you want to eat. I’m to make you whatever you want.”

“Wait, hold on.” I held up my hand. I knew Hopper had a chef that came in to make his food once a week, but I hadn’t expected a giant rock monster. But the surprises weren’t over.

Another monster walked out of the living room. At first glance, he almost looked like a normal Asian guy except for his long bird legs and the giant black feathery wings on his back. He looked incredibly out of place in his black jacket, dress slacks and his white undershirt, which he’d left unbuttoned to show off impressive tattoos on his chest. He grinned at me from under a beak-like nose, showing pointed teeth, and leaned against the counter. I almost pinched myself to make sure I was awake.

“What’s the matter, kid?” the newcomer asked, picking up a carrot and taking a bite. “Cat got your tongue?”

The other monster looked up from chopping carrots. “Hey now. Hopper said to be nice, Kaito.”

“I am being nice, *Levi*.” The bird man swung a katana up onto his shoulder and pushed away from the counter. He disappeared in a puff of black smoke only to reappear behind me, feathers falling. “So you’re Hopper’s pet?”

I twisted to frown at him. “I’m not his *pet*.”

“*Sou desu ka?*” he said in a mocking tone.

“I understand Japanese, *baka*,” I growled.

He made a sound caught halfway between a laugh and a chirp in the back of his throat as he came back around in front of me. I flinched as he brought his sword down and used the tip of it to lift my chin, making me stare into his big, black eyes.

“I don’t know, Levi. He seems a little... *little*.” He smirked when he saw me scowl.

Levi shrugged and continued chopping his vegetables. “All humans are little to me.”

“I’m not little,” I protested. “And I don’t need my legs to kick your ass.”

Kaito huffed and pulled the sword away, planting it on the floor between us. “Ah, at least he has spirit.”

“Why are you here?” I rolled my chair back and out of range of the psycho’s sword. “Does Hopper know you’re in his house? With a sword?”

“Of course he knows.” Kaito sighed and turned his head as if he were bored with the conversation. “Although he normally doesn’t keep me waiting so long. I’m rather offended and starting to feel I’m entitled to be compensated for my wasted time.” He glanced up and down my body in a way I didn’t particularly care for. “As for why I’m here, I came to warn Hopper. The weather patterns are unusual for this time of year in the mountains. Snow has retreated early, and the Heavens say it will be an early winter with volatile storms.”

I crossed my arms. “So you’re what? A professional weather bird?”

His eyes sparkled, and he made that chirping laughter sound again. “Oh, I like you, human. It’s too bad Hopper has laid his claim. You’d be a fun one to *break*. You certainly need some *discipline*.”

I snorted. “Now you sound like my dad. And that’s not a compliment.”

“Kai, be nice,” Levi warned again.

Kaito winked at me, grin widening. “In any case, human, if you tire of the jacqeroi, send a message on the wind and I’d be happy to show you the error of your ways.” He patted my head as he walked by, headed for the front door.

I turned my chair. “Where are you going? I thought you were waiting for Hopper.”

He waved a dismissive hand, spreading more feathers. “I came to warn him, and I’ve done that. No doubt, you’ll relay

my message. Do be sure he gets it, little human.”

“Wait!” I wheeled the chair closer.

Kaito turned, lifting an eyebrow expectantly.

“The tear is up in the mountains, right? And you said that’s where you were from.”

“It is where I reside, little one. Not where I am *from*,” Kaito said with a hint of irritation. “I guide the lost souls who come across down to the town. When it suits me, of course. Sometimes, I’m too busy sleeping or brushing my feathers, or doing literally anything else.”

“Whatever. You haven’t seen another human and a Dominion up there, have you?”

He tapped his chin. “Ah, yes. I did some time ago, yes. Last week, in fact. They went through the tear, which I thought strange for a human. Your kind rarely comes up my mountain.”

I frowned. “But they haven’t come back?”

“I don’t expect the human will,” he said, again sounding bored with the conversation. “The other side of the tear is quite volatile and unkind to your soft, squishy bodies.”

My heart skipped a beat. What if Charlie and Cupid hadn’t come back because Charlie was hurt? Or worse. “Cupid would protect Charlie,” I said out loud. “The human is the Dominion’s mate. He wouldn’t let anything bad happen to him now that they’ve bonded.”

“Unless, of course, the empress orders it,” Kaito said with a shrug. “If it suits her to have him dissected for her entertainment, no force in this world could stop her.” He thought for a moment. “Well, *I* could, but that’s a waste of my talents. Either way, if she didn’t have him executed, the khetch might eat him, or perhaps he’s fallen into a pool with an irqed. Or simply gotten lost. The chances of him returning safely are miniscule.”

“Don’t taunt the human, Kai,” Levi said and then added, “I’m sure they’re fine. Just got distracted, is all.”

I wasn’t sure which one to believe. Cupid had insisted the journey would be safe for Charlie, or else Charlie never would have gone. It was possible those two idiots had gotten distracted, though. Probably stopping to fuck every hour on the hour. Those two were disgustingly sweet on each other and seemed to forget the rest of the world existed sometimes.

“Is there any way to check?” I asked. “Maybe to send word to see if they’re okay?”

“Suppose you could go through to ask,” Levi offered, gesturing toward Kaito with his knife.

“*Me?*” Kaito squawked. “Oh, no. I’m far too busy polishing rocks and playing with my bells. I simply don’t have the time. Speaking of busy, I should go if I want to be back in time to watch the sunset. *Ja mata*, little human. Be good to Hopper, or I shall have to hunt you down and eat your pretty eyes.” He shook his hand and a wide straw hat appeared in his fist. He placed it on his head and went out the door.

“The hell’s with that guy?” I asked Levi.

“He’s a crex. They’re all like that.” He looked up, thinking for a minute. “Although, I suppose that’s too much of a generalization. Kai is actually nicer than most crex. He’ll only eat your eyes if you deserve it.”

I cringed.

“Or if he gets really bored. Bored crex are a real menace. Anyway...” He dumped the vegetables he’d been cutting into a sauté pan and smiled pleasantly, wiping his hands on his apron. “What would you like to eat? Oh, hey. I’ve got an idea. How about a nice spinach and ricotta ravioli? Or a nice beetroot and kale salad?”

I pressed my lips together, thinking before nodding to him. “You know how to make ramen?”

“Oh, I’ve got an eggplant I could grill for that. Some bonito flakes, a little mirin... Yeah, I think I can do that, friend.”

I grinned. “Good, because I have an idea.”

TWENTY

HOPPER

LEVI WAS STILL IN the kitchen when I came into the house. Not surprising, considering I'd called it an early day. Not only had I only gotten about two hours of sleep last night, but Layla had been giving Noah fits all morning. Every time I tried to get her to leave the barn, she'd charge me. I was exhausted, sweaty, and covered in rock dust. There was also a front coming in that had me sore as hell.

"Lo, Hopper," Levi said pleasantly, stirring whatever was in his big metal mixing bowl. "Nice to see you."

"Is Kaito still here?" I let the door swing closed behind me.

Levi shook his head. "Left a message with Mister Smith."

I frowned and looked around. "Where is Robert?"

It was foolish, but I'd half been expecting Robert to be there to greet me when I came home, or at least to pop by to say hi. All day, even as Layla was giving me fits, he was all I could think about. And it wasn't just the sex. I worried I'd worn him out with that since he seemed so tired. Though I'd left him water and his usual peanut butter sandwich, I had this stupid

notion that he was going to balk at taking care of himself. There was a part of me that worried I'd scared him off. Something happened between us last night and our casual arrangement had been on the verge of becoming something more. Maybe he didn't want that.

"He's in your bedroom," Levi said, turning back to his work. "Gave me special orders for dinner, too. It'll be served fresh in the dining room at seven."

My heart did a somersault. Surely, he wouldn't be in my bedroom if he regretted it? I took a step toward the hall but paused with a cringe. I was filthy and reeked of dragon. While I was eager to go straight to him, I needed a bath first, and that was going to take a while, sore as I was.

While I was debating what to do, my bedroom door opened, and Robert stepped out. My breath caught at the sight of him. I'd seen him wearing dresses before plenty of times and thought he looked amazing in them, but those were cute little sun dresses and the occasional long skirt. Today, he was wearing a pink satin patterned corset and two layers of skirts, one of them tied up intermittently. With the wig, the makeup, and the jewelry, he was barely recognizable.

Robert glanced up and down the hallway before his eyes settled on me. His shoulders stiffened and his eyes widened as if he were surprised to see me. Fear, I realized. It was fear and worry that flickered across his lovely features. He swallowed and came down the hallway, fidgeting with his fingers.

“Robert, you look...” I gave him an up and down before shaking my head in awe. “You’re beautiful.”

That didn’t seem to put him at ease. So, it wasn’t the clothes. Something else was bothering him.

He pressed his painted lips together, then rolled his bottom lip in to bite it. “Actually, when I’m in full drag like this, could you call me Annie? Annie Mae. It’s a stage name of sorts.”

I removed my hat. “Pleased to make your acquaintance, Annie Mae. Is that Miss Annie Mae or mister or...” I trailed off, trying to get my mind to work, but my train of thought had derailed completely. I just wanted to get it right, but I didn’t even know how to ask.

“She and her pronouns are fine for Annie. But like... Robert is still a he. And I promise this isn’t some sort of mental break or something. I’ve been doing this for a long time. It...” She looked away, rubbing her fingers together. “I don’t know. I just like it.” She glanced back at me and then away quickly again. “You think it’s stupid, don’t you?”

A shockwave of guilt went through me. “It ain’t stupid to do what makes you happy, Princess.”

Annie’s eyes watered, and I thought for a moment I’d said the wrong thing.

I removed my hat and toyed with the bill, feeling an inch tall. “Can I still call you Princess, or does Annie prefer something else?”

She rushed forward to close the gap between us, throwing her arms around me and nearly crushing my hat in the process. A choked sob came out against my chest.

I squeezed her tight, still unsure of what was happening. “It’s all right. I’m sorry. No tears, now. You’ll ruin all that hard work, and I was enjoying looking at this new face.”

The sniffing turned into a laugh. “I’m sorry. It’s just... I was expecting...”

I put my hands on her shoulders and gently pushed her back so I could lift her chin and look into her eyes. “Listen here, Miss Annie Mae. I don’t like you because of your name, or your clothes, or your body. I like you for who you are, and that don’t change, no matter what you’re wearin’.”

She ran a finger under her eyes. “Stop it. You’re going to make me cry again.”

I smiled and started working the kinks out of my hat. Clearing my throat, I put it back on my head. “So, can I still call you Princess?”

Annie smiled. “Only if I can still call you Daddy.”

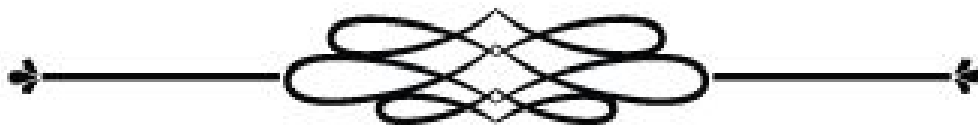
“Call me whatever you like,” I said and slid past her. “As long as I can get a bath, some dinner, and a nap in that order.”

“Actually, I was kind of hoping to spend the evening together.” Her tone had me turning around in time to see her tuck the pink strands of her wig behind her ear. “I kind of had everything set up already.”

I paused with my hand on the door. She seemed... disappointed. That wouldn't do. While I was tired, and I did smell awful, maybe we could meet somewhere in the middle.

“Tell you what, Princess. Why don't you let me get a quick bath and then we'll have dinner together and go from there?”

Her face lit up, and she nodded excitedly.



I HURRIED THROUGH MY bath as much as I could, even though my sore muscles were screaming for a good soak. My legs were sore as hell, and the prosthetic feet felt particularly heavy as I walked across the cold bathroom floor to stand in front of the mirror.

I took the time to run a fine brush through my fur and rub a little oil onto my antlers so they'd be nice and shiny. Then I went into my bedroom and paused. There was a cloth over the nightstand covering something up. Robert—Annie—had said she'd set things up for later, and I didn't want to ruin the surprise, so I left it alone, going straight to my wardrobe.

What to wear? She'd dressed up for me, so it only felt right to do the same. I grabbed my good boots from the back of the wardrobe and some polish. It'd been a spell since I'd had an excuse to wear them. Boots polished and set aside to dry, I pulled on my best pair of Levis and my favorite embroidered red button up. I pulled my nicer black Stetson from the hook on the wall and blew off the dust, carefully lowering it over

my antlers and tucking my ears up underneath. Last thing I grabbed was a small spare squeeze bottle from the bathroom and filled it with lube from the big bottle. Never hurt to be prepared.

I stopped in front of the mirror. My reflection stared back at me, a little more polished than usual, but I was still me. I hooked a thumb in my belt, turning my face one way and then the other, puffing out my cheeks to blow out a breath. *Okay, Hopper. You can do this. You're only as old as you feel...* And gods, did I feel *old*. How old was Robert, anyway? Twenty-five? Twenty-six? Still baby-faced, but old enough to know better than to hook up with an old jacqeroi like me.

Fuck, I didn't even know.

Didn't know his favorite color, or his favorite food, or his hobbies. I should've known those things about him, shouldn't I? Those were the types of questions people who were romantically involved asked about.

I blew out another breath and adjusted my hat back. *Guess tonight's my opportunity to find out.*

I made sure my shirt was tucked in properly and checked my watch with a curse. Of course I was late.

Knees aching, I limped out of the bedroom, headed for the dining room. Annie was already waiting, pacing next to the table. Someone had gotten the good tablecloth out and even lit some candles.

My throat constricted, taking in the unfamiliar, romantic atmosphere. I immediately felt guilty that Annie had gone through all this trouble on my account. I didn't need candles and dinner and fancy dress up to enjoy an evening with her.

I smoothed my hands over my shirt, trying to work out the nerves more than the wrinkles, and cleared my throat. When Annie turned around, a smile on those painted lips, my heart did a tumble.

"There you are, Hopper. I was starting to worry you'd stood me up."

"Naw. Just slow moving. Sorry I'm late." I pulled out the chair for her to sit.

"Such a gentleman," she purred in a sultry voice.

I snorted and gave her bottom a swat as she went to sit. "Don't even. I was literally born in a barn."

Annie blinked rapidly. "You were?"

"Yep," I said, limping over to my chair. "All jacqeroi are, though, so I ain't special. Mothers nest with the dragons. Raise us right alongside the egg clutches the first few months." I sank into the chair, watching Annie's eyes sparkle.

"That's so cool."

I shrugged. "I don't remember it, but it's why we're all..." I winced. "Why *most* of us are bonded to dragons for life."

"So, which one is supposed to be yours?" Annie asked as Levi entered with two bowls.

A sick feeling swept over me, sweat gathering on the back of my neck. My fist closed around my fork and I barely noticed when Levi put the bowl in front of me. *“Short tail! Short tail! Hopper has a short tail!”*

“Hopper?” Annie’s voice pulled me back from the threshold of memory.

I shook my head. “He’s gone.”

Annie made a choked sound. “Oh my God. I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“It’s fine,” I said with a shrug, pushing the swell of emotion down. “It was a long time ago.” Before she could say anything else, I gestured to the food in front of me. “What’s this?”

Thin white noodles sat in a bath of savory smelling broth alongside a halved hardboiled egg, some mushrooms, browned tofu, and some green onions. It smelled delicious, just like everything Levi made. For a grinnie, he was a damn good cook.

“Ramen noodles with teriyaki glazed tofu and some shiitake mushrooms,” Levi announced, and something in the kitchen beeped. “Oh, and that’d be my vegetable egg rolls. I’ll be right back.”

Annie picked up her chopsticks and started stirring up the contents of the bowl. “So, you might notice tonight has a theme. I wanted to introduce you to one of my favorite hobbies. Have you heard of anime?”

I frowned and fiddled with the chopsticks. “Anime... Like cartoons for kids?”

She chuckled. “Oh, these aren’t for kids. It’s a style of animation in Japan. I got into it when I was recovering in the hospital. They used to do these midnight marathons of anime, and it was the only thing that could really hold my attention. I was going to show you a few episodes, if that’s okay.”

I wasn’t sure cartoons would be for me, but if it made Annie happy, I was willing to try. Especially if we could watch them in my bed cuddled up together. “Sure,” I said.

Her eyes lit up, and she slurped up some of the noodles. “You’ll love it,” she said, mouth still half full. “It’s sort of a western, but set in space, and it has this to die for jazzy soundtrack. It’s a classic, Hopper, and a nice, easy introduction to the genre. Anime can get a little... Well, let’s just say there’s a reason I had to ask you about the tentacle thing. But it kind of has a sad ending.” She frowned and lowered her chopsticks. “Maybe I should’ve picked something happier.”

“I like tragedies,” I said.

“Someone told me once we like sad stories because it helps us process our own sadness safely,” she said, picking through her dinner.

“Sounds like a wise person.”

Annie snorted. “I don’t know if I’d call Axel wise. He still needs to leave sticky notes on his door to remind him to put on

pants some days. Dude's got the worst case of ADHD, but he's all right."

"Axel's your friend?"

Her head bobbed back and forth in a half nod and her eyes flicked up to take in my face hesitantly. "We were sort of friends with benefits before this."

I frowned and put my chopsticks down. "You're gonna have to be a little more plain with me, Princess."

"We slept together a few times, but it wasn't serious."

Jealousy flared in my chest and I had to stuff it back down. Whoever this Axel fella was, my Princess deserved better than some casual fuck on the side from someone who couldn't even remember to wear pants.

She gestured with the chopsticks, slicing through the air. "Anyway, that's over now. He wasn't really my type. A little too young and precious for me, if I'm being honest. I mean, he's older than me, but... You know what I mean."

I swallowed and tried to still my shaky fingers as I reached for my glass of water. "And how old is Axel?"

"Thirty, I think." She looked up and seemed to realize that was my roundabout way of asking about her age. "I'm twenty-five."

I choked on my water. Twenty-five? Gods, I really was a cradle-robbing monster.

She smirked and leaned forward on her hands. “Okay, so how old are *you*?”

I hesitated. “Two hundred fifty-seven.”

Her eyes widened, and she sat up straighter. “Holy shit. You’re older than America! And I’m really your first?”

My skin warmed, and I stared down into my half-empty bowl of noodles. “All right, all right. I know I’m old. No need to rub it in, dammit.”

“No, no. I didn’t mean it like that,” she said quickly and paused. “Will you think I’m weird for saying I think it’s hot? I mean, I’m honored I got to be the one to pop your cherry. I’m just... How did someone so goddamn sexy go two hundred fifty-seven years without getting pounced?”

“Shit,” I muttered, drawing out the vowel, my whole face on fire. “You’re teasin’ me.”

“Maybe a little, but it’s true, too.” We tucked back into our meals in pleasant silence for a little while before she said, “Charlie and Cupid didn’t come back today. When should we worry?”

Now, was my first thought. *Should’ve worried the second that fool human decided to go through the tear with his Dominion mate.*

They’d known the dangers, which I’d explained exhaustively over the phone. Charlie hadn’t cared. He’d been adamant that he was going with Cupid, and it wasn’t my place to stop either of them. But since they were now two days later

than their planned return, I'd started to get even more worried something had happened. Dominion were a prideful species, but they rarely failed to keep their word. If Cupid said he'd be back in a week, he meant to be back in a week.

I didn't want to worry my Princess, though, so I shrugged. "Probably got distracted."

Annie sighed. "Yeah, probably. And it's not like we can do anything about it, anyway. We can't go through the tear."

I watched her pick at her food, worry creasing her beautiful face. "Actually, I'll be driving the dragons through in a few weeks. Might be even earlier if the weather turns. Maybe I can check on them then if they aren't back."

"Oh!" Her head shot up. "That reminds me! This asshole name Kaito told me to tell you... What was it, exactly?" She tapped her bottom lip. "He said the snow had retreated early, and that winter would come early with volatile storms... or something like that."

I frowned and tapped my chopsticks against the bowl. That was exactly what I didn't want to hear. If the snow had already retreated in the mountains, it meant I had days, not weeks, to find the help I needed for this year's drive. No wonder Layla had been so restless. Spending some time on the other side might be just what she needed, too.

Annie tipped her head. "Does that mean something to you?"

"Means I might be leaving sooner than I thought." I sighed. "If they aren't back by then, I'll find them when I go across."

I'm sure they've just gotten distracted, though.”

She hummed in agreement, but I didn't think she was convinced.

We finished our dinner in short order and left the plates for the housekeepers to get. I'd saved a small brownie from being eaten by a dragon once, and apparently that entitled me to a lifetime of cleaning services from him and his kin. They didn't come out while I was around, but the dishes were always clean, and the floors always spotless.

After, I was anxious to go back to the bedroom and find out what she'd left out under that cover, but Annie brought me into the den instead. I didn't spend much time in there. I certainly didn't ever use the television. I'd only bought it because everyone else had one and I thought I'd been missing out on something.

But Annie had hooked her laptop up to the thing and, using some kind of technological wizardry, used the laptop to make her anime appear on the big screen.

I stretched my leg out on the big leather sofa to elevate my aching knee. Annie practically skipped back to curl up in my lap, vibrating with excitement. She kissed my cheek and settled in with her head resting on my chest, body draped lazily over mine. She really wanted me to like this cartoon, so I'd try, but I couldn't care less about the show. I'd have watched a blank screen with her like that.

I flinched when the screen exploded in an of assault flashing text and loud jazz music. Characters, weapons, and spaceships

floated across the screen in vibrant technicolor while trumpets screamed and bass thrummed in the background. It was such a loud, intense opening sequence... Because of course it was. That was just like my Princess, wasn't it? To like something so *big* and *loud*.

The show itself was all right, I supposed. It revolved around some ragtag bounty hunters always on the move, but never moving forward. They all seemed stuck in the past, no matter how much they fought against it. Time was their great enemy, and death was the only way to beat it. I liked the dog, though.

After a few episodes, I closed my eyes just to rest them.

Next thing I knew, there were soft lips on mine. Teeth nibbled at my bottom lip and a soft, sweet voice asked, "Tired?"

I forced my eyes open. The room was dark except for the red light coming from the screen, paused on a red frame of the opening credits.

"I'm up. I was just restin' my eyes," I said, shifting to sit up.

"You were snoring."

My eyes finally focused, and I realized I must've been deep asleep. After I closed my eyes, Annie had removed some of her attire. A crumpled baby wipe sat on the coffee table, stained with makeup. It sat right next to the pink wig.

Robert had left on the corset and garter belt, and a pair of matching lace underwear. At least, I thought it was Robert.

Maybe it was the sleep, but I wasn't sure which name I was supposed to use when they were like this.

“Robert? Or...”

His smile was radiant white in the dark. Soft fingers traced over my mouth. “Please just call me Princess, Daddy.”

TWENTY-ONE

ROBERT

HOPPER MUST HAVE BEEN exhausted, but his cock hadn't gotten the message. It was already hard beneath me. I should've left him alone, let him sleep. He'd been working hard and needed his rest. When I saw how tired he was, I'd meant to end the night early and save the rest for another time, which was why I'd covered everything up in the bedroom. I meant to sneak in and hide it.

Then he started talking about *leaving*. The thought of being away from him, even just a few weeks so he could do his job, left me aching in a way I'd never felt before. Now that I knew what it felt like to be with him, it'd be torture to go back to the way things were before. Not just the sex, though that was a part of it. Hopper was the best lay of my life, despite being a virgin. He was also the sweetest, most caring person I'd ever met. Maybe not in the way most people would think of, but he was what I needed when I needed it.

There were no buts about it. I was in love with Hopper, and I wasn't letting him get away that easily.

I kissed his chin, pointedly avoiding his lips when he turned to try to catch mine. He tried again, and I pulled away. With a laugh, I sat up and snatched his hat off his head, putting it on mine and drawing my fingers over the bill while licking my lips suggestively. An excited shiver ran through me when he reached up and grabbed me by the back of the neck with enough force to hold me.

A flash of something dark went through his eyes. “I’ve had just about enough of your games tonight, Princess. You’d best settle down now or else.”

I flashed him a defiant smirk, reached up, and flicked the hat back slightly on my head. “Or else what?”

His hand snaked under the hat to grab a handful of my hair, yanking my head back to expose my neck. My heart skipped and I couldn’t contain the groan that came out of me.

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you actually want to find out,” Hopper said, his voice rough.

I wiggled my hips, my cock feeling annoyingly trapped in the lace panties. “A good Daddy would discipline me for being out of line.”

“Would he now?” Hopper licked his lips, looking me up and down, eyes black with hunger.

I’d taken my prosthetics off when I settled on the couch with him, but he still had his on, so I expected him to scoop me up and carry me to the bedroom like he’d done before. Levi was still in the kitchen, cooking up a storm. I could

vaguely hear him humming to himself. Maybe Hopper couldn't though, because in a surprising flash of movement, he had me spun around, facing away from him. I squeaked as he pushed me forward, my chest hitting the opposite arm of the brown leather sofa. He shoved my head down, and I shivered as teeth grazed the back of my neck.

“Hopper!” I hissed. “Levi's still in the kitchen. He'll hear us!”

“Maybe.” His hand came down on top of the hat and he lifted it from my head, putting it back on his before he hooked a calloused finger in my panties and pulled the back down to expose my ass. He slapped my ass hard enough that the sting brought tears to my eyes, and I jerked, biting back a moan. “Are you really going to pretend the idea of being caught doesn't make your pretty cock hard, Princess?”

Fuck, he had me there. I was already so hard I could barely stand it. That my dick was still trapped in the tight confines of those lace panties only made it worse. I wanted him to pull them all the way down, but he seemed content with just exposing my ass, leaving the waistband to pull tight around my thighs.

“Gods, you're so perfect.” His hold on me loosened for a minute, suddenly unsure. “If you'd rather, we can still go—”

I gritted my teeth. “Fuck the bed,” I snarled, too horny to care if we got caught or not. “Hopper, if you don't fuck me right now, I swear—*ungh!*” I grunted as he shoved me back

against the sofa arm, holding me down by the scruff of my neck.

Metal tinkled and my cock jumped, imagining him undoing that ridiculous belt buckle he always wore. The whisper of a zipper and the rustle of heavy fabric dropping followed before I heard a small pop.

“Fuck!” I bit down on the arm rest when one of his slick fingers slid into my hole, trying to muffle the sound of my shout. I bent my arm, fighting the urge to claw at the leather, panting while he worked me with the digit.

“I hope he does hear us,” Hopper said. “I hope him and Noah and everybody does. I want them all to hear how much my princess enjoys Daddy’s cock.”

I whined as he added a second finger, my face burning at the thought of them all hearing the undignified sounds I was making. I’d never been particularly shy about sex, but it was one thing to be a little loud behind closed doors and another thing entirely to fuck out in the open where anyone could walk in on us. There were no doors between us and Levi or the front door. Noah was always coming and going, or Charlie could come back... God, I’d never live this down if *Cupid* saw us.

I should have been worried, not turned on. Instead, I was so hard it hurt, my cock drooling heavily into the lace panties. Hopper had found my prostate and was rubbing his fingertips over it relentlessly, but it wasn’t enough. I needed *him*.

I canted my hips slightly to try to entice him, but that only made it worse. The new angle had his fingers plunging deeper

and hitting that sweet bundle of nerves with every pass. I let out the most embarrassing loud moan that Levi definitely would have heard.

“That’s it,” Hopper snarled. “Let go, Princess. You’re mine, and everyone knows it.”

“Please, Hopper!” I whined, working hard to keep my voice low.

He added a third finger. “Who am I?”

“Daddy!” I screamed out at the sudden jolt of pleasure from the painful stretch.

“And what does my Princess want?” He sounded like he was seconds away from completely losing it and fuck if that wasn’t the hottest thing I’d ever heard in my life.

“Fuck me hard, Daddy!”

The snarl that ripped out of his throat was practically feral. I wailed when he took his fingers out of me, my poor abused hole flexing around nothing, but he didn’t leave me that way for long. Just long enough to slick his length with more lube and line it up.

I shouted in appreciation as he thrust in suddenly, my back arching and vision flashing white.

Hopper leaned forward to plant a soothing kiss between my shoulders. “Too much?”

“Fucking hell, no! Don’t stop!” My voice cracked, but I didn’t care, nor did I care that I was shouting everything loud

enough they probably heard me in town. “Don’t you dare go easy on me!”

“All right then.” He adjusted his hat before gripping my hips and pulling out, nearly to the tip before slamming back in.

Twin lightning bolts of pain and pleasure shot through me, making my cock jerk where it was still trapped. Every thrust sent a wave of force up my spine, making my muscles tremble, but it still wasn’t enough. I could tell he was still holding back, being careful not to let the thick knot at the base of his cock slip in.

“Give me all of it!” I pleaded, voice breaking. “*Please!*”

He groaned and bent over me, kissing my back gently. “I can’t.”

I almost wailed, on the verge of weeping with the need to have the rest of him inside of me. I didn’t care that it would hurt. My body was on fire, burning with the need for him to claim me, and how could he do that if he didn’t give me all of him?

“Please! I need you! All of you!”

“Robert,” he moaned into my skin, the knot pressing hard against my hole. Another good thrust, and he’d push it inside. I tried to rock back against him to take it, but it had started to swell too large.

I wailed with disappointment when I felt the telltale kick of his cock inside of me and knew he was already coming. He shuddered against me, hot breaths tickling my back. When he

was done, he laid still against my back for a long time, just breathing. I could feel his heart pounding against my skin like it was trying to jump out of his chest.

“Hopper,” I whined as he withdrew from my body.

He blew out a breath. “I know. Just... gimme a sec. I’ve never come out of both at once before.”

Oh, fuck. No wonder he seemed so wrung out, but he was still hard, and I hadn’t finished yet. If he was determined not to let me have all of him, the least he could do was let me get off.

“Let me ride you,” I pleaded. “I really need to come.”

“Yeah,” he said, his voice oddly gentle, almost pained. “Okay, Princess. Whatever you want.”

I was too horny to think. I tore the thin waistband of the panties and ripped them off enough to free my cock before shoving him onto his back. There was a tiny bottle of lube sitting on the coffee table. I snagged it and gave him a fresh coating before turning around to grab his ankles. The position was hell on my knees, but heaven on my prostate, and he got a damn perfect view of himself going in and out of my ass. I balanced myself, holding onto him one handed so I could fuck my fist.

I knew it wouldn’t take long, not as worked up as I was, but even I was surprised when it only took a few minutes. I gave one final shout, the muscles in my stomach and ass tensing as my cock emptied into my hand. Behind me, Hopper let out a

loud grunt. Fingers, both mechanical and human, dug into my hips as he came with me.

My heartbeat thumped loud in my ears as I came down from it, my body sweat drenched and sticky with cum. I eased off Hopper, which was no simple task in the corset. Before I fell asleep, I would have to take it off. I just needed to catch my breath.

With a contented sigh, I crawled up Hopper's body and nestled my head against his chest, inhaling his scent through the shirt he was still wearing. He always smelled the best right after a good fuck. "Sorry for getting cum on your fur."

He hummed and kissed the top of my head. "'s all right."

I wanted to ask him why he wouldn't let himself go all the way inside me, but I was almost too afraid to hear the answer. While I had already started to look for reasons to extend my stay with Hopper, he'd started talking about leaving. Maybe I was reading this whole thing wrong, and he just wasn't that into me. This hadn't started out as anything other than a casual arrangement like the one I'd had with Axel.

Except it was nothing like that at all. I'd never felt anything for Axel. We'd fuck and then go our separate ways and that's all it ever was, all I thought I'd ever have with anyone. I sure as hell hadn't expected to fall for Hopper, especially so hard and fast.

"Don't sweat it, Princess," Hopper said and lifted his hat to put it on my head.

“Well, I don’t want it now.” I stuck my tongue out at him and shoved the hat back before straining to sit up. “Fuck, I need to get this corset off. Do you mind helping?”

“Anything you want, Princess.” There was that sad tone again.

I stayed still while he sat up, gently loosening the ribbon holding the corset. “When you go... Will you be going alone?”

Hopper sighed. “No way I can make that drive on my own. It’s a two-man job. Since Noah takes summer classes, I’ll have to hire on a cowboy to help. Not looking forward to that.”

“Why not?” I twisted to glance behind me as he worked.

He shook his head. “Not any trained cowboys in Eden. I’ll have to put out a notice and take on a human. It’s a risk every time I do. Any human that comes in here might see the dragons as a gold mine and try to steal them out from under me, like Leroy did. It’ll be hard to find someone I can trust in such a short time, and I always regret turning people’s worlds upside down.”

“What do you mean?” The corset was finally loose enough I could slip out of it. With Hopper’s help, I managed to wriggle it over my head. It was a relief and a half to have it off, even if I looked hot as hell in the thing.

He put the corset aside and shifted his hips to pull his pants back up. “Well, think about it. Now that you’ve seen them, now that you know there are monsters in the world all over,

just living their lives... Would you ever be able to go back to a normal life? For most humans, it's a reality shattering experience to learn we're here, let alone living alongside them."

"Really?" I asked, settling in against his chest again. There was something particularly sexy about being naked next to him while he was still fully clothed. "Not much changed for me when I found out, honestly. If anything, it's made my life better." *You've made my life better.*

Hopper smiled and slipped a hand around my shoulders, pulling me closer to him so he could kiss me lightly. "You're a special kind of human, Robert. I hope you know that."

I forced myself to smile, but inside, I felt hollow. *Am I special to you, Hopper? Or just in general?* I didn't give a shit about being special, not unless it meant something to him.

"What's wrong?" he asked, drawing a thumb over my cheek. "You all right?"

"Yeah, just..." I swallowed, searching for something else to say. When I looked up into his eyes, though, I lost everything I thought I needed to say. "Can I help you interview the cowboys?"

He blinked in surprise, and I was sure he was going to object. Why shouldn't he? This was his ranch, and I wasn't the one who was going to have to spend weeks up in the mountains with whoever he hired.

“I just think they’ll be more comfortable with another human in the room,” I blurted.

Hopper snorted. “You know I can glamor myself to look human, right?”

“It’s not just that. You can be abrasive. If you want help—good help—you need to keep from scaring them off.” I shifted to sit up so I could look down at him. “I interview people all the time. Sort of. It’s for Dungeons and Dragons, but I think the skills transfer.”

“Princess...”

I shook my head, cutting him off. “I’m not good at much, Hopper, but I’m good at reading people. At least, I think I am. It’s always been something of a survival skill where I come from. I—”

“Stop talking,” he said and put a finger to my lips. “You don’t have to convince me, Princess. The answer is yes. It’s always been yes.”

My heart did a backflip at those words for some reason, as if we were talking about something deeper than interviewing cowboys.

“Scuse me,” came Levi’s voice from the hall. “Yeah, um, ‘lo in there. On the off chance that the dying cat sounds were copulation related and not murder, I made you some cheese and tomato sandwiches. Left them on the counter. But you might want to get them before the Brownies show up. You know how they like their dairy.”

“Oh my God.” I buried my face in Hopper’s chest with a groan.

Hopper chuckled and patted my back. “Thank you, Levi. That will be all.”

“That’ll be all?” I shook my head, face blazing. “How am I ever supposed to look your personal chef in the eye again after shouting ‘fuck me harder Daddy’ while he was making us *sandwiches*?”

“I have an idea,” he said, with a glint of wickedness in his eye. “How about we take our sandwiches into the bedroom? We eat, and then I fuck you into the mattress until you forget all about Levi?”

I thought it sounded like the best idea he’d ever had.

TWENTY-TWO

ROBERT

THE ALARM WENT OFF at four thirty. And four forty-five. Then again, at five. At five after five, Hopper yanked the blankets away from me and I curled up into a very sore, shivering little ball of naked pre-dawn rage.

“Wake up, Princess.”

“Why?” I groaned and shoved my head under the pillows.

He gave my ass a light swat. “Because if you want to interview cowboys with me, you’re gonna have to shadow me all day, and I’m already running late.” When I didn’t move, he added, “If you don’t get your tight little ass out of my bed in the next sixty seconds, Robert, I’m bringing the bath to you.”

I sat up, ready to scowl at him, until I saw him standing there with a steaming cup of coffee. He held it out to me.

“You’re the best,” I mumbled sleepily, taking the coffee. I sipped it without looking and then grimaced. “Changed my mind. You’re the devil. What is this horse piss? Where’s the damned sugar?”

He sighed and leaned down to ruffle a hand through my messy hair. “I’ll remember the sugar tomorrow. We gotta go, Princess.”

Hopper’s morning routine sucked. It wasn’t much different from mine, except he did it at stupid o’clock. I hustled through the fastest, coldest bath I’d probably ever taken, the sting of that lessened by the fact that it was Hopper’s bath and he helped me. I tried twice to seduce him, thinking maybe I could con him into five more minutes asleep after, but he wouldn’t have it.

After I dressed, there wasn’t time for breakfast, so Hopper handed me a couple of cold banana nut muffins that Levi had baked. It was just starting to get light in the sky when I limped out of the house with Hopper. My ass was definitely sore from the night before, but he had no sympathy for me. Apparently, I’d brought it all on myself. I might’ve grumbled about him being an insatiable lecher in response.

Fog clung to the landscape as our little golf cart trundled down the road, and dew hung heavy in the grass. The sun coming up behind the mountains was a breathtaking sight, painting the sky in crimson and gold. I’d seen my fair share of sunrises, but not one could compare to the beauty and majesty of that one.

“I can’t believe it’s so beautiful out here,” I muttered.

“What’s that, city boy?”

I gave Hopper the side eye.

He just laughed and said, “We’ll make a country boy of you yet.”

The shadow of excitement fluttered through me at the thought. What if I stayed? Not just for a few more days, or a few weeks. Could I live out there? I’d never really spent much time thinking about forever. I was too busy getting through each day, one at a time. But forever out on Jackalope Ranch with Hopper? There’d need to be some changes. Internet for one, and he’d have to hire on more help, so he wasn’t working himself to death. I sure as hell wasn’t staying if I couldn’t have one or two days a week to sleep in with him.

Where’s the downside? I thought, looking over at Hopper. *Maybe he doesn’t want me.* My chest felt hollow at the thought, but that didn’t track with how last night had gone. If every day was like last night, I’d suffer through a hundred four-thirty wake-up calls.

We went straight to see Layla. She was curled up in the corner of her big enclosure with her head laying on the tip of her tail.

Hopper handed me a blue bandana. “Tie this over your mouth and nose.”

“What for?” I asked, taking it.

“So you don’t retch. Dragon shit stinks to high heavens, especially Abrakari shit.”

I tied the bandana awkwardly while he walked over to hit a lever. Machinery beneath our feet hummed to life, and the

floor began to vibrate, moving the hay around.

“There’s a subfloor that collects the waste,” Hopper shouted above the whirl of the machine. “The machine knocks it all loose and sends it down through a blast of liquid nitrogen that flash freezes it and puts it through a series of sieves, and then into chutes.” He pushed the lever back down, and the silence that followed was almost deafening.

“Nitrogen tanks are probably one of the most dangerous things on this ranch,” he continued, and walked over to hit the wall with a fist. It looked like wood, but clanged like metal. “They’re behind here, behind a couple layers of insulation and heat detectors. If Layla gets pissed off enough to breathe fire, to keep the tanks from exploding and killing everybody, there’re a temperature and pressure gauges.” He waved me over to a panel on the other side, pointing out several dials.

“I assume red is bad?” I said.

Hopper nodded. “You see a needle in the red, you’re dead.” He tapped one of the dials. “There are a bunch of processes run by computers and shit that I don’t rightly understand that keep that from happening.”

I almost pinched myself. “Did you say computers?”

He leaned against the wall with a big grin. “Thought that’d interest you. Wanna see?”

“Does a dragon shit gold? Hell yes, I do.”

Hopper walked me outside to what looked like a flimsy shed. It was really just a box to hold an entrance to an

underground lair. Well, maybe lair wasn't the right word, but it sure felt like I'd just walked into a supervillain hide out. There were servers and computers everywhere. Air rushed from a grate on the floor in one of the most advanced cooling systems on the market.

I walked down the line of cords and flashing lights, running my hand over the panels. "All this just to keep the place from exploding?"

"Part of it runs the barrier too," Hopper said.

I frowned and turned back around. "The barrier?"

He nodded. "It's what keeps this place hidden from the rest of the world. Acts like an electric fence for the dragons to keep 'em from getting out. There are a couple of these scattered around the ranch to help with the barrier and redundancies."

"What about a power outage?"

"Generator back-ups," he said, nodding again. "But then we're relying on manual gasoline delivery to each one and it's a pain in the ass."

He was quiet while I walked around, admiring all the hardware. All this beautiful tech had been right under my feet the whole time. I could hardly believe it.

When I made it back to Hopper I asked, "If you don't know how all this works, who maintains it for you?"

"I pay someone to do it," he said, waving a hand. "Some expensive IT guy in Nevada. Lucky dragons shit gold, or it

wouldn't be worth it. He makes six figures on my contract alone every year.”

I almost choked on my next breath. “You're getting railroaded, Hopper.”

He shrugged. “I figure, but I don't do computers, and I gotta make sure it's all secure without getting too many outsiders involved, so what choice do I have?”

I bit my tongue to keep from shouting, “fuck the Nevada guy” and offering to do it for him instead. It would probably be a bad idea to work for the guy I was sleeping with.

We walked back up out of the server room and I paused by Layla's enclosure, leaning on the fence. She looked so sad, and I couldn't blame her. She'd lost her mate and now her babies. Poor Layla was probably just confused and upset.

“Is there any hope for her?” I asked Hopper once he came back into the barn.

“Gods, I hope so,” he said with a heavy sigh. “All the loss she's seen has been tough on her. She ain't eating like she should, and you can tell she's lost some weight. Nothing I try to get her to eat is working. I hate to say it, but if she doesn't show some improvement before I have to leave to drive the dragons, I might have to make a tough decision.”

I frowned, a sinking pit in my stomach. “Layla, girl, you gotta eat.”

She shifted her head against her tail and snorted.

“Have you tried treats?” I suggested as we walked out of the barn.

He nodded. “Tried everything I know to do. When I push her too hard, she gets aggressive, and it feels like I’m making things worse. I don’t want to have to put her down, especially since none of this is her fault, but I can’t let her hurt the others.”

I thought about Layla for most of the morning, even as we started meeting with the Cowboys. Since we couldn’t do it at the ranch—Hopper didn’t want to reveal the dragons to anyone he wasn’t sure about—we wound up going in town and holding interviews at the Cowboy Café.

Hopper’s human glamor was as sexy as his monster face, but definitely a little heavier on the silver fox vibes. He gave himself the most luscious, thick salt and pepper hair and matching stubble. I wondered if he’d be offended if I asked him to wear the glamor sometimes to bed because *damn* he was hot. He was hot as a monster, too, but more in a don’t-fuck-with-me way.

He took the lead, playing bad cop, and I played worse cop, scrutinizing resumes like my father would’ve looked at the ones for his interns.

The first guy was too skinny, nervous looking. Neither Hopper nor I liked him. The second interview was better. At least he had some experience, but I didn’t like the way he looked at Hopper, so I asked him if he’d submit to a physical

and, suddenly, he wasn't interested. Hopper frowned at me, but didn't question me.

There was one more guy who was more than qualified with a stellar list of past employers and he was willing to do the work for a little less than Hopper was offering. But he was prettier than me, and I'm a petty bitch. I did not want Hopper to go up into the mountains for a couple of weeks with someone whose ass looked that nice in tight jeans. I was a little offended that Hopper wanted to hire him on, so I cut him off before he could make an offer.

"All right," I said, interrupting their conversation about salaries. "Thank you. We have your information, and we'll call you if you're a good fit. Thank you. Have a nice day."

The cowboy blinked his dark lashes, frowned, and got up from the table.

Hopper waited until he'd gone out the door to turn to me. "You know, Robert, when I agreed to let you help, I thought I was bein' clear. I really do need someone to assist in the drive. It's not optional."

I picked up the stack of resumes and tapped them on the table. "I know."

He was quiet for a minute. "What was wrong with that last fella?"

"Nothing specific," I replied with a shrug. "Just didn't like his vibe."

“Uh-huh.” Hopper crossed his arms. “You sure it ain’t the pretty face you didn’t like?”

“What? *No.*” The exaggerated way I said it wouldn’t have convinced anyone I was being honest. I licked my lips and rolled my eyes. “Okay, maybe, but I’ve seen *Brokeback Mountain*. I know what happens when two sexy cowboys go up into the mountains alone for a couple of weeks in the summer.”

His mouth twitched up into a wicked smirk. “Jealous, Princess?”

“Why would I be jealous? Not like we’re an official item. You can sleep with who you want once I leave. I’m just making sure you can focus on your work and not Cowboy Glutemaster out there.”

I didn’t miss the way his jaw flexed when I mentioned leaving, and I immediately felt like shit for saying it. Having only two hours of sleep was seriously inhibiting my brain to mouth filter.

“I’m wasting my time, aren’t I?” Hopper mumbled. “You’re just going to turn away everyone who’s a decent candidate ‘cause you can’t stop thinkin’ with your dick.”

I sat there, feeling heartsick, angry, and guilty all at the same time. It was stupid, how I’d even involved myself in any of that, as if I wasn’t going to be leaving, eventually. We both knew this thing we had was temporary. Hell, I didn’t even know what to call it. Was Hopper my boyfriend? Just a fuck buddy? Something less or more?

My phone buzzed on the table and I yelped. I'd forgotten I'd plugged it in to charge so I could connect to the wi-fi. I picked it up when it continued buzzing, alerting me to dozens of missed text messages.

Hopper sighed. "I'll get us coffees to go," he said and got up.

About a third of the texts were from Axel asking if I was still alive, or if he'd left something at my place. The rest were either from Ryder or my father... except for one number I didn't recognize. I frowned at the unfamiliar number and the blinking icon informing me I had a voicemail. Nobody left me voicemails except for telemarketers and robocalls, but this wasn't an eight hundred number.

I glanced up at the counter. Hopper was in line, so I had time.

I pressed the button to listen to the message, sitting through all the pre-recorded bullshit, and then ground my teeth when I heard my father's voice.

"Robert, don't hang up," he said. "There's something you should know about Hopper Meadows. Regardless of how you feel about me and this family, I want you to be safe. I ran a background check on the man you're staying with and I'm concerned for your safety, son. Has he told you he has a record? Has he told you he's a *murderer*?"

A chill ran up my spine. The message continued to play, but I tuned it out, staring at the monster currently ordering me

coffee and doughnuts. Murder? Hopper? He was a bit rough around the edges, but a cold-blooded killer?

Then I remembered how he'd taken shots at Leroy without a second thought. He'd gone marching down the street, armed to the teeth and ready to kill him. No fear. No hesitation. Was that the face of a monster who'd killed before? Then there was the day we met. He'd gotten into a bloody fistfight. There were red flags all over the place once I started looking.

I swallowed and dismissed the voicemail, lowering my phone. Shaky fingers raced over the screen, tapping his name into a search engine along with the phrase "criminal record". My blood ran cold when the results came back.

"Ready to go?"

I must've jumped nearly a foot at the sound of Hopper's voice behind me, and I almost dropped my phone. I caught it and quickly swiped away from the screen I'd been looking at.

He frowned. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah. Why wouldn't it be?" I stood and flashed him a reassuring smile. "That for me?"

Hopper seemed to relax when I took the to-go bag and the iced coffee with whipped cream, but I was a wreck as we walked out of there, my heart shattered to pieces.

Why hadn't he told me?

There had to be some rational explanation. Maybe it was an accident, or a misunderstanding. But then why hadn't he explained it? Why hadn't he even brought it up? I'd told him

everything about me, given him plenty of opportunities to tell me. Yet he hadn't. That had to mean something.

But did it mean he was guilty?

I looked over at him as we rolled down the road in his truck, Johnny Cash on the radio. Did I dare ask? He was already in a bad mood because I'd fucked up his plan to hire a cowboy.

Fuck, what's wrong with me? I rubbed the side of my nose. *Do I really believe he's going to drag me out and shoot me?* *Do I trust him that little?* I shook my head and leaned against the window, watching dust fly up around us like a halo. I needed someone to tell me what to do.

I needed Chris.

TWENTY-THREE

ROBERT

WHEN WE GOT BACK to the ranch, I told Hopper I was exhausted and excused myself to my room, locking the door behind me. Then I got out the bell to summon Chris and Ollie and waited for Hopper to leave again. He'd said he had more work to do.

After the screen door slammed closed behind him, I counted to five hundred before venturing out back of the house. After making sure neither Hopper nor Noah were around, I lifted the silver bell high and rang it three times.

Then I stepped back to wait.

It took a while for the portal to appear. Long enough I'd started to doubt they were coming. When the air shimmered and snow drifted through, followed by a blast of frigid air, I shivered. Ollie the Krampus came through first. He was eight feet of dark fur, horns, and tail with goat-like hooves. He glanced around and seemed surprised by the scenery. When his eyes fell on me, they widened as if he'd been expecting someone else.

Chris tumbled through the portal awkwardly a second later. My oldest friend wasn't as hot as me, but he was definitely a Michigan seven with his dark hair, dark eyes, and classically handsome face. When that face split into a big grin, he easily went from a seven to an eight.

“Hotdog! You've got your legs on!” He came forward to clap me on the shoulder. “And you're out of the house!”

I snorted and gestured widely. “Out of the state. Welcome to Wyoming. Jackalope Ranch, specifically.”

Chris looked around as if he hadn't noticed where he'd fallen through to. “Huh. Don't think I've been to this part of the ranch.”

Ollie closed the portal and stepped closer. “Hotdog, why are you still at Jackalope Ranch? I thought you were going to return when Charlie and Cupid completed their quest.”

I winced and rubbed the back of my head. “They haven't come back to this side of the tear yet.”

Ollie started. “That is... concerning.”

“Is that why you called us?” Chris asked.

“Not exactly.” I glanced between them and took a deep breath. “Look, there's no easy way to say this, but I really just wanted to talk to Chris if that's okay. It's kind of... personal.”

Chris put a hand on Ollie's arm and scratched him like he was a dog. “It's okay, Big Guy. Maybe you can find Hopper? I'm sure he's got something heavy he could use your help with.”

Ollie nodded with a grunt. “I will go and find Hopper.” He leaned down to catch Chris’s lips in a disgustingly sweet kiss.

I swear to God, they were like two teenage girls sometimes. I rolled my eyes when Chris watched Ollie walk away, his eyes glued to Ollie’s waving tail. “Gross. Tell me he doesn’t fuck you with the tail.”

“You’re just jealous.” Chris unzipped his coat and shrugged it off. “So, what did you want to talk about? Is that rash back? Because I told you last time—”

I pushed away from the wall I was leaning against and started limping toward the back door. “God, no. And I told you that was a *heat* rash.”

“Whatever you say, Hotdog.” Chris shrugged and followed me through the door.

I thought about taking him into the den, but then remembered what I’d done in there the night before with Hopper and decided against it. The kitchen would be too public for what I had to say, so we wound up grabbing some beers from the fridge and going back to my room.

Chris turned in a circle, eyeing the mess of clothes everywhere as he popped the top off the beer. “So, how’s it been hanging with Hopper all this time?”

“Actually, that’s what I wanted to talk to you about.” I plopped down on the edge of the bed and leaned over to push some clothes off the only chair in the room besides my wheelchair.

Chris sank into the chair and threw one arm back, making himself at home. “That bad, huh?”

I fidgeted with my beer, deciding how to answer. Chris was my hero, the older brother I’d always wished I had. He’d looked out for me at basic training, and ever since. We’d told each other everything up until he disappeared after his car accident. If there was anyone in the world who wouldn’t judge me for what I was about to say, it was him, but that didn’t make it any easier to say out loud.

I swallowed my nerves. “Actually, Hopper’s kind of... great. I think.”

There was a beat of silence.

“Holy shit. You’re fucking him.”

My head jerked up, and I made a face at him. “Fuck you, man.”

“You are!” He reached across the space to punch my shoulder, a big dumb grin on his face. “Shit, man. Good for you. But I gotta ask... Hopper? Really? Dude’s in the dictionary next to the word *asshole*. I didn’t think he’d be your type.”

“Shows what you know. And he’s not that bad once you get to know him. Just stubborn and old fashioned.” *And he loosened up once he finally started getting laid.* I left that last part out and took a long pull from the beer. “Besides. I think the whole asshole with a secret heart of gold aesthetic really

does it for me. Having a dick with two heads sure doesn't hurt."

"I bet," Chris said with a hum of agreement, and leaned back in the chair. "So, how'd that happen?"

"Daddy issues, mostly." I sighed and leaned forward, letting the bottle dangle between my legs. "It was just fucking at first, but..."

"Don't tell me you're falling for him?"

I turned away, shaking my head. "I don't know, man. I know he doesn't seem like it, but he's sweet, Chris. He plays the guitar, and he takes care of the dragons like they're his babies, and he makes me sandwiches. There's this whole other side to him that nobody else sees. He's like a cactus. Only prickly on the outside. Once you get past the needles, he's a different person."

"But?" Chris prompted.

I lifted my head. "But what?"

Chris got up from the chair and came over to sit with me on the edge of the bed. "I'm sensing a but here for some reason. What's wrong?"

I sighed. "You know my dad's a grade-A asshole, right? Well, he found out I was here. For some reason, he's hellbent on bringing me in line. When I refused to do what he wanted after he cut me off, he dug into Hopper. He called me, Chris. Said he did a background check. He said... He said Hopper was on trial for *murder*."

Chris sucked in a deep breath. “Are you sure he’s not just yanking your chain?”

“I Googled it. The only thing I could find was something that happened over a hundred years ago, and he was using a different last name, but his picture was right there. He didn’t tell me, Chris. I don’t know what to think. I... I don’t know what to do. On the one hand, I know that was a long time ago and that people change. Maybe he had a good reason. But still... And he didn’t *tell* me. I want to trust him, and I want more from this, but how am I supposed to do that if he’s hiding things from me?”

Chris chewed on his bottom lip for a minute, weighing his next words. “You haven’t asked him about it?”

“No!” I gestured with the bottle. “What if he freaks out? What if there’s some other secret side of him, just waiting to snap?”

“Then let me ask you this. If it is true, and he did kill someone, how does that change things?”

I didn’t answer.

Chris put a hand on my shoulder. “We went to war. We’ve been desensitized against this sort of thing to a degree by all the military’s programming, but remember, we could’ve killed people too.”

“It’s not the same.” I pulled away and got up to pace.

“I’m not saying it is. But a hundred years ago, that was what? The nineteen twenties? It was still pretty unsettled out

here. Hell, Wyatt Earp was alive a hundred years ago. You don't have all the facts, so it's impossible to make a judgement. You have to talk to him, Hotdog."

I crossed my arms and sighed. He was right, and I knew it, but I was scared. Not of Hopper. I didn't really believe he'd hurt me. I couldn't. Instead, I was more worried about hurting *him*. If I didn't like what I heard, and decided to break things off, it might break his heart, and I didn't want that.

"Your dad didn't think it was weird that your boyfriend is over a hundred years old?" Chris asked.

My shoulders stiffened, mind racing. If he knew Hopper was that old and hadn't batted an eye about it, then it must not have been unusual to him. He also knew about the ranch. Did that mean he knew about monsters? It wasn't a huge stretch, considering he was a senator who probably voted on funding packages for ESCU.

My stomach dropped at the implications of that. What if my father was somehow connected to ESCU? How much pull would it take for him to get them to come out to the ranch and capture Hopper like they'd done to Ollie and Bud? If he knew about Hopper, then Hopper wasn't safe, and it was *my* fault.

I spun around. "My dad knows about monsters."

Chris sat up straighter. "What?"

"Think about it," I said and started to pace faster. "He's a senator, so he has access to all kinds of classified documents. He's more weirded out by the fact that I won't leave than

Hopper's age. Him telling me all of this about Hopper? It's his way of telling me he knows. It's a threat, Chris. If I don't do exactly what he says, he's going to send the military after Hopper."

TWENTY-FOUR

HOPPER

ROBERT WAS NOTABLY SILENT at supper. It almost felt like he'd been avoiding talking to me after our little spat in the café. Earlier in the day, Robert had called his friend Chris and his mate, Ollie. I supposed I couldn't blame him for being a little homesick. I'd be grumpy too if the only face I saw for days at a time was mine.

At least Ollie had been a big help with some of the work. We'd finally gotten caught up on processing. I'd compensate him for his time in goods, of course. He was always in need of something down there at the South Pole, and I had plenty.

Chris and Ollie had decided to stay on for a while, which was fine with me. Gods knew I could use the help, and maybe it'd pull Robert out of his melancholy mood. Noah was giving them a tour while Robert and I had our supper. Apparently, they'd already eaten. I almost wished they hadn't. Having someone else at the table between us would've made conversation easier.

Robert pushed his squash ravioli around on the plate, pointedly not looking at me. I'd snapped at him, which I

hadn't meant to do. Honestly, it was touching to see him jealous, but I couldn't let him interfere with the business. He was right about one thing. As much as neither of us wanted to talk about it, he'd eventually be leaving my side.

I picked up my water and swallowed half the glass, trying to ease the lump in my throat. "So," I started and paused, searching for something to say. "Ravioli is... nice." *Gods dammit, that was stupid, Hopper. Don't talk to him like he's a stranger. You've shared a bed with this man. Act like it.* I put my fork down. "What's on your mind, Princess?"

He looked up with a frown.

"You think any harder at your plate instead of eating it, you might set it on fire," I pointed out. "If you're still mad at me over what I said in the café..."

"I got a text from my father," he said quietly.

My temper immediately flared. I was glad I wasn't holding the fork or I might've bent it. "I thought I told him to leave you alone. That's it. I'm going to file harassment charges. Tomorrow, I'm going to talk to Sheriff Eddie and—"

"He said you were a murderer."

A shockwave of surprise ran through me, followed quickly by more anger, and then an aching sadness and grief, knowing there'd be no coming back from this. That son of a bitch senator. Damn him.

And damn me for thinking I could bury the past forever.

Robert slowly lowered his fork and met my eyes. “Is it true?”

There was no point in denying it or dancing around it. Not now.

I drew the handkerchief over my mouth and set it aside before pushing my unfinished plate away and folding my hands on the tabletop. “You want to hear the whole story or you just want a straight answer?”

“I want to know why you didn’t say anything,” he said, the heat of anger coloring his tone. “Why did I have to hear it from him and not you?”

“‘Cause it ain’t easy to talk about. It’s complicated, Robert.” When he looked away, I sighed, deciding where to start. “I was what you’d call a late bloomer as a kid. My first set of antlers didn’t come in until every other jacqeroi my age had already shed their first pair, and when they did, they were stubby and small. My tail grew out late, too, and the kids were relentless in their teasing. They used to shove me, laugh at me... Trip was the worst offender. He liked to pull on my tail and push me down. Even made fun of my dragon, Sampson, calling him slow and ugly. Dragon ranching business is a small circle, which meant I grew up with these guys, and I worked with them when I got older. The bullying never really stopped. They just got more... creative with it.”

I took a drink of water, as if that would somehow make what came next easier to say. “When I finally had enough and came here to start my own ranch, they all thought I was

running away. Hell, maybe I was, but I couldn't take it. There was no place for me back there. I let them run me out of town, but that wasn't good enough for Trip. Every year, when I ran the dragons back through the tear for breeding season, he'd be right there with his *friends* to harass me and the dragons."

"What's that got to do with a hundred-year-old murder trial?" Robert asked impatiently.

"I'm getting to that part," I said. "One year, while I was across the tear, I caught them torturing a Canivviros. Hitting it with cattle prods to make it mean. Turns out, they were running a dragon fighting ring. I stepped in to put a stop to it. Things got... out of hand. We got into a fistfight, which riled up the dragons. One of them got my hand." I held up my prosthetic hand. "Sampson lost his shit. Started tearing into the other dragons, attacking the other jacqeroi. Luckily, they got out but the other dragons..." I shook my head. "It was a blood bath. He killed over a dozen before I got him back under control and we high tailed it out of there. But there was to be a reckoning. I knew it was comin'. Thirteen dead dragons, three of my fellow jacqeroi ranchers mauled? I holed up here, thinking I could hold them off. Though it killed me, I put Sampson in confinement.

"When Trip and the others came, I offered to pay for all the damages. I offered to turn myself in, to give up the ranch. I'd have given them anything if they'd just leave Sampson alone, but they wouldn't have it. They wanted blood. They came across the tear and demanded he be put down for what

happened. I told them over my dead body. They took it literally.”

I ran a hand over my face. “They fired first. I fired better. Didn’t matter in the end. Turns out they’d split up and Trip circled around behind me. Killed Sampson right under my nose. Soon as it happened, they ran. When the dust cleared, there were only two bodies: Sampson’s and Trip’s right-hand man, Clayton. I didn’t know what to do, but I felt so guilty over it, and broken up over losing Sampson... I just didn’t want to go on. So, I turned myself in. There was a trial, of course, but given the circumstances, the county judge felt I had a right to defend my livelihood when it came under attack, so the charges were eventually dropped. So yes, Robert. It’s true. I am a murderer.”

I waited for him to say something, anything, my mouth dry and heart pounding. He was going to hate me after all that. The whole thing sounded like some sob story, but it was the truth, and it was complicated.

After a long beat, he asked, “Why didn’t you tell me before when I asked about your hand?”

I sighed and looked down at the gloved mechanical hand, flexing the fingers. “It ain’t easy admitting all that. The way you looked at me was like I was some sort of hero badass. I’m not. I ran away from my bullies, Robert, and I hid here. My best friend in the world paid the price for my cowardice and...” I swallowed and lowered my head. “I’m ashamed. I don’t want you to think less of me.”

Robert stood and came around the table to stand in front of me.

I looked up at him, my throat almost too tight to speak. He was going to leave me. I knew I should've told him, but I just couldn't bear to have him believe I was a coward. "What are you..."

"I think I love you," he said and then jerked, blinking rapidly as if he hadn't meant to say it.

I stared at him. My heart couldn't decide whether to soar or break in two, but it sure felt like it was about to explode. To my surprise, words came tumbling out of me all on their own. "I think I love you too, Princess."

The words felt strangely powerful, even though they were small, not nearly big enough to encompass what I felt for him. The whole sky wouldn't be big enough, not even to the stars and back. When Sampson died, I'd lost a vital part of myself. I never thought I could feel whole again. The last few days with Robert, though, had made me feel young again. Hopeful. *Complete*. I had been dreading the day when he'd leave me, knowing it'd be like ripping out my heart and stomping it into the dirt.

He didn't say anything else or move. Just stood there like he was waiting for me to do something.

I swallowed, the fear twisting its way up my throat. "So... you're not mad?"

“I’m pissed you didn’t tell me. Even more pissed off that I heard it from my father and not you.” He sank into my lap, putting an arm around my neck to draw me down into a kiss, his lips slightly garlicky from the ravioli. “But I’m pretty sure if you grovel enough, I can get over it.”

“God, that’s so sweet it makes me want to throw up,” Chris said from the doorway.

I nearly dropped Robert. Might have if Robert hadn’t curled up even more, snaking his arm tighter around my neck.

“I hope you brought ear plugs,” Robert said with a grin. “I’m a screamer when he really gets going.”

I scowled at him. “You’re lucky you got bad legs, or I’d drop you square on your ass, Princess.”

“Then you wouldn’t get to use it later,” he said and winked at me.

“Get.” I shoved him out of my arms as Ollie stepped into the dining room.

The Krampus tilted his head and then looked around as if he’d rather be anywhere else, but when Chris sat at the table, he decided to join him.

“So, *Princess*,” Chris said with a shit-eating grin.

Robert flipped him off with both hands. “Eat a dick, Christmas.”

Ollie sighed. “We think someone should go find out what’s happened to Chappie and his mate.”

I nodded. “Probably.”

Chris and Ollie exchanged a glance before Chris sat up straighter, staring at me.

I sighed and my shoulders dropped. “Let me guess. You think I should take care of it?”

“I have not been to the other side in hundreds of years,” Ollie said apologetically. “I have no memory of the layout. I’d only get lost.”

“Besides,” Chris added, “Ollie says you go to the other side all the time.”

I shook my head. “Only to take the dragons once a year for the summer. Normally, I wouldn’t leave to do that for another four to six weeks, but my guy up in the mountains said the spring thaw is early. He’s predicting an early and rough winter, too. I was thinking of taking the dragons up early this year. Problem is, I’m down a cowboy, and it’s a two-man job minimum. Even when I get over there, I doubt I’ll be able to leave the dragons long enough for a search and rescue, but... Lucky for you, I know a guy who can help.”

Ollie frowned. “Not Honor, Hopper.”

Robert squirmed in his chair. “Who’s Honor?”

“The only man for the job,” I said simply, “whether Ollie wants to admit it or not.” The Krampus opened his mouth to say something else, but I cut him off. “How about it, Robert? How’d you like to be a real cowboy?”

He almost fell out of his chair. “Me? But I don’t know how!”

I shrugged. “The drive’s easy. It’s the ride that’s hard, and I can teach you to ride a dragon and throw a rope. So what do you say? Well? Don’t just sit there. Say something.”

“One second,” he said, holding up a finger. “I’m trying not to cream my pants over here.”

Chris laughed. “I think that’s a yes.”

“It’s settled then.” I hit the table and stood. “We start training you to be a cowboy tomorrow morning, bright and early.”

TWENTY-FIVE

ROBERT

AFTER SUPPER, THE FOUR of us went to watch a few more episodes of *Cowboy Bebop*. Chris and Ollie sat together in the big armchair while Hopper stretched out his legs on the sofa, and I curled up with my head resting against his chest. I couldn't tell if Hopper was that into the show, but he'd occasionally comment on the characters or ask about some minor detail he'd missed. Chris and I had seen the entire series a couple times over, but Chris was terrible to watch TV with. He'd get excited when one of his favorite moments was about to happen and tap Ollie's arm to make sure he was paying attention.

I closed my eyes between episodes and then had to force myself awake. After the next one, Chris and Ollie politely said goodnight and went off to their guest room. I sat up, unsure if I should go back to my room, or if Hopper wanted me to come with him. Hopper looked pretty tired, and we had to get up early to start my cowboy training the next day.

Hopper folded an arm behind his head and drew a thumb across my cheek. "You tired, Princess?"

I huffed. “Me? You look like you’re about to keel over, old man.”

“You’ve been runnin’ me hard,” he agreed, “but I think there’s still some life in these old bones yet. Plus, I’m dying to know what you’ve left covered up on my nightstand from yesterday.”

Oh, crap. We’d gotten busy watching TV and then messed around on the sofa. I’d forgotten all about that.

I flashed Hopper a wry grin and stood, offering him my hand. “You want to go find out?”

Hopper took my hand and stood with a grunt. He limped ever so slightly on the way to the bedroom, but when I pressed him about it, he insisted he was fine as long as I wasn’t planning on too many acrobatics.

I twisted my fingers around his as we got closer to the bedroom door, my heart suddenly racing. My mind jumped back to what he’d said at the dinner table, the confession I’d accidentally let slip out. I hadn’t meant to say I was in love with him. It just fell out, but it wasn’t untrue, and his reply had seemed genuine. I wanted to believe it, but there was still a part of me holding out for him to change his mind, or to change his ways and become someone else. That’s how it always went. They called it the honeymoon period. Maybe it’d last a week, or a month, but eventually he’d get sick of me. He’d find something about me he didn’t like and then it would be all he’d ever see. What if he asked me to *change*?

Hopper walked past me and opened the door, meandering in slowly. He left it open behind him and went to hang up his hat. When I didn't come in, he paused with his hand still on the hat. "Well? You comin'?"

I'd better enjoy this while I can, before that honeymoon period ends, I thought, and flashed a confident smile. "I was just waiting for the invite." I ducked past him, going to the covered bedstand. "You really didn't peek?"

"You said not to."

I took a deep breath and blew it out slow.

"Why you so nervous?" Hopper asked, unbuttoning his shirt and shrugging it off. "Ain't like there's a live rattlesnake under there or something."

I couldn't help but give his furry chest a hungry once over. Who would've ever thought I'd be into a monster with antlers and soft fur? And here I'd always thought it'd be tentacles. Actually, in retrospect, and considering what was sitting under the towel I'd thrown over the bedside stand, I shouldn't have been surprised at all. Now I was starting to second guess myself. What if he thought it was weird? What if he was offended? Shit, I should have thought of that.

He put his hands on his hips. "Well? Don't keep me in suspense forever, Princess."

"Okay, don't be mad or offended or anything," I started.

Hopper sighed and crossed his arms. "Just show me."

I bit my lip and yanked the towel up, watching his face carefully for confirmation that this was a bad idea.

At first, Hopper didn't react. He just stood there, studying the items I'd laid out, eyes dancing from one thing to the next. After a minute, he said, "I don't get it."

I picked up the silver butt plug. It was a normal looking plug, not too big or too small. Unremarkable in every way except for the little pink bunny tail, which would've been the only part sticking out of me once it was put in. With my other hand, I picked up the headband with the pink bunny ears and put it on my head. Then I picked up the length of rope I'd found lying around and held it out to him. "So, you remember that time you lassoed me outside Layla's enclosure?"

His eyes dipped down to the rope and back up to my face. "You want me to do that again?"

"Not that exactly, but you could... tie me up?" I paused, waiting for him to react. When he didn't, I charged forward. "I know you have this thing where you don't want me to touch your tail, and maybe this is a stupid idea, but I just thought... Well, since I can't play with your tail, I thought maybe you'd want to tie me up and play with mine."

He blinked. "And that goes..."

God, he really was precious, wasn't he? "It's a butt plug. You do the math. I cheated my way through algebra."

He studied the plug, frowning. "You want me to put that in your ass while you're tied up?"

My face was suddenly hot. “Never mind. It’s dumb. Forget I said anything.” I lowered the rope.

Hopper stepped forward and grabbed it before I could. “Princess, if you want me to tie anything more than your pinky fingers with that, I’m gonna need a lot more rope.”

I didn’t know what to say or how to react, and before I could, he leaned in and kissed my cheek.

“You make yourself comfortable. I’ll be right back.” He went out of the bedroom and took a right, going further down the hall toward his workshop at the back of the house.

For a minute, I wasn’t sure what to do with myself, but he’d said to get comfortable. *What the hell am I waiting for?* I thought, and unbuttoned my pants. When Hopper came back, I was already lying on the bed, my head propped up on my elbows. I’d left the bunny ears on, as well as the pink underwear. They were cotton and not lace, but I’d dressed to be functional earlier and not sexy. If I’d known we were going to do this, I’d have put on a nicer pair for him.

He smiled a triumphant grin and held up a longer length of rope with a wink. “I think this’ll do.”

“Just one more thing,” I said. Might as well go all out, right? Wasn’t like I got a chance to live out my gay cowboy fantasy every day. “Would you wear the hat?”

He huffed, amused, and grabbed his nice hat from the wall, placing it on his head. “Time for your first cowboy lesson,” he said, and held up the rope. “We’re gonna tie a lasso. This

here's what we call a Honda knot. Pay attention now. You do it right the first time tomorrow. Maybe I'll let you touch my tail after all."

I sat up a little more, interest piqued. He walked me through the steps, showing me and explaining as he went. It looked simple, but it was really three separate knots, and he did it so effortlessly. There was no way I was getting that right the first time.

My worry was short-lived, because he decided he was going to swing the lasso around his head and damn if the movement didn't highlight all the nice things about his body. Suddenly, I didn't care one bit if I got it right. If every lasso lesson was going to be as hot as the show he was putting on for me, I'd probably never learn.

I laughed when he tossed it and easily caught me on the first throw, but my laugh was cut short when the rope pulled tight around my shoulders and he pulled himself in. He had the biggest, dumbest, most carefree smile as he tilted my chin up, tipped his hat back with two fingers, and came in for a kiss.

I was too turned on to kiss him back, absolutely stunned by how good that confidence looked on him. "Oh my God. Hopper, if I get any more turned on, I'm gonna have an aneurysm."

He smirked, showing perfect white teeth. "That so? Well, I hope that's an exaggeration, Princess, 'cause no EMT is comin' all the way out here, and we just started this dance. Scoot over and get comfy."

Hopper held the rope tight as he sat down on the edge of the bed. He took my hands and shifted them behind my back.

“Not too tight,” I warned as he started winding the ropes around my wrists.

Hopper snorted. “I may not know everythin’, but I know rope, Princess. If there’s a knot that I can’t tie, I ain’t ever met it.”

I closed my eyes and smiled, a little pleasant shudder going through me as he worked the rope. “I love it when you talk all country to me.”

“Only way I know how to talk.” He tightened the rope, gripped my shoulder, and gave me a push toward the bed. “How’s that, city boy?”

I wiggled my fingers and my wrists. “Maybe a little more give than I like.”

His hand snapped against my ass, drawing a yelp from me. “Any tighter and you won’t have circulation. You get loose from that, I’ll eat my hat.”

Just because he said I couldn’t, I had to try. I tugged one way and then the other, struggling enough that the ropes rubbed. He ignored me while I did, working on removing his prosthetics.

When he was finished, he gave me an amused smile, watching me fight. “Done yet?”

“Almost.”

“You’re gonna throw a shoulder before you get loose, I’m telling you. If I can tie a knot to hold Layla, I can tie one to hold you.”

I gave up and deflated into the mattress with a satisfied sigh. He was right. I’d hurt myself before I’d ever loosen those knots up enough to escape.

Hopper grabbed the little space of ropes between my wrists and pulled, giving me a little shake to make sure I was still secure. “They get too tight on you. Don’t be afraid to give a holler.”

I grinned stupidly and snorted to keep from laughing. *Holler*. I’d never actually heard anyone use that word in actual conversation before. God, he was such a sweet, old fashioned country sort of monster. My parents would’ve *hated* him. Once upon a time, they’d made the mistake of telling me I could grow up to be anything. If they didn’t want me to become a shameless slut for a furry monster with antlers and a country drawl, they should’ve been more specific.

The bed shifted as Hopper’s weight settled over my back and he kissed the back of my neck, slowly working his way down my spine. I let out a pleased hum and closed my eyes, relaxing into a happy puddle. I couldn’t help it. Some people liked massage and spa days. For me, rope was the key to a perfectly relaxed state. I had tried it with a few other guys in the past, but most of them were inexperienced or they didn’t go as far as I wanted with it. I would’ve loved to be completely suspended, wrapped up tight in it. It wasn’t even

the kinky side of it I liked, although that had its own appeal. I just liked the weightlessness of it, the snug fit like a big hug. When I was tied up like that, I didn't have to worry about where limbs went, or how they got in the way, or how awkward it was not to have all of them. It was like flying with none of the risk of falling.

“Doin’ all right, Princess?” Hopper ran his fingers over the tramp stamp on my lower back just above the panty line.

“Yes, Daddy.”

“Not falling asleep on me?”

I smiled and didn't answer until his palm cracked against my right ass cheek. “No!”

“That's better. I ain't doin' this for my health, you know,” he said, and I heard him fidgeting with something.

I snorted at that and rolled my eyes. “As if you don't get anything—ow!”

He'd pulled the elastic out and let it snap against my skin. I twisted to scowl at him and to say something smart, but didn't get a word in before his lube slicked fingers slid under the panties to tease my hole. I lost all the will to fight, eyes rolling back. My cock throbbed, but there was nothing I could do about it. I was completely at his mercy, and that was exactly the way I wanted it. I groaned as he slid a finger inside.

“What was that, Princess? You have a complaint? Want me to stop?”

“No!” I whined. “Please don't.”

“There are those manners.” His finger retreated, but came back again a moment later with more lube.

He didn’t waste his time getting me too worked up, for which I was thankful. I was already as ready as I could get. I flinched when I felt the cold metal of the plug press against my entrance.

“Easy, Princess. Relax for me. There you go.”

The most undignified groan bubbled out of my throat as he worked the plug in. I hadn’t told him, but that was coincidentally my favorite toy. Not because of the bunny tail—though that was almost ironic—but because it was the perfect size and shape, and because of one other amazing feature.

“What now?” Hopper asked. “What else does my Princess need?”

“There’s a button,” I said, my voice thick and slightly high. “On the base just under the... *Ungh*, shit!”

Hopper didn’t have any trouble finding the button to turn it on. The plug buzzed to life and if I could’ve melted into the mattress, I would have.

“Oh, it *wiggles!*” Hopper let out a snort of amused laughter. “Oh, Princess. That’s downright adorable on you.”

The only answer I could manage at first was a weak whine. I tipped my hips, trying to get a little friction on my cock.

“You need something else?” he asked, kissing my lower back. “Tell me. Ask nicely, now.”

I bit my lip to keep from blurting out what I really wanted, which was for him to fuck me with the plug, or to jerk me off while it was inside of me. Those weren't really what I needed, even though that's what my body was screaming for. "Whatever you want," I said and then buried my face in the mattress. "I'm yours to do with as you please."

Hopper sucked in a breath through his teeth. There was a long pause before he asked, "Anything?"

Somewhere distant, worry went to war with all the pleasure buzzing through my body. Who knew what he wanted? What sorts of dark, kinky things he might be into? But he'd said I could stop. All I had to do was *holler*. I trusted Hopper. Maybe I was crazy, especially with what I'd just found out about him earlier in the day, but I did.

"Whatever!" I groaned. "Just please!"

I gritted my teeth, not knowing what to expect. I was so on edge that I flinched slightly when his hands lightly touched my hip.

"Can I turn you over?" he asked hesitantly.

Turn me over? What for? I considered saying no. It was one thing to be so helpless when I didn't have to look up at him, but being on my back, my hands bound, the most vulnerable parts of me exposed so he could do whatever he wanted... "Yes."

He did it so gently, so carefully, that I immediately felt guilty for doubting his intentions. Hopper didn't want to hurt

me. He'd said he *loved* me.

But he wouldn't be the first person to say that and then lash out.

Hopper adjusted his hat and double checked the plug was secure. Then he leaned his big, muscular body over mine, caging me between his arms, and kissed me so tenderly, I thought I might cry. His textured tongue danced over mine, the sweet, enticing scent of him potent in my every breath. I flexed my fingers, wishing they were free to feel him, to touch him. When he pulled back, we were both breathing heavy.

“There's somethin' I've been dying to do,” he said, removing his hat. “I feel I didn't do right by you the first time, and I'd like to give it another go, but if it gets to be too much... Well, you just holler and I'll stop.”

“I swear to God, Hopper, if you say the word holler one more time, it's going to make me come.”

He snickered at that and set the hat aside. “You're such a hoot, Princess.”

I started to say something smart, but the words died on my tongue when he lowered his head and gave my aching cock a lick. “Oh holy fuck...”

It had only been a few days, and I'd already forgotten how good that textured tongue felt. I hadn't gotten to enjoy it much the first time because I was so concerned about ensuring he enjoyed his first time properly, but this time, there was nothing for me to do. Nothing I *could* do, not even if I'd wanted to.

He seemed to take forever, licking up one side and down the other, swirling his tongue around the head, tracing out some pattern only he understood. I couldn't focus on what he might be drawing with that sweet, textured tongue. It felt good, but I easily remembered why I didn't enjoy getting blow jobs as much as I enjoyed giving them. The pleasurable sensation was overwhelming, almost to the point of pain, making me hot all over. My thighs quaked and my breathing came out raspy. I couldn't think, couldn't process anything but how good it felt. Even if I hadn't been tied up, I would've been so utterly at his mercy that I couldn't respond.

Hopper closed his lips around the head just barely and hollowed his cheeks in a deep suck. My hips bucked, an agonized shout tearing its way out of my throat. He stilled me with his hands on my hips and the cry became a desperate sob and blubbering nonsense, pleading, begging. For what, who knew? My brain had stopped working. I was stuck in that beautiful, awful crossroads where pleasure and pain met sensory overload. When he pushed his mouth lower down my length, my eyes rolled back and I swear I almost stopped breathing.

“Hopper!” I barely recognized my voice, it was so raspy and dark. Every breath burned its way out of me between choked sobs as he bobbed up and down my length slowly, painfully slow. I squeezed my eyes closed and tears—honest to God tears—fell down my cheeks. “Don't... stop!”

I closed my restrained hands into fists, clenching my jaw closed so tight it made my teeth ache. The little squeal of

pleasure I let out barely seemed worthy of the lightning storm of pleasure that ripped through me. My body trembled with it, every muscle contracting at once. My hips bowed off the bed, the reaction strong enough even Hopper couldn't hold me back without hurting me. I came so hard that it hurt, but the orgasm didn't stop. It shot up my spine, holding me in its grip for longer than I'd ever experienced before.

I was only vaguely aware of the plug being shut off and the rope coming loose, but when my hands were free, the first thing I did was throw my arms around Hopper and cling to him like a drowning man. Then there was nothing but soft fur, and a warm body, and the sweet, welcoming scent of him all around me.

“All right, okay,” Hopper whispered. “You're okay. I've got you.”

It took a long time to come down from it, and when I did, I was trembling uncontrollably. Hopper had pulled a blanket over us. He had me clutched tightly, face first against his chest, his hands making little circles against the small of my back.

He kissed the top of my head. “You okay, Princess?”

I took a shuddering breath, trying to assess myself and everything that'd just happened. “Yeah,” I said, my voice raw. “That's just... It's super intense for me like that.”

“I'm sorry.” He lowered his head so that his antlers rubbed against the top of my head.

My hand shook as I lifted it, gripping his antlers with a weak fist. “Don’t be. It’s good. Just... Can I sleep here? I’m real tired. I don’t think I can move.”

“Of course. Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

I closed my eyes, halfway to sleep already. I was almost out when I realized I hadn’t done anything at all for him.

“Hopper, I didn’t do anything for you,” I pointed out groggily.

“You’re doin’ it, Princess,” he said and squeezed me tighter. “Now go to sleep. Four-thirty comes early.”

I groaned inwardly, even as I closed my eyes. As cool as being a dragon-herding cowboy sounded, I was not looking forward to all the early mornings.

TWENTY-SIX

ROBERT

IT WAS STILL DARK when we made it out to the hidari enclosure. The hidari dragons were roughly the size of a horse, their scales dark and leathery rather than sharp and hard like most of the other dragons, their eyes dull and movements limber. They didn't have wings, either. Hopper said they were the most forgiving dragon to learn to ride, safe enough for even city boys.

He showed me how to put the saddle on, which was much more complicated than I expected it to be. There were half a dozen steps, and I had to remember which loop went with which strap. He drilled me about the saddle parts and the process of securing it to the hidari named Wyatt I was supposed to learn how to ride. The dragon saddle wasn't like a horse's saddle. It had a taller back—called a cante—and additional cinches, or so he said.

When I finally got it all right, which took an embarrassing amount of time, Hopper patted the saddle and said, “Hop on up then and Noah and I will take you through it.”

I watched Noah carefully, trying to see how he managed to get up into the saddle, but he did it so fast, so effortlessly, that I was still unsure. When I tried, it didn't go nearly as well. First of all, it took a lot more upper body strength than I expected. My arms were pretty strong from all the time in my wheelchair, but the muscles used were a little different, and it was awkward to get my prosthetics up. For a minute, I just had to cling awkwardly to the side of the dragon.

When I looked over at Hopper, he was snickering behind his hands.

“Don't laugh at me, asshole,” I said with a scowl. “Help me!”

“You're doin' just fine, Princess,” he managed. “Pull yourself up. It's all here.” He patted his chest. “More chest, less arms.”

Great, because I definitely wasn't built for that.

In the end, he had Noah climb down from his dragon—named Kingsley—to bring me a mounting block. It was much easier to get up with that, but still awkward as hell. I'd have to learn to get up there without it if I wanted to drive the dragons west with Hopper in a few weeks.

The dragons had an unusual sort of lope that wasn't so bad to adjust to when they moved slow. Hopper walked with Wyatt around the enclosure, me in the saddle, just so I could get a feel for it.

“Square up a bit,” Hopper advised. “Relax your knees. Most of the work you do with your thighs, but you’re going to want to learn to bounce with them.”

“Bounce?” I frowned. “Bounce how?”

“Tighten your ass muscles with his steps, let your body lift up out of the saddle a bit. Come down with the up step. Takes time to get used to it, but you’ll get a feel for the pace.”

I tried to do what he said, but I didn’t fully understand. Not until he asked if I was comfortable speeding up. When Wyatt started loping forward a little faster, the bounce was way more noticeable, and the faster he went, the worse it was. Each step tossed me up if I didn’t flex muscles I wasn’t used to using. Coming down was worse. Every time was another impact on my balls that left me wincing.

“Fuck, my balls!” I grimaced. “How do you do this all day?”

Hopper chuckled. “I don’t. I do it right. Adjust your timing. Let him lead, you direct. Dragon’s not a horse. You fight him, he’s not going to change his ways. He’s just going to keep on keepin’ on. Show him, Noah!”

Noah nodded, and he and Kingsley came away from where they’d been waiting, speeding through the yard where we’d been circling. He didn’t bounce near as much in the saddle. Or maybe he did. Maybe he just did it so well, he didn’t look like he was bouncing.

I finally got it toward the end of the morning, and the three of us mounted to ride around the ranch. Our first stop was Layla's enclosure to check on her, and it'd be Hopper's last stop before we went in for the night, too. He spent a lot of time trying to work with her, but still seemed worried that she wouldn't come around. I had to leave Wyatt outside and dismount, which Hopper helped me with. I quickly learned the only thing worse than sitting in the saddle for hours at a time was getting out of it.

I winced when my prosthetic feet hit the ground and nearly lost my footing as a shockwave of pain radiated up my body. Every part of me from the neck down was sore as hell. If I'd been an ounce less stubborn, I would have given up right then. I wasn't tough like Hopper. He was right to call me a soft city boy, but I didn't want him to know it, so I swallowed my discomfort and limped after him into the barn.

Noah gave a little whistle as soon as he walked in, and Hopper called out her name.

She stayed where she was, curled up against the far wall, only looking up when I came straight up to the gate and said, "Hey, girl."

Layla gave a little snort in response.

I leaned against the gate, covertly trying to stretch my lower back out. "How come you don't ride her?"

"Used to," Hopper said, retrieving a length of rope. "Leroy'd ride Ephith and me and Lalya'd make a good team of

our own. She won't let me mount now, though. Not since..."
Not since her mate had to be put down.

Layla let out a low bark and tucked her chin between her front paws again.

"The hidari won't be ideal for herding," Hopper continued. "Dragons aren't like cows. They're temperamental and most tend to obey the dragons that are bigger than them instinctively, which is why we had Layla and Ephith. But, if needs must, we make do with what we've got to work with."

"Can I go in and pet her?" I asked.

Hopper jerked and nearly dropped the rope. "What?"

I turned away from the enclosure. "I want to go in and just spend some time with her."

He frowned. "Robert, I'm not sure that's such a good idea. The last time you were close to her, she charged you. You could've been hurt, or worse!"

"But I wasn't." I sighed. "You're looking at this like it's a dragon problem, but what if it's not? What if it's a broken heart problem? Think about how you'd feel if you saw the things she's seen, been through what she's had to endure. She's all alone in the world, Hopper. Maybe she doesn't need you to get her back to work, or some routine. Maybe she just needs a *friend*."

Hopper's jaw flexed. He glanced past me to where Layla laid in her enclosure, his lips pressed tight together as he considered it. "I don't know. Might not be safe."

“The best things in life never are. You want something to change? You’ve got to take a risk, Hopper.”

He shook his head. “What if she hurts you? I can’t... I don’t...”

“I’ve just got this feeling. I want to try, Hopper.” I pushed away from the gate to cup his cheek and lift his face so he’d look at me. “I trusted you before. I’ll trust you now to protect me. If anything goes wrong, I’ll get right out.”

He relented with a sigh, lowering his head. “All right. Fine. But we’ll be standing by with tranquilizers just in case.” He gestured to Noah at the other end of the barn.

“Thank you.” I planted a kiss on his cheek.

The skin beneath his fur flushed slightly, and he turned away. “Just don’t go taking any stupid risks, would you?”

Hopper waited for Noah to come down the corridor with the tranquilizer gun. Noah picked a spot out of Layla’s direct line of sight, but where he had a good shot and nodded. Hopper walked me to the gate and unlocked it. Layla lifted her head, observing us with keen eyes.

“You sure about this?” Hopper asked.

I took in the size of the dragon. A lot could go wrong very quickly. She was the size of an eighteen-wheeler and could easily crush me, or bite me in half faster than Noah could shoot.

“Layla’s not going to hurt me,” I said with as much confidence as I could muster. “Are you, girl?”

Hopper eyed me up and down. “I’ll be right here. Remember, you promised, Princess.”

He pulled open the gate and held it.

I stepped into the enclosure, my heart in my throat and my movements slow. The weight of her gaze settled on me, and I waited for the feeling that I shouldn’t be there, the raw terror I’d felt before. It was absent. Looking at Layla now, all I felt was... Well, it was hard to pin down. I *understood*. Maybe I’d never lost a mate or had my eggs carried away, but I knew what it was like to be alone and misunderstood, to be looked at and never be seen. I knew how easy it was to retreat inside my own head rather than face my fears and my feelings.

I’d spent eight months hiding from the world because I couldn’t handle the way people looked at me. It pissed me off, the way everyone wanted to treat me like I was broken, like the moment I lost my legs should define me. People looked at me and they saw a young veteran in a wheelchair robbed of his mobility, his future, his life, and none of it was *true*. Fighting against that narrative was exhausting. I liked putting on a show, but not like that. All I’d wanted was for someone to take the time to get to know *me* and not be weighed down by the narrative they’d already written in their heads.

I forced myself not to creep warily into the enclosure and, instead, kept my shoulders as relaxed as I could, approaching her slowly but casually, the way I’d approach any animal for the first time. “How you doing this morning, Layla?”

She huffed out a breath and curled her paws tighter against her body.

“That good, huh?” I stopped a short distance away. “I know things have been rough lately. Hopper wants to take you out into the yard and try to work with you, but you don’t want that, do you? You just want things to go back to the way they were before your life got turned upside down. Feels sort of like you’re not in control of your own life anymore, doesn’t it? Like you’re stuck in time, but the world is moving on without you.”

She looked up at me with big, watery, intelligent yellow eyes as I took a step closer.

I shook my head, took a breath, and closed the distance, moving within arm’s reach of her razor-sharp teeth. She lifted her head, staring at me.

“I don’t know if you can understand me,” I whispered. “But if you can, please don’t eat me. I’m not here to hurt you. I don’t even know if I can help. But I can listen, and I can sit in here with you if you let me. You don’t even have to get up or answer or work... I don’t want anything from you, Layla, except for you not to be alone.” Slowly, I lifted my arm and held out my hand, stopping just short of touching her face.

She blinked quickly. Hot breath poured over my arm as she snorted.

“I’m here,” I said, “but you’re going to have to meet me halfway.”

She snorted again and averted her eyes, but I didn't give up. I held out my hand even though my arm was sore. Even when it started to shake from the effort, I held it up. I kept my hand out even though my back ached, and my muscles were screaming, and sweat was dripping down the sides of my face. I'd vowed not to give up on her, so I wouldn't. I'd stand there all day if I had to.

I don't know how long I stood there, arm outstretched in the early afternoon sun, but it must have been long enough. Layla very gently leaned forward to nudge her nose against my hand.

"Well, I'll be damned," Hopper said behind me.

Though her scales looked rocky and rough, they felt smooth and cool under my palm, almost metallic like the surface of a coin. She pushed her head against my palm for only a second before she pulled back, and when she did, my heart nearly stopped. There was a deep crimson egg nestled between her paws. An egg with a crack in it. I flinched when I saw the crack *flexing*.

"Hopper?" I said loudly, careful not to shout so I didn't upset Layla. "Layla has an egg."

"What?" he said, sounding upset. "That's impossible. We cleared them all out when she started acting erratic."

I turned my head to the side. "I'm telling you, I'm looking straight at it and it's *moving* on the inside."

A moment later, Hopper appeared beside me, his hand on my shoulder. "Gods, you're right. We must've missed one. I

don't know how. I did a damn thorough sweep. But if there was an egg in here we missed, no wonder she's been so upset every time I take her out."

"What should we do?" I whispered to Hopper as Layla backed further away.

She nudged the egg slightly with her snout and made a small sound in the back of her throat, not too dissimilar from the happy trills I'd heard Bud make.

"Nothing to do," Hopper said, and removed his hat. "Nothing but watch and wait."

TWENTY-SEVEN

HOPPER

IT WAS A LONG afternoon.

Layla sat back against the far wall, concentrating hard on her egg and shifting nervously back and forth. I don't think she would've blinked if she didn't have to. Every so often, she'd nudge it slightly and make an encouraging sound, or lean over it to breathe hot air on one side.

Robert got too tired to keep standing, so I had Noah bring me a concrete block for him to sit on before sending Noah back a safe distance. It was a miracle she was tolerating having the two of us in the enclosure while the egg hatched, and a testament to her good nature. I felt guilty for ever doubting her.

Robert squirmed on the edge of the block. You'd think he was the one hatching an egg, as nervous as he was. Every little twitch of the egg had him pointing excitedly, wondering if it was time. I had to keep reminding him not to get too close or move around too much. Layla was handling it well, but I kept my eye on her and a hand on Robert's shoulder, just in case I

needed to yank him out of reach. This was her baby, after all. Her *last* baby.

“Why’s it taking so long?” Robert whined.

“Life takes time,” I said simply.

He looked up at me, eyes big with worry. “Do you think it’s okay? Shouldn’t we be doing something?”

I chuckled and ran a hand through his hair. “Dragons have been hatching on their own since before man or monster walked this land. You and me don’t have no part in this. Mamma and the little one have got to do this on their own.”

He sighed, folding his arms. “I wish I wasn’t so helpless. I just want to make sure the baby’s okay.” Robert tapped out a rhythm with his fingers. “Do you want to have kids?”

I pulled my hand away, stunned into silence. It was an odd question coming from him, and it felt like it’d come out of the blue, even though I could follow his train of thought.

His face flushed slightly. “I don’t mean with me, obviously. I just meant... you know. In general.”

“Can’t say I’ve ever thought about it,” I lied.

The truth was much more complicated. Ranching was a generational business, especially for the jacqeroi, who famously had large families. I was the odd one out for not bothering. Most of the kids I’d grown up with had four or five kids of their own by then, and all those extra hands would sure help around the ranch.

I had no interest in any ladies, nor really any men either until Robert, and to have children, there'd definitely need to be a lady involved. I was almost entirely certain Robert was even less interested in women than me, but there were other ways, maybe.

I'd better back that thought up a bit, I thought with a frown. *Be silly to go making plans for a life that might never happen.* But I couldn't stop myself from wondering about what kind of family we could be.

"I've thought about it," Robert admitted, almost absently. "With the right person, you know? Adopting a few kids. Maybe being a foster parent or something. Charlie was in the foster system, you know, and he says there's never enough good people there to look out for lonely kids. The ones who slip through the cracks. I don't know. I just... I wonder what that'd be like. To be the dad I wish I'd had for someone else who needs it."

I put my hand back on his shoulder and squeezed. "You're a good man, Robert."

Robert snorted. "Yeah, I'm a real *saint*." He sat forward suddenly again, and I had to pull him back. "Look!"

I looked. The tiniest little edge of a nose popped through the biggest crack, the bright red shell stuck to a pitch black scaly nostril. A moment later, there was an audible crack and a black wing sprang out, coated in a sticky red liquid. Layla chirped and leaned forward.

Robert practically mimicked her every move, his eyes widening. “It’s happening, Hopper!” he whispered, squeezing my arm tight and shaking me. “It’s about to come out!”

I smiled, half watching the hatchling and half watching Robert’s excited expression as more of the egg fell away and a little black abrikari tumbled free. They were all tails, wings, and head when they were born, their bodies almost too small to hold all of it up.

Layla darted forward, licking away the mess while the hatchling’s greenish eyes rolled around the room. The hatchling’s lips parted, revealing a toothless mouth, and the baby let out a squeaking bark.

Robert gasped, and I pulled my hand away, thinking I’d hurt him. “Oh my God, Hopper. It’s so adorable I’m gonna *die!*”

My tail twitched. “I don’t think—”

His hand closed around mine like a vise. “Can I name him? Oh, crap. How do you sex a dragon?”

I chuckled and pulled my hand free, shaking it out. “I’ll show you.”

Layla wasn’t too hesitant to let us approach since we’d already been there a while. Handling the hatchling was a different matter altogether. Her instinct was to protect her baby, and I couldn’t fault her for that. Just the same, it was imperative to sex the hatchlings as soon as possible for record keeping, so we had to sedate her. It was for the best. Since we

hadn't known she'd been incubating an egg, I wanted to give her an exam too, just to make sure she was in good health.

I showed Robert how to administer the sedative. He paled a shade when I slid the needle between two of Layla's belly scales, but I reassured him she didn't feel it. Dragons didn't have as many nerve endings as humans, and I was careful not to hurt her. She got three shots, which would make her docile and still, but not quite put her to sleep. While she was still up, we fitted the carry sleeve under her belly, a swath of heat-resistant material. Once she was under, Noah brought in the lift and we used it to position her on her side.

I walked him through some basic dragon anatomy, noted her vitals for Noah to write down, and gave her a quick once over. There were no signs of distress or infection, so I hit the lever to lower the lift, and Robert helped me detach the sleeve.

He didn't want to leave Layla, but I promised him that Noah would stay outside her enclosure until she'd fully recovered. He needed to muck the spare stall, anyway. We'd need the extra space soon enough.

The little hatchling came back to the workshop with us, wrapped up in a blanket and riding in a little basket that Robert kept clutched to his chest. Since he'd spent the morning on dragonback, I decided it'd be more prudent to use the carts to take us back to the house.

When we got close to the house and I saw the van with the custom scenic paint job on the side and the motorcycle on a rack in the back, I frowned. I'd known he was coming, but it

was bad timing. Then again, I hadn't planned on Layla hiding an egg from me either.

Robert squinted at the van as we came closer. "Who's that?"

"Old friend," I said and pulled the cart up beside the van. I stopped it there and pointed Robert toward the side entrance, handing him the key to my workshop. "Put the dragon in the big wire cage for now. I'll show you after we're done talking to our guest. Oh, and just one thing. When you meet Honor, try not to stare."

TWENTY-EIGHT

ROBERT

THE MAN HOPPER INTRODUCED as Honor Rose was the most intimidating human I'd ever met. He was probably just a hair under six feet tall with a streak of silver running through his long, black hair, which he kept combed all to one side. It was probably an attempt to cover the prominent trio of scars that ran from his forehead to his jaw, ducking under an eyepatch on the way. He stared at me with his one good eye, which I couldn't help but compare to the color of burning coals. It was so brown it was almost red. Honor was dressed like he expected to walk onto the set of some moody, blues backed outlaw biker drama with his patched-up leather jacket, road worn blue jeans, and heavy stompers.

The monster with him looked like even more of a handful. He was as tall as Levi, and as big too, with shoulders so broad he probably had to duck through doorways sideways. Underneath a full set of armor that looked like it'd been made from a random collection of animal bones, dried flowers, crow feathers, and butterfly wings, he wore heavy leather hides and furs. His skin was a deep indigo with stripes of royal purple, almost like cat stripes, though if he had cat ears and a tail, I

didn't see them. Maybe the ears were under the skull helmet, which looked like it belonged to a saber-toothed bear. He just stood there next to the human, balancing a giant ax on his shoulder as if it were the most natural thing to do.

Hopper set a sweating can of Coke on the table in front of the man named Honor. "What brings you to my neck of the woods, friend?"

Honor tore his glare from me to put his hand over the mouth of the can. Faded tattoos covered his sun-darkened and rough knuckles, and there were thick silver rings on every finger. He glanced back at me, lip pulling up in a scowl that only highlighted his scar more. "Looking for work," he said in a voice that was much quieter than I expected. He lifted the can and frowned at it. "You don't got any Pepsi?"

"No, because I have taste," Hopper replied.

Honor popped the tab and took a sip before making a face handing it to the monster, who chugged it loudly.

The monster belched loudly and wiped his mouth before handing the empty can back to Honor.

"Heard you had something that needs doing," Honor said.

"Someone that needs finding." Hopper nodded and motioned to me. "Show him that picture of Charlie and Cupid on your phone, Robert."

I got my phone out, keenly aware of the eyes on me as I flipped through the pictures. When I found the one Hopper was referring to, I held the phone out, screen facing Honor.

Honor glanced at it, then back at me, lip twitching up into another sneer before he snatched the phone away from me.

The big monster behind him leaned in and spoke in a language with lots of tongue clicking and guttural noises at the back of his throat. His voice was so deep and booming, it made me shiver.

Honor tapped the screen, pinching with two fingers to zoom it in.

The monster nodded and said something else.

“He says he knows the Dominion. The empress’s first sword.” Honor held the phone out to me. “You want me to kill him or capture him?”

“What?” I squawked and yanked the phone away. “No! They’re *missing!*” I gave Hopper a worried look. Just who were these crazy people?

“The human’s his mate,” Hopper explained. “Charlie Cavallero. They went across the tear almost two weeks ago, which means they’re one week late coming back. Cupid—that’d be the Dominion’s nickname—was dead set on resigning his post, and the human couldn’t be talked out of going with him. I’ll be running the dragons across for summer grazing and breeding season in a few weeks, but I was hoping you’d find them before me.”

“Need *cimophis*,” said the monster. “For smell tracking.”

“*We* don’t need *anything*,” Honor snapped at him.

“Sorry to pry,” I started, “but I didn’t catch your friend’s name, Honor.”

The monster rumbled. I hoped that was laughter and not a growl, but I couldn’t tell. “I am Zigzug Uuhveddh, husband to Honor Rose.”

Honor’s eye widened. “He’s not,” he said quickly and scowled at the monster, mumbling, “Stop saying that, Ziggy. We’ve been over this.”

“Refusing to consummate our *nes’ehi* does not make it a lie,” Ziggy said with a shrug. “You broke the bones. It is done. I am yours, and you are mine until the *ral* falls into the *udiep*.”

Honor groaned into his hands. “It’s all a moot point, Hopper. We’re not taking the job. You know I don’t cross over for more than a quick exchange. Not anymore.”

I was relieved. These guys seemed like the shoot first and ask questions later type, which wasn’t who I wanted going after Charlie at all.

Hopper, however, wasn’t happy about it. He snorted and went back to the fridge, coming back with two more cans of Coke. He put one on the table in front of Honor and opened the other. “Look, Honor, I know you’re wary after what happened with Jesse and Kit—”

“For good reason,” Honor cut in, glancing again at me and then quickly away. “Humans don’t belong on that side of the tear.”

“Might as well say monsters don’t belong on this side,” I muttered.

“They *don’t*,” Honor said firmly.

I glared at him. “So everyone in Eden should just pack up and go home?”

“They don’t have a home,” Honor snapped at me. “Almost everyone here was born here, but they aren’t from here. They’re from nowhere, and they’ve got nowhere to go back to. That’s why Eden doesn’t exist, kid, and you have no idea what a high price has been paid to keep it that way.”

“Honor,” Hopper said in a tone that made my spine straighten.

Honor’s attention snapped to Hopper as he put down his Coke can.

Hopper reached into his pocket and drew out a single silver coin. It looked like a silver dollar, except it was just a hair larger, and I didn’t recognize the image stamped on it.

Honor’s shoulders slumped as Hopper slid the coin across the table to him. “Of course you’d call that in now. You son of a bitch.”

“You’re not leaving me a choice, Honor.”

“No, I suppose not.” Honor sighed and took the coin from the table. He pointed it at Hopper. “If I die, I’m going to use my last breath to curse you. You know that?”

Hopper nodded. “Then I suggest you don’t die. Come on, Robert. Let’s go check on the dragon.”

I turned to follow Hopper, but Honor’s voice stopped me.

“Robert was it? You wouldn’t be Robert Smith? The one who goes by Hotdog?”

I tried not to let my surprise show. Only a few people had earned the right to call me by that name, and they’d either bled beside me at war, or helped me come back from all that. Those people were my family. “How do you know that nickname?”

“You’re Axel’s...” His eyes flicked over me. “Friend.”

I glanced down the hall toward Hopper’s workshop. Hopper had disappeared inside, but left the door open. He was waiting for me, so I couldn’t be long.

“How do you know Axel?” I asked.

“I guess I don’t really,” he said with a sigh. “Not anymore.” For the first time, I heard something other than anger or indifference in his tone. He almost sounded... sad.

Ziggy shifted his ax over his shoulder. “Axel... I know Axel. He’s your *mir t’tak’n*.”

Honor clamped a hand down over Ziggy’s mouth with a scowl. “That ain’t his business.” He turned back to me. “Look, I knew his mother and his dad a long time ago. When he was a baby. Sometimes I check in on him to make sure he’s okay. I just... Could you tell me... Is he happy?”

I studied the man in front of me. He was older, but he didn't look old enough to have been friends with Axel's parents. That would've made him at least fifty, pushing sixty, right? He didn't look a day past forty, if that. But who knew with all the monsters and half-monsters running around? Maybe he was part monster, and that kept him looking young.

Axel didn't really talk about his family much. I knew his parents had gotten caught up in some type of cult and he hadn't talked to them since he was seventeen, but whenever he talked about them, he got distant and sad.

I shrugged, not wanting to give this stranger more information, especially without knowing if Axel would want me to or not. "He seems okay."

Honor looked relieved. "Oh. That's good." He glanced around before hitting Ziggy in the breastplate again. "Come on. If we hit the road, we can make the tear by sunup." He pushed past me without so much as a goodbye.

The big monster was a little more polite. He bobbed his head and rumbled in his deep voice, "Human," on his way out.

TWENTY-NINE

ROBERT

THE DRAGON WAS A female, and I named it Calcifera, or Callie for short. She was in good health, according to Hopper, and we went out that same night to bring her back to Layla, who breathed hot air on some rocks and crushed them up for Callie to eat.

Hopper and I sat just outside the enclosure for a while, watching the two of them together. I was pretty sure he wanted to go in and get some sleep, but I kept asking for a few more minutes, knowing he'd never deny me.

I don't know what time it was when I finally fell asleep leaning against him and he had to roust me and tell me firmly it was time to put me to bed.

I didn't remember much of the ride back because I was dozing off and on, but I remember the stars, the way they hung so big and close, like a blanket over that place. Made me believe I could reach up and touch them if I just tried hard enough.

The next morning, I was disappointed to wake up in my own bed rather than Hopper's, but he'd insisted I go to my

room to get real sleep. That insistence didn't stop him from waking me up at four thirty to go through another grueling day of cowboy training.

For almost a week, that was how it was. He'd wake me at the ass crack of dawn with sugary coffee in hand, hustle me through a bath and getting dressed, shove some food at me, and drag me out to saddle a hidari. I'd ride around the ranch with him while he did his morning chores. If he had to spend a lot of time in one place, Noah would come and take me around to do feedings.

After lunch, we worked with the rope. I was good at knots, but learning to throw the lasso was much harder than it looked. They started me with stationary targets, and I got excited when I did it once. Then Noah hit a button on his remote and the target took off. Nobody had told me the thing had *wheels*. I was still holding onto the rope, and it jerked me off my feet. It drug me about three feet before I got my legs back under me. Something in the prosthetic suddenly snapped, and I went down with a yelp.

Hopper raced out to check on me. "Yep, you definitely bent it," he said once he was sure I wasn't hurt.

"Fuck!" I screamed at the sky. Replacing a prosthetic leg was damn expensive, and all the way out there?

"Don't sweat it," Hopper said, patting my back. "I know a guy. I'll give him a call, but for the rest of the day, you're going to have to practice your knots."

I grumbled all day, practicing the Honda knot on a long length of rope as Hopper and Noah finished all the chores. While I sat in the shade, they were out sweating in the sun. I never thought I'd be jealous of people getting to do hard labor, but I already missed it. Not the work part. I'd be the first to admit I was lazy and didn't enjoy manual labor. I just missed being out there with them, doing something. Being *useful*.

I threw a glance over my shoulder at the mountain in the distance, wondering again if Charlie and Cupid were okay. Honor and his monster friend had promised to look for them, but I wasn't sure I trusted them.

We went back to the house early, and I couldn't help but feel guilty because I knew it was my fault. Levi was there, which meant another week had passed. Cupid and Charlie had been gone for three weeks, which meant this was definitely more than them being distracted by each other. Something had happened. Something *bad*, I was sure of it.

I went to mope in my room and work a little on the next Dungeons and Dragons campaign while Hopper made his phone call. When he knocked on the bedroom door, I'd just figured out who the next big bad was going to be.

"Yeah?" I looked up from the table, all my dice and notes spread out in front of me.

Hopper leaned against the doorframe, hands folded in front of him. "We can get you fitted for new legs tomorrow, but we'll have to go into town. Guy I know doesn't do house calls."

“I’m sorry, Hopper. I don’t mean to be a pain in the ass.”

He frowned. “You’re not bein’ a pain in the ass. You just need better quality prosthetics is all. What’re you workin’ on there?”

“Just the next Dungeons and Dragons game I’m going to run for my friends.” I stared out the window, struck by a sudden pang of longing to see them all again.

As much as I loved being out there with Hopper, I missed my friends and couldn’t imagine a world where I didn’t see Charlie or Axel or Chris every day. Yet that was the direction we were all headed in, wasn’t it? Most of them had moved on. Charlie had Cupid, Chris had Ollie... Axel was keeping his distance.

Hopper came in and sank onto the bed. “What’s eating at you, Princess? Somethin’ I can help with?”

I sighed and pushed the page I’d been working on away. “Just thinking about the future. What happens when we figure out what happened with Charlie and Cupid? To us, I mean.”

He looked away and reached up to rub the raw spot on his antlers absently. “Well, I suppose that’s up to you. You know you’re always welcome to stay, but I know you’ve got a life back in Michigan, too.”

“Not really,” I admitted. “I mean, I had Chris and Charlie and Axel, but Chris and Charlie have both moved on, and Axel... He doesn’t need me. I want everyone to be together, but...” I chewed on my bottom lip, considering.

Maybe I was crazy, but I didn't want to go back to Michigan. The place didn't matter to me. It was the people I cared about. As long as we could all get together occasionally to shoot the shit, play games, and catch up, I didn't care where it happened.

"I'm happy here," I said quietly. "Happier than I've been in a long time. Don't take this the wrong way, but it's not just you either. It's this place. It's the dragons. It's like... It's like I've found myself here. My head's not all clogged up trying to make sense of all the different sides of me. I just... I make more sense out here, as strange as that sounds."

"It don't sound strange to me," he said, shaking his head. "I know what you're sayin'. There's something special about this place that just feels right. It's why I'm here. I like to think everybody's got a special place somewhere out in the world that's waiting for them to find."

I chewed on my bottom lip a little harder. "Would you... Can I..." Fucking hell, how was I supposed to ask him? "I don't think I want to go back to Michigan, Hopper. Not even when Charlie gets back. Do you think it'd be okay if I stayed here?" When he didn't answer immediately, I added, "I'd be happy to work to earn my keep. I can run those servers, help with the dragons, whatever you want. I can even—"

Hopper cut me off, putting his hands over mine. "Princess, you don't have to do anything to earn your place here but *be* here. I don't have any expectations of you except that you do what makes you happy."

I stared at him, clenching my teeth to keep my jaw from quivering. No one had ever said anything like that to me before, never put my happiness first. I didn't have to dress a certain way with Hopper, or act a certain way, or say the right words, or even throw the lasso right. I didn't have to do anything, and he'd still want me.

He smiled and hooked a finger under my chin. "You know I only got one rule, Princess. Don't—"

"Don't eat the peanut butter out of the jar," I finished, still trying not to cry. I took a shaky breath. "This is crazy. It's crazy, right? I've only been here three weeks and I don't want to leave. I want to stay out here with you, Hopper. Now that I know you, I can't imagine a life without you. Without this place. All of this... This feels like home. *You* feel like home to me."

I was rambling, and I knew it, but I couldn't stop myself. Once it started coming out, all of it had to come out.

Hopper swallowed and withdrew his hands. I panicked. Shit, I'd said too much, and I was coming on too strong. I'd scared him, asked for too much.

"I been thinkin'," he said quietly, "once you get your legs all patched up, we ought to do a little trial run up in the mountains. Take a couple dragons up there, let you practice. Maybe this weekend? Once you have a few days to get used to your new legs."

I blinked. "You really think I'm ready for that?"

“Well, not yet. But once you get your legs patched up, I’ll put you on Layla for a day, see how you feel about it.”

“B-but the ropes!” I stammered. “I still can’t throw a lasso to save my life, Hopper.”

He waved a dismissive hand, leaning back. “Don’t sweat the small stuff. If you can ride and shout, and pay attention, you can drive dragons well enough. We’ll keep working on your rope skills, though. Just in case. Of course, we’ll be roughing it up in the mountains. It’s important you know that. Sleepin’ in pup tents on the ground. Can you handle that?”

I nodded enthusiastically, even though I’d never slept in a tent in my life. I’d have slept on a bed of hot coals if that’s what it took to get him to say something back to me. The way I’d just gushed about my feelings was awkward and weird, and I felt off balance because he hadn’t said anything back.

“Good,” Hopper said and stood. “Now you get cleaned up for supper, and I’ll tell Levi to make us some food for the road while he’s here. If it all goes well, we’ll be crossing over next week sometime, and hopefully we’ll find Honor has some news for us.” He leaned over me and caught my lips in a quick kiss. “Love you. See you after I get cleaned up.”

I stared at his tail as he walked away, my heart fluttering fast like hummingbird wings. He said he loved me. He loved me! Not prompted, or forced, just casually, the way real couples did.

And I hadn’t said it back. Fuck.

I hurried to roll my chair to the doorway so I could catch him before he disappeared. “Hopper!”

He paused halfway to the kitchen and turned around, wearing a look of concern. “Everythin’ all right?”

“Yeah, I just...” I looked around, suddenly feeling like an idiot for making such a big deal out of it. “I love you too.”

He smiled a slightly crooked smile and *winked* at me in a way that made my heart jump against my ribcage. “I know you do, Princess. See you at supper.”

I went back to my room and hauled myself onto the bed with a huff, staring at the ceiling. *I’m going to marry that monster if he doesn’t kill me first.*

THIRTY

HOPPER

“HOW’S THAT FEEL?” BIG Al asked Robert for the fiftieth time, adjusting something on the leg.

Big Al was part durlik, which meant he was small and had a natural ruddy flush to his skin and a long white beard. They called him Big Al because he was big for a durlik, who only usually reached four feet in height. Al was five feet even.

The feet Big Al had fitted him with were titanium, much tougher made than the junk one Robert had shown up with. He’d need a pair. Better to replace them both at the same time rather than wait for the second one to break.

Robert took my hand, using it to stand tentatively, frowning down at his new metal feet. “Feels weird.”

“It’s gonna feel weird. It’s new,” I said.

Al grunted. “Take a few steps. Try it out.”

Still holding onto me to keep his balance, Robert took a few hesitant steps forward. He walked over to the floor to ceiling mirror and frowned, letting go of my hand to turn around and look at his backside. “I still just don’t know.”

I sighed. “You said that about the last pair, too.”

“Well, they’re both nice. I think the other pair makes my ass look better, but these are sturdier. They’re so expensive... I have to make sure you’re getting your money’s worth.”

I sighed again and turned to Big Al. “We’ll take both pairs. Can you have them ready this week?”

“There’ll be a rush fee, but you know I can.” Big Al waved a hand and walked over to the register to tally everything.

I moved to follow, but Robert grabbed my arm. “Hopper, can you afford that? I know your dragons shit gold, but I also know running the ranch isn’t cheap.”

“Bringing you on to cowboy and run the servers is going to save me a fortune,” I told him. “Besides, you need legs, Robert. It’s nothing.”

The figure Big Al gave me wasn’t nothing. I tried to remember the last time I’d dropped fifty grand in one sitting on anything other than the ranch itself and came up empty. I had it to spend, though, and I’d rather spend it on Robert than myself. Didn’t stop me from wincing a little when I slid my card through the reader.

“Well, what now?” Robert asked as he wheeled his chair through the door I held open for him. “Back home?”

An inexplicable flutter of joy went through me, hearing him call the ranch home. “Not yet.” I tucked the receipt into my wallet for safekeeping and got out my personal credit card, holding it out to him. “I’ll probably have to stop by the bank

after a purchase like that to make sure they cleared it without any trouble. Why don't you go get yourself some clothes?"

He stared at the card I was offering him before giving me a worried glance. "Are you serious?"

I huffed. "Well, you're not going up into the mountains in hip huggers and crop tops. Get proper ranching clothes, Robert. Jeans, flannel. Cotton underwear. It gets cold up there at night sometimes, and you'll be more comfortable riding in that."

"I feel bad spending all your money, Hopper," he said.

I snorted. "No, you don't."

Robert sighed and took the card. "You're right. I kind of like having a sugar daddy."

I rolled my eyes and leaned down to kiss him quickly. "Meet me at the café when you're done. Try not to spend more than a grand, would you?"

"No promises!" he called as he rolled away.

I shook my head and turned to go the other way. The bank was across the street, but I didn't bother crossing. My destination was right next to the sheriff's office. I checked behind me to make sure Robert wasn't paying any attention and then ducked through the glass door. A delicate little bell tinkled overhead and an elfish young man with deep brown skin looked up. He had delicately pointed ears and shining bright eyes, but I couldn't quite tell what sort of monster he might be. Since I'd never been in the jewelry store, I didn't

know him either, but he seemed to know me. Everybody in Eden knew me.

“Good morning, Mr. Meadows,” he said pleasantly, folding his hands on top of the glass case. “How can I help you today?”

I eyed the clerk, suddenly unsure this was a good idea. Maybe Robert was right, and we were mad for being so serious after only a few weeks, but what he said about it feeling like home... That rang true for me. I’d never felt that way about anyone before. Never wanted to. With Robert, everything just clicked. It was like I hadn’t even known what was missing in my life until he was suddenly in every part of it. I wanted him with me all the time, enough that the thought of him being with anyone else left me with a physical ache in my chest.

“Mr. Meadows?” The clerk tipped his head to the side.

I shook my head to try to clear out the doubt. “Oh, I, uh...” I paused to clear my throat. “I wanted to see some rings, is all.”

“Certainly,” said the jeweler, moving to the next case over. He slid aside the back. “Anything in particular?”

I opened my mouth to answer him, but the little bell above the door jingled again. When I turned around, I spied Sheriff Eddie ducking through the door, a frown on her face.

She scanned the shop, eyes settling on me. “Hopper. I thought that was you. Glad I caught you.”

“One second,” I said to the clerk and tucked my hands into my pockets, turning to face the sheriff. “You got news on Leroy? Get that warrant to search his place?”

“You might not like what I’ve got to say,” she said, folding her arms over her chest and canting her weight to one side. “Search didn’t turn up much, but I did get a tip that he was across the border.”

I muttered a curse and pushed my hat back to rub the base of my antlers, tail twitching. If he was hiding out on the rez, then he was out of reach if the tribe didn’t turn him over, and that was about as likely as rain in the Sahara. Not that they’d actively obstruct the investigation. They were just understaffed, and the reservation was too huge to search for one small-time crook on foot.

“That isn’t all,” Eddie said. “I keep getting calls from some east coast senator asking me to go out to the ranch and do a wellness check on his son. I assume that’s the human I saw with you last time?”

I pulled my hands from my pockets and flexed my fingers into fists. “Robert’s at the ranch of his own free will. He don’t want nothing to do with his family.”

“I figured, and since he’s legally an adult, I told the senator there’s not much I can do. He keeps threatening to have my badge and sue me into the ground, though.” She rolled her eyes, telling me what she thought of that. “You should have Robert talk to his family, though. See if you all can’t get this resolved. I’m getting tired of fielding these calls, Hopper.

Considering he's a senator, he might have the pull to make good on some of those threats."

I dipped my head apologetically. "I know, Eddie. I've already spoken to the senator, and I know Robert has too. Don't know much else we can do. We ain't got nothing else to say to 'em."

She sighed and nodded. "I'm just worried about the repercussions for the town, you know? Eden exists on the good graces of the government looking the other way so long as we pay our dues, but after the Michigan incident... Things are a little up in the air, aren't they?"

"Honor will find something to smooth it over," I said. "He always does."

"I know. I just hate that we have to rely on arrangements like that to live in peace."

"There's always a price," I muttered, shaking my head.

"Ain't that the truth? Just sucks, is all." Eddie sighed. "Well, that's about all I had to say. I just wanted to bring you up to speed." She turned to go, but paused and snapped her fingers. "Oh, and Kaito stopped by a few days back. Said you might be driving the dragons up early this year? Did you find yourself a cowboy?"

I couldn't help but grin. "Matter of fact, I did. He's a bit of a city slicker, but he's a fast learner and got a good heart. I think he'll do all right."

“Glad to hear it,” Eddie said, nodding. “Well, I’ll be seein’ you around, Hopper. You take care now.”

“You too, Eddie.” I watched her go, waiting for the door to close behind her before I turned back around to address the jewelry clerk. “Now. Let’s have a look at those engagement rings.”

THIRTY-ONE

ROBERT

“DO YOU HAVE THIS in pink?” I asked the clerk at the clothing store, holding up a bright blue and black flannel button up.

She lifted an eyebrow. “What we’ve got is what we’ve got.”

I sighed. That was why I preferred to shop online. The selection at the small-town clothing shop wasn’t exactly my style. Then again, Hopper had told me to get something functional. I guess blue was functional. Good thing dragons didn’t care about fashion.

I grabbed three of the same shirt and then rolled over to the jeans, frowning at the sizes. I didn’t remember what I wore in men’s sizes. Women’s jeans looked better on my ass, so that’s usually what I went for, if I bothered with jeans at all. Shorts were just fine most of the time, and easier to get on and off. If I was going to go riding through the mountains, though, I should get good, sturdy men’s jeans and not the women’s jeans with the sequin hearts on the ass.

Fuck it, I thought and rolled away from the men’s section to grab the sequin heart jeans I’d been eying. I was only willing

to sacrifice so much for functionality. *Speaking of...*

I poked my head around the rack of jeans, glancing back up at the clerk, who was bent over a magazine, absently flipping through the pages. While she was distracted, I casually went over to the lingerie section and picked up the pink three-piece set. The little rings on the garter belt were heart-shaped, and it'd match the pink tail and bunny ears I had perfectly. The only question was whether I should get the B cup I knew would fit, or to go up to a C just for fun. I picked up one of each, holding each against my chest. Which one would Hopper like? Did he even like boobs?

“Robbie?” came an impossible voice behind me. Impossible because I *knew* Ryder wouldn't be in Eden, Wyoming.

I turned my head and froze at the sight of my twin brother, the C cup pink lingerie pressed against my chest. After years of not seeing him in person, I'd forgotten how alike we looked. I mean, I was clearly the hotter of the two of us, but he got all the *bulk*. Maybe it was because he liked to work out, which I detested, but Ryder had a broad chest and arms that didn't look like twigs. He also had a slightly more defined jaw than me, or maybe that was just because of the sharp suits he always wore.

I lowered the lingerie and stared at him, slack jawed. “What the fuck are you doing here, Ryder?”

He sucked in a breath and stepped forward. “Looking for you. After what happened...” He glanced around, frowning. “Maybe the ladies' underwear section isn't the place to do

this? I saw a coffee place down the street. How about I buy you lunch?”

“Hopper is buying me lunch,” I snapped, a little irritated that he was here. “Did the sperm donor send you?”

Ryder sighed. “I wish you wouldn’t call him that, but no. He doesn’t know I’m here. Grace doesn’t even know. They all think I’m at a conference in Nevada, but I sent my assistant instead.”

“The great Ryder Smith playing hooky? Now I know it’s the end of the world,” I scoffed and held up both sets of lingerie. “You like tits, right? Which one?”

He gave me a funny look.

“You’re right,” I said, putting the C cup one back on the rack. “Don’t flaunt what I don’t got.”

“I was going to say... you’re as flat as Oklahoma, bro.” He grinned and tapped a fist against his chest. “Though you look like you’ve been working it recently. You look... Well, you look better than I expected you to.”

“You mean I look better than you?” I rolled my chair past him and headed for the check-out counter. “Try not to be jealous. It’s been twenty-six years. It’s time for you to admit I’m the hot one.”

“More like the snot one.” He followed me to the counter and only helped me get the items up on the counter when he saw me struggling with them.

The clerk started ringing me up, taking everything off the hangers and neatly folding them to put them in the bag. For a few minutes, I sat awkwardly in the chair next to my brother, wondering why he was there if our father hadn't sent him. Maybe mother had. Maybe he was genuinely worried. There was a time when we'd been close, me and Ryder, but life had put us on different paths. His was straight and narrow and mine was kinky and queer. Sometimes, I wished for the old days, when we could talk about anything, but I didn't know how to make things go back to the way they used to be, especially since he was still in contact with our dad.

When the clerk got to the lingerie set, she scanned it and held it up. "Cute. I'm sure your girlfriend will love it."

"I'm about as close as I ever want to be to an actual set of tits right now, sweetie," I said with a snort. "That's for me."

"Then I'm sure your boyfriend will love it," she said with a tight smile and looked at my brother. "Are you twins?"

"We are," Ryder said pleasantly, flashing a million-dollar smile.

"Did you ever switch places growing up?" she asked. "I used to know this pair of twins and my teachers had so much trouble telling them apart."

"Oh, no. We're too easy to tell apart. He's the straight one," I said, deadpan.

The woman's smile fell.

“Obviously,” Ryder agreed with a small sigh. “Suppose God decided there was only enough room in the world for one perfect Smith.”

“Which is why he must’ve beat you with the ugly stick in the womb,” I added, sliding Hopper’s card.

Ryder shrugged. “Well, somebody had to give you a chance of getting a date.”

The clerk hurriedly shoved the receipt in the bag and held it out.

I snatched it up before Ryder could and shoved the bag at him to carry. “Come along, Igor. We have cadavers to dissect.”

He scrunched up his face and hunched over, hissing in a distorted voice as he limped along beside me, “Yes, master.”

We held it together until we got out of the store before we both doubled over laughing.

“God, did you see her *face*?” Ryder put a hand on my back. “She had no idea how to react!”

I grinned up at him and gave him a shove. “Your Igor impression is still terrible.”

“And you’re still terrible in general.” He sighed and fell into step beside me as I rolled down the sidewalk, headed for the Cowboy Café. “So... You look fine. You don’t seem like you’re being held against your will or anything.”

“Is that the story father’s telling?” I huffed.

Ryder shrugged. “Not really. He’s just pissed you made him look like an idiot on national television on an election year. He had half the capital ready to launch a nationwide manhunt for you, bro. When he found out you’d just disappeared to shack up with someone twice your age, he was *furious*.”

“He’s just worried someone will photograph me making out with another man and use it against him in one of his debates,” I pointed out.

“Maybe.” Ryder opened the café door for me and held it. “And maybe he really is concerned about you, Robbie. After Detroit—”

“Hopper isn’t like Shane,” I said quickly and shot him a look as we got in line to order.

Ryder sighed. “I know you think that, but you didn’t think Shane would be like that either. I just... I know how you are, bro. You’re a big, squishy, softie who falls fast and hard for the wrong kind of guy.”

I shook my head. “Hopper isn’t like that. He’s a little rough around the edges, but he’s good and decent. He’s sweet, Ryder. He takes care of me.”

“I don’t doubt you believe that,” he said, putting a hand on my shoulder. “And I know you’re technically two minutes older than me, but... Well, you’re my bro. My only bro. If I don’t look out for you, who will?”

I sighed, dropping my head slightly. “Well, if you stay a little while longer, you’ll get to meet him and decide for

yourself. But do me a favor and try not to be an asshole? I really like this guy. Like... a lot.”

Ryder folded his arms over his chest and cocked an eyebrow. “More than *The Legend of Zelda*?”

I pressed my lips together in thought. “Which one? Because he’s definitely above *Majora’s Mask*, but if we’re talking about *Ocarina of Time* it’s gonna get iffy.”

Ryder laughed. “You’re such a nerd.”

“Jock,” I retorted.

“Not that you ever complained about having an automatic pass into the locker room.”

I shrugged, relenting. “True, true. You were always a good wingman.”

Ryder ordered a vanilla chai latte, and an overpriced banana, mumbling something about being jet lagged. I got myself a chocolate doughnut with peanut butter icing and a hot chocolate with extra whipped cream. For Hopper, I ordered a large black coffee and an egg sandwich with cheese.

Then Ryder and I settled in at a table to talk. He asked me what I’d been doing, and looked surprised when I told him I’d been training to cowboy, but seemed interested. I left out that I’d be herding dragons and not cows. Even though I looked around and saw small pieces of evidence that the people around us weren’t entirely human, Ryder seemed blissfully unaware that most of Eden’s population was monsters. It seemed the glamor only worked on people who were unaware

that it was in effect. I saw people with tails, horns, and scales all around, but he was none the wiser.

Ryder told me about how he'd just filed the paperwork to run for state representative for his district in Pennsylvania. He was nervous about running for a third-party spot, and dad wasn't happy about it, but he just didn't agree with the two-party system. Ryder had always been a little idealistic, and it was good to hear him bringing some of that to his campaign.

"People are really energized," he said, sipping his latte. "Especially young people. I really think the next generation is going to change things for the better for everyone. I've never been more hopeful than I am today for the country."

"Okay, Wonder Boy. Save the speeches for the campaign trail." I took a bite of my doughnut and glanced around. What was taking Hopper so long? He'd said he was just going to the bank.

Ryder chuckled. "Sorry. You know I'm just passionate about it. Actually, I'm surprised you're so into this ranching thing. You always hated the outdoors."

"Yeah, well... the view's nice." I shrugged.

"I bet." He lowered his drink, focusing on someone approaching the table.

I twisted and saw Hopper coming our way. He hesitated when he saw Ryder at the table with me until I waved him over. "Hey, Hopper. Where've you been?"

"Got busy talkin'." He eyed my brother with a frown.

“This is my twin brother, Ryder Smith. Ryder, this is Hopper Meadows.”

“Pleased to finally meet you,” Ryder said, holding out his hand and flashing one of his professional politician smiles.

Hopper’s tail twitched. He looked at me. “He ain’t bothering you, is he?”

“Ryder’s all right,” I told him, heart fluttering a little that he was so concerned.

“Well, it’s good to meet you.” Hopper took Ryder’s hand.

Ryder’s eyes flared wide when Hopper squeezed, and then his lips turned up in a smirk that looked entirely wrong on his face.

“Sorry to be so suspicious, but my interactions with your father haven’t been so positive,” Hopper said, sitting.

“He can be a handful,” Ryder admitted and then shot me a look I couldn’t quite read. He pulled his latte closer. “So, Robbie tells me you’re training him to cowboy. Is that safe?”

Hopper snorted and pulled the lid off his coffee so it’d cool. “Safe? No. Nothing worth doing is safe, though. But don’t you worry. I’ll take good care of him.”

“He *is* my only brother,” Ryder said. “And if anything ever happened to him, I don’t know what I’d do. Probably something stupid. I’d feel sorry for anyone who hurt him.”

“Ryder,” I growled through clenched teeth. “Stop.”

Hopper shifted back in his seat and gave my brother another, longer look. “Ryder, was it?”

Ryder nodded.

“Well,” said Hopper, stirring the coffee, “if anybody ever laid a hand on Robert in a way he didn’t like, that fella would have one less hand when I caught up with him. If he was lucky.”

My heart did a little flip-flop, and it took real effort not to grab Hopper and drag him out to the truck to have my way with him.

Ryder nodded once and smiled at me. “You know, I think being a cowboy suits you, bro. And Wyoming certainly agrees with you. I don’t know what Dad’s problem is, but as far as I can see, you’re in good health, and you’re happy. Happier than I’ve seen you in a while. I’ll have a talk with him and see if I can’t get him to back off and focus on something else. It is an election year and he’s up for re-election.” He stood, adjusting his suit jacket.

Hopper frowned. “You’re going? Already? You could stay.”

“Wish I could,” Ryder said, “but I’m supposed to be in Vegas right now, and if I don’t at least show up and shake some hands, I’ll never hear the end of it from my campaign manager, who I happen to be married to.” He picked up his latte and came around the table to hug me. “Don’t be a stranger, big bro. Call me once in a while to let me know you’re alive, would you?”

I put my arm around him and patted his back. “Only if you promise to find time to come see me in person. You know I hate the phone.”

I caught his hand in a squeeze and we made a few quick and familiar hand motions before slapping our palms and bumping shoulders, the same secret handshake we’d had ever since we were kids. A lot had changed since then, but it was good to know Ryder was still in my corner, even after everything that’d happened.

“Love you, bro,” he said, grinning. He nodded to Hopper. “Nice to meet you, Hopper. Take care of my big brother for me. Don’t let him run you too ragged.”

“Fuck off, Wonder Boy,” I said, and gave him a slight shove.

“Nerd,” he called and walked backward to the door. He gestured again for me to call him and backed out of the café.

THIRTY-TWO

ROBERT

MY LEGS WEREN'T READY for another two days, which meant I spent more time in the chair than I cared to. As soon as they were, we went back into town to pick them up.

The first day I had them on, I spent it just getting used to the new weight, walking around, trying to do all the things I'd been learning. Some things were a little easier once I got used to the weight. I didn't have to worry as much about going easy on the lifting since the new legs were heavier duty, and they didn't leave me nearly as sore at the end of the day.

Hopper took full advantage of that, working me hard all day, hard enough that I went straight back and fell asleep. The next day, he had me saddle up Layla, and I took her for our first ride.

Riding her wasn't anything like riding the hidari. She was bigger, for one, but she was really a gentle giant. I didn't have to work as hard to get her to listen, and we didn't have to move as quickly since she took bigger steps. With the new legs, I also wasn't quite as sore from the saddle at the end of

the day. I was actually starting to believe I could do this cowboy thing.

The only downside to all the hard work I was putting in was that I wasn't getting anything put in *me*. I'd been too tired to do anything with Hopper, despite wanting to. After almost a week without sex, or at least jerking off, I was usually losing my mind, but the last week had gone by so quickly that I hadn't even had time to think about it. I felt bad, though, because I wanted to spend time with him outside of the work. We were both just too tired.

The night before we were set to leave on our weekend trial run into the mountains, I went out after supper to check on Calcifera and Layla. I'd taken to looking in on them in the evenings I felt up to it, often without Hopper. The ranch was like a second home to me, and I was more than comfortable navigating on my own. I knew better than to go into the pen without him or Noah there, though, just in case something happened.

I stayed on the outside of the pen, leaning against the gate, just watching them together. Calcifera had started to get a little bigger already. She stretched her wings out and liked to toss rocks around her mamma's feet, chasing them like a cat chased mice. Layla had started to move around a bit more, pacing in the back of the enclosure. She was eating better, too.

I wanted to be present in the moment and enjoy watching them play, but my mind kept drifting back to Hopper. I felt bad for not giving him any attention for a week, tired or not. We

were supposed to go out for a weekend tomorrow, but I knew after riding into the mountains all day, I'd probably still be tired. I hadn't meant for a week to pass. He hadn't said anything about it either, but I was starting to wonder if maybe I'd scared him off with my confession.

I said goodbye to Layla and Calcifera, pushing away from the gate to go back to the house. It was too far to walk, so I took one of the carts. Noah had taught me how to drive them, which wasn't quite as easy as it looked.

Back at the house, I went to knock on Hopper's door, but by the sounds of it, he was already asleep, so I dragged myself back to mope in the bath, deciding what to do. It was early, and the sun had only just set, but we also had to get up before dawn. It'd be a long day tomorrow. I should have just gone to bed, but I couldn't shake this feeling that I needed to be with Hopper. My fingers ached to touch him and I missed the feel of his fur against my cheek, the sweet soft sounds he made when we were together. I'd never cared enough about anyone to miss them when they were just a few rooms away.

When the feeling hadn't subsided by the time I got out of the bath, I decided I had to do something about it. Hopper might be upset if I woke him, but I had to risk it. I donned the lingerie I'd bought at the shop earlier in the week, threw on a robe, and went down the hall where I lingered outside his door, listening to his snore. A smile touched my lips at the sound of it. If anyone had told me I'd ever find a snore cute, I never would have believed them.

I tried the door and found it unlocked, so I slipped inside as silently as possible. Hopper didn't wake. He was lying on his back in the bed, all the blankets tossed to one side like he was too hot, and he was wearing a pair of loose-fitting pajama pants. His upper body was bare. I stayed by the door a while, greedily drinking in the sight of him bathed in deep shadow. He wasn't the sort of muscular you'd find on any magazine covers. No eight pack abs, no pretty, perfect pecs and veiny biceps. But Hopper was solid, built tough, and I knew that if I ran my fingertips through the light dusting of chestnut fur on his belly, I'd feel the hard muscle beneath flex in response. If I curled up against him and he put his arms around me, I'd feel safe and warm, and I'd never want to leave.

He didn't stir when I sat on the end of the bed and quietly removed my prosthetics.

I crawled carefully up the bed, nestling my head in the crook of his arm. "Hopper," I whispered, and traced my fingers lightly along his jaw.

He made a soft sound in protest of waking up that I swallowed with a kiss. It took a minute, but he started kissing me back, and once he did, we couldn't stop. His arm closed around my shoulders, drawing me closer, and I felt the other go to my ass. He wasn't wearing any of his prosthetics, but that didn't bother me. I loved him the way he was, with or without all the bonus aftermarket parts. Even then, some part of me knew I'd love him forever, as long as our hearts were beating and we were both breathing, and beyond.

The kiss was slow and unhurried, as if we'd only just realized we had all the time in the world. Hopper's textured tongue slid over mine in a slow glide, his one good hand drifting over the mix of skin and lacy pink clothes I'd put on for him. I had never dressed up for anyone else before. Never wanted to. But Hopper was different, and I wanted him to feel special when we were together.

He broke the kiss after a long while, drawing the stump of his arm over my hip, eyes half-lidded. "What's all this?"

I grinned up at him. "You should know. You bought it for me."

"I don't think this counts as sensible." He grunted and buried his face in the hollow of my neck, letting his antlers rub against my cheek.

I shuddered and gripped the antlers. I had always thought antlers would feel more like bone than they did, but his had a very thin soft covering, almost like velvet, except in the place he'd worn it all off. There was a matching spot of worn wood on the headboard where he must've been rubbing them.

"You don't make it easy to be sensible, Hopper," I breathed, dragging my fingers lightly over the antlers until his ears and his tail twitched. "Do you like it? The outfit."

"What do you think?" he asked and grabbed one of my hands, guiding it between his legs to feel how hard he was. "I like everything you do, Princess, except when you eat peanut butter out of the jar."

I kissed him again, this time briefly, before pulling back to say, “I love you.”

“I know,” he replied, a mischievous light in his eyes.

I shifted against the pillow, giving him the side-eye. “Did you just make a pop culture reference?”

His grin widened. “Maybe.”

Before I could poke more fun at him for referencing a forty-three-year-old film, he’d pulled me into another deep kiss. I groaned when he palmed my already hard dick through the lacy panties and closed my fist around the base of his cock through his sleeping pants, suddenly impatient.

I let out a needy whine. “I need you. Don’t make me wait any more.”

“Never, Princess,” he said gently, and reached to strip off his pants.

As soon as he’d discarded them by the bed, I pounced, not even waiting until he’d laid back down. His shoulders hit the headboard when I pushed him back with a hand on his chest, antlers coming to rest right next to the worn section of wood. Hopper muttered a curse and fumbled to find the lube. He held it while I pumped it into my palm. White teeth gleamed, and he bit his lip as I hurriedly coated him in it.

“Easy, Princess. What’s the hurry? I ain’t goin’ nowhere.”

“I’ve waited my whole life to find you. I don’t want to wait another minute.”

My forehead rested against his briefly and he held onto me while I moved the panties aside and got myself ready for him. I didn't bother with any more stretching or preparation than was absolutely necessary before letting only one of his heads slide in to do a little more. He grunted and breathed out a small, needy curse before catching me in another kiss.

It was awkward at first, just taking part of him. I was worried it might hurt him somehow, and I couldn't go down very far without hitting the v where the heads met at his shaft. To keep from going down too hard, I gripped his antlers and used them like handles, which had him moaning and grunting as he gave me shallow thrusts.

The second head rubbed relentlessly, hot and smooth against my ass, leaking everywhere. All the extra stimulation felt amazing, but it'd take forever for me to come like that. Individually, the heads were just long and big enough to give me the sensation of being filled without going deep enough to hit my prostate, making it a terrible tease.

"Hopper," I whined even as I shifted my hips to keep from letting the other head slip inside. As desperate as I was, I knew he'd never be satisfied if he only came once.

He was already panting and sweating beneath me, his hand tight around my arm as I rode him. I slid my hand down his antler, the one with all the rubbing marks on it, and ran a thumb over the rawest point. He'd rubbed it white there where the rest of the antlers were a deep, chocolate brown.

Hopper shuddered beneath me and let out that sweet, low moan that told me I'd hit the right spot. His cock twitched against my body, the neglected one drooling heavily while the other one came. I waited for him to finish before switching them out and riding the other one until he came that way, too.

Somehow, despite coming twice already, his shaft felt even harder. I slid my hand down to the base, trying to wrap my hand around the thick, swelling knot there, wondering if I could ever get that inside of me. I'd asked him before, but he said he couldn't, and I hadn't brought it up since. I had the feeling that I physically could take it, even if it took a little more work, but he seemed reluctant. Maybe there was some cultural significance to the knot, like it was taboo to use it or something.

"Robert!" His voice was strangled as his one good hand tugged the front of my panties down to free my cock so he could stroke it.

Hearing my name on his lips in such a desperate tone sent a thrill through me and made my dick jerk in his grip. Holy shit, I almost came from his *voice*. This man, this monster, had such a hold on me... I was so far gone, I was drowning in him, and I didn't want to come up for air.

I slid my fist up, pressing both his heads tightly together and guiding them carefully toward my already well-used hole. The first slide of his body into mine was such bliss, my eyes rolled back. He fit me so perfectly, I wondered how I'd ever been satisfied by anyone else. Maybe I hadn't. I put my hands back

on his antlers and used them to balance me as I moved my body, doing all the work. Our combined breaths rasped into the dark, the only sound against the obscene wet sound of me moving on top of him and his hand moving over my cock.

“Gods, fuck,” Hopper said, breathless. “You feel so good inside, so hot and tight...”

“Don’t sweet talk me now.” The words escaped as a panting whine of protest. “Too close.”

“Come on, Princess. Stop fighting it. I want to see you come first.”

I didn’t want to go first. Some silly, competitive part of me was determined to make him break first, but then he dragged a fingernail lightly over the flushed head of my cock. “*Fuck!*” I came with a shout, body stilling overtop him as my cock emptied onto his stomach.

Hopper’s hips arched up, pushing him deeper and bumping that thick, swelling knot against my hole. I felt it flex as he came again, almost as if he were resisting pushing it in.

After, I collapsed against his chest, not caring that I was lying in my own cum. His cock was still hard, and still inside of me, but he seemed content not to pull out just yet, and I was happy to just enjoy the feel of him there. His hand traced over the tattoo on my lower back with a strange sense of reverence while we tried to get our messy, uneven breathing back under control.

“Robert?”

“Mmm?” I shifted my face, burying it in his fur to inhale more of his sweet scent, still half floating in my post-fuck haze.

Hopper’s fingers threaded through my hair, gently gripping the back of my head, and pulling my face back so he could look at me. “You okay?”

I smiled and let out a dreamy sigh, settling back against his chest. “Yeah,” I mumbled, and closed my eyes. “Needed that. Don’t make me wait a week again.”

He chuckled. “Been workin’ hard, haven’t we, Princess?”

“Mm-hmm,” I agreed and yawned. I needed a bath or his fur would probably stick to me, but I couldn’t be bothered yet. “Do you ever take days off?”

“Not for a long time. Never wanted to. The work’s exhausting, but I love it. Guess ranching’s not so much a job as it is a lifestyle.”

I agreed with another tired hum. “Well, maybe you could afford to hire on more hands. Then you could relax a little. Maybe you could even sleep in with me every once in a while.”

“You’d have to promise not to run them off.”

I snorted at that. “Just don’t hire any hot cowboys.”

He hooked a finger under my chin and lifted it. “You know I don’t want anybody but you, Princess. I never have. I don’t think I could. There’s just somethin’ special about you that makes me want *you*.”

My chest suddenly ached. Hopper was the only one who made me feel that way. I'd never been special, not even as a kid. Growing up, I was always living in Ryder's shadow, always the one to lag behind in grades and social skills, always the one in trouble. I hadn't stood out in the military for anything other than being bad at it. Even in my group of friends, I was the most average guy most of the time. I had never excelled at anything, never stood out, never been anyone that seemed unique and valuable. But to Hopper, I was, and he made me feel it every minute of every day that we were together, even when we weren't physically in the same room.

I grunted as he pulled out of me, still hard. It'd be a long while before he settled. It always was. I wondered if it was because of the big knot at the base of his cock, because he always stayed hard until that relaxed. What would it take to fully sate him? I wanted to ask, but it felt awkward, and he'd seemed so hesitant before when I asked him to use it with me.

With a contented sigh, I slid off of him so I wasn't making it hard for him to breathe and curled up in the crook of his arm, my head resting on his shoulder. He shuddered when I traced my hand down his length, gently dragging my fingernails over the thick knot of tissue. "Maybe next time you could put all of this in me?"

He grabbed my hand gently with a sigh. "Robert..."

"I can take it," I promised him. "You'll have to work me up to it, but I can."

“It ain’t that. It’s...” He sighed again and sat up, pulling me with him. “Princess, there’s something you should know. I want to do everything with you, but the knot... We only use that with our lifemates.”

“Oh. So like... the person you... marry.” My heart sank a little, and I turned away, though I didn’t know why. It wasn’t like I was marriage material. We’d only known each other for a few weeks, anyway. Even if it felt right, and I knew I could spend the rest of my life with him, maybe he didn’t feel the same way.

“There’s more to it than that,” he said, running his fingers over my arm. “Jacqeroi, we mate for life, and we live long lives. When we find our lifemates, there’s a special ceremony that we go through that binds our lives together so that we never have to live without our beloved. The knot is part of that.”

“You mean symbolically, right?” I sat up. Surely, he didn’t mean they’d actually match their lifespans up. That seemed impossible. Then again, it was hard to judge with monsters and magic.

Hopper shook his head. “I mean it literally, Princess.”

I swallowed. “How long do jacqeroi live to be exactly?”

“Five hundred to five-fifty, if we’re lucky.”

I stared at him, trying to do the math and failing. Humans only lived to be about a hundred, and that was with the best care. Even in an ideal world, everyone I knew and loved

would be dead within a hundred years. I tried to imagine living five hundred years and could barely wrap my brain around how much the world had changed in the last *twenty* years. “So, if you were to tie yourself to me, for example... Would I live to be five hundred?”

He shook his head again. “It’s more like it’d average out. I knew a jacqeroi who mated with a verrid once, and they have fairly comparable lifespans to humans. He was about three twenty when he passed, and they both went together in a beautiful end-of-life ceremony. His life was drastically shortened, while his verrid partner’s lifespan increased by about the amount he lost.”

I swallowed. Hopper was two hundred fifty-seven. If we ever tied our lives together, he’d lose hundreds of years of his future to be with me. He might get another eighty or a hundred years, and that’d be it, when he should have had another two fifty. It would be incredibly selfish for me to ask him to consider that, and yet that was what I wanted. I wanted to be with him forever, and I wanted it more than I’d ever wanted anything else ever before.

“Hopper, I...”

He shushed me with a finger on my lips and a kiss on the top of my head. “Don’t you worry about it, Princess. My friend, he was never sad about the time he lost. That ain’t the jacqeroi way. We focus on the life we have, and we’re happy with it. I wouldn’t trade a day with you for anything.”

I wanted to tell him not to think about it, that he shouldn't give up literal years of his life for me. I wasn't worth it. Yet it felt presumptuous to say, considering I didn't know if he even wanted that. Instead, I swallowed the worry threatening to choke me and made myself smile for him. "We'll take it one day at a time, then."

THIRTY-THREE

HOPPER

FOUR-THIRTY CAME TOO EARLY. Though I'd gone to bed earlier than normal, I'd lost a few hours of sleep thanks to Robert. Not that I minded. It was all well worth it, but it meant we got a slow start the next morning.

Thankfully, Noah turned up early and his help made up for it. He helped me pack all the supplies onto Layla and Ephith, whose wing injury looked to be healed. I brought my guitar, the only extra piece of equipment. It was an indulgence, but I wasn't willing to go up without it.

So Robert could practice herding in a controlled environment, I decided we'd take the two dozen zezzirs up for the trial run. Zezzirs were dumb as shit, which made them easy to herd, but also a bit of a pain. It'd be good practice for him.

I had Robert do the count as they came out of the gate and we fell in around six in the morning, driving them to the west side of the ranch to go up toward Sunlight Peak. We had to be careful not to go too far west, or we'd be skirting more populated peaks. Almost no one went up the way I planned to take him, and if anyone happened to spy dragons, we'd deal

with it. In the hundred years I'd been driving dragons, no one had yet.

There wasn't much room for talking at first. Just keeping the zezzirs in line was a task that required most of our attention until they learned to listen. They instinctually fled the path of bigger dragons, but Robert had to learn not to swoop in too close and push them the other way. Until he did, we stayed a good distance apart so I could push them back his way.

Around noon, we'd moved into a narrower path so there wasn't far for them to stray, and I rode closer to Robert. He was sweating, the back of his neck getting sunburnt, so I took off my hat and held it out to him. "Here. You're getting a sunburn."

"Really?" He frowned and rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. "It's not even that hot up here."

"Heat's got nothing to do with it. You can get a sunburn in the snow if there's enough sun. You drinking enough water?"

"Yes, mother," he said, rolling his eyes.

He took the hat and put it on his head. It was way too big for him, but that just made him even more adorable. When we went back down, I'd have to get him a hat of his own. We rode on a bit in silence, watching the dragons walk through the rocky pass with jerky movements.

"So, where is this tear?" Robert asked at length. "What's it like?"

“It’s near the peak,” I said. “There’s a meadow high up with a little clear lake in the middle. Tear’s just off to the right of the lake shore inside a rocky shelter. It was originally just out in the open, but Kaito thought it’d be safer if it wasn’t so obvious. He built a big rock dome over it some years back and keeps an eye on it. The tear itself’s not as impressive as the one out in Colorado, but the US government controls that tear. They built a big military facility up around it.”

He started and turned to me, wide-eyed. “You mean there’s more than one?”

I nodded. “There’s probably quite a few. Most of them aren’t big enough for anything to come through, but there’s two that we know of in North America, one in Eastern Europe and another down in Australia. Far as we know, human governments are only aware of the one in Colorado and the one in Siberia. They’re both patrolled heavily on either side, so smart monsters know not to go through those.”

“That’s how they capture monsters?”

“Some,” I said and pressed my lips into a thin line, eager to change the subject. “We won’t be reaching the tear on this trip. I just wanted to take you up so you could feel what it was like.”

“Time for this city boy to learn to rough it, you mean.” He flashed me a wide, white smile that made my heart melt.

We fell silent for a while, the only sound the skittering of dragon feet over the rocks and the gentle clucking sound the zezzirs made in the back of their throats.

“I hope Charlie and Cupid are okay,” Robert said, his brow creased with worry. “What do you think could’ve happened to them?”

I shook my head. “Don’t know. Honor’ll find them, though. I doubt they’re in any danger. Dominion like their politics, and Cupid was an important member of the empress’s court, so chances are good they just got wrapped up in some political mess or another.”

He looked over at me, the worry lines in his face deepening. “You don’t think the empress would do anything to hurt Charlie, do you?”

“Naw. Dominions have a long history with humans, more so than any other monster. They’re pretty keen on humans and Charlie seems a nice fella, so I doubt it. Plus, Cupid would protect his mate with his life. Like I said, it’s probably some political circus got them held up is all. Either that or they got distracted by all the fancy food and wine and just decided to stay and honeymoon a bit.”

Robert snorted. “Can’t say I blame them. Charlie’s been through hell. He deserves to be pampered, and Cupid likes to spoil him. You’re probably right. Doesn’t mean I’m not going to yell at him for making me worry when he gets back.”

“You and me both, Princess, especially since I had to burn a bridge with Honor to have him found.”

He was quiet for a moment. “That coin you gave to Honor. What was it? Some sort of monster currency?”

I sighed. “Of a sort. It’s not something you should trouble yourself with. Old world stuff. Point is, it’s done. We’ll ask after them all when we go across next week, but until then, worryin’ about them isn’t going to do anybody any favors.”

“You’re right,” he said, scrubbing a hand over his face. “I’m trying not to. It’s just... He’s my friend.”

“I know, Princess. I know.”

We made it about halfway up the peak before the sun dipped, and I guided us toward the little rocky oasis where I sometimes made camp with the herd. Driving all the dragons up would take longer. It’d be three days up to the tear, two days to the grazing grounds once we got across, and then we’d have to move them through The Veirval slowly over the next six weeks to the mating grounds at Sarok. I’d pay a pretty price for good pens there, and we’d have to put up with all the other jacqeroi who came. I wondered what Robert would think of my kin. I’d liked his brother, even if it was a little shocking to be face to face with a carbon copy of Robert.

It was going on three o’clock or so when we made it to the place I wanted to make camp, a little flat top area where grass and moss clung to the rocks. There was a small lake fed by a lazy waterfall, just deep enough to go for a dip in on a hot day. It wasn’t quite warm enough for that, though. Maybe on the way back.

It was the perfect spot since there was a natural alcove big enough to hold a hundred plus dragons comfortably, and the rock face protected us from most of the wind.

I had showed Robert how to set up the tent beforehand, but he was still awkward with it, so I stepped in to help pound the pegs into the rock so the tent flies would be secure. If there was a good windstorm, I didn't want us to blow away.

The tent seen to, we set ourselves to scattering extra feed for the zezzirs, and making sure Layla and Ephith got food, water, and a good rub down. Layla was a little anxious, probably because it was her first time away from Calcifera, but she behaved admirably, especially when Robert gave her a pat down. She nudged him repeatedly and gave a happy little snort. It was good to see her so taken with him, and just served to make me more sure I was making the right decision.

I got the fire started, showing Robert again how to do it, and set two cans of beans on a grate over the rocks to heat. By the time they were done, I was almost too nervous to eat. My stomach was all in knots, my heart jumping in my chest every time Robert looked up at me.

This was a stupid idea, Hopper, I thought, forcing another spoonful of beans into my mouth. What if he says no? Then you're trapped up here on the mountain with him all weekend and it'll be awkward. Should've brought another tent. Should've asked him first.

I looked around. Wildflowers bloomed at the shore of the lake, little yellow daffodils and something orange I didn't know the name of. They weren't toxic to dragons, and that was all I cared about.

"Is everything okay?" Robert asked.

My attention went back to him, where he sat on one of the little folding stools we'd brought up with us. "Course it is. Why wouldn't it be?"

"You just seem kind of... antsy." He frowned and lowered his beans, half finished. "I should've let you get more sleep last night."

"No, that ain't it. It's..." I sighed and looked away again.

"Why do you do that, Hopper?"

"Do what?"

His eyes darted up to my antlers. "You've rubbed a big raw spot on your antlers. And don't think I haven't noticed the corresponding marks in the wood on your headboard. Is it like... a sex thing? I know you like when I touch them."

I chuckled nervously and set the beans aside. "Well, maybe. We, um... You see, it's like..." I sighed deeply, trying to figure out how to explain it to him. "It feels nice, but there's more to it. We mark things that way."

"Like your territory and stuff?"

I shifted in my seat, suddenly fluttering with even more nerves. "It's a form of scent marking. I don't think other monsters can smell it, so maybe it's a dumb thing to do. It just marks things as mine. Keeps all the other jacqeroi away. Sometimes, the urge is stronger than other times. Like when we've found a mate."

He blinked his big, pretty eyes at me. "Am I..." He licked his lips. "Do uh... Do you..."

I don't know why, but that made me panic. "I want you to be my lifemate, Robert," I blurted.

As soon as the words left my mouth, I was horrified that I'd said them. I'd had this big plan to propose romantically. I had wanted to play a song, ask him under the stars, and do it right, not vomit the words nervously over lukewarm beans in a tin.

He stared at me, eyes wide, saying nothing.

"I know people usually wait a lot longer to ask, until they're sure," I said, rubbing the back of my neck. "But I'm sure now. I've met hundreds of people and not liked a single one of them the way I like you. The way I feel about you, Robert... It's like I can't breathe when we're apart, even for a little while. The thought of you leaving makes me so sick, I can't eat. I can't... I don't want you to go, either. I want you to stay with me forever. Not just at the ranch, working for me. I want you to be my partner in every way. I want to work beside you, and eat with you, and stay up late and watch weird Japanese cartoons with you. I want to sleep next to you, and wake up next to you every morning, and make you peanut butter sandwiches every day for the rest of my days. I'm sorry if that's not what you want, and if this is too much. I just... I can't live without you, Robert. It ain't worth it."

With shaky hands, I fished the ring box out of my pocket and got up from the stool to fall to one knee, opening it as I did. "Marry me, Robert Smith."

He stared at me, eyes big and watery, not one sign of his answer on his face. My heart was pounding in my chest, trying

to leap out and into his hands where it belonged. If he said no, I didn't know what I was going to do.

For a long minute, he said nothing, and then when he opened his mouth to answer, the sound of thunder came out. I blinked in confusion. The sky was pink with sunset, but there weren't any clouds, no sign that there was a storm approaching. I didn't think humans could make that sound.

Robert's eyes widened. "Oh my God! Hopper! Your *shoulder!*"

I looked down, an icy numbness spreading through me. A big red stain was spreading over my yellow and white flannel. At first, I thought I'd just dropped a bunch of bean juice on myself like a fool, but then I heard the hammer of a revolver click back right behind me.

"No sudden moves, cowboy," came Leroy's voice at my back. "Next one goes in his skull."

And then it dawned on me that was no bean juice stain. That coward Leroy had shot me in the back.

THIRTY-FOUR

ROBERT

HOPPER SLUMPED OVER IMMEDIATELY. I was torn between catching him and keeping my hands up so Leroy didn't shoot me, too. In the end, I decided it was safer to keep my hands up. As bad as I wanted to go to Hopper and check on him, I told myself I couldn't do that if I was dead.

I lifted my hands. "Easy, Leroy. Easy. I'm not armed."

He licked dry lips, nose twitching. "I knew you'd be here. He always stops here." He glanced down at Hopper, but not long enough for me to move or do anything. Leroy sidestepped Hopper's still body, the gun pointed at Hopper's head. "I don't mean you no harm, kid. I ain't here to hurt you."

"What do you want?" I asked calmly. Inside, I was panicking. I'd barely had time to process that Hopper was asking me to tie my life to his forever, and then suddenly he was bleeding, and we were both in danger of dying. He might be dead already.

No, Robert. Don't think that. If I started down that line of thinking, I'd never come back from it. I'd panic, and that was

the last thing I needed to do with a gun pointed at Hopper's head. I swallowed my fear.

Leroy lifted his big eyes and blinked at me. "Your pa sent me to fetch you."

That son of a bitch! I didn't know whether to be furious or feel sick. It was one thing for him to harass me, but hiring someone to shoot Hopper? That was low, even for him.

"The deal was," Leroy continued, licking his lips again, "I bring you back to him alive, and I get the ranch. That ranch should've been mine from the beginning, you know. Thirty years I gave to him. Thirty fuckin' years! I'm the one who took care of things when he lost his feet. I bled for it, sacrificed for it. And what does he do? Four goddamn weeks after meeting some city slicker, he's ready to hand it all to *you*. I don't know what kind of spell you've got him under, but you need to go home, city boy. You don't belong here." He spat in the dirt and came closer.

A loud, feral growl radiated through the air behind me and hot breath snorted against my neck. The hair on the back of my neck and on my arms stood straight up, every alarm bell going off in my head at the sound of Layla's growl.

Leroy halted where he was, eyes widening at her behind me. His nostrils flared, and he swallowed before looking at me. "I don't want no trouble with you. I just want you to go home where you belong so I can have what's mine."

"Jackalope Ranch was never yours," I said firmly. "It was never going to be yours. Hopper gave you a job out of the

goodness of his heart and you betrayed him by stealing his dragons out from under him! Layla's mate had to be put down, and Layla nearly died! What did you even do with those eggs you stole, huh?" I started to lower my hands.

He jerked the gun toward me. "Hands up! Hands up or I *will* shoot!"

I lowered my hands. "You won't. If you shoot me, not only will you lose your bargaining chip with my father, but Layla will eat you in one bite. I'm the only reason she hasn't."

Leroy's hand shook as he glanced past me to the dragon. He gritted his teeth and stilled his hand. "Call her off."

"I don't think I will."

"You're crazy," he said. "Don't you see I've got a gun, kid? Why are you even fighting me? Just go home! Crossing me is one mistake you don't want to make."

"The only mistake I made is not realizing sooner that I was already home. Get him, Layla."

Leroy's eyes widened. He swung the gun around, pointing it at her, and fired. The bullet ricocheted off her scales and hit a nearby rock. Before he could fire another round, she'd clamped down on his outstretched arm. He screamed as she lifted him into the air, shaking him violently, before biting clean through. Leroy went tumbling down the nearby incline, screaming like mad, and Layla swallowed.

"Hopper!" I rushed forward, throwing myself to the ground next to him and rolling him over with a grunt.

There was blood everywhere. His shirt was completely soaked through, and it was seeping into the dry dirt. His eyes were closed, but when I put my hand over his mouth, he was still breathing. That was good, right? Fuck, why hadn't I paid more attention in first aid training?

There was a sudden swoosh and a thud behind me. My head snapped around, and I spotted Kaito folding in his wings.

"Help!" I croaked. "Hopper's been shot!"

Kaito stiffened, then cocked his head to one side and blinked one eye at a time. "*Nande?* Gods, what's happened? I go up the mountain for a single peaceful evening of preening my feathers and counting my bottlecaps, and he gets himself shot." His clawed feet scraped over the dirt as he came closer. A feathered hand closed around my shoulder. "Back away, human. Let me see."

I wanted to, but I couldn't bring myself to let him go. Hot tears had started streaming down my face, and I couldn't get my ragged breathing under control as Kaito squatted on the other side of Hopper. "It was Leroy! He just showed up with a gun and shot him in the back! Layla bit off his arm and tossed him over that ledge."

"Easy, now. Stow your tears. They'll do him no good. Help me get his shirt off so I can see."

My whole body trembled as my fingers fumbled with his buttons. *Please, God, if you're there and you listen to the prayers of someone like me, keep him breathing. I'll do anything you want, just don't let him die!*

As soon as I had the first two buttons undone, Kaito grabbed either side of Hoppers collar and yanked the shirt open the rest of the way. Several buttons popped off, and I was sure Hopper would be furious about it. He could be mad all he wanted as long as he lived.

“We need a doctor,” I blurted. “Fuck, it took us all day to get up here! I don’t know how to fly on dragonback yet. Do you have a cell phone? Shit, there’s probably no service up here, is there? How far is it to the nearest hospital? Should we call the park rangers or *somebody*?”

“Cease your nervous rambling, human, or I will seal your mouth hole shut.” The look Kaito shot me told me he’d actually do it, so I pressed my lips together and tried not to blubber too much. “Looks like a lucky shot. Went all the way through. Shattered some bone and might have nicked something important in there, but not to worry. I can mend him. Leroy, however, is another matter. Where is his arm?”

“Who cares?” I snapped. “Fuck Leroy! Fix *Hopper*!”

“As you wish.” Kaito pressed his feathery hand to Hopper’s shoulder and closed his eyes.

He took a deep breath and hummed a low note before lifting two fingers to the center of his forehead. Kaito whispered a quick chant of several short syllables under his breath, lifting a bell from his belt to ring it before he started again. An invisible electric current buzzed through the air around us and golden sparks ignited, spinning and dancing like tiny gilded embers.

My jaw fell open as I watched Hopper's wound knit itself closed in front of my eyes. "Holy shit," I whispered.

Hopper's eyes fluttered open, unfocused. "Robert?"

"I'm right here." I grabbed his hand and squeezed it. "Hold still. Kaito is..." I looked at Kaito for an explanation for what was happening. I certainly didn't have one.

"Manipulating time and reality inside a controlled sphere," Kaito said, with no small hint of irritation. "Be quiet. I must concentrate, unless you want me to cause an inter-dimensional rift."

Hopper suddenly shot forward, eyes wide. "Leroy!"

Kaito sighed and pulled his hand away, rolling his eyes. "You people really don't have any sense of self preservation, do you?"

"Layla ate his arm and the gun before tossing him over that ledge," I said, ignoring Kaito and pointing for Hopper. I looked at Kaito. "Are you done?"

Kaito waved his hand in disgust. "Sure."

I flew forward in an instant, throwing my arms around Hopper. A sudden wave of emotion overcame me as I realized just how close I'd been to losing him forever. Another inch toward the center of his chest and that bullet would have... I squeezed my eyes closed and let out a choked sob. "Hopper! Don't you ever scare me like that again!"

"Shh, it's all right. I didn't mean to, Princess." Hopper squeezed me back. "I'm here now, and I ain't going anywhere."

You're stuck with me forever. That is..." He gripped my shoulders and pulled me back to look at him. "If that's what you want, Robert. I don't believe I got your answer before Leroy's interruption."

I smiled at him through my tears and tried to push them away, but they wouldn't stop falling. "Yes, Hopper. Of course my answer's yes. I fucking love you, you grumpy old asshole."

"I know," he said as I kissed him deeply.

"How delightfully disgusting," Kaito commented and dropped a bloody, trembling Leroy in the dirt near us. "Now, what do we do with this one? I've stopped the bleeding so he won't die prematurely while we decide. Shall we feed the rest of him to the dragon?" He snapped his fingers. "Or, you know what'd be really fun? I could slowly increase the pressure in his eyeballs until they burst!"

Leroy let out a terrified whimper.

I gripped Hopper's arm. "My father put him up to this. He promised him the ranch if he brought me home. That fucker hired a goddamn hitman to take you out!"

"A shitty hitman," Hopper said with a snort. "If he'd taken five minutes to get to know Leroy, he'd have learned he can't hit the broad side of a barn. He's always been terrible at gunplay."

Kaito tapped a finger against his chin. "I wonder if I can turn him inside out. I've never tried that before. Or vivisection.

That's always fun, especially with non-humans!"

"Please don't kill me!" Leroy shouted. "I'll do anything! Anything you want! Tell you whatever you want to know! Just don't kill me!"

An idea dawned on me slowly. At first, it made my insides twist. I'd never thought of myself as a vengeful man, but maybe it wasn't vengeance to get back at my father. It was justice. He'd broken the law by sending Leroy after Hopper.

I swallowed and turned to Hopper. "If this ever went public, it would ruin my father. He'd lose his senate seat, be investigated for corruption... He could go to jail, Hopper. But only if Leroy testifies against him."

Hopper frowned and pushed his hat back to rub his antlers. "This could ruin your whole family, Robert."

I shook my head. "Not if Ryder gets out ahead of it. He broke the law, Hopper. We can't let him get away with it just because he's some important asshole in Washington. I know someone who can break this the right way to the right people, and then my father is out of the picture for good. He'll go behind bars where he'll never hurt anyone again, and you and me... We'll be free of all his plotting and pestering. You get to keep your ranch, Leroy goes to jail... I just need to call this influencer I know in Michigan to make it all happen. Everybody wins."

"Except Leroy and Senator Smith," Kaito pointed out. "And me. Are you sure we can't just dissect him?"

“That’s up to Leroy.” Hopper folded his arms over his chest and closed on where Leroy was huddled in the dirt. “Here’s the deal on the table, Leroy. First, you’re going to tell me what happened to those dragon eggs you stole and where you’re keeping them. Then you’re going to agree to testify against the senator about this plot to steal the ranch away from me. In exchange, I’ll see if Eddie can keep you local so you don’t have to spend your sentence in a human prison, and you get to keep your insides inside. Well, at least the ones Layla didn’t eat.”

Layla gave a satisfied snort.

“What do you say, Leroy?” Hopper asked.

“Please feel free to say no,” Kaito said, examining his fingernails.

Leroy chewed on his lip and whimpered. “Guess I don’t have much of a choice, do I?”

THIRTY-FIVE

ROBERT

WE CUT OUR WEEKEND short. Kaito used some sort of spell to transport Leroy directly into a jail cell in Eden. I later learned he'd *accidentally* forgotten to send Leroy's clothes, so he arrived in the cell stark naked, startling the hell out of the sheriff.

When Kaito came back, it was with Noah, who promised to bring the zezzirs back down after making sure Hopper was all right. Hopper and I set off down the mountain, declining Kaito's offer to transport us. For all I knew, he'd stick us together by our heads or something just because he thought it was funny.

It was dark when we made it back to the ranch, and the sheriff was waiting for us with an EMT to look over Hopper. The EMT confirmed that the gunshot wound had been healed, but ordered Hopper to take it easy for a few days. I was all right with that. My plan was to drag him into the bedroom and keep him confined to the bed except for trips to the bathroom, preferably naked and on top of me.

There was still a lot to do. I needed to call Ryder and give him the heads up, and I needed to call Ben, but it was well after midnight by the time things settled down, and I hadn't been alone with Hopper since Leroy shot him.

The minute the front door swung shut behind Noah, who was the last one to leave, I locked it and secured the deadbolt, putting my back to it. "Tell me about this crazy sex ritual that links our lives together."

Hopper lifted an eyebrow. "Afraid it isn't all that crazy." He sank into a chair at the kitchen table in front of the steaming cup of coffee he'd been nursing for the last fifteen minutes and lifted his leg onto the nearby chair. "Are you sure you want this, Robert? You know we can still be together, even if we don't do this. Things can keep going on as they are."

I sat down in the chair next to him, taking his hand in mine. "I want this, Hopper. I've never wanted anything more."

"I know you think that, but if you need more time—"

I cut him off by pulling him into a kiss. "I've been waiting for my whole life, Hopper. Waiting for answers, waiting for permission, waiting for things to make sense, to feel like I matter, waiting to be happy. I've always been the one *waiting*. The world's always moving on around me, and I stay still, just waiting for something to happen. Well, I'm done waiting. I finally found something I want, someone that makes me feel special. For the first time in my life, I don't feel out of place or out of time. I want this, Hopper. I want you. I'll take you as

you are, aftermarket parts and all, if you're willing to put up with me."

The lump in his throat bobbed before he nodded. "Well, all right then. If you're sure."

Hopper gave me a quick rundown of what the ritual entailed, and he was right. It really wasn't all that crazy sounding, other than the idea that we'd be linked together by magic. He said it had to be done under the stars, and I asked if we could still do it that night. I wasn't sure he'd be up for it, having been shot earlier in the day, but he almost seemed relieved that I was in such a hurry to do it.

We had left the tent up in the mountains, but it was a mild evening, and Hopper had a backup plan that involved his pick up truck. My stomach was a ball of nerves as I helped him carry the supplies out and secure them in the bed.

I just kept thinking to myself, Fuck, this is really happening! I'm about to tie myself to him forever. The nerves weren't trepidation, not exactly. I was excited to do it. Beyond excited. I was just nervous that I might screw it up somehow, or that something else might happen that would stop us or slow us down. I kept waiting for that other shoe to drop, but it didn't. Not as we closed up the tailgate, not as I climbed into the passenger seat, and not as we started down the old dirt road toward Eden.

Rather than go into town, Hopper took a turn off just outside the ranch. I hung out the window, looking up at the big sky and the shining stars, wondering if Charlie and Cupid were

doing the same wherever they were. I hoped they were happy and safe.

After I talked to Ben tomorrow morning, I'd call Chris and tell him what'd happened. I wanted him to know first. Part of me was a little sad for him and Ollie, thinking about how Ollie might outlive him. I wondered if maybe they could do something similar, or maybe that didn't matter to them. Maybe this was something special just for jacqeroi.

I don't know how long we drove for, or where we wound up, but it seemed like we stopped in the middle of nowhere. It was so dark that I couldn't see much in any direction but up, and that was only thanks to the moon, which hung full and bright high above. A thick belt of stars curved its way across the sky, a snapshot of the Milky Way that'd traveled thousands of years through time and space just to be there for us. The Absaroka Mountains rose in the distance, giant sleeping blue shadows against a deep, dark sky. We were about as far from the hustle and bustle of the city where I'd grown up as we could ever get, and I'd never felt more at home.

"Last chance, Princess," Hopper said, putting the truck in park. He looked over at me. "Just so we're being clear, you know I snore, right? I can't cook to save myself, and... Well, I might be a little addicted to peanut butter."

"I'm a cross-dressing, unapologetic slut who can't clean up after himself," I told him. "And I might also be a little addicted to peanut butter. But I'd rather be your cross-

dressing, unapologetic slutty slob with an unhealthy peanut butter addiction. As for the snoring, I think your snore is cute.”

I couldn't see his tail, but I had no doubt it was twitching with irritation. “I'm a lot of things, Princess, but that might be the first time anyone's ever called me *cute*.”

“You're fucking adorable, and you know it,” I said with a snort. “Now take me out back, country boy, and make a proper man out of me.”

He laughed and threw open his door. I let him come around to open mine for me because I knew he liked having the opportunity to play the gentleman. Hopper was old fashioned, and I loved that about him, even if the first change I was going to make was to get some wi-fi installed at the ranch. I hadn't told him that yet, but there were just some sacrifices I wasn't willing to make.

There was a slight chill in the air, or maybe my nerves had me shivering. Either way, I was glad I'd put on the heavy sweater. I didn't know how the hell I was going to get naked out there without my balls shriveling up.

Hopper pulled down the tailgate and climbed up into the back of the truck, unrolling several sleeping bags and laying them out, lining the truck bed with them. He laid out some pillows and a few extra blankets before helping me up into the bed with him. We took a few minutes to remove our prosthetics, tucking them in the cab behind the seats and well within reach if we needed them.

While I was still putting mine away, Hopper was fiddling with something he had hidden behind the pillows. I didn't know what it was until the music started to play. Of course he had to have his country music. He turned it down so that it was playing quietly, barely noticeable, even as we settled into the truck bed next to each other.

For a long time, we just laid there next to each other, staring up at the big sky, my hand in his. I considered what we were about to do, the ramifications of which I could only begin to wrap my head around. According to Hopper, there was no way to know exactly how many years either of us would get, but he guessed we'd have a good hundred and fifty years together. That didn't seem like a big number at first, but a hundred and fifty years was a long time. Long enough that I'd outlive Ryder's kids, and maybe their kids, too. I'd be alive to watch the world change in ways I'd never be able to guess, and I'd live through terrible days. Trying days, days where the only thing that'd keep me going was knowing he was there for me.

But there would be good days in there, too. With a hundred and fifty years, I could learn a lot of things. Maybe we could open up the ranch, help out people like Leroy before they got all twisted and turned into real monsters. There were plenty of people out there struggling to find a place to belong. Jackalope Ranch could be that place.

We could have a family.

There'd be time to decide all of that, time for everything.

I turned my head to look over at him and found him looking at me. “What are you thinking?”

“Thinking about the day we met in town,” he replied with a small smile. “I knew when I saw you that you were trouble, Robert Smith.”

I laughed and squeezed his hand. “You love it.”

“I think I needed a little trouble in my life. And you needed a little hard work to set you straight.”

I bobbed my head back and forth. “Well, I think we both know I’m never gonna be straight, Hopper.”

“And I wouldn’t have it any other way.” He chuckled and kissed the top of my head lightly before turning to grab the thermos he’d brought with him.

My stomach clenched as he unscrewed the lid and dumped two tiny vials of bubbling purple liquid into his palm. *This is it. There’s no going back once I drink that.*

“You can still change your mind,” he said, holding it out to me. “Last thing I want is for you to regret this in a hundred years.”

“Gimme.” I scowled and snatched one of the vials out of his hand.

Apparently, the magic potion was made mostly from a ground up crystal that grew in a specific region on the jacqeroi’s native island. It was difficult to procure, since it was guarded by wild dragons, and even more difficult to prepare. It had to be handled with great care, he’d told me, because

inhaling the dust could cause the crystal to take root in your skin and literally start growing out of you. To be safe, they had to mix it with a bunch of other ingredients and water from some magical spring... It was a whole process, and a closely guarded jacqeroi secret, one the government would've loved to get its hands on.

Popping the cork, I ran it under my nose. It had a vaguely fruity scent, like something nutty and exotic I'd never tasted before. The liquid bubbled as if it were effervescent, and if I looked closely, there were tiny bolts of lightning running through it.

"Are you sure this is safe for humans?" I asked Hopper.

He shrugged. "Guess we'll find out, won't we?"

I swallowed, considering the vial. "So I just drink this, and we fuck under the stars and that's it?"

"As far as I know. Were you expecting something else?" Hopper removed his hat and put it down by the tailgate with his boots.

"I don't know what to expect," I admitted, and held the vial out. "Cheers?"

Hopper smiled. "Cheers," he said, and we bumped our vials together like expensive champagne before I downed it in one gulp.

THIRTY-SIX

ROBERT

THE MAGIC POTION TASTED like shit. If someone accidentally mixed rock salt with really flat off brand clear cola, and it'd been in the same room as a really bad coconut, it might taste something like the potion.

I made a face as it went down, and Hopper gagged.

“Ugh. That was unpleasant,” he said and looked over at me. “How do you feel?”

I smacked my lips and tilted my head. “I don't feel like I'm going to explode, so that's probably a positive sign.”

“Good.” He touched my chin to turn my face toward him, catching me in a kiss.

I immediately gave his bottom lip a teasing nip before pulling away. “Promise me you won't hold anything back. If you want me to be yours, you have to make me feel it, Hopper. All the way down into my bones.”

“Oh, you're going to feel it,” he promised, and pulled me into a greedy kiss.

I groaned, my hands going straight to his antlers to tease the spot he was always rubbing. A low growl rumbled from the back of his throat and Hopper pounced me, pinning my back to the blankets. He swam on top of me, mouth moving from my lips to my neck, kissing a simmering line down the hollow of my throat. The position put his antlers right in front of my face, so I let go of them and leaned forward to run my tongue over the same spot.

“Fuck, Princess,” he murmured into my neck, and thrust his hand under my shirt to twist my nipple.

I squealed and wiggled to try to get away from the chill on his skin, but he held me there until his hand warmed and my squeaks of protest turned into pleased moans. He pushed my shirt up, and I squirmed, gasping when he sucked one into his mouth. The contrasting sensation of his soft, chilled lips and the heat and texture of his tongue left my cock bucking in my pants. Hopper hollowed his cheeks, sucking harder, until it started to hurt and then a little more until the pain was so sharp I cried out again.

I was panting and shaking when he sat up to admire his handiwork with a proud grin.

“I’ve wanted to do that ever since I saw these,” he said, running his fingers over my oversensitive nipple. “They’re so pink and dainty.”

My cheeks were flushed and hot, but I grinned widely. “Pink’s my favorite color.”

“Mine too,” he admitted, “especially on you.”

Hopper swept in to give the other nipple the same rough treatment, taking his time to sit back and make sure they matched when he was done. Despite the cold, I was sweating when he leaned back, so I started fighting to get my sweater off.

He let me get it over my head before he grabbed it and pinned it above me, my arms still trapped. “Leave it like that a second. I like the sight of you half-dressed and messy.”

“Holy fuck, Hopper,” I managed, my voice tight.

He leaned in and kissed me gently. “Too much?”

“Hell, no. Boss me around some more and don’t be afraid to manhandle me. I swear to God, do *not* go easy on me or I’ll never forgive you!”

“I’m going to make you come completely undone for me, Princess,” he promised, and nipped at my lip. His textured tongue darted out to soothe the sting after. “But first, I need your mouth on me.”

My brain was hazy as Hopper released me, rolling lazily onto his back. I waited for him to undo his belt buckle or start to undress, but he didn’t. It was slow to dawn on me that he expected me to do it for him. Fuck, why was that so hot? It should’ve been against the law to be so damn sexy, just laying there doing nothing and fully clothed.

He slipped one arm behind his head. “You can take the sweater off now, but leave your pants on. I don’t want you touching your cock until I say so. Understand me?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

I awkwardly got up on my hands and knees and crawled over, repositioning myself between his legs. My hands were shaky, breath raspy as I carefully undid the belt buckle and fumbled to undo the button and zipper. I'd done this plenty of times with a couple dozen guys, some of whom I'd never even bothered to learn their names. Even though I'd sucked Hopper off plenty of times, this felt different. Nerves had my stomach in knots, or maybe it was the strange concoction he'd had me drink. Either way, I shook like a virgin as I slid his jeans down to his knees. Hopper's cock sprang free, resting full and heavy against the slight swell of his stomach. The heads peeked out from the foreskin, flushed bright pink, the same color as his nose and the insides of his big ears. The one on the right was ever so slightly larger than the left, but the left was more sensitive. It was already leaking, the slit shiny with his pre-cum. I licked my lips, mouth watering at the sight of him, and leaned in to lick it up.

Hopper tangled his fingers in my hair close to the scalp. I groaned and resisted the urge to swallow him in one gulp so I could gag on him. I'd told him to make me, and he wasn't making me do anything yet. So, I took my time, gently tonguing the slit and licking over the flushed head with light touches, looking up at him.

Hopper's nostrils flared and he let out a small snort that made the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. “Come on now. I know from experience you can do better than that.

Open your mouth. Now.” He gripped the base of his cock just above the knot I was so desperate to feel inside of me.

I opened my mouth just a little wider and stuck out my tongue.

“Wider,” he demanded. “I’m gonna need more room than that.” When I didn’t comply, he grabbed my hair and twisted it, sending a sharp stab of pain down into my skull. My dick jumped and my skin prickled in response. “*Wider.*”

I opened my mouth wider. Hopper yanked my head down roughly, thrusting all the way to the back of my throat in one go. I gagged and pulled back, but only so I could adjust. I hadn’t ever had both his heads in my mouth at once before. I usually sucked on them one at a time. Not that I minded in the least. One at a time, the heads were easy to manage, but together, they were a challenge. I was no stranger to a challenge, which was the one good thing about hooking up with Axel previously. Axel was *hung*, the biggest guy I’d ever been with, and Hopper was comparable in size all together. I’d have to remember to thank Axel for the small part he played in making this work out. He’d have a good laugh over it and be first in line to shake Hopper’s hand.

“Damn, Princess,” Hopper panted, thrusting into my mouth. “You’re so good at taking Daddy’s cock like this.”

He tipped his head back and moaned loudly. I tightened my lips around him and pulled back to swirl my tongue around the heads, first the left and then the right.

“You’re going to make me come.” Hopper’s voice was rough with lust. “You want Daddy’s cum?”

He didn’t let me take my mouth off of him to answer, but he knew the answer was yes. It was always yes. I was practically addicted to him, unable to have enough. Even if we had a full five hundred years together, I’d never get tired of this. My answer bubbled out of my throat in a mild hum and I pushed my mouth further down his shaft, swallowing until I could run my tongue over the knot at the base.

Hopper groaned and his thighs trembled before one of his cocks started to spurt into the back of my mouth. Or maybe it was both. I couldn’t tell, and I didn’t care. There was certainly enough cum to suggest he was coming out of both. It ran down his shaft faster than I could swallow all of it. When he was finished, he released my hair so I could pull back and lick him clean. Both heads were flushed a bright cherry red and even harder than before. The knot at the base of his cock had swollen a little more, too. Much more and I seriously doubted I’d be able to fit it into me.

“Fuck,” Hopper choked out. “I need you naked. Now.”

I’d never rushed to take my pants off so fast in my life. I had to roll onto my back to do it, but I hesitated once I got them off. I’d put on the same lacy red thong I’d been wearing that first night, and I wasn’t sure if he wanted me to take it off or leave it on. Hopper made his choice clear when he rolled over on top of me and yanked it down, snapping one of the hip straps. I let out an irritated whine.

“I’ll buy you more,” he promised, and tore the other side for good measure. Hopper yanked the dainty lace panties off of me and flung them off into the dark before seizing my lips in a claiming kiss that made my skin burn hot. “I want to fuck you like this so I can see your face, Princess.”

Oh, fuck. Oh God. That was... I’d done it that way before, but not often. It always felt too intimate, and I’d never really liked anyone that much before him, but this was Hopper. He was everything. My lifemate. The one I’d been waiting all this time for. I’d do anything for him.

My voice was uncharacteristically small as I said, “Yeah, okay.”

I bit my lip as Hopper got out the lube and coated his fingers. I tried to get comfortable, adjusting the pillows to support me and bringing my knees up. Oddly enough, being an amputee actually made that position easier, even if it felt a hundred times more vulnerable. Another reason I didn’t do it with anyone. It put my legs—or lack of—on full display. I wasn’t self-conscious about it, but it was often awkward, and it weirded some people out.

Hopper didn’t seem to care. He’d taken off his right hand, but figured out how to use his forearm to hook it under my knees to push them both back, giving him better access. My breath caught as he splayed his hand over my ass, spreading the cheeks before spearing me with two fingers at once.

The first breach always burned a little until I convinced my body to loosen up. I pushed down against his fingers and tried

to will myself to relax, but there was just no rushing it. Hopper was still pretty new to sex, but he knew enough to take this first part slow, adding more lube and giving me time. I didn't want time. I didn't want to fully adjust to his fingers. I wanted him. *Now.*

“Hopper,” I whined, not even caring how needy I sounded. I gripped the shirt he was still wearing, just to have something in my fist. “*Please.*”

“All right, all right. Patience, Princess.”

I whined again when he removed his fingers, even though I knew it was a necessity so he could coat himself with more lube, but he didn't leave me empty for long. A moment later, he was balancing against my legs, using them to support him while he held himself in a fist and lined both heads up with my entrance.

The first slide of him into me was pain and bliss wrapped into one beautiful moment. I resisted the urge to draw in a sharp breath, instead trying to bear down to make it easier on both of us. We groaned in unison as he slid past that first tight ring of muscle, stretching me even wider than he'd done with his fingers.

“Fuck, Princess, you're so tight and perfect,” he panted and pulled back before pushing in.

My back arched slightly as I felt the thick knot at the base of his cock bump against my hole. “Hopper!”

“You want that?” he asked, pulling back out again.

“Yes!” I shouted as he thrust in hard, just barely stopping short.

“Are you *sure*?”

My fist closed around the sleeve of the stupid flannel he was still wearing. He’d unbuttoned the top so that the little tuft of brown fur that was a little thicker on his chest peeked out and it was insanely hot. “Yes!”

“Beg me for it,” he said, teasing me with every thrust. “Convince me.”

I clenched my teeth. “Dammit, Hopper! Give it to me!”

“That’s not begging, Princess. You know how to do it right.”

I let out a low, mewling whine of need. “*Please*, Hopper! Please, please, please! Pl—*Ungh!*”

I broke off, eyes widening when he didn’t pull back to give me another teasing thrust. Instead, he slowly shifted his weight forward. I stared at him, tears pricking the corners of my eyes as he slowly eased the knot in one torturous, glorious bit at a time. There was a point about halfway where I thought I couldn’t take it. My jaw quivered and the first tears fell, the accommodating stretch so painful it felt like I was being ripped apart.

“Shhh,” Hopper whispered, never relenting. “Almost there. Almost. Just a little more. You’re doing so well.”

I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think. My whole world narrowed to that one point of contact, the experience so

intense, I knew I'd remember it for the rest of my life. More tears spilled over, but he didn't stop. I didn't want him to. I needed this, even if it hurt. No, I needed it *because* it hurt.

I let out a loud cry when the last of him finally slid inside, my body throbbing around him. I was hot and cold and shivering, feverish on the inside and icy on the outside. There was this strange feeling in the pit of my stomach, like I was falling, but I wasn't afraid. Hopper would always catch me.

Hopper leaned down to give me a gentle kiss. "You okay, Princess?"

Dumbstruck, I nodded.

He reached up to brush the tears from my face before kissing me again. Slowly, the cloudy feeling in my head faded enough that I realized he wasn't moving except for all the trembling he was doing, and the gentle glide of his tongue over mine.

I pulled my lips away from his, feeling like they were on fire. "Please don't stop."

Hopper nodded and started moving inside of me, slowly at first, giving me time to adjust. My dick had gone soft from the rough stretch, but perked right back up once I saw the raw lust in his eyes looking down at me. In just a few minutes, it was leaking onto my stomach, heavy drops falling with every thrust as he pushed the knot against my prostate.

"Hopper," his name was a plea on my lips. I gripped his antlers, holding on tightly as he lowered them and rubbed

them against the side of my face. The velvety texture brushed over my cheek, my neck, my shoulders, marking me with his scent, claiming me as his. “Hopper,” I whispered again and closed a fist around my cock to start jerking myself in time with his thrusts.

I nuzzled my face against his shoulder, panting and lightheaded. The words I mumbled came out automatically, as if they’d been written somewhere in my DNA, buried deep and waiting for him to draw them out of me. “I’m yours, Hopper. Your breath, your heart, your lifemate. Everything I am, I give to you.”

“You’re mine,” he repeated, “and I am yours, Robert Smith. We’re one breath, one heart, one life. Everything that I am, it’s *yours*.”

Hopper’s hips stuttered as he thrust into me one final time, and my orgasm raced up out of nowhere, swirling like a tempest up my spine and through my balls and my cock, making me come harder than I ever had before. Deep in my chest, there was a snapping sensation. Not the feeling of something breaking, but rather of something sliding into place that had always been there, like the final piece of a puzzle I hadn’t known was a part of me. Gold sparks of magic crackled in the air around us, between us, *inside* my veins. I shuddered and screamed, my voice echoing off the distant mountain peaks, spilling what felt like an endless release into my fist.

My vision went black, and I might have lost consciousness for a moment. It wasn’t clear if I was ever totally out, or if I’d

just dipped into some altered state for a while.

When I came back to myself, Hopper was still inside of me, the thick knot swollen to an impossible size. I could feel his heartbeat through it, and damn if that wasn't an odd sensation, being able to feel someone else's pulse throbbing in my ass.

He took a shaky breath and kissed me gently on the lips. "You with me?"

"Holy fuck," I choked out and stared at him numbly. "Holy fucking fuck."

Hopper started to chuckle but winced and stopped himself. "Don't make me laugh when we're locked together like this."

I swallowed the dryness coating my tongue. "Um. How long is that going to... How long are we stuck like this?"

His face flushed slightly. "I don't know exactly. I've obviously never done this before, but before, the swelling is usually reduced after about a half hour, so you might want to get comfy."

"Hmm." I smiled and closed my eyes, nestling against his chest. "So it worked? I don't feel different."

"Me either," he admitted, "but something happened."

"I guess we'll just have to take it one day at a time and figure it out," I said sleepily.

Hopper grunted and shifted enough to pull a blanket over us so we wouldn't freeze.

I closed my eyes, more contented than I'd ever been in my life. "Hopper?"

"Yep?"

"I love you."

He placed a gentle kiss on the top of my head. "I know, Princess."

I smiled to myself, knowing I'd never, ever get tired of hearing that.

THIRTY-SEVEN

HOPPER

One week later...

THE MOUNTAINS WERE CALLING, and we answered, driving the dragons up toward the tear, me in my black hat and Robert in his custom-ordered pink sequin Stetson. At least I'd never lose him in a crowd.

Ephith and I sat perched upon a rock, counting the torquid as they loped lazily through the narrow pass toward the tear at the top of the mountain. There'd been no word from Honor, and no sign of Charlie or Cupid, and I'd promised Robert we'd do some investigating of our own once we made it to the other side.

We'd stayed at the ranch long enough to do everything that needed doing, mainly for him to make his phone calls to one Ben Hammond, who was apparently some bigshot social media influencer. I didn't quite follow how it all worked. What mattered to me was that the story broke the day before we went up the mountain. The FBI had raided Senator Smith's office and home, carrying out box after box of evidence. Every news station in the country was there when they escorted Senator Smith out of his home in handcuffs, and just as many were there to run the story of how his young son Ryder had discovered his father's murder for hire plot.

I had heard there were protests going on all around the country, young people with signs and slogans demanding better rights and protections and fewer hate crimes. According to Robert—who'd brought in something called a hot spot so he

could access to the internet—I was something of a sex symbol and the subject of something called a *meme*.

End of the day, all that mattered to me was that he was safe and happy. The villains were behind bars where they belonged, the ranch was on track to post record profits... We'd even gotten Leroy to tell us where he'd stashed Layla's other eggs, which had hatched, and the dragons were in good health. All three of the hatchlings had taken to Robert like a second mother, almost never leaving his side.

A torquid wandered away from the rest and Robert gave a whistle, directing Layla forward a few steps to get him back in line. The hatchlings chirped happily, imitating their mother's movements, hopping from rock to rock next to Robert.

Robert caught me looking at him and flashed one of his big, winning smiles before giving an exaggerated tip of his hat.

I snorted and shook my head, clicking my tongue to get Ephith to come down off the rock. We padded over toward Robert, Ephith's long neck waving back and forth with every step.

“Well,” I said as I got close enough I could be sure Robert heard me, “you ready for your final cowboy lesson?”

His grin fell, eyes widening with excitement. “Really? You're going to teach me to fly?”

“Have to. Once we get to the other side, there'll be places it's just more sensible than walking. Make sure you're secure. Double check everything. Twice checked is—”

“Never as safe as thrice checked, I know.” Robert patted down the belts and harnesses that kept him attached to the saddle and gave his emergency tether a solid tug. “Looks good to me.”

“All right then.”

I showed him where to pat Layla to let her know to shake out her wings. She’d need to stretch them a bit before actually putting them to use. We loped up the slope on dragonback while Ephith and Layla stretched their wings, the hatchlings doing the same.

“Steering’s mostly the same in the air,” I said. “But don’t over-steer. You yank, she’s gonna fight.”

“Got it.” He nodded as we reached the top of the rise. “How do we get her to take off?”

I grinned at him and directed Layla to the right, toward a sheer cliff face. “That’s the fun part. We dive.”

He paled and leaned forward in the saddle, peering over the cliff. It was a good seven-hundred-foot drop into more unforgiving rock.

“Trust your mount,” I said. “She knows when to pull up. You ready?”

“No,” he squeaked, voice tight.

“Don’t think so hard! Just *go!*” I reached over and gave Layla a firm tap on the ass.

She snorted and broke into a run, headed straight for the cliff. Robert let out the most adorable, undignified little scream as she dove over the edge, wings stretched wide. The hatchlings followed her to the ledge, but didn't jump after, still a bit too young for flight.

Ephith and I waited on the edge of the cliff, watching Layla dive while Robert fought to hold onto his ridiculous hat. She pulled up at the last second and soared straight out over the canyon floor. I chuckled to myself when Robert leaned over the side of the saddle and promptly threw up.

Ephith gave an unimpressed huff.

I patted her shoulders. "Don't worry, girl. We'll make a proper cowboy of him yet. Now, what do you say we go teach this city boy a thing or two about flight?"

Ephith dropped off the edge of the cliff almost lazily, spreading her wings to glide down a few hundred feet before she caught the wind.

We easily caught up with Robert, who was still looking rather green. He shot me a scowl. "You asshole."

"Yep," I said, grinning ear to ear. "But sometimes it takes an asshole to get shit done."

That made him laugh and shake his head. "You're such a dick, Hopper. I love it."

I chuckled. "Well, now that you've learned how to take off, what do you say we go for a little ride? Tear's over yonder, a

little to the west. If we hurry, we can catch the sun setting behind it before we settle in for the night.”

Robert grinned over at me, mischief sparking like a fire behind his eyes. “Last one there has to cook dinner!” he shouted, and he and Layla took off.

I gave him a ten second head start before I followed, and he let me catch him, just like always. We smiled at each other, a secret little smile that neither of us shared with anybody else, and we rode off into the sunset, driving the dragons west.

PROJECT OVERLORD ARCHIVES

TRANSCRIPT: CASSETTE 142

(FOUND IN A HIDDEN COMPARTMENT OF A 1987 WINNEBAGO RV)

KIT: OKAY, RECORDING. I think. [shouting] Honor, if the red light is blinking, that means it's recording, right?

HONOR: Red light means it's recording, yes.

KIT: Right. So, this is Kit. It's October fourteenth, at five twelve in the afternoon. Subject is a...I'm sorry. Can you repeat your species name?

LEVI: Name's Levidan Gholloc. Levi for short.

KIT: No, I mean your species. What your *people* are called.

LEVI: Oh. I'm a Grinnie. Least that's what most people call us. Our real species name is [unintelligible screech] which is very difficult for most people to pronounce.

KIT: Fascinating. For the record, Levi is... How tall would you say you are? In meters.

LEVI: Don't know what a meter is, but about three or four good sized boulders stacked up. That's how tall I am.

KIT: Let's just call it two and a half meters tall. He's got gray skin, the color of granite, and a very tough exterior. I wouldn't quite call it a shell or an exo-skeleton like an irqed has but—

LEVI: Irqed? Blightstone, you haven't got any of those this side, have you?

KIT: One or two. No need to worry. They're being held in a safe location where they can't hurt anybody. Now, for the purposes of your immigration interview, please state how you came to be on this side of the tear.

LEVI: I don't rightly know. One minute, I was gathering edible wildflowers to make a nice wildflower salad for my lunch, and then [popping noise]. What do you know? I was here and very confused. That's when the big bird man started talking to me. He sent me to you. When can I go home? My mum will be missing me for supper.

[Loud slam]

UNKNOWN: Daddy, Daddy, look what I found! Can I keep him?

KIT: Not now, Axel. Daddy's working.

AXEL: But you're *always* working. And look, he's hurt. Can't I keep him until he's better?

KIT: I'm sorry, Levi. One second. Axel, you know how your mother feels about snakes.

AXEL: Please, Daddy? I'll catch mice and crickets and stuff to feed him. I even found a box in the woods to use! Look, I

already filled it with moss and sticks and stuff!

KIT: We'll talk about it later. Look, I think your papa is out back working on his bike. Why don't you go show him?

AXEL: But Daddy—

KIT: No buts, Axel. I mean it. Honor! Jesse! Someone, please come get Axel so I can finish this intake.

HONOR: You heard him, Axel. No snakes in the house.

AXEL: But he'll *die*!

HONOR: You can't save everyone, Axel. That black rat snake's eagle or cat food already. Better to put him out of his misery.

AXEL: No! I hate you! Stay away from him!

[Loud pounding, retreating]

HONOR: I'll take care of the snake. You finish here.

KIT: [sigh] I'm sorry. Can we.... Can we take a short break? I need to see to my son. I apologize. He's usually so well behaved.

LEVI: Oh, no problem. Kids, right? [nervous laugh]

[End Recording]

FROM THE AUTHOR

THANK YOU FOR READING Lassos and Lace!

I know you're probably eager to find out what happened with Charlie and Cupid. I promise your questions will be answered in the next installment of the series.

Robert "Hotdog" Smith's voice came out very strong during this book. He and Hopper were some of the easiest characters to write. I'm a little sad to be saying goodbye to them for now, but we'll be seeing more of them in the future either through cameos in other books or a future short story (or two).

What's next?

Next, we're going back in time a little bit. If the name Honor Rose felt a little familiar, it should. Honor and Axel share a last name for a reason. Though the two of them aren't related by blood, they share a common background, and I need to tell Honor's story to set up Axel's book.

Honor's book, *Bounty and Bone*, will also conclude everything with Charlie and Cupid. It's a little different than the other books, since it spans a considerable amount of time,

beginning a few decades in the past. It's also going to be the first book in the series with a trans main character. It was supposed to be a novella, but it's already gotten too long to qualify as that.

Axel's book will be after Honor's, and then I have books planned for Ben and maybe Noah... We'll see!

I have several other series in the works, so it depends on how those work out too.

If you want to stay up to date, the best way is to [join my email list](#), and you can always [read advance chapters posted to my Patreon](#).

MONSTER INDEX

CREX (krecks)—A shape shifting bird-like monster. They tend to be self-centered and live in isolated locations at high altitudes. Most crex are fascinated by shiny objects. They are also known for their cruel practical jokes.

Appearance: Crex are shapeshifters able to manipulate reality and magic and therefore may appear however they wish. Their natural form, however, resembles a humanoid crow with a beak nose, black feathers, and bird legs.

Dominion—A race of highly competitive telepathic monsters. Dominion have a long history of interacting with humans and are often mistaken for gods or angels going back to antiquity. Ancient Roman and Greek culture was strongly influenced by early interactions with the Dominion. They live in close-knit cities in an expanding empire overseen by an empress. While Dominion do not need to eat to survive, they enjoy doing so. They bond for life and believe that they are all fated to have one or more mates, which they will recognize through telepathic touch. Dominion are able to bond with their

mates and live deeply shared lives. Each Dominion has a halo, which is a specialized magical device that acts as a focus for their telepathic powers. However, the device may be misused as an amplifier for strong desires, allowing them to manifest as powers in non-dominion species. Dominion are also known for having hallucinogenic bodily fluids and tattooing their deeds on their bodies.

Appearance: Humanoid with wings, and eyes appearing on the wings. Dominion have four arms and horns. Many have extensive tattoos that read like a list of accomplishments.

Durlik (dur-lik): A monster known primarily for their skill in inventions and blending magic and technology for practical use.

Appearance: Short, stoic, and dwarf-like, most often being under four feet in height

Grinnie (grin-nee): Large, towering monster with a tough rock-like outer skin. They are known for being kind and softspoken, often referred to as gentle giants.

Appearance: Over 7 feet tall with rock hard skin ranging in a variety of rock-like colors.

Irqed (ir-ked)—A carnivorous, sentient monster that revels in hunting worthy prey. Little is known about irqed at this time except that they have the ability to become invisible, and do

not consider verrid worthy prey. They are incredibly violent and feared even by Krampuses.

Appearance: Black, tough hides with long limbs and sharp teeth.

Jacqeroi (jack-er-roy) —A monster known for sharing a kinship with dragons due to being raised alongside them. They tend to have large, tight knit families, and bond with their mates for life.

Appearance: Humanoid and fur-covered with large bunny-like ears and velvet covered antlers. They also have a tail that resembles a bunny tail.

Khaetch (catch) —A non-sentient cat-like monster that preys upon verrid.

Krampus (kram-pus)— Krampuses are rare, with only a few left in the world. They live in cold regions and generally interact only rarely with other monsters and humans due to their territorial nature, which can sometimes drive them to be violent. They tend to claim items and protect them with a ferocity that few other species show, willing to kill in order to protect whatever they deem to be theirs. If not threatened, they are gentle creatures with a tendency toward hoarding. The krampuses pre-date the widening of the tear between worlds, having come to Earth from the monster world many, many generations ago. They are a long-lived non-humanoid species.

Appearance: Very tall, often 7-8 feet minimum, and covered head to toe in fur. They have two curling horns, goat-like feet, and a very long tongue. They also have a long prehensile tail with a tuft of fur at the end. Hidden in the fur tuft is a stinger that injects hormones that prompt some species to become overwhelmed with the desire to mate. All Krampuses are male but possess a pouch for carrying offspring.

Pomtuki (pom-too-kee): A race known primarily for their love of practical jokes, lack of a lengthy attention span, and large genitalia, especially on males of the species.

Appearance: slightly smaller than humans, pomtuki are covered in a fine brown or gray fur with a long fluffy tail bearing colored rings of fur. They are often compared to lemurs in appearance, or red pandas and have fur ranging from a rich red to deep black in color.

Verrid (ver-rid)— Verrid are generally considered peaceful and live in small communities. They feed on sunshine and are known for being incredibly loyal with a strong sense of community. However, they can also be very judgmental of perceived differences. Verrid possess generational memory, which passes from one generation to the next, and a near perfect photographic memory. Other monsters generally consider them polite, but a bit elitist since they keep to themselves.

Appearance: Verrid are large lizard-like humanoid monsters with brightly colored scales. Bud technically has a form of albinism, which means he was born without coloring in his scales and has pink eyes, which are not common verrid traits.