

A MONSTER PARANORMAL ROMANCE ANTHOLOGY



MONSTERS IN LOVE

VOL. 3: LOST IN THE FOREST

MONSTERS IN LOVE VOL. 3: LOST IN THE FOREST

A Monster Paranormal Romance



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AFTERWORD



DEAR MONSTER LOVER,

MONSTERS IN LOVE IS AN ONGOING ANTHOLOGY SERIES. EACH volume is limited edition, and will be available for purchase for three months in digital and print format.

We have created a special edition *Monsters in Love* charity anthology that released March 7, 2023. It is available digitally on Amazon, and will be free with Kindle Unlimited. The print edition of the anthology is available in two books due to print limitations.

All proceeds will be donated to Best Friends Society, a no-kill animal shelter.



FUTURE MONSTERS IN LOVE ANTHOLOGY VOLUMES and release schedule are listed below. We thank you in advance for preordering in support of our stories.

MONSTERS IN LOVE VOL 4: LOST IN THE DEEPS

RELEASING SEPTEMBER 2023

MONSTERS IN LOVE VOL 5: LOST IN THE FIRE

RELEASING MARCH 2024

MONSTERS IN LOVE VOL 6: TITLE TO BE ANNOUNCED

RELEASING SEPTEMBER 2024



Thank you for all your love and support. Your preorder lets us know that you want to read more of our work.

Much love,



EVA PRIEST

CREATIVE DIRECTOR, DARKLIGHT PRESS



Please note that this anthology features a diverse range of stories that span from sweet to spicy, and all the delicious flavors in between.

They may contain the following themes, tropes, and triggers:

Abduction, Assault, BDSM, Criminal Acts, Dark Themes, Fighting, Forced Marriage, Graphic Sex, Heat, Hunting, Kinks, Menage, Nightmares, Power Exchange, Size Difference, Trafficking, Why Choose.

Please proceed with caution.

CLAIMING THE VISCOUNT VIPER

EVANGELINE PRIEST

AN OBSIDIAN RIFT X MONSTERS BALL STORY



Lord Kurzon Sarthak, Viscount Aurleon has found his fated mate, and will contrive all manner of ways to ensure she wants to claim him as much as he wants her.

Please note: There will be biting, knotting, and graphic sex between consenting adults.

Featured tropes include: fated mates; instalove; size difference; pheromone-induced, graphically-described sex between consenting adults.



NOORIYA SELLA SMOOTHED AN ERRANT WRINKLE ON HER uniform. She had served in many noble houses before, but this was the first time she served a naga household.

She didn't have a problem with the *bete monde*. Quite the opposite. She was enamored of them.

The Valentano Keep had an old pedigree, and their wealth was obvious in the opulence of their home. But it was not just the grandeur of the house that had caught her attention, it was the naga themselves. Their sinuous bodies, adorned with shimmering scales, and their hypnotic eyes made her pulse race every time they looked her way. She had never felt this way about any of her previous employers.

Though she passed for human, she was convinced she had more than a little monstrous heritage diluted in her bloodline.

As she made her way to the master's chambers to deliver his tea, she couldn't help but replay the way Lord Aurleon's

forked tongue had flicked out and tasted the air when he had first seen her during her interview. It had sent a shiver down her spine and she had to clench her thighs together to fight off the sudden heat between them.

Two weeks later, and here she was trying not to make a fool of herself on her first proper day of employment. She needed to keep this job. She had been about ready to sell everything she owned—and perhaps a bit of herself—in order to gain passage to the Americas.

Thankfully, fate intervened, and she discovered the Earl needed another maid on his staff.

With relief, mingled with a touch of disappointment, Lord Aurleon's rooms were empty. She should have expected that. After all, he was an important lord, likely with many appointments on his agenda.

“Thank you, Miss Sella.”

Nooriya nearly jumped out of her skin. She hadn't heard Lord Aurleon entering. “Pardon me, my lord. I didn't realize you were here.” She braved a look up at him to gauge his mood.

The corner of his mouth quirked up. “The fault is mine. I should have announced that I was entering my chambers.”

Was he teasing me? Nooriya thought to herself. Braving a look, she saw amusement graced Lord Aurleon's fine features. Her stomach tightened, and other places lower pulsed with a radiating heat.

The lord was young and virile, only now returned to claim his estate from his father after serving his tour in the military. Nooriya's heart was hammering in her chest, and she could feel the heat rising in her cheeks. His eyes were a burnished copper that glinted with ruby red speckles. It complemented

the variegated bronze and tan dorsal scales that ranged down his tail. His ventral scales, however, were the hallmark gold of House Sarthak, also known as the House of the Golden Serpents, of which Lord Kurzon Sarthak, Viscount Aurleon, was the named heir.

The naga lord's presence intoxicated her, and she knew she should remain composed and professional. Nooriya looked away, suddenly feeling self-conscious under his scrutiny.

"Is there something I can assist you with, my lord?" she asked, struggling to keep her voice steady.

The naga lord slithered closer, and Nooriya couldn't help but notice the way his scales glimmered in the light. He fixed his gaze on hers, and she felt as though he could see right through her. A shiver ran down her spine as he rested his large hand on her shoulder. "I think I should ask you that question," he murmured, his voice low and seductive. "Is there something I can assist you with?"

Nooriya felt a surge of desire course through her body. How many times had she envisioned just this moment over the last two weeks? How many times had she dreamed of Kurzon pressing her against the wall, the naga lord's hands roaming over her body? She would moan softly as he trailed kisses down her neck, his fangs grazing her skin lightly. She would feel him growing harder against her, and she knew she wanted him just as badly as he wanted her.

With a sudden burst of passion, he would lift her up and carry her over to the bed, laying her down gently. She dreamed of reaching up and tangling her fingers in his long, roan-colored hair, feeling the silk of it brushing against her skin. Then she would pull him down into a searing kiss, and he would

respond eagerly, his tongue tangling with hers as they explored each other's mouths with feverish intensity.

Then she would finally behold the glory of Kurzon's twin cocks. She had only heard downstairs talk about naga male physiology, but there was no reason to doubt it. Whatever he hid in his sheath, she knew without a doubt, would be magnificent.

She wanted all those things and more, but knew her place. She couldn't—now, she wouldn't—jeopardize the boon of this employment posting.

With her gaze set firmly on the floor, she noted how Lord Aurleon's tail looped into a circle around her, and yearned to feel it coil tightly around her body. "I have everything I need, my lord. I should check back with Gideon. She wished for me to accompany her to town for some purchases to go with the dinner meal."

"Of course, Miss Sella. I would hate to inconvenience the head housekeeper. I look forward to tasting what you have to offer."

Nooriya blinked up at Kurzon's beatific face, trying to see if he intended a double meaning in his words. The swirl of red and gold in his eyes only made her pulse race faster. Without a word, she turned on her heel and nearly ran out of the room. She was so overwhelmed, as soon as she turned the corner and raced down the back stairwell, she snuck into a corner pantry to catch her breath. The throbbing between her legs became unbearable. Despite knowing that the housekeeper had waited for her, Nooriya backed into the far corner of the pantry and leaned against the wall. Lifting her skirts, she cupped her sex, pressing her cool fingers against the slick wet heat at the juncture of her thighs. She rubbed the pad of her thumb in circles over her swollen clit.

She imagined Kurzon kissing his way down her body, his hot breath teasing her navel, and then finally tasting her where she hungered for him most. His tongue would be rough, but no more than his touch. With one hand, he would spread her legs wide, granting himself full access to her forbidden depths. He would lick her hard, and then gently, coaxing out every drop of her honey. If she were very good, he would let her wrap her own fingers around his shafts, then he would fuck her until she screamed.

Waves of pleasure flooded her senses, and she floated in the aftershocks of the multiple orgasms that gripped her. She came back to her senses when she heard the sounds of footsteps in the hall. Hastily, she smoothed out her skirts, trying to look presentable just in time as Gideon entered the room.

“Nooriya, dear, there you are!” The older woman, her cherub face creased with concern. “I realized I didn’t specify which pantry we would meet in and wondered if you would be here. I apologize for the miscommunication.”

“It is I who should apologize,” she said. “I intended to seek you out, realizing my mistake.”

Gideon smiled and patted Nooriya’s cheek. “Well, no worries, child. It seems we found each other in the end. Let’s take our notes and be on our way. His lordship’s gathering tomorrow is quite involved and I don’t want to miss out on getting the best finishing touches.”

It was only when she and Gideon were in the carriage toward town did Nooriya realize she left Lord Aurleon’s presence without so much as a curtsy.

Good lord, she would be lucky to keep her job for two weeks if she kept this up. She pushed that encounter from her mind

and resolutely helped Gideon carry parcels and sundries from store to store in town.



“PLEASE DO NOT TELL ME YOU ARE MARRYING A MAID?”

Kurzon placidly swirled his whiskey in his glass as he eyed his father bursting into his study. Ludo Sarthak, Earl of Valentano and the current head of House Sarthak, was in a gloriously foul mood indeed. Excellent. Ludo must have received his notice.

“Then I won’t tell you,” Kurzon said, raising his glass to his father in mock toast. “Whiskey?”

Ludo’s maroon eyes narrowed on him. “You cannot pluck women from the street and make them your wife. And yes, make it a double.”

Kurzon poured out a whiskey double and handed it to his father as he paced. “Says who?”

“Says me! You know, your father!”

Kurzon snorted. “Please. First, I did not pluck her from the streets, though I wanted to. I scented her, tracked her down, and seeing that she was a maid, urged an acquaintance of mine to encourage her to interview here at Valentano Keep.”

“We are not even hiring,” Ludo exclaimed before downing his whiskey. He wagged the now empty glass to Kurzon, who splashed some more of the amber liquid into it. “We don’t even need maids.”

At his father’s exasperated look, Kurzon laughed. “Exactly. You didn’t need a maid, so you didn’t really hire her into your staff. However, I needed a reason for her to stay, as she had every intention of buying a passage to the Americas. Thank the Great Serpent, my friend and his wife intervened at the port and sent her my way.”

That Nooriya’s scent called to him in the middle of a bustling port packed to the brim with monsters and men alike was a miracle. He had never played into his father’s notions of soul mates before, and would rather pluck out his scales before listening to tales of romantic escapades between his parents. Once he had scented Nooriya, though, he had known that he needed to find her.

As if his heart would burst from his chest if he didn’t.

Ludo sighed and settled onto the divan by the fireplace, his golden coils piled beneath him. “I hear the beginning of a scheme, and so will let you speak.” He gestured for Kurzon to sit in the chaise lounge opposite.

“It’s a simple plan, really. Valentano Keep will host a bridal hunt. Nooriya runs in it. I claim her, and declare her my mate. Then, we shall go to Aurleon Hall, and be the dutiful Viscount and Viscountess, and by this time next year, you might have a grandchild to hold in your arms.”

At the hint of family, Ludo's eyes widened. At the possibility of a legacy as a grandchild, Kurzon knew he had won.

Ludo straightened in his seat, casually tapping his glass in thought. "Yes. That would work. No one at Aurleon would know or care about the girl's pedigree. All they would know is that she is your mate. Yes, this could work indeed." He brought the glass to his lips, realized it was empty, and slithered over to the bar to fill it once more.

Kurzon knew his father would be an easy sell once family talk came around. If his blessed mother had been alive, he knew for a damn fact she would have had no objections to the mating. She had more naga sensibilities, and valued a person's heart over one's title or pedigree.

"When will you wish to host this hunt?"

This would be the hard sell. "Tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow night?! Boy, are you mad? Can you imagine the preparations? The food alone—"

"And that is why I'd been preparing for it these last two weeks. The bridal hunt at Casselon seemed to be a rousing success last month, and I wish to emulate my cousin's fortune."

"You were out of the country last month. How could you have possibly known that?"

"The servants talk, father. Besides, the anonymous Lady Grey of the High Tea Society spoke of a contingent of nagas crossing the country to help a certain viscount hunt his lady wife. It didn't take a master code breaker to decipher those clues."

Ludo harrumphed as he resumed his prior perch on the divan.

"You best be sure that the girl even wants to be hunted, let

alone wants you to claim her.”

With a triumphant smile, Kurzon nodded at his father. Only he would know that his darling intended had been so bothered by his attentions that she had to relieve herself immediately after being in his presence. Her fertile scent had been so potent that he needed to do the same.

Oh, what a mess he made of his sheets. Endless jets of cum shot out of his cocks. He couldn't wait to saturate every bit of Nooriya's body with it. “That is the only thing I am sure about in this world.”



THE TOWNSPEOPLE OF VALENTANO HAD BEEN TREATED TO A holiday of sorts, courtesy of the Lord Aurleon. Many hailed him and greeted him home from many tours abroad.

Nooriya felt a twinge of pride that her new employer was so honorable, yet she also realized that the gulf between them was an ever-widening chasm.

“Miss Nooriya, there you are!” Another maid with sleek auburn hair and tan scales that peeked up from her collar came racing toward her.

Nooriya hated she felt as if she was constantly being looked for. “Miss Chelsea. What has happened?”

“Nothing, don’t be alarmed. Gideon sent me to fetch you to join the other unmarried ladies on the hunt.”

“Hunt?”

“Yes, the unmarried men and women can take part. You get to run, and the men chase you. And then, if one catches you, you can consent to the claiming. If you don’t, then he needs to back off.”

“But I have no interest in being claimed.” As Nooriya spoke, she heard a familiar voice speak her name. Lord Aurleon didn’t need to raise his voice. It was like her body instinctively knew he was there.

“Miss Sella,” he uttered her name in a low tone, one that made her stop breathing. “Have you decided if you will run tonight?”

Anxiety gripped her instantly. “I am not sure. I hadn’t intended on it. In truth, I’m ignorant about all this entails.” She hoped she didn’t sound as breathless and naïve as she felt.

“I see,” he said simply. “I can educate you, if you wish?”

At her nod, he continued. “This hunt is a kind of naga tradition, so to speak. During the New Moon closest to the Spring Solstice—so today—we host a feast like this, and when the sun sets and darkness settles, the unmarried women run and hide in the forest.” Lord Aurleon pointed to the woods that bordered the Valentano estate. “Then, the host of the hunt will sound the horn, and the unmarried men will hunt for a maiden to claim.”

Every word out of his mouth set fire to her nerve endings. Suddenly, her dress was too scratchy against her sensitive skin. Her nipples, especially, were so taut they threatened to cut through the fabric of her bodice.

“Miss Chelsea said that if the maiden doesn’t want to be claimed, the hunter needs to back off?”

The speckles of red in his eyes glittered like rubies. “Yes. No male is allowed to mistreat or harm the maiden.”

That put Nooriya’s anxiety to rest. If she ran, she would be safe from resisting a man’s offer. However, if Lord Aurleon would take part...

“What if the maiden submits to a claiming? What then?”

A rakish smile split the viscount’s face. “They both spend the night in each other’s company, glorying in the delightful pleasures of the flesh.”

Nooriya felt her pussy dampen at his words. He made the idea sound thrilling yet terrifying.

“I want you to know, Miss Sella. If you decide to run, I will be glad to give chase.” His eyes smoldered her. “You should know that no matter how fast you run, I will overtake you. No matter where you hide, I will find you.”

She didn’t know how to respond to him, so entranced was she by his fervor. “I am sure that you will.”

Tilting his head toward her, he asked, “Does that mean you submit to being hunted, Miss Sella?”

Her throat dried up as her heart pounded like war drums in her chest. Whatever she answered, she knew in her heart her life would be different after tonight. “Yes.”

Something akin to hunger flickered over Lord Aurleon’s face as a bass note rumbled through the air. It was the signal for the volunteer maidens to gather at the boundary. “You have made me extremely happy, my lady.”

Nooriya nervously twisted her hands together. “I believe I need to join the others now.” Heat rushed her face, and she turned from the viscount, allowing herself to be swept away

with a group of excited young women. As she waited for the next horn to sound, she replayed the conversation in her head.

Did he call me 'my lady'?

She didn't have a chance to explore what it meant, because the next horn sounded. The women squealed in excitement and sprinted into the forest.



KURZON WOULD SAVOR HIS INTENDED BRIDE FOR DAYS. NO question about it. Her scent had frayed his threadbare control.

He watched with a satisfied smile as Nooriya flew away like a frightened deer, her feet barely touching the ground. His gaze tracked her lithe figure as she twisted and turned through the trees, her dark hair streaming behind her like a wild river before it disappeared from view.

With her gone from sight, every primal instinct within him raged to run after her. The one rational thought that kept him in check was the knowledge that if he broke the rule, they would hold him back until the other hunters reached the forest.

That would not do. He would not risk losing Nooriya, nor inadvertently killing all the unmarried males of the town under his father's protection.

As soon as the horn blared, Kurzon shot into the forest with preternatural speed. He could almost feel the tension in the air

as the hunt progressed. Though he had lost sight of Nooriya, her scent trail was a beacon luring him forward.

Kurzon chased after her with grace and ease, his long tail easily covering the ground in great strides. He relished the sound of her small gasps as he closed the distance between them.

Suddenly, she darted off the path and rushed through the thick underbrush. Kurzon followed, undeterred. He tracked her by her mounting excitement, and the rustle of her dress through the trees.

He rounded a bend, and there she was, standing in the middle of a clearing, her large doe eyes wide and luminous, cheeks flushed. The sight stirred something deep within him, and he moved closer to her.

“Are you surrendering, my lady?” His voice was velvet, but his words were steel.

She nodded her head silently, and Kurzon felt a thrill of triumph. He stepped closer and reached out his hand. She placed her trembling hand on his, and he pulled her close.

Kurzon smiled slyly. He knew that this would be the perfect opportunity to make his move. With a confident swagger, he strode forward and scooped Nooriya up into his arms.

She gasped in surprise, but her eyes sparkled in delight.

“You are mine now, my lady,” he whispered, nuzzling her neck. He reveled in her sweet musk and even now was impatient to dive into her wet heat. “I intend to have you to myself for the next few days, and not just tonight. If you wish otherwise, speak now.”

Nooriya blushed, but did not try to escape his embrace. Instead, she snuggled closer to his chest, her heart racing with

excitement. “I’ve wanted to be with you since the first day I met you,” she confessed.

The urge to take her roared within him, but he knew that the next few moments would be crucial for them. He did not want her to doubt him, ever, nor give her any reason to mistrust him. And so, he gazed into her eyes that shone like twin moons, her tan skin nearly as deep as his bronzed scales. She was his mate, as sure as he was of his name.

“As have I. Your scent called to me. You were made for me, and I promise I will cherish you and keep you safe.”

Nooriya’s eyes glistened with tears, but she smiled up at him. “I believe you, my lord.”

Kurzon wrapped her in his embrace, feeling her heart beat against his chest. Already, the sounds of passionate lovemaking echoed around them. If he didn’t leave now, they would soon join in the chorus. However, Kurzon would not allow for his bride’s first coupling to be outside among strangers.

Besides, once he started, he did not plan on stopping. Kurzon carried her to one of the secret tunnels that allowed safe passage out of the castle in case of a siege. Before long, they arrived in his den, where he had prepared for the two of them.

As the door swung shut, Kurzon wasted no time establishing his claim. He slanted his mouth over hers, delving his tongue into her mouth. He groaned against her. “You’re even better than I imagined.”

He pulled apart from her, roving his gaze over her features to gauge whether she still wanted this—still wanted him. Her eyes were glazed with passion, and she flicked her tongue over

her lips as if trying to capture every bit of his taste in her mouth. “Let’s get you out of this dress.”

Nooriya nodded, and he gently peeled away the layers of fabric, revealing her body to him. He made quick work of the laces on her bodice and peeled off her dress, revealing her curvy body to his gaze. Kurzon’s breath caught in his throat as the sight of her lithe curves lay before him. His hands trembled as he explored the contours of her body, memorizing every inch.

When Nooriya shivered beneath his touch, he knew she was ready. He pressed her back onto the bed, pressing his body against hers as he brought his lips to hers. He paused for a moment, noting the wildness in her eyes before finally giving her what she wanted. Kurzon moved his mouth against hers hungrily as his hands stroked her skin, exploring her body and learning her soft curves. As he moved his hands lower, Nooriya gasped with pleasure and Kurzon felt his own arousal surge.

Kurzon had waited a long time for this moment, and he wanted to savor every second. He moved slowly, losing himself in her warmth, delighting in each moan and gasp as his skillful hands aroused her. He parted her thighs, exposing her pussy to him. Nooriya gasped and reached out to grab hold of his head as he slid his tongue into her slit. She bucked her hips towards him, desperate to feel more of his touch. She moaned as he plunged his tongue into her pussy again and again.

“I know what you need,” he said, as he parted her seam with his tongue, exploring her honeyed depths. He let his fangs graze her delicate skin, just enough to be thrilling. She quivered beneath him as her climax neared. He pressed gentle

lips against her throbbing clit, teasing and sucking it, slowly ramping up and building the intensity. He swirled his fingers in her cream, readying her tight cunt for his cocks.

Nooriya's fingers tangled in his hair as she chanted his name. "I know, my darling, I know." He cooed encouraging words against her sex, reveling in the liquid heat that flowed from her. He dipped the tip of his tail inside her now, pushing into her, feeling her tight walls grip him so well. As she crested, her cries became insistent, until finally her body bowed under the intensity of her orgasm. Kurzon increased his pace, sending wave after wave of pleasure through her. When another crest swelled within her, he twisted his tail into her tight pucker.

Nooriya screamed in pleasure, and it was all he could do to hold her hips down so he could continue tormenting her.

She felt his forked tongue circling her nipples, nipping and sucking at them. His hands traced the length of her body, stroking and teasing as she squirmed in pleasure under his touch.

She shuddered as she exploded in orgasm.

When she finally lay still and wrung out, Kurzon rose above her, centering himself between her legs. "My lady. Look at the mess you've made of your pretty cunt." He ran his finger between her folds as if in emphasis. "I'm going to make it even worse."

Nooriya's gaze snapped to his at his dark promise. His cocks emerged from his sheath, and her eyes grew even larger when she saw that liquid leaked out of the tip in a fair trickle. "May I touch you?" she said, breathless.

"I would prefer that you do," Kurzon responded.

Like an eager student, Nooriya took each cock in hand and found a rhythm in stroking them. She leaned forward and licked one before licking the other. Both would be a mouthful for her, but as long as she wanted to learn, he would teach her how to take a cock deep in her throat with all she wished.

“Gods be praised, Nooriya. Your mouth is perfect.” She hummed in praise, which made him impossibly hard.

Kurzon wanted to take her—claim her—as instinct and ritual required. He wouldn’t thrust into her mouth. He wouldn’t have the control to be careful.

Slowly, deftly, he slid from her mouth. Though she whined, she let him push her back once more. “I need you too much. I’ve waited for too long.” Indeed, if he didn’t find release soon, his cocks would fall off.

He nudged her legs apart, positioning himself between her creamy thighs, pulling her knees up to accommodate his shoulders. He licked her one last time to orgasm before lining his bottom cock to her entrance and pressing himself into her.

The sight of his massive cock pushing inside of her made her gasp in delight. He grinned and reached down, parting her lips with one hand. He teased her clit with the tip of his second cock, rubbing it back and forth in little circles. The slide of the ridges along the underside of his shaft over her clit was heaven. Fully seated within her, his cock throbbed and pulsed. He snapped his hips against her, the smacking sounds of their desperate flesh filling his ears.

Nooriya let out a loud moan as he thrust into her, burying himself up to his thickened knot in one stroke. She wrapped her legs around his waist as he pulled out and thrust back in again. He buried his face in her neck, flicking his tongue over her sensitive skin.

Once he started thrusting, he knew he couldn't stop. He plowed into her faster until she unraveled. "Kurzon!"

His name, torn from her lips in heated passion, was his undoing. He growled her name, pounding into her faster and faster until he sank his fangs into her soft flesh as he came. A tiny rational voice inside the darkest corner of his mind recognized the shocked gasp that came from Nooriya. Carefully, he withdrew his fangs from her, licking the tiny holes so that his saliva could heal her.

Finally, as they lay still, their bodies entwined in the afterglow of a passionate night. Nooriya looked up at him, her eyes shining with love, and Kurzon knew in that moment that he never wanted to let her go.



HE BIT HER. LORD AURLEON BIT HER. ON HER SHOULDER.
Surely that meant something?

“It means you are mine,” he whispered against her lips.

Nooriya blushed. “I said that aloud?”

He smiled down at her, his face still so beautiful. “Yes, you did, my lady.”

She looked away, not know how to broach this topic while his presence was so near, his cock still hard inside of her. “I don’t think you should call me that, my lord. It gives a certain level of privilege that is not mine to claim.”

Like a taut spring, Kurzon rolled them to a sitting position so that his back leaned against the headboard and she straddled his lap. This position hit all of Nooriya’s spots, and she gasped in pleasure even as her pussy lips fluttered around him.

“You are mine, Nooriya. You belong to me, and no one else. I will take care of you, protect you, and make sure that no harm comes to you. When you submit to be claimed, that means that I am the one claiming you. For life. You are now my bride.”

“Your bride? But that would mean we are going to be married?”

“It means that we already are, by naga rites and blessed by my father.” He grasped her chin and gently tilted her up so he looked into her eyes. “You are my lady wife, the new Viscountess Aurleon, if you choose to accept me.” A sly smile spread across his face. “Fair warning. If you do not accept me, it is your right, but I will spend the next three days convincing you to claim me.”

A flood of liquid heat spread from her core. Any teasing or words otherwise would have only been false bravado on her part. “You already know I accept you and claim you.”

He ran his long fingers down the curve of her neck, sending a thrill of pleasure through her body. He leaned forward, his face inches from hers, and whispered, “You smell divine, my dear Nooriya.”

Nooriya’s breath hitched as he took in her scent. She felt his hot breath on her neck and she moaned softly as he traced a line down to her collarbone. Her skin erupted in goosebumps as he trailed kisses down her chest, flicking his tongue over her nipples.

Kurzon grasped her hips and fucked her onto his cock until she screamed for him. She moaned loudly as he fucked her harder and faster. She rocked her hips in rhythm with his, her pussy tightening around his cock as she rode him hard.

The cock inside of her swelled until she rode the line between pain and pleasure. “Come for me, my darling. Do it once more so you can squeeze my knot. I want to feel your tight cunt milking me.’

The thrill of his words spurred her on. Pressure built in her hips until Nooriya bowed her back, offering her tawny peaked nipples to her new husband and lord as another orgasm gripped her.

Kurzon grunted against her, curling his tail tightly around their joined bodies. He buried his fingers in her hair, embracing her so close that his very soul imprinted itself into hers. “I love you, my lady,” he growled. Ropes of his thick seed sprayed hotly upon her chest as he finally found his release.

“And I, you, my lord.”



AS PROMISED, NOORIYA SPENT THE NEXT THREE DAYS LOCKED in Kurzon’s coils. Despite all that time, and with only a few breaks for eating and sleeping, Nooriya found she craved his touch more and more. Her fervor for him didn’t diminish. In fact, it seemed to grow.

“It is likely that you are experiencing a heat, my lady,” Kurzon said as he thrust up into Nooriya’s lax body as she straddled his hips. They were in a shallow pool sunk into the middle of the chamber that could accommodate Kurzon’s long coil of tail.

Nooriya moaned low, pinching her nipple. “That would make sense since I can’t seem to quieten this fire within me that burns for you.”

Kurzon tilted her face up so he could capture her lips. “When you say it like that, I never want you to stop burning for me.” In one deft move, he lifted her and placed her gently on her tummy against the carpeted floor. He rose behind her, his hands trailing a loving caress down her back before resting on her hips.

Nooriya sighed in delight as Kurzon entered her from behind. His motions were shallow and slow at first, as if he wanted to savor her. Then, gradually, as his hips pumped faster and harder, Nooriya felt her entire body come alive with pleasure.

He lined up his top shaft against her tight pucker. He had gradually worked her muscles there, introducing lubrication and special oils made for this activity. His glans naturally kept his manhood lubricated whilst in his sheath, which was what he spread over his cock now to ease his passage into Nooriya.

“Relax, my darling. I will claim your tight pucker now. I will make sure you don’t feel pain. But if it hurts, tell me, and I will stop.”

She gave a frantic *yes*, reaching behind herself to grasp his leg. As he expected, he could slide inside her tight rim slowly and gently until both cocks filled his precious Nooriya to the brim.

Kurzon’s hands moved up to cup her breasts in his palms as he continued to thrust into her depths. With each stroke, he brought her ever closer to a powerful climax.

Just as the pressure was becoming too much to bear, Kurzon leaned down and bit the back of Nooriya’s shoulder, a twin to the one he gave her from their first night. The sudden jolt of

pain sent her over the edge and she came hard, screaming out his name and clinging tightly to him as her body trembled with pleasure.

Kurzon followed her over that edge soon after with a powerful roar. The two of them stayed entwined until their breathing returned to normal.

“I love you,” Nooriya whispered against Kurzon’s chest.

“As I love you,” Kurzon replied, leaning in to kiss the top of Nooriya’s head.



THE CARRIAGE RIDE TO AURLEON HAD BEEN MOST EVENTFUL, especially since Kurzon commanded the driver to make circuitous rounds of the estate in order to enjoy the rapturous splendor of his lady wife's body for a while longer. He loved her most this way, bent over, so he could fill both her holes at the same time.

Kurzon grabbed her full hips, lifting her against him so her knees didn't scrape the ground as he thrust wildly into her body. Nooriya moaned as Kurzon's member crashed into her sensitive folds with each powerful thrust.

"My lord," she gasped.

The sounds of their lovemaking echoed off the walls of the carriage as Kurzon finally released himself into Nooriya, groaning in pleasure. He pulled her upright and kissed her deeply, his tongue dancing against her own.

“My love, my Lady,” he murmured back, his hands still caressing her skin in a sensuous trail.

As they finally arrived at the estate gates properly, the sun was just setting on the horizon and Nooriya felt the warmth of Kurzon’s embrace wrap around her even tighter. Life with him was a dream come true, and she was ready and eager for whatever was to come.



Thank you for reading *Claiming the Viscount Viper*. If you want to read more Regency monster romances, check out [*Taming the Viscount Viper*](#).

Click the link or type this link into your favorite browser:
<https://books2read.com/viscountviper>

For other stories featuring the House of the Golden Serpents, check out *A Cherry on Top* (<https://books2read.com/monstrousappetites1>) which is part of the Monstrous Appetites, a slice of life, date night with bite series.

“A Plum Job” is featured in [*Monsters in Love: Wicked Tales and Monstrous Ever Afters*](#)

About the Author

Evangeline Priest writes love at first bite paranormal romance featuring growly alpha heroes and women strong enough to tame them. She writes “monsters in space” science fiction romance as Eva Priest. Try out The Legion universe, starting with *Hunted*:

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She is usually within reach of coffee, chocolate, or a bowl of noodles.

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HIS MONSTROUS TITHE

CLIO EVANS



Hello, Creatures!

This story has the following:

Full shifted sex, double knots, knotting, tongue sex, first time anal, mentions of heat.

This one is relatively sweet and tame compared to my other stories, but make sure to always proceed with caution!



EIRE

I DID NOT KNOW HIS NAME.

But I knew his face. I knew his warmth.

I knew the moment the leaves crackled that he was close.

My monster.

I sucked in a breath as I stepped into the circle of trees, kneeling to the ground. I wore a soft cream-colored dress with a fur shawl wrapped around my shoulders, my red hair tumbling down to my waist.

I had been waiting for this moment for so long. The fates had guided me here and everything fell silent, the lull before a final decision was made.

I could only hope that my monster would accept what I had to offer.

“You came,” his dark voice rasped.

I bowed my head, nodding. I couldn't control the way my body reacted just by knowing that he was near. Heat spread between my thighs, blooming in my cheeks. My pale skin flushed beneath the moon's pearlescent light.

“I belong with you,” I whispered. “You and you alone. My soul burns for you. My body craves you.”

The wind picked up, tossing my curls back. I kept my head bowed, hoping he would accept me.

He would, wouldn't he?

I felt him come closer until finally, I could see his clawed feet. They dug into the earth, meant to tear apart humans like me. How many times had I seen him kill?

Countless.

My monster was a warrior. The kind that fought battles and protected those that he cared about, and that often did not include my kind.

And yet...here I was.

Offering myself to him.

This forest ran through the boundaries of Bitu, and he was one of the guardians. His entire life was dedicated to keeping humans from crossing over into the other world. He kept problems from arising, a shepherd guiding the flock. For thousands of years, it had been this way.

Monsters and humans were not supposed to mix, but neither of us could stop ourselves. I was drawn to him like a moth to a flame. My heart craved him, my soul yearning for his touch.

“*Eire*,” he said, his voice a low growl.

The way he spoke my name sent a shiver through me.

His massive hand reached down, and he cupped my face, forcing me to look at him. His claws pressed lightly against my skin, and my eyes widened as I met his golden gaze.

I knelt in front of him, the beast of the forest. He was a king amongst creatures. But when he looked at me, gone was the fierce killer my people knew. Instead, I was faced with softness. With pride.

“You honor me, lass,” he whispered reverently.

He leaned down, and I opened my mouth, eagerly taking his kiss. I wound my arms around his thick neck, gripping his fur.

He drew back with a soft growl. “Are you certain, Eire? I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You could never,” I answered immediately. “I want this. I want to be yours.”

He studied me for a few moments, and I knew he was thinking.

This was a risk to both of us, but I knew he would keep us protected. I wasn’t too bad in a fight myself, with humans at least. But monsters? Well, there were very few of us humans that could truly fight them.

I would never forget the first time I saw him. I had been running through the forest, playing hide and seek with some of the children from the village. I helped keep watch over them, as I had none of my own yet.

I had always warned them to not go too deep. We had lost many others that way.

But then I had. I’d lost myself in the trees, in the verdant darkness. I had run until the light in the sky had faded and

howls erupted around me. I should have died at the vicious mouths of wolves, but I didn't.

No.

He had protected me. Found me, kept me, and then returned me safely home.

“You have to promise me that if anything I do makes you want to stop, you tell me, Eire. I need this promise from you,” he said, combing his claws through my hair.

I moaned, closing my eyes for a moment. His claws combing through my hair brought me a sort of tender pleasure I'd never felt before. Every touch from him felt like heaven and home.

“I will tell you. I want you, monster. Please.”

He knelt down in front of me, his massive body looming in front of me. “Are you certain?”

“Yes,” I said, this time stronger.

He nodded and then pulled the furred shaw from my shoulders, tossing it aside. “I will keep you warm, my love,” he said, leaning in.

I moved so that he could lift the dress up, and I blushed as he pulled it free. I was now completely naked in front of him, my body exposed. A brisk wind picked up and I shivered in the darkness, the cold making goose bumps appear on my skin and hardening my nipples.

He let out a low rumble, humming.

“You are beyond beautiful,” he said.

He gently dragged his claws over my skin before cupping my breasts in his warm palms. I gasped as a sharp sensation passed through me, crying out at his surprising touch.

He started to draw back, but I grabbed his hand, holding it to me. Mine was so small compared to his, but I tipped my head back, staring up at him.

“No,” I gasped. “I want this. Please.”

“I fear I will hurt you, and I could never live with myself if I did,” he admitted, wincing.

He was so much larger than me. He towered a good three feet above me, his massive form covered in charcoal fur. His golden eyes burned in the dark like two suns, his diamond shaped pupils strange yet hypnotic.

“Even if you hurt me, I would still trust you,” I said.

Before he could argue, I moved forward in a feeble attempt to push him down onto the grass. His laugh echoed around me as he drew me against his chest, his warmth enveloping me.

“I want to touch you,” I whimpered, trying my best to not sound so desperate.

“I see,” he said, amused. “My little human has wants.”

“Yes,” I moaned.

He made me squeal as he lifted me and rolled back onto the ground, pulling me with him. He pulled me on top of him, his claws digging into my thighs.

I was straddling him now, his hips so wide that my knees didn't touch the ground. He lifted his head, and my entire body flushed as his glowing eyes roamed over me, his tongue swiping around his sharp teeth.

“My wild red haired goddess,” he purred. “You have stolen my heart.”

I felt need sear through me, and I moved my hips, grinding myself against him. His hands gripped my thighs, curling entirely around them.

“If you continue this, I will not be patient,” he said darkly.

I straightened my spine, looking over my shoulder. I could see the head of his cock emerging from his sheath, growing harder with every moment that passed.

“I don’t want you to be patient,” I whispered. “May I touch you?”

“Yes,” he grunted. “I am yours in every way. Touch me however you please.”

Excitement had me smiling. I had dreamed of this moment for months now, wondering what it would be like to be ravaged by the forest’s king of beasts. I reached behind me, running my palm over his cock. It immediately responded, growing from my touch.

I gasped, watching as it became so large, I could hardly fit one hand around to stroke it. Liquid glistened at the tip, and I turned so that I could lean down and swipe my tongue over it.

He let out a low groan mixed with a growl, his hips bucking.

The taste of him empowered me to do more. I ran my hand down the length of his cock, gasping as I felt ridges along the bottom. My palm came to the base where two knots swelled, pulsing against me.

How would I fit him inside me?

“I can take no more,” he grunted.

With a growl, he flipped me over, caging me beneath him.

My monster had accepted my offering.



MONSTER

THE HUMAN SHIVERED BENEATH ME AS I PINNED HER TO THE ground.

The wind caressed my fur as I leaned in, breathing in her sweet honeysuckle and sage scent. A low clicking noise reverberated in my throat, and I smirked as she whimpered.

Her breaths were coming in fast pants, her skin flushed. Moonlight haloed her wild red curls as they splayed out in the grass, her eyes fluttering on another moan.

“Monster,” she rasped.

Indeed. I was a monster. A werecat, a creature of the night. I had lived for a very long time, hunting the humans that dared enter my forest.

But not this one.

Not Eire.

“*Your monster,*” I growled, my voice deep and rough.

She had offered herself to me, kneeling before me in my forest. Giving her body to me, her soul to me.

I’d never forced her, nor would I ever.

I cherished her. She was my tiny human, fragile against the cruel ways of the world. The men in her village would never protect her the way she deserved.

Her naked body shivered beneath me again, her lips parting. “I want you,” she whined. “Please.”

“So eager,” I chuckled, my throat clicking again.

My cock had already released from its sheath, rubbing against her inner thigh. I dug my claws into the dirt above her, again inhaling her scent that was now tinged with her arousal.

She was precious. She had saved me from the darkness, and she didn’t even know it. How long had I lived? How long had it taken for me to find my soul mate?

I leaned in, my long rough tongue unfurling from my jaws. Her eyes widened, her breath catching as I licked her face.

She tasted so sweet, so heavenly.

“What...” she trailed off as I licked her again, this time from her neck to her jaw. She let out a soft giggle as I continued, and it soon dissolved into a moan. “What...what are you doing?”

I drew back for a moment, fighting all of the dark primal urges threatening to unleash.

I wanted to take her now, but I wanted to savor the moment even more. And I needed to be gentle with her. My Eire was only human, and not yet mated to me.

I was going to groom her. To lick every part of her body, to make her cum just from my tongue.

“Relax,” I purred, chuckling.

Her hands came up, her fingers curling into my black fur.

I licked her neck again, my tongue swiping up from the base of her collarbone to her jawline. She moaned, her grip tightening.

“Why does that feel so good?” she whispered.

I smiled to myself, continuing to taste her. This time, I moved further down— licking at her hardened nipples.

“Oh fuck,” she cried, her body bowing up.

I sucked one of her precious nipples between my teeth, giving her the softest bite. She cried out again, writhing beneath me.

My cock began to pulse, my knots swelling.

It would take every ounce of control to not devour her.

“I need you to be very still,” I growled, my tone harsher than I wished.

She immediately stilled, although her heartbeat thrummed fast enough for me to hear.

“Be very still while I bathe you,” I whispered. “Or else I might devour you, my dear Eire.”

I stared deep into her seafoam green eyes, making sure that she understood what I was asking.

“Do you understand, Eire?”

“Yes, monster,” she answered.

I shuddered, my claws digging further into the earth.

I began to lick her again, every part of her soft body. I reached down and stretched her arms above her head, pinning her wrists with one clawed hand as I groomed her. I listened to her soft whines, her surprised pants.

Her scent became heavier, her lust pooling between her legs.

I ached to taste her there. With a heavy grunt, I released her hands and slid down her body—licking the space where her hips met her thighs.

“Spread your legs for me, Eire,” I commanded, lifting my gaze to meet hers.

Her bottom lip quivered, her muscles trembling as she spread her thighs apart.

Her scent made my mouth water. I pressed my nose into the curls there, breathing in her sweet aroma. Lust, sweet lust.

“Have you ever touched yourself here, Eire?” I whispered.

A noise escaped her throat as I pressed my snout against her clit, her voice twisting into a melodic cry. “Only—only sometimes.”

“Did it feel good when you did?”

“Ye—yes,” she cried. “Monster, *please*.”

Her throaty beg drew a growl from deep within me. She was so eager for me to fill her tight pussy, but I had to go slow. Even if my cock was desperate to be gripped by her, to fill her with every drop of my monstrous seed.

“If we continue, I will mate with you, Eire. I will bond you to me, and no human male will ever touch you again. Do you want that? Do you want to belong to a *monster*?”

“Yes, I want this,” she gasped. “I want to be yours. I could never be with one of *them* after knowing you,” she said, her lips parting on a breathless sound as I pushed her thighs apart even further. “I want to be your *anam cara*.”

I stilled at her softly spoken words, closing my eyes for a moment, my heartbeat thrashing in my chest. Warmth spread through me, followed by pride.

Anam cara. Soulmate.

Yes, Eire would be my mate, mine for eternity. She was my little red-haired lioness, my beautiful *anam cara*.

Her hands reached up, taking my face so that I would look up at her again. Tears glistened in her eyes, ones of joy and desire. “I’m yours.”

“You are mine,” I growled, “And I’ll show you what that means this Lúnasa night.”

I buried my tongue deep inside of her, her taste causing my cock to harden beyond reason. Her cry rocketed through the sky, her fingers gripping the top of my head.

“*Oh Áine!*” she moaned.

My throat clicked with pleasure as I drove my tongue inside her sweet cunt over and over. She was already wet, her pussy dripping with nectar. I lifted her hips, pushing her legs back so I could go even deeper.

I plunged my tongue in and out, growling as she constricted around me. Her breaths were uneven, broken by cries and moans.

She screamed this time and then started to twist, reaching for my cock. Her delicate hand wrapped around my shaft, and I pulled my tongue from her, letting out a dark yowl.

“*Goddess*,” I hissed.

“Please, I want to taste you. You’re leaking,” she begged.

I looked down, realizing that she was right. My seed was leaking from the tip, my two knots pulsing in unison.

I growled and scooped my human up, carrying her to the nearest tree. She squealed as I flipped her body upside down, holding her by her ankles. I lifted her until her thighs rested on my shoulders, and her pussy gleamed in front of me, waiting to be feasted on.

“Oh,” she gasped, and I knew that she finally comprehended the position we were in.

I braced her against the trunk of the tree and moaned as I felt her lips touch the tip of my cock.

“*Eire*, you’re a blessing from the goddess,” I snarled, wrapping my arms around her waist so that she was supported.

I felt her take the first inch into her mouth, her small tongue lavishing me. With a possessive growl, I plunged my own back into her cunt. She moaned around my cock, and I used the moment to thrust in further, hitting the back of her throat.

“You’re taking my cock so well,” I gasped.

Her fingers dug into my thighs, and I started to move my hips back, but she grabbed on and pulled me even closer.

I moaned as I drank her, determined to drive her to the same edge of lust that I was on.

She began to writhe in my arms, her moans muffled by my cock.

I shoved her harder against the tree, pinning her there as my hips began to thrust. She felt so good and tasted like *Albion’s*

fruit.

Fuck.

This human was both the end and the beginning of me.



EIRE

MY MONSTER'S TONGUE PLUNGED INTO ME JUST AS I BEGAN TO shake, a rush of pleasure crashing into me. I moaned around him as my first orgasm took me.

I held onto him, crying out into the chilly night. My blood was rushing to my head, singing with the wild heat of passion.

He lifted me again as if I weighed no more than a leaf.

My monster hoisted me up, and I immediately opened my mouth, taking that ravaging tongue down my throat. I could taste myself on him, and that only intensified my desires.

I loved knowing that tongue had just been inside me.

My muscles cried out with pleasure as I continued to tremble from my release, aftershocks of desire still gripping me.

He slowly turned me right side up, pinning my back against the tree. The bark pressed into my skin, the occasional pain

from a scratch something I found myself enjoying.

I wrapped my legs around his hips, but was unable to cross my ankles as he was so big.

He was massive, his muscles stronger than my village's fiercest warriors. He was a god of this verdurous forest, a son of Cernunnos, a protector of the boundaries of Bitu.

He was my mate, and the monster that I had fallen so desperately in love with. The moment I had laid eyes on him, I had known that I belonged to him.

"*Eire,*" he purred, his body pressing against mine. The heat of him warmed me to my core. His voice was low and deep, reassuring the flash of nerves I suddenly felt.

All those nerves disappeared as I felt the tip of his cock rub against me. I let out a soft moan, everything feeling right. I was safe with him, and I had wanted to be with him for so long.

I was wet, so wet for him. He made me feel like there was a fire within me, my heart burning for him.

"Are you ready, little one?" he asked, blowing out a hot breath.

I nodded, tangling my fingers into his chest fur. I needed to feel him inside of me just as I needed the air to breathe.

He pressed his fangs against my throat, his tongue sweeping across my flesh. I stilled against him just as he thrust forward, his cock entering me.

I wailed, my voice intertwined with his yowl. He thrust forward more until the first knot pressed against my opening.

"*Monster,*" I gasped, my head falling back against the trunk of the tree. "Monster, you're so big."

“You’re tight, little one,” he growled.

I felt his knot stretch me as it shoved in, and I gasped at the intrusion, tears springing to my eyes. My monster lifted his head, his tongue lapping up the first tear that escaped.

“My brave mate,” he crooned. “My little lioness. Can you take the other?”

I was already aching, pulsing around his cock. It was painful, but all of it was blinded by the increasingly intense pleasure. His cock pulsed inside of me, his knot like a hot fist.

“Yes,” I gasped. “I want to feel all of you,” I moaned.

He grunted, taking a moment to breathe in my scent. I shivered against him, unable to control myself. He was already buried so deeply inside of me, I wasn’t sure if he really could go all the way.

But then he started to press further, the noises coming from him turning me even hotter. I panted, gripping his soft fur as the second knot pressed against me.

I cried out as he pushed it into me, stretching me impossibly wide, until finally his monstrous cock was fully seated inside of me.

“Monster,” I cried, writhing against him. “I want your seed,” I gasped, burying my face against his warm chest. “Please fill me. I want every drop.”

“Oh, lass,” he whispered, caressing me while I adjusted to his girth. Both of his knots pulsed inside of me, making me wetter and wetter.

He began to thrust, slow and sensuous at first. I held onto him, gasping every time he drew out and pushed back in. His tongue unfurled again, and he pressed me harder into the tree

with a growl. I opened my mouth to take his kiss, to taste him as he began to fuck me harder.

Pain rippled through me from the rough bark, from the force of his thrusts. But it was tempered by the pleasure, by the roaring of my blood in my veins.

“Eire,” he moaned.

He lifted me, wrapping his burly arms around me and pulling me from the tree. My head fell back, and I stared up at the moon, crying out as another orgasm overtook me. My vision blurred with tears, my world becoming one with his.

He bounced me up and down until I felt a stab of fire. His teeth sank into my shoulder, drawing a scream from me.

Then I felt the flame of a connection, our souls being tied together. It was as if his heart was merged with mine, a bridge built between us, bringing us closer together.

I reveled in the feeling of him. His emotions and desires and needs all echoed my own, amplifying everything that I felt.

“Fill me,” I gasped. “Please!”

My cry made him roar, his thrusts becoming more hurried.

With one final thrust, he filled me. Warmth spread through me as his cum poured in, his tongue swiping over the wound he’d made. He held me to him, his chest reverberating with soft growls.

“Mate,” he whispered, licking my neck. “You took me so well. My cock fits inside you perfectly.”

“Your mate,” I moaned in agreement.

I’d never known bliss like this. I didn’t know that this was what rapture felt like.

My monster slowly knelt down, rolling over so that I could sprawl on top of him. His cock had swelled so much inside of me that it was now locked, holding me to him.

I relaxed against him, enjoying the way he felt beneath me. He stroked my skin with his claws, petting me.

“After we untie, I’m taking you with me to Bitu,” he murmured, rubbing my body.

I could still feel him cumming, his seed filling me as his knots continued to pulse. I moaned, nodding with a smile.

This was everything that I had hoped and dreamed.

“Okay,” I said. “I’m happy to go with you.”

“I’ll take you to my home. You will be protected,” he said gently. “Are you certain you will leave your home and your friends behind?”

“Yes,” I said, raising my head to look at him.

It was true. I had said my goodbyes today. They had known I was going to the forest, and that I would never return. It wasn’t my home anymore. Had I ever truly come back since that day I wandered in?

The day I got lost was the day I was found. Since then, I had never wanted anything more than to belong to him.

The village had seen that change, and they knew that my destiny belonged elsewhere.

I belonged to him and was meant to be at his side, now and forever.

“Then so it will be,” he sighed happily, letting out the softest grunt.

We stayed like that for a while, intertwined as intimately and completely as our soul bonds. I listened to the pounding of his heart as his knots began to release from me, feeling like I'd finally found my way to where I was meant to be.

Finally, he rolled me over beneath him again. He slowly lifted me and pulled free, breaking our tie.

His seed gushed from me, and I gasped as I felt it pool into the grass.

"Oh," I moaned. "That was so much..."

He chuckled, licking my cheek. "I have more to give you too."

I wanted it all over again. For him to mate with me, to feel his fangs at my throat. Heat filled me, and I let out a pant, reaching for him.

The urgency of need began to change and I frowned as every thought became centered around him. I suddenly felt like I was running a fever, everything urging me to be bred by him over and over again.

"I want you again. I feel hot," I cried.

He cocked his head and then leaned in, breathing in my scent. He paused, letting out a low growl.

I felt... hot. Needy. I needed him inside of me, to knot me. I needed him to fuck me.

He let out a soft curse, one in a language that I didn't know.

"Oh, you...How is this possible? It's like your heat has been activated, but you are a mortal."

"Please," I moaned, bucking my hips against him.

"Spread your legs for me," he growled.

I did immediately and then yelped as he pressed his mouth there, his tongue slipping inside of me.

“Oh!” I gasped. “Monster!!”

His tongue continued to ravage me, and I screamed as his thumb pressed against my clit. I reached out and gripped his ears, grinding against him.

I was so close to cumming again.

He drew back and flipped me over, pressing my head down with his massive hand. I felt the tip of his cock brush against my opening and then higher...

“No,” I cried.

He paused, waiting. “No? It will feel good, little one. I promise.”

I panted, confusion filling me. “Are...are you sure?”

“Let me show you,” he growled.

“Be careful,” I moaned, squeezing my eyes shut.

He let out a gruff noise, and I tensed as he rubbed his thumb over my ass, pressing against me there gently. I twisted my head so I could watch him, and I whimpered as he parted his jaws and spit, using it as lube to press his claw into me.

“Oh, fuck,” I gasped.

At first, there was a hint of pain, but after a few moments...

“Oh,” I gasped again.

He chuckled and pulled his thumb free, replacing it with the tip of his cock. “You’re such a good girl,” he praised, slowly pressing forward.

I let out a scream, but it ended with a heady cry. He thrust forward more until I felt his first knot.

“There’s no way,” I rasped, my entire body throbbing.

He reached below, rubbing my clit. I immediately sank back with an inhuman noise and then gasped as the first knot slipped in.

“You’re too big,” I cried.

“I’ll be able to fit,” he crooned. “Such a good girl. You look so good with my cock buried deep inside of you. How are you feeling?”

It was a mix of pain and poignant ecstasy, and I wouldn’t trade it for anything else in the world.

“Good...More please,” I panted.

He began to play with my clit again, his gentle rubbing causing the fire in my veins to burn even hotter.

“I want all of it,” I said, pushing my ass back to meet his hips.

He was inside of me, joined with me again. His growl rippled around me, and I knew his control was slipping. He gripped my hips, his claws digging into my skin.

“You like a little pain, don’t you?”

“Yes,” I admitted.

He thrust forward, his weight pushing me into the ground. Our cries mingled as he began to move, his second knot filling me. He began to thrust in and out, dragging screams from me as he did so.

The whole forest could hear. I didn’t care.

He took me, ravaged me, made me his— and I didn’t want it any other way.

“Fuck me harder,” I demanded, gripping the grass beneath me. His vicious growl sent my blood rushing as his movements became brutal.

“I’m going to cum again,” he gasped.

“Fill me,” I moaned, “Please. I want you to fill me.”

He pounded harder, his claws drawing blood from my ass and thighs. Every movement could be heard, the sound of his balls slapping against my skin echoing around us.

Within a moment, his hot seed splashed into me, and he pulled free, half of it hitting my back. I fell to the side, my body pulsing with the feeling of being used.

He grunted, leaning over me. He gave my cheek a gentle lick.

“Are you...”

“I want more,” I whimpered.

“*Eire*,” he chuckled. “You’ll be the death of me, I swear. We’ll have an eternity together to make all of the love we can.”

I couldn’t even move, but he had shown me what passion could look like. The pain, the pleasure.

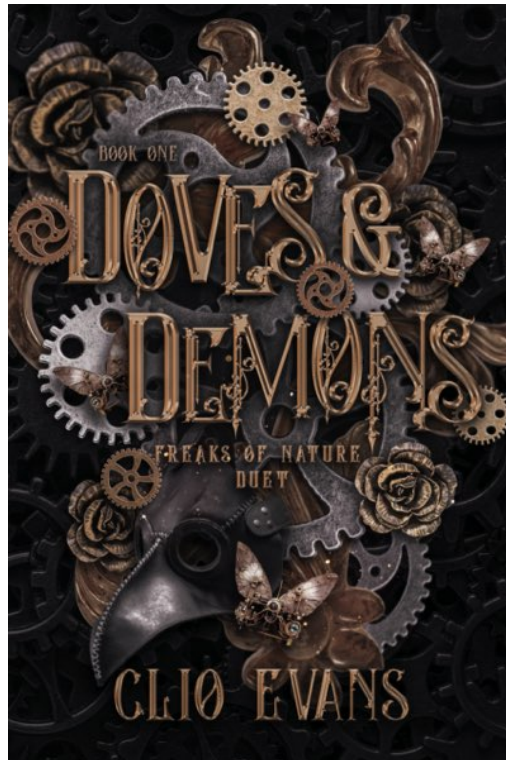
My thoughts were clouded, but I was still able to form words. “Can we start again now?” I asked.

He laughed and scooped me up into his arms, always gentle with me. Then, he cradled me against his chest as he began to walk, all the while looking down at me.

“When we get to our home, yes. All of Bitu will know you are mine.”

“You promise?”

He grinned, his fangs flashing in the moonlight. “I promise.”



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About the Author

Hello Creatures 😊

My name is Clio Evans and I am so excited to introduce myself to you! I'm a lover of all things that go bump in the night👁️, fancy peens👁️, coffee☕, and chocolate 🍫

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Troll hunter Bradoc never envisioned marrying a human, but that's the prize he won when he and his tribe conducted their latest raid. He's happy with his choice: a forthright, pretty woman. But happiness doesn't last for long; under the cover of a vicious squall, the neighboring trolls initiate an attack of their own. Bradoc and Oaklyn are stuck on the mountain in the middle of the raging storm, facing not only the weather, but also the thunderous culture clash between them.

With no middle ground between them, is it possible for two people from such vastly different worlds to find their happily-ever-after, or will the storm of emotions between them be their undoing?

Tropes and potential triggers include kidnapping and forced marriage. Please read at your own risk.



OAKLYN

“THERE’S A WITCH’S COTTAGE IN THE WOODS.”

My roommate Adria looks up from the book she’s reading.

“What?”

“I found it when I was hiking. I mean, I don’t know if a witch actually built it. It could have been a fairy or an old man or who knows what. All I know for sure is that the perfect cottage exists, it seems magical, and I want it. No shade to this beautiful apartment we share.”

Adria grins. Our apartment is cute for what it is, but kinda small for two people,

especially one who longs for a big yard instead of a tiny balcony. “Is it for sale?”

I shrug. “Not that I know of, but it doesn’t look lived-in either. It’s not dilapidated or anything. It just has that air of

abandonment to it. But it's perfect, with wildflowers in the yard and an herb garden on one side. Isolated enough for privacy, but not so far from town as to be *totally* inconvenient. I tried looking it up online, but it's not like it has an address. It's just plonked in the middle of a clearing in the woods, partway up the mountain."

"Hmm," Adria says. "You should talk to Laia Tahiri about it."

"Who?"

"Laia Tahiri. She's the best real estate agent in town, over at McCray's Realty. Remember, she took it over after Dave McCray retired, though I don't know why she kept the name." Adria purses her lips thoughtfully. "Anyway, if anyone can find out more about your magic cottage, it would be her." She plucks a book from the never-ending pile at her side and hands it to me. "By the way, this came into the store today. I thought you'd like it."

It's a lovely hardbound coffee table book with *Haven's Hollow: Legends and Lore* embossed in gold print. The cover features Lake Erie and has beautiful sparkling little pixies scattered through the trees. It reminds me of *Enchanted Forest*, my favorite board game as a kid.

"Ooh, I can't wait to dive into this one!" I say. "You are the best, Adria Shah. And good idea on the Laia Tahiri thing. I'll give her a call and see if she knows anything about it. I don't know how you research a property that doesn't have an obvious address, but she probably does."

Adria sticks a bookmark in her novel. As the owner of The Novel Nook, she'd never be caught dogearing one. "Other than that, any plans for your vacation?"

I have an unexpected week off from Queen of Tarts, thanks to covering for my boss while she was dealing with an emergency. I don't know all the details—Libra is pretty private—but I do know a guy died and Libra went through some shit. I told her I didn't need a whole week off, but she insisted, and you know what they say about a gift horse (although—what the hell even is a gift horse?).

“I think I'm going to do a hiking/camping thing on the mountain,” I say.

Adria smirks. “Call it that if you like, but we both know what it is: amateur cryptozoologist at work.”

I shrug. “I am what I am. And besides, it's not like it's a field you can go pro in.” I give the book on my lap a thump.

“Besides, this is just more evidence that the folk were here once. And maybe still are! I'm gonna find something one of these days.”

“More power to you,” she says. “Me, I'm perfectly content to read about mythical monsters, rather than meeting one.”

I'm not sure what to say to that. Adria doesn't know about my family's heritage, and it's not something I'm eager to bring up. Not that I really think it would cause a rift between us, but... you never know.

As far as I can tell, she's not keen on the mythical and the magical. Which is why it's weird she's chosen to live here, in Haven's Hollow. The mayor has pointed ears, for heaven's sake!

Griffin and the rest of the Bishops are human, but somewhere way back when, an elf dabbled in the family gene pool. To this day, they all have super blond hair, wildly blue eyes, and adorably peaked ear tips. Of course, they blame it on some

quirk of DNA, which I guess it technically is, but certainly not in the way they're trying to suggest.

All the same, the Bishops don't seem to bother Adria in the least, so she might not care about my slightly more-than-human ancestry either. But just to be safe, I keep my mouth shut about it.

"Anyway," I say. "I'm heading out early in the morning and I plan to be gone for several days. There's no phone reception up there, so I'll be incommunicado. But I've packed plenty of essentials."

"Okay. I trust that you know what you're doing. Just be careful. My weather app is saying we could get some heavy storms for the next week or so."

I quirk a brow. It's been sunny and beautiful for the past ten days. "Well, I guess I'll have to cross my fingers that the app is wrong and the good weather holds out. But if not, I have an umbrella and a poncho. And I can always come home early if I get rained out."

Adria nods. "Happy monster hunting. I hope you catch a big one."



OAKLYN

I'm up before dawn the next day, well before Adria has even begun stirring. I grab coffee and a quick breakfast of avocado toast and berries, then put my pack and my tent in my Jeep. There's a general parking area at the base of one of the

mountains where several trails begin, and lots of people leave their vehicles there.

The signs make it clear that you're supposed to stick to the marked paths; the trails have varying levels of difficulty, so there's a little something for everyone.

The postings are funny, saying things like *Caution, up there be dragons* and *Danger, watch for falling orcs*. Notices and silly puns that play into the town's monster lore, but are really meant to keep people safe from mudslides or whatever. As always, I ignore them. I've never been a rule-follower, and I don't want to go where there will be a ton of people.

I snag my gear and start with one of the marked paths, just to get me about a quarter of the way up, before I diverge. I'm an experienced hiker, and a few rocks and bushes aren't enough to slow me down.

I grab a piece of chalk from my pack; I can use it to mark trees along the way, so I don't get lost. I'm a natural in the woods and I never lose my way, but I still do it as a precaution.

The air gets chillier as I ascend, but the sun and challenge of the hike keeps me warm. It's a lovely day, with a slight breeze that keeps me from getting too sweaty. By late afternoon, when I'm ready to stop, I'm well and truly out of civilization. Far beyond any of the marked trails and higher than I usually go on the mountain.

I find a nice clearing in some evergreens and decide to set up camp. It doesn't take long; I've done this plenty of times and I don't need much. Putting up my tent is simple, and then it's pretty much a matter of rolling out my sleeping bag and getting settled. If it were colder, I'd gather some wood for a fire, but I don't think it will be necessary tonight.

I eat a simple meal—nuts, a banana, a sandwich—then crawl into the tent. I grab my book light and the small, battered field guide to mountain and forest folk that I always keep in my pack.

After all, there's a reason I'm hiking way off trail, and it's not because I don't like people. It's because I'm searching for cryptids, and even though I have this book memorized, it never hurts to remind myself exactly what kind of creatures might be roaming around out here.



BRADOC

“How many of you are on your first raid?” I ask, eyeing the males lined up before me. There are fifteen of us; we make a decent-sized party, if not as large of one as I would like. Two hands go up and I nod. It's Ekon and Tizane, young twins. They are tall and strong for their age, though, and have demonstrated good instincts. I'm not worried about their skill in this.

“We go under the cover of night,” I remind the group. “We will take all that we can: food, livestock, and most especially, the females. This is a bride hunt more than anything. Arm yourselves well and do not forget shielding. The Galkaj tribe will be furious and savage at our attack. We have only our skills and the element of surprise in our favor.”

It is never wise to go into battle with arrogance. Confidence, yes; we must believe that we will succeed. We are proud

warriors, but so are our enemies. Cockiness could be our downfall. It is better to be wary and alert.

“Kurzol has made it clear that he expects at least three brides to be captured in this hunt.” I relay our tribe leader’s command. “Those who demonstrate the most prowess tonight will have their pick of female.”

The men murmur among themselves; this is a prize, indeed. Troll females are notoriously rare, and our tribe has been dwindling in number because we lack wives. It’s not unheard of to marry outside our species; in fact, it’s sometimes required for our survival.

But Kurzol is a proud old troll, and he wants our tribe, the Kalzak, to remain as pure as possible. Which is why he willing to take risks like tonight’s raid.

I don’t mention that I anticipate that I will be the most successful warrior tonight. There is a reason I am the tribe’s alpha hunter and raid leader, after all.

But I am in no rush to take a wife, and there are older males in this group who have waited longer. Rokahn, for example. He is nearly forty winters old, and longs for sons of his own. Rokahn is a true friend to me, and I will see him wed if it is the last thing I do in this world.

“Prepare yourselves. We reconvene here at dusk,” I tell the group, allowing them to disperse. Raids are less common these days than they once were—trolls in general are less common than we once were—so hopefully the Galkaj tribe won’t be expecting us.

Part of me is pained by the idea of attacking other trolls, since our numbers are falling, but Kurzol’s word is final.



BRADOC

My men are waiting, armed and ready, when darkness falls. I give them a nod and move swiftly into the forest, heading northeast toward the Galkaj village. It's several miles away, but they're apt to have scouts patrolling in wide perimeters—we certainly do—so we'll need to remain silent and invisible for as long as possible.

It's not long before we enter a clearing that shows obvious signs of habitation. But not by trolls; the belongings are clearly human. I hold up a hand, signaling for my men to stop, and wait, listening carefully.

Humans are tricky creatures. They're small and physically unthreatening, but they have dangerous technology. The men serve no purpose for us, other than food. But the women... well, trolls can always use females of a compatible species. If the human—or humans—in this clearing are women, we would be wise to take them with us.

There's a low rasp that's almost drowned out by the droning of the night insects. I watch carefully, and sure enough, a figure creeps out of the tent and into the trees. It slips into the shadows and I lose track of it, but not before spotting its distinctly feminine shape.

“Movement!” I call out to the men.

“What is it?” responds Tizane.

“A human female! We must capture her, but do not harm her. Fan out!”

Larzac, a seasoned hunter, looks inside the tent. “There’s no one here,” he calls out.

“Everyone be still. We will wait and see what happens,” I command.

Then men obey, freezing in place, not so much as rustling a leaf. But the woman is clever, and even with us melting into the darkness, she does not reveal her hiding place.

She is a cunning foe, something I appreciate and respect.

Eventually, I give Larzac an order. “Lead the group through to the trees on the other side. I’ll bring up the rear.”

The human is somehow blending into the trees, and she’s doing an excellent job of it. But I’m a decorated hunter in my clan, and there is no prey that can hide from me for long. I have skill and I have patience, and between the two, I will capture this prize.



OAKLYN

I’m awakened by the sound of whispered voices. They’re quiet enough that they wouldn’t wake most people, but I’m a light sleeper with extra sensitive hearing.

I slowly slide out of my sleeping bag and press my ear to the tent, my heart racing. There’s no way to unzip the tent silently, so I’m trapped. I’m parked in the middle of the clearing;

there's no way whoever is out there could miss me. Maybe they'll just leave me alone, but it's the middle of the night, so whoever these people are, they aren't your average hikers.

Sweat beads along my brow as I breathe as silently as I can, listening carefully. I only hear one voice, distinctly male, and it sounds like it's giving directions, though I don't recognize the language.

My stomach sinks when I hear another male voice respond.

Well, shit. I'm sure they've seen me, so there's no point in being quiet now. I unzip the tent with lightning speed and fling myself out of it.

A voice calls out, in a raspy guttural language I don't understand. Another voice replies; they're all around me, surrounding the clearing.

My heartbeat ratchets up another notch as I step on a twig. It snaps, impossibly loud, and the men surrounding me suddenly go quiet.

In a panic, I wrap my arms around the nearest tree and send a prayer to my ancestors.

They were dryads, and while I don't have much of their magic, maybe I can blend into this tree well enough that these men won't see me. In the old myths, this was one way to escape dangerous men; maybe it still is.

Please, please let me become one with this tree.

From my perspective outside the tent, I can at least get a better idea of what's happening and how many of them there are. It's dark, but I see at least four men searching the clearing, though they aren't carrying flashlights.

Searching in the dark seems pointless, but then again, they don't seem to be having any more issues seeing than I am. My hearing and eyesight are dryad blessings, which leaves me wondering: who—or what—are these men?

As I watch, a large shape pokes its head into my tent and then backs out a moment later. It says something, presumably that I'm not in the tent.

The first voice, the deepest one, responds. The owner of the voice is clearly in charge, and even though I can't understand what's being said, I think I get the gist.

I'm being hunted.

I close my eyes and steady my breathing, willing my pulse to slow down. I feel the change as it comes over me, slow and prickly. This might save my life, but it's not especially comfortable. My skin tightens as it turns to bark, and I feel the tug on my scalp as my hair becomes leaves.

My face freezes in place, my features becoming knots in the wood. My breath and heartbeat slow even more, until they are imperceptible. I'm completely immobilized, part of this tree. I'll stay like this as long as I have to.

The men, who are huge, hulking shapes in the dark, search thoroughly, but of course they don't find me. Finally, the leader calls off the search and they move out of the clearing, disappearing into the woods.

I wait several minutes, ears pricked for the smallest sound: a snapping twig, a crunched leaf. When there's nothing, I slowly let go of the magic enfolding me, regaining my human shape.

With a sigh, I step away from the tree and make my way back to the tent. I'm almost to the entrance when a massive, heavy

hand slaps across my mouth and an arm as thick as an oak trunk bands across my torso.

“Gotcha,” whispers a hot voice in my ear.



BRADOC

BRINGING A CAPTIVE WITH ME INTO ENEMY TERRITORY WAS not part of the plan, but when the forest offers up a gift, one takes it. The human woman was simply there for the plucking, and I'm certain she can be of use to us in one way or another. As a bride, perhaps, or simply an extra pair of hands around the village. Or, if she proves too troublesome, we can store her with the rest of the captive game until the seasonal slaughter.

Trolls don't often eat humans these days, but when the pickings are slim, we aren't choosy. Better to eat what we can than to starve in the lean, cold months.

Capturing this particular human was almost...fun. She proved cunning and elusive, disappearing into the trees and evading all of my men. It was only by staying behind, silent and watchful, that I was able to locate her hiding place and catch

her by surprise. I bind her hands behind her back and tie a gag around her mouth to keep her quiet.

“Mmmrph!” she splutters as I carry her deeper into the forest, where my men wait. Whatever she is saying is muffled by the gag, but I don’t particularly care to hear her protests at the moment.

“Be silent,” I warn her. “There are enemies nearby, and if they hear you, we’ll all be killed. If you want to live, you will make no noise. Do you understand?”

She glares at me, but nods and raises her hand slightly. I lower the gag enough for her to speak.

“Who are you?” she hisses. “Where are you taking me?”

“My name is Bradoc. And you’ll find out everything else soon enough.” I put the gag back in place as she watches me through narrowed, emerald-green eyes.



OAKLYN

What the hell is that supposed to mean?!

His accent is rough, but lucky for me, his English is perfectly fine and I have no problem understanding him. Unfortunately, I’m not at all sure I want to know what ‘everything else’ entails, given that the part that’s already been revealed includes taking me against my will and binding and gagging me. If that’s the part Bradoc is cool with me knowing, then what the hell else is yet to come?

We've caught up to the rest of his group—at least, I assume they're his men and not the aforementioned enemies—and it's clear I'm surrounded by a bunch of hulking males who are definitely not human, which is as much as I can make up in the absolute blackness that is a thick forest in the dead of night.

My heartbeat speeds up, a mix of excitement, trepidation, and a whole boatload of adrenaline. I'm not exactly scared, or at least, not entirely.

I came to the mountain to find cryptids, and holy shit, it looks like I succeeded, which is exciting as hell. I'm stoked. However, I am also *extremely* annoyed about being kidnapped. And pretty concerned about what a dozen monster men might decide to do with me.

It's only a small comfort that Bradoc doesn't seem to want me dead, since he told me to keep quiet if I wanted to live. But he probably only said that to protect himself and his men, to prevent me from alerting the enemies to their presence. For all I know, *his* enemies could well be *my* friends. Or at least people who would be willing to untie me.

But I'm not going to count on that, not before I at least have some idea who they are. So for the moment, I'm stuck.

Bradoc keeps me close, and it's clear to me that while my night vision is better than most people's, it's not as good as his. He keeps me from tripping over rocks and getting smacked by branches, but he never says a word. In fact, none of them do. They're totally silent, moving through the forest like ghosts, and I can't help but wonder where we're going.

Before long, the trees thin out and a small village appears. It reminds me of something from a medieval story book: huts with thatched roofs, small pens for livestock, larger buildings

that might house big animals or grain or something. It's quaint, with smoke coming out of some of the chimneys.

Bradoc leads me to a smallish tree and ties me to it. "Stay here," he whispers, like he's giving me a choice. "And no matter what, stay quiet."

He says something to his men in their guttural language, and all of them—I count sixteen, including Bradoc—pull out weapons. Axes, bows, swords...it's like an entire old-fashioned armory.

"What are you doing?" I hiss around the gag, but it comes out garbled and they all ignore me, instead creeping into the village and taking up positions around the various huts. On silent feet, they slip into the homes, and it doesn't take long for shouting to erupt. Men come pouring out of the huts, giant males like the ones who brought me here, armed just as well.

Holy hell, this is some kind of raid. In the dark, they all sort of look alike, giant horned males with weapons, and I lose track of Bradoc and his allies. It doesn't take long for things to erupt into full-blown mayhem.

There's screaming, the bellowing of animals, and even a small fire that erupts in the middle of the village. Huge, dark figures run to and fro, occasionally falling to the ground with sickening thuds as weapons find their targets.

It lasts maybe half an hour or so; the villagers were unprepared for the arrival of Bradoc and his men, who had a clear advantage. One of them snuffed out the fire before things got too out of control, but even without its flickering light, I can see bodies lying on the ground. I have no idea if they're alive or dead.

Bradoc and his party return to me with three bound females in tow, along with some miscellaneous farm animals and a few deer. The women are obviously the same species as these males; though shorter than the men, they absolutely dwarf me.

Without a word, Bradoc unties me from the tree and begins marching me back through the forest, the rest of our party close behind. Thanks to our proximity, I can feel the sweat on his arm as it guides me. His skin feels clammy, and his breathing is more labored than I would have expected.

I wonder if he was wounded in the raid, but with the gag in my mouth, I can't ask. So instead, I march along in silence, wondering where we're going. It takes ages before we reach our destination, which is a village similar to the one they just attacked.

One of the men takes the animals to a small barn, while Bradoc herds the other women and me to a small hut. He says something in their shared language, and the women glare at him. Then he turns to me.

“You'll spend the night here with the other captives. Soon someone will choose you for a wife.”

He turns and stalks away, leaving me to stare in horror at his retreating back. Finding cryptids was one thing. Going on an adventure was something else.

But *marrying* one? Not gonna happen.



OAKLYN

The night is long and uncomfortable, bound as I am. My back and knees ache, and when Bradoc returns just after daybreak, I'm actually happy to see him. Maybe now he'll untie me.

But when I catch a good look at him, it's obvious that I'm not the only one feeling rough. His skin is pasty and clammy than before, with an odd greenish tint. Sweat beads his brow, and his breathing is labored, almost wet-sounding.

He's shirtless, which not only reveals skin crisscrossed with scars, but also shows off the fresh, bloody wound on his chest, which is obviously festering. Its edges are ragged, and little red lines radiate out from it, a sure sign of infection. Worse, I can smell it from here.

I make a noise and point to my gag, and with a sigh, he removes it.

"What is it?" he asks.

"What happened to you? Are you okay?"

He shakes his head. "No. I was struck by a poisoned arrow. It is fast-acting, and there is no cure, leaving me with only days to live. The Galkaj tribe is clever with their concoctions," he says darkly.

I blink at him, taken aback by his frank statement. "I'm sorry, what? You're dying?"

He nods, seemingly unperturbed. "It is a risk we all take, but the raids are necessary. We have acquired game and women, which will give my death meaning."

Well. How very alpha male of him. "You don't have some sort of doctor who can help you?"

"We have a healer," he says, "but there is nothing to be done. As I said, there is no cure for this poison."

I narrow my eyes. One of the biggest advantages to my dryad heritage is my innate knowledge of herbs and medicinal plants. I'm skilled with them, and his wound doesn't look too far gone. Yet.

"I doubt that," I say. "Most poisons can be cured, if your healer knows what they're doing. Which I guess yours doesn't."

He narrows his eyes at me. "You are a healer as well?"

I shrug. "From time to time. It doesn't really come up much." Working in a bakery and café rarely leads to the need for plant-based medicines.

"Can you help me?"

"Probably, but why should I?"

"Because no other member of my tribe speaks your language. If I die, they will not simply let you go. But no one will marry you, either—who would take a wife who cannot understand her husband's commands? Instead, they would throw you in with the rest of the game to be slaughtered. But if you aid me, I will return the favor and ensure you live."

Well. Talk about an offer I can't refuse.

"Fine. I'll try to help. But you'll have to untie me. And I have to go into the forest to forage for plants."

"I will go with you," he says.

"Are you kidding?" I point to the horrid wound. "You are *literally* dying. You can't tromp around the woods with me."

"None of the others will understand you or be able to help you search. Besides, staying here won't change the fact that I'm being poisoned to death. I can die just as easily in the woods as here."

Okaaay. This guy brings pragmatic to a whole new level. Like he seems seriously unbothered about his imminent death. Then again, I guess we never know how we'll react to an unexpected situation.

If someone had told me I'd get kidnapped by wild, non-human mountain people, tied up, and threatened, I would assume that I'd be terrified. But weirdly, I'm still not that scared. More just...oddly fascinated? And annoyed that I haven't found a way to escape yet.

I suppose I could try to run away from Bradoc in the woods, but I have a feeling he'd catch me, even in his weakened state. Besides, I feel oddly compelled to help him, which is kind of irritating. I shouldn't. He fucking kidnapped me. But I'm a sucker for the injured, from birds with broken wings to dogs with mange. To...whatever the hell he is.

Even ill, he's a sight to behold. I'm 5'9" and athletically curvy, but he absolutely dwarfs me. He must be close to eight feet tall, and probably 350 pounds of raw, solid muscle. Not gym muscle either, but the rough-hewn kind that comes from mountain living.

Huge, powerful horns swoop back from his head, small tusks emerge from his generous lips, and his face is lined with intriguing scars, just like his chest.

His pale hair is braided back from his face, revealing pointed ears, but then flows over his shoulders and down his back, an intricate style worthy of a social media influencer. He's battered and fierce, and utterly fascinating.

I meet his gaze; his eyes are such a light gray that they're nearly silver. "I have a question before we do anything. What are you? Your species?"

He tilts his head in curiosity, as if he expected I already knew the answer. “I am a troll, of course. A mountain troll, specifically. I am the alpha warrior of the Kalzak tribe.”

Huh. Okay, then. That seems about right. And technically, I finally succeeded in my whole cryptid search. I have found a whole village of non-humans. Trolls. Who’d have thunk it?

“What do we need to search for?” he asks.

I give my head a shake, trying to clear it of the sense of wonder. “Um. We’ll need echinacea and chamomile if we can find them. And feverfew, from the looks of it. Lean down so I can touch you,” I command.

He raises a brow, but obeys without comment. As I suspected, his forehead is clammy and hot. “Definitely feverfew. Goldenseal would be good if we can find it.” I run through my mental list of herbs, making notes of a few more we should look for.

“Does your village healer have tools?” I ask. “A mortar and pestle? I’ll need to grind the herbs together and make a paste,” I explain.

Bradoc nods. “We will find what you need. First, though, we must search for the plants.”

“You know what we’re getting into, right? It’s not like we’re going to find a clearing where everything I need is merrily growing. These plants have different needs, different preferences. Grow under different conditions. It’ll take a while.”

“I am a skilled hunter. I can track plants as easily as enemies or game. Simply tell me what to look for and we will find it.”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes, since he doesn’t actually seem to be boasting. More like stating a fact. “Fine. But *first* we’re

gonna talk to the village healer and see if they have any of what we need. No sense in searching for something you already have.”

“Very well,” he says with another nod. “You are sensible, human.”

“My name is Oaklyn, by the way.” If I’m going to be helping him, he might as well know what to call me.

“Oaklyn,” he says thoughtfully. “You are named for the tree?”

“Yes,” I say with a nod. I’m not in the mood to explain how I’m descended from dryads and everyone in my family as some sort of tree-like name. “It’s a family thing.”

“I like this,” he says in a decisive tone, smiling at me, and I can’t help but grin back.

“Thanks. I like it too.”

“We will go now,” he says. “I know a place to begin our search.”

As promised, the village healer has some basic herbs and a mortar and pestle, so I have some of what I need. Once that’s confirmed, Bradoc leads me into the woods and higher up the mountain. The trees are dense, with nothing much growing beneath them, thanks to the lack of light.

“We need to find a clearing,” I say, and Bradoc nods.

“That is where we are going,” he says.

We hike another half hour or so, and then all of a sudden, the trees open up to a stunning view. If someone told me this place was the Garden of Eden, I’d believe it.

It’s a meadow full of ferns and wildflowers and herbs, with a crystal-clear pond on one side, fed by a merry little waterfall.

The waterfall is big enough to be impressive, but not so massive that it's roaring and scary. It's the kind you can play in.

"Bradoc, is this water clean?"

He nods. "It's fed from the snowmelts much higher up."

It must be a long stream, because I can't even see the top of the mountains from here. "Perfect. Then we can get started cleaning your wound."

We make our way to the edge of the pond and settle on some rocks. I pull off my tank top—fortunately I'm wearing an olive green sports bra underneath—and dunk it in the water, then carefully dab at the wound on his chest. He grunts at the pain, but doesn't flinch away from my touch.

"This looks bad," I murmur. There's pus mixed in with the blood, giving everything a sort of greenish cast. It stinks, too, which is never a great sign. I wipe away as much as I can, including the scab that's starting to form. I'll need clear access when I apply the medicinal herbs.

"All right," I say when I'm done. "That's as clean as I can get it for now."

"Since we are here, I might as well wash completely," Bradoc says. He rises from the rock and peels off his trousers, which seem to be made of the troll equivalent of buckskin—some sort of dark hide.

I watch without thinking, only to be startled when he reveals that he is very much naked underneath. I shouldn't stare, but of course I *do*, because hello, big naked troll standing in front of me, completely unembarrassed by his nudity.

Horns and pointy ears notwithstanding, he mostly looks like a giant human man, and that doesn't really change when he

takes off his clothes, with one *major* exception. He has two legs lightly dusted with hair, abs that would make a bodybuilder weep with jealousy, and a surprisingly juicy butt.

But it's his cock that catches my eye, for multiple reasons. One, when a guy gets naked in front of you, it's instinct to check it out. Two, it's just as huge as the rest of him. It doesn't quite reach his knees or anything, but it's not that far off. Third, unlike the rest of him, it doesn't look human.

I mean, the shaft seems normal enough, but I can't tell what the tip looks like, because there's a flower-shaped covering hanging over it. Sort of like a limp, open umbrella.

Weirdly, I've seen something like this before. I was watching some nature program once about mating habits of wildlife, and it featured the tapir, a creature native primarily to Central and South America that kind of looks like a cross between an anteater and a hippo.

They were featured on the show because they also have incredibly long penises with a flower flap on the end. Unfortunately, I stopped paying attention to the program, so I never learned why they were like that. Given my current situation, it seems like it might be useful information.

Like, I know he's a troll, and he kidnapped me, and he's dying and everything...but damn, facts are facts: He's really fucking hot and I'm a red-blooded, heterosexual woman. So sue me, I'm super curious about his wang. In other circumstances, I might want to get a little more up close and personal.

However, since these are not those circumstances, I just want to know more for, like, for the sake of information. Right.

"Will you join me?" Bradoc says, and I jerk my head up, cheeks aflame.

“Um,” I say. I would like to rinse off, it’s true. I’m sweaty and sticky and a dip sounds lovely. But it would entail getting naked in front of him, which I’m not exactly itching to do.

Before I make up my mind, Bradoc turns and wades into the water, sinking below its surface and reemerging with water streaming down his excellent hair. He doesn’t seem remotely interested in whether or not I join him. I can’t tell whether that annoys me or not.

“Fuck it,” I mutter. I strip as fast as I can and dash into the water, sinking immediately so that it covers my chest. I scuttle, crablike, until the water deepens and I can stand up all the way.

Unfortunately, I hadn’t realized just how clear this pure mountain water is. It doesn’t cover anything at all, but it’s too late to be modest. The pond is cool and refreshing, so I dunk my head and enjoy myself, even knowing that getting my curls wet will make them shrink now and frizz later.

Instead of joining him for a swim, I probably should have tried to run away. That would have been the sensible thing to do. But I guess I’m not all that sensible, because I promised I would help him and I’m going to keep my word. Ugh. Damn my ethics.

I surface and turn to find him repeatedly dunking his head and then shaking like a dog, apparently trying to give his hair a good rinse. Water droplets cling to his horns and sparkle in the sun, and for the first time, his harsh features are relaxed, making me realize that he’s younger than I initially thought. Probably not more than thirty or so.

Without thinking, I flick my hand and splash him, water smacking him right in the face. He splutters and then stares at me, agape, and I can’t help but giggle. After a moment, his

own smile emerges and he splashes me back, using much more force than necessary.

A big wave comes at me and knocks me backward a bit. I let my head go under, curious how he'll react, and sure enough, he suddenly appears at my side in the water. He snags my waist and hoists me up a bit, holding my head above water.

"I'm sorry."

I laugh. "I'm not. That was fun."

Once again, it takes him a beat to realize that I'm playing with him. When he does, he lets go of me and dives beneath the water. A second later, I feel his giant hands grab my ankles, and then he tugs hard, pulling me under.

I suck in a last-second breath and then we're both submerged, staring at each other through the crystalline liquid. I smile, boop his nose, and then turn, swimming as fast as I can. I was on the swim team in high school, so I'm fairly speedy.

But what Bradoc lacks in speed, he makes up for in sheer power, and it isn't long before he catches me, once again grabbing my ankle. This time he pulls me close, and we hover there, inches apart, treading water.

"So you do know how to have fun," I say, my voice a little husky.

"Of course. I spend most of my time hunting and protecting my tribe, but we also have games," he replies.

I stare up at him, at his eyes that almost match the water and the droplets that sparkle on his lashes. He's still holding me with his big arms and this close, I can smell his natural, woody musk.

My heart picks up speed. If I leaned in just a little, our lips would touch. I start to shift forward and his pupils dilate as I get closer. He leans in too, just a little, until we're only a breath away...

What the hell am I doing? He is a dying troll and I am his kidnap victim.

I clear my throat and wiggle out of his grip.

"Come on. You shouldn't exert yourself. And we need to look for herbs."

I swim to back to the rocks without looking at him, and pull on my clothes even though I'm drenched. I need to focus on finding plants, not thinking about what I almost did.

And worse, why I already regret not doing it.



OAKLYN

IT TAKES ANOTHER FULL DAY OF SEARCHING, BUT I FINALLY round up all the herbs I need, grind them together, and make a paste. Bradoc is with me every step of the way, and when we're not searching, I'm returned to the hut with the kidnapped troll women. By the time I finally rub the paste into his wound, suffusing it with a little dryad magic, he's looking lousy.

"You need rest. Sleep," I tell him.

"I have things I must do," he says.

"And first among them is rest," I reiterate. "Healer's orders. The paste won't work if you run yourself ragged."

He looks annoyed, but he finally nods in acquiescence. "I will sleep now. But I will return tomorrow, with the others. You and the women will be claimed in the afternoon."

Claimed? I do not love the sound of that. “Wait, is this the marriage thing you mentioned?”

“Yes. All of the women will be selected by men of worth. The ceremonies will take place tomorrow night.”

“We’re being married off *tomorrow*?” I can’t keep the horror out of my voice, and Bradoc misinterprets it.

“Do not worry about not being chosen. We need females, even human ones.” He turns to leave. “Now we should both rest.”

I lean against the wall, keeping my distance from the three troll women. They’ve mostly ignored me, talking amongst themselves in their odd troll tongue. I imagine they know what’s about to happen, since it seems to be a tradition among their kind. They don’t seem especially worried about escaping or anything.

But I am.

If I can’t figure a way out of here tonight, I’ll be *married off to a troll*.

As soon as the sun sets, I try to open the door of the hut, but of course it’s barred from the outside. I throw my shoulder against it a few times, just in case, but it doesn’t budge. I even try to appeal to the other women—if we all hit it at the same time, it might give, because let’s face it, they are big ladies—but they either don’t understand me or don’t care to try.

They just sort of grunt and curl up to sleep. Maybe I have some sort of negative mental stereotype of trolls fed to me by fairy tales, but I thought these women would have more... verve. More fire. More desire to get the fuck out of this hut. Instead they just seem large and sort of placid, like cows.

Maybe that’s their nature, or maybe they recognize the futility of my efforts. Whatever the reason, they don’t help and the

door doesn't budge.

By the time the sun rises, I'm still sitting on the floor of the hut, back against the wall as I wonder how to extricate myself from this mess.

I take comfort in knowing that even if I somehow end up involved in a wedding, I can still escape later. I mean, it's not like it would be legally binding. I could still find a way down the mountain and back to Haven's Hollow and my real life. It wouldn't be that hard to pretend my troll husband doesn't exist.

I snort aloud at that thought. A few days ago, I was an enthusiastic cryptozoologist determined to wander the mountains and find magical folk. I was hoping I might even meet a full-blooded dryad and learn more about myself.

Instead, it looks like I will have *an actual troll husband*. Talk about more than I bargained for. Nothing in any of my books mentioned this as a possibility.

And some wedding day this will be. I'm in bloodstained hiking clothes and I'm tired, hungry, and dirty. Worst of all, I stink, even after my swim in a beautiful mountain pool.

Not exactly my bridal dream, but I guess it doesn't matter, since this will hardly be a real wedding. If it happens at all. Bradoc guaranteed someone would choose me, but I wouldn't be surprised if they tossed me in a livestock pen and forgot about me until slaughter day.

The morning passes slowly in the hut. The troll women do what they always do—chat with each other and ignore me—and I mostly kill time by trying to imagine what a troll wedding might be like.

I suspect some sort of large, savage feast will be involved. Maybe the slaughter of a young deer or something. And will we be married as a group, or will we each get an individual ceremony? Will the whole village come to witness the event?

By the time we're released several hours later, my tension in through the roof. Bradoc is there to let us out, along with some of the other troll men. He speaks to the troll females in their shared language, and the women don't seem to react much. They nod and file out of the hut calmly, evidently resigned to their fates.

Bradoc leads us to a small platform thing in the middle of the village, like a speaking dais. The four of us are paraded up there in front of all and sundry, while a handful of male trolls stand in the middle of the crowd. Bradoc stands behind me. "I will translate for you," he says in a low voice.

A man steps forward toward the platform. He's not as tall as Bradoc, and seems a bit older. Still, he looks extremely strong and fit, with light brown hair that is braided back from his scalp.

"That is Rokahn," Bradoc says. "He has been waiting for a wife for many seasons. I promised him his pick of the women from this raid."

Rokahn speaks and points to the troll woman on my left. She's tall, of course, with a tumble of black hair and dark eyes. The horns on her head are long and delicate; I could see how she might be considered a beauty among her kind.

She nods at her selection and says something, then steps off the platform and joins Rokahn. I guess the process really is that simple. Two other troll men step up in succession and claim the remaining troll women, leaving me the lone female on the dais.

“Now what?” I quietly ask Bradoc.

He steps around me and places his hand on my shoulder while addressing the crowd. “I have claimed you,” he says to me when he’s finished speaking to his people. “You were not chosen by the others because I had already made my intentions known. As alpha hunter and leader of the most recent raid, I was given first pick. I told the others you were mine.”

My belly does a weird flip at the possessiveness in his tone. “Why? When you could have had a troll wife?”

“I promised you that I would repay you for healing me,” he says. “My wound has already improved. You saved my life, so I returned the favor.”

I nod, feeling strangely disappointed. He chose me out of obligation, not because he likes me or thinks I’m interesting or something. I shake my head, mentally berating myself. What a ridiculous thing to be upset about.

“Come,” Bradoc says, leading me off the platform. “We must make preparations.”

“Where are we going?”

“My cabin,” he says.

Interesting. I have to admit, I’m curious about Bradoc’s home. Despite myself, I’m curious about him in general, and seeing where he lives might tell me more about him.

The interior of the cabin is simple and stark, with rustic furnishings: some rough-hewn seating carved from fallen trees, a pallet stuffed with feathers to serve as a bed, some hides in front of a basic fireplace, and a large metal tub in one corner.

Steam rises from the water in it, which is interesting, because I don't spy any plumbing. Bradoc must have somehow heated the water elsewhere and filled the tub by hand.

Flowers and fragrant herbs float on the surface, and I have to admit, it looks pretty inviting. I've always loved swimming and bathing, and after not having had a proper shower in several days—swimming in a mountain pool notwithstanding—I'm eager to climb in.

"I must bathe you," Bradoc says, and I turn to him in surprise.

"What?"

"It is part of the wedding ritual. The husband bathes, adorns, and dresses his wife for the wedding ceremony."

"Uh, what exactly does that entail?" I ask.

"I wash you from head to toe, until your skin and hair are soft and clean. Then I paint my tribe's symbols on your body, to show that you have joined with us. After that, I dress you in traditional Kalzak wedding garb. I will weave flowers into your hair, and then, when you are properly prepared, we will undertake our ceremony."

Huh. Okay. That seems like a lot of very *intimate* preparation.

"And what about me? Do I...prepare you in some way?"

He shrugs. "It is not tradition, but if you wish to bathe and dress me, and help me with the traditional hairstyle, I will not object."

"And when do we start?"

"Now," he says. "First, I will help you undress."

Whoa. Hold up. I mean yes, I've seen him naked and he saw more of me than I bargained for, but it doesn't mean I'm cool with just dropping trou right here and now. "I'm not too sure

about all this,” I say. “Can’t we skip all these traditions? I’ll just pop on whatever clothes you want and we can go from there?”

“No,” Bradoc says firmly. “I will do all I can to make you comfortable, but we will honor the wedding traditions of my tribe. It would be disgraceful for me to do otherwise. I would lose my position among my people.”

Well, heavens forfend, we can’t have that. I remind myself yet again that I can always run away when I get the chance and pretend this wedding fiasco never happened. In the meantime, it’s best that I play along. Which I guess means getting naked.

“All right,” I say, taking a deep, steadying breath. “Let’s begin.”

He steps in front of me, meeting my gaze and placing his hands on my shoulders. In a low voice, he says something in his language, then gently slides his big palms down my bare arms, over my wrists, and across the backs of my hands. I suppress a little shiver at the sensation.

Without breaking eye contact, and moving with exquisite slowness, he kneels down and carefully unlaces each of my boots, drawing them and my socks off with almost delicate care, caressing my feet in the process. Then he undoes the button on my pants, sliding them, along with my undies, down just as carefully, lifting my left leg and then my right to pull them off without upsetting my balance.

“I have chosen well,” he murmurs.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

He smiles, revealing his even teeth and small tusks. “You are beautiful. I have never paid much attention to human women

before, but you are small and dainty. You have good proportions. Lovely.”

I laugh to myself. No one has ever called me dainty before. I’m too tall and curvy. But compared to him, I’m practically a tiny little doll. “Thank you,” I say.

He nods and stands again, hands encircling my rib cage. “I will finish undressing you now.”

He slides my tank top up and over my head, somehow managing not to tangle it in my curls. Then he slips off my bra, leaving me naked before him. My heart is pounding and I’m breathing too fast, but I don’t know why. I’m not scared, or even all that uncomfortable.

Moving so swiftly I don’t see it coming, he scoops me up and carries me to the tub, carefully lowering me into the steaming, scented water. My muscles immediately sigh in relief—after all, I’ve been sleeping on the floor of a wooden hut for the past few nights.

I go limp, letting myself sink under the water. Bradoc settles behind me, rubbing my shoulders with strong, nimble fingers. It’s the most glorious thing I’ve ever felt, and he absolutely missed his calling as a massage therapist.

“Oh my lord,” I sigh. “That’s magical.”

“You enjoy it?”

“Mm-hmmm.” Between the hot water and the massage, I can barely form words. My eyes drift close as I sink deeper into relaxation.

For such a big creature, Bradoc is remarkably capable of moving with slowness and tenderness. He proved it when he disrobed me, and proves it again as he begins to wash me, starting at my shoulders and gently working his way down my

right arm, all the way to the palm and fingertips, which gives me a flippy sensation in my belly. He repeats it with my left arm, and then moves to my collarbone.

I find myself holding my breath, and force it out in a whoosh. Despite my reservations about this whole process, there's something incredibly erotic about being washed by a careful man.

With a studious intensity, he moves the washcloth over my breasts and nipples, making me gasp, then down my torso and across my belly, dipping into my navel. He slides down one leg, then the other, lavishing attention on each toe. He ignores the space between my legs, and I can't decide if I'm grateful or furious.

"I need to do your back," he says in a low voice, so I shift.

He follows the same route, starting at my shoulders and ending at my buttocks, before shifting me again and dunking my hair. He massages my scalp and works the fragrant water through each curl. He's remarkably thorough and patient, not skipping a single body part.

By the time he stops, my nipples are hard, my belly is swooping, and I'm totally confused about how I feel.

"Stand," he orders.

I do, and he helps me out of the tub and dries me off. Once I'm mostly dry, he covers my skin in an oil that smells like tuberose and then begins to decorate my skin with paints made from crushed flowers.

"I wish I had green," he says. "Your eyes are the color of grass in a meadow. But blue and white will have to do."

I smile to myself. Despite English being his second language, his command of it is both perfect and oddly poetic.

“How is it you speak my language when no one else in your village does?”

“It is my duty,” he explains. “As alpha hunter for my tribe, I have spent time observing humans. Learning your language and customs. It isn’t often we capture your kind during raids, but when we do, you become my responsibility.”

“You’ve taken other human women before?”

“Only one other woman. My tribesman Yankaz chose her as wife and they eventually left the village. We have not seen either of them in many seasons.”

“Why did they leave?”

He shrugs. “I do not know. Perhaps they made a home with another tribe. That is not common, but it does sometimes happen.”

“What’s going to happen to me? Once we’re married, that is.”

“What do you mean? You will be my wife. It is a place of honor in the tribe. We will live together in this cabin and have children.”

“But Bradoc, I have a life with humans. A job, friends, an apartment. I can’t just stay here and be your wife, popping out kids like a broodmare. I’m not a prize you collected.”

“That is exactly what you are.” He looks up, his silvery gaze meeting mine. The possessiveness in his expression is enough to take my breath away. “You are mine. I will not let you go.”

He chooses that moment to paint a circle around my right areola, distracting me from the protest I was about to lodge. He repeats it on the left, then draws a line down from my breastbone to my navel.

I fall silent, mesmerized by the soft brushstrokes as he feathers them across my skin. A few dots here, an intricate whorl there, a pattern along my cheekbones. At long last, he sets the brush down and rises, taking a step back and inspecting his work.

“Do I pass muster?” I ask.

He nods. “Now I must attend to your hair.”

I wince, because I know it’s going to dry all frizzy and huge, and totally ruin the bridal look he’s working so hard to create.

But he seems undaunted, carefully squeezing the water out of my curls and reshaping them. He doesn’t ask me about the streaks in my hair; this month they’re the same green as my eyes. He sections off a few areas and begins braiding them, working wildflowers into the plaits as he goes. By the time he’s finished, my hair is still wet, but a check in the mirror shows that the curls are tamed and the flowers frame my face prettily.

“Now for your dress,” he says. He pulls a simple, rough dress from a carved chest. It’s sage green, and obviously meant for a troll female, because when he slips it over me, it’s huge. It bags at the waist, the long sleeves swallow my hands, and the hem pools around my feet.

“Uh, it doesn’t really fit,” I point out.

He chuckles. “No, but it does not matter. It will suffice for the ceremony, and then you will take it off again.”

“I will?”

“Of course. After we wed, we will feast and then return here to celebrate our union.”

“And exactly how do we celebrate?”

A smile teases his lips. “I will show you when the time comes.”

He steps back and removes his own clothes, once again surprising me with how comfortable he is getting naked in front of a virtual stranger, even if I am about to become his wife. He climbs into the tub and bathes himself as thoroughly as he did me, then dries off and pulls his own wedding attire out of the chest.

It’s as simple as mine, a loose tunic and another version of the hide trousers he always wears.

“Do you wish to help me with my hair?”

“Sure,” I say. “If you sit down so I can reach it, that is.” He sits on a wooden chair and I stand behind him, uncertain of how to handle his hair, which is thickety-thick and reaches nearly to his waist. “What do I do?”

He explains the appropriate style, and I do my best to create it. I French braid a chunk down the center of his head, and then plait all the remaining pieces on the sides.

Once those are done, I pull them back and affix them to the main braid, so his hair is all swept back from his face, really emphasizing his high cheekbones and strong jaw.

While I prefer his wilder, more casual look, I have to admit, Formal Bradoc is quite a sight. “You look amazing,” I tell him.

“All the credit goes to you,” he says, which is gallant but laughable. All I did was braid his hair. Everything else—the groom attire, the chiseled features, the stubble, the muscles—it’s all him.

“Come,” he says. “We must go.”

I expect to return the dais/stage thing in the middle of the village, but we don't. Instead, he leads me to a building off to one side, larger than the others. There are rough benches outside, and he sits on one.

"We wait here for our turn," he explains, so I sit next to him.

After a few minutes, a couple—one of the captive troll women and the male who claimed her—exits the building, dressed similarly to the way we are, although the female's dress fits her better. Hers is also a dark gray, in contrast to my light green one.

The male says something to Bradoc, who stands with a nod. "It is our turn," he says to me, extending a hand to help me up.

I swallow hard. This whole time, I've just been going with the flow to keep myself from focusing on what was about to happen. But I can't pretend anymore. There's no way out of this, and in a few minutes, I'm going to be married.

Married.

United forever in matrimony.

To a troll.

A freaking, non-human, has-horns-and-tusks *troll*.

What is my life?

"Tell me again why you chose me," I demand, planting my feet. He could drag me into the building if he wanted to, but I'm hoping he won't. At least, not before he answers my question.

He looks puzzled. "I have told you. I owe you my life. I am the only one who can communicate with you. I did not wish for you to become livestock."

Oh, yay. The romantic declarations every bride wants to hear. “Why would you care, though? You don’t even know me.”

He frowns, looking more puzzled than ever. “Honor is important to trolls. I would not let the one who saved me die. But more than that, I think you are interesting. I have never been opposed to a union with a human. I think we are well suited, and of course, we will coe to know each other.”

“If it’s about honor, why not let me go? That would be an easier way to repay me,” I point out.

“I told you before, that is not an option. You are mine. You are meant to be my wife. Now, come. We must go inside.”

He gives my arm a little tug and I give in with a sigh.

The lighting in the building is dim, with just a few torches mounted to the walls so we can see. It seems to be the troll version of a chapel, though there are no pews. But there is an altar of sorts, and an older troll man stands at it, waiting for us.

“That is Kurzol,” Bradoc says in a low voice. “The leader of our tribe. He will perform the ceremony.”

We stop before the altar and Bradoc kneels, so I follow suit. Kurzol says something in the troll language, and Bradoc responds, then translates. “He asks if I am sure I wish to claim you has my wife. I told him yes.”

I wonder if I’ll be asked if I want to take Bradoc as my husband, but I have my doubts. I don’t seem to have many rights in this whole thing.

“I will tell you what to say and when to say it,” Bradoc tells me.

Kurzol launches into a speech that I don’t pay much attention to, given that I can’t understand a word. Eventually, he pauses

and Bradoc says, “*Kala.*”

They both look at me expectantly, and Bradoc gives me a nudge, so I repeat him. “*Kala?*”

Kurzol nods and carries on. After a moment, he asks Bradoc something and my groom responds with “*Moz.*” He gives me another little nudge, so I say it too.

We proceed like that for a few moments, with me answering questions in a language I don’t speak. Then Bradoc takes my left hand in his right, and Kurzol walks in a circle around us three times. He sprinkles scented water over our heads and makes a proclamation, and then Bradoc stands and pulls me up with him. We turn and walk silently out of the chapel.

“Is that it?” I ask when we’re back outside.

“Yes,” he says. “We are now wed by the customs of my tribe, encircled for life by the tribe leader, and blessed by my people. Now we return to my cabin.”



BRADOC

IT DOESN'T QUITE SEEM REAL. AFTER SO MANY SEASONS without a mate, and with the shortage of troll women, I never truly believed I would take a bride. Certainly not so soon. Maybe in my later years, if the opportunity presented itself. But here I am, wed to a delicate human woman with a gift for healing.

I know other members of the tribe were surprised that I claimed Oaklyn. With three troll females to choose from, and the honor of first pick, most of the village assumed I would select Lakana, the beautiful woman that Rokahn wed today.

In truth, if someone had asked me even a season ago which one I would choose, I would have thought it would be Lakana.

But there are things about Oaklyn that fascinate me, from her tiny proportions to the green in her curls to her simple honesty. Not to mention, her willingness to heal me. I would not have

let her become livestock, but I could have prevented that without wedding her.

The simple fact is, I want her.

And tonight, I intend to take her.

It does not take long to reach my cabin, and I can tell that Oaklyn is nervous. I am aware that she doesn't understand our customs and that none of her actions since we met have been by choice. She will come to understand that that is the way for females in this society, but until then, I must proceed with caution.

I think that if I keep her calm and intrigued, and do not give her time to panic, she will cooperate. She likes me, and despite her protests about leaving, I can sense her interest in both me and my tribe. All I need to do is keep her occupied.

Fortunately, I have the perfect idea of how to do that.

"This is your home now," I tell her as we enter my cabin.

"What's mine is yours, by the custom of my people."

"Okay," she says, and there is a wobble of uncertainty in her voice. She is still doubting the situation.

"Are you hungry?" I ask.

She nods. "Starving, actually. I didn't have much to eat when I was confined with the other females, and today has been overwhelming, to say the least."

"Tomorrow night, the village will gather for a banquet to celebrate the new unions. But tonight is reserved for us, for all those who were wed today. We will dine together, share our stories with each other, and then seal our union."

One of her eyebrows shoots up. "Seal our union? What exactly does that mean?"

I know enough about humans to know they are not so different from trolls in this regard. “Physically. We will celebrate our marriage.”

“Are you talking about sex?” she asks.

“Of course. Is that not customary among your people as well?”

She shrugs. “Yeah, I guess. But generally both parties are willing participants in the marriage. I don’t even know you, much less how the hell I ended up in this situation.”

At least she sounds more confused than upset by the situation, which is good. Still, her words puzzle me, and I frown. “Of course. This is why we dine and share our stories. So that we are better acquainted when we join.”

“This is normal for your people? To marry strangers?”

“Yes,” I say. “Troll women are scarce, and their numbers have been dropping for many, many seasons. No one knows why. But there are always more males in a village than females, so we must raid other villages to acquire our wives. The females understand this; they expect to be taken one day. In fact, one female may undergo many marriages over the course of her life, depending on how many raids she experiences. That is simply our way. The only way to get to know one’s mate is after the wedding.”

“Huh,” she says. “That’s wild. So the females that you captured the other day—they could get taken again? By some other tribe? And married off again?”

“Of course. Though it is unlikely. Our tribe has strong defenses, and I am an able warrior. I have trained the males well, and we are capable of defending our women. Sit down,” I tell her, pointing to the table and chairs in the corner. “I will serve you, and we can continue our talk.”

“You serve me, huh? Maybe married life isn’t so bad.” She chuckles, and it pleases me. I want her to be happy.

Our wedding meal is simple, as is the case for all our food. The women of the village baked coarse bread and prepared a thick stew for all of us who wed today, and I bring those to the table, along with two mugs of ale.

“The food is plain but hearty,” I tell her.

“I’m sure it will be fine,” she says. “I’m not picky, and like I said, I’m starving.”

As I set the table, the pleasant, steady patter of rain begins on the roof. “I will light a fire to keep us warm,” I tell her, moving to place logs in the hearth.

She smiles and sits. “Stew, a fire, and a rainy night? Very cozy.”

“I am glad you like it.”

She shrugs. “So far, so good.”

After we eat, I clear the dishes and we settle on the skins in front of the hearth. “Now we tell our stories.”

She has her knees drawn up and her arms wrapped around them; her entire posture suggests that she is tense and uncertain again. “While we talk, perhaps you would like another massage? If you are sore?”

“Oh, I’m definitely sore. The past few days have included a fair amount of hiking, not to mention sleeping on the ground or the floor. My muscles are crying.”

“Lie on your stomach,” I tell her. “I will begin with your back.”

She complies, stretching out in front of the fire. I begin at her shoulders, where her muscles have tightened into knots. I knead them carefully, mindful of how much stronger I am. She is so small and fragile; I must be careful not to harm her.

“What does this alpha status of yours mean?” she asks.

“It means that I am the best tracker, hunter, and raider in my tribe. It is a place of honor and comes with certain benefits. The alpha may have first choice of any game that is collected, for instance. And after a certain age, if the alpha remains unmarried, he gets first pick of a wife, which is what happened with us.”

“How long have you been the alpha?”

I work on a tight muscle in her shoulder, gratified when she makes a little sound of pleasure.

“I was only fifteen seasons old when Balkor, my tribe’s previous alpha, died. Despite my young age, I had proved myself in raids and hunts, and our tribe leader named me Balkor’s successor. I’m thirty seasons now, so I have served in this role for half my life.”

A clap of thunder rolls overhead, loud enough that the lightning must be close.

“What about your family?” she asks, her voice turning drowsy.

“Your parents?”

“I lost them when I was ten seasons, during a raid. My father was killed trying to protect us, and my mother was taken. I never saw her again. The rest of the tribe helped care for me and the other children who were left, but I chose to fend for myself. This is how I gained the skills to become alpha.”

“What about brothers and sisters?”

“No,” I say. “Breeding is challenging for trolls. Having multiple children is uncommon. Not unheard of, but it doesn’t happen for most couples.”

“That’s so sad. So lonely.”

“In some ways,” I say. “Yes, I missed my parents, but the tribe is my family. I was never alone. And now I have you to share my life with.” I work my way down her arm to her hand, which is clenched in a fist. “Relax,” I order, unfolding her fingers and kneading her palm. I can feel her melt beneath my touch, fully giving way to the massage.

“That feels incredible,” she mumbles.

I smile to myself and keep going, working on the other arm and hand. “You have a hard time loosening up,” I note.

“Mmm,” she says, her body going even softer under my touch. “It’s true. I’m kind of a tense person. I like to keep busy, but I also get stressed easily. I’m not great at self-care.”

“Well, that’s no longer a problem. Now that we’re married, I’ll be certain to take care of you. Forever.”



OAKLYN

As wedding nights go, this one is okay so far. The stew was surprisingly tasty, full of beans and vegetables, kind of like the troll version of minestrone.

And honestly, I think Bradoc should consider a career change. He might be a great hunter, but he’s an even better masseur.

He's finding kinks and knots I didn't even know were there.

And speaking of kinks, it turns out I definitely have a thing for big dudes with horns and scars. The massage started out as relaxing, but the longer it goes, the more aroused I'm getting. Those big, hard palms all over me, rubbing away tension?

Hot as fuck.

Now I'm as turned on as I've ever been, squirming underneath his touch as wetness builds between my legs, without even the benefit of undies to hide it.

I think it's safe to say the word "troll" has negative connotations. It either conjures up internet assholes or storybook monsters: giant, bumbling, club-wielding idiots.

Never have I heard the word troll and thought things like: hot, sexy, protector. Never have I wanted a troll to rip off my clothes and take me hard.

Until now.

I'm pretty much ready to consummate the hell out of this marriage, consequences be damned. I'll look into troll divorce rituals in the morning.

The rain is falling hard now, beating down on the cabin's roof, but it's like we're in a fireside bubble, cozy and comfortable and safe from the elements.

I roll over and sit up, meeting Bradoc's gaze. With tentative fingers, I reach out and cup his cheek. His skin is softer than I imagined, though the texture is a bit different than human skin. Thicker, tougher.

He raises his eyebrows, seemingly startled by my touch, which makes me smile. With a deep breath, I lean forward and touch

my lips lightly to his, just grazing his mouth. His lips are warm and soft. Inviting.

I move closer and increase the pressure, fascinated by his contradictions. The toughened scars, the taut muscle, the supple mouth.

He makes a sound low in his throat, a cross between a groan and a growl. The noise pings directly between my legs.

One rough palm comes up to cup my neck, pressing my mouth even harder to his. My lips part of their own accord, and he takes it as an invitation, his tongue invading my mouth and tangling with mine.

His other hand slides around my rib cage and cups my breast, his finger and thumb pinching my nipple through the rough fabric of my wedding dress. I moan, leaning into the touch, which sends a throbbing ache all through my core.

My head tips back as the pleasure swamps me, and Bradoc takes advantage, nuzzling at my neck. The small tusks in his lower jaw scrape against my tender skin deliciously, and then his mouth finds that sensitive spot where my neck meets my shoulder.

And then suddenly, his head snaps up, leaving me confused and bereft.

“Do you hear that?” he asks, his attention shifting from me to something outside.

“Huh?” I ask, still reeling from the pleasure.

“There was a noise outside.”

I listen for a moment, trying to shift my focus from the tingle between my legs to whatever has his attention, but all I hear is

thunder and the pounding of the rain. What started as a simple shower has transformed into an angry, torrential downpour.

“No, I can’t hear anything over the storm,” I say.

Bradoc cocks his head, listening intently. “I’m certain I heard something. Shouting, perhaps?”

I frown. “At this hour?”

He moves away from me and to the door, which he opens carefully. Immediately, he utters a harsh, guttural word in his language; I don’t have to be fluent to recognize it as a curse.

“What is it?” I ask.

He shuts the door and whirls toward me, moving fast. “A raid. The Galkaj getting their revenge, most likely. I didn’t expect them to retaliate so quickly.”

My heart leaps into my throat. “A raid? What do we do?”

Weapons line one wall of the cabin. He grabs both a sword and a bow, then snags a quiver of arrows from where they rest on the floor. “You stay here,” he orders, strapping on the sword. “I must protect the tribe.”

I nod. Every part of me wants to demand that he not leave me here, alone and unprotected while enemy trolls rampage the village. But I know he has higher priorities, a job to do.

He gives me a final look and then dashes out the door, bow already raised.

I’m not sure what to do while I wait, but one thing is certain. If enemies breach this cabin and I have to defend myself or run away, I can’t do it in this giant, heavy dress.

Moving as fast as I can, I yank it off and put my hiking boots and regular clothes back on. They’re dirty, smelly, and torn,

but I have a lot more mobility.

I glance at the remaining weapons on the wall. They're huge and heavy, nothing I could wield with any dexterity in a fight. There's a knife, though, the one Bradoc used to cut the bread during dinner. It's where he left it, drying near the basin where he washed the dishes. It will have to do.

What next?

The fire, I realize. I need to put it out. I don't want to draw any attention to the cabin, and while smoke probably doesn't show through the storm, I don't want to take any chances.

I grab the soup bowls and fill them with the water left in the tub, then toss it into the fireplace. It takes a few rounds, but I finally knock the blaze down to a few glowing embers. Good enough.

I creep to the door and open it a crack, just enough to see what's happening. Even through the tiny opening, I'm buffeted by the intense wind. The storm is wild, like the mountain version of a hurricane.

The gusts are blowing the rain sideways, where it hits my face like needles. Between the rain and the thunder, I can't hear anything, but the continuous flashes of lightning illuminate a terrible scene.

It turns out I *can* see smoke in this weather. Somehow, even with all the rain, several of the buildings in the village are smoldering where the Galkaj trolls tried to set them on fire. They must have had some kind of oil or accelerant to even get the flames going.

Large shapes move in the darkness, but I can't make out who's who, and then, over the cacophony of the storm, I hear a high-pitched scream.

My heart pounds in my throat. I hadn't considered these trolls much of a threat, because Bradoc and his men raided them so successfully just a few days ago. But the element of surprise must have worked heavily in their favor, because I don't think my team is winning this time.

As I watch, a huge male comes lumbering out of the darkness. I try to shut the door before he sees me, but I'm too slow. We make eye contact, and a grin spreads across his face, almost in slow motion.

He shifts direction, running right toward me, and I do the only thing I can: I throw open the door and sprint into the storm.



OAKLYN

I run blindly into the rain, no idea where I'm going. It's not like I have the layout of the village memorized; the majority of my time here was spent in a locked hut.

My dryad instincts are screaming for me to get into the woods and hide among the trees. It's also not lost on me that this is a good time to escape my so-called marriage, though I'm more than a little disappointed I didn't get to consummate it before taking off.

I swipe a hand across my eyes, trying to clear the rain out of them. I'm already drenched; running in this rain is tantamount to swimming in a lake, except much, much louder.

I flinch when a clap of thunder erupts directly over me, intuitively ducking to the ground to avoid the impending

electrical strike. Maybe trees are a bad idea, given all the lightning.

When it hits, uncomfortably close, I jump up and start running again, just barely catching sight of a hulking figure in my path. I zag right, ducking around a cabin that still seems to be intact.

I take a moment to wonder what all the troll women are doing right now. Are they out in this fighting? Hiding? Waiting to get captured, or rescued, whichever the case may be?

Where the hell am I supposed to go?

A few feet away, I spot the small peaked roof of the well that sits in the center of the village. Better oriented, I turn to the right and run again, heading for the edge of habitation, where the woods start again.

Out of nowhere, another big shape rears up in front of me, and though I try to stop, I lose my footing in the mud. I run smack into the big form, and with a shriek, try to tear myself a way.

But a huge hand grabs my upper arm, stopping me.

“Oaklyn?” bellows a familiar voice.

I look up, shoving the rain and sopping curls out of my face. As luck—or possibly fate—would have it, I crashed right into my new husband.

“Bradoc!” I cry, relief pouring through me. “A Galkaj troll came for me. I had to run.”

“Come on,” he says. “We need to get you someplace safe.”

“But what about the village? Don’t you have to fight?”

“We’re outnumbered, and the rain isn’t helping. There’s nothing I can do right now. Besides, you’re my wife. It’s my duty to protect you.”

Yeah, I'm not gonna argue with that.

"What do we do?"

"We can't stay here," he says, shouting over the storm. "We need to hide."

"The woods, then?"

He nods, and takes my hand, leading me away. I trust his judgment in this; as the alpha of his tribe, he's intimately familiar with this territory. If anyone knows where to go, it's him.

I'd thought I'd feel better once we were out of the village, ensconced in the safety of my beloved trees, but I was wrong. It's darker in the woods, for one thing, and the gale-force winds keep blowing branches into me, scratching all my exposed skin.

I trip over a root and curse, annoyed, and Bradoc scoops me up and tosses me over his shoulder, never breaking stride.

As rain drips into my ear, I remember Adria's warning from before I left: Her app predicted heavy storms for at least a week. Up this high, we're sure to get the brunt of it, and this awful weather might genuinely last for the next several days.

At the time, I blew it off because I figured I'd just head home if the rain started. But that's not exactly an option now. So where are we going to go?

Bradoc is trudging along implacably, seemingly undaunted by the relentless deluge or my weight. Which I guess makes sense. Even though I'm a hundred-thirty pounds and pretty muscular, compared to him, I'm practically a feather.

But now that I'm slung over him like an ungainly sack of potatoes, I notice his breathing is heavy and uneven. I don't

think it's the hike or my extra weight, which makes me wonder if he's injured again.

If so, I hope it's not another poisoned arrow. Collecting the necessary herbs in this weather would be almost impossible, even now that I know where they grow.

"Where are we headed?" I shout in Bradoc's ear, but he just grunts in response. I'm not sure how to take it. Does he not feel like yelling? Or does he not have a plan?

After an interminable hike, all rain, trees, and dislodged boulders, he finally stops. "We'll rest here," he announces.

'Here' doesn't look like much, until I notice the cave in the mountain. "Are you sure it's safe? Not home to a bear or a puma or something?"

"Bears and mountain lions avoid troll territory. They are not apex predators where we are concerned."

The image of Bradoc rolling on the forest floor, wrestling with a bear, pops into my mind unbidden. I shake my head. Now is not the time.

"Okay, then. The cave it is." I say.

He sets me on my feet and we tentatively make our way into the hole in the rock, going only as far back as is necessary to get out of the driving rain.

"I wish I had my camp pack with me," I muse. "I had matches and paper in there. We could start a fire. There's no way we'll be able to find any kind of kindling in this mess." Though, even if we could start one, I don't see how we could keep it going. There's not a dry log on this whole damned mountain.

Inside the cave, the sound of the storm is muffled a little bit, at least to the extent that we don't have to yell anymore.

“Thanks for the rescue,” I say.

“Of course,” Bradoc replies.

“So. How injured are you this time?”

He tilts his head at me, feigning confusion. “What do you mean?”

I roll my eyes, though I doubt he can see it. “Come on, don’t play games. I’m positive you didn’t come out of that raid unscathed.” He doesn’t strike me as a reckless warrior. Just a brave one who will throw himself headlong into battle in order to save others. “So tell me how bad it is.”

“I am fine.”

I huff. I know he’s not telling me everything. His gallant streak goes a little too far sometimes. Maybe it’s just the way trolls are, but he needs to realize that I’m a fully capable modern woman and I can handle shit. Not to mention, I have unique healing abilities.

“Bradoc, you can’t protect me if you’re injured. Let me help you.” I don’t quite keep the smugness out of my voice; if there’s any way to get him to admit what’s going on, it’s to question his ability to do his duty. I may have only met him a few days ago, but I already have a deep understanding of who he is.

Honestly, it’s a little unnerving to feel like I know him so well after such a short time. I’m having a hard time with my emotions, which are swinging like an out-of-control pendulum. There are moments when I just want to run away, pretend this marriage never happened, and resume my normal life.

But those moments are interspersed with my growing interest in trolls in general, and Bradoc specifically. My curiosity

about their lifestyle and my weird, inexplicable-but-intense attraction to this huge man.

He sighs, sounding more put upon than I have ever heard. “I have some minor injuries, but nothing that can’t keep until morning. I propose we get some sleep and assess our situation when it’s light out.”

“All right, fine,” I say. “But I’m giving you a thorough inspection in the morning, buddy.”

“I would expect nothing less,” he says.

Do I detect the faintest hint of sarcasm from the troll? Thus far, he’s been remarkably earnest, but it seems being exhausted, wounded, and worried about his tribe has rubbed some of the polish off.

I’m into it.

He settles onto the cave floor, and I cuddle close, ostensibly for warmth. Though who am I kidding? I just want to snuggle.

I don’t expect to get much sleep, what with the raging monsoon and the rocks poking me in the back, but to my surprise, I crash out hard. When I wake up, thin light trickles into the cave, and while it’s still raining steadily, the endless thunder and lightning seem to have abated.

Bradoc is nowhere to be found, so I stand and stretch, taking a moment to rub the sore spots on my neck and shoulders. Then I venture out, wondering what I might find.

My troll husband is sitting at the mouth of the cave, staring thoughtfully into the forest. In the light, I can see the fresh cuts on his face and arms, and I wonder what else I might find when I examine him.

“Good morning,” I say.

He grunts in response. Perhaps, like me, he's not really a morning kind of guy.

"How are you feeling?" I try.

"Concerned."

And mono-syllabic, apparently. "I meant physically."

"I'm fine, Oaklyn," he grouses, turning to look at me. "No need to hover."

Ooh, someone is grumpy today! "Who pissed in your Cheerios?" I tease.

Bafflement spreads across his face. "What?"

I shake my head. "Never mind. What are you thinking about?"

"I'm trying to decide what to do. I went back to the village this morning, but it's deserted, except for bodies. I don't know where my tribe is. And we can't make it down the mountain, because of downed trees and boulders. We're trapped up here, alone."

Well, that's not ideal. But it's also not entirely true, I don't think. "Trees and boulders can be climbed over or skirted. It might take a while, but we can get down the mountain if we really need to." Besides, he's enormous. Can't he just pick up the fallen trees and toss them out of the way?

He shrugs. "Perhaps. But that is not where my tribe would be. They would never head *down*, into human territory."

"Well, maybe they're just scattered at the moment. Could be everyone took cover like we did, right?"

"It is possible. I don't know. Nothing like this has ever happened before. We've endured raids, yes, but not ones

where we were so outnumbered. And so battered by the weather. The Galkaj planned it perfectly.”

“Goody for them,” I mutter. His bad mood is rubbing off on me. Not to mention, I’m hungry. And being hungry makes me grouchy. “We should find some food,” I say.

With my dryad heritage, I’m instinctively good at foraging for things like berries and edible mushrooms. Finding anything in the wrecked, muddy forest might be a challenge, though.

“Maybe we should go back to the village,” I suggest, though I’m not eager to stumble upon the bodies he mentioned.

“Again. See if we can find food there, and also check on whether anyone else has returned by now. Or look for signs to see where they all went.”

“I already checked for signs. If there were any, they were washed away by the storm.”

“Well, we can’t just sit here feeling sorry for ourselves. So what’s the plan?”

It occurs to me, again, that this is my chance. I could suggest we split up to search, and then try to make my way back to Haven’s Hollow.

But the trouble is, it’s still raining, the paths are clogged with storm debris, and I don’t have any food or supplies. My odds of survival are actually better if I stay here and help Bradoc.

“You’re right,” he finally says. “We will return to the village and see if others have returned. We will eat and decide what to do with the bodies, as well.”

I swallow hard, not relishing the thought of that last part.

“Lead the way, then.”



BRADOC

I BRING OAKLYN BACK TO THE VILLAGE, BOTH OF US QUIET AS we clamber through the forest rubble. I wonder what she's thinking, but I don't ask. I am not interested in conversation at the moment.

All of my thoughts are directed at the task ahead: finding my people, restoring my home, burying my dead.

When we arrive, it looks much as before. Quiet and empty, several buildings damaged. No sign of any life.

I take Oaklyn straight to my own cabin, which sustained the raid just fine. There are a few things in my larder she can eat, and that will keep her busy while I deal with the most pressing task ahead of me.

"Wait here," I tell her. "Eat as much as you want. I'll be back as soon as I can."

“Where are you going?” she asks in a subdued voice.

“I need to assess the dead,” I say. “See if they are my people, or if they are Galkaj. And deal with the bodies accordingly.”

“Do you have a funeral ritual?”

I nod. “Yes. Normally, warriors are burned on a pyre, while women, children, and the elderly are given a burial. But with the rain, I cannot burn anyone. And without the rest of the village here, I cannot give them proper rites. But I also cannot leave the bodies lying about. They will fester.”

“What can I do to help?” she asks in the same quiet, solemn tone.

“Nothing yet. I must determine who they are. Then perhaps we can devise some sort of ritual to suffice in the absence of the tribe.”

“All right. I’ll be here when you’re done.”

It doesn’t take long to inspect the village again, more thoroughly this time. When I investigated this morning, I was in a hurry to get back to Oaklyn. Now I move slowly, with care.

I find four bodies, which is something of a relief. I had feared it would be more. Better still, three are unknown to me, which means they are Galkaj.

The only one I recognize is Marzon, a warrior who was more than fifty seasons in age. The arrow sticking out of his chest suggests he took a shot to the heart, which hopefully means he died instantly and without suffering.

There are no women and children among the dead, at least not here in the village, which is a great blessing.

Still, I am left with the problem of what to do. It is possible I might find dry logs if I went from cabin to cabin, as most of the villagers would have a small stockpile in their homes for the hearths.

But I doubt it would be enough to create the size pyre I need. Moreover, the rain is still falling in steady sheets, which would make it difficult to maintain a fire.

My only real option is burial, and at least the ground is soft. But to give burial rites to these enemy trolls causes discomfort in my stomach. That is a job for their own people.

As I stand, pondering, I hear a rustling in the woods to my right. I whirl, ready to fight with my bare hands, but relief courses through me when I see Rokahn picking his way through the trees.

To my surprise, Lakana is by his side. I had expected the newly acquired troll women to take advantage of the raid and return to their people. Then again, I have no way of knowing if the Galkaj even *are* their people. Perhaps the women have been captured many times.

“Rokahn!” I call in greeting.

“Bradoc! You are alive.” He reaches me and grasps my forearms in greeting. “What is the status of the village?”

“Damaged and deserted. Only one Kalzak dead that I have found. Marzon.”

Rokahn lowers his head in respect for the fallen warrior. “I hope he will find peace in the lands beyond the living.”

“As do I. There are also three dead Galkaj that must be dealt with. And the matter of where our people are.”

“Scattered,” says a low voice. I start. It is the first time I have truly heard Lakana speak, beyond her acknowledgement of Rokahn when he chose her.

“Explain,” I say.

“It is part of the Galkaj strategy. One I know well. They come in a swarm, overpowering a village. They destroy what they can, they take who they can, and the rest? They drive away. They leave no one remaining. They will give chase for miles. If your people are still alive, it may take some time for them to return. Especially in these the conditions.” She gestures loosely at the rain and fallen branches.

“That is a dishonorable practice,” Rokahn says darkly.

Lakana shrugs. “Perhaps. But it is effective.”

“Why have they never done this to us before?” I wonder.

“There is only one reason,” she says. “They never considered your tribe a threat before. Now it would seem that they do.”

“*Our* tribe,” Rokahn corrects quietly.

Lakana bows her head. “Yes, husband. I misspoke.”

I glance at my fellow warrior. “Do we simply wait for our people to return? With only the two of us to search, it could take months to find them.” The idea of doing nothing chafes at me.

Rokahn raises his palms, his helplessness plain. “I do not know.”

I sigh. “You should go to your cabin and determine its condition. I must check on Oaklyn.”

The other trolls nod and move past me, and I return to my wife. She’s still sitting where I left her, looking sad.

“What is wrong?” I ask.

She looks taken aback by my question. “How can you ask that? Look around.”

“The situation bothers you?” I do not know why this surprises me. Oaklyn is a kind person, but I know she was not comfortable here with my tribe.

“Death and destruction?” She glares at me, obviously offended by my opinion of her. “Yes, you could say I’m bothered.”

“They have been your people for less than a day. You are not even the same species,” I point out.

She frowns harder. “And that’s supposed to matter? I mean, yeah, my time in this village has been strange and a lot has happened without my consent, but it’s not like I wanted to see the place pillaged. And I don’t like seeing you hurting.”

I brush this off. “My wounds are minor.”

She narrows her green eyes. “I wasn’t talking about physical pain. But now that you mention it, you should let me look at your injuries. As healer, I’m the one who decides what’s minor and what isn’t.”

She points to one of the wooden chairs. “Take off your shirt and sit.”

Faintly amused, I follow her command. I have had far worse injuries in my time, but her concern for my health is endearing.

With cool, competent fingers, she examines my head, arms, and torso. “You’re right,” she finally says. “I think you’re mostly fine, though I’m a little worried about this gash here.” She points to my ribcage. “It’s deep and I don’t want it getting infected.”

She grabs a cloth and dunks it in the basin, which I filled fresh this morning, then carefully cleans the wound and applies some of the leftover balm she made. I kept it for just such an occasion.

As she tends to me, she asks me questions. “What did you find out there? And what are you going to do next?”

“There were four dead, but only one of my tribe. I have no choice but to bury them. Rokahn and Lakana have returned; he will help me. As for the others, Lakana says it is Galkaj practice to drive enemies from their homes. I can only assume they are out there, in the woods.”

She looks puzzled. “So they’ll just come home, right? All you have to do is wait?”

I shake my head. “It is not so simple. The warrior men know the area well and can probably make it home. But the women and children, the elderly...they could get lost. Or they could be injured. I must go and search for them.”

“But there are thousands of miles of forests in these mountains. It could take months, if not years.”

“I know. But what other option is there?”

She pauses for a moment, thinking. “I don’t know,” she finally says.

“I will start in the morning,” I say. “It is already getting late; it will be dark soon. There is no point in searching without light, and in the rain.”

“Good,” Oaklyn says. “It wouldn’t hurt you to get some rest and do a little healing. And you need food.”

I don’t argue. The fact is, I am both tired and hungry. We still have bread and stew left over from the previous night, and she

serves it without a fuss.

“Eat,” she encourages, pulling up a chair for herself.

We dine quickly and quietly, both of us focused on our food. When we finish, I clear the dishes and move to the furs by the fire that serve as my bed when it is too cold to sleep on the feather-filled pallet. “Will you join me?” I ask.

She nods and settles next to me, sitting between my knees and leaning her back against my chest. I stroke her hair absently, and she makes a little hum of pleasure and leans in.

“Tell me something about yourself,” she says. “Something I don’t know.”

I pause to think. My life is simple and straightforward: I hunt, I lead our raids, I do what I can to care for the village and protect the tribe. “I suppose you already know that I enjoy swimming,” I say.

“Yes,” she says, and I can hear the smile in her voice. “That was fun.”

“It was,” I agree. “Hmm, what else? Oh, I know. I enjoy canines. Foxes and wolves and the like.”

“Really? Have you ever had one as a pet?”

“No,” I tell her. “I have encountered them in the wild, of course. I befriended a vixen once and used to bring treats to her and her kits, until they were grown and the whole family abandoned their den. But I could never bring myself to confine a wild animal to my home. It wouldn’t be right.”

“You need a dog,” she says.

“A dog?”

“A domestic canine. One that’s meant to live in the home and be part of the family. I guess you don’t really encounter those up here in the mountains.”

I shake my head, even though she can’t see it. “No, I suppose not.”

“Tell me something else,” she says. “Help me get to know you.”

“I’m not sure what to tell you. I live a quiet life. Because my parents died when I was young, I consider the tribe to be my family. There is nothing I would not do for them. Most of time is dedicated to the betterment of my people.”

“I get it. Loyalty is important to me, too.”

“It is everything. But let me think, when I am not working...I enjoy zazlakine. I am quite good at it.”

“What in the world is zazlakine?” she asks.

“It is an activity we play in the village. It is part race, part strength competition. We line up boulders of various sizes at the end of a straightaway. The participants must run as fast as they can to the boulders and choose one to break. Whoever can break the largest rock and return to the starting line first is declared the winner. But if the person who reaches the starting line first did not break the largest boulder, then there is a playoff between the one who is fastest and the one who is strongest.”

“And you’re good at it?”

I chuckle. “I am undefeated. In fact, sometimes I choose not to participate, because there are few who will go against me. It is only fair to sometimes give others a chance.”

“And this is just for the men?” she asks.

“Oh, no. All the village plays. The women compete against each other, the children do the same, et cetera. It is the only equitable way to play.”

“What other things do the villagers do?” she asks.

“We celebrate the changing of the weather,” I answer. “When the days get shorter and colder, and then when they lengthen and warm again. We have village festivals with dancing and feasts. The women sing songs and the children braid flowers in our hair. I have even been known to sing myself, from time to time.”

She cranes her neck to look at me. “You sing?”

“When the occasion calls for it.”

“Will you sing to me now?”

I think for a moment, then sing her *Kesh Merkaj*, a lullaby that all troll mothers use to soothe their babies. It is the story of a star visiting our world and learning the names of all the animals that it can see from its home above.

Oaklyn leans more fully against me, relaxing into the music. When I stop, she sighs. “That was beautiful. Even not understanding the words, it’s a lovely melody. And your voice is something else. Such a clear tenor.”

I am inordinately pleased by her praise. “I am glad you enjoyed it.” I run my hand down her arms, gratified when she shivers against me. It seems my bride enjoys my touch. I repeat the caress, and she shivers again. My whole body notices.

“Honestly, you would have been so successful as a massage therapist. I thought it last night and I still believe it. Between your strength and the size of your hands, the way you feel on my skin is magical.”

“If you like, I could touch you more. In other places. In case you’ve forgotten, we were interrupted last night.” I let my hands drift do her rib cage, curious how she’ll respond. She sighs and cuddles closer.

“Oh, I haven’t forgotten. Believe me.” Her words go straight to my cock, which stiffens against her backside.

I rearrange her in my arms, turning and lifting her so that she’s straddling my lap, letting her feel what she does to me. “Kiss me,” I demand.



OAKLYN

Loving the command in his voice, I lean forward and press my lips to his, nothing tentative or unsure about it. He instantly parts my lips with his tongue, dipping inside to taste me.

Situated the way I am, I can feel every inch of Bradoc’s tough, hard body. And I do mean *every* inch. And I do mean *hard*.

The weight of that giant cock pressing between my legs instantly gets me going. My nipples tingle as they stiffen into tight peaks, and a low throb begins to pulse between my legs.

Both of his hands slide up my torso, tweaking my hardened nipples simultaneously. He breaks the kiss and moves his mouth lower. “If I remember correctly, I was right about here when we were so rudely disrupted.”

Without warning, he bites down on my neck, not enough to hurt, but enough to make me gasp. My hips shift reflexively, grinding against him.

I never knew I liked orders or a little snap of pain in the bedroom, but everything he's doing is making me wet. Without thinking, I reach my hand into my pants and stroke myself, needing the pressure.

Bradoc notices and groans. "Tell me what you feel." He licks my neck.

"I'm wet and slippery," I tell him. "My clit is swollen and it feels so good when I rub it." As I say the words, the little nub of flesh flexes against my probing finger. I slide my hand lower. "Mmm, so, so wet and creamy. Getting ready for your cock."

Without warning, he yanks off my shirt, the sports bra going with it. Cool air hits my nipples, making them pucker.

"Look at your nipples," he says. "So rosy and hard. I want to suck them."

"Be my guest," I say, still stroking my clit, loving the way it swells and pulses against my finger with each touch.

He leans forward and takes the right one into his mouth, swirling his tongue against the tip. I gasp and I can feel him smile against my skin as he tightens his lips, creating a hard suction.

"Fuck, that feels good," I moan.

He switches to the other side, repeating the action, and I moan again. In response, I can feel his cock twitch against me.

"We're wearing too many clothes," I gasp.

He chuckles and stands, picking me up with him. I love that he can manhandle me, like I weigh nothing to him.

He sets me on my feet, my knees shaking. "Strip," he orders, and I happily comply. He does the same and I watch his

clothes fall away, revealing a body I'm becoming mildly obsessed with. I never cared about big gym bros in the past, but Bradoc is different. His size and strength are the result of his species and job, not the need to post thirst traps on social media.

I glimpsed his cock when we went swimming, but it was flaccid then. Now it's hard and huge, absolutely intimidating.

"There's no way you'll fit all the way inside me," I say. "It's not anatomically possible."

He shrugs, unbothered. "Then I'll fit as far as I can."

I reach out and delicately fondle the flap at the end. From here I can see that the tip of his cock is normal, and that the flap surrounds it like a big flower petal. "What is this? Human men don't have it."

He trembles lightly beneath my touch; apparently the flap is sensitive. "It acts as a plug," he says. "It flares and hardens inside the female. I've told you that reproduction is difficult for trolls. This helps the cause."

I've heard of this kind of thing in nature, seminal plugs that allow a male to ensure the offspring belong to him and not the next male that comes along. It's not something I ever expected to experience.

"Can I touch you?" I ask.

He grins at me. "As much as you want."

I drop to my knees, but he's so tall that my head isn't in line with his pelvis. It doesn't matter, though. I draw my tongue along the length of him, a long, slow lick that makes him shudder with pleasure.

I draw the flap into my mouth and delicately caress it with my tongue, fluttering along its edges. He groans, deep and long. The sound brings a flood of fresh moisture between my thighs.

I've never understood those women who act like sucking cock is a chore. I love it. The power of making a strong man weak is heady. Making him feel so good that he starts helplessly thrusting his hips against my mouth, desperate to come? Fuck, I can't get enough of that.

I lock my lips around him, increasing the pressure, and take him as deep as I can manage. I choke a little and my eyes water, but I refuse to stop.

His hips flex, just a little, as if he's resisting the urge to thrust into my throat. I moan at the thought, and the vibration of it spurs him on. He grabs the back of my head and takes control, fucking my mouth.

I love every second of it, enjoying the taste and feel of him, the way he gets wilder the longer it goes on. Finally, he pulls back with a grunt. "Not yet," he says, sounding breathless.

He drops to his knees, and utilizing that incredible strength, lifts me up and lays me out, spreading me like a buffet before him. He shoves my knees apart and dives in, no teasing.

His mouth is hot and wet against me, his tongue swirling and fluttering against my clit in much the same way I tortured him. My hips buck at the onslaught and he captures them, holding me down, forcing me to take whatever he doles out.

I toss my head from side to side as he increases the pressure, not trying to be neat or tidy. Everything he is doing is sloppy and wet, and it feels like nothing I've ever experienced. The pleasure is coursing through me, my whole body already

tensing for the explosion that I know will happen if he keeps this up.

“Oh my god,” I moan. “That feels so good. Too good.”

“No such thing as too good,” he growls. He slides a thick finger inside of me, swirling it around, and I gasp. I’ve always been able to come from either internal or external stimulation, but the combination is a guarantee.

I feel my knees tighten as he licks and sucks my clit, and there’s a clutch low in my belly. My nipples strain, the tingling I felt earlier increased tenfold. My breathing picks up, as does my heart rate, pulse slamming against my chest *and* in my swelling clit.

I moan, clenching against him. “Fuck, I’m gonna come.”

He doubles down, sucking my clit hard, his tongue still working against me, and it sends me over the edge. White spots lurch into my vision as my whole body stiffens and then erupts, throbbing pleasure bursting through me.

“Shit, I’m coming. I’m coming, I’m coming,” I chant it over and over in time to the sensations rolling through me. I can actually feel my clit expanding and contracting against his tongue, and I thrash as the ecstasy swamps me.

He moves lightning fast, lifting me again and setting me down on his cock before the spasms have stopped.

“Ride me,” he commands, and I can’t help but follow his order, my body still coming hard, over and over.

I slide as deep as I can and then drag back up.

He growls, grabbing my hips. “I can feel your orgasm.” His voice is suffused with both wonder and pride.

“Me too,” I pant. It’s never been like this before. I’ve come plenty of times, and some of them have been impressive. But they all eventually trail off. Not this one. The continued stimulation is drawing it out, so that I’m still throbbing and dripping, panting and moaning. Tears leak from my eyes at the intensity, but my body won’t relent.

I flex against him, hard, making us both grunt. “I can’t stop coming, Bradoc. Everything feels too good.” Another wave hits me and I clamp down on him, making him gasp.

“I never want you to stop,” he manages. “Keep going forever.” He slips his hand between us, his deft fingers sliding against my overworked clit, stimulating it all the more.

“Oh, holy fuck,” I moan.

Somehow, a new orgasm takes me under, without the first one ever relenting. It’s bright and sharp, and I scream.

Bradoc just chuckles and moves his fingers faster, all while upping the pace of his thrusts. I’m barely even moving on him at this point; I’m just hanging on, trying to survive the power of whatever is happening to my body.

“Keep coming. Keep milking me,” he orders and it’s like he owns my body, because I spasm on him hard when he says it.

“Yes,” he moans. “Just like that. It feels so fucking good.” He’s murmuring, dirty talk in his own language, the sounds harsh and guttural and hot.

He manages to thrust a little deeper, and I feel his flap stiffen inside me. Inexplicably, the sensation makes me tense all over again, my body preparing for the next wave.

“Unnghh,” I moan, nearly incoherent. Unable to form real words.

His shaft hardens noticeably, and my body reacts, clamping down tight, gripping it like a fist. We both cry out, and then he gives a final, heaving thrust, roaring as he spills inside me. The hardness and the heat of him tip me over the brink again, a fresh orgasm ripping through me, leaving me screaming until my throat is raw.

When it finally, finally stops, I collapse against him, shaking and panting.

“I’m not sure I’m alive,” I whisper, my voice hoarse.

“Take my word for it,” he says, amusement in his tone. “You are.”

I wait for him to soften, so I can detach. “How long until your flap goes down?”

“Why?”

“Well, we can’t, uh, disengage until it does, right?”

“And why would we want to do that?”

“Because...we’re finished?” I venture.

“Oh my wife,” he says, his voice husky. “We’re not nearly done.”

Turns out, troll men rebound *way* faster than humans.



OAKLYN

THE FIRST THING I NOTICE WHEN MORNING ARRIVES IS THAT the rain has finally stopped, the incessant tapping on the roof finally over. Instead, I hear birds chirping.

The second thing I notice is the sexy troll next to me, cradling me close. I snuggle in even more, squishing my face into his side so my voice is muffled when I speak.

“Mmm, good morning.”

He chuckles, a low, gruff noise that I can feel in his chest.

“Hello, my wife.”

Wife. I still don't know what to make of that word. Last night was utterly spectacular, the most magnificent sex of my life. But in the harsh light of morning, reality strikes uncomfortably close.

It should feel weird waking up next to a troll who kidnapped me and forced me to marry him, but weirdly, it doesn't. It feels natural and, well, pleasant.

And that, in and of itself, is concerning. Because there's a part of me that's mad at myself for not being angrier about all this. Like what kind of woman am I that this doesn't bother me more? He did a bunch of stuff against my will, after all.

And yet.

I don't know if it's my interest in cryptids or just Bradoc himself, but I can't seem to work up a mad about it all. Right now, I feel so cozy and cared for that it kinda feels like fate was driving the bus and I would have ended up here no matter what.

And hell, what do I know? Maybe it *is* fate.

I do know that in Bradoc's eyes, he did nothing wrong. This is simply the way of his people. Maybe that's what eases the sting. If a human man had done this to me, I know I'd feel way differently about it. I'd be hissing and spitting like a wet cat.

Like an anthropologist conducting an extremely in-depth ethnography, I jumped—or got thrown, depending on how you look at it—into this culture headfirst.

I got a taste of how they do things, and I have to admit, it's kind of interesting. Sexist and annoying, sure, but there's a primal part of me that sort of likes the whole 'alpha male protecting his woman' kind of thing.

"What are you thinking about?" Bradoc asks, breaking into my internal rant.

"Us," I say.

"What about us?"

“Just...our situation. The way our cultures are so different. And how if you were a human, I’d probably hate you.”

He shifts so that he can look me in the eye. “What do you mean?”

How can I explain this to him in a way that he’ll understand? Everything that has happened between us is natural and normal for him.

“In the human world, the things you did to me are considered a terrible violation. Taking me from the campsite would be considered kidnapping, which is a serious crime. One you’d be locked up for. And forcing me to marry you without ever asking me if that’s what I wanted? Also bad. Same with telling me that I have to stay here in this village with you for the rest of my life. I know for you, it was all totally normal. In fact, you view our marriage as a way to pay me back for a favor, even a way to protect me. But for humans, that wouldn’t be the case.”

To his credit, he seems interested and maybe a little chagrined. “I must admit, I have had concerns that you would feel this way. But you understand in my culture that I have done nothing wrong, yes? This is how we do things.”

I nod. “Yeah, I get it, which is why I’m not more upset. And it helps that I like you a whole hell of a lot. But I do think it’s important for you to know that my culture considers your actions to be very wrong. And that I’ve had to work to understand your ways and not be angry about them. You said you would never confine a wild animal to your home, but you have no problem doing it to your wife. The way trolls treat women isn’t great, Bradoc.”

“Explain.”

“Well, I know I haven’t witnessed a lot of your way of life, but from what I have seen, it sucks to be female. Women are regularly taken from tribe to tribe without anyone asking them what or who they want. They’re handed off to males like livestock. And they have no real role in your society, as far as I can tell. They hang around the house waiting for the men to come home from whatever it is you do when you aren’t raiding. Hunting, I guess? And their only job is to have babies, assuming it’s even possible with your low birth rates. What a boring, depressing lifestyle. Women have a lot to offer, and these troll ladies aren’t given a chance. Worse, they’re conditioned to just accept what’s been done to them.”

“And how is it for human women? Is it very different?” he asks.

Oh, lord. How the hell do I explain that one? That it differs from society to society, that in many places, it’s basically the same for humans as for trolls. But that women have also been fighting the patriarchy since forever and that we have at least made some headway, if not enough?

“Well, for one thing, in a lot of human societies, women contribute outside the home. They have jobs, hobbies, friends, interests. Like, have you ever asked the women of your village if they can hunt? Or fish? They might surprise you with skills you didn’t know about. Has your village leader ever been a woman? Women can lead just as well as men, and might offer a different perspective. Or a different way of doing things. Also, most human women definitely get to have a say in who they date or marry. At least, in the culture I’m from, they do. Men can’t just point to them and say, ‘that one,’ and expect said woman to happily settle down.”

“Are you unhappy?” he asks. “Do you wish I had not chosen you?”

I shake my head in frustration. “It’s not that, exactly. I haven’t had enough time here to be unhappy, although I’m sure that would happen eventually. I’m just trying to explain why I would be angry if you were human.”

“You didn’t answer my second question.”

“No, I don’t wish that. I mean, I wish that you had a more equitable way of pairing off—have you even tried dating?—but if it had to happen, I’m glad you were the one who chose me. In spite of everything, I have feelings for you, Bradoc.”

“As I have feelings for you, my wife.”

This time, the way he says ‘my wife’ sends warm bubbles all through me, which is kind of annoying, given how it undercuts everything I’ve been saying. I guess that’s the crux of it. I don’t *want* to like how I feel with him, but I *do*. Very confusing.

“Married couples shouldn’t just like each other, though. Or have developing feelings. They should be in love. At least, that’s what I believe.”

He looks puzzled, confusion wrinkling his tough, handsome face. “Of course. I believe this too. Love comes with time, with shared experiences. It grows between the husband and wife, the way the trees grow in the forest. Slowly, and with time, so that the roots are deep and the trunk is tall and strong.”

Okay, that’s kind of hard to argue with. “I mean, yeah. But what’s wrong with growing nice, deep roots before the marriage? You know what I mean?”

He shrugs. “I can see how this would work, and if it is the human way, I will respect it. But it is not the troll way.”

“I guess that’s my point. We can’t have a complete troll relationship, because I’m not a troll. If we’re going to try this at all, our marriage will have to be a mix of troll and human beliefs, or else it won’t work for me. I have to adapt to your culture, but you have to be prepared to adapt to mine. It’s the only way it will work.”

I’m saying all this like I plan to continue this sham of a marriage. But who am I kidding? No matter how much I like him, how much I might grow to love him in time, I’m not really going to spend my life in this cabin, hoping to get knocked up and birth a creature that might have horns, am I? The very thought makes my vagina cringe.

But the thought of giving him up makes my heart cringe, leaving me bewildered.

Then Bradoc says something unexpected. “I had not considered this, but you make a good point. If I expect you to become part of my tribe, it is only fair that I learn about your culture as well. To try and make compromises when and where you need me to. You must understand, Oaklyn, that even though my ways are strange to you, I strive to be a good husband. I want you to be happy. I want *us* to be happy. I will try.”

Well, shit. There’s nothing like a tough man being vulnerable and understanding to make me feel all melty and squishy inside.

He gives my hand a gentle squeeze. “Can we finish this discussion later?” he asks. “I must begin searching for my missing tribe members, now that it is light and the storm has ended.”

“Yeah, of course. I’ve pretty much said what I wanted to say, anyway.”

“Good.” He stands and stretches, showing off his huge, impressive body. I don’t even try not to stare. The six-pack, the biceps, the muscled forearms. The long hair, all intricately braided back. The scars and the powerful legs. He’s a fucking package, all right.

“This search will be difficult, “ he says, stepping into his pants. “The storm washed away everything that might have told us where people went. There is a lot of ground to search, and only Rokahn and I to do it.”

I chew on my lip. Years of hiking these mountains, searching for magic folk, have given me an idea. “I think I know a way to help.”

He turns and looks at me. “Yes?”

I nod. “Yeah, I’m pretty sure I do. But here’s the thing. I have to go back to my home to do it. There are things there I need.”

He shakes his head. “No, it is not safe. The mountain is in disarray, and I would not be there to protect you.”

At least he doesn’t say something annoying, like ‘this is home now.’ “Bradoc,” I say. “This is exactly the kind of thing we were just talking about. I love that you want to keep me safe, but you also need to have faith that I can take care of myself when you aren’t around. You have to trust me.”

“But if you leave, how do I know that you’ll return? Especially after all the things you just said?”

“You don’t. That’s where the trust comes in. You have to believe I’ll come back, just as I have to believe you’ll come home every night after you’ve been out searching.”

He stares at me intently, something unfathomably in his silver-gray eyes. And then, as if solving some internal struggle, he nods.

“Very well. If you have a way to help find my people, I would be foolish not to accept it,” he says. “But you promise me you will return? That you will provide this aid? You will give me your word.”

I meet his serious gaze and nod. “I promise.”



OAKLYN

Fortunately for me, my dryad sense of direction—especially in the woods—is perfect. I can’t get lost, because the trees tell me where to go. It’s a good thing, because one, I have no way of tracking the convoluted path Bradoc took when he snatched me, and two, the chalk marks I made on the trees washed away in the storm.

So even though it takes a while, I eventually make it back to the clearing where I had originally set up camp.

My tent has long since blown away, but miracle of miracles, my pack is hanging on a tree, where it got snagged on a branch after the wind grabbed it.

I pull it down and check it; to my relief, my keys and wallet are still there. Feeling a fresh burst of energy, I hurry back down toward Haven’s Hollow, dodging loose boulders and fallen limbs. The mountain is a mess, yes, but not as impenetrable as I had feared.

After several hours, I finally make it to the parking lot at the base of the mountain, where my Jeep waits. I climb in and dig my phone out of the glove compartment, plugging it in.

The drive home won't take more than ten minutes, but I need to get it charging as soon as possible. It lights up when I connect it, informing me that it's 3:26 on Wednesday afternoon. That seems impossible. It was only Saturday when I went hiking in the first place. How has it only been five days?

In the confines of my car, I can smell myself, and it's clear, despite the swim in the mountain pond and Bradoc's attentive bathing, that I need a real, honest-to-goodness shower. One with lots of soap.

As bad as I smell, I must look even worse. My clothes are basically unsalvageable, my hair has been wrecked by all the rain, and I'm covered in little cuts and scrapes from our trek in the storm.

As I drive, I try to figure out what I'm going to tell Adria. The whole story is long and convoluted, and I have no idea if she'd even believe me. Luckily, she's out when I get home, which is kind of a relief. She's wonderful, but I do not have the headspace to try to explain everything that has happened over the last few days, including the fact that I'm apparently married now.

Instead, I go straight to my bathroom, strip off my horrible, grimy clothes, and take the longest, hottest shower I can muster. I scrub myself from head to toe, finding new appreciation for the honeysuckle scent of my shampoo and the fruity lather of my body wash.

When I'm finally clean, I put on fresh clothes and sit on my bed to think. If I'm really going to help Bradoc, then I need to make some stops in town.

But is that what I want to do? I'm home now, free of my bizarre troll marriage. The odds of him coming down here, to human habitation, to find me are slim. And besides, he has his hands full with locating his missing tribe members. He won't even have time to miss me.

Honestly, if I don't go back, our lives will just resume as they were. I'll keep working at Queen of Tarts, he'll help put his village back together, and everything will be normal. No harm, no foul. I can chalk it up to one wild week that will live in my memory forever.

So why do I absolutely hate that idea?

I can't just leave Bradoc and not even say goodbye. No matter how things started between us, they're different now. *I'm* different now. I would need closure if I ended things between us. And besides, relationship aside, I gave him my word I would help.

But it's more than that. However it happened, I've developed deep, complex feelings for the big troll. Already, I miss him. It's actually kind of weird.

We've only been apart a few hours, but I've gotten used to his comforting presence. The idea of never seeing him again is upsetting. And the fact that he agreed to at least try to compromise in our relationship gives me hope.

The fact is, I've never felt about anyone the way I do about him. No matter how it happened, no matter how different we are, I have to face the truth. I care about him. I want him in my life and in my bed. I want to see if a human and a troll can actually make a marriage work. And if that's what I really, truly want, then there are some things I need to do. Right now.

I'm not expected at work until Monday, but I'm not sure how long it will take to solve this whole thing. I grab my phone and text Libra, telling her that I have an emergency and will be gone for a few more days.

She responds almost immediately, telling me that it's fine. We have a few floater employees who come in when we're short, and she's happy to deploy them.

Decision made, I put on some fresh boots and head downtown. I have shopping to do.



OAKLYN

I walk down a block of main street—oh, so creatively named Main Street—and take in the shops. On the left: Moonstones and Magic, the jewelry store; Queen of Tarts; the Novel Nook; Silver Serpent Metaphysical Treasures; and Haven's Pantry on the corner.

To my right: The Apothecary, our local pharmacy and herb shop; Outdoor Outfitters; Fur and Purr Veterinary Clinic, McCray's Realty; Wallow and Wine. A collection of interesting, unusual businesses that make up our quaint downtown and help fuel our tourist trade. I love working here, love knowing all the business owners. I don't want to give it up.

But I won't give up Bradoc, either.

Nodding to myself, I pop into Outdoor Outfitters to pick up some supplies. Maps of the mountain, a GPS, some night-

vision goggles.

The trolls know the woods up there better than anyone, but I think making an organized search grid and marking it on the map is the smartest way to handle the search. And even though we all have excellent night vision, the infrared function on the goggles will make tracking down living beings a little easier.

Materials thus acquired, I cross the street and head into the Silver Serpent. Chimes tinkle when I open the door, and I step into a cozy shop full of velvet, fringe, and sandalwood incense.

The owner is working today; she's friends with Adria, by virtue of them owning neighboring businesses, so I know her fairly well.

Sabine Merlot is one of the most striking women I've ever laid eyes on. With her warm brown skin, shocking blue eyes, and mass of white waves, she looks like the ruler of a fairy bower.

Add to it just the slightest trace of an accent and an eye for avant-garde fashion that would make most women look ridiculous, it completely makes sense that she runs the town's metaphysical store.

Most of her wares are for tourists: tarot cards, healing crystals, pentagram earrings. But for those in the know, she also deals in the occasional handy cantrip and spell.

"Oaklyn!" she greets warmly. "How are you, *cher*?"

"Eh, I've been better. I really need your help."

Sabine nods, her expression going serious. "What can I do?"

"I need magic."

She pauses, just for a second, as if uncertain how to proceed. I plow on. "Look, I know a lot of this is just fun for visitors. But

you and I both know that magic is real, and I suspect, like me, you might not be entirely human. Well, there are some other non-humans in the mountains who need our help.”

She raises her brows but doesn't interrupt. When I finish, she gives a slow nod. “Spells are finicky. Tell me everything, so we can get you the right thing, *oui?*”

I let out a breath in relief. I thought she might fight me a little harder on the whole thing, and I'm eternally grateful she didn't. I give her the whole crazy story, and to her credit, she listens intently, nodding along. When I'm done, she rubs her hands together briskly.

“Yes, let's see. You need a locator charm. I have just the thing in the back. Come with me.”

By the time I step back on the sidewalk, a renewed sense of purpose has settled over me. I'm going to help Bradoc and his people, but that's not all. I've made my choice, and now it's time to act.

With a grin I can't suppress, I hurry down the street. I have two more stops to make.



OAKLYN

Adria is home when I get back, and I'm relieved that I'm already all cleaned up. If I walked in looking like something a wild beast dragged in, she would have so many questions. After all, there's a reason she owns a bookstore: she's naturally curious and adores a good story.

“You’re back!” she says when I walk in. “I was worried about you up there in all that weather.”

I grin and plop on the couch. “It was really something, not gonna lie. And you won’t believe this, but I’m heading back out tomorrow.”

She arches a black eyebrow at me. “Already? What did you find up there?”

“What do you mean?” I ask, infusing my voice with as much innocence as I can muster, not that that kind of thing *ever* works on her.

“I think you know exactly what I mean. No way would you come all the way home, just to turn around and go back up that mountain, unless you found something interesting. Something *cryptic*.”

Dammit, she knows me too well. Sure, I could lie to her, but I already told Sabine what was up. If Sabine mentions any of it to Adria, I’ll be busted. “Okay, yes, I found something, but it’s full-on bonkers. You aren’t going to believe me.”

“Try me,” she says. “I might be more receptive than you think.”

“Well, first things first, then,” I say. “What do you know about dryads?”

It takes a long time to tell her everything, especially because she stops me partway to get us each a glass of pinot noir. According to Adria, it’s a tale that requires fortification. Once I’m completely done, she leans back in her chair, her dark eyes large and luminous.

“Okay, wow. So not only did you find trolls, you married one. And you’re descended from forest nymphs. That’s a lot to take in.”

“I know it sounds absolutely crazy. But I swear it’s true.”

She raises her glass at me. “Sweetie, I believe you. Especially about the tree nymph thing. Lots of folks around here are like...97% human. It’s not so strange that you’re one of them.”

So she’s known about that the whole time. I guess she was more chill with it than I thought. “Yeah, sorry I never told you before. I wasn’t sure how you’d take it. And really, like all the others around here, I am mostly human. I just had a dryad grandma several generations back.”

“Sorry I made you doubt me,” she says ruefully. “But going back to the troll thing...what’s your plan? Just move up the mountain and live with a band of trolls?”

I shake my head. “No way. I’m not giving up my life here. But I do have an idea that I want to run by you.” I tell her about the last two stops I made this afternoon, and she grins.

“Am I nuts?” I ask.

“Not at all. I actually think that sounds reasonable.”

“Now I just have to get my husband on board,” I say, and we both cackle. The idea that I have a husband is ludicrous enough, and the fact that he’s a troll? Icing on a very weird cake. And yet...somehow, calling Bradoc my husband feels pretty natural. Like the intensity of the past several days helped me adapt to the situation much more quickly than I would have otherwise.

“I’m not saying we’ll be together forever,” I tell her. “After all, I’ve known him less than a week, which is just absurd. But, I dunno, I feel something when I’m with him. I at least want to give myself the chance to find out what this thing between us really is.”

“Oaklyn, life is short, and the existence of magical and monstrous folk is one of your lifelong interests. You absolutely need to see this through. If there’s even a chance that you’ve found your, you know, person, you need to know.”

I lean over and squeeze her hand. “I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: You’re the best, Adria Shah.”

She laughs and finishes off her wine. “Never forget it.”



OAKLYN

I set off again the next morning, hiking as fast as I can. Without a pack or tent, I’m unencumbered and pretty speedy, but all the same, it until late afternoon.

When I reach the troll village, everything is silent and still. Whatever Bradoc and Rokahn have been doing, it doesn’t seem like they’ve been successful at finding their missing people. Since I have no idea where they are, I take the only path available to me: I go to Bradoc’s cabin to wait.

I get the fire going and curl up on the fur in front of it, planning to nap while I wait. I may be fit and good at navigating the mountain, but it’s still an exhausting endeavor.

It’s dark when I wake, with a tired-looking Bradoc looming above me. I sit up and knuckle the sleep crusties out of my eyes. “You’re home,” I say. “I was waiting for you.”

He lowers himself onto the rug with me. “I was not certain you would return.”

“Honestly, neither was I. But I told you I would help. So here I am.”

He meets my gaze for a moment, as if trying to read my thoughts. “That is the only reason? Because you said you would?”

Oh, how the tables have turned. Just as I wondered if the only reason he married me was to pay me back for saving him, now he wonders if I’m only here to keep my word. I smile at him, a little shyly. “There may have been another reason.”

“Tell me.”

“Well, I would have felt bad if I hadn’t kept my word. But I also didn’t want to leave without telling you.”

“So you’ve come to say goodbye?”

“If I have?” I ask. “Would you let me go?”

He pauses a moment, still staring into my eyes. “Yes,” he finally says. “Even a day ago, my answer would have been different. But I cannot be the one who makes you unhappy. So, if that’s what you want...” he trails off and shrugs.

Warmth suffuses me. It seems we’ve both changed: he’s willing to let me go, and I’m willing to stay. “It’s not what I want. I came back because I missed you. You’re my husband,” I say with a little laugh.

“That is good,” he says, looking relieved.

“But,” I warn. “I can’t just stay here in your cabin for the rest of my life. I have my own goals, my friends, my job. I’m not willing to give those things up either.”

His calm expression morphs into one of concern. “But I cannot live among the humans. Surely you know this. Besides, my people need me.”

“I do know those things,” I say, covering his hand with mine. “And I think I have an idea about how to solve both our problems. But first, we have a village to save.” I stand and gather the supplies I brought, laying them out on the furry hide and explaining my thinking.

He picks up each item in turn: maps, GPS, goggles. “And you think these things will help?”

“Yes. At the very least, it will allow us to be methodical in our search. We can mark off areas on the map once we’ve looked, so we don’t spend time doubling back and hunting in the same places over and over.” I pull the vial Sabine gave me out of my pocket. “There’s also this: a magical locator charm. We can only use it once, so we need to save it for the direst circumstances.”

“A spell?”

“Yes. Trust me, it will work. I’ll show you how to use it when the time comes.”

He sets the supplies aside with a nod and takes my hands in his, a remarkably human gesture. “Thank you for this. Even if it doesn’t work, your willingness to help me means more than you know.”

He leans in, his full mouth landing on mine. I part my lips and he deepens the kiss, slowly lowering me down to the rug.

He pulls back slightly. “It’s too dark to keep searching. We’ll have to find another way to pass the time.”

I opt not to mention the night-vision goggles again. “Hmm, whatever will we do?”

He smiles against my lips, his big hands already sliding over my ribcage. “I have an idea or two.”



BRADOC

I plan to start the search early, but Oaklyn has other ideas.

“Can you let Rokahn and Lakana handle the search today? I promise to help you tomorrow, but there’s something I want to show you today. And it’s going to take a couple hours to get there.”

“Very curious, my wife. Where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise, and it’s kind of far away. But I think it will be worth it.” She grabs one of the maps she brought and shows me the path we will be taking. She’s right; it will take two to three hours to reach.

“Eat something,” I tell her. “I will inform Rokahn of our plans and return soon.”

She nods and goes to the larder, while I hurry to Rokahn’s cabin. He agrees to handle today’s search, and I collect Oaklyn and set out to see whatever it is she wants to show me.

After a couple of hours of hiking up and down the slopes, we finally arrive at our destination. It’s a little stone cottage, complete with chimney and peaked roof. The whole house is surrounded by wildflowers and herbs.

“What is this place?” I ask.

“I call it the witch’s cottage,” Oaklyn says. “I found it once when I was hiking and fell in love. Yesterday, when I was in

Haven's Hollow, I talked to the realtor about it. Turns out, it's been on the market for a few years. I put it an offer."

"What does that mean?" I ask.

"It means that I want to live here with you, if you'll consider it. I realize it's not that super convenient for either of us—you have a long hike to your village, and I have an hour's drive into town. But it could be a good compromise. We can stay together, but maintain our lives. You could keep your cabin in the village for nights you need to stay there. And I can keep my job and my friends. Maybe spend the occasional night in town when you're busy. Bradoc, I think we could make a life here."

"You want me to leave the village?"

She shrugs helplessly. "I don't know how else to make it work. You said yourself, you could never live with humans. And while I could live with trolls, that's not the right life for me. I want to be more than just someone's wife. If we move here, in between our homes, maybe we can make it work."

"There's no way you will live in the village with me?"

"Not permanently. I mean, sure, I'll spend time there, especially if you keep your cabin. Don't get me wrong, we will have a life with your tribe. I just don't want it to be the *entirety* of my life. Please, Bradoc. At least give it a try."

"When will you know if this place is yours?"

"Fairly soon, I think. Laia said she'd put the offer in today. If the owner accepts, it shouldn't take more than a month to close the deal."

I nod, thinking. I have never considered something like this. Never dreamed I would leave the village. But the relief I felt when I found Oaklyn in my cabin last night cannot be

understated. I truly thought that she would leave forever, once I gave her the opportunity. The fact that she came back, that she's willing to alter her life to be with me...how could I do less?

"All right," I say. "I am willing to try. To see if this can work."

Her smile lights up her whole face. "In that case, I have something else to show you. After I talked to the realtor yesterday, I made one more stop. At the jewelry store." She reaches into her pocket and pulls out two simple gold rings, one small and the other impossibly large.

"In human tradition, when two people get married, they exchange rings. The circle represents the eternity of the bond. Since we followed your rituals for the ceremony, I thought you might indulge me and let me have a ritual of my own." She raises the larger ring. "Will you wear it? And signify to all that you are mine?"

I'm touched that she would share this tradition with me. "Of course. It would be my honor." I hold out my hand and she slides it onto my finger. It fits perfectly.

She slips the smaller ring onto her own finger and then holds it up to show me. "I think they look pretty good," she says.



SIX MONTHS LATER

OAKLYN

THE COTTAGE IS EXACTLY AS PERFECT AS I'D DREAMED IT would be. Cozy and quaint, with the most glorious yard, full of rioting flowers and herbs competing to be the biggest and best.

I watch from the front window as the dogs chase each other and wrestle, yipping happily. I found them at the shelter; at age four, they had been consistently overlooked in favor of puppies.

A pair of Australian shepherds, brother and sister, they were so grateful to be given a home and a yard that they have turned into the sweetest, most loving dogs I've ever seen.

And though they are happy to spend time with me, trailing at my feet and fervently hoping for peanut butter, it's Bradoc they adore. And, cutest thing ever, the feeling is mutual. He

loves to roll around in the grass with them, tossing sticks and rubbing their bellies.

I rest my hand on my own belly, which is still flat. It won't be long before it rounds out, though. I just found out this morning that I'm expecting; apparently that plug of Bradoc's really does the trick. I haven't told him yet, and the idea of doing it makes nerves flutter through me.

I think he'll be happy, but it's so soon. Sure, we're married and things have been going well, but we've only known each other a few months. Not really my ideal timeline for starting a family.

I made a doctor's appointment as soon as two lines showed up on the at-home test, but I'm fairly sure I'm about nine weeks along. Of course, I had to call Haven Bishop first. Not only is she a good friend, she's also the mayor's cousin and basically knows anything and everything there is to know about the town—including which doctors might have a little something extra running through their veins, the same way she and I do.

I don't need an OB/GYN who will pass out at the sight of tusks on a sonogram, so it was important to find someone who accepts the magical.

Of course, there are plenty of regular humans in town, too, so I have my work cut out for me. People in Haven's Hollow have certainly noticed the gold band on my finger, and there's no way they'll miss my pregnancy once I start to show.

I can't exactly broadcast my troll marriage or halfling child to the whole town, so I'm going to have to come up with a story. Maybe a military husband, constantly deployed?

Oh, well. At least I have some time to think about it before I start to show.

As I watch, Bradoc comes strolling into view, home at last. Between his utter dedication and my supplies and spell, the search for his people has been going well. Most have been found by now, and as each one returns and provides extra hands to search, the remaining stragglers should be rounded up soon.

Repairs to the village have also been successful; all the damaged homes are back to normal now. And while Bradoc does sometimes still stay in his old cabin, most of the time he makes the two-hour hike down to our cottage, which warms my heart. He really is dedicated to making our marriage work.

Sure, our relationship has had its growing pains, just like any other, but once we leaned into compromising on the hard things, it blossomed. Now I can't imagine my life any other way. Standing here, waiting for him to come home and share our life? It's bliss.

I open the door and call out to him. "Hello, my husband!"

He grins at the sight of me. "Greetings, my wife!"

I throw my arms around him when he reaches me, and he lifts me up for a twirl.

"Bradoc, I have something to show you," I say. Best to just jump in and get it over with. "Something important."

"All right. What is it?"

I pull the pregnancy test out of my pocket and show it to him. Naturally, he's confused. "What is it?" he asks.

"A handy piece of human medical technology," I say. "A pregnancy test. This confirms that you and I are going to have a baby."

He gapes at me.

I wait a minute, but he doesn't speak. "Bradoc? Are you okay?"

"We are going to have a child?" he finally says.

I nod. "I know it's soon. It surprised me too. You're not upset, are you?"

"Upset?" He laughs, his delight suddenly evident. "I've never been happier. You're certain? I'm going to be a father?"

I grin at him, the nerves evaporating. "Pretty sure. I have a doctor's appointment in three weeks to confirm. But all the physical signs are there, and it's pretty hard to get a false positive on one of these." I shake the stick I'm still holding.

"I cannot believe it," he says. "It is so hard for trolls to reproduce, and to do it with a human...I had hoped this might happen for us one day, but I never thought it would be so soon or so easy. Maybe we can have a dozen children! I'll teach you *Kesh Merkaj* and we can sing it to all of them!"

I laugh at his exuberance. "Slow down, cowboy. We have no idea how easy this will be or what kinds of complications we might face, especially with a hybrid baby. And even if all goes well, there's no way I'm having twelve babies. Three, tops."

His grin is luminous, making his silvery eyes shine. "I am certain this child will be healthy and happy. I can feel it, deep within me." He wraps his arms around me, hugging me hard.

"If I haven't told you lately, Oaklyn, I love you. With all that I am and all that I will ever be. I will spend my whole life making you and our children happy."

That melty feeling he gives me oozes through me. No matter how many times he tells me, I can't quite get over being loved by this man. This creature, this troll. My husband. My soulmate.

“I love you, too, Bradoc. I always will. No matter what happens, we’ll face life side by side.”

“Of course we will, my wife. We were meant to be.”

That we were. It was a strange set of circumstances that brought us to this place, but now that we’re here, I can’t imagine my life being anything else. As it turns out, this is what I always wanted. And somehow, miraculously, I got it.

THE END

STAY TUNED FOR DARKWATER, BOOK FOUR IN THE MONSTERS OF Haven’s Hollow series. There’s a new creature in town, and Haven Bishop is about to have her hands full...

About the Author

Greetings! I'm Vivienne, and I write all things magical and mysterious, from fairy tales to alien romance to futuristic whodunits.

I've been writing fantastic tales since I could hold a pencil. Captivated by fanciful stories from a young age, I gradually began to create my own worlds filled with fantastic creatures and monstrous beasts. Now a USA Today bestselling author, I'm still sending my characters on as many wild journeys and dark adventures as I can.

In addition to spinning a good story, my loves include chocolate, reading good books, traveling, and taking as many bubble baths as possible. When I'm not writing, you can find me roaming around the southern U.S. with my husband and two very fluffy cats. I'm the redhead in pajamas.

For a list of my books, [click here](#). To find out more about me, and to subscribe to my mailing list, please visit my [website](#).



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A HARPY TIME

DEE ST. HOLM

A SHORT TALE OF THE MONSTERS BALL





THEO

“I COULD HELP, YOU KNOW.”

Theodore Essex jerked as an amused voice chirped from beside his ear. Where on earth had that person come from? Not that he could tell. He was unable to see anyone past the leaves of ivy clouding his vision. He grunted, tried to turn around to regard the speaker, and only succeeded in sending himself spinning in a maddening circle.

As happened when one tried to scale a stone wall, and ended up hanging upside-down, having gotten oneself thoroughly tangled in the vines covering the stone barrier.

Bloody humiliating.

To be fair, breaking into balls wasn't his normal manner.

His days were typically spent reading in chambers—otherwise known as doing all the research for the solicitor who'd

deigned to accept him as an apprentice—and performing whatever errands the man required. On a typical day, his greatest challenges involved navigating the courts and delivering legal documents to some of the seediest locations in London. To be sure, that involved some degree of danger, but he prepared for those eventualities, and those were necessary acts while he secured the position that would ultimately liberate his sister, and their estate, from their malignant boil of a father.

Going into trade should have been enough. But no. Their father had forced Theo's sister, Penny, to attend the Monsters Ball. And having escorted her to the door of the estate, he was then told to get himself gone. And Theo would be damned if he let her face those monsters alone.

Hence his current predicament.

He hadn't planned to scale the outer wall surrounding Broadstone Hall—the imposing estate perched on the cliffs of Dorset—nor had he dressed properly for the occasion. But needs must—or so he'd thought. Alas, he'd overestimated his climbing talents. Clad in unsuitable shoes and with his legs thoroughly tangled, he was thus at the mercy of the vines.

Ever so slowly, the vines spun him around.

At first, all he could see was the dark of the forest.

Then a pair of stunningly fine eyes appeared in his field of view.

Bright yellow and gleaming with mischief, they sat within a face that was inches from Theo Essex's own—a true feat, as he was hanging at least eight feet off the ground, suspended by the most tenacious spread of ivy ever grown.

He gave silent thanks that his spectacles had stayed on his face—they were useful at concealing his true feelings—and strove for a banal tone. “I beg your pardon, madam?”

Her lips curved. “I said, I could help you.”

He lifted a brow—or tried to. “Is that so?”

She grinned at him, displaying a set of neat—and remarkably sharp—teeth. Hers were the pointed features of a creature that had bitten and would bite again—and, he suspected, gleefully so. To his utter shock, the thought sent a bolt of heat straight to his loins.

“I *won't* help,” she said. “But I find myself compelled to point out that I *could*.”

At a complete disadvantage, Theo could only say one thing in response: “Are you intending to hinder me?”

Her head tipped to the side in contemplation. “Not at the moment.”

“Grand,” he grumbled.

He shifted his view as best he could to take in the rest of her, and found himself regarding a well-dressed lady perched on the branch of an oak tree beside the wall. A set of massive wings folded neatly down her back, and her feet were a set of hawk-like talons, the claws gleaming bright against the bark.

Just what he needed, to be caught by a bloody harpy.

No doubt she was an attendee of that bloody Ball, which meant any moment she'd tire of this game and retreat to the house—where she'd alert the countess or the guards or some bloody minotaur. Normally he was well prepared for those eventualities, but bringing his work-kit, as he called it, had felt both unnecessary and potentially incendiary.

Shows what he knew about the Monsters Ball.

He glanced at the lady, noting the rich green of her gown and her simple, yet elegant, pieces of jewelry, and concluded she was quite well off. Curiously, she hadn't yet *flown* off. Interest piqued, he found himself wielding the basic standards of propriety. "What brings you to the forest, lady?"

"Oh, I was so hoping you'd inquire," she said.

His eyes widened in alarm as she reclined along the branch.

The silk of her gown slithered over her body, displaying lush curves as she adopted a pose better suited to a Grecian goddess resting at a riverside. She twirled a finger through one of the artful curls framing her face. "I found myself rather tired of waiting for the attending gentlemen who fancy ladies to become drunk enough to entertain my advances. One man seemed quite keen, and I was hopeful when he escorted me to the pleasure garden. But one look at Fintan the Minotaur railing an eager miss and my escort lost all muster." She tisked sadly. "It pains me to say he fled the scene in a rather pitiful manner."

Minotaur? Railing?

Did that mean what he thought?

A glance at the lady's face confirmed that, yes, the minotaur had been intimate with a miss in a public setting. *Goddamn*. That wasn't supposed to happen outside the Hells!

Theo had to get his sister out of that Ball immediately.

He began struggling against his bonds. They were only stupid vines, for god's sake, surely he could break free. He wasn't some soft lord who spent his days drinking tea and playing at fights. He trained. When required, he fought. He could damned well break a few—

A vine snapped and he dropped headfirst toward the earth.

He'd barely gaped in alarm before another vine tightened around his middle and his fall was arrested.

"I'd be mindful of the vines, if I were you," she observed dryly.

He slanted her a look. "Is that so?"

"Indeed. This forest has opinions." She plucked a leaf from a nearby vine and spun it between her fingers. "It is why I had such high hopes for Broadstone's pleasure garden. Alas, my potential lover fled and, while three is often delicious company, none of the couples in my vicinity appeared inclined to share."

He gaped at her.

If he'd had access to his hands, he'd have removed his spectacles and polished them—simply to make sure it was in fact a lady speaking to him and not some mistress of a bawdy house.

"A great shame," she continued. "As that minotaur truly was —"

"Madam," he managed. "I beg you. No more."

She laughed—a light, birdlike trill that had an alarming effect on his body—and propped her chin on her hands. "You are hardly in a position to do much more than beg, my lord." She flashed another of those devastatingly sharp smiles at him.

"But if you ask *very* prettily, I could perhaps be compelled to assist."

He absolutely would *not* beg assistance from a lady. And certainly not one who spoke of a minotaur's private member so casually.

“I assure you, madam,” he said. “I have the matter entirely—”

Another vine snapped and his stomach soared while his body plummeted another foot to the ground. Were those rocks beneath him? Yes. Indeed, they were. Rather pointy rocks at that, surrounded by a variety of sticks and without any soft moss or pile of leaves to cushion the fall. Oh, he could get down, and he’d survive the encounter. But if he got himself bloodied and broken, he’d not be in any condition to help his sister.

Bloody hell.

“Still a long way down,” the lady drawled. “Not a soft landing.”

He cleared his throat and said grudgingly: “Upon considering my circumstance, I find I might be in need of assistance.”

“There.” She grinned. “Was that so hard?”

His mouth scrunched to the side. “Yes. It rather was.”

“Delightful.” She gave a short laugh that was almost a caw. “I did enjoy your obvious reticence, as well as your inevitable defeat. But I have no intention of letting you off so lightly.”

He glanced at the ground. “I rather thought that would be the point of assistance.”

“Oh, of that lightly I can assure you I’m quite prepared. But...” She tapped him on the nose with a leaf. “My assistance comes with a price.”

Price?

Surely, she couldn’t mean...

His face heated so quickly he felt as if he’d stuck his head in a forge. “I am...” Damn his throat for closing and his body for

standing fully to attention. “I am not inclined to enter the pleasure garden, madam.”

“You are delightful.” Another tap to his nose with the leaf.

“But no.”

He was afraid to ask.

He was also afraid to remain in these vines until he expired. He’d remain unfound in this remote corner of the estate until one day his skeletal remains were discovered by a horny minotaur and his latest conquest. Out of all possible ends, that particular demise was very far down Theo’s list.

He cleared his throat. “Then what?”

“Merely an explanation.”

He sucked in a breath, ready to inform her that it was none of her business—until it occurred to him that it would indeed be her business if she lent him aid. As much as she had the conversational inclinations of a Vauxhall harlot, she’d evidenced no hint of ill will toward the Ball, the attendees of the Monsters Ball, or the Broadstone grounds. She was a monster who had been attending said ball herself. She needed to know if his current state was the result of mischievous folly, or if she’d aided someone intent on doing harm.

It’s certainly what he’d have demanded.

He released the air he’d been holding. “I accept your terms.”

“I rather thought you might,” she said, resting her chin on her palm, while somehow remaining perfectly balanced on the narrow branch. “Very well. Out with it, my lord.”

“I am not a lord,” he said. “I am Mister Theodore Essex, and I’m hanging from this damned wall because I was supposed to accompany my sister to the Ball. Only the bloody footmen—”

“Kicked you to the curb upon arrival?” She clicked her tongue. “They’re rather fond of doing that. And rather large. I do appreciate that, but I can see why a human such as yourself would opt not to argue.”

“Gee, thanks,” he muttered.

“Of course.” She waved a hand. “Orcs are large and monstrously hard to deter once they’re set on bludgeoning something.” Her head tilted. “Yet that doesn’t explain how you came to be in the vines.”

Theo had thought he couldn’t sink any lower than when he’d begged Mister Hamsley to take him on as an apprentice. He’d had to offer the greasy little man nearly every coin to his name and promise to clean his offices on a weekly basis simply to secure the position—Theo might have been in line to inherit a Baronetcy, but he was also the son of a complete wastrel. He’d been forced to give up on becoming a barrister because of the cost and he’d barely obtained a position with a solicitor—who’d only accepted Theo as his apprentice for the satisfaction of lording over someone set to inherit a baronetcy.

It had been five years of degradation and dangerous assignments, and he was finally at the brink of applying for recognition and admittance to the practice as a solicitor. That moment was meant to mark the end of his helplessness and spark a new era of independence.

But no.

Here he was, prostrating himself before a harpy.

Still, all things considered, the monstrous lady was a far improvement from Mister Hamsley. She was charming and willing to give aid to someone in need—neither of which were qualities his mentor possessed.

And he should be a bloody gentleman about it.

“My apologies, madam,” he said. “I fear I’m out of sorts and most concerned for my sister. She was ordered to attend the Ball against her will, and I promised I would be there to accompany her.”

“And that I cannot mock,” the lady said softly. “I’d best untangle you.”

With a sigh, she rolled to her feet—giving him a view of a great deal of leg in the process. As a harpy, her lower half was a tantalizing mix of human and bird. Her feet were three powerful claws that led into slender shins that were slung backward like a bird-of-prey. From her knee, he caught a flash of shapely thigh that curved like a pair of fitted pantaloons.

A beautiful and deadly form.

It should have been impossible to become more heated at the sight, but his body didn’t care for the odds. The unexpected spike of pure lust that went through him would have bowled him over if he hadn’t been caught up in vines. He swore his spectacles fogged. *Good grief.* It had clearly been far too long since he’d been with a woman, because he was about to choke on his tongue.

As she gripped the ivy overhead, he took a breath and fixed his gaze on a nearby tree.

That smaller branch was growing out of a larger knot almost as if...

Stop it.

The trees are not licentious.

“Going down,” the harpy cried cheerfully.

The vines shuddered, there was a snap overhead, and suddenly he was being lowered to the ground at pace. He managed to right himself and bent his knees to brace for impact, working to avoid the sharp sticks below. His hair lifted, and his spectacles bounced on the bridge of his nose.

Breath rushed out of him when he landed on the ground.

Thankfully, the ground was softer than it had appeared, and his years of boxing proved surprisingly helpful when plummeting to the earth. When one was a slender, bookish type, larger creatures liked to assume they could take advantage. Theo enjoyed correcting those assumptions. Now he had an additional reason to appreciate the sport.

“There.” She landed neatly beside him. “You are saved.”

“My eternal gratitude, madam,” he said, giving a bow.

He held out his hand in silent invitation. “I realize we have yet to complete our introductions. As I said, I am Mister Theodore Essex—” He paused, and cleared his throat. He loathed men who lied to ladies, even by omission. “As I’ve broken into the grounds of an estate holding a ball for eligible monsters, I fear I must note that I was likely cast out for both being an older brother and for being a penniless gentleman set to inherit a broken Baronetcy and who is going into trade as an attorney. Those facts notwithstanding, I am in your debt.”

“Lady Enid DeWhitt.” Lips quirking into an amused smile, she placed her fingertips in his grip. “Wealthy heiress and generally scandalous harpy, who enjoys bold honesty.”

“Charmed.” He bowed over her hand and pressed his lips to the inside of her wrist. The gesture should have been chaste, yet the taste of her rocked through him and he had to fight the urge to yank her into his arms. *Dear God*, breaking into a ball

for eligible monsters had just become a great deal more complicated.



ENID

ENID FELT THE BRUSH OF HIS LIPS ALL THE WAY TO HER CORE.

Good. Grief.

If Mister Theodore Essex had a title or any amount of fortune to his name, he'd be in a great deal of trouble. As it was, she'd spent too much of her life dodging the advances of the fortune-hunting ilk to drop her guard. Despite his dedication to his sister and his bold honesty, she'd learned the hard way to keep any man lacking a fortune at a comfortable distance. Even if she were inclined to break her own iron-clad rule, she could not: the terms of her inheritance required her to choose a man with a title or forsake all her funds.

More's the pity.

She'd never much minded that clause before.

Now it chafed her skin like a poorly fitted corset. Because she'd just discovered that her tastes ran to bookish men with spectacles, a slender build, and an unexplainable edge of danger surrounding their person.

How a man she'd rescued from ivy could have such an air she could not explain—but he did. There was something shockingly sexy about the way the glass of his spectacles reflected the light just so, always obscuring his eyes. He looked like an Oxford librarian run amok, but she'd noticed the toned muscles of his arms and thighs as he'd fought those vines. The gentleman might appear bookish, yet he had enough muscles to make her feather ruffle with interest. Impossible as it was, his narrow jaw and red hair lent him a hard edge.

And she wanted more of it.

She clicked her tongue and considered her options.

Unlike the men attending the Ball, Mister Essex had neither fawned over her, nor treated her with undue caution. He did not appear unnerved by the strength of her claws. He seemed to genuinely care for his sister—something that mattered greatly to Enid, as she valued her own sister immensely. And his arrival had certainly proved entertaining.

Lord, she'd been bored in that ballroom.

Now that she'd freed him from the vines, she really ought to return. Only, she did not wish to. Her friends were all avidly engaged in the hunt for a match—or making an outstanding display of faking the task—while she'd found herself at an impasse with the eligible men of the Ball.

It was a great pity that Mister Theodore Essex had been evicted from the Ball, because she longed for a dance with

such a man.

Still. She had no rule against casual entertainment.

Her head tipped to the side and a slow smile spread across her features.

Yes, indeed. This was exactly the solution her evening required. Whether he was thrown dramatically from the grounds or managed to sneak past the footmen to reach the ballroom, she was in for a diversion of the highest order. That would surely scratch the itch that none of the other attendees at the Ball seemed capable of reaching.

As if reading her thoughts, Mister Essex took a step back and glanced around the glade. “Uh, madam?”

“I shall help you spy on your sister,” she announced cheerfully.

“Ah...” He stared at her. “I beg your pardon?”

“It is quite a brilliant solution to both our problems.” She ruffled her feathers with satisfaction. “I require diversion. And you do not know the way to the manor or have any idea of the night’s itinerary.” She produced the piece of parchment with the Ball’s elegantly penned schedule. “I do. Moreover, I am willing to guide you through the forest.”

“That is very thoughtful of you, lady.” He cleared his throat.

“But I have no wish to get you in trouble.”

“Good thing I enjoy making my own trouble.” She beamed at him.

Trusting her instincts, she turned and, picking up her skirts, headed unerringly toward Broadstone Hall—like most harpies, she possessed a superior sense of direction. With a slight beat of her wings, she hopped over a stump and glanced at the man

standing frozen beside the vine-covered wall. “Come, Mister Essex. Your target lies this way.”

After a moment, she heard footsteps following.

He caught up to her as she rounded a pair of saplings and avoided a prickly bush—never fun to get thorns stuck in one’s wings. He let out an audible sigh, and then offered his arm.

“Sir.” Her lips twitched. “This is not a ballroom.”

“Oh, this is not for your benefit,” he said with a slight grin. “If I am to dance between the trees with a lady, I must assuage my conscience by pretending to be a gentleman about it.”

She snorted and looped her arm through his. “You wish me to save you from tripping over branches?”

“That too,” he said in mock seriousness.

“I do believe I shall enjoy this adventure, Mister Essex,” she said.

“I fear I might as well.” He chuckled, and then sent her one of his unreadable glances. “As we are going to do mischief’s work together, would it be too forward of me to invite you to call me Theo?”

“Not at all.” She flashed him a grin. “I prefer to be on a first name basis with my co-conspirators.”

“Excellent,” he said.

“Please call me Enid,” she said. “It’s less of a mouthful to shout when fleeing.”

“As you wish,” he said, a thread of amusement tugging on the otherwise serious words.

As they wove through the dense forest, curving around trees and ducking beneath branches, she was once again reminded

of Theo's strength. His modest appearance belied a wiry frame, and with their arms locked and her hand upon his forearm, she was perfectly positioned to admire the hard, corded muscles beneath her touch.

She let him lift her over a patch of nettles and spun on her toes upon landing, turning the action into a dance. How remarkable that she'd found her most enjoyable dance of the night in the forest.

"So, Theo—" She glanced at him. "—do you often spy on your sister?"

His lips tightened at the corners. "You will likely not credit it, but no. I find I'm only compelled to spy, as you call it, when I'm surprised by the inability to escort her to a ball."

Does he dislike monsters after all?

Enid hated the sense of disappointment that threatened to crush her at the thought. He'd seemed so easy with her, so human. She clicked her tongue and searched his face. "Not a fan of the Ball?"

"Not a fan of my sister's hand being forced," he snapped, and his arm flexed beneath her fingers.

"It has nothing to do with the monsters in attendance?" she prodded.

"No." His tone was hard, and the harsh angles of his jaw could have cut stone. "Our father forced her. I am determined that she has someone watching out for what *she* wants."

How utterly wonderful.

Enid and her sister had only had each other when their parents had passed, and too often their needs had been buried beneath the opinions and wants of the uncle charged with their care. It

was technically possible that Theo Essex was imposing his views on his sister, but Enid found she couldn't quite credit it.

He struck her as too honorable for such petty foolery.

"I am very glad I happened upon you, Theo." She hopped into the air and spun around him. Landing, she smiled up at him.

"And even more glad to be of service to your sister."

"I..." He drew in a breath. "Thank you."

He wore the expression of a man who had placed the weight of the world on his shoulders, and who couldn't conceive of anyone outside his family being willing to carry the smallest pebble. She knew that feeling, for she'd lived with it herself since her parents died.

"Of course," she said simply, and patted his hand. "Come now."

"Lead on," he murmured.

Her unlikely companion might be delightful, but he was far too tightly laced. He walked as if life had strapped him into a steel corset, and the slightest transgression would doom him forever. Not that she knew what doom meant to him—though she imagined it circled around funds and supporting his sister. No doubt a reasonable concern, given how he'd described his financial situation.

It was probably quite poor of her to judge, given her inheritance meant she'd never worry about money.

Yet she couldn't help but wonder what he'd be like if he let himself unravel?

Slipping her arm from his, she leaped onto a rock and flew a short distance to a low branch hanging across their path. There was little room for flight among the trees, but she was small

enough—and determined enough—to make it happen.

Landing on the branch, she gripped the beam with her claws, swung herself around, and met his gaze from upside down.

Her skirts slid toward her waist.

“Will you catch me?” She batted her eyelashes at him.

“Madam!” He quickly averted his gaze. His cheeks flushed red, and she caught a glimpse of heat in his gaze before his spectacles once again obscured his eyes. “Your skirts are... ah...”

She laughed. “Fortify yourself, sir.”

Staring determinedly at a neighboring tree, he held out his arm to her. “Can I do that while we continue walking?”

“What a gentleman.” She uncoiled from the tree and reclaimed his arm. Then she leaned into him, close enough to feel the heat of him, and she spoke quietly into his ear. “You do know that you’re planning to spy on The Monsters Ball. You truly are going to have to fortify yourself against some ankle and a little leg.”

High color stained his cheeks. “I am not spying.”

Goodness, she’d never much cared for gingers before this moment. But his skin revealed truths that his expression hid, and she found the contradiction fascinating. “You scaled a wall and have convinced an attendee to lead you through the forest—I am afraid this is quite clearly spying. Indeed, the Queen’s own covert officers would commend—”

“I am going to confirm Penny is well,” he said. “Then leave.”

“Just so,” she said, biting her lip in an effort to contain her amusement. “You appear to have it all in hand.”

“I try, lady,” he said dryly.

“I can see that,” she replied in mock seriousness.

Despite her teasing, she wondered what he would do if his sister wasn't well. Most men enjoyed claiming grand acts of heroism when the exercise was purely rhetorical, and when faced with reality they up and ran. She rather thought Theo Essex would prove the opposite: that this slender human wouldn't hesitate to challenge the most fearsome creature in the room if his sister was in peril.

It warmed her blood—along with other parts.

The temptation to tarry was almost impossible to resist, but she could feel Theo growing tenser with each step. He was truly worried, and she wasn't cruel. She knew what it was like to feel responsible for a younger sister. They emerged from the trees and skirted the grounds to the edge of the gardens, until they had a view of the manor's wide veranda and wall of glazed windows, through which spilled the warm light of the ballroom.

He started forward.

She caught his arm and stopped him.

“What.” He spun around and glared at her.

Unphased, she pointed to the distant figures of orc footmen framing the veranda. “There appears to be a small hitch—and by slight, I mean enormous and green-skinned—to your otherwise masterful plan.”



THEO

“FUCK,” THEO CURSED, GLARING AT THE PAIR OF ORCS. THEN he winced and glanced at Enid. “My apologies, madam. I—”

“Please.” She waved off his apology. “I think we’ve established I’m not some wilting miss who will collapse at salty language. Unless you’re worried you’ll woo me with your dangerous words?” She flashed those ever-so-slightly sharp teeth at him. “In which case you’d best beware.”

*In that case I should show off my London Hells vocabulary—
Stop it. She’s a lady.*

He adjusted his collar and forced himself to focus on the task at hand: figuring out how to get across the remaining gardens and into that ballroom to check on Penelope.

Right now, that meant getting closer to the manor.

He gently tapped Enid's wing to get her attention and inclined his head toward the veranda. "I don't know the gardens," he said, careful to pitch his voice low. Who knew how sharp an orc's hearing was? "Can we get closer to the veranda while remaining out of sight?"

"Indeed we can." Her grin sent a frisson of warning down his spine. "This way."

Lady Enid was far too happy about this development.

They hadn't been acquainted for more than an hour, and yet he'd learned to beware that twinkle in her golden eyes. Afraid that he'd just gotten himself tangled in something more tenacious than ivy, he followed her along the edge of the lawn to where ornamental shrubs lined a pathway. Candlelit lanterns already glowed along the walkway, though the sun had yet to fully disappear.

She led him through the greenery, to the side of a well-trimmed hedgerow.

"This is the exterior of the maze," she said quietly. "It will conceal our approach from the orcs... probably."

Probably?

Bloody hell.

But there was nothing else to be done. He had to confirm Penny was okay—and if she wasn't, he'd square off with those damned orcs until they either let him in or allowed his sister to leave.

"Lead on," he said to Enid.

She gifted him with another of her feral smiles and slipped from the path to the edge of the maze. Trailing her fingertips along the edge, she glanced over her shoulder. Even if they

hadn't shared a destination, that single look would have compelled him to follow.

You are here for your sister. Not a sinfully attractive harpy.

Unfortunately, his body wasn't listening.

The smell of her, some heady mix of fresh air and wild roses, enveloped his senses as he followed her along the maze's perimeter. Her wings were tucked neatly along her back, and did nothing to hide the enticing sway of her hips. He couldn't keep his thoughts away from her, couldn't stop himself from imagining what it would feel like to spin her around and shove her against that wall of green.

Would she lock her talons behind his back and moan as he drove into her?

The spike of lust was so profound he could almost hear...

He stopped in his tracks.

His eyes slowly widened.

That lusty cry was not the product of his desire-riddled brain—it was real, and it was coming from the other side of that hedge. His gaze snapped to Enid, who'd stopped a short distance ahead of him. The smirk curving her mouth said it all: this maze concealed the infamous pleasure garden.

She fluttered her lashes. "Want to go in?"

Yes.

"No," he said, wishing he didn't sound half-strangled.

"Liar," she whispered. Her skirts and wings flared dramatically as she spun around to continue their approach, but she sounded more amused than vexed by his refusal.

He adjusted his cravat for possibly the hundredth time.

If he spent much longer in Lady Enid's company, he'd reduce the stretch of fabric to a worn strip only good for polishing desks—and his mentor delighted in giving him such tasks. *A reason to put harpy heiresses out of your head. And focus on the task at hand.*

Deciding it was wiser to keep quiet, he followed her along the hedge until they neared the far edge of the veranda. He studied the footmen and swallowed hard. This close he could see the size of the orcs—at least seven feet tall and bulging with muscles. It was like a higher power had taken a corded lump of green clay and focused entirely on forming muscles and tusks.

“Bloody hell,” he muttered.

He was talented with a sword, a pistol, and his fists, but fighting those brutes would be akin to wrestling a castle turret.

Enid touched his arm. “I’m supposed to be here. Allow me to create a diversion while you get a look at your sister through the glass. Confirm she is well.” A sharp fingernail dug into his side. “Then for the love of everything, get yourself gone—with haste.”

“Lady,” he said, “I cannot allow you to—”

Her wings extended and she rose from the gardens to alight on the veranda. As soon as she touched the stone, she lifted a hand to her forehead and let out a dramatic cry. “Oh no!” She staggered to the side with the theatrical aplomb of a drunken Shakespearean player. “I believe I have twisted my ankle!”

Both orcs rushed to her side.

Theo blinked.

That ridiculous bit of overacting should not have worked, but he wasn't going to argue with fortune.

In a quick movement, he'd vaulted silently onto the veranda—who said avoiding the bullies at Eton wouldn't instill lifelong skills?—and crossed to the immense row of windows. Peering through the pane, he ignored the lavish trapping and searched the swirling crowd for his sister.

Years of apprenticing for a rough-edged solicitor in London's Cheapside had taught him to read people as fast as documents. A quick scan confirmed Penny wasn't among the dancers. Nor was she standing beside the refreshments or seating in the chairs nearest the window.

A flash of red hair—the same shade as his—caught his eye.

He let out a sigh of relief as he located Penny standing alongside a group of ladies at the edge of the dancefloor. The wallflowers, thank goodness. His sister was terrified of marriage, and she claimed that those ladies dubbed wallflowers offered the only sanctuary at any event. She should be fine in that circle—though the group of monsters around them appeared quite intent...

Theo stiffened as a red snakelike creature took Penny's hand and tried to force her onto the dance floor.

Like hell you will.

Mountain-sized orcs be damned, Theo wasn't going to stand by while anyone manhandled his sister—no matter how large and terrifying. Eyes glued to the scene unfolding, he started for the doors.

Then froze when another monster forced his way through the crowd.

Dressed in the height of fashion, this creature had dark blue skin, a wicked set of horns, and what looked to be blue fire covering his entire body. He pushed between Penny and the

red devil, bowed over her hand, and then turned to escort her onto the dancefloor.

With the movement, her rescuers face came into view—

Was that... Roth?

Theo's jaw dropped.

Had his former best friend—the one who'd caught the *monstrum plaga* and then promptly cut off all contact with Theo—just *saved* Penny? Yes, it rather appeared he had. Moreover, Penny's expression had been relaxed and she seemed more than happy to slide into a waltz with the bastard.

“Bloody hell,” he swore. “You fiery bastard.”

“What's that?” A deep voice exclaimed from behind him.

“You!”

Theo spun around to find both footmen closing in on him. Their expressions were set in fearsome alignments, and their massive hands were curled into fists that resembled warhammers.

Well, fuck. He had failed at being silent or fast.

“Gentlemen.” Holding his hands up, he backed toward the edge of the veranda and scrambled for a plausible story. One that would explain his presence and hopefully cause the least amount of trouble for his sister. “My apologies for startling you. I appear to have misplaced my horse, and was drawn by the lights and sounds of your engagement. If I can kindly—”

One of the orcs lowered his head and his nostrils flared. “I remember you.”

Damn. Seemed they had an excellent sense of smell and memory.

“Ah...” He took another step back. “Do you now?”

Lady Enid flapped her wings from behind the orcs and mouthed “want help” at him. *Double damn*. The bloody harpy looked far too amused, and he could hardly allow a lady to endanger himself on his behalf.

He focused on the first orc—the one who’d remembered him—and continued walking slowly backward. “I’m afraid, my kind sir, that I’m in a bit of a pickle. I’m apprenticing to an attorney with no concept of polite timing. I don’t want to interrupt, but perhaps you can relay a message—”

“You arrived with the young miss,” the orc grunted. “You were told to go.”

“You’re right,” Theo said. “Playing dumb was a mistake.”

“Yes.” The orc sent him a vicious grin. “It was.”

Theo’s heels touched midair and he froze, realizing he’d reached the edge of the veranda. “It was, and I apologize—both for sneaking onto the grounds and for attempting to dissemble. Though, I truly am an apprentice to an attorney, and he is most uncaring.” He held his hands out at his sides. “But surely you can understand a brother’s care for his sister?”

The first orc pointed a fist at him. “You questioning the countess’s hospitality?”

“No! Not at all.” Theo couldn’t retreat farther without falling off the veranda and landing flat on his back in the grass. Not an appealing prospect, given the furious gleam in the footmen’s gazes. “You see, it’s just that my sister was ordered to attend and she was expecting me to accompany her...”

The more he talked, the more furious they appeared.

Fuck it. I am not prepared for this.

Penny appeared to be safe—now it was for Theo to abandon pride in favor of his own survival. Even if the only solution at hand was far from something a gentleman would choose.

Needs must. He looked past the pair of orcs to where Lady Enid perched on the veranda's low, decorative stone railing. "I have decided to request your assistance, madam."

"Excellent!" she cried. "I am pleased to hear it."

The orcs startled, and both turned to stare at the lady in shock—as if they'd forgotten her presence. While they watched, she took flight, immense wings spreading outward until the span nearly dwarfed the orcs. She shot upward, into the night sky, and then her figure swooped toward him.

He sucked in a breath and braced himself.

He wanted to close his eyes, but he refused to allow himself such cowardice.

Features filled his vision and clawed feet closed around his shoulders, and then he was in the air. The orcs rapidly diminished into green splotches upon a blur of grey stone.

"Holy God!"

A chirping laugh sounded past the rush of air. "Welcome to travel by harpy, Mister Theo Essex. You'll note it's widely considered to be a vast improvement over horse and carriage."

It was.

But he rather suspected that's because it was her.



ENID

AS THE SUN DROPPED BELOW THE HILLS AND THE SKY FLOODED with brilliant hues of crimson, gold and pink, Enid flew them back into the forest—the orcs wouldn't abandon their posts, and everyone at the Ball seemed to think the forest would take care of intruders.

She intended to test that theory. And happily so.

Her hair had fallen from its artful twist, the cool spring breeze kissed her face and ruffled through her features—oh, and she had a delectable man in her clutches.

Perfection.

She laughed with pure delight, the sound more like a nightingale's song than a regular sort of revelry, and set her sights on an opening among the trees, easily catching the evening currents. Her talons had a solid grip on Theo, but his

long form seemed to fight the air—and there was no point in losing her passenger before she'd finished enjoying him.

He tapped her claws. “Everything is... well, up there?”

“Everything is perfect!” She began her descent. “Brace yourself, Theo Essex. We are going to land.”

“Ah, good.” He gripped her ankles. “Capitol.”

His calloused palms created a delicious sensation against her bird-like skin, his fingers strong and grip firm—the touch rough and firm in a way polished men of society never knew. A heady heat rushed through her, and she resisted the urge to land faster, just to see whether his control would fray further.

They landed in the soft moss of a secluded grove just as night claimed the heavens. She'd released him, letting him fall a short distance to the ground, before tucking in her wings and alighting beside him.

“See,” she said with a smile. “Travel by harpy is far superior.”

“Indeed, it is.” His eyes might have been hidden by his spectacles, but the curve of his lips spoke volumes. “And I must thank you. Again. I am truly in your debt, lady, and if you ever have need of an attorney—”

“Pish.” She brushed off his thanks. “This was most diverting.”

His eyebrow rose over the rim of his glasses. “You did this for entertainment?”

“Of course.” She grinned at him. “And for the love of sisters. You did see your sister, did you not?”

His mouth firmed. “I did.”

“And she is well?” Enid prodded.

“She appeared... well,” Theo grumbled.

“Did she now?” Enid peered up at him, noted the telltale signs of a male whose rescue had been entirely thwarted by reality. “Oh, there is a tale here. And I believe you owe me for yet another rescue, Mister Essex. So enlighten me.”

With his spectacles reflecting the night, he had an impressive glare.

In truth, it improved her opinion of him.

“Fine,” he growled. “She had seemed to be in danger of unwanted advances, then the Duke of Roth swept in and saved her. And now she’s waltzing happily with the bloody, fiery bastard.”

“Roth and your sister?” Enid clapped her hands. “Good show! He needs to get out of his funk.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Theo grumbled. “Bully for him.”

“You dislike a duke protecting your sister?” Enid asked wryly, head tipping to the side. “I’d assure you that he’s a decent enough chap, but you seem better acquainted with him than myself.”

Theo’s mouth constricted. “We were friends. Once.”

Did it end because he became monstrous?

Her claws gripped the soft earth. It was ridiculous, perfectly ridiculous, that the prospect bothered her. She shouldn’t care—shouldn’t ask for details. “And you severed the acquaintance after his illness?”

“No,” Theo said. “He did.”

Of course, she thought.

The pressure that had suddenly gripped her chest eased.

She wasn't wrong in her estimation: Theo Essex was far too honorable to cut someone from his life simply because they'd become a monster covered in cold fire. She'd been born a harpy and had never faced the challenges of those few who contracted the plague and changed, but she knew from what little Roth had told her that the transformation was desperately painful. Physically and, more so, emotionally when loved ones and friends rejected the new shape.

"I am sure he will respect that old friendship and look after your sister," she said softly.

"As am I," Theo replied. "I simply wish I'd been of service to her."

"You were." Enid couldn't stop herself from laying a hand on his arm. "You cared enough to check, and respected her enough to leave without causing a scene. Those are rare qualities, Theo Essex, I assure you."

He gave a short laugh. "You're too kind."

"Not at all," she murmured. *I simply fancy you.*

"I supposed you should be going," he said, voice strangely rough.

"I suppose I should..." She tipped her face up to the sky, expecting to study the stars, and frowned at the gray mist obscuring her view. Blinking rapidly, she searched the grove and realized a thick fog had rolled in. *Blast.* She'd been so distracted by Theo, she hadn't noticed. "Or perhaps not. I forgot how quickly the fog can creep in from the ocean in Dorset. It appears I may not be returning to the Ball tonight."

"This is my fault." Theo's entire body jerked, and he took her hands. "My dear lady, I am very sorry—"

"It's no matter," she said.

“Incorrect. It is a very great matter, as I hadn’t imagined you’d be trapped in the forest overnight. And you were forced to reveal your involvement to extract me from those footmen. Tell me true—” He pulled her close and the intensity of his gaze rippled over her skin like the heat from a fire. “Will you find yourself in trouble with the countess over what happened this night?”

She shrugged. “Oh, probably. They might insist I leave.”

“Enid.” He appeared stricken. “I cannot allow—”

“Please.” She’d have waved him off, but she was enjoying his touch too much to remove her hands. Indeed, between his touch and that fierce, unreadable gaze of his, her insides were all aflutter.

She stretched up on her toes, purely to put her lips within easy reach—because her appreciation would hardly prevent her from setting him straight. “You will not be guilty, and you will not insult my intelligence. I perfectly understood the risks and, to be honest, none of the gentlemen present at this month’s Ball captured my interest. It is a great shame I’m not as partial to ladies—in a group, it is most fun, but alone I find myself wanting a man’s particular equipment—for there were some fine figures present. But alas, I am not. Therefore, you’ve done me no harm by extracting me from tedium.”

His throat worked, and his hands tightened around hers. “I see.”

“I rather hope you do,” she said softly.

The cool fog caressed her heated skin.

It filled the forest, turning their small glade into another world. Somewhere removed from their day-to-day lives—somewhere

that invited them to toss their cares aside and embrace the moment. Perhaps they could do exactly that.

She licked her lips and swayed toward him.

He abruptly released his grip on her hands and took a step back.

His fingers appeared unsteady as he adjusted his cravat yet again, and she got the distinct impression she wasn't alone in her appreciation of their situation. Despite the chill of the fog, heat radiated from him. And the gleam of his lenses reflected an impossible flame.

She drew in a deep breath, and the distinctive scent of arousal caressed her senses.

A slow smile spread across her mouth.

She moved toward him, reveling in how the fog slipped and slid along her feathers. "I am not sorry to leave the ball and its attendees behind. But I had been hoping for some... sport this eve."

He froze. "Sport?"

"Sport," she confirmed softly. "What say thee, sir?"

His throat worked, and even the thick fog couldn't hide the bulge in his trousers.

"Want to play?" Her voice was quiet, yet she saw his body flex at her words. "Because I do."

Still, he held his silence and his ground.

His eyes remained shrouded behind those wire-framed rounds, as if the glass had been ensorcelled to always conceal his true feelings from the world. Indeed, he was slender and human, and yet there was something infinitely dangerous about him in

that moment. Something that wasn't horns or fangs or wings, but that washed over her body and left it vibrating with need.

I want to see what happens when your control breaks.

I want to be the reason it breaks.

She slunk across the moss until she stood before him, almost close enough to feel that hard line against her belly. Slowly, she trailed a finger down his chest, letting the faintest edge of her claw test the wool of his coat. "Mister Theodore Essex," she breathed. "I think you are more than you appear."

"What is it I appear?" His voice, low and rough with desire, made her feathers ruffle with anticipation.

Stretching up, she brushed his ear with her lips. "Something rather dangerous."

"I do believe that is the first time anyone has called me dangerous." His lips curved and his hands slowly cupped her shoulders, even as his eyes remained unreadable. His head lowered and his grip became as hard as iron bands, exerting a tantalizing pressure on her flesh. When he spoke, his low voice sent a shiver of pure lust down her spine. "I find I like it."



THEO

A GENTLEMAN WOULD REFUSE WHAT THE LADY WAS CLEARLY offering.

Standing in that shrouded glade, his fingers tight on Enid's bare shoulders, Theo knew he should escort her back to the Ball—where he would take whatever punishment was required. But for the first time in his life, he couldn't quite make himself do the right thing.

Because that meant walking away from this moment. Walking away from *her*.

His vision was smoky with lust.

The scent of her filled his senses, as fresh as flying on a cool spring night and impossibly alluring. This harpy was strong and bold and free—she wore her desire boldly and held his gaze with a direct passion headier than the finest whiskey.

After spending every day of the past eight years protecting his sister and desperately clawing out a future for her, he would give anything to release himself from that burden for a night.

To drink in Enid's glorious, wanton freedom.

"I should take you back to the Ball," he said, forcing the words out. "But I do not want to."

"Good." Her lips curved into a sinful smile. "For I do not wish to go."

Her golden eyes were luminous in the fog, beaconing him into darker, desire-filled waters.

Who knew sirens had wings and talons?

But this one had captured him as surely as any song.

His fingers flexed against the smooth skin of her shoulders. It had been too long since he'd allowed himself a break. An escape from duty and work. And God, he'd never been so hard for a woman. Her strength invited challenge—invited him to shed his civilized cloak and give in to temptation.

He slid his hands up to cup her face. "What if I am dangerous?"

She drew closer. "I hope you are."

Even through his lenses, her bright gaze burned into his.

Without looking away, she eased out of his grip, just far enough for his fingers to trail across her cheek. Reaching up, she laced her fingers through his right hand. She rubbed her cheek against their locked knuckles, and then slowly pressed a kiss to each of his digits.

Arousal hummed through his veins and sent his heart pounding.

The corner of her lips curved, and she delicately licked the tip of his index finger. Scraping her teeth across the sensitive pad, she drew it into her mouth. And oh, God, her mouth was hot and wet.

His hips bucked at the sensation.

“*Enid.*” He twined his fingers into her hair and yanked her in for a rough kiss.

She tasted like forbidden fruit.

Musky and sweet, like a pomegranate from mythology. Only sweeter, as if Hecate herself had emerged from the depths to offer him a Turkish delight baked of pure desire. His hold on her hair tightened, and he deepened the kiss, tangling his tongue with hers.

Fuck, he wanted to sink into her.

Sharp teeth scraped across his bottom lip.

A deep, rasping groan escaped him at the sensation. But he forced himself to pull back, to search her face. “You are a lady. I am not eligible, and I cannot offer you my hand.”

“I know.” She bit the tip of his thumb. “It’s rather perfect.”

He gaped at her. “I beg your pardon?”

“I don’t want an offer, and the terms of my inheritance restrict my options most egregiously—but I am no meek virgin.” She nipped his bottom lip. Her voice dropped to a sultry whisper, while her gaze seemed to glow with an almost predatory promise. “Tonight, I want pleasure. I want *you.*”

A wave of lust nearly blinded him.

“Tell me,” she said, scoring those delectable claws of hers down his chest. “Do you want that, too?”

Honor dedicated that he should lie.

Except right now, surrounded by fog and forest, he couldn't fathom what he'd say—or how much he'd hate himself in the morning. Honor could take a long walk off a short pier.

“God, yes.” He crushed his mouth to hers.

He tasted blood and wanted more.

Sinking his fingers deeper into her hair, he circled her waist with his free arm and lifted her against him, pressing her curves against his wanting body. She moaned into his mouth, then a fierce beat of her wings sent them flying backwards.

His shoulders slammed into a tree trunk.

“Damn, woman,” he grunted. “Warn me next time.”

“Just wait.” Her eyes gleamed with challenge, a lustful chirp making music of her words. She was a monster—a predator—and she was glorious in her power. “I want to taste you.”

Thank god the tree's bark caught at his unbuttoned coat.

Otherwise, his knees would have given way and he'd have sunk to the earth before her. Lord knew she deserved to be worshiped in such a manner, but pride was a fickle beast that demanded he hold his ground.

As if she'd seen the conflict on his face, she tapped his lips.

“Stand still.”

“Lady...” He'd spent far too long working in the roughest corners of London to be at ease with a lady like Enid going to her knees before him—even if it was the most erotic sight of his bloody life. He sucked in a ragged breath and tried again.

“Lady, please. As a gentleman, and the reason you're no longer at the ball, it is my duty to pleasure you.”

“We’ll get there.” Claws flicked open his buttons and scraped against his skin.

She worked her way lower. Her hand cupped the shape of him through his trousers.

“Enid...” His vision blurred.

She gave a throaty, chirping chuckle and the buttons holding his trousers in place released. The first stroke of her hand along his heated length had him seeing stars. “My my,” she hummed. “Talk about hidden danger. I would never have imagined such an impressive piece of equipment.”

Her fingers circled him, the tips of her claws teasing his flesh.

He fisted his hand in her hair. “Fuck. Enid.”

“More?” She trailed her tongue along the length of him.

To hell with honor.

“*More,*” he demanded.

“Very well.” And she swallowed him—all of him.

Her teeth brushed the very base of his cock, while her claws teased his balls. And her throat?

“Holy god.” He gripped a branch with his free hand and held on for dear life.

He’d had it on excellent authority that he was uncomfortably large. The odd time he indulged in a night with a widow or professional lady, he’d been informed that his size was unpleasant. Unwieldy. On those rare nights, after he’d survived a particularly challenging task for his mentor and had desperately sought release, he’d learned to accept faint touches and hasty encounters.

Not here.

Not with her.

“*Mmmm.*” Her teeth grazed his base, her throat constricting around him, demanding more. It took all of him at once. Held him and worked every inch of him. The sensation was impossible. Exquisite. Despite his effort to hold still, his hips began to thrust toward her ministrations.

His body tensed, demanding release.

He sucked in a breath and pulled her back.

The sight of her eyes, heavy lidded and glazed with passion as she licked her lips nearly sent him over the edge. She snapped her teeth and reached for him again. He firmed his jaw and yanked her back by her hair, narrowly evading those teeth and that magical throat.

He was a gentleman, dammit.

“I refuse to take my release first,” he ground out. “No matter how enticing it is to bury myself in your throat.”

“Come now,” she murmured.

“Oh, I intend to,” he said. “But you first.”

“Promises, promises.” She slipped from his hold and danced backward across the glade. “I do enjoy pretty words. But I enjoy the deeds even more. Catch me, sir, if you can. I saw a cottage not far from here—”

He launched himself at her.

Her eyes widened with shock, then their bodies collided and they went tumbling on to the moss. He pinned her to the ground and lowered his head until they were nose to nose.

The shocked circle of her lips said it all.

People always underestimated just how fast he could move.

He grinned down at her. “I don’t require a cabin, lady. And something tells me you have no need of one.” He kissed the tip of her nose, and then pinned her hands over her head. “I believe you wanted to see how dangerous I can be? Allow me to show you.”



ENID

ENID QUIVERED WITH ANTICIPATION. "PLEASE DO."

She'd wanted Theo's control to snap, wanted to taste the passion churning beneath that controlled exterior—and now she had a hard length of man between her thighs and the taste of him on her tongue.

Smoke and chocolate: her favorites.

She ran her tongue around her lips and arched toward him.

"Now, if you please."

"Are you sure?" he asked, voice low and threaded with desire.

"Entirely," she whispered.

"Then your wish is my command." He gripped her wrists with one hand, pinning them over her head with a surprisingly firm hold, while he used his free hand to nudge down her gown.

With his shirt unbuttoned and his trousers undone, he should have appeared almost comical—most males were entirely ridiculous in such a state of undress. Theo Essex was not one of them. The remains of his clothing only served to remind her of the civilized exterior she'd stripped away. Just enough of that exquisite control remained for him to untie her stays with a single hand.

She shivered and arched into his touch.

“Enid.” The light burning in his eyes was bright enough to escape the reflection of his spectacles. She felt the warning in that gaze—and the question. He was giving her an opportunity to cry off. To retreat and return to the Ball before the full force of his passion scalded her.

“Don't you dare stop now,” she said.

“I hoped you say that.” His mouth curved, and his grip on her wrists grew fiercer yet.

She caught her breath.

Slowly, tantalizingly slowly, he was uncovering her breasts. With each inch of skin revealed, his fingers worshiped her form, drawing heated lines across her flesh that felt impossibly hot against the cool fog. It was a miracle her exposed skin wasn't sizzling against the night air.

Her silk gown slipped to the forest floor.

Mist rolled over her naked form, and she quivered, feathers rustling against the moss and body tightening with impatience. She was already desperate for the pleasure he promised to bring.

“Cold?” he asked.

“No,” she whispered. “Merely waiting.”

“Never say I kept a lady waiting,” he said.

His fingers trailed along her skin, tracing the line of her collarbone and down, to the swell of her breasts.

Oh, he worked with his hands.

Those rough, nimble fingers of his shattered her self-control.

She gasped as he circled her nipple. Sensation spiked through her, that simple touch somehow enough to send her to the edge of release. Excitement rushed through her veins. She tried to push it back, determined not to come apart at the first stroke of her breast. But she was already wreathing and twisting against his hold, silently pleading for more.

His expert touch continued to torment her, slowly sliding over her curves and leaving a trail of sensation as it went.

Her wings splayed across the mossy glade, beating helplessly into the soft earth.

“Theo!” She sucked in her breath when his touch barely ruffled the fine down surrounding her core.

“So wet,” he murmured. “So perfect.”

She bucked, willing those magical fingers to delve into her core.

“Patience,” he murmured, relentlessly maintaining his grip on her wrists. “The best is yet to come.”

With that, he leaned down and covered her nipple with his mouth.

The rush of pleasure was so intense that her vision blackened. For a moment she feared she’d bely her bold claims and faint. The sensations were nearly overpowering, and his tongue was already sliding over her chest to worship her other nipple.

“*Ummm...*” She groaned, head rolling back. “Oh, *god!*”

“I did promise danger.” His chuckle sent a bolt of lust straight to her core. His mouth wasn’t the only thing caressing her wanting form. His free hand stroked the insides of her thighs, but stopped short of where she needed him most. She bucked and writhed, but he seemed intent on kissing the undersides of her breasts before slowly working down her belly.

She was shaking with need by the time his head dipped between her thighs.

His tongue slipped between her folds and the spiraling need in her suddenly snapped.

Her climax simply crashed over her.

Body shaking and ears ringing, she tried to force herself back to awareness.

“Damn...” She sucked in a breath and sent him a wry smile. “I normally have more staying power.”

“Never fear.” His chuckle vibrated through the fine feathers at her core, just as his breath teased her sensitive folds. “You’re not done.” His head lowered between her legs once again, and even as his tongue swirled around her sensitive bud, his fingers eased into her channel.

Her hips rocked uncontrollably against him.

“Come for me, Enid,” he said. “I want to see you break again.”

At his command, her back arched and her body launched into bliss.

It was like flying—like catching the perfect updraft and being swept away from the regular world. When she drifted back to earth, she found him regarding her with a satisfied grin on his face.

“Welcome back,” he said. “Now hold on.”

In a fluid movement, he released her wrists and flipped her around.

“Theo,” she gasped as her knees landed in soft moss and her fingers dug into the earth. She was a creature of strength and sharp objects, and her lovers were normally all too aware of her deadly talons. They moved her carefully, as if expecting her claws to leap off a bed and attack at random.

Not Theo—he didn’t give a damn.

And her body was desperate for what came next.

He leaned over her and spoke into her ear. “Yes, Theo? Or no, Theo?”

“Yes!” she cried. “God, yes.”

He yanked up her hips and impaled her with a single thrust.

God, but he was huge. She’d taken more than one orc to her bed, and this human put them all to shame. He wasn’t merely large, he somehow *filled* her. As if his body had been made for her pleasure. Her heart pounded with delicious anticipation, and she knew she was in for a ride—and lord, how she wanted one. She longed to be taken by a man without fear.

She groaned as he settled deep within her.

He grasped her hips, holding her firmly against him, and then he began to thrust into her, driving that long, glorious length of his to the very heart of her need. Holy god, it was like being taken by a master of the art—by some ancient god of desire who spent his days hidden behind tweed coats and polite demeanors.

But there was nothing polite about the way he drove into her.

Her eyes rolled. Claws sunk into the earth.

Waves upon waves of pleasure crashed over her. It was as if her previous releases had only heightened her need, had only revealed a higher peak from which she was desperate to fall.

She was so close...

“Now it’s my turn to see all of you,” he said.

Once again, she found herself moving. This time, he flipped her onto her back with a neat twist. Then, while holding her hips and without breaking his perfect rhythm, he lifted her up. Off the soft earth, until he knelt in the moss and his arms held her waist tight against his stomach. Her legs were wrapped tight around his hips, and her wings could stretch wide in the cool air.

How extraordinary.

Every sensation heightened with the freedom of movement.

She beat the air, using the force of her wings to drive herself even more deeply against him. Her tunnel felt as hot as a forge and as charged as a storm, and every thrust was amplified a thousand times as pure pleasure ricocheted through her veins until her very bones vibrated with passion. The intensity of it built to impossible heights, and she undulated against him, growling and gripping his shoulders with her claws.

He didn’t so much as flinch as tiny rivulets of blood trickled down his chest.

Instead, it only seemed to increase his skill—and the depth of his thrusts.

Her vision blurred and the burgeoning tension within her tightened, and finally snapped. She threw her head back and screamed her delight at the night sky as she finally peaked.

As she did that, she felt him shudder into his own release.

Somehow that incited her passion even further, drawing out her climax. She shuddered and gasped as waves of sensation continued to wrack her body. Her head dropped onto his shoulder, and she clung for dear life as the spasms of bliss gradually subsided.

As the fog of pleasure slowly cleared from her mind, she managed to lift her head and grin at him. Sweat and blood marked his chest, and his eyes burned bright. And oh, if she hadn't passed the brink of exhaustion, she'd take him again. "Theo Essex, you did not disappoint."

He cupped her face. "You are well? I was not too rough?"

"I am perfect," she said.

She stretched languidly against him and hummed with satisfaction. "Though, I am far too tired to fly anywhere. I demand you oblige me."

"As you wish." Theo retrieved his coat and spread it upon the ground beneath the shelter of an oak tree. He picked her up and carried her to the makeshift bed, and she curled happily into his arms. It was rare for harpies to share their wings with others, but she couldn't help but wrap them around him.

Warm and safe in his arms, more satiated than she'd been in her whole life, she knew sleep was about to claim her. She sighed into his chest, and his arm tightened around her. She was far from virginal, and she'd dallied with all manner of monsters and men.

Just her luck that a slender human with spectacles blew them all away.

However much she might wish it otherwise, she couldn't keep him. But right now, limp from pleasure and more content than

she'd ever been, she could savor this moment. She nestled against his toned chest, her wing locked around him, and she fell asleep.



THEO

THEO WOKE TO FIND MORNING LIGHT REACHING THROUGH THE branches and the warmth of a harpy vanished from his side. Letting out a soft sigh, he touched the coat where she'd been curled up. When last he'd awoken, she'd been tucked against his side and her wing had been wrapped around them. His shoulders had been sliced by her talons and he'd been trapped in a strange forest—and it had unequivocally been the best night of his entire life.

With her beside him, he'd slept better than he had in years.

Now, she was gone.

And while that wasn't surprising—if he'd had enough faculties left to consider the matter last night, he'd have expected her to return to the Ball before anyone rose for the day—it was shocking to discover how much he missed her. For a moment, the sense of loss drove the air from his lungs.

And not just the loss of her body—though that was delectable. He missed her bold wit and her almost feral sense of humor. Her birdlike movements and her incisive observations.

He missed *her*.

His fingers closed around a piece of paper and a single feather.

He held the feather beneath his nose and allowed himself to draw in the scent of her. Fresh air and wild roses, and as soft as the delicate down of her core. Sitting up, he cleaned his spectacles and then unfolded the parchment. Scrawled on the back of the Ball's schedule in looping, flowing script that belied the charred stick that must have been used in place of a quill and ink. Indeed, the style perfectly mirrored the author and her note:

DEAREST THEO,

I wish I could keep you and I fear that if I linger in this glade, I will try. That would end very badly for both of us: as you are penniless and I will lose my inheritance if I take someone without fortune. And then where would we be? We both have sisters depending on us, and we both must act in their best interests.

So instead, I shall sneak away in the dawn.

I pray you will not hold the cowardice against me.

Please believe me when I say that this was the single most enjoyable evening I've ever known. I shall treasure it, and you, for the rest of my life. And yes, if I am ever in need of an attorney, you may trust that you'll find me at your door.

Yours,

Enid

p.s. Assuming they allow me back at the Ball, I promise to keep an eye on your sister. Subtly, of course. I suspect she is well in Roth's care, but you may rest easy knowing I'll ensure that remains the case.

p.p.s. I have marked the direction out. Do attempt not to perish.



A SHORT HUFF OF AMUSEMENT ESCAPED HIM.

Trust Enid to salve the wound with her unflinching honesty.

Carefully folding up the missive, he tucked it safely into the inner pocket of his coat alongside the feather—he would carry that piece of her with him, always. He quickly set himself to rights, reclaiming abandoned articles of clothing and buttoning his shirt, jacket, and trousers—thankfully she hadn't sliced the buttons off with her claws when she'd removed the articles.

As he stood, his gaze settled on an arrow formed of sticks in the middle of the glade.

“Marked the way indeed,” he murmured. “My thanks, lady.”

Allowing himself a final, longing look in the direction of Broadstone Hall, he turned on his heel and aimed unerringly to where the arrow pointed: away from the Hall and toward the road.

He straightened his shoulders, and a strange certainty washed over him.

Right now, their lives ran in different directions, like a river forced to part by a spear of rock. But he imagined that water always remained connected, even when it must rush along separate paths, and he felt an echoing tie to his harpy.

Theo might not have been a great believer in fate, but something told him that last night wouldn't be the last he saw of Lady Enid DeWhitt.



THE END (For now)



Thanks for reading! I hope you enjoyed Theo and Enid, and this melding of monsters and regency, as much as I did writing it.

And Theo is not wrong, there's more to come for him and his harpy. When Enid's sister disappears, she turns to the one person she can trust: Theo Essex. Together they become embroiled in a deadly conspiracy and entangled by a fiery passion—both of which threatens to consume them.

You can preorder [*The Harpy And The Gentleman*](#), a regency monster mystery romance now!

If you weren't already aware, you'll be delighted to know that this story is connected to the world of The Monsters Ball—a

shared world featuring twelve stand-alone stories by twelve monster romance authors. While each tale stands alone, you'll enjoy interconnected relationships and a veritable cornucopia of easter eggs.

Roth and Penny have their story already, in *The Monstrous Duke And I*. And you can see all the books [here](#).

About the Author

Dee St. Holm is a pen name for USA Today Bestselling Author Dee J. Holmes. A Canadian author obsessed with monsters and their love lives, Dee enjoys creating rich fantasy worlds—and always likes to play with monsters. The characters she enjoys don't sit in some narrow box and do what they're told. Whether battling supernatural forces or facing fantastical terrain on distant planets, her characters are defying expectations and finding true love.

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THE SATYR'S WOOD

S.J. SANDERS

A DANGEROUS MONSTERS ROMANCE



In a world changed after the Ravening, safety is rare. For Tiffany, when she is forced into marriage by her parents for her unnatural fascination with the monsters, it means the loss of everything to whatever man claims her. Choosing the dangers of the open world over those confined within the town, Tiffany flees and finds sanctuary with a satyr who offers to hide her away where no one will find her. Yet, when what is meant to be a temporary reprieve hidden deep in the woods suddenly becomes something more, Tiffany must decide if this is the forever that she has been searching for.

Barbasa survived the labyrinth, but he did not escape the taint. It clings to him, flooding him with madness to escape his pain. Seeking peace, he has isolated himself within an abandoned human dwelling in the midst of the woods. But a satyr is not meant to be alone. When the sweetest scent he has ever tasted draws him to a frightened human woman, he tempts the gods and the taint within him, to protect and possess her. Does a broken male deserve a happy ending? Perhaps not but is willing to

grab what little he can. When the nature of the taint begins to change around the female in his keeping, he begins to wonder if happiness is possible, even for a male such as him. And what he would do to keep it.

This fantasy romance has some dark themes and horror elements, and is a part of the Dangerous Monsters series, a spinoff within the Dark Spirits world.



BARBASA RECLINED AGAINST A TREE AS HE RUBBED A THUMB across the carved reed pipes. It had been long since he had fashioned an aulos but he had little to do with his time as of late and it proved him with some small pleasure. Besides, he had nothing but time on his hands. He no longer had a flock to guide and provide for. There was just him and the woods where he'd chosen to make his home.

Tilting his head back, he breathed deeply, drawing the sweet air into his lungs. Sunlight dappled through the trees as birds sang to each other from where they fluttered among the branches. It was good. Better than good, actually. After centuries trapped in the labyrinth, he had forgotten the taste of fresh, clean air and water. Of proper food prepared in a proper home that he'd found abandoned in the depths of the woods he claimed for his own. Acorn bread had almost wiped out the memory of the taste of human flesh. He wished for it to be gone more than anything. Although his kind took pleasure in

frightening humans, that was a feast that they'd never indulged in. The labyrinth had turned him and his flock into monsters in truth.

Somehow, he'd managed to hold on and remember himself. He never descended into the craven madness of his flock. That knowledge had been a source of guilt before he even left the labyrinth but more so afterward with the murder of his kin staining his hands. But he hadn't been able to risk bringing them out into the world. As much as he'd hoped that maybe he could save them, he'd realized that the taint had to die in the labyrinth with them.

By all rights he should have died as well but he'd been unable to carry it out no matter how his conscience whispered to him.

Placing the reeds to his lips, he pushed his breath through the instrument, the double reeds of each pipe picking up his song. His fingers slid over the holes, the melody of one pipe counterbalanced of the drone of the other weaving in his mind threads of memories of ages past. Time before the labyrinth which was faded and little more than a shadow in his mind, diluted from the horror that became his existence.

The last note echoing, he lowered the aulos and sighed, his eyes glancing restlessly among the beauty of his surroundings. How was it that he was free and possessing such a territory and yet his music possessed such melancholy? Was he... lonely? His skin shivered as he felt a dark emptiness close in around him, muting the splendor of nature. The poison of the labyrinth that he always feared he contained still within him, rushed through his blood, heightened his senses, and made his cock swell and pulse within its sheath.

Chuckling wildly, he tossed the aulos, his green eyes following it as it sang its last hollow note as it whipped through the air

before landing with a splash in the pond. Leaping to his hooves he began to pitch into primal dance, his hair streaming behind him. Round and round he danced among the trees, his hooves tapping a lively rhythm. His breath rushed in and out of him as his heart raced and for a moment it was as if he was chasing prey among the dark corridors once more. Leaping with a turn, he laughed again. He was not in that place, he was free, and whatever he desired or needed he would chase and claim.

With a deep howl he spun and dashed through the woods. Running. Running. His nostrils flared, a hunger crawling up from within his belly. Pleasure ran up his spine as his cock extruded and released threads of cum that dripped from its tip. It flexed, seeking to burrow deep and slake the need within his prey.

Running until exhaustion claimed him, Barbasa gripped his cock hard within his hand and stroked it viciously, his natural lubrication making his hand glide slick over his shaft so that each pass caused his hand to curl tight and tug at the head. His hips kicked and pumped as he forced his cock to burrow repeatedly into his tight hold as it swelled further, growing as the veins bulged in the way of his kind as his pleasure grew. That pleasure wound deeper as a hot thread coiling through him, contracting and stretching until it unraveled and his howl terminated on a roar and his hot seed pulsed in thick jets from his tip along the fronds of ferns and sunlit leaves of the bushes before him.

He stared at evidence of his lust, his seed wasted upon the ground, and felt emptier than ever. As he would until the madness caught him again.



TIFFANY CREPT FROM THE HOUSE; THE STRAP OF HER backpack firmly gripped in her hand until her knuckles whitened around it as she listened intently for any hint of sound. It was ridiculous. She was twenty-seven and forced to sneak away like an errant child, but she had little choice. She refused to get pressured into marrying some dull leading citizen. Especially not when the town seemed to be festering as it slowly declined. The gates were barred as they hunkered within the ruins of houses that they attempted to repair and maintain—most poorly. And yet the creatures beyond the gates who passed freely stirred a yearning within her.

Inhuman, powerful and primal in appearance, she had watched them from afar, desired them and all that they represented. While the people within the sad excuse for a town whispered fearfully of what such creatures could do to a human caught within their grasp, she was allured by the more carnal speculations of monsters hunting down innocent women to

take as mates. It certainly presented a more interesting prospect than anything offered behind the walls.

And she'd been fascinated from the start, conjuring fantasies within the depths of her imagination at all hours. They haunted her, feeding into her dreams until, by scavenging and trading for paper and pencils, she drew the images of her fantasies, all the while her pussy wetting in ways that it refused to at the sight of any of the men she knew. Monsters with thick cocks, dripping cum, eager to spend their release into tight, willing human cunts had her masturbating frequently when she was alone. That was until she was caught and that quickly it was deemed that she would marry and find ways to utilize her interests in healthier ways.

That had been the end of her parents' patience. Where they had once been content to allow her to remain in the house without pressure to marry one of the numerous single men who shared their decrepit town, confident that she'd eventually find one that suited her, they now left her with little choice in a hope to curb her "unnatural desires."

Tiffany's lip curled contemptuously as she hurried stealthily toward the ramshackle gate. Unlike some towns she'd heard of that dwelt within several days' travel that possessed better fortifications, their gate was pitiful enough that she had been passing back and forth through it with ease for weeks. It would serve as no obstacle to her in her escape. Truth be told, the fact that none of the monsters passing made any effort to bypass their gate gave her more confidence than was probably wise. There was a chance that it provided a false sense of courage, but she decided she would rather take her risks out there than among men whom she had to be on constant guard against.

Marriage supposedly would offer her protection from that—as her father protected her mother—but, as a child, she’d seen firsthand how things had changed. In the early days, she’d seen the women scream and try to fight off men who’d snatched them up as unwilling brides. She’d also walked in on the sight of her mother’s sister laying dead with a number of other women. Poison, her parents had whispered late at night. They had consumed poison together to escape that fate. And within a few years of that event, she’d seen men who were killed by other men to gain possession of their women within just scant years of their community forming. There was now an illusion of civility within their town, but Tiffany had caught glimpses of that same hunger and desperation barely contained within the eyes of the men who’d followed her in attempt to draw her interest.

Men, as a whole, were not safe. There were plenty of good men in town, like her father, most of whom were either elderly or happily married, but she couldn’t bring herself to trust any of the others. She was simply too afraid of them. Especially as she noticed the way many of her “neighbors” started to watch her more, with interest and what appeared to be a sort of sly speculation in their eyes as she matured, and her father began to show his age.

And now that he wished to see her “safely married”—those who wanted to possess her would begin circling like wolves. What had quickly become apparent was that there was no real safety for her now whether she stayed or left. It could be incredibly stupid, but she couldn’t shake the idea that if she were to find safety with a male, she wanted a monster who would not only satisfy her desires and fantasies but also ruthlessly destroy anyone who attempted to take her.

Approaching the gate at an angle, it only took Tiffany seconds to locate the loose board as she ran her fingers along the side of the gate. It didn't give much but as the one next to it was so loose that she was able to pull that nailed board completely free by hand as she'd done countless times, it provided just enough room for her to wiggle through. Being short and lean had helped her to escape unwanted attention many times as it gave her a better ability to hide. And it was very useful in this case as well. She doubted anyone could see her at all since she blended in with the shadows of the equipment near the gate so well. The only thing that would mark her passage at all would be the small gap she left in the gate since, unlike other times, she wouldn't be returning to pin it back in place.

Her heart pounded with exhilaration as she stepped out onto the road and a smile stretched across her face as a sense of freedom filled her. Although she knew it was really the same as the road that continued within the confines of the gate, it didn't feel the same. Like every time—and perhaps this time more so than others since she didn't intend to return—she felt like she'd stepped out into a whole different world. But she didn't rush forward, no matter how that reckless freedom made her want to. She was willing to take a risk, but she wasn't stupid. Danger was everywhere, and there was little to protect her from it. She was exposed to everything being on the road as she was but as far as she was concerned it was still better than in town where it was harder to spot. So many pretended that everything was perfectly normal despite the numerous arguments and protests at the meeting building that the town wasn't doing enough to bring in more women.

Not enough women. They needed women. Each man should have a woman. They deserved it. Or so they insisted every month while they tried to make it sound reasonable that they

wanted to send out parties to look for women on the road and bring them back to “safety.” All of it sounded sickeningly too familiar.

“Maybe, not the road for me,” she mumbled to herself as she took a quick glance around.

She was nearly at the edge of the old town, her eyes flickering along the wide open spaces that stretched ahead without a building in sight. She shivered, imagining how easy it would be for anyone just to come upon her walking there. Scavengers and other wandering people stuck the roads as they moved from town to town and to the larger cities where dangers multiplied. There was no knowing how many men had come up with similar ideas.

She gazed toward an open stretch of long grass and turned toward it, pausing at the edge of the road. The faintest blush of early morning light made the waving grass visible enough and yet contain enough shadows for it to appear ominous. She swallowed nervously. Scavengers who came to town spoke of new dangers introduced into their world that were spoken in hushed voices among the townspeople. She didn’t know exactly what they were since her parents refused to allow her to listen in on gossip that they said would only terrify her, but now she wondered what exactly they were.

Something about the forests...and deep mountain caverns. Gateways through which the monsters traveled and brought all manner of creatures and wildlife.

Tiffany turned slowly on the road in a circle, noting the spark of a lamp in the far distance as someone’s household slowly began to rouse. She couldn’t waste any more time. Sinking her teeth into her bottom lip hard enough that she tasted the sharp metallic bite of her blood, she spun back to the tall grass and

ran forward into it. The grass scraped along her boots and pants as she fled, her heart racing with a mingling of fear and excitement. It was heady and some crazy part of her loved it.

Her pack bouncing on her back, she set a quick pace, putting the town increasingly farther behind her.

She was free.



BARBASA SCRATCHED HIS BELLY IDLY AS HE STRETCHED OUT IN the grass. Although he preferred his forest, he did enjoy frequent ventures out in the thick grassy areas to hunt out easy game that nested in the ground there. Pheasants and quail were particularly his favorite, but then there were the odd rabbits and occasional deer, the latter of which fed him easily for days once he hauled it back home and butchered it.

He studied his claws reflectively. Perhaps he should hunt. He wasn't particularly hungry at the moment, but he would be and there was a restless itch crawling up his back that demanded that he get ready for... something.

Rolling over onto his side, he gave a jerk of his head as thick straw caught on his horns and squinted into the distance. His tongue stroked over his sharp teeth thoughtfully as he closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath, savoring a hint of something... intriguing... on the wind. Something sweet that

sent a shiver through his frame. He inhaled deeper, a soft growl trebling in his throat.

Something... female.

His growl rolled through him, growing deeper as his lust hit hard. It had been so long... too long since he felt that desire. He hadn't been able to bear touching another female since his mate's death centuries ago. He had lost the taste for indulging in release with males in his company shortly after that. He'd been so long without that feeling that it took him by surprise, but no more so than picking up the scent of a lone female so close to him.

He'd seen small groups of males and females together, both human and fae. But a lone female was intriguing. Too intriguing to ignore. It made the predator within him stretch hungrily. He could chase her down—capture her—and run his tongue over her most intimate of places where he would be able to feast upon her sweetness. His cock swelled and twitched within its sheath, to the tip threatening to extrude and spill evidence of his climbing lust everywhere with his copious precum and lubrication that made large satyr cocks easier for smaller beings to take. It had been so long since he savored a female cunt, he was certain that it wouldn't even take much time or effort for him to reach engorgement and true rut.

His stones tightened at the base of his sheath, a small tingling sensation racing from them. His hips flexed in the air, a heavy indrawn and exhalation of breath making his frame jerk in response. He blinked in response to it, a small measure of his sanity returning through the blaze of his lust. Since when did he react so strongly? Like any satyr, his desires were a driving force, perhaps a bit more than others due to his size and age, but he didn't recall having such a powerful reaction.

A small frown pulled at his mouth as he rolled into a crouch, his hooves digging into the dirt as his gaze peered over the top of the tall, reedy wild grass. Air rippled across the surface of the blades, sending a fresh wave of scent directly to him, portending something beyond his keen scope of vision. His nostrils flared to pinpoint her location and his pointed ears tipped forward as he strained to listen.

She was in the meadow, but she was far from the shelter of his woods and the boundaries of his territory markers. Barbasa glanced back at the nearby tree line uncertainly. Did he dare leave his territory undefended? His tongue ran over his fangs again, contemplatively. His absence would be all the opening another would need to move in on his territory and make a claim for it. A wise male would not. He was fortunate to find a comfortable spot. A thick tangle of forest with an abandoned human dwelling in surprisingly good repair nestled safely within it. Was a female truly worth risking it?

He drew another breath and moaned as he caught the richness of her scent on a swelling breeze. It sparked a longing within him... and he could not say that it was entirely of the carnal sort. That he could probably ignore. Instead, it caused a curious reaction in that, as much as his loins ached, the emptiness within him that had come with his solitude now ached even more. A satyr alone without a flock was a sad thing.

Shaking his head so that his horns tossed lightly, Barbasa stood and stretched. This was ridiculous. He turned away, fully intending to head back to his woods but blew out a long sigh as he stared at the deep shadows of the trees. Wouldn't it be good to have a companion?

Yes. It would.

Decided, he spun around on his hooves and hurried at a bounding pace through the grasses, stopping every so often to give a few strokes of his cock to release a thick stream of precum upon rocks to mark his route before continuing on. Not only would it give him a clear path of return, but he also hoped that his scent trail would discourage any other who might think to approach his territory until he returned.

If not...well, he was not averse to eating his enemies. Quite literally. His only concern was that it might overly distress the female he returned with. But that was a matter to worry about later.

Picking up his pace, he lowered into a hunting stance allowing for quicker movement as he raced forward, following the enticing scent. A darkness expanded within his belly in response to it, so subtly that he wasn't aware of it at first. It rose through him like a hot tide, dulling his thoughts even as his hunger spiked and his cocked filled to the point of pain and was no longer containable within his sheath. Extruded fully, his long shaft bobbed with his bounding gait, a trickle of hot precum slipping down over it, dripping from him as he ran.

Closer. His prey was getting closer. He could almost taste the heat of her now as he closed in. Sweet, hot, and wet. He would drink fully from her once he had her in his arms and satiated himself fully on her flavor.

There, a flutter of pale gold hair in the breeze.

He charged for it, his need eclipsing his thoughts. He would claim what was his and take her home. He would seed her and keep her. His female. His.

A snarl burst from him as he leapt, and the female whirled on him with a flash of startled amethyst eyes. He nearly purred at the sight, his arms reaching eagerly for her when something

dark and heavy rushed out of nowhere and struck him with enough force to send him dropping, ungainly, to the ground. His breathing wheezing out of him, he managed less than a croak as his gaze lifted and pinned the female standing just a short distance away and some sort of large bag held defensively in front of her. She stared back at him in shock and scrambled further away as his hooves twitched and slid across the dirt as he pushed himself back up.

Straightening to his full height, Barbasa blinked at her bag in confusion and a mild sense of betrayal rising through the confused bewilderment lingering in his mind. “You struck me!”

Her lips parted to gape at him, but she shook her head and brought her weapon up higher in a threatening position as she scowled back at him. “And I’ll do it again, you... you....”. Her brow knitted with confusion as her gaze continued to skim over him. “Whatever you are.”

Her eyes drifted down to his cock that—much to his private amusement—hadn’t diminished the slightest bit. In fact, if he was not mistaken—exactly the opposite. Fresh precum drooled from its tip, his lust curling tightly within his belly. The darkness that had fogged over his mind with blind instinctual need, however, remained wherever it had retreated to within him.

For the second time, her mouth dropped open and this time he scented a delicious thickening in her scent that betrayed her interest. While she was not eagerly leaping into his arms like the nymphs he had consorted with the past had, that hint of desire drew him in stronger than he had anticipated. Barbasa eased toward her, his cock waving with his every step. He paused when she took a step back and drew her pack up higher

and for a moment he peered at it in amusement, wondering what exactly weighed it down to have such a powerful strike.

“Stay back,” she warned.

Though her voice was slightly unsteady, and she bore a trace of fear souring her intriguing scent, there was a bite to the way she spoke that made him pause and stop in his tracks. He suddenly had the impression that she was fully committed to going down fighting. As much as he enjoyed a good tussle, he was not of mind to hurt the little female. Shockingly, he found that he did not wish to scare her either. Cocking his head, he peered at her for a moment before his gaze drifted back to bag. His lips quirked, unable to further restrain his amusement.

“What exactly is it that you have in there?” he asked, betraying his thoughts aloud.

Surprise flickered in eyes that dropped briefly to her bag. “Rocks,” she admitted so blatantly that it surprised a laugh from him.

He crept forward at a pace, unfazed, that she lifted her bag higher in threat. Other than peer at it—and her—curiously, he gave no further attention to it, his eyes instead fastened on the fascinating creature in front of him.

“Rocks? Truly?” he murmured. “What would a delightful little thing like you wish to carry rocks around for?”

Pink climbed into her cheeks, and she shrugged, her arm lowering only a fraction as she considered him. “Some rocks,” she clarified slowly, and her lips pinched. “My supplies did not last as long as I believed they would and then yesterday, when I noticed there was someone following my trail, I decided it was better to at least make an attempt to arm myself.” Her lips twisted bitterly. “Should have thought to

bring dad's gun," she muttered quietly, perhaps in the erroneous belief that he could not hear her as her gaze moved past him in the direction of her path through the grass.

Though Barbasa did not know what a gun was, the fact that it was likely a weapon was not lost upon him. He might have given it more attention and inquired as to why she wandered without better protection than a sack of rocks except that two details caught his attention. One was that his little female had probably not eaten in some time, which was concerning enough. The other was that someone was in pursuit. His ears perked and he attempted to draw in the scent of anyone else nearby and was foiled by his own obsession with the female's scent. He could not seem to push it away long enough to focus on other distant scents before it drew him back in. He was beginning to pant, his cock slowly engorging with the lust tripping along his spine.

His eyes turned back toward her and the sweetness in her scent ripened with her heightening arousal. She swallowed, her gaze flicking over him while studiously trying not to stare too openly at his cock.

"W...what are you, anyway?" she asked at length.

His brows snapped up because he had never met one who did not know what a satyr was and had plenty of preconceived notions about them. His eyes narrowed on her slightly in an attempt to determine if she was playing some clever game.

"Do you not recognize a satyr when you see one?" he queried.

Her flush rose higher on her cheeks. "Oh, yes. Well, sure," she stammered and paused as her brow furrowed slightly. "Just so we both are on the same page... perhaps you should tell me what a satyr is."

She said it so magnanimously as if she were graciously offering him an opportunity for clarification that he bit back a startled laugh. She didn't know! Suddenly, a world of opportunities felt as if it were opening up. He could keep her in his wood, and she would be none the wiser as to why she never found her way out. She would never suspect him of being anything but a rescuer. His eager cock aside.

He just had to play this right.

Using one hand to painfully force his engorged cock back into his sheath only for it to spring out again, Barasa gave her a hapless smile.

“My apologies. This,” he gestured to his phallus, “is a blessing or a curse, depending on how you see it, from the gods in providing my kind with such primal natures.” He gave her a sweet smile. “Satyrs are creatures of the woods and fields... protectors, if you will,” he added, “of those who cross through our territories and off the land itself.”

The latter was at least a little true. And the former wasn't exactly a lie. There were cases of satyrs showing some kindness toward a traveler. Sometimes.

“My name is Barbasa,” he said, extending his hand in greeting.

She peered at him and his hand suspiciously for a moment. He maintained what he believed to be a sweet smile and waited patiently. He nearly crowed in triumph when she settled her pack over her shoulder and placed her small hand in his. She gave his palm a quick squeeze before releasing his hand even quicker.

“I'm Tiffany,” she replied in a rush.

He cocked his head, keeping his movements slow and unalarming as he regarded her. “Do you need a place to escape

to for a short time, little Tiffany? I have a dwelling a distance away, hidden in the woods. If you are escaping pursuit, I would be pleased to offer shelter.”

Her brow wrinkled again but her gaze cut nervously back to the direction from which she came and she gave a jerky nod of her head.

“Okay,” she mumbled as her gaze snapped back to him. “For just a little bit. A day or two maybe just so I can be sure I lost them.”

He beamed down at her, careful to keep his possessive snarl buried within. She truly was exquisite. Small and dainty, smaller than even most human females he had seen, she possessed a slight figure that drew out every single one his territorial instincts and need to claim and protect. And yet with golden kissed skin and pale gold hair, she appeared as if she were a daughter of Helios, himself as powerful as Circe herself. “Can I ask why you are attempting to elude other humans—I assume you speak of humans.”

She gave another awkward nod and a worried look shifted briefly over her face. “A small group of men, I think. I could hear a couple of them shouting to each other about flushing me out of hiding.” She glanced up at him uncomfortably. “Are you sure they won’t find me?”

His grin widened and he hoped it did not show too much of the sinister or feral within him. “Of course. I guarantee no man will find you where I shall hide you,” he vowed.

Her brows drew down slightly at his wording but then her expression relaxed as she obviously decided to overlook his phrasing. He came very close to licking his teeth gleefully but managed to restrain himself at the last minute.

“Okay, then,” she said at last, taking a wary step closer to him. “I’ll go with you if you really think you can help me.”

He stepped in closer in turn. “We will need to move quickly,” he purred. “Close your eyes, little female.”

Her expression turned suspicious. “Why?”

He leaned in closer, enjoying the slight tremble that raced over her skin. “Because I can outrun any man easily even with the slight weight of a human in my arms. I do not think you can boast the same,” he rumbled in amusement. Her lips tightened in annoyance and his grin widened. “Besides, I think you might enjoy the experience.”

An intrigue he desperately wanted to explore lit up in her eyes and her tongue ran over her bottom lip as her eyes dropped very briefly to his throbbing cock before shooting back up to guiltily meet his. He wanted to croon to her that there was no need to be guilty for an action that gave them both pleasure but bit back his words and waited for her decision.

Finally, she nodded and stepped close enough to be swept up in his embrace. He did not waste time in going slowly so not to alarm her human sensibilities. Instead, he snatched her roughly to his chest and hefted her small body up high against him as he spun back around in the direction of home. With a leap he set off with a soft feminine squeal of surprise warming his ear.

Ah, how he could not wait to get her hidden safely at home!



THE SATYR WASN'T ENTIRELY TRUSTWORTHY. IT WAS EASY enough to spot in his smile that looked far too mischievous and charming with a hint of wildness to it that set Tiffany on edge. She'd be a fool to trust him. And yet, at the moment, he was the best option she had. Probably not the sanest if she were honest with herself as nothing about him screamed trustworthy but she was willing to take a chance considering that, despite her best efforts, she hadn't been able to lose the people following her. Every time she believed she possibly lost them, she was disheartened at the returning smoke that marked the position of their camp every evening.

They were getting closer.

The sad thing was, with the way they were gaining on her, she would already have long ago been captured if it hadn't been for a bit of quick thinking that first day. She'd lost a full night of sleep laying a false trail for their half-starved dogs before

wading down stream for a few miles before exiting onto dry ground. The wet squelch of her boots had been worth it as she hurried away from the river. She'd gained a good day and a half on them before she'd noted the campfire smoke some distance away, and from the direction from which she'd come, as she'd prepared to bed down for the night.

Last night they were the closest that they'd been yet. She'd been able to smell the smoke and hear the faint barks and howls of the dogs, making it very clear that her time was running out.

That was the sole reason she swallowed back her panicked scream and made no effort to fight off the satyr's hold as he raced away with her. Although he was sporting a massive, erect cock that made her more than a little uncomfortable with the way it seemed to wave at her persistently and nudged persistently at her thigh as he carried her, he'd been open to her questions and allowed her to lead their interaction. He'd even given her the choice if she wished to accompany him. That alone made her feel more comfortable going with him—for a short time, anyway.

The opportunity to lay low somewhere that she could safely hide until her pursuers moved on was worth taking a little chance. Of course, she recognized it could be a bit of a ploy, but it seemed pretty unnecessary for a male who, just by looking at him, could overpower her easier than any of those hot on her trail. So, she clung to him as he raced through the grasses to the edge of the woods into which he plunged without hesitation. Rather there was a sense of complete familiarity as he navigated with a surefootedness among the trees in comparison to her own disorientation from the sudden shift from open sunlight into the heavier shadows of the forest.

He didn't even seem to notice the thick, twisted limbs that reached for them. Tiffany did, however. She couldn't have missed them to save her life. Although they were nothing more than trees thick with vines and moss amid numerous bushes and flowering plants, there was a darkness that clung to it around the edges that hinted of things concealed among the eerie beauty and the mangled, darker forms that the trees seemed to take. There was something uncanny about it that settled like a cool weight in her chest. If she were walking at her normal pace instead of being carried at an abnormally high speed, she didn't think that she would be able to take more than a few steps at a time without quaking at the unease that filled her just being there.

That feeling grew as Barbasa raced along some hidden path, carrying them deeper into the depths of the forest. The deeper they went the longer and more ominous the shadows grew and the darker their surroundings as the sun moved overhead. At times she thought she caught ghostly wisps moving amid the trees that chilled her blood but that couldn't be right. Ghosts? Monsters were flesh and blood. Those she could believe. But a ghost couldn't be more than whisperings that people enjoyed scaring each other with.

Her fingers dug into the heavy muscles of the satyr's back in reaction but even more so when she felt his gait suddenly change. The shadows seemed to uncurl from within themselves, threads of darkness trailing between leaves and limbs and blades of grass and debris of the forest floor. Her pulse quickened in reaction until she rode the edge of the fear that was flooding her veins. She didn't want to stop in the midst of the thickest and darkest part of the forest! And yet, that was exactly what was happening. They were slowing down.

Biting back a whimper, she turned as much as she could in Barbasa's grasp to peer nervously at her surroundings as he continued to sedately walk forward to their destination. He had spoken of taking her home, but this was not what she expected. There was nothing but trees and darkness cut with brief, intermittent pools of dim sunlight that made its way into the canopy. It was dark enough that she missed the outline of a dark structure among the deepest pool of shadows until they were practically upon it and his hooves struck in a clatter against what sounded like cement poured within a small area that led to a short series of porch steps with a rough and weathered banister.

Tiffany stared as he began to hasten up them, her eyes slowly rising from the wooden porch to barely visible walls covered with what appeared to be thick ropes of some sort of viny plant that trailed along the sides of the porch and along its supports. No wonder she hadn't been able to see it. Between the vines and what appeared to be numerous overgrown bushes surrounding it, it blended into the rest of the forest too well. Despite her discomfort with the forest, the seclusion and obscured cabin gave her an incredible gift of comfort and she felt some of the tension ease from her shoulders and from her hands where she still tightly gripped him.

She doubted anyone would find her there. And though part of her laughed in terror out how suicidal it was to take relief in being kept somewhere that she would never be found, she strangely did. She could actually close her eyes and get some rest if the satyr proved to be as trustworthy as he led her to believe.

She hoped he was. She felt like she hadn't gotten a truly restful good night of sleep in weeks. Not since her father's decision to marry her went public. She'd been sleeping with

one eye open, terrified to truly let down her guard. And because of that, she was thoroughly exhausted. She could easily sleep for an entire day or two, as tired as she was.

The door creaked open, the hinges protesting and within moments she found herself lain in a soft pile of furs while the clip of the satyr's hooves retreated across the room. With a spark and a flare of fire, the room lit up with a dim light that gave the wooden walls a warm, cozy glow. Tiffany sank deeper into the furs, dragging the largest and plushest one over her as the heat from the fire slowly warmed the room and seeped into her bones. Despite her exhaustion, her eyes followed Barbasa as he took a small flame from the hearth and carried it around the room, lighting various lamps set out until it provided a comfortable glow by which she could see.

His skin shuddered and he bowed his head to blow out the flame in his hand, the fire in the hearth behind him highlighted his sculpted muscles, the two sets of horns that sprouted from his brow, and the powerful, inhuman lower torso with its short tail. The angle he stood at thankfully kept his cock from being outlined with a glow, however, which she was grateful for. She certainly didn't need to be staring at it again. Safe zones only. She didn't want to give him the wrong idea. Easing back into the furs, she met his eyes when he suddenly turned and grinned a little too wickedly.

“Just look at you. A delicate little morsel just begging to be snapped up,” he observed with a purr. “I do so like seeing you burrowed in my bed.” He cocked his head, the short spikes, offset as they were by being framed by large, curling horns, pierced the air as he considered her. “Are you warm enough?”

She gave a quick nod of her head, not quite trusting her voice yet after her shock at his unexpected words followed directly

by genuine concern. His sudden shift from feral hunger to worry had her completely off balance and not knowing what to expect and she wasn't entirely sure if she liked that.

“Good, good,” he replied with another easy smile as he swept past her to a wooden barrel near the window. From within the barrel, he drew out a couple of dried apples and held one out to her. “Are you hungry? I have plenty. The woods provide,” he explained as warmth climbed into his glowing yellow eyes.

Swallowing back the saliva that pooled in her mouth, she gave another sharp nod.

“Yes,” she rasped as she leaned forward and reached for the fruit.

How long had it been since she ate an apple? It was not fresh from the tree, but even dried apples were a luxury that her town hadn't had access to since the few scrawny trees that they owned died on them a couple years back. Sometimes they could get some apples in the early fall in trade with other towns, but there were none last year. An apple was precious in her town—even a dried one—and he was offering to her as if it were nothing.

The smile he bestowed on her as she plucked the apple from his clawed fingers was filled with genuine happiness. It creased his cheeks with dimples and reached his eyes where the corners crinkled with merriment. In that moment, he didn't look like the half-feral male who offered her protection but someone warmer and kinder. And lonely. She was certain she saw that in the depths of his eyes behind his merriment. She recognized it because it was the same that she felt no matter how many smiles she wore.

Under his approving gaze, she sank her teeth into the rubbery flesh of the fruit and moaned as the slightly tart taste of the dry

fruit swept over her tongue. From beneath her lashes, she watched a shiver raced over him and she wasn't able to ignore the way his cock twitched and dripped a thick stream of milky lubricant between his hooves. Drawing in a deep breath, he turned and settled into an old rocking chair. The wood groaned under his weight but held as he curled his fist around his sex. Her eyes widened and shot up to his face. Was he really going to jerk off right there in front of her?

To her relief he gave himself a hard squeeze, bringing up another stream before pressing it down and laying a thick fur over his lap. Settling back, he tipped the chair with his hooves so that it began to rock and regarded her in turn from half-open, luminous eyes. A tiny panting breath escaped him, and another shiver ran over him as he continued to rock, his breath hitching on a rumbling moan. She was certain now that he was seeing to his needs. She should be mortified but as far as she could tell she didn't see any halls or doors going off into other rooms that he could escape into. It was just the single room with the kitchen area over in one corner that she could now clearly see. Embarrassed to be witnessing such a thing, she blushed and ducked lower in the furs, trying to look anywhere but him. All the while, she was aware of his gaze fastened on her and the shudder that wracked him with a violent growl as his hips lurched in the chair.

Clenching her thighs together, Tiffany rolled onto her side and burrowed deeper into the warmth there. She didn't move, barely dared to breathe when she heard the light step of his hooves over the floorboards as he moved about. Sooner or later, he would join her in the bed. The fact that there was only one hadn't escaped her notice either.



BARBASA'S EYES SLOWLY OPENED, A SMILE CURLING HIS LIPS as he focused on the small female whom he'd curled his much larger frame around. Lowering his head so that his nose brushed her hair at the top of her head, he drew in her scent. There was something comforting about it that he had not expected. He had fully expected to awaken in a confused, aroused, and wary state as he had for innumerable years. Ever since the labyrinth had begun to chip away his sanity.

It was for this reason that, before bedding down, he had shifted the female to the farthest side while he took the other. He had hoped that the distance between them would give him the needed space to awaken and become fully alert without doing any damage to her soft, human flesh. Not that it would have mattered if the darkness had taken him in his sleep.

He frowned. He did not understand why it still gripped him as it did. The minotaur, Asterion, had seemingly recovered

entirely from the madness of the labyrinth. With nothing better to do with himself, Barbasa had followed him for a time, observing his once friend from afar. The male had been perfectly capable of striking with ruthless brutality when he desired, but overall, there were no signs of his senses being overcome whereas Barbasa hadn't been so fortunate. Though he remained unaffected at most times, the darkness had a way of attacking him randomly when his guard was down to varying degrees. Some of which he embraced—the raw wildness of it was merely an amplification of a satyr's own nature. But its cruelty and cold viciousness—that was enough to scare even a creature such as he who took pleasure in regulated amounts of fear.

It was on account of that madness that he had taken care to keep some distance between himself and his human while he slumbered and was most vulnerable to it taking hold. Close enough where he would be subconsciously assured that she remained with him and not give another, more aggressive opening to it, but far enough to where he was confident that he would not pose any immediate risk to her before he became aware of himself and regained control.

And yet, at some point in the night, they had both somehow shifted and met at the center, their limbs entangling in a warm, nestled embrace in which their scents merged. It was that scent that he breathed in and settled over and deep within him a sense of comfort. It perplexed him but not enough for him to feel his usual caution and roll away from her. Instead, he tucked Tiffany closer to him and a pleased smile lit his face as she rolled into his embrace, her legs and human feet sliding along his in the process, and rubbed her cheek against his chest with a contented sigh.

Taken completely off-guard by the affectionate gesture, his heart clenched even as his cock swelled with a pleasant ache within his sheath. As much as it was a relief not to awaken and find himself caught in the pulse of terrible desires demanding that he hunt out relief, or engorged as he customarily was, the low hum of mellowed lust rolled through him, tightening his sack. Burying his nose once again in her hair, the subtle scent of her arousal lay under her natural perfume. It wasn't heightened as it had been last night, but it was present in a banked state similar to his own desire.

He swallowed back a ravenous growl and the moan that immediately followed. She smelled so good. Had a female of his meeting ever smelled so sweet, rich, and earthy? He recalled being drawn violently toward the scent of female flesh within the labyrinth and how intoxicating it had been for him, but he did not recall experiencing true joy or pleasure.

Tiffany's scent was something new and pleasing without the fog of the labyrinth's influence. She scented of sun warmed earth, wildflowers, and honey with the deeper musk hinting at her arousal. He drew in another greedy breath, wanting more of it, practically tasting it on his tongue. She was a goddess of desire and longing made flesh, and possessing a natural perfume to her flesh that aroused and intrigued him.

His cock kicked once again in his sheath, swollen to an even larger size, but he ignored it. It was strange that he was so content to merely hold her, his eyes fastened on her face as he waited for the first signs of her waking. He wanted to see her surface from her slumber. Would she greet him as a lover in her confused, half-asleep state? That thought intrigued him as well. He hoped that she would, but all the same he didn't want her to do anything she would regret. Whatever they did together, there would be no crying foul.

And he would take precautions. He would protect her from the part of him damaged and carrying the poison of the labyrinth still.

Ever so gently, he dragged the claws of his first two fingers through her hair, separating the strands with his claw tips. Pale gold, it picked up the sunlight streaming through the windows, the strands shimmered, bringing a smile to his lips. Shifting his hand, he allowed the soft strands to slide down his fingers and over his hand. As much as it appealed to him, he drew his hand back quickly when her eyes fluttered with her awakening. As much as his nature would delight in every little gasp of surprise, he recognized the importance of restraint at this particular time. He wanted to play with her—not truly make her terrified of him.

Pale lashes lifted and dark blue eyes peered groggily at him before focusing on his face. Her pupils expanded slightly—demonstrating her surprise—but it was brief and her scent didn't carry any particularly strong fear scent as she calmly studied him. He rumbled happily, pleased at her interest. Oh, liked it very much and had to resist preening at her attentiveness. Instead, he held perfectly still so that she could thoroughly look him over. He didn't so much as twitch as her gaze slid over his features, though his lips curled as her expression grew amused at her scrutiny. His skin warmed and tingled with awareness everywhere her eyes touched as her gaze slid over his hip and up along his abdomen and chest before gradually returning to face once more.

A pink hue stained her cheeks as she drew the fur covering her higher so that it rested over her shoulder. He did not understand why. She wore as much clothing as she had when he found her. It seemed terribly uncomfortable to sleep in such a way, but he kept that opinion to himself for the time being.

“Ah, thank you,” she mumbled.

His eyebrow raised at that, and he cocked his head. “For what am I being thanked?”

Her flush climbed a little higher and darkened subtly. “I guess for everything. You didn’t have to, but you’ve been genuinely very kind, and I appreciate it. You saved me, fed me, and kept me warm. Very warm,” she added with a low chuckle that teased his senses.

Blinking, Barbasa worked to contain his surprise. She thought he was... kind? Even before spending centuries caught into the hold of the labyrinth, he had not been called kind. He’d been called fair in the early days, but he couldn’t think of a single adjective applied to him that surpassed that one.

Worst, he knew he wasn’t kind. He was selfish and couldn’t bring himself to regret it—and it certainly did not change his mind in regard to his course of action. He desired her in every way—carnally and socially to stave off his loneliness. She would remain with him as his companion. Whether she liked it or not.

Her smile shifted into a quizzical expression as the silence stretched between them and he realized that she expected some sort of response from him. Lips twitching with amusement, he inclined his head in a tiny bow.

“Of course. I may be a poor host but consider everything I have here yours for as long as you need it. It is my pleasure to provide for such a lovely female so lost in this brutal world.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly at that and for a moment he wondered if perhaps he had taken it a bit too far and made her suspicious. So, he met her frown with politely raised brows

and a vacant smile until the wariness slowly faded from her face.

“I... appreciate it,” she said at last, and her lips twisted faintly in a grimace. “It would be nice to have a little time to truly rest. I knew it was going to be dangerous, but I guess I didn’t fully realize how hard it would be on my own. Though that factor really wouldn’t have been inescapable either,” she added with a grim laugh.

He cocked his head. “Do you not have a flock... ah, family... to protect you?”

She nodded reluctantly but shrugged. “I have my parents,” she agreed at length. “But they decided it was time I get married, and I wasn’t really going to get any choice about it.” Her lips thinned briefly as if she wanted to say more but she sighed and shook her head, an unhappy expression on her face. “I left that same night that they told me their decision.”

Barbasa peered at her in confusion. “That is it? You left because they wished you to take a mate?”

That... didn’t sound right to him. In his experience, when he’d last been in the human world, human fathers had arranged the marriages of their daughters. Certainly, they were not all very happy, and more than one woman wandered from home to please herself drinking wine and indulging in erotic delights among the company of satyrs, but it all seemed to be the nature of things.

Tiffany rolled her eyes, communicating clearly what she thought of his comment and tone of voice. “Easy enough for you to say, or the men in my town for that matter. You haven’t seen what happens in town when there is an available woman in town. It’s not like they are asking her to the movies.”

He had no idea what that was, but he assumed it was a social engagement given the context and the brief wistful look that flashed across her face. In the next moment, however, her expression tightened.

“I guess we are supposed to be thankful that it’s no longer violent like it was after the Ravening that collapsed our world, but I’ve seen the fear on the faces of the woman turned out on the labyrinth.”

He gave her a horrified look. The labyrinth? Had it somehow survived the destruction Asterion dealt it in his escape all so that humans could use it in their foolish mating rituals? It was a terrifying prospect and one that made him grateful that he was far from any human settlement if was manifesting itself in such a way.

Some of his shock must have shown on his face, however, because she hastened to explain, much to his relief.

“That’s what we call a network of streets that were set up as a separate walled off area outside the main town that has been used for settling conflicts and, because there are a lot of single men and rarely a single woman in sight, for settling who gets the available woman.” She let out a bitter laugh as she began to run her fingers through her hair to comb through the tangles. “Some women who already have a secret lover manage to arrange a meeting place with him to cheat the system so to speak. And women who are under the protection of their fathers and deemed by their fathers as being marriable get a free pass. Otherwise, it is whoever gets to her first, claims her, and returns to the town first.”

Barbasa gaped in disbelief. It was... barbaric! And that was something coming from a satyr!

“And your father’s decision that you should marry would have subjected you to this?” he demanded in bewilderment.

Tiffany nodded and offered him a wry smile as she began to weave her hair into a braid. “Yeah. Honestly, I’m surprised he held out as long as he did. I’ve had a lot of time to think about it since I left and while I felt betrayed by his decision, I have to wonder now how long the town had been pressuring him... and how hard. I knew that my single status was protested quite frequently at the meeting hall, and it wasn’t like I didn’t have men following me whenever I happened to be caught alone, but I don’t know how far it went.” She shivered then and he had no doubt that it was in memory of being hunted, a thought that made Barbasa want to hunt *them* down. “So, I got out before the wolves could truly begin circling and I was thrown to their mercy at the next town meeting.”

His hackles rising, Barbasa sprung to his hooves and stalked away from her, the simmering anger within his belly loosening tendrils of the taint buried within him. He wrestled them down until all he felt was his anger without the touch of the madness. The snarl he vocalized, however, made his little female jump slightly in surprise, though her eyes warmed as she watched him pace irritably, his tail held out stiffly behind him as he attempted to work off some of his pent aggression.

“And the men hunting you?” he bit out. “Do they intend to do this as well?”

“Probably not,” she admitted. “They won’t need to. They would either share me between them or have already decided who gets to keep me.”

And instead of chasing her through a labyrinth of city streets, they chased her through the grasses. No different really. He understood why she left. At least in the wilderness she had a

chance of escape. And she had managed to remain ahead of her pursuers though it had obviously left her exhausted. Though he had no intention of letting her go, he also had no intention of abusing her in such a way. When he finally hunted her it would be because *she* desired it. She would not be unwilling prey to any male.

Females loved the thrill of the chase when it came to a satyr's lust because they made sure it was always on her terms. That was something that even he had forgotten in the dark depths of the labyrinth as the poison of the corridors ate at his mind and spirit. It now rose furiously within him along with a strong sense to protect that. He was a selfish male... too selfish to release her, but he would honor that.

Spinning abruptly back toward Tiffany, he peered down at her, his chest expanding so that she understood that he was a large and powerful male. Although he wasn't as large as Asterion, he still had some size advantage to many of the human males he had spotted at a distance. And though his flock was gone, he was a king. He would see to her protection.

"You will be safe here with me, I swear it," he rumbled and the teary look of gratitude in her eyes nearly undid him right there.

Overcome by his emotion he hurried to the door. "Remain here while I scout my territory. Have some apples if you wish, or bread. It is a couple days old and made with ground acorns so I don't know if it will be to your taste. You may enjoy anything I have. I will return shortly."

With that promise and her murmured thanks, he slipped out the door into the morning light and dragged in the scents of his territory into his lungs. While in the past he had been tolerant of human comings and goings around and through his

territory, he would make certain no human was foolish enough to come anywhere near it now. Not when he had a female to protect and so much more to potentially lose!



TIFFANY PROPPED HER ELBOWS ON THE COUNTER AS SHE watched Barbasa work a loaf between his hands, her admiration growing rapidly ever since his pronouncement of her complete safety just days ago. She didn't see him for long stretches of the day, but she got the idea that he was often roaming his forest anyway. She didn't mind since she felt perfectly safe, even if it was getting a bit boring. She'd come to look forward to his returns in the late afternoon, often with some small game that he had come across.

To her surprise, despite his poorly disguised leering and frequent extruding at random times to tempt with her the glimpse of a cock that seemed to verge on scarily large, she was comfortable in his company. Oh, she had no doubt that he desired her—it was pretty hard for her to ignore, although Barbasa seemed to be able to overlook the presence of his erect cock as if it wasn't staring back at her—but he wasn't aggressively pushing her toward anything. He was just very

blatant about his interest and made no effort to hide it. Not even when he eventually curled around her as they lay together at night and the hard, hot length pressed firmly against her bottom. Every twitch of it against her never failed to send hot currents deep into her belly to the point that it was leaving her with a restless feeling throughout the day.

It was getting to the point where she was beginning to wish that he would make a move. Even if his dick frightened her a little, there was an ache growing slowly within her, one that she shouldn't indulge in since she wasn't staying. Barbasa's offer, as generous as it had been, was only a temporary one. Which was probably the reason he good-naturedly tolerated the little adjustments she made to the cabin in his absence.

The table she sat at was one of them. She'd found it pushed into one corner with a heavy layer of dust and covered with a bunch of old crap that she was sure had been there since before the Ravening. It had taken her most of that afternoon to haul the heavy tarps and pieces of some sort of machinery that appeared to be some kind of engine off of it. Hunting down a cleanser had taken her a bit longer. Water and regular soap had been close to ineffectual. It wasn't until she spotted a small shed just off to the side of the cabin and went to explore its contents that she found exactly what she was looking for. That was, once she got past the gruesome sight of numerous metal traps, long hooks hanging from the ceiling, and a butchery table stained so thoroughly with blood that her stomach turned. As there was a bucket of water sitting next to it, she knew that Barbasa utilized it and the clean hooks closest to it even if he touched none of the other dust coated things within the shed.

Returning to the cabin with the grease cleaner had felt like a small victory, but it proved worth the effort after she hauled

the table into a bright spot in front of a window and scrubbed it thoroughly. It had taken some work, but the old furniture gleamed with the bit of wood polish she'd rubbed sparingly into it. The wildflowers that she'd gathered had been the final touch. Sure, it had probably been overkill, especially since they required a cupful of precious water that she got from the barrel of drinking water, but Barbasa had smiled when he saw them. He did, however, raise an eyebrow at the junk pile that had shifted onto the floor before quietly setting to moving it out of the cabin. She wasn't entirely sure where he put everything since the shed hadn't had too much room as it was, but the cabin felt quite a bit cozier afterward, especially now he was bent over it, wearing a weathered apron with yellow ducks printed over it, turning out bread dough.

She shook her head in awe as she watched him work. *Acorn bread. Imagine.*

That certainly hadn't occurred to anyone within town, and she couldn't say why since there were plenty of acorns from trees that grew everywhere in the abandoned areas. Instead, they struggled with small farm plots to grow wheat, barley, oats and other food staples. Bread was communally made, baked and divided among those living there with extra portions going to men for doing more of the "harder work," and needing more of the calories. Or some such stupidity since she was well aware of how the women worked themselves from morning to night. There had been many days that Tiffany had still been hungry following supper and would have been thrilled at having more of the hearty bread available. And now... now because of Barbasa's acorn flour, she had all that she could possibly eat.

And she had made quick work of what remained of his last loaf, much to her embarrassment. He had been strangely

pleased, however, and she couldn't understand why. Since she was too embarrassed to ask and he didn't seem inclined to say anything about it, it remained a great mystery. But she was sure that satisfaction had something to do with why he was making bread that morning instead of going on his usual rounds.

She certainly didn't object to watching his powerful hands knead the dough and the veins on his forearms stood out in firm ridges with the effort. He was glorious to watch, even with the ducky apron that added to masculinity in the confidence with which he wore it. Her gaze drifted over him before returning to the loaf he was fashioning.

"Do you still plan to go out today?" she asked conversationally.

His yellow eyes flicked to her and a smile tugged at his lips. "Have you missed me that much?" he purred in return, drawing a giggle from her.

"I'm not sure how to answer that," she teased. "If I say yes you will get a big head. If I say no, you may be crushed and suspect I wish to oust you from your own home and keep it to myself."

Eyes dancing mirthfully, his smile widened at her response. "As for the first, I already have a most impressive head, as you've seen for yourself. And especially that one," he added with a meaningful look toward his cock hidden behind his apron, making her choke on an embarrassed laugh. "As to the second, you can try," he rumbled, "but you will quickly discover that I won't give up so easily when it comes to what I desire to keep."

Those final words were delivered with such directness and intensity that they conveyed a sort of heat that rushed over her

as if they were speaking of more than just the cabin.

“So, what will it be, then?” he continued. “Do we spend a day together?”

He glanced over at her again as he spoke, one of his dark eyebrows rising with his inquiry. Despite the directness of his question, she thought she caught a hint of vulnerability in the quick shift of his gaze as he studied the dough, turning it about between his hands an unnecessary number of times as he did so.

Spend a day with him? A warmth crawled through her as her imagination conjured a cozy image within her mind. They could build up the fire in the hearth and perhaps she could teach him a few games. She'd found a faded deck of cards. There were a couple missing so it wasn't quite complete but good enough for a few games. And he would have plenty of opportunities to teach her a few things.

Despite her best effort not to, Tiffany's cheeks grew hot just as she swore that heat raced through her and erupted within her belly to sink low to the intimate spot between her legs.

Barbasa's nostrils twitched and flared as he drew in a sharp breath in reaction and the hair prickled along her arms at just how primal that response was as he clearly scented her arousal.

“I would like that,” she replied though her belly quivered with a sudden nervousness.

His eyelids dropped slightly and he regarded her through thick, dark lashes from beneath their hoods. The hard line of his mouth curved in response, and his beautifully sculpted cheek creased with the flash of a dimple. Though he was distinctly inhuman in appearance from the tip of his horns and the gleam of his glowing eyes, right down to his tuft of a tail

and hooves, those parts of him that were like those of a human man were of a breathless beauty.

Captivated, she watched as he stroked his fingers through the bit of beard on his chin, her gaze focusing on his long, elegant fingers tipped with seemingly dainty black claws. His horns took on a subtle shine as they caught the sunlight with the curious tip of his head. That same sunlight brought out the reddish hue within his brown curls that fell over his brow and teased his pointed ears.

“Is there some activity in particular you had in mind, Tiffany,” he purred.

He drew her name out in such a way that it seemed as if he savored it as the sounds fell elegantly from his lips. She didn’t think a single person had ever made her name sound so beautiful or erotic before and she was all there for that.

“Tell me,” he insisted, his purr sinking suddenly into a deep rumble that made her belly clench.

Her extreme attraction to him felt practically insane with how strongly it gripped it without any control or consent on her part. She was so lost in him and the puzzle of powerful pull toward him that she jumped when he gave the dough a final hard slap before scooping it up and setting it in the pan. There was a touch of wickedness to the grin he gave her then as if he enjoyed the effect that he had on her.

She blew out a long breath and mentally rolled her eyes. Of course, he did. He wasn’t human but he seemed to enjoy a small game of power in his interactions with her. And she’d noted early on that he enjoyed that game very much. What did surprise her, however, was how much she enjoyed it in turn. That she wouldn’t have suspected. She’d spent so much time fantasizing about having a sexy, devoted and protective

monster that would make her feel safe and secure in every way, that she hadn't even imagined a male possessing less desirable traits or that she would get so much enjoyment out of it.

"I was thinking a good game of cards, perhaps," she suggested as she watched him carry the loaf toward the wood stove.

He paused, crouched over the oven, and briefly peered at her over his shoulder as if trying to make sense of what she wanted. Suddenly, he shook his head with a chuckle.

"Ah, Tiffany. You are such a delight," he rasped. "If you wish to fleece me... you will have to find a way to hold me down."

She stared at him puzzled and he gave her a wink. Despite her confusion, her lips twitched at the absurdity of their situation. Somehow, he had turned the suggestion of a card game into something naughty, but she had zero context for what he was even talking about.

Her lips still twitching, she leaned forward and raised her eyebrows. "What?"

Barbasa's reaction made her stifle a giggle as he cocked his head and his brow puckered in echo of her confusion. "What?"

Shaking her head as a tiny snort of laughter escaped her, Tiffany walked over to the old drawer barely hanging together by a few nails and worn glue and pulled out the pack of playing cards. Holding them aloft, she returned to his side and wiggled the small box.

"Playing cards," she giggled as she pulled the cards from the box and set the stack on the table between them. She flicked one card over—Ace of spades—and then another—Queen of Hearts—and gestured to them. "It's a game, well several

games actually depending on what you want to play,” she clarified with a grin. “Now what were *you* talking about?”

He laughed then; a rich booming sound that made her smile widen. His horns swung as he shook his head with amusement. “I thought you were speaking of carding wool, which did seem like a strange activity, so I thought you were meaning alluding to the shearing time and binding a male down in place,” he explained, conjuring a clear picture in her mind of the satyr bound and at her mercy. “Which certainly seemed like an interesting game to me,” he added in a provocative murmur.

A hot, wet gush filled her panties with the clenching and quiver of belly. Heat raced over her skin and deep within her in dual currents, beading her nipples and bringing a throb to her clit. How did he have that effect on her? She bit her lip and blew out a slow, controlled breath in an attempt to keep herself under control and smiled gamely as she began to shuffle the cards.

“As interesting as that sounds... perhaps Go Fish would be a better place to start.”

His lips tipped with amusement, no doubt onto her attempt at redirection but he went along with it as cheerful as ever.

“I *do* like fishing. Anything that involves a pole and a deep pool is worthy of *hours* of attention.”

Her hold on the cards slipped, releasing cards wildly over the table in front of her as her own needy “pool” pulsed and clenched with its lack of rod. Desire wasn’t new to her, and she’d masturbated plenty over the years, but she was suddenly beginning to doubt that she would be able to ease this particular ache he was creating.

Clearing her throat, and with his soft chuckle in her ear, Tiffany gathered the cards up again, gave them another couple of shuffles and proceeded to deal them out. In an annoyingly breathy voice, she hastily explained the rules so that he wouldn't have an in for any further innuendos. To her relief, though his smile grew wider, he didn't continue with that direction of thought. He did, however, throw her numerous lascivious looks and purred what he sought in ways that made her cheeks heat and her shoulders shake with laughter. It shouldn't have been so arousing. There was nothing arousing about it other than the strange emphasis that he put on thick clubs and piercing swords—and in fact should have been more hilarious than anything—but said in that thick, rumbling purr she was unable to restrain her imagination.

Sucking in her lips, she regarded him as steadily as she could manage while pretending that she was barely keeping herself in place on her chair and not wiggling her bottom to provide some tiny bit of relief to her swollen bud. With great effort of concentration, she focused down on her hand.

“Do you have any two of clubs?”

“Two clubs,” he murmured with a sly look in echo of her request. “Two clubs can be quite fine. I can rightly give you two clubs with a bit of innovation.”

That was it. With a muffled groan, she flung her hand down and hurried out the front door to seek some privacy. Barbasa stood from his chair as she passed but she waved him back.

“It's okay, I just need a moment alone. I will be back in a minute.”

He didn't ask what she intended, and she thanked the gods for that. She would have died of embarrassment to admit that she was so turned on that she was going to go out there to

desperately rub one out. She knew that he would be happy to take of her desire, but she wasn't entirely sure still if he was the one. The impermanence of their situation aside when she wished for a male who wouldn't leave her aside, she felt as if this was all a game to him. And while a part of her appreciated his jovial flirtation, she didn't want to be a game or conquest.

Hurrying around a small cluster of trees so that she wouldn't be seen from the cabin, Tiffany yanked down her pants and sank two fingers into her soaked, slippery passage with a grunted, bit-back moan. She stroked into her pussy and along her clit until her breath came out in needy pants and her thighs shivered with her impending orgasm. Biting hard on her lip to keep her cries of pleasure contained, she pinched her nub between her knuckles, sending herself hurtling off the edge as her orgasm swept over her and sagged against the tree supporting her.

She had a feeling she would be spending time daily at that damned tree.

Fuck. This male is going to kill me yet.



BARBASA GRUNTED AS HIS COCK SPILLED A COPIOUS AMOUNT of seed against the thick roots of the tree in front of him. His lips twisted into a faint smile as he stared down it, the long thick ropes of semen covering the splatter that had gushed from a certain female's wet cunt. A shiver of excitement ran up his spine in reaction and his tail flicked rapidly as his cock let loose another thick stream, pumping the last of his cum in a final burst.

Over many days, he had fallen into a strange routine with Tiffany that he was still struggling to make sense of. She desired him, he tasted it in the air as it bloomed with every erotic temptation he offered, and yet she resisted fulfilling her mutual desire. He knew exactly what she was up to and when she returned to the cabin with a flush on her face and his cock hard enough to chop wood. And every time he excused himself and followed her enticing scent to the tree coated in her sweet release to spill his own seed over it.

Part of his urge could be explained as a way to cover her scent so that no other male picked up the perfume of a ripe, unmated female and tracked it back to their door. But that was only a small part of it. A large part of it was an impulse formed from a deep instinctual need that rose to the fore. He didn't even think of it, his body demanding that he go and cover her scent with his own and make it his.

If any male even thought to take what was his, they would very quickly be a very dead male. He hadn't even fucked his female and he was feeling a strong possessiveness and protectiveness over the small human. And gods help him, the taint was reacting to it. It rose in him now and a territorial growl escaped him as he peered suspiciously among the surrounding trees. Stepping back from their combined mess, his nostrils flared as he scented the air, his ears twitching at even the slightest sound, as he sought any sign of an intruder.

He would tear apart anyone who dared to come close. Tear him with claws and teeth until their blood ran down his throat and their flesh fed his appetite.

The birds fell silent at his growl, and even the hum of insects disappeared until nothing but silence pervaded his woods. The mingled scents of himself and his mate were strong and there were plenty of scent trails of animals burrowed nearby and those that had passed along the game trails, but nothing else that threatened his territory.

Another shiver ran over him, his thick skin and hide quivering with the force of it. He glanced back at the cabin, catching sight of it between the trees. The glow of hearth's fire and the few lamps Tiffany had set out to comfortably illuminate the space for her weaker sight drew him with its warmth. The taint, however, pulsed with an angry hiss through his psyche.

It demanded that he defend and stake his claim. To go to the edges of his territory and send his warnings clearly to any who may think to venture toward the boundaries of his woods.

His cock swelled with replenished seed and he groaned deep in his throat as he turned away from the cabin. The taint curled deeper within his mind, its once painful hooks softening as it merely flooded through him. His breath hissed from between his sharp teeth in a snarl and he sprung forward, heading deeper within his wooded abode. He would mark his inner boundary first so no other denizens of the wood be tempted crossing over from the fae realms, and then he would deal with the outer boundaries that followed along a trail of rocks in the grasslands just outside the forest.

Strength from the taint rushed through him, giving him extra speed and endurance as he bounded along game trails that ran in heavy networks through the forest. He knew the moment he hit his boundary. He had patrolled them often enough and had usually contented himself with leaving nothing more than pheromone laden scratches on the largest of the trees. That was no longer enough. Turmoil ran sharply through him as he caught the faint scents of a reynard, a vulpine creature that had claimed a burrow somewhere within the dense forest beyond Barbasa's territory.

A small fox darted among the trees, drawing his attention and his nostrils flared, scenting the air. It was not the reynard. Rather it was one of the male's spies. Barbasa grunted in acknowledgement and dipped his head quickly as he drew back. The male was wise enough never to venture close their shared border, though his foxes crossed through it often enough. They did not bother Barbasa, however. They were merely small animals that posed no threat to him or his, even if they were eyes and ears for their master. So long as they did

not venture too close to spy upon his dwelling, he had no argument with the male or his beasts.

Turning his attention away from the reynard's territory, Barbasa gave a few strokes of his cock, spraying a thinner, pheromone rich splatter along one tree and then another. Since it didn't carry his seed, it rose rapidly to serve his purposes, allowing him to complete his task and move on. So he continued his task throughout the day until he had marked all of the required trees and rocks. Scenting no threat, and his task complete, the taint retreated enough to allow him to return to his female.

He did not explain his whereabouts when Tiffany looked over at him curiously as he stepped through the door some time later, a pair of fat rabbits hanging from his fist. Just the sight of her sent a sense of calm rushing through him that brought a smile to his face. She had been busy again while he was away, adding more of her small feminine touches. He had brought her bunches of the longest, thickest grasses and thin strips of willow over the week and she'd been busily applying herself to learning how to fashion simple baskets under his instruction. Now a lopsided basket was now sitting beside the hearth that she'd apparently finished that day while he was gone. She had filled it with the woodchips for their fire in place of the pile that had previously sat there.

She had also brought in more fresh flowers and had herbs hanging to dry that he had pointed out to her during their walks close to the dwelling. He never ventured far with her so that she remained at all times within the heart of his territory and she seemed to be content with walking those familiar paths that he'd taken her on that he did not worry knowing that she walked along them when he was not home. He didn't resent her desire to enjoy the woods rather than remain within

the house waiting for him. She was always there when he returned, anyway, calming him and banking the taint.

Whatever curse had carried over since exiting the labyrinth, he now understood that, for some reason, it quieted whenever he was safely denned with her. He had even taken to cuddling with her beneath the furs when he crawled into bed without worry.

He only prayed to the gods who oversaw and toyed with the worlds of men and fae that she would never witness him in the grip of the taint's madness. If he could control it and find small ways to make her life easier and more comfortable there with him, he was certain that he could make her happy. None of that would be easy but he was a stubborn satyr. He never lost a game that he set his mind to. And as he had decent piles of tanned fur and supple leather exquisitely cured and fashioned by satyr secrets, he could easily begin with adding to her comforts when he took them in to the mixed human and fae settlement to trade. They always greeted his work with pleasure and gave him much for them. He would find some things suitable to make his mate smile.

He wasn't worried about leaving her alone. She was smart and knew where to stay within his territory and he was certain that his marking would keep intruders out while he was gone. Still, he would wait some days just to be completely certain that she would feel safe and secure during his absence.

Once she was ready, however, it would only be his greatest pleasure to delight her by showering gifts upon his mate. He even had some trade credits accumulated in the settlement. He could get her soft pillows and a blanket to wrap around herself to ward off the chill when a fur would be too bulky or heavy.

Carrying the rabbits over to the sink to skin and prepare them, his footsteps clipped with barely restrained excitement as he began to make plans. Tiffany gave him searching looks, a tiny smile playing at the corners of his mouth betraying the fact that he couldn't quite hide his feelings as thoroughly as he thought. Beneath his excitement, however, contentment soaked through him as they prepared dinner together.

Yes, his mate deserved the best of everything. Whatever he could find worthy of her and carry home would be hers. Perhaps one day he would even take her to the settlement—though that day was long off. His territorial nature was slow to trust potential rivals when he had not yet claimed her, and she had not yet claimed him in turn. But eventually he would.

Whistling merrily to himself, he set to work as he allowed himself to dream of a future that was still out of reach but was becoming increasingly more real to him by the day.



TIFFANY STARTED DOWN AT THE BOLT OF BRILLIANT GREEN fabric. At her side a basket of new sewing supplies still sealed in badly yellowed packaging awaited her attention along with two more bolts of fabric—one a deep blue and the other yellow with a floral pattern printed across it. She ran her fingers over the soft material in disbelief, a little squeal of pleasure escaping her. She glanced up at the satyr grinning down at her, still unable to believe that he gave her all of this. She had known that he'd left to trade some of the furs and leather he had been skillfully working on, but she'd expected for him to return only with simple goods that they needed. Since two people ran through his supplies quicker than just one, it made perfect sense, and she'd simply been relieved that no word had been spoken yet of her leaving. But she had never expected *this*! Not when some part of her still waited with dread, day to day expecting him to call an end to their unusual living situation.

Instead, he had patiently prepared her for his absence as if wanting to be certain that she would be fine for the several days it would take for him to return. Although she'd been nervous that she was to be left alone, she took it all in stride. It helped that he was in no hurry to leave her side though she knew that there were things that they required. Eventually, it was Tiffany who had to laughingly tell him to go. She just hadn't anticipated how much she would miss him. One day passed and then another. By day three she was sick of her own company and the endless quiet of the cabin without his teasing laughter and the warm scent of him filling the air. As the days passed, she felt increasingly twitchy and caught herself watching for him as she walked restlessly among the trees around the cabin. By the end of day five she began to worry about him and considered trying to find him, though she had no idea what direction she would go or where she would even begin. Thankfully, he returned on the sixth day with his sack swollen with supplies and merry twinkle in his eyes as if he were the Santa Claus of her childhood.

And even *then*, she hadn't expected him to bring her gifts. She'd learned a long time ago to not get her hopes up for anything from anyone. Gifts had disappeared from her life as quickly as celebrating birthdays and holidays in their dreary town. There were no gifts when every day was a fight for survival. And yet—Barbasa gave her so much and she didn't know what to think of it.

“Where did you get this?” she asked in awe.

She brushed her fingers again over the fabric, pleased that she had thought to thoroughly bathe herself that morning in the nearby stream that cut through their woods a short distance behind the cabin. She didn't want to soil the fabric before she even had an opportunity to make something of it.

The satyr chuckled at her obvious delight and unloaded several small packages beside her to join her other gifts. Honey and thick pillows and a large, soft blanket joined the gifts at her side before he stood with his leather sack and carried it over to the kitchen area where he set it on the counter. He did not linger there, though, but returned quickly to her side and crouched down beside her once more.

“Do you like it?” he asked, the flick of his ears betraying his hint of uncertainty.

“It’s gorgeous! I’m almost afraid to use it out of the worry of messing it up.” She chuckled quietly to herself. “I’m not the best at sewing, although my mother did her best to teach me, but I do think I can make a couple of simple, drapey dresses that I can belt up as I need to.” She beamed over at him.

“Thank you! For all of it,” she added gesturing to his other thoughtful gifts.

She peered up at him, suddenly shy as she wondered if he wanted a demonstration of her thanks. She’d seen her mother kiss her father for small things he did for her. And when Tiffany was thirteen there had been that boy who demanded a right to a kiss and to feel up her dress when he had helped her drag an old vanity from a vacant house to her own.

She’d punched him in the face for it.

But for Barbasa—she would happily reward him in that way, but she wasn’t sure how to begin with. Although he often cuddled with her during the night, they didn’t trade kisses or touches. In fact, other than curling around her at night or the brush of his hand or hip against hers, he rarely touched her. She knew he would touch her sexually since he flirted so heavily with her as if intentionally building up to that, but would he even welcome an unexpected touch when there was

nothing sexual leading up to it? He wasn't human and she didn't know if his species had gestures of affection. It would be awful if she flung her arms around him and he interpreted it as an attack when there was no sexual buildup to it. That was one aspect of being with a monster that she hadn't considered.

She was tempted to try it anyway and went so far as carefully setting the material with the others and lifting a hand with the idea of pulling him close. It was his curious glance at her hand that had her courage fail her. Instead, she plucked up one of the blankets he brought her and dragged it around her shoulders. Snugly into it, she gave him an embarrassed smile from behind the thick material. He cocked his head, his expression becoming more curious as he watched her.

"This is a lovely blanket," she rushed to explain. "So warm. If you can get stuff like this, I don't know why you don't stay wherever you went to. We don't even have anything so nice in the town where I lived."

His lips tipped in an answering smile but there seemed to be a new hesitancy to it. "It is a nice settlement with an interesting mix of species. That blanket there was made by a lupi family that rear sheep." He chuckled at that. "Imagine wolveren males and females, and their sheep, but they are the best guards and caretakers of them. And the weave of their cloth and blankets is uncomfortable."

She blinked at the fabric. It had been so soft that she hadn't even guessed that it was made of wool. What was more, it had an entirely different texture from the blanket around her. "This is all from their sheep?"

He nodded, his smile widening at her surprise. "There are also carvers who make great things of wood, though the furnishings would take multiple males to cart this far into my

woods,” he added with a rumbling chuckle. “Asterion, a minotaur who raises bees, comes through once a month with his supplies—I was lucky to catch him this time.” His smile fell a little at those words but returned quickly, though when it did, it wasn’t quite as bright. “There are nymphs who make ciders and ales. Pies. Oh, I’ve brought a pie!” He started to stand but Tiffany grabbed his hand, wound her fingers with his and tugged him back down to her side.

She peered at him in confusion. “Why don’t *you* live there then?”

His smile disappeared and he gave her an uncomfortable look. “Satyrs don’t do well in settlements. We are not comfortable having too many around us who are not flock.”

“Flock?” *Was this a sheep thing again?*

His lips twitched faintly as if he had some idea of what direction my mind drifted off into. “A flock is a family group of satyrs,” he explained after a several minutes of strained silence. “At times a flock will adopt new members but generally most are blood related and descended from a single mated couple who split from their own familial herd with their own line.” His eyes crinkled slightly. “Of course all satyrs only father males, who are in turn satyrs, so we tend to mate with females who join our numbers by choice. Shepherdesses that we come across, usually,” he continued with a hint of his old mischievousness returning.

Of course it would be. Tiffany snorted as she attempted to hold back her laughter. She was not going to be distracted.

“Okay, so where is your flock?” She was suddenly very confused. Why was Barbasa all alone? “Surely if you are that social to where you live in a large, extended family groups, no satyr would willingly live alone like this. So why are you?”

Pain flashed through his eyes, dulling their yellow hue. “I had a flock. I took over as king with the passage of my grandsire and the responsibility for their care fell to me. And I failed them.”

“What happened?” she whispered, her voice dropping at the gravity of the situation.

There was pain there that he obviously didn’t want to look at—and she wouldn’t push him—but felt like this was something that happened to him that was important. Something that she needed to know.

He cleared his throat and slanted an uncertain look at her. “It’s not a pretty tale. You may be happier not knowing.” He shook his head as he appeared to struggle with his thoughts. “I shouldn’t tell you. It has nothing to do with now.”

Still holding his hand wound tightly with hers, she rubbed her thumb across his knuckles, dragging his attention back to their joined hands. “I would like to know,” she admitted.

He pinned her with a hard look. “Be certain of this. It will change how you see me—how you feel around me.”

That sounded ominous but she was there with him, living with him and enjoying his protection. It didn’t seem right for her to just blithely continue on without helping to relieve him of a small part of the emotional burden he carried. Whatever had happened to his flock, it had left deep scars within him.

“I’m certain,” she murmured.

Holding her gaze with his pale eyes, his lips barely moved as he whispered, “I killed them.”

Tiffany stared at him in shock, for a moment certain that she misheard them. Upon realization that she hadn’t, her first impulse was to recoil away from him and put distance between

them, but she forced herself to remain still as she worked through it in her mind.

“Okay.” The word left her in a drawn-out whisper as her stomach threatened to heave. The male she had spent weeks with had killed not only one person but many from the sound of it. He was a murderer. “You killed your entire family.”

His lips twitched and lifted into a sad smile that was more of a grimace. “You are afraid now.”

She shook her head but immediately followed it with an uncertain shrug. “I don’t know. I mean, yes... maybe. You just admitted to killing them.”

“It was the only way I could save them,” he rasped. “I was the strongest, the king of my flock and I think that is the only reason I escaped the taint... in a matter of speaking,” he added with a humorless laugh as his eyes continued to bore into her eerily. “You don’t know what it is like to spend centuries captured in the belly of a labyrinth, kept alive and driven mad by its spirit until all you know is the hunger that crawls through you insidiously.”

“A labyrinth,” she repeated, his reaction to her use of the word suddenly becoming clearer.

“A place that had developed a lust for death and vengeance which those that lived within it, that survived within the bowels of its deep corridors, carried out for its satisfaction.” A long, weary sigh escaped him and with it she imagined she heard centuries worth of struggle, pain, and sorrow. He did not flinch away, however, as he spoke. “I did terrible things. I feasted on the pain and terror and enjoyed it.” The corner of his mouth lifted. “You see now the monster I truly am. I wasn’t entirely truthful with you before. A satyr enjoys the taste of fear and panic... all in good fun. It is part of our

passion and lust for life. And we are lusty,” he added, a dry chuckle following on the heels of his observation.

“Really? I never would have noticed,” she remarked, grasping desperately at humor to alleviate some of the tension tightening between them.

Barbasa laughed again, that time with a touch of genuine humor. It was fleeting, however, and returned to regarding her silently.

Clearing her throat, she gestured for him to continue. “So you were stuck in hell and you all went insane...you a bit less, if I understood right. What happened?”

“Yes,” he mumbled, his eyes drifting from her to the fireplace as a distant look came to them as if he were looking back and was no longer in the room with her. “We were delivered a way to escape,” he said slowly. “My kin were wild with their hunger to the point of attacking each other no matter how I attempted to redirect them.” Pain filled his eyes. “Our mates had died within the early years of our captivity, my own Ariana within just months when a small number of centaurs viciously attacked us.”

Tiffany felt her heart break just a little then. There was no room for jealousy. By his own words, it had been centuries ago. But her heart still bled for him for suffering the loss of one he clearly had dearly loved.

He released a quiet, frustrated growl. “I blame that a little on the power of the taint within us as it fed on our grief. The hunger there knew no end no matter how much you filled your belly, and it consumed them. They attacked everything within reach, indiscriminately and as I watched them, I realized a terrible truth.”

“What was that?”

His gaze shifted back to her and hardened. “I couldn’t let them leave the labyrinth. There was only one way that I could free them that would be merciful to my flock and save them from committing any more horrors, as well as saving the world that they would have escaped into. My flock was filled with cousins, brothers... sons,” he added in a choked voice. “I killed my own two sons while they were busy tearing apart one of the smaller males between them, his flesh filling their mouths.”

Bile rose and Tiffany felt like she was going to be sick. Understanding flickered in his eyes and he wearily dropped his head, his double pairs of horns suddenly seeming very much like the weight of a heavy crown. His eyes pinching tightly closed against the chaos of his grief, he shuddered with unspent grief. He was still being tortured by it. Though he had clearly loved his flock, that love had forced him to destroy them. They had become true monsters... nightmares and horrors. And he carried that with him still. The guilt of a father and king who had stepped with them into the darkness and had been the sole survivor of it.

Scooting closer, she gave his hand a squeeze and leaned into his arm in a physical offering of comfort. His eyes dropped down to her and some of the chilliness left them.

“Are you not afraid, little human?” he rasped. “I am still infected with the taint of the labyrinth. It waits and lurks within me like a spider on its web.”

“And it hasn’t hurt me yet,” she countered. If he was going to try to use that to scare her away, it wasn’t going to work. She would have felt it within him—she was certain of it.

His lips slowly curled in response. “It is more likely to try to devour any threat that comes to you. I fear it has burrowed so deep into my instincts that it has struck a claim upon you.”

A shiver ran through her as she experienced the sort of awe that she imagined came with knowing that someone had access to that sort of power. Whatever lived within Barbasa would destroy everything to keep her safe and she couldn't deny that there wasn't an appeal to all of that.

“And what of you?”

Leaning forward, he bent his forehead down to hers to press their brows gently together as he threaded his free hand through her hair. “I had my claim on you from the first,” he rasped. “Never have I felt such a powerful pull since Ariana. I would gladly let the taint to consume me and bring down the world should anything happen to you.”

Tiffany dropped her head to his shoulder and soaked in the feeling of his solid presence beside her. “I would gladly let you.” She swallowed. “And I think would like to claim you in turn.”

His hand tightened on hers and he pressed his lips to her head, the bit of beard on his chin surprisingly soft as it brushed the bridge of her nose. “There's no rush, Tiffany. When you are ready, you will know. In the meantime, I am here, however you want me. But first, let us put up our supplies and then rest,” he murmured.

Her head still laying against his arm, she nodded before pushing herself up. He was on his feet immediately, his hands outstretched in an offer to help her stand which she gladly accepted. Together, they picked up the gifts he'd given her that had remained strewn across the floor during their conversation and stacked them neatly in one corner. She looked at the

untidy heap and acknowledged that she would have to make another basket for that before hurrying after him to help him put away what remained in the bag. There was the pressed oil to fuel the lanterns and cook with that he explained was harvested from olive groves and had come up from along southern routes, as well as the honey, various powders and spices for cooking, and lard, among many other food staples that she had stared at it all in wonder.

There was so much there she suddenly had no doubt that he wanted to keep her there forever. A smile pulled at her lips as she looked around their well-stocked kitchen. In a small way he demonstrated that everything there was now hers as well, and she couldn't imagine any other place she would rather be.



BARBASA PLUCKED A DARK BERRY FROM ITS BUSH, SMILING down at the female at his side as he fed the plump fruit between her lips. She moaned at the first trickle of juice and her tongue swept across his fingers. A lustful growl burst from him and his cock thickened immediately in reaction. And to which she smirked, in clear enjoyment of his need for her. And he did need. They had been dancing around each other ever since his terrible confession, flirting and sharing the briefest of touches. It tormented him that he didn't get to so much as enjoy the taste of her lips because both of them knew that once he began kissing her, the game would be over.

So, he endured it, waiting for her to be ready as her body heated and creamed for him, driving him to distraction night after night. That she allowed him to stroke her cunt with his fingers and tongue and bring her to completion for the first time two nights ago had filled him a satisfaction that had quickly been eclipsed when she had placed her sweet mouth

and hands upon his shaft. He had nearly drowned in the pleasure despite the inexperience within her touch. Or perhaps because of it.

It was hard to say. Satyrs didn't put more weight on such things in terms of value but he did enjoy the fact that she was learning to chase her desire and fuel her passions from him. His previous mate he had stolen from a human male who had done much damage that hindered her ability to seek pleasure. Tiffany had an unrestrained eagerness unbroken by men that delighted him.

It was certainly getting harder to resist her. Their daily walks helped. To a degree. He had to acknowledge that her very nature tempted him as much as her sensuality, so even her simple pleasure pulled hard at his desire. Moreover, despite their very real physical differences from the hips down, she never seemed bothered by it. In fact, more often than not, she acted as if there were no differences between them at all. She wasn't simply ambling by his side as his mate had once done as they wandered, but rather, she wrapped her arm in his, held him close to her as he'd seen humans do from a distance. He didn't feel set apart by her but cherished as her own and he didn't realize until then how much it meant to him.

Plucking another blackberry from the bush in front of them, he pressed it to her smiling lips and her blue eyes flashed with laughter. Holding his gaze, her mouth opened and her tongue slid out and stroked along the length of his fingers before her hot mouth closed around the berry at his fingertips. Another shiver ran through him, and she released his fingers with a light laugh.

“Are you trying to fatten me up, Barbasa?” she teased. “What is with this sudden interest in feeding me from your hand?”

“I wouldn’t mind more of you to hold,” he replied as he ran a claw along the her bottom lip, the tip ever so gently indenting it. “But in this specifically, perhaps I just enjoy seeing you lick my fingers the way you lapped at my cock. It gives me ideas.”

Her eyes darkened at his words. “Really? I might just be interested in hearing those ideas,” she murmured as she slid back, ducking out of his grasp. “...if—”

A soft growl rumbled through him as his eyes narrowed and tracked her movement. “If what?”

Her smile widened as she sidled back more causing his muscles to tighten instinctively as his body prepared to give chase. She wouldn’t dare tempt him. Now when she knew that the taint was so thoroughly imbedded within his instinctual nature. If she ran, he wouldn’t be able to resist giving chase. And when that happened—it worried him too much to think about.

“Tiffany,” he rumbled in warning as he offered his hand to her. “If you are in the mood to play games, there are better ways we can do it. And safer within the confines of our home. I will be at your command.”

Her eyes glittered with interest and the tension in his muscles eased, certain that she would take his hand. He was, therefore, taken by complete surprise when she suddenly whirled away and sprang forward from the balls of her feet, leaving him gaping after her. He was so shocked that he stared after her for a minute or two streaking among the trees. His blood pulsed hotly through him as his heart sped in reaction to the sharp excitement and need rising rapidly through him. But it was the uncoiling touch of the taint that ultimately broke his control and sent him springing after her, his hooves carrying him far quicker over the forest floor.

With the taint rising rapidly through his blood, he should have been afraid for her as he waited for the foggy madness to descend. But there was something different about it. It curled through him like a dark fire feeding his frenzy and desire, stroking through his balls and shaft until his extruded cock wept with copious amounts of lubrication dripping from his shaft. And although there was a haze of desire that filled his mind, it held on to him with a different sort of touch than the madness. He didn't feel corrupted... he felt... alive!

His lips pulled back from his teeth as he howled and laughed in echo of Tiffany's giggles as she led the chase, darting between the trees ahead of him. What a sight she was! His desire surged, his cock pulsing with every brush against his belly. Every touch of the sensitive tip to his stomach sent a new hot lick of desire straight through him. It filled him with pleasure and a rush of joy. As his lingering doubts dissolved, his smile widened with predatory glee as his eyes followed her winding path. He couldn't get enough of feasting on the sight of her fleeing ahead of him. Her hair streaming behind her, flashing in the sunlight as she tossed her head to grin beckoningly over her shoulder.

She teased him and he relished it. He could have caught up to her easily but somehow he kept control of himself enough to regulate his speed so that he drew closer slowly, prolonging the chase. Glancing back at him again, Tiffany whooped with laughter and changed direction suddenly as if that would give her an escape. Grinning wildly, he spun at his full speed, his hooves finding purchase in the turf with a skill that couldn't be replicated with her booted human feet. His mate squealed with a surprised laugh when his arms came around her and he dropped them into a mossy knoll, his body turning to take the brunt of the fall. Though the clack of his four horns hitting a

rock echoed loudly, he suffered no ill effects from the fall. Not even his breath had been knocked out of him which he demonstrated as he hauled his mate along his body.

She grinned at him breathlessly as he held her pinned against him. Lying side by side, he traced his fingers up the side of her legs, drawing up the dress she'd made. The fabric was as beautiful on her as he knew it would be and soft against his fingers. From the way her eyes slid shut, he knew that it slid against her own skin pleurably. With her rich scent thickening the air around them, he growled and rolled them so that he was braced over her and her breasts brushed his chest as they rapidly rose and fell with every panted breath. Releasing her dress so that it rested bunched up around her pelvis, he wrapped his fingers around her wrists and drew her hands over her head to where a cluster of vines hung just inches away from the tree they clung to.

Barbasa made quick work out of wrapping her wrists firmly in the vine, entangling her there so thoroughly at his mercy that she jerked against her bindings in shock when he grabbed hold of her hips and tugged her splayed legs closer to him. She stared down her body at him with a desperate, wild need, the blue of her eyes nearly disappearing within the expanse of blown out dark centers. She trembled against him, her scent of arousal rising from her to coat him and fill his senses as he dragged his cheek down her body and pressed his mouth against the hot well of her essence between her thighs. He lapped at her folds, stroking his tongue deep into her slit as her every sigh and gasp sang to him. He feasted on her and exulted in it, filling himself with her sweetness, and coating his mouth and hands with it as her orgasm rushed through her. It marked him, branded him with her pheromone signature until he was filled with the scent and taste of her.

And he loved it. He wanted to draw more of it into him so that he would never get her scent out of his skin.

He growled against her slick cunt, enjoying the way she gasped and jerked against his mouth as the vibrations shot through her. Catching a flicker of movement from the corner of his eye, he stilled, his mouth still clamped against her cunt as his gaze lifted and shifted warily. A red fox peered at him, its eyes flashing with the light of another peering back at him through them. Lifting his mouth, he bared his teeth at the fox, conveying his message to the reynard, loud and clear. The fox's tail stiffened and wavered in the air behind him at the threat, but the creature had greater sense than its master. With a startled yip, it bounded away and disappeared within the thick growth of blackberry bushes.

His brows slanted in a heavy scowl, Barbasas gave one last growl in the direction of the bushes before turning the fervor of his attention back onto his mate. Although the reynard hadn't truly been present and his fox likely had crept close more as a matter of curiosity, it didn't change the fact that it fueled his need to possess his mate and claim her completely so that the damned vulpine male didn't attempt to so much as send one of his spies to sniff around her.

Rising from between her legs, he noted that she too stared curiously off in the direction the fox disappeared. Without preamble, he gave a sharp nip to her hip that made her draw in a sharp gasp. He immediately laved it with his tongue to take away the sting and lifted his gaze to meet her shocked eyes.

“Have you seen many foxes when you've ventured outside, my love?” he rumbled.

He needed to know otherwise it would twist within him, tormenting him as it fed the voracious appetite of the taint. To

his relief, she gave a quick shake of her head.

“No. That would be the first. I’ve seen a couple from the cabin, and always at a distance, but never when walking and never so close.”

He nodded thoughtfully and gave her a fierce look. “Things are not always what they seem in these woods. Some creatures, like the foxes, can be the eyes and ears of other beings that cross our territorial boundaries without difficulty or challenge. They won’t hurt you, and in fact add extra protection that benefits our territory, keeping it safe from humans, but do not follow them either,” he cautioned. “Stay within the confines of our walking route and close to the cabin you will be fine. It is not likely that the fae will dare to intrude on the territory of another.”

“Okay,” she replied in a shaky voice. “I won’t.”

“Good,” he rumbled as he bent his head to lap at her hip again causing his little mate to twitch against him. “I need you,” he rasped against her skin in a strained voice. His nostrils flared as he breathed in her skin, drawing the tangy sweetness of her scent deeper within him. “I need to know that you are mine.”

“I am yours,” she replied, stifling a gasp he dropped his head to nip very gently at her swollen bud.

He lifted his head and met her eyes again, holding her gaze.

“Do you claim me, then, my little would-be mate? Would you mark me with your essence and allow mine to mark yours until our pheromones are so imprinted on each other that they’ll never be separated?”

Her eyes widened with full realization of what he wanted but she gave a quick nod of her head.

“Yes,” she whispered.

He glanced down at himself and the thick length of his twitching, heavily beaded cock. With the swirls and knots of beaded flesh along his shaft and the much thicker head of his cock, he knew it only superficially looked like one belonging to a human male—and only at a distance if one squinted and didn't take proportion into account. Although she had seen him extruded numerous times, he felt that he was still obligated to point it out. Though he burned with desire, he would still give her one last chance to change her mind if that was what she truly wanted. He knew well enough that humans struggled with the concept of being pierced by the cock of a male from another species.

“I am not like your men. I do not have the ability to make it seem as though this part of me is as some species do. Do you truly wish to welcome me into your body?”

“Fuck, yes.” Her hips lifted and strained toward him, her glistening cunt opened wide for him. Begging to be filled. “This is what I've wanted.”

That specific wording caught his attention. “You have desired to be claimed by a monstrous male's cock?”

That seemed so improbable to him that he couldn't quite make sense of it. His last mate had come to terms and eventually enjoyed their matings, but he hadn't imagined a woman lusting for it before she took one into herself.

A pink hue flooded his mate's cheeks but she rolled her eyes. “It might have been the reason that my parents decided it was time to marry me off. I was a little too interested in fantasizing about... fae males.”

That surprised him. “Then why wait so long to enjoy the pleasure I offered?”

Her gaze snapped to him in bewilderment. “Hey, a fantasy is one thing, but I wasn’t going to just jump the first male that came along just because he waved his impressive and inhuman cock around on a daily basis.”

Barbasa choked back a laugh and crawled over his mate to settle more comfortably between her thighs. Pressing kisses against each of her eyelids, he purred down at her happily as he adjusted his hips so that his cock slid along her seam until the head notched at her entrance.

“Fair enough, my love. I will try to be gentle so that it is as good as you have dreamed of, but for this first time it will be a tight fit.”

Tiffany exhaled slowly and nodded. “I know. I’m ready.”

Another laugh rumbled in his chest. “Not yet, but you will be.”

Slowly he shifted his hips, moving the head and shaft of his cock so that it slid against her, teasing the sensitive flesh. Her body quivering beneath his, Barbasa attentively lowered his head to drag his tongue along one breast and then the other, at times sucking her nipples into his mouth with gentle, drawn-out tugs, and at other times, grazing them with his sharp teeth. Just hard enough for her to feel it without drawing blood. His cock swelled further with her heightened arousal, and he ground against her, stroking his cock harder against her cleft. Each pass opened her further as her desire flamed higher in response, her heat bathing the entire length of his phallus. Her swollen little nub at the tip of her slit, abraded against his cock, increasing their mutual pleasure until they both dripped with their combined arousal.

Her thighs slid up around his furred hips as she moaned, her pelvis lifting in a silent plea, her slick heat bathed his cock as

he nudged his hips forward, her cunt slowly swallowing the length. And it was slow. His girth stretched her so that she was wrapped tightly around him but his precum pumped into her in response to her most intimate place squeezing tightly around him. It flooded her and dripped around his cock as it slowly worked its way in with his every thrust, the veins along the length of his shaft bulging with his incredible, building need to spend within her. He resisted the urge and flexed his hips, gradually pushing deeper as her cunt spasmed and clenched around him with the fresh orgasm that tore through her.

She cried out with his slow invasion, her hips twitching all the time as if she couldn't decide whether to pull away or drive him deeper. Her fingers dug into his hair, however, and kept him clutched tightly to her as she panted and her body gave bit by bit to his invasion until he was buried deep within her, his whole cock swallowed up to its very root. He stared down between them in awe and his eyes rolled back as the walls of her channel spasmed once again around him. Unable to hold back, he withdrew and snapped his hips, sending him driving back into his mate so that they both moaned together.

Shuddering with the intense pleasure rushing over him and the love welling up just as quickly that desperately needed to be expressed, Barbasa caught her mouth with his and drowned within the ecstasy of her kiss. Their mouths mated and tongues tangled as he rocked against her, setting a slow pace as he relished the tight squeeze of her milking his length from root to tip with every pump. His passion burned through him, pulling at him, demanding more as the taint twisted through him. Adding a roll to his hips, his thrusts became quicker, his rising rut driving his cock into his female as her legs wrapped hungrily around him as if to keep him anchored to her as she met his every pump. Their kisses grew more desperate as their

bodies came together harder and faster. Her teeth nipped at the sensitive skin of his lip until he groaned against her mouth. And he couldn't have pulled away even if he wanted to because somehow she had worked a hand free and had an iron grip on his left central horn spike, holding her more firmly to her.

As much as he was claiming her, she was claiming him in turn as her body met his with answering aggression. Excitement rumbled through him as his true rut descended up on him and he began to pound in earnest into his mate's soft body, pulling loud cries of ecstasy from her as her cunt rippled and squeezed around him, and draggled on him tightly as her orgasms flowed into each other. Still, he rutted as the fog of his desire thickened and descended over him until there was nothing more than the hunger and the need. His cock thickened and swelled within her until she screamed, her channel spasming tightly, locking him completely within her as his cock jerked violently, giving up its thick streams of seed. Over and over again he emptied himself until his thighs shook with exhaustion and Tiffany's cries of pleasure began to grow hoarse. When he finally collapsed against her, his cock still tightly clutched within her sheath, his mate peppered his face with soft, butterfly kisses bringing a lightness to his soul as the taint once again retreated, leaving in its wake satisfaction rather than the endless hunger that had always plagued him.

He felt... complete.

Turning his head, he pressed against her brow. "I love you. My heart is yours for the rest of our days," he rasped.

At his confession, a beatific smile stretched across her face and there was a shimmer of something that looked suspiciously like tears in her eyes.

“Thank fuck because I love you to,” she breathed as she fully relaxed beneath him. Her eyes roamed lovingly over him as she grinned. “So, are we now thoroughly claimed?”

His own answering smile lit his face. “That we are. There’s no going back.”

“Once again, thank fuck,” she sighed, winding her arms around his neck to hold him close. “Because I don’t think I can ever let go.”

Sinking into her embrace, he smiled, finally feeling at peace and at home. “Nor I. I could be stuck together with you like this for eternity,” he teased giving a subtle twitch of his hips so that his cock pulled deliciously where it was seated deep within her.

Tiffany moaned in reaction and punched him lightly in the shoulder, drawing a sharp bark of laughter from him.

“Don’t even joke like that,” she wheezed through her own laughter. “As much as I love having you buried within me, that would get awkward after a while.” She smiled up at him fondly. “And besides, separation gives us all the more excuse to do it again and again.”

Grinning down at her, he lowered his head to brush her lips with his. “I like the way you think, my mate.”

He couldn’t wait to repeat it all again. The gods truly must have smiled on him to give him, a cursed and tainted male, a gift that he hadn’t dared to dream of having again. Whispering a thank you to whatever deity was listening, he clutched her tight and vowed to revel in the destruction of anyone who tried to take her from him.



TIFFANY STARED INTO THE QUIET DEPTHS OF THE FOREST. A fox flashed past and then another. Neither of them was heading toward her and so she watched them curiously as their sleek red and black bodies moved with a liquid grace between the trees. She wished she possessed the acute senses that the fae seemed to have because she stood there clueless while the reynard's scouts took off to investigate and her own mate had gone off in that same direction just moments earlier.

There was something there that had the bitter smell of singed air from a fire. There were a few times she believed that she heard the faint echo of screams. They sounded almost ghostly coming through the trees, but Tiffany was certain that if her mate was the source then whomever was screaming had done something to well deserve them. Her mate tolerated a lot, even people passing through the edges of his territory again now that they were mated and settled comfortably. His taint seemed completely under his control, moving only to feed into and

utilize his voracious appetite for her... and she certainly had no complaints. If he was killing someone, it was necessary and so she waited in place within the deep protection of their woods until she caught sight of her mate moving among the trees.

Though blood was splattered over him, the steely look in his eye warmed at the sight of her as she hurried toward him. She didn't even mind the blood that smeared over her as she threw herself into his arms.

"What was it?" she whispered.

His body trembled against hers with an unspoken rage. "Men," he rasped. "Ones I scented on the trail passing by my territory shortly after I found you. They had returned with fire and the intention to burn down my territory with the thought of scaring you out as they had concluded that you had taken refuge and were hiding here." Drawing back, he met her eyes grimly. "I destroyed them. I pulled the flesh from their bones and cracked open their skulls before severing limbs entirely."

She squinted up at him. "You didn't eat any of them, did you?"

Barbasas shivered and shook his head with a sneer of disgust as he gave her an incredulous look. "No, of course not. I was not that far gone to the taint."

Grinning up at him, she stood up on her toes and dragged his head down by one horn to peck a kiss on his blood splattered lips.

"Just checking," she teased. "I don't mind a bit of blood but that would have been a bit much. Blood can be cleaned."

His mouth quirked in a sly smile that she knew well and loved. "Do you wish to bathe me then, my queen?"

“I *might* be persuaded,” she replied, drawing the words out slowly.

With a growl, he descended upon her and plucked her up into his arms. “Then I best not let you get away,” he rumbled to her peals of laughter.

Settling within his embrace, she let her monstrous mate and protector carry her away. There was pleasure and joy that awaited her at the hands of her beloved mate... and a particularly lovely cock of epic proportions that put to shame her fantasy sketches. Her mate truly was everything she ever wanted and more.

She did wonder, however, if anyone ever came across that sketchbook and whose dreams and fantasies it currently inspired. She certainly hoped that whoever it was would find the same joy she had.

Pressing a kiss to Barbasa’s muscled chest, Tiffany grinned up at him. “Let’s go home.”

Home had found her, though it had a funny way of coming about. Thank the gods, however, that it had.



Thank you for reading *The Satyr’s Wood*. If you want to read *the rest of the series*, then why not check out where it all began with *Havoc of Souls*!

<https://books2read.com/u/mddP8W>

For Asterion’s story and the first appearance of Barbasa, be sure to pick up *Blooded Labyrinth*!

<https://books2read.com/u/bzVLGq>

About the Author

S.J. Sanders is a mom of two toddlers and one adult living in Anchorage, Alaska. She has a BA degree in History, but spends most of her free time painting, sculpting, doing odd bits of historical research, and writing.

While she has more research orientated writing under another pen name, her passion is sci-fi and paranormal romance of which she is an avid reader.

After years of tinkering with the idea, and making her own stories up in her head, S.J has begun to seriously pursue writing as an author of Sci-fi Romance utilizing her interests in how cultures diversify and what they would look like on an extra-terrestrial platform with humans interacting with them and finding love.



ENTICING BRODY

NOVA BLAKE



Newly promoted to head of a team, Brody is eager to prove himself as a leader. While he has dominated in other areas, once he's at the archery range, he can't seem to land a single arrow. Left to gather all the stray arrows, he finds a trail of blood. Thinking that he's hurt an animal, he follows the trail to the hollow of a tree and finds something impossible.

Someone impossible.

Selene had only meant to spy a little. Her mother always told her that she had to stay away from the humans, but the temptation was just too strong. Only, when an arrow goes astray and embeds in her side, she has to seek shelter in the hollow of a tree, hoping that she can solve this problem before her mother realizes.

The human didn't intend to hurt her; but the harpy queen won't care about that.

This is a sweet monster romance between a human and a harpy.

CONTENT WARNING:

arrow wound, curse, mean mother, threat of flesh eating.



BRODY

“FIRE!” THE CALL CAME AGAIN. I COCKED MY ELBOW ALL THE way back and this time - this time, dammit - I was going to hit the fucking target. The sound of bow strings twanged in my ears and I held for just a moment longer before releasing my arrow and watching it sail towards the row of targets at the end of the field.

And then right past it and into the forest.

Dammit.

Josh patted my shoulder, his low laugh grating on my nerves. “Don’t worry about it, Brody. Can’t be good at everything. So long as you’re hitting targets in the office, right?” He cocked a finger gun at me, and it took everything not to smack him, though I did it mentally.

I ground my teeth together and tossed him a tight grin, trying hard not to let it show how much this bothered me. “Don’t you worry about that. I’ll be blowing those targets out of the water.”

“Right, gather around,” our instructor called. I thought his name was Carl, but we’d had so many staff over the last few days that it was hard to keep track. He stood at the front of our small semi-circle, my team listening intently. They’d been doing so well since we got here, and I’d noticed positive changes already. I’d have to thank Nathan for organizing this retreat later.

“We have a policy here that the lowest scoring archer collects the stray arrows.” He glanced down at his clipboard, his pen running over the tally. My stomach dropped because I knew it was going to be me. I’d barely landed an arrow on the target. And damn if it didn’t grate. I was still proving myself. Still finding my feet. Hopefully, my failure here didn’t lose me respect.

“Brody! You’re on arrow collection.” Carl gave me a grin that was completely wholesome. Unlike the one that Josh threw my way. Jenny patted me on the arm with a commiserating look.

“I’m sure I was almost at the bottom, too. It’s just meant to be fun,” she said with a shrug. “Don’t let him get to you. He’s only pissed because you beat him for the job.”

“Thanks,” I said wryly.

Carl approached me next and handed me a torch and the keys for the utility shed. “You might need the extra light. Dark under the trees. Look for the bright nocks on the arrows and you’ll be fine.” He stepped past me, then turned back. “Oh, and if you’re not back in an hour, I’ll let Cruise know to come

and grab you. Don't want to be out in the woods when it gets dark."

The man glanced at the trees. It looked like he was stifling a shudder, and that didn't fill me with confidence. I didn't watch as he left though, didn't want to think about the look on his face. I shoved the keys into my pocket and set off for the far end of the row. Macey had landed most of her arrows on the target, so it wasn't hard to clean up after her. It seemed like we'd somehow lined up from best to worse because as I got toward my end, there were more and more arrows to be found in the grass behind the targets.

Mine had just one arrow on the target and as I stepped behind it, I noticed how the hulking tower of hay bales blocked out the light. I was closer to the woods here, and after I'd spent ten minutes scouring the ground and only finding a few, I knew I was going to have to go deeper. Steeling myself, I stepped beneath the trees.

Only dappled light reached the ground

I really needed the torch here, and was thankful that at least at the edges there wasn't a lot of undergrowth. I only had a few more to find, so I moved deeper. Clearly, my issue wasn't with force, but with aim. Dammit. I'd always struggled to know where to aim myself, so it felt like a personal condemnation that I couldn't hit the fucking target.

Kicking at the grass and leaves, I unearthed another arrow. Two more to go. I moved the torch and stepped back at the sight of thick red blood on the ground.

Shit.

I must have hit something. But what?

I moved the light around, scanning the ground for something small and furry. What else could be out here? I thought back to the look on Carl's face and decided that perhaps that didn't bear thinking about. He wouldn't send me out here if I was in danger though, and whatever I'd hit couldn't have gotten far with that amount of blood loss. All I could find was a trail of blood, though.

Dammit.

I had to track it down and make sure it was dead or put it out of its misery if it couldn't be saved; and I really didn't think it could. Keeping my light on the trail, I walked deeper into the woods, daylight getting dimmer and dimmer through the thick canopy of leaves. Thank fuck I had a torch.

The bushes along this faint trail seemed to have been flattened in places, more damage than a rabbit or squirrel could have done. A thread of tension pulsed in my temple, and I just had to hope that I wasn't getting myself into more trouble than I could handle.

The droplets of blood were getting smaller now, though one seemed to be smeared like a handprint against the base of a tree. That couldn't be right though. Surely, there were no people in these woods; that seemed the height of stupidity for someone to be hiding behind the targets. Watching.

A shudder ran down my spine, and I couldn't help but worry. It was ridiculous, though. I squared my shoulders, making myself taller and striking my most dominant pose; the one I practiced in the mirror sometimes so that I could put it on before I stepped into the office every day.

It didn't come naturally to me, but I knew it was the only way to forward my career.

The trail of blood seemed to end, but there was no body waiting for me. I flashed the light around, trying to spot it. Off to the left there was a large tree with a curved hollow in the base, as if a large rock had once been there but now disintegrated. It was large enough for something to have crawled in there to die, so I knew what I had to do.

I switched the torch to my left hand and drew an arrow from the quiver with my right. It was lousy as a weapon, but the best I could do under the circumstances. I wasn't sure if I could actually kill a wounded animal, but I had to take responsibility for what I'd done. Approaching slowly, I ducked down to peer into the hollow, flashing my light around the interior, braced for the screams of some animal.

My light found pale feathers, and then a dark thigh. Like a human thigh. Connected to feathered ankles and vicious looking clawed feet.

What. The. Fuck.

My brain struggled to comprehend what I was seeing. I scanned the other way, gaze landing on a humanlike torso, wings tucked against her sides, full chest, covered in rough bindings, only enough to keep her modesty, before resting on a beautiful face. She had feathers around the edges and large, fearful eyes which locked directly on mine.



SELENE

THE HUMAN. HE WAS HERE.

I chittered, freezing again when he frowned. My breath came in ragged pants, my chest heaving with them. It had taken all of my energy to find this safe place, but now he was here, too. We had been discovered.

Mother was going to kill me.

If he didn't first.

She'd told me all about his kind, how they came with their guns and their dogs and killed most of our kind, how they had raped and brutalized us.

And yet, he wasn't looking at me like he wanted to hurt me. In fact, there seemed to be pain in his eyes.

"What are you?" he asked. Then his shoulders slumped, and he shook his head. "You probably don't understand me." He

dropped to a crouch in front of me, the arrow in his hand falling to the ground.

It matched the one embedded in my side.

“I know what you are saying,” I said, my voice shaking as I spoke.

He gasped and stumbled backward, falling on his rear. “I... I’m sorry, I just... I thought I would find a rabbit, not... Well, not you.”

His eyes met mine, and they gleamed a golden brown, filled with wonder and curiosity.

“Did I hit you?” he asked. I watched the small bulge in his throat as he swallowed hard.

My wing twitched back, revealing the wound in my side. He gasped, his face paling in the light from the torch. His hands moved, as if he wanted to reach out and pull the arrow from my flesh, but then he froze.

“I can help.” It came out more like a question than a statement. There was no certainty in him now. The man I’d watched on the archery field was completely different from the one before me. Even if he had been a terrible shot, he’d brushed off the comments other made and keep a confident stance.

“Please.” I let the single word out, even though I knew it would be better for him to leave. Before Mother found me, found him.

The Queen of the Harpies was vicious, and I didn’t think she’d take lightly to someone wounding me; no matter the treaty between us and Nico.

Yet I needed help, and he was here. I’d never been touched by another, and his hands looked soft and warm.

He approached me slowly, moving from a crouch to his knees. I could feel his eyes skim me like they were a touch, his gaze searing. There weren't many of us left in the world, and so I knew that for him I was a creature of myth and legend.

Right now, I was a creature in pain.

"Please," I said again. His gaze snapped to mine, and he nodded, his hands shaking as he reached out to touch me. I shuddered at the sensation, so different from my own touch, alien and yet welcome. I tried to relax my body, but the arrow was wedged in deep and each breath I took sent a shudder of pain through me.

"This will hurt," he said. "I'm sorry, I..."

"Do it," I demanded, adding more force to my words. I needed this to happen now so that he would go away and I could keep him safe from Mother.

He gripped the arrow and tugged. It was lodged deep in my flesh and I could feel the muscle tearing as he wrenched it free. I bit down on my lip, trying so hard not to let a sound escape, but I couldn't trap the low, keening wail. He tossed the arrow to the ground and pressed his hands against the wound to staunch the flow of blood. Before I knew it, he was pulling off his shirt and tearing it into strips to wrap around my body, his hands moving fast and efficient. He cinched it tightly, and only when he was satisfied did he turn his gaze back to my face.

"That should hold for now, but we really should get you to a doctor."

"No," I said, the word strong enough to make him lean back.

"I cannot leave this place. I cannot go to your human doctor." I

shook my head, the pain making it hard to think, but even then, surely, he realized we weren't the same.

"I..." He sighed and sank back to the ground, all the frantic energy from before leaving his body. "What are you?"

"I am harpy, and you must leave. Before it's too late." I hissed the words at him, wanting him to listen, pleading with my voice. I didn't know if he could see the fear in my eyes, or perhaps he misinterpreted it as fear of him.

But that wasn't it.

The sound of huge wings made me whimper. "Go. Now."

"I don't—"

"Go!" I tried to shove him, but he wasn't in a good position to move. He just stayed there, unaware as his fate was sealed in stone.

Soon, he would die.



BRODY

THE SOUND OF BEATING WINGS FILLED MY EARS, AND I PEERED out from the hollow in the tree to see the giant wings of another harpy.

Harpy. Mythical bird woman. *What the hell kind of world had I accidentally stepped into?*

Darkness had deepened now, but I could see the shadow of the creature against the sky. Broad wings, claw hooked feet as she landed.

The wounded woman scrambled in front of me, pushing me out of the way as she moved. “Mother,” she said, her voice firm. “Do not hurt him. He saved me.”

“Saved you, did he?” The other harpy tilted her head in a very birdlike movement, as if she was assessing me even in the dim

light. Her eyes seemed to glow golden in the gloom, piercing me. “I can smell him on your body, Selene.”

“There was an arrow,” Selene said. This time, her voice was quieter.

The silence stretched out between them, as if they were carrying out an entire conversation that I couldn’t hear.

“I’ve warned you before about getting close to the humans,” the mother screeched. “You know the consequences.”

Selene raised a hand, the other cupping her side where the wound was. “No. Please, Mother. He was only trying to help me.”

Some strange part of me wanted to step forward and tell her it was fine. I would do what was required. After all, it was my arrow that had wounded her. It was my fault that we were here at all. I was known for doing the right thing, but it would be utterly stupid to put myself directly in the sights of this monster.

“What are the consequences?” I asked, then swallowed hard, not liking the dry feeling in my throat. At the office I felt in control, but here? I had no idea what was happening and there was no manual for dealing with mythological creatures. No way did Google have the answer to this question.

I was out of my depth, more than normal.

The mother turned her glare back to me. I could see no expression on her face, only those glowing eyes, but they seemed to somehow smirk. Sinister energy radiated from her as she looked me up and down; as if I was the last piece of a plot she had been working on, falling right into place.

She flicked her gaze back to her daughter; the smile spreading across her lips now, too.

“It’s time, dear one. You know it as well as I.”



SELENE

THE WORDS REVERBERATED THROUGH ME. I HAD KNOWN THAT they were coming, but nevertheless, they shook me. I wasn't ready, and I certainly didn't want to bring harm to the man behind me. It might have been his arrow in my side, but it had been my choice to venture so recklessly close to the humans. And he had such kind hands, a kind face.

I turned to face him, some of the strength and energy seeping from my body as I did. He caught me as I stumbled, ushered me back into the hollow of the tree, and helped me to sit. My side ached so badly, but I knew that once he was gone, mother could bring the salve and the wound would heal easier. Knitting back together with herbs and a touch of magic. A single arrow would never be enough to take down one of my kind.

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered. “Please, you have to know that I didn’t want this for you.”

Mother stalked toward the entrance of the hollow, blocking out all light. However, the glow of her eyes radiated in the space, as well as the tinge of her magic in the air.

“Human,” she intoned. “I summon forth the winds of our people and place a geas on you.” Mother was all harpy queen with those words; she was almost always all harpy queen, but more so now than in a long time. I could feel warmth radiate from her, her pleasure obvious. She was basking in the sensation of her magic as it infiltrated this small space, as it moved between the man and I.

In fact, now that I thought about it, she had likely forbidden me from spying on the humans just so such a chance meeting could happen, and she would get her way. None could learn of us and remain free.

The man’s eyes were wide, and he lifted his hands, peering at his body as the light floated around him before it punched into his midsection, making him bend over at the sensation. It was lighter for me, perhaps because I knew what was coming; had felt the touch of her power over the years many a time.

“What was that?” he gasped, looking up at me, his expression full of confusion and pain.

“A geas,” I whispered. “A curse of sorts, of our people.” I hoped he could tell how bad I felt about this. Hoped he could see that I wanted no part in this.

“A geas?” The human shook his head slowly, the light brown hair falling around his ears. “I don’t know what that means.” He dropped his arms from his stomach and sank to his knees.

All the while, Mother looked on, the imperious grin on her face making me feel sick to my stomach.

“Three tasks you must undertake in order to break the geas, and until then you cannot leave this place,” Mother intoned. Her eyes seemed to glow even brighter in the darkness.

His eyes met mine, confusion darkening his glance. “What does she mean?” His words pained me, because he didn’t deserve this.

And neither did I.

“A geas is a curse,” I said, trying to explain things in a simpler way. “And in order to break this one, you must do three things.”

“Okay...” He dragged his hands through dark brown hair that hung to his ears, and longer at the back. “So, what are they?”

“I’ll leave this to you, daughter.” Mother thrust herself into the air, landing further up the tree to give us some semblance of privacy; though I knew she would hear everything. Knew that she could still whisper her commands in my ear and screech at me if I didn’t do this right.

I had the feeling she would almost like it if I disobeyed.

“You must complete the first task before you can move to the second,” I said, wanting to give him as much information as I could; but really, I didn’t want to tell him anything. Didn’t want him to be here, caught up with me. With us.

“And the first task is what?” he asked brusquely. I knew he was nervous. He’d have to be. The Harpy Queen was to be feared and even a mere mortal who’d never met her before would know that. I could see his gaze flick upward, as if in response to my thought. We couldn’t see her from here, but I could feel her presence.

And not just me.

Come on, Mother, dictate what you need.

Delight the senses, taste, mind, body.

I shuddered at those words as they reverberated in my mind. I could see exactly where she was leading me, and I wished there was a way to avert this train wreck.

“For the first task, you must delight my tastebuds.”

He frowned, and I realized then that I had no idea what his name was. Corey? Jonathan? Michael? These were all names that I’d heard at different times; for I had spied on other occasions, I’d just never been caught before.

“That sounds... Simple enough? What kinds of tastes do harpies enjoy?” he asked, almost to himself. I could see that his brain was already engaged with the question, but then he locked eyes with me again. “And what happens if I fail?”

I shook my head slowly, biting my lip. “Don’t fail, please.” I couldn’t keep the tremor from my voice. Couldn’t help but convey some of my emotion to him.

“Do I get to try again if I fail the first time?” he asked.

I nodded, the feathers at the edges of my cheeks twitching. This man was intelligent, asking all the right questions. “You have three chances for each task.”

“It’s like my very own fairy tale,” he said with a soft laugh. “Complete with consequences, I have no doubt.” He raised an eyebrow and I could see a trace of humor there, as if this couldn’t actually be real.

Don’t tell him, mother hissed inside my head.

I nodded at him the slightest bit, my eyes wide. His face shifted as though he picked up on the nod and then his eyes flicked toward the top of the hollow where the tree towered above us, in which my mother perched. He widened his eyes and pointed up. I wasn't sure exactly what he was asking, but I nodded again.

She was there. She could hear. She would know.

She always knew.

And after all these years, I still hadn't found a way to lie to her.

"I'm so sorry, again," he said. "I'm such a terrible shot, and it was pure accident that I actually hit something. Someone." His eyes were pained, though I wondered whether the words were for me, or my mother. Maybe, just maybe, for both of us. I dared not hope. "I'd never have done that on purpose."

His fingers twitched, as if he wanted to reach out and check that I was okay, but was afraid to touch me. I remembered his cool fingers, his gentle touch, the way he'd tried so hard not to hurt me more than he already had. I didn't blame him; I blamed myself.

"You should go. Now. Before the others come," I added, reaching my hand out to grasp his. I stroked the pad of my thumb against the back of his hand, careful not to scratch him with my curved nail, and I hoped that with that touch he knew I wasn't sending him away because I wanted to, but because I had to.

As soon as the magic of the geas had been cast upon us, the attraction I'd felt when I watched him on the archery field had grown. I could feel it tugging at me, but I needed to resist it. Resist him.

He gripped my fingers, and then shuffled toward the entrance of the hollow, where he paused and looked back. “My name is Brody, by the way. What is yours?”

I swallowed the lump in my throat and parted my lips.
“Selene.”



BRODY

SELENE.

It was a beautiful name for a beautiful creature. There was an ache in my gut at the memory I had hurt her, even if I'd had no intention of it. Only I would be such a bad shot that I'd accidentally hit a living creature that was nowhere near the target.

And I'd forgotten to bring the arrow back with me. Well, to hell with it, the company could pay for them. None of that mattered. I had just seen a creature from legends, spoken to her, touched her skin - if only to pull the arrow out. Now I had a quest of my own, one like those in the story books from my youth; not that I'd ever have confessed to being an utter fantasy geek in the office. It was only cool to like the latest streaming adaptations of books, not the books themselves.

Something to delight her tastebuds...

It was an interesting challenge, but it felt like it should be simple. Too easy. There were so many amazing tastes in the world that she couldn't have tried before - but would those delight her, or would they seem so unusual that they'd come across as intense or unpleasant?

Dammit, this might be harder than I thought it would be.

I locked the remaining arrows into the shed and then heard the rumble of a bike. Clearly, I'd taken too long and Cruise was coming to pick me up. I scanned my clothing in the semidarkness, saw a few spatters of blood and reached to the ground, scraping up some dirt to smear on my shirt. Hopefully, it would be enough to deflect attention.

"Brody?" a voice called.

"Yeah, sorry. I got a bit turned around. Any chance you could drop me at my cabin so I can clean up before dinner?"

"No problem. Jump on!" Cruise scooted forward on the seat, making a little more room for me, and I swung my leg over, grabbing onto his waist as he took off faster than I'd have liked.

Before I knew it, I was back at my cabin and the bike was roaring off again on whatever Cruise's next mission was.

It felt strange to open the door and step inside. I'd just been in the forest with a harpy, and now I was seeing a wide screen TV and a fridge. Those two things felt like they shouldn't be in such close proximity to each other. And yet, they were.

Had other people seen them? Were there other creatures lurking in the woods as well?

It was like the world had been tilted on its axis and I wasn't sure what to do with the information. I couldn't tell anyone.

Wouldn't speak of this because what if it put her in more danger?

I couldn't stand the thought of that. Those large, luminous eyes, the soft brown of her skin, the downy feathers beneath her wings, dotting her hair. It hadn't been great light, but the glimpse of her I'd had? Shattered me. She was majestic, and that I had harmed her broke me.

It was all too surreal right now, Selene and her mother, the Harpy Queen, the geas—the magic. I brushed a hand against my stomach, remembering the pain, the cold sensation that leeches through my skin to my bones when the curse had been cast upon me; and the way it seemed to link me to Selene. As if there was a thread between us now, tugging me back to her.

I glanced at the clock and realized I'd need to hustle to make dinner on time, so I stripped off my grubby clothes and changed; a shower would have to wait until later.

Dinner was already in progress when I arrived at the large back deck. I slid in beside Gemma and reached for a plate, my eyes already skimming over the bounty of food on the table. There were so many flavours here, so much that might delight Selene.

“Hey, what's the best thing you've had so far?” I asked Gemma.

“These spring rolls are pretty damn good,” she said.

“Nah, I reckon it's the quesadillas, so delicious,” someone else added.

I used the tongs and grabbed one of each, as well as an assortment of other things. Maybe somewhere here I'd find the perfect taste. But I had to remember that it wasn't my perfect taste, just hers. What did delight even mean?

“Took you a while to get back,” Josh commented.

“Yeah, got turned around in the woods. It’s darker in there. No city lights to guide you.” I popped a sliver of hot lamb into my mouth and chewed. The flavour was fat and salt, and exactly what I needed to ground myself in the here and now. This was the real world, not Selene and her mother. Not Harpies and geas. I grabbed the spring roll and bit into that next.

This was what I needed. I must have stumbled into a nightmare in the woods because it couldn’t be real. This was. Chatter about the day, the occasional mention of the office; everyone feeling lucky to be here rather than stuck back there. Yet I couldn’t seem to get her face from my mind.

Selene. That tug at my gut again.

“Brody!” The curt voice snapped me back to reality. “You’re a million miles away. What’s going on?” Josh. Fucking Josh.

“Just running some numbers in my head,” I said. “Nothing to worry about. What’s on our list for tomorrow?” I asked.

“Sea kayaking,” Jenny said. “Should be good weather for it, too.”

“Hopefully you’re better at that than you were at archery,” Josh joked, though it bit harder than it should have. The conversation moved on and I let it all slide over me, unable to connect with much of it.

I finished up dinner then stood up, excusing myself.

“Not staying for drinks and cards?” Josh asked.

I could see it now, him finding more ways to slight me. Maybe the managers would all gather and he’d try to get in their good books. Part of me wanted to sit back down, hold my ground, but my body ached and it felt like if I stayed, I’d do more

damage than good. I didn't have the energy for Josh and his antics tonight.

"Nah, wouldn't want to beat you at your own game." I gave a wink and walked away, lifting a hand to wave behind me as I went.

Back inside my cabin, it felt like I could finally drop the pretence. The familiarity of the space mixed with the lingering sense of magic and mystery from my time in the woods made me uneasy, and it was like my mind was being pulled in two directions at once. I couldn't seem to find balance. Could barely believe that I had truly experienced what I knew was real, but it couldn't be.

Sleep. I needed sleep. In the morning, everything would feel better and I could shake off this feeling; this urge to run back into the forest and see if Selene really existed. Like the only thing that could convince me was seeing her again.

I opened the fridge door and scanned the contents, reaching for a bottle of beer, hoping it would help knock me out. I had sleeping pills too, and the two combined should do the trick. Stripping off my shirt, I tossed it on the floor and headed toward the bathroom to wash the funk of my adventure in the woods off.

My mind flashed to the image of Selene's brown skin, the flash of her skin, soft and silky in the pale light, the curve of her breasts beneath her chest covering. The way her hand had felt against my skin. My cock twitched, unexpected arousal. It felt wrong to be turned on by her when the reason she had been lying on the ground was because I'd accidentally shot her, but my body could not be convinced otherwise.

There was only one thing to do for it. I turned the water on and stripped naked, stepping under the stream as I gripped my

cock.



WHEN I WOKE UP TO FIND THE SUN WAS GLOWING THROUGH the curtains. It was just like any other day and it would have been so easy to pretend that last night was a dream, a nightmare, a combination of too much sun and not enough water.

I slathered on some sunscreen and grabbed my windbreaker before going up to breakfast. There was nothing that stood out as a taste to delight, so I crammed a few pieces of toast in my mouth before heading down the cliff path to the breach.

I arrived on the shore just as the sun peeked over the horizon. A few people had already gathered there, though the expected stragglers were late to arrive.

Everyone began lugging their kayaks down to the shoreline and after a safety briefing and a last-minute check to make sure everyone had their lifejackets on correctly, we set off.

I was thankful for the fact these were one person kayaks; knowing my luck, I'd have been paired with Josh and have to endure hours of his ribbing. Our primary instructor, Corey, paddled out past the waves crashing onto the shore and into deeper waters, with the rest of us following behind him and Tamara, his assistant, bringing up the rear. The sound of everyone's paddles hitting against the water filled my ears, and I felt a surge of energy course through me; this is what it meant to be alive!

For hours, we navigated through the waves and marveled at the beauty of nature around us. I stopped to take in the view and for a moment, felt like I was one with the ocean. Out here, there was no room for anything but the sea and the wind, for the here and now. We were so freaking lucky to be here and able to enjoy this day.

We headed up the coast and I glanced up at the tall trees. A sliver of thought tried to consider where in the woods the harpies lived; whether these were the same ones at all, but I forced my mind back to the task at hand. Soon, Corey was circling his paddle, showing that it was time to head back down the coast. I focused on the way my ass hurt now and how chilled my feet were getting in the slosh of sea water that filled the bottom of my kayak, using these sensations of bodily discomfort to keep me grounded in reality.

Harpies.

No one would believe me if I told them. I had to have been hallucinating, right?

And yet the feel of her soft feathers, the luminous glow of her eyes in the darkness, the gentle tone of her voice despite the fact that I'd literally shot her in the side with an arrow...

It was all too real to me.

Too real to be a dream.

I dragged my kayak onto the beach with the others, leaving it by the trailer. We had a picnic lunch on the beach before slogging back up the pathway to the retreat.

At dinner tonight, I was determined to find something delicious to take to Selene, and as soon as I could slip away, I'd be back in the woods and on my way to her.



SELENE

MOTHER HAD SMEARED A POULTICE ON MY WOUND AND THE skin was tightening around it already, flesh meshing with flesh. Within a few nights, I'd be able to move easily from the safety of this hollow, though it would be a week or more until I could take to the skies again. I itched to be free, but I knew that once I was gone from this place, it would be much harder for Brody to find me.

He must find me. If he took too long to bring me something to taste, then he would feel the impact of the curse, and I couldn't bear the thought of that.

I yearned for the sight of him, my body aching with an almost unbearable longing. I knew it was the magic working on me, knew that mother had been waiting for a moment to make this happen; and I had been stupid enough to give in to my curiosity. Even before the geas, I'd been drawn to Brody,

though. His tall frame, lean yet muscular, the ease with which he seemed to move through the world. The way his dark hair fell across his eye sometimes made me want to reach out and push it back. I sighed, imagining Brody's powerful arms around me, his lips seeking mine. My lips parted, wanting.

I had never felt like this before. Never wanted to, either.

Because I knew what it meant.

Love was not for our kind, for any mate to a harpy would end up dead, and if he could not complete the tasks of the geas, then the queen would rip him apart with her claws and feast on his heart.

That was the part of this curse that I could not speak to him. Fear would only hamper his ability to think clearly.

He had to remain brave. Hopeful.

I did too.

Stepping out from the shelter of the hollow, I breathed in the night air, hoping that I could catch the scent of him on the mild breeze. Nothing, yet, but there was a tingle along my skin that hadn't been there before, a tension in my gut.

Just as I was about to retreat into the shadows of the hollow, I heard footsteps approach. Instantly, my heart leapt in my chest and hope surged within me. I held my breath in anticipation, hoping that it was Brody who had come for me.

As the figure drew closer, the light from the moon illuminated his features and revealed that it was indeed him. I let out a relieved sigh, feeling a wave of elation wash over me.

He slowed his pace as he approached and stopped just at the edge of where the shadows met with silver light from above. His eyes were bright with anticipation as he stared into mine,

and for a moment, we were both lost in the intensity of that gaze.

“Selene,” he breathed, his voice barely above a whisper.

“You came,” I said, voice trembling even with those two words.

“I spent all day pretending that this wasn’t real—that you were a figment of my imagination. But I couldn’t stop thinking about you.”

He stepped forward, closing the distance between us until he was just a few feet away. I wanted to reach out and touch him, to pull him closer, but there was a tension in the air and I knew that he’d come here for a purpose. One that we had to deal with. He slid a bag from his back and withdrew a box. I could smell strange things, and my stomach twisted to think that it wasn’t entirely pleasant.

“I brought something for you to taste.” He passed the box to me, his hand shaking slightly. I reached for it, my hand brushing against his as I claimed the box and drew it toward me. “I don’t know what you like, but...” He gave a one-shouldered shrug. “I had to start somewhere.”

I smiled and tugged open the lid before lifting my gaze back to his. I wasn’t sure what was in the box, but I didn’t want him to feel bad. “It smells wonderful,” I said, smiling at him softly. He smiled in response, his face brightening with it. He was such a handsome man. I wanted to reach out and touch his cheek, to kiss him.

But I knew that was what my mother wanted too. So, I couldn’t.

“I hope you enjoy it as much as I did,” he said, his gaze dipping to my lips, voice low and rough with emotion. The

tension between us was too much, so I stepped back, breaking eye contact and settling into the nest of blankets in the hollow.

“We will find out soon enough,” I replied, eager to sample the food he offered. To get this over with. I could taste the failure already, hoping that the side effect of that wouldn’t be too bad.

I reached inside and lifted something from the box, sniffing at it. It was like nothing I had ever seen before, but it smelled like meat, only different. Not the way we normally ate it. Tarnished?

Brody looked so hopeful, like this was the answer to everything, but I could barely bring myself to taste it.

The scent was strange and metallic, like old coins or ashes. I bit into it hesitantly before quickly spitting out the foul-tasting morsel.

It was dry, tough and chewy in my mouth, with a flavor that seemed to linger for far too long on my tongue—bitter and acrid. My stomach heaved and there was a definite jolt of pain that came with the failure. Brody winced, one hand dropping to his stomach and clutching it tightly. His jaw clenched, but he didn’t say anything about the pain I knew he was feeling.

I sighed heavily as I placed the box on the ground. “I’m sorry,” I whispered.

“Don’t be,” he replied, taking my hand gently in his own.

His thumb stroked my skin in small circles, sending ripples of pleasure through me. I wanted him closer. Needed him further away. The sooner he left, the better.

He smiled at me reassuringly. “We’ll find something that delights you,” he said. “Maybe you could give me a hint? What do you love to eat?”

Brody winced, and I knew that his stomach was as pained as mine. Whatever I felt, he would feel it twofold; but there was no point telling him that now. Nothing about our situation could be changed.

I thought back to the sweet treats that I enjoyed on hot summer days. “Wild strawberries,” I said, a smile playing at my lips.

“So, berries, sweet...” His eyes moved out into the forest as if he was scanning the woods for berries right now.

I tugged his hand, making him look back at me. “It can’t be something from my world, Brody. It has to be something from yours.” It was hard to get those words through my lips, as though Mother’s geas didn’t want me to speak them, but I had to help him. Help us both.

“Okay.” He nodded, his gaze slipping back to the woods, his mind clearly thinking ahead. “I should have asked what you liked before I tried, I just... I didn’t think of it.” He looked sheepish at that admission, heat reddening his cheeks. “I wanted to begin. To win at this, at least.”

Win? It was a strange concept to me, maybe one that humans used. It did not belong in my world, though.

“I can’t tell you exactly what will fulfil the curse,” I told him. “But we will both know when you do.” I bit my lip and then cocked my head to listen. I could not catch a scent or sound of my mother, but I had a feeling that she wouldn’t be far. I drew him closer, brushing my lips against his ear. “I want you to succeed, more than anything. Sweet, fresh, something that leaves a tang in my mouth afterwards.”

The beat of wings in the night air rang like an alarm, and I shoved Brody away from me with more force than I’d

intended. My eyes flared wide in warning as I flicked my gaze above, hoping that he would understand me with no words.



BRODY

MY EYES FOLLOWED SELENE'S, AND IT WAS ONLY THEN THAT I heard the harpy queen landing with a thud.

She looked huge in the moonlight. Her hooked talons glinted, and she kept her wings unfurled as if she wanted to intimidate me. The urge to shudder was overwhelming just, but I had to keep a brave face. I couldn't let Selene know I was scared.

The harpy queen cawed in annoyance as she whispered something grimly to herself before locking eyes with me. Hers had a red tinge to them, making her more menacing than she might otherwise be.

“What brings you here, mortal? Don't tell me you've already completed the first part of the geas.” Her sneer told me everything I needed to know.

“No,” I said, keeping my back straight and assuming the same stoic manner I did in the office. “I failed my first attempt, which I’m sure you’re quite happy about.”

“Go,” whispered Selene, pushing me gently away. I glanced back at her, frowning, but she mouthed the word again and ushered me away. I could see the fear in her eyes and wished I could do something about it.

The harpy queen burst into laughter so loud that it echoed through the forest and made the birds scatter from their roosts in fear. The sound followed me as I moved away from the hollow. Away from Selene.

I could only hope that the harpy queen was kinder to her daughter than she was to strangers.

Taking one last look at Selene, I turned my back and disappearing into the night. Who knew what might happen, but I was no help to her now.

There was too much energy thrumming through my veins, and I knew I wouldn’t be able to sleep, so I jogged through the woods, my feet seeming to know the way already, even though I’d only been this way a few times before. Instead of heading to my cabin, I walked to the main retreat building, hoping to find an open door. Surely, there would be one. It was a huge building with staff working around the clock, and while we had some supplies and a kitchenette in our cabins, there were valid reasons for keeping the main complex unlocked.

It wasn’t until I made my way to the rear deck where we had dinners that I found an entry point though, and surely, the kitchen wouldn’t be far away; they wouldn’t want to carry the many trays of food too far, meal after meal.

The large room was dark, moonlight glimmering off clean, smooth surfaces. I spotted a trail of low lights along the wall guiding me to a corridor and followed it, finding myself in a large industrial kitchen at the end. Gleaming stainless steel counters and cooking ranges filled the room, along with several huge refrigerators and freezers. It was like a dream; to find something so modern here in the middle of nowhere. State-of-the art, much like the rest of the retreat.

I searched through every cupboard looking for sweet things, anything tangy or fresh enough that it might delight Selene's tastebuds. Finally, my eye fell upon a basket full of ripe apples tucked away in one corner.

Would that be enough?

No, it was available to her in the natural world. So, it didn't count. It had to be something from my world.

I moved to the freezer and yanked the door open. The cool air rushed out to greet me, and I felt a wave of relief wash over me as I saw tubs of ice cream inside. Perfect!

The harpy would never have tasted something like this before—so sweet and creamy with all that frozen goodness—surely, this would do the trick. A warm glow swirled in my gut and whether it was the magic of the geas telling me I was onto something, or just my hope, it drove me on.

I grabbed a few tubs—Mint Chocolate Chip, Coconut and Mango Swirl, Berry Ripple. I left the plain chocolate in the freezer though, along with the more modern ones, like cookies and cream and peanut butter fudge. I didn't think they would appeal to her tastebuds. She liked fresh and fruity, and if I could find something that was from my world but appealed to her taste, I had a feeling I could complete this first part of my quest and move on to the next.

But what if I was wrong? I would only have one more chance after this.

No, I had to trust my gut. It usually led me in the right direction.

I put the tubs on the counter, shaking out the chill in my fingers as I opened drawers until I found where the utensils were, snagged a spoon, and then pulled the lids off each of the three tubs.

The first was Mint Chocolate Chip, smooth and creamy with just a hint of mint flavor. Delicious, but even that small bit of chocolate might be foreign enough to throw her off...

Shit, what if harpies were lactose intolerant? I should have asked. Done more research.

Pushing that thought out of my mind, I dragged over the Coconut and Mango Swirl, digging a new spoon in and delivering the scoop to my mouth. This one was sweet, slightly nutty, and had delectable swirls of tropical fruit throughout it.

Berry Ripple was the only one left now. I picked up another spoon with a hint of trepidation. But Selene had said she loved strawberries, so hopefully this would deliver what I was looking for. I spooned some into my mouth and closed my eyes at the tart berry flavors that coursed through the ice cream.

I couldn't imagine what Selene would think of this treat; she'd tasted nothing like them before, that was for sure.

"Snuck in for a midnight treat, did you?" A voice came from behind me and I spun like a naughty child to see who had busted me. My shoulders sagged in relief when I saw it was Jenny.

“You scared the shit out of me.” I slid the spoon into the sink and started putting the lids back on the ice cream, but then I stopped. Maybe she could give me advice; no, that wasn’t going to work. She was human and Selene was a harpy. I could only do this based on what I knew, and that meant the berry ripple.

“I felt peckish, slide over that mint choc chip if you’re done with it?” She raised an eyebrow and lifted her hand, so I slid it down the bench. She caught the tub, found a spoon and dug in. She clearly didn’t have the guilt that I did over sneaking around the kitchen in the night. Maybe it was because I wasn’t here for myself, but for a reason I couldn’t articulate to anyone else; no one would believe me if I tried. I’d probably lose my damn job, or at the very least be demoted out of my team leader position.

I moved to the freezer and put the Coconut and Mango back in. I was going to go directly back into the forest with the other tub and see if I could solve this one tonight. Then at least I’d have the day to think about the next part of the geas.

“I’ll leave you to it,” I said, “going to finish this one off in my cabin.” I hefted the Berry Ripple and gave her a nod.

“Are you avoiding me?” she asked.

I spun back to face her, brow furrowed in confusion. “What?” She indicated to the expansive kitchen. “It’s not like there isn’t enough space for both of us. Are you avoiding me, or is there somewhere else you need to be?” She raised an eyebrow at that, and I couldn’t help the flush of red that blazed across my cheeks. “Oh, you dirty dog, you’re taking that ice cream to a booty call! Don’t worry, I won’t tell HR about this. It’s not anyone on our team, is it?” She leaned forward, a wicked gleam in her eyes.

“No, definitely no one on our team,” I replied with a quick grin. Then I tapped on the top of the tub and gestured to the door. “Better get this to her before it melts.”

“Get it, boy!” she called out, the cackle of her laughter ringing after me.



SELENE

“HE IS FULL OF TROUBLE,” MY MOTHER SAID. SHE’D DROPPED her harpy queen stance, though she still wouldn’t deign to come inside the hollow with me. I was sitting up easier now, the pain so much less than it had been originally.

“You’re the one who bound him to me with the geas, mother,” I bit out. Not that I was complaining. I mean, I enjoyed the attention that he was giving me, how he looked at me. Like I was made of magic, something from out of this world; out of his world, at least. That he could very well die hadn’t escaped me, but I didn’t want to dwell on that right now. I could do nothing to change his fate, even though I wanted to.

The moon was lowering in the sky, rain clouds coming in. I glanced up at my mother with a mixture of defiance and sadness. “Do you think he’ll be able to break the geas?”

My mother's wings twitched, her eyes flickering from side to side like she wanted to say something but was holding back. Then finally, with a resigned sigh, she answered my question.

"He may find a way," she said softly. "But there is no guarantee. Do not get your hopes too high, though perhaps it is me who should be hopeful. After all, he is your first chance at having your own clutch, and if he breaks the geas..." She left her thoughts hanging there, though I knew what she implied. The magic between us would continue to draw us closer; she'd made sure of it.

With that, she flew off into the night sky, leaving me to stew in my hollow.

Footsteps sounded in the darkness, sending a strange mix of fear and fascination flooding through my body. Was it Brody, or one of the other monsters that dwelled on these lands?

I heard a soft rustle as it moved through the underbrush, followed by a light thudding noise as feet hit the ground with careful steps. A chill ran down my spine at the swirl of night air. My heart raced and despite my fear of the unknown, I felt alive with excitement.

A figure stepped out from between the trees, but it wasn't Brody.

"Nico," I said, my stomach sinking at the sight of him. The huge dark gargoyle owned this place, and if he was here, now, it meant that somehow, he had caught wind of the geas mother had bound Brody with.

"Where is she?" he asked, his voice like gravel in the darkness. He could have snuck up on me easily, so the fact he'd made his approach obvious should have set me at ease. It didn't.

“I’m not sure. She flew away when the rain began to fall.”

“Not like her to be wary of getting a little damp,” he said, his tone droll. He looked up, out into the trees, but even though his night vision was immaculate, he wouldn’t find her.

I shrugged, knowing he could see me clearly even in the hollow’s darkness.

“I know what she’s up to,” he growled, his eyes narrowing.

“No human must die by the hand of a monster on this land. See that she keeps her word. If the peace is broken, there will be consequences.” With that, he took off into the night, and I released a long sigh of relief as his presence faded away.

A deep sense of unease replaced the peace of the night. I had only a notion of what my mother was up to; knew that she wanted our line to continue, that a human male was the only possibility for that. Knew also that she missed the taste of human flesh, the thrill of the kill. Whether or not Brody completed the tasks of the geas, mother had marked him, and right now he was caught in her game, hunter and prey.

And I felt helpless to do anything about it. I was just another pawn in whatever game she was playing; one she would no doubt end up winning.

But I prayed not. Brody had done nothing wrong. He deserved better than the fate she would give him. As I watched the moon dip below the horizon and felt the chill of night settle in around me, I knew one thing for certain—I couldn’t let him die because of this geas. No matter what happened, I would save him from whatever fate my mother had in store.

There was the snap of a twig and my head shot up as I peered into the darkness, my eyes adjusting. I could pick out another figure moving toward me, and this time I could tell it was

Brody. The shape of him was just right, the smell of him too. Something that I couldn't describe; something that wasn't part of my world.

But why had he returned already?

It took too long for him to get to my hollow and duck inside, dropping to his knees beside me. Part of me wanted to reach for him and draw him close, to touch his hair, his skin, but I knew that keeping my distance was best for now.

"Brody," I said.

"I had an idea," he replied, thrusting a container of something toward me as well as a curved tool.

I tilted my head to the side, brow furrowed as I tried to figure out what it was.

"It's a new flavor. I think this one will work."

I shook my head, pushing the container away. "No, Brody. You don't want to rush this. If you fail, then you'll only have one more chance." My gut ached, churning with nerves. It was too soon, and he had failed so spectacularly for the first time.

But there was a twinkle in his eyes, and I knew he was going to insist.

"I'm sure, Selene, and if this doesn't work, I'll find something that will. Do you trust me?"

I pressed my lips together.

I did trust him, but if he got this wrong, we would both suffer.

After taking a deep breath, I nodded. "Yes, I trust you." At least, I trusted he believed he was right. It was the best I could do under the circumstances.

He smiled, the expression making him even more handsome. How was I going to keep my distance from him? Taking my hand in his, he placed the container into it. It was cold, and I shrank away, letting it drop to the floor between us.

“It won’t hurt you, I promise,” he said gently, scooping it back up. He kept hold of it, though, peeling back a skin on top to reveal something creamy inside. “And it’s meant to be cold. This is called ice cream.”

“Ice cream,” I repeated, testing the name out. It sounded strange in my mouth and I could only hope it didn’t taste strange as well.

“This is Berry Ripple,” he said, grinning at me. “Because you like berries.”

I raised an eyebrow, still uncertain.

He put the utensil into the container and scooped some of the substance up. It was like nothing I’d ever seen before and I could feel my tongue tingle as though I was already tasting it. Not all tingles were good, though; maybe it was dangerous.

Maybe he had figured out that my mother would ensure his death and he had decided to get in first.

No.

I couldn’t believe it. Not when he was looking at me with such kind, caring eyes.

He held the morsel out to me, but I shook my head, pressing my lips together.

“You first. Show me how to eat it.”

Brody laughed, a soft chuckle that warmed me from the inside.

“It’s easy,” he said. “Like this.” And with that he simply

popped the tool into his mouth, closed his lips and slid it out again, clean as a leaf after rain.

My mouth dropped open and before I realized what I was doing, I reached out and put my finger between his soft, damp lips.

The substance was still cool, melting against his warm tongue, the combined sensation of it sending a shiver of pleasure through my body.

Brody looked at me with wide eyes, the whites of them gleaming in the moonlight. His tongue moved against my finger, gentle and probing. He realized what he was doing and opened his mouth. Awkwardly, I removed my finger and gnawed on my lip.

“Sorry. I just...” I shook my head, the feathers around my face ruffling. “I’m not sure what came over me.”

He smiled, a soft expression that seemed to light up his face. “It’s okay.” He reached out and ran his thumb along my jawline.

His touch sent sparks through me, igniting something deep inside my heart that I had thought I might never experience.

Harpies always mated with humans, but the idea of killing him after—killing anyone—was repugnant to me. And yet he was here. Already bound to me by the geas. Already destined to die.

“What is this?” I asked, pointed to the utensil to try to change the topic. His gaze slid away from mine to see what I was referring to.

“It’s a spoon,” he said. “Do you not have them?”

I shook my head. There would be so many things that we did not have; I knew their world was different, more advanced than our own. We probably should have died out a long time ago, but we persisted.

“Here.” He dipped it back into the ice cream and took another scoop. This time, he held it out to me. “Try it.”

I looked at him for a moment, unsure if I should be trusting my instincts or not. But then I realized that there was no way back from this now and so I leaned forward, pressing my lips against the spoon and tasting the cool sweetness of the Berry Ripple ice cream.

It was like little fragments of joy were dancing on my tongue. I had tasted nothing so sweet and delicious in all my life; the flavors melted together to create a sensation that was both comforting and exciting at the same time.

I opened my eyes, looking up into Brody’s face. He smiled at me, his lips curving in a way that made me feel warm inside. I smiled back and suddenly it felt like anything was possible. Anything at all.

He scooped some more of the ice cream onto the spoon, his movements graceful, like he’d done this a thousand times before. I watched him, marveling at how different our worlds were yet how fascinated we were by one another.

It was a strange and powerful connection, one I didn’t quite understand but wanted to explore further. He handed me the spoon again, and I grasped it, savoring each bite of the delicious ice cream.

The flavors danced around my tongue - sweet, tart raspberries along with creamy vanilla. I closed my eyes and savored the moment, feeling utterly content in his presence.

When I opened them again, Brody hadn't moved an inch. He was still looking at me with those same kind eyes, that same warm smile tugging at his lips as though he'd known all along what this would mean for us both.

"I can tell that this is it," he said. "It's like a warmth here." He pressed a hand against his chest, his mouth opening in a gasp. I felt it too, a spreading tingle from inside my body, pushing to the surface and becoming a glowing ball of light between us.

Nothing had prepared me for this before. I'd never seen it happen, hadn't been warned about it from Mother. But there it was, right in front of us. A magical ball of light, shimmering and glimmering like a star that had been sent down from the heavens.

I stared in wonder, eyes wide with amazement, as I watched the light hover between us. It seemed to draw us closer together, binding us in a way that I could not explain.

I knew, without a doubt, that the first part of the geas had had been met.

Brody shook his head and his mouth worked, but no words came out.

"Are you okay?" I reached a hand out and grasped his fingers, squeezing them lightly to try to ground him.

"I didn't expect... I didn't know that it would be like this, I thought... I thought..." His shoulders sagged a little, as though the reality of the situation was finally hitting him.

"You thought it was just words. That it would all be okay. You didn't know. How could you?" I gripped his hand tighter, hoping that he could see the sorrow in my eyes. "This is real, Brody. It is serious. And if you fail..."

He straightened, sucking in a deep breath and then giving me a tiny nod. “Tell me.”

“You will die.” I whispered the words, not wanting to give them any weight, but needing them out in the open.

“Oh, shit.” He dropped my hand, his whole body going limp as he slumped into himself. “Dead, huh?” His eyes were low, and I scooted forward, tilting his chin up with my hand. My side ached, but he needed me right now, and I needed to make him feel better.

“You’re going to do this, though. Can’t you feel it?”

The ball of magical light had faded, but the memory of it still lingered inside me, and I was sure he must feel it too, this connection between us, growing with each interaction. His lips parted, and I moved closer still, brushing mine across his. Just the faintest touch, but enough to make me want more. More that I could not have. Not if I wanted to save him. And yet...

His lips parted as though he wanted to inhale me as well.

My breath felt heavy and loud in the space of the hollow, and I forced myself to sit back on my feet, even as my hand reached for his again.

Brody was quiet for a moment, though his grip on me was firmer than before, as if he had to maintain that physical connection or lose himself entirely.

“What is the next part of the geas?” he asked.



BRODY

I WAITED, BREATH HELD, UNTIL SELENE SPOKE AGAIN.

“For the second part, you must delight my mind.”

Delight her mind...

I laughed. Literally, out loud, so loud in fact that it shocked Selene, and she leaned away from me. I tugged on her hand, though, not willing to let her go. I never wanted to, not now that she had come so close to me, not now that I’d smelled Berry Ripple on her breath and knew that I would die if I failed her.

No pressure or anything...

This one, though, I knew I could solve. I reached into my pocket and pulled out my phone. Selene’s eyes narrowed as she looked at the cell.

“What is that?” she asked.

“This is a cell phone. It’s like a tiny computer that can do a million wonderful things.”

Her brow furrowed deeper. “Com-pu-ter.” She sounded the word out slowly, and in that instant, it reminded me that our worlds were vastly different.

“Yes. A computer.” I said, trying to explain it in the simplest terms possible. “This small device can do many things like send messages and make phone calls, access the internet, play games and much more.”

I paused for a moment, my brain searching for the right words to use.

“Essentially,” I said slowly, “A computer is a machine that can perform calculations and solve problems much faster than a human ever could. It’s like having an extra brain to help you get things done.”

Selene’s eyes lit up with understanding and she nodded her head. I smiled, relieved that she had grasped the concept. She still held my hand in hers and I squeezed it lightly.

“I’m pretty sure I can blow your mind with this.” I slid my finger across the screen to unlock it, then made my way to my saved videos, looking for the funniest cat video in there. Once I’d located it, I moved so that I was sitting beside Selene. I rested one hand on the ground, my arm behind her, the feathers of her wings tickling my skin. It was so strange; she was strange, more than my brain could really take in. Yet she was right here, close enough to touch.

“Okay, watch this,” I said, hitting play.

We watched the video, and I couldn’t help but chuckle as the cat made silly noises and did its best to keep up with a toy

mouse. Selene, though, she just stared at it, her lips parted in surprise.

But not delight. I knew it without her needing to say a word. No glowing orb, no intense swell of feeling in my chest. Just the pang of pain, almost enough to make me double over. I gritted my teeth as she turned to me.

“I’m sorry,” she said, her face stricken. “This device is astounding, but I don’t understand why that small panther is chasing something that is clearly not edible.”

I laughed then. Shallow, but true. Of course, it made no sense to her. What had I been thinking? “You don’t need to apologise, Selene.” I smiled at her. “Do you like music?” I asked, my brain already skipping over the options. There were a thousand sub-genres of music, though. How would I find something that was just right?

But it didn’t need to be just right, it just needed to delight.

“I do,” she said. “We have many songs, our own, and the birds in the forest. The song of the world runs through everything.”

The song of the world. It was such a beautiful way to look at things, but it didn’t help me narrow it down. That she liked music was good, though. I searched my mind for something that might delight her, my thoughts turning to the natural world and something that might mimic some of the sounds found there.

“Okay. One more attempt tonight, and if this doesn’t work, I’ll sleep on it and come back tomorrow.”

Selene shook her head so hard that her feathers stirred a wind around me. “Brody. We must be patient. We must get this right.” Her eyes were so full of sorrow, the expression I had seen there since her mother laid the geas on me; I just hadn’t

understood why. I would give anything to wipe that look from her face, anything but wait.

“I think I know,” I said, flicking through the apps on my phone until I found Spotify, and then bringing up Fur Elise. My finger hovered for a few seconds before I hit play, and then I forced my gaze to Selene’s face as she listened.

The first few notes of Fur Elise filled the air, and a small smile crossed Selene’s face. She closed her eyes, letting the music wash over her as she swayed in time with the melody. I watched her closely; the sadness that had been there moments before was now replaced with sheer joy at the beauty of this music. A tear escaped from one eye and ran down her cheek, but she didn’t bother to wipe it away—she just kept swaying and smiling. With every passing second, my heart swelled until it felt like it might burst from my chest. The magical light of a completed task was already filling the space between us, blue and purple, shimmering like it was full of distant stars, a rush of pleasure and connection flooded through me and I squeezed my arm around her, pressing us closer together.

At last, when Beethoven’s masterpiece ended, Selene opened her eyes and looked up at me with a mix of awe and admiration. “That was incredible,” she breathed. Her eyes seemed to dance with the colors of the magic and before I knew it, she had turned and was on her knees, her lips pressed to mine in a kiss that I could drown in.

I dropped my phone, not caring where it fell.

My hands went to her waist, pulling her closer still as I returned the kiss. Every inch of my body was alive with a feeling that I could not describe, but had been there since the day we met.

The moment seemed to last forever and yet it ended too soon. Selene pulled away after what felt like both no time at all and an eternity. Her eyes were bright and her cheeks were flushed, a contrast to the pale blue of the fading magical light around us.

“That was perfect,” she said, before pressing one last kiss to my lips and shuffling away, putting a little space between us.

I smiled in response, not trusting myself to say anything. It felt like magic, like we would find a way to fulfil the geas. And then? Anything was possible.

I couldn't let the fear of potential death slow me down.

“Tell me the third part, Selene,” I asked. I could still taste her in my mouth, sweet and earthy, unlike any other woman I had ever kissed. I wanted to kiss her again, but it was getting late and the fear of her mother returning was hovering over me. I still had to get some sleep so I could be at least semi-functional for tomorrow's activities.

Selene's eyes seemed to glow in the hollow's darkness, like twin moons. I hadn't noticed that before, but maybe it was lingering strands of the magic between us. With each step I broke, our connection grew. I couldn't explain it, but I could definitely feel it.

“You must delight my body.”

My cock twitched, like it was ready to get to work on that right now. I shifted, trying to adjust my hardening bulge without drawing attention to it.

“Your body... Like...” I licked my lips, trying to figure out how to say this without being crude. “Sex?” I raised an eyebrow, tried to play it cool, though my heart was hammering

in my chest and I wanted her. I wanted her badly, had been drawn to her from the moment we locked eyes.

With a self-conscious laugh, Selene shook her head. “Your member cannot enter my...” Her gaze flicked to mine and then away again. “But there are other ways to delight a body.”

I couldn't tell in this faint light, but I was sure she was blushing.



SELENE

MY LIPS FELT BRUISED BY HIS KISS IN THE VERY BEST WAY. I brushed my fingers over them, in awe at the way it had felt.

I had never been kissed before. Never known what it truly felt like to want another, and now it was like a floodgate had been opened inside me; a connection I'd never expected to have.

But I had to stop it. Now. Before it was too late. If Brody completed the last task, there was no way I would be able to resist dragging him into my bed. Every inch of my body already yearned to be touched, and once we'd lain together, his fate was as doomed as if he failed to lift the geas.

Nico was my only chance. He would get my mother to undo her curse, to free Brody and ensure that he was safe. He wanted no death on this land, but Mother was hungry for it. If I could get to Nico, tell him...

I stood up, ignoring the tug of healing skin at the wound in my side. It was irrelevant right now and healed enough for me to move easily, even if I couldn't take to the skies. The night was dark aside from the moon hanging high; I scanned above the trees, making sure that she wasn't out there.

I stepped outside of the hollow in the tree for the first time in days, my legs feeling a little shaky from disuse. My eyes adjusted to the darkness until I could see almost as easily as if it was daylight. I stretched my wings behind me and yearning for the sky tugging at my soul. I longed to soar again. Night was the only time we could really take to the sky and fly in the way I loved most. Any other time and we'd be spotted too easily, far too large to be mistaken for a bird.

It would have to wait until I'd resolved this situation I was tangled up in.

Moving through the undergrowth, I tucked my wings against me, using them to deflect branches from scratching my skin.

I weaved through the trees, barely making a sound. I'd been trained by the best; my mother had taught me how to move stealthily and I was grateful for it now.

Eventually, with one last push of my wings, I broke free from the forest and out into a clearing far too small to be a meadow. In the center, bathed in moonlight, was a single figure.

The harpy queen.

I let out a long sigh as she turned toward me, a wicked smile on her face.

“You didn't think I'd let you stray too far, did you? Not after what happened the last time.”

I stood my ground at the edge of the clearing as she stalked toward me. I could see the burning rage in her eyes; that I

would go against her was enough to ensure she would punish me when this was all over and done with.

“You can’t kill him,” I said, my voice quavering despite my determination to be strong.

My whole life, Mother had kept me small and meek, and I had been willing to go along with that; there was no reason not to.

Now, I had a reason.

She laughed, and it rang through the clearing and seemed to bounce from the trees surrounding us. All the other sounds of the night stopped then, as if every living creature could hear the inherent threat.

“I can do whatever I want,” she said, her chin high, that haughty expression I hated so much on her face.

“We made an agreement. With Nico. You have to abide by it. He knows you’re up to something.”

It felt cowardly to turn this onto him, but it was the truth. I had no actual power here; she was my queen. But I could put my foot down.

Brody was too important to me to let him die. I didn’t understand why I felt like this about him, but I did. Every time I saw him, each part of the geas he broke, I felt like a wall between us had broken too. His kindness, his desire to please me, to find out what would delight me.

I wanted that.

I wanted him.

And I wasn’t going to let my mother get in the way of it.

“I won’t let you hurt him,” I said, and this time my voice was firm. “I care about him.”

She laughed again. “That puny mortal? He’s a means to an end. A sperm donor, if you will.”

I stepped forward so that we were only a foot apart. “He’s more than a sperm donor - hell, he is not even that yet. He is kind, and he cares. About me.”

Mother raised an eyebrow. “And you think that matters? There are hundreds, thousands—countless men that you can fall in love with if you really must. Though we are royalty, and I had hoped you were better than that.” She sneered. “This one is to help us continue our family line. Nothing more.”

“You really want him to die,” I whispered, knowing that the words were true. Once upon a time, the Harpy Queen had led a life of terror and destruction. She had been feared, respected—and rightly so. Now, she wanted nothing more than to exact her revenge on whatever human crossed her path.

“Yes,” she said bluntly. “And I will have my way.”

I took a deep breath, shaking from head to toe as I stepped forward and looked the harpy queen in the eye. I could not think of her as my mother now.

“No. You will not.”

For a moment, we simply stared at each other. The air around us felt heavy with anticipation; I knew that no matter what happened next, things would never be the same between us.

Finally, she stepped back and cackled. “You surprise me,” she said simply, and I could almost see the admiration in her eyes. “But it will not matter. You are mine, and so is the geas.”

Mother circled around me, trailing a clawed finger across my skin, my wings, the back of my neck until she was in front of me again, her hand holding my chin.

A thrum of nervousness resonated through my body as she locked eyes on me. She gripped my chin tighter, and then, before I could do anything, had whipped her other hand up and pushed her fingers between my lips to grab my tongue.

I tried to scream, to wriggle away from her, but her gaze locked me in place as her pupils dilated and the tingle of magic ran across my skin.

“You will not speak against me, not to Nico, not to Brody. You will not tell them what I intend.”

It was like an electric shock to my tongue and then she let go, stepping back from me and turning away as if I was no threat at all.

And I wasn't. Not really. My tongue felt fat and heavy in my mouth and I clenched my jaw, biting back all the hurtful things I wanted to say.

Not that they would penetrate her emotional armor.

“If you wanted for me to breed, you could have just told me,” I said, keeping my words soft. “Instead, you bound me with him. If you did not want me to feel this way, you could have just let him go. It could have been anyone.” Though as I said that, I shuddered. I didn't want just anyone; didn't think I could lie with a man just to continue our harpy line. But if it saved his life...

“In fact, if you free him, I will. I'll get pregnant by anyone that you choose. If that's what you want.”

She turned back to me, and now there was a sliver of sorrow in her eyes. Regret? Or something similar.

“We each have to learn this lesson the hard way. Love is pointless. Love hurts. It is not for us.”

I frowned at her words, struggling to comprehend. “What if it is? If we can feel it, then surely there must be a way for us to have love?”

Mother tilted her head and for a moment, I thought she might answer me, but then she shook her head. “It does not matter. You must do as you’re told. And when all of this is over, you are still mine. Always. Remember that.”

With those harsh words, she turned and strode away. I clutched my chest as a wave of emotion rushed through me—sadness, anger, even a bit of fear. She was right; I was hers. No matter what happened in the future, she would always have control over me.

And now she controlled my tongue; stopped me from speaking out against her, of even so much as warning Brody.



BRODY

I COULDN'T GET THOUGHTS OF SELENE FROM MY MIND. No matter what we were doing, no matter how important this meeting was. The urge to go to her was so strong that I had to grip the arms of my chair to keep myself seated.

"Brody, did you want to report on how your team is doing?"

"Sure." I sat up straighter and tried to unclench my hands, tried to be in the room. Present. I couldn't blow this. Didn't want to lose my job. "It's taken a day or so for things to settle after Keziah's, ah, incident. But everyone is bonding well and I've got high hopes for improved performance once we're back in the office." Which reminded me I should really check in on Keziah. She was no doubt recovering well at home, wanting no reminders about this place, but I should assure her we understood.

If only she'd been able to talk to us earlier, maybe we could have helped, or at least made for a more supportive environment at work.

“Yes, unfortunate business, that. It's just lucky that they didn't make us all pack up and go home.”

“John, do you want to go next?”

Grateful that the conversation had moved away from me, I forced myself to lean back in my chair to relax.

The faint scent of leaves and bark seemed to waft through the room, taunting me.

I wanted to be back inside that hollow. With her. Whether this ache was the geas or something else, I didn't know. Couldn't explain. But every part of me needed to be near her, to satisfy her, to hold her, kiss her.

I'd been wracking my brain for ideas on how to delight her body—without having sex—but my thoughts came back to that over and over again. I wanted to be inside her, to feel her around me, to watch her face as she shuddered in pleasure beneath me.

The meeting continued, but I didn't take in anything that was said; had no idea how the other teams were faring. All I knew was that we only had a few days left here, and I wanted to spend as much of that time with her as I could.

And yet, once the geas was broken I'd have no reason to see her.

A new plan developed in my head. I wouldn't break the third part of the curse today. I would do something simple, something that was nice but not delightful. If how I felt about her was because of the magic, I didn't want it to go away. Not yet.

It had been years since I'd felt like this about anyone, and that she was a mythical creature added to it. I'd never met anyone like her before; never knew that creatures like her existed, never stopped to fantasize about them. Certainly not sexually. But it wasn't about her wings or her large eyes, not the feathers that lined the edges of her face, though each of those things thrilled me, made me want to touch her more, explore this fascinating new being.

Selene had a kind soul, a deep soul, and I could see the loneliness in her eyes.

They were mirrors of my own.

The meeting wrapped up, and I checked the time. Almost six. I didn't think I could handle going to dinner and trying to make conversation with the others, though. It had been physically painful to be so close to them and so far away from her. I went down to the kitchen and poked my head in.

"Hey," I said, catching the attention of the closest staff member. "I'm not feeling up to eating with the rest of the company tonight. Do you think I could take something to my cabin?"

"Of course," she said with a smile. She grabbed a container and started filling it with a range of vegetables and meat—a mini buffet—and then placed that in a bag along with some yeasty bread. It was still warm, I could tell, and my mouth watered a little as she passed it to me.

"Thank you so much," I said.

"No problem. It happens more than you might think." She gave me a wink and then returned to her work. Dismissed, I left the kitchen and headed for my cabin, keeping my head

bowed so I didn't accidentally make eye contact and get asked where I was going.

I felt awful thinking about it, but none of them mattered. Not right now. I had only one person and my mind, and she wasn't even a human.

There was a strange tug in my chest that I didn't understand. Had never felt before. Like a literal pull toward the forest as I headed toward my cabin. I had to go in and force myself to eat something. Maybe try to meditate. Anything to keep my mind off her for just a bit.

Finally, I was there. I locked the door behind me and drew the curtains closed, not wanting to see anything green or vibrant. Not wanting any reminder of her.

But the food tasted like ash in my mouth and when I lay on the bed, a feather from the down coverlet poked me. Feathers. But nothing as beautiful as hers.

Dammit.

I stood up and paced the room. I wanted so badly to be beside her, and yet the sooner I broke the geas, the sooner I would have no reason to. This feeling was like a drug and I wasn't ready to give it up.

I wanted to know more about her, learn from her. I wanted the unthinkable—I wanted her to stay in the hollow, stay with me. But she could never be part of my world, and I didn't think there was a place for me in the woods.

I tried to distract myself with books and movies, but all it did was make me miss being with her even more. The longing was an ache in my bones, a physical need that threatened to consume me as I lay in my bed.

Before I knew it, I was at the door, into the night. I didn't even take my phone. Didn't need anything but the moonlight to guide my way to the hollow. That tug in my chest took me through the forest, directly to her. As I walked, I made a plan, tried to think of things that wouldn't work but that I might find reasons for. Any touch sensation would do.

Any reason to touch her, as long as she wanted to be touched by me. And how she'd kissed me last night suggested that she very much did.

"Selene?" I whispered her name into the entrance, and her large eyes opened, reflecting the moonlight. They were such a deep brown, like the forest that she lived in, like earth and bark, like chocolate.

"You came," she said, her voice just as quiet.

"I don't know about you, but I couldn't keep away if I tried. And, I did." My shoulders sagged. "I thought that if I stayed away... If I could drag this out for longer..." I sighed. "I don't want this to be over." I pointed from my chest to her, hoping she understood.

"Neither do I," she whispered. She stood then, her long limbs untangling, wings unfurling behind her as much as they could within the confines of the space. The wound in her side was all but healed. My mouth dropped open at the sight and I stepped toward her, reached for her skin and grazed my fingers over it.

"How?"

"Magic." She shrugged and chuckled.

"That's amazing."

I only realized then that I was touching her. The heat of her body warmed my fingers, and I couldn't help but slip my hand

to her hip and rest it there. It felt like a tingle was running through me and I wondered whether she could feel it, too.

“You’re amazing,” I added, moving my gaze to hers. She was as tall as me, her build similar, stronger than mine from her time living in the forest. So strong and so feminine. I’d had no idea how drawn I would be to that power. I could see it in every limb of her body.

She ducked her head, as if she didn’t know how to take the compliment; with a mother like hers, that was no surprise. I cupped her cheek and tilted her head up so that our gazes locked. I could see myself reflected in hers, but all I wanted was for her to see herself in mine.

“I mean it. You astound me.”

“Despite the fact that it is my fault you have a geas on you? That you could die because of me?” Tears welled in her eyes then and I shook my head, wiping them away with the pad of my thumb as they trickled down her cheek.

“If I hadn’t shot you...”

“You did not mean to! I know you would never have hurt me on purpose.”

I wondered at that. How she could know me so well when we had barely spent any time together; I knew it had to be the magic of the geas, though. There was no other explanation for it.

“I know. I’m so sorry.”

She shook her head, as if she didn’t want to hear an apology from me. Instead, she stepped closer and pressed both palms flat against my chest. Her warmth seeped through the fabric of my shirt and into me, filling me with a warmth I hadn’t felt for years.

“I wanted you to stay,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

The ache that had been in my chest this entire time disappeared, replaced with the warmest kind of calm. I smiled and held her gaze for as long as I could before leaning down and pressing my lips against hers. This was more than just physical; I felt my soul reaching for hers, wanting to become one with her.

“I’m here,” I said as I pulled back. “And I’m not going anywhere.”

She smiled, her eyes finally betraying the emotion she had been trying to keep from me. Relief and joy flooded through me at that sight, in that moment.

“Hearing you say that is everything,” she said, leaning her forehead against mine. “But it is not possible. We are from two different worlds. Mother...”

“Will never let us be together.” A river of dread emptied into my stomach as I finished her sentence. I stepped back from her, needing some distance.

I couldn’t have her; not in the way that I really wanted. But even if I couldn’t, it didn’t mean that I wouldn’t stay.

“But I won’t leave you,” I said, my voice firm and sure. “Not until I have to. If that’s what you want.”

She reached for my hand and drew me back.

“I want,” she said, and her voice was full of more than just emotion.

I pressed a soft kiss to her lips, and while every part of me ached for more, I didn’t think I could relax while this geas was still hanging over us.

“Let’s break it,” I said. “Let’s finish this, and then we can figure out what happens next.”

She nodded, but I could see that her eyes were full of worry. I wanted to reassure her that everything would be okay, but I couldn’t make a promise like that. I had no idea what would happen next.

“Whatever happens,” I said, brushing a stray strand of hair away from her face. “I’m with you.”

Selene nodded again, though this time it was firmer.

“And how do you intend to delight my body, Brody?” she asked, her voice taking on a more formal tone.

I took a deep breath, wishing I had given it more solid thought, but I knew where to start and I was determined now. Only once I was free could we see where our futures lay. And I wanted that.

“In the human world, there’s a lot of research that suggests hugs are important. They have to last at least thirty seconds for the full impact of them. Do harpies hug?”

She frowned at me as though she didn’t really understand.

“Can I... show you?” I asked, the deep desire to embrace her overwhelming me. I wanted to press her close to my heart, to feel hers thrum against my skin. Never mind that I had no idea where a harpy’s heart might be.

Selene nodded, her eyes brighter now, and I stepped closer. With great care, I embraced her with both arms, slipping one below her wings, and the other over above. That same warmth from before swelled inside me. She was delicate but powerful beneath my hands. Her feathers tickled my skin and flapped ever so slightly in response. I closed my eyes and breathed in

the scent of her, letting it fill my nostrils. Her arms lifted, moving around me to hug me back.

“Like this?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I murmured into her hair. It was strange to be like this, to see her wings over her shoulder, just there. There was no way anyone could mistake her for human, but I forgot we weren’t the same until a reminder like this slapped me in the face. Almost literally in this case. “Now we stay like this, I’ll count.”

“Do you really think this will work?” she asked.

“I don’t know, but it’s nice.” More than nice, but I didn’t want to draw attention to the way that my body was responding to hers. I twisted my lower half to the side, hoping that she wouldn’t notice the bulge in my pants; the last thing I wanted to do was make her uncomfortable.

“Brody. We must be careful.”

“Just try it, please? We still have two more tries after this. No more talking until I say.”

She huffed out a small breath, but then rested her head against my shoulder, her face tucked into the crook of my neck. The feathers around her face tickled me, but I tried to ignore them and sink into the embrace. My brain kept thinking about how little clothing there was between us.

No, come on, Brody. Enjoy the hug. Breathe into it. Let those good feelings wash over.

Selene sank against me. Her body relaxed, her breathing calm. I had to wonder if she had any of the same thoughts as me or if I was the only one on that wavelength right now.

How long had it been? I counted ten seconds, twenty. My body relaxed too and I could feel her heart, feel her breath in time with my own. Felt the geas too, the magic between us which seemed to strengthen with each breath we took; until it punched me in the gut, alerting me to the failure.

“Okay,” I whispered, letting out a breath and releasing her as I clenched my jaw against the pain. My fingers reached for her wings, stroking the feathers as she stepped back from me, her fingers pressed to her stomach. The last part of the geas had not been met and now I only had two opportunities.

She shook her head, sorrow on her face. “It was nice, but...”

I let out a sigh. “To be honest, I didn’t think it would delight your body, but it was an excuse to hold you.”

A smile spread across her lips. “You need no excuse. You may hold me whenever you would like.”

The unspoken words hovered in the air between us.

If you survive this.

I had to survive.

It was only then that the reality fully hit me. If I failed, then that was it for me. I was dead. Would my body ever be recovered, or would the harpy queen consume me?

A shudder ran through me at that image. If she did, I could only hope she would kill me first, though I wouldn’t put it past her to eat me while I was still alive.

“Can I kiss you?” I asked, desperation clogging my throat. I needed to taste her, and then perhaps I could delight her body.

“Kissing you is a delight, but we’ve already done that, and so it cannot count.”

“No, I mean. I just want to kiss you. While I can.”

Her eyes widened a fraction before she stepped closer, her face lifting to mine. Her lips were so close that I could feel the warmth of her breath against my skin. My heart was hammering in my chest and then, finally, our mouths met for a long, slow, sweet kiss.

It felt like coming home.

We explored each other, learning the shape of our lips and how to move in harmony. We kissed until I felt like I was going to burst from pure pleasure.

Selene’s eyes were closed as we parted, a small smile on her lips as she leaned against me. “That *was* delightful,” she said softly before pressing a gentle kiss to my cheek.

I smiled back before gathering her close once more, just wanting to stay in this moment forever.

But I knew that wasn’t an option; we had two more chances and then it would be over. It was up to me now. I just had to find a way to delight her. Then I would be free to love her forever.

And that was all the motivation I needed.

I pulled away and smiled down at her. “No more talking,” I said firmly before taking her hand in mine and leading her towards the nest of blankets. A spark of determination lit inside me, and I refused to let it go until our future was secure.

“I’ve got another idea,” I said, thinking about all the ways in which touch could be used. “And if this doesn’t work, then I am sure I know what will.”

“Then why don’t we just do that?” she asked, her voice high pitched and panicked. “Start with the thing you are sure of.”

Should I admit I wasn’t as sure as I sounded? No, now was not the time for that.

“This will help, either way. Do you trust me?” I asked, knowing I had asked this of her before, but needing to hear her say it again.

“I do. I just don’t want you to die.” She bit her lip, sharp teeth looking like they might cut.

“Neither do I. So, stay with me. Be with me. Feel everything as much as you can. I need you in here,” I said, tapping her chest, “not up here.” I stroked her hair, pushing it back from her face, my fingers ruffling her feathers as I moved.

My breath felt like it was coming harder now, like I was being choked with need for her, with the desire to stay alive. Selene stepped away from me, laying down on the blankets that formed her bed here. I realized for the first time that this wasn’t where she normally lived; she’d been grounded by the damage I’d done to her, and this was only the safest place she could find in a hurry.

I pushed those thoughts away, knowing that I needed to stay in the moment to. To be here, with her, give these moments all my attention just in case they were the last ones.

Maybe, after this was all over, I could see where she really lived.

I knelt down beside her, my gaze moving across her body. Her wings were splayed behind her on the ground. The scrap of fabric that covered her breasts and torso had seen better days, and the skirt she wore only just hid the things I most wanted to

see. Oh God, if only I could make love to her right now. I would show her so much delight.

But no sex. I couldn't thrust myself inside her to win this one. At least, not my cock.

I swallowed hard and moved closer to her, my hands skimming above her body, trying to think of where best to start. Massage could be delightful. It would feel good, especially after she'd been holed up in this hollow for days now. I just wasn't sure where to begin. Her back was a foreign country to me, as I had no experience with wings. It felt wrong to just reach out and touch her breasts, even though I yearned to.

I moved behind her, gently lifting her head so that I could get beneath her and rest it in my lap.

"What are you going to do?" she asked, looking up into my eyes.

She looked even more alien to me upside down, but the soft look of curiosity in her gaze drew me in.

"We call this a massage," I said, stroking the feathers around her face. They ruffled and twitched back, giving me more room. Her skin was smooth and soft, and if I'd been a more flexible person, I might have leaned over and kissed her again. I had to stay focused, though.

"Massage," she repeated, testing the word out.

"Close your eyes," I said, wishing that I'd thought to bring some oil. I'd just have to do my best. When she had relaxed against me, I placed my thumbs at the center of her forehead. With firm, gentle pressure, I worked in circular motions around her eyes and then up to her temples. As I worked, my

fingers moved downwards, skimming over her cheeks before reaching the jawline.

I continued working until all the tension was gone from her face, feeling Selene's body relax completely beneath my touch.

"How does that feel?" I asked softly, barely daring to breathe in case it broke the spell.

She smiled up at me, her eyes still closed and her lips slightly parted. "It feels wonderful," she said dreamily before opening them fully and looking up at me. "Thank you."

I smiled back, feeling warmth bloom in my chest. Suddenly, all my worries seemed to drift away as I realized just how much I loved this woman—this beautiful, magical creature who had opened her world to me and given me a glimpse of a life I could never have imagined.

The pain in my body was nothing compared to the feeling that radiated between us.

"It's my pleasure," I said, stroking her hair back away from her face.

I didn't need to speak the words. We both knew that the last tether of the geas had not been broken.

Her smile was full of sorrow and concern, but I caressed her cheek and shook my head. "No. Don't worry. I can do this."

I gently lifted her head from my lap and slipped out from beneath her, bundling blankets up to make a pillow. After crawling to the other end of her body, I rested at her feet.

"I saved the best for last," I said. My breath felt ragged in my chest, but it wasn't with concern this time. It was because if

she let me, I would taste her, give her the pleasure I'd been dreaming of. "If you'll let me."

"We cannot-"

"I know. I can't have sex with you. This is... Not quite sex, but something just as intimate."

I saw a shiver run through her body, as if in anticipation, and her hips ground a little circle.

"But what if-"

"Please, Selene." I crawled up her body so that I was hovering over her, face to face. "Let me taste you. Let me love you. If I'm going to die, then I want to do it between your legs. I need you."

She thrust herself up, crushing her lips to mine, claiming me with that kiss. I lingered there, unable to stop myself from pressing against her. She flung a leg over me, and I couldn't help but grind the bulge of my cock against her core. God, I wanted her so badly, but if all I could do was taste her, then that was what I would do.



SELENE

BRODY LEFT ME PANTING, WANTING MORE. I WISHED HE COULD thrust himself inside me, sheath his cock. I ached to be filled.

He could not know it, but he was the first man I had ever felt this way about. The first man I wanted to mate with. Of course, I had looked upon others as they moved within the retreat, but no one had ever taken my fancy in the way that he did.

“Are you ready?” he asked, his breathing ragged with want.

I nodded, unable to speak, uncertain I even could. I did not know what he was about to do, but I knew I wanted it. His hug had been lovely, his massage so soothing, but his kiss had heated me up and the sight of him between my legs made me burn for him.

He moved back, his hands sliding down my body to rest on my knees. He paused only a moment before he pushed them out, splaying my legs. I moved my clawed feet, making room for him there, my core pulsing, wanting. I felt exposed in a way that I had never had before.

And then he slid his hands down my thighs, parting them even wider, his thumbs dragging up the fabric of my skirt. My breath caught in my chest as he leaned down, his tongue tracing along my inner thigh to where his hands were. Only a sliver of dirty fabric covered me. My mother had refused to bring me fresh clothing, but Brody looked at me as though I was wearing the most beautiful gown. Or wearing nothing at all.

He bit his lip, plump from kissing me.

“I want to taste you. Can I?”

Unable to speak, I nodded my head, a tremor running through my body. I was nervous, excited, and could not understand why the geas had not already broken. Even the waiting, the wanting, was delicious.

And then he pushed the fabric aside, his lips opening in a gasp as he laid eyes on my most intimate part.

“Feathers,” he whispered, shaking his head in amazement. I pressed my thighs together, squeezing him out, all sense of pleasure disappearing. He found me strange. Human women didn’t look like this; I’d known that from the windows I’d spied through, but I’d forgotten in the heat of passion.

“No,” he said firmly, sliding a hand between my legs. I pressed harder, but then looked at him, saw his gentle smile. “You’re amazing, beautiful, wondrous. I’ve just never seen... please. I want to feel you.”

I breathed deep, forced myself to relax at his touch, to let him open my thighs and graze his tongue against the skin there again as his fingers dipped to my mound. He ran them softly through the downy feathers and I could feel him smile against my thigh.

“You’re amazing,” he murmured. “Unlike anyone I have ever known.” He kissed me again, edging ever closer to my core. “And not just because of this.”

He slipped his fingers down, sliding through the feathers to part them and expose my lips. I had no knowledge of what he expected to see, what he wanted, but all thought was driven from my mind a moment later when he licked along my slit, his hot breath heating me more than I already was.

“Brody,” I whimpered, one hand going to his head, gripping his hair. I tried to sit, but he pushed me back with one hand, the other still on my mound, parting me wider as he pressed his tongue against me again, laving me until he hit my clitoris and sucked the hard nub into his mouth.

“Oh gods of wind,” I gasped on an exhale. His lips curved, and I knew he was smiling at the delight he was giving me, and it was. I could feel every nerve in my body tighten in response to his efforts. Somehow, he had a hand beneath me now, a finger circling my entrance as he continued to work on my nub, sucking, licking, his tongue flicking down to dart inside me now and then.

I needed more, more now.

“Please,” I begged, squirming against him, tilting my core toward his fingers. He didn’t wait, didn’t tease, but slid one inside, followed by another, his own gasp tickling my clit.

“You’re... ridged?” His voice pitched on that last word. “Holy fuck, that’s hot.” He whispered the words against me. For one second I thought about telling him how the ridges helped to lay eggs, but now was not the time for that. I didn’t want to do anything that might make him stop what he was doing.

He plunged deeper inside me, his fingers curling in a delicious movement as he increased the pressure, keeping a perfect rhythm, his tongue working my clit more before he moved down to lap at my entrance, adding pressure and heat to the movement of his fingers.

My hand tightened in his hair. It felt like I could not breathe, like I might die here, now, and that would be perfectly okay with me.

“Come for me, baby,” Brody said, his words ragged, as though he was enjoying this just as much as I was. The thought drove me closer to the edge and when he ground my clit with a thumb, rubbing it in quick circles as he thrust in and out of me, I imagined the feel of his cock and plunged over, my thighs tightening around his head and shoulders as I bucked against him, crying out in absolute pleasure as the orgasm tore through me.

I was undone. Utterly destroyed. My thighs dropped to the side, my hand fell from his head as he lapped at me, soft, pleasure sounds emanating from him as he cleaned my juices from my lips and thighs.

“God, you taste so good,” he said, finally looking up at me. His eyes were full of lust and longing, and I wanted him all over again.

The magic between us bathed our bodies in a blue, purple glow. I’d known from the moment he pressed his lips to my clit that this would work, but the tension of the gas had burst

now and it was radiant. My heart ached, yearned for more of him. More that I didn't know if I could actually have.

"I need you, Selene," he said, his voice low, heavy with lust. "I need to be inside you." His chest heaved as though he had just completed one of the obstacle courses at the retreat, and I could practically hear the thudding of his heart.

How could I deny that? Even if I had wanted to. With the magic tingling through my body, forcing the bond between us ever tighter, there was no way at all. I reached for him, drew him up. He stripped off his tee, revealing a body that was lean but toned. I reached for the button on his jeans, yanking at the zip as he awkwardly kicked off his shoes and then stood to strip his pants off. He was completely naked before me, the strange magical glow making him the most magnificent thing I had ever seen. I needed to be free of my clothes too, to feel his skin against mine, to let his touch ruffle my feathers in all the right ways, so I dragged a talon down my tunic, tearing the fabric free and casting it aside.

His jaw went slack, his eyes widening as he viewed me in all my naked glory. I had the feeling that he would bow down and worship me again, like he'd already done, but I wanted his cock this time, thick and ready to give me what I needed.

"Make love to me, Brody. Fuck me senseless."

He didn't respond with words, but before I knew it, his body was covering mine, the heat of his skin warming me from the chill that had slid against me in those moments we'd been parted.

"I can't explain this," he said, kissing me softly, "but I feel so much for you. I want to give you everything you want. I don't want this to be over."

I opened my mouth, about to tell him that this was all we could be, that he was still in danger even if he had broken the geas, but he kissed me again, harder this time. Then he dragged my lower lip between his teeth, the perfect amount of pressure to edge between pleasure and pain. I gasped and kissed him again, harder this time, teeth clashing, my hands reaching around his back to draw him fully against me, one leg slipping behind him, a heel on his ass. It was like my body knew exactly what it wanted, and for now, my brain needed to take a holiday. I could not think with his cock resting against my mound, my belly. I needed him inside me.

Now.

“Please,” I begged against his mouth, pressing fervent kisses to his chin, his neck, nipping him with my sharp teeth but trying not to draw blood.

One of his hands moved between us and slid between my lips, opening me up. I could feel him shift, feel the thick head of him press against my entrance. He tilted his hips, rocked against me, and my body responded, the slickness of my pleasure granting him access into my narrow canal.

I had never had sex before, never felt a man inside me, and each slow movement of him, deeper and deeper, made me gasp anew.

“Is this okay?” he asked, a worried frown on his face.

“Shut up and kiss me,” I said, taking his mouth with my own, drawing him back into the moment. His body responded, thrusting inside me before he drew back with a slowness that was a delicious torment all of its own. I pressed my feet against his ass, begging wordlessly for him to fill me again. This time he thrust in faster, sliding all the way without

resistance, though he tilted his head back, eyes closed, groaning in pleasure.

“You feel so fucking good,” he said, gazing down at me as he pulsed inside, not moving too far from my core. It sent shivers of pleasure through me, but I needed more, bigger, harder thrusts. I needed him to give me all that he could.

“You feel amazing too, but do not go gentle on me. I need it harder. I need it wild like me, wild like your eyes.” With those words, I dragged my talons across his shoulder, his gasp of pain and the resulting thrust driving my need higher. I pulled him down, licked the thin line of blood. He watched my lips, felt the arch of my core, and then he moved.

His thrusts were still too gentle at first, as he pulled all the way out before plunging back inside me. I sliced him again, gripping his hip with my other hand, digging the tips of my nails into his skin. He slammed inside me then and I moaned with pleasure. Then he was thrusting again, each pump harder, hitting my core and spiralling me into a pleasure greater than I had ever known. He held himself off me, giving himself greater leverage. I needed to clamp down, though, to bite something. I tilted my head to the side, finding his forearm and taking it in my mouth. Brody cried out in pleasure and pain as I sank my sharp teeth into him. Not taking a bite, just enough to keep me here in my body, to keep him in mine, to keep this heavenly tension as he thrust inside me again and again until I could feel my orgasm coming, my whole body tensing with it as he sped up, his face taut, sweat beading on his brow.

“Come for me,” I murmured, releasing him from my teeth.

With those words, he lost it, his thrusts wild and magnificent, my brain exploding with pleasure as the orgasm rocked

through my body, as his orgasm pumped inside me, filling me with his seed.

Oh.

Crap.

I couldn't do anything about that now though, lost again in the sensation of his body against mine, his organ pulsing inside me, my body thrumming around his.

We were joined in all ways now, the magic between us forging a connection I had never expected. One that my mother had never warned me about. I loved this man. I knew it, even though it seemed impossible, and I had a feeling that he felt the same way about me, too.

And now I'd let him inside me, body and heart, and he was doomed. If my mother knew that we'd lain together, she would surely kill him. I had his seed now; that was all a harpy required.

And that was when I heard the beat of wings.



BRODY

“PANTS!” SELENE PUSHED AGAINST MY BODY, ROLLING ME OFF her quickly.

“What?” I frowned, pleasure still thrumming through my body. I was utterly spent, just wanted to curl up next to her and fall asleep, but the urgency in her voice cut through that.

“Get dressed,” she hissed. “She is here.” Selene’s eyes were wide with fear, and something else that I couldn’t place my finger on. She tossed my pants, and I snatched them from the air, trying to shove my feet into them. Everything about my body was slow though, but now I could hear what Selene obviously had; the heavy beat of wings.

That shot energy through me and I tugged at the fabric, yanking my jeans on so that I was covered should the harpy queen charge into the hollow. Our little sex nest.

Just thinking of it like that made me wish the queen had stayed away. I wanted Selene again already, the feel of her body, the feathers of her wings brushing my back, her claws in my shoulder, and those damn ridges lining the walls of her pussy.

Fuuuck. I was a goner.

In several ways, if the shrill cry from outside was anything to go by.

How could she know what we had done?

Selene was up, trying to twist a blanket around her body to cover herself. The tattered piece of clothing she'd been wearing was basically ribbons on the floor. Still, she looked fiercer than I'd ever seen her before, a gleam in her eye that I'd like to have taken some credit for, but that I thought was probably her very own.

She seemed to stand taller. Whether her wound had completed healing or if it was something else I couldn't be sure, all I knew was that I felt every inch the mere human that I was beside her.

It was like the breaking of the geas had forged her anew and she stood there looking every bit as regal as her mother.

"Stay behind me," she said, ushering me with a wing as she stepped to the fore.

"You don't have to go out there," I said, concerned for her. For me.

For us.

"I do," she said, glancing over her shoulder. Our eyes met, and I thought there were tears in hers, but it was too hard to see in the semidarkness. "Whatever happens, know that I will never regret our time together. And, I'm sorry."

With that, she turned and stepped out from the hollow and into the night. I followed, staying as close to her as I could. It wasn't like I could provide any protection against the harpy queen, but I still felt that urge, that connection.

The geas might have been broken, but it felt as though something new had been forged between us. I would not let her face the wrath of her mother alone.

"I see you have broken the geas." The queen sneered at me, then turned her gaze back to Selene. "And now he is mine."

Selene stepped forward, lifting her wings as a barrier between the queen and I. "You can't have him, mother."

"Oh, but I can. We can't let him go back to the mortal world. Can't have him spilling our secrets."

"He will tell no one, will you Brody?" She glanced back at me, eyes widening to tell me I needed to agree, and fast.

"No, of course not," I said. Though I couldn't imagine leaving her, returning to my life. Not when this thing was between us like strands of rope making me want to be closer to her, even now with her mother right there, perched on a branch above us, poised as though she were ready to swoop down and rip my throat out.

"He won't be able to help himself." Her mother preened, cocking her head and looking at us with delight in her eyes. "The two of you are bonded now. I can sense it. Hell, I can practically see it."

The geas, I realized. Each time part of it was broken, I had felt that connection between us. The magic had swarmed and invaded my body, hers, binding us ever closer.

Would I have wanted her the same if that had not happened? Would I care for her so intensely, without her mother's

interference?

I wanted to believe so, but at this point, it didn't matter. I felt how I felt, and I would not deny it.

“Love is not ours to keep, daughter. You know this, and I know that his seed is in your body now, eager to implant.”

Selene's wings dropped, but her shoulders stayed rigid. “We didn't have sex. He... he did other things to me instead.”

The queen laughed, vicious, cackling. “Don't think I can't smell him on you. I'm familiar with the scent of sperm, the taste of a man's release. And now he must die. You know that is our way.”

Her words shot through me, and I snapped my gaze to Selene. She'd half turned toward me, sorrow etched into her face.

It was true.

And she had known it all along.



SELENE

“I AM SORRY,” I SAID AS I TURNED TO FACE HIM. I KNEW THAT my mother was watching us, no doubt loving the tension that she’d created. “I could say nothing because she spelled me. Believe me.” I stepped closer to him, my heart aching when he took one step back. But I closed the distance, not willing to let him go, to let him believe that I wanted him to die.

I felt different now, more. I could not explain it, but I needed him to know. To feel it too.

“Why?” he asked, his breath a mere whisper. I clutched his hands, held him tight as I looked directly into his eyes.

“This is her way. The old way. It is not mine, and I will not let her kill you. I won’t let anyone. I promise you.”

Please, I begged him with my eyes, begged him to believe me. My heart was thudding in my chest, and I didn’t think it could

cope if he stepped away, if he ran. But, surely, he knew that if he ran, my mother would swoop down on him and kill him before he could exit the forest.

I could practically see all those thoughts cross his face, so I reached up and cupped his chin with one hand. “Stay with me. Please.” I stepped closer, relieved when he let me. “I need you.” My hand shook. He reached up and gripped it with his, stepping in to kiss me.

In front of my mother.

It wasn't something I ever thought would happen, though I'd known that eventually she would pair me up, to mate me so that our line would continue. But something else had happened when she had laid that geas, and the feeling between Brody and I was stronger than I could have anticipated. My feathers ruffled as he kissed me, as I kissed him back, and the magic that had been released each time we broke part of the geas flooded into my chest.

“Trust me,” I whispered against his mouth, hoping that he would.

No. *Knowing that he would.*

I could feel the change as I turned, knew what it was about me that had changed. Could see it in my mother's eyes as she realized as well.

I was no longer her subject. I was a queen in my own right.

And she had every reason to fear.

“The old ways must die,” I said, my voice ringing through the trees. “We are here with Nico's blessing, but only if we harm no humans. You know this.”

“What I know is that the man who tainted your flesh with his, who has fathered the eggs that even now are forming, must die. His blood must salt this earth, his body must provide nutrition for you as you grow the future queens and princesses of our line.”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. All the fear I used to feel was gone now. I knew that this was the way things used to be done—the same thing her mother had inflicted on her. But times had changed and we must change with them if we wanted to survive in this new world. “I am a queen now. You can tell, can’t you?”

And my words were true. She couldn’t deny them, either. I was the fertile one, the one who held the future of our line in my womb, and as much as she might loathe that, she couldn’t do anything about it. “As queen, you’ll respect my mate, or you will leave these lands.”

My voice trembled then, ever so slightly. She caught the whiff of my hesitation to claim my title and she dove.

“No!” Brody pushed me to the side, foolish and lovely in his attempt to keep me safe, but I turned and wrapped my body around his, wings covering him entirely. Mother’s claws sank into my wing, tearing feathers and flesh, aching fire burning through my body. Thank the winds that our claws held no venom, or I would be writhing in pain.

We landed on the ground and rolled. I released Brody, unable to hold him any longer with the damage to my wing. Tears formed in my eyes, but my heart hardened as I realized I had one tool in my power now that she did not.

The geas.

“You have wounded a queen, and so I place a geas on you.” I yelled the words, the screech of power behind them making Mother crash to her knees and peer up at me.

“No,” she whispered, the colour draining from her face. “You may do no harm to a human, and you will not speak until you can find it in your heart to love one.”

The words thrummed, the magic emanating from me and spreading towards my mother, who cowered now beneath her wings. I heard one last word, a sorrowful no before there was silence.

We were all frozen for a few moments, and then Brody came to stand beside me, his hand slipping into mine and gripping it. “Are you okay?” he asked, his eyes grazing over my body, the wound in my wing.

“No,” I said, my heart full of grief for what I’d had to do to my mother, and for what she had done to me. The old ways had to die, and I could only hope that she would break her own curse, to return to a full life and move on, because if she did not, it would kill her.

I had not specified a timeframe for this, but the magic would know. It would find a way. It would do its bidding now that it was free in the world.

“Your wing,” Brody said, his fingers hovering above the wound.

But my wing hurt less than my heart, which was heavy with what I had done. “It will heal,” I said, “hopefully one day I will fly again, but for now...” I turned to face him, looking into his deep brown eyes, saw the love there and felt some of the ache in my heart lift. “For now, this will be enough.”

His fingers slid along my chin, cupped my cheek, and he kissed me softly before drawing me closer into his embrace, that warm, safe space I had yearned for.

Mother stood, her legs wobbling slightly. She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. Pain and anger were written all over her face, but she didn't come for me now. Instead, she turned and ran, throwing herself into the night sky. She could have the sky for now. When I healed, I would return to it. Maybe with some baby harpies of my own.



BRODY

BY THE TIME THAT MORNING SUNLIGHT WAS REACHING FINGERS across the sky, I was utterly exhausted.

Selene slept, clean and bandaged, dressed in a gown that we'd cut in strategic places to allow it to go over her wings. The bed was stark white, and it was surreal to see her in this place - inside a building - and not in the hollow, or even the forest.

She seemed less real, but also hyper real, if that made any sense. The powerful muscles in her body, the fine feathers around her face, speckled through hair which I could see now, was blacker than night. She looked younger in repose, the lines of pain that had been etched on her face when we'd arrived at this place all but gone.

There was a gentle knock on the door, and then Nico stepped inside.

He had been yet another surprise; a gargoyle who looked like a man most of the time. I'd seen him around the retreat; had no idea that he was anything more than the wealthy owner of The Nest. Yet he was here, hiding and protecting a whole range of monsters on this land by the sound of it.

I'd had no idea.

And now that I knew, it seemed a little dangerous to have them so close to humans. But then, if he didn't provide this haven, I would never have met Selene, and I couldn't imagine my life without her now.

"Come," he said, his voice soft. He nodded to the door, and I followed. I didn't want to leave Selene, but he was the boss here, and I didn't want to get on his bad side. He'd been nothing but resourceful when I had come to him for help; it was me who had been surprised at what I'd found.

He led me through the house and out to a garden where there was a tray of food and two mugs of steaming coffee. I sat and poured milk into mine, waiting for him to say whatever he wanted me alone for. Nico didn't take a seat, though. Rather, he leaned against the back of it, watching as I sipped my coffee.

"This is good," I said, needing to break the silence. "Thank you. For this, and well, everything." I gestured to the woods with my free hand.

Nico nodded, his jaw tight, as though he were turning to stone before me. But apparently, that wasn't what this gargoyle did in the light.

"You know you cannot utter a word of this to anyone," he said.

"Of course. I never would. Selene... I..." I let out a breath, sagging into my chair, the events of the night really settling in

now. “I would do anything to keep her safe.”

“Good.” He nodded, but I could tell there was more. “We have ways of ensuring that our... privacy is retained.”

I didn’t like the sound of that, but I wasn’t sure what I could do or say that would convince him I’d keep his secret. And really, who the hell would believe me, anyway?

“I get it,” I said. “I do. It’s important to me too.”

Nico didn’t look like he believed me, but he dropped into the seat opposite and drew the other mug of coffee toward him.

“We have... A process,” Nico said after he had taken a sip.

“You can’t stay here.”

“But-”

“No.” Nico held a hand up, his eyes flashing red. “Don’t interrupt. My land, my time.” His grip tightened on the mug and for a moment, I thought he was going to crush it. “I’m not trying to keep you apart. I just need you to go back to your life for a bit until we can work this out.”

“How am I meant to go back and pretend that nothing has changed?”

“Better folk than you have done it.” His eyes flashed again, but this time there was a small smile playing on his lips. “I want Selene to be happy, and she’s going to need you soon enough. Her mother might not be able to harm you, but she’ll be in the forest, sulking, and she’ll find a way to get her revenge. She’s not the type to let things slide.”

I pressed my lips together, wishing that I knew more about this world; enough to make an informed suggestion.

But I had nothing.

“I could say I got head hunted. That I’m moving to another state for a bigger, better job.” I suggested.

“And then?” Nico raised an eyebrow.

“Then we figure it out. I don’t know.” I shrugged, feeling defeated. “All I know is that I’d live with her in the hollow of that fucking tree for the rest of my life, if that’s what she wanted. I’d get used to living off worms and bark.”

Nico leaned against the back of the seat, his gaze assessing me. Movement caught my eyes, and I looked up to find that Selene was leaning against the door frame, watching us.

“I do not want to live in a hollow,” she said, a warm smile on her face. “But I appreciate the sentiment.”

“Honestly, I don’t know what it is about your company,” Nico muttered. “More bloody humans falling in love with monsters than ever before.” He shook his head and dragged a hand over his chin. “Leave it with me, and I’ll figure it out.” He added something about Sam under his breath, who I could only assume was his wife, and then he got up and left the two of us alone.

I stood up and approached Selene as she stepped outside into the sunlight. It was strange to see her this way, clean, in the open, with the sun shining overhead instead of the moon.

But nice. Good.

Right.

No more hiding; expect for that which was necessary. Maybe just no more hiding from her mother.

“Do you think he really will figure it out?” I asked, figuring that she would have more of an idea than I did.

“He will,” Selene said, reaching for my hands and drawing me closer. I tried not to look at the way her wings were bound close to her body to stop the stitches from pulling. Focused instead on her gaze as she looked at me. “Do you still feel the same, now that the geas is broken?” She bit her lip, one sharp tooth digging into the soft flesh there.

I wanted to kiss her so badly, but more importantly, I needed to show her that nothing had changed. Nothing ever would. I closed the distance between us and cupped her face in my hands.

“I want you, always. I love you so much, you have no idea.”

She smiled at me and as she leaned in to kiss me, she said, “I think I do.”



SELENE

I COULD HEAR BRODY IN THE OTHER ROOM, FINISHING UP A work call. I knew it would be audio only because the man was covered from head to toe in paint. He'd been working hard to get the nursery ready in between work and catering to my every need.

It was strange living in a proper house, but way out here, away from prying eyes, we were free to just be us, and I had to admit that the super king mattress in our bedroom was a damn side more comfortable than the blankets of the hollow.

Any day now the eggs would hatch. Three precious, blue marbled homes for our babies. I could feel them squirm, the shell thinning in places as they readied to make their entrance into this world. I probably didn't need to keep sitting on them at this point, but I wanted to. There was no other time I would get these children to myself, and I was making the most of it. I

needed to be different to my mother, better. More loving and less demanding.

The pressure changed beneath me. A soft crack, a tiny chirp.

“Brody!” I yelled. “Come quickly!”

I heard him make his excuses, heard the creak of his office chair as he pushed away from his desk, the pound of his feet as he ran down the hall and burst into the room.

“Is it time?” he asked, his eyes wide. He dragged a hand through his hair, looking as stressed as I’d ever seen him.

We had watched some human birthing shows and they looked truly horrific. I could not fathom why the women of his kind decided to have children.

My kind certainly had it easier.

I slipped from the eggs and moved toward him, gripping his hand in mine and leading him closer. My wings fluttered in anticipation as the first hatchling breached the shell of the egg, a clawed talon breaking the surface. Silver grey feathers stuck to her leg and I gasped in delight.

Brody surged forward, reaching for the edge of the crack, but I dragged him back, pulled him to the ground where we could kneel in comfort; this could take some time.

“It’s important that they make their own way out,” I said. “The shell provides their first nutrient. Just be here with me. Watch.”

He settled beside me, though threads of tension radiated from him. Our bond hadn’t dampened at all since we had broken the geas; in fact, every day seemed to make it stronger. I could practically read his thoughts, so I gripped his hand tighter.

“It will be okay. They are strong.” I pointed to the other eggs, the cracks that had now appeared in them.

Three little harpy girls of our own, a new future, one brighter and kinder than my past.

About the Author

Nova is a lover of pizza, coffee, and zombies (in no particular order). She was raised on a healthy diet of fantasy, horror, and science fiction, and despite many attempts by various English teachers, has refused to budge on her position that these are the best genres ever. When she's not busy raising her wonderfully creepy children, or dreaming of the day she'll have an army of ninja kittens, she is writing, reading, or playing games.

She writes a whole range of subgenres, but for now her one true love is MONSTERS. She always enjoys a bit of darkness in her tales, as well as a chuckle here and there, so you can expect all of her books to be some combination of magical, spooky, sexy, and fun.



IGNIS FATUUS

YD LA MAR



Scotland was meant to be an escape from my grief—instead I ran straight into the clutches of the Fae that craved me to my very marrow.

My parents wove tales of the tooth fairy when they put my teeth under my pillow as a child.

As an adult, I returned to my mother's homeland to mourn their deaths. Instead, I was lured by wisps into the forest only to encounter the reality of their stories.

The Bone Faerie. Morel was as cruel as he was intriguing, destroying any fae that dared covet any of my precious bones. He collected every piece of me that was placed under my pillow.

Now that he had all of me, would he ever let me go again?

COURTESY WARNING:

This book may contain triggers for some. Triggers may include but are not limited to talks of past violence, light dub con, dark themes, references to murder, themes that may be disturbing to some readers.



SOME THINGS REMAIN IN YOUR MIND FOREVER. BREAKING your first bone. Your first disappointment when a promise is made and not kept. Losing your first best friend because at that tender age, you both truly didn't understand what friendship really meant.

Cass and I have known each other since we were born. We lived in a small neighborhood and went to the same school.

We were diaper buddies. Inseparable. Until my mother got sick.

Suddenly I was 'that sick lady's kid' and was shunned by everyone around me at school as if I was infectious. Those who used to sit beside me at lunch suddenly had other groups they needed to hang out with.

When my mother passed away from cancer, my world turned upside down.

If watching her slowly wither away wasn't enough, my nights were haunted by the dark circles under her eyes and her hair left in the sink.

I couldn't connect with anyone my age. No one was going through what I did. How could I explain to them that waking up with a living corpse was my everyday life? Because that was exactly what it felt like.

Don't get me wrong. I loved my mother *dearly*. I loved her with everything I had. But I didn't deserve to go through all that at such a sensitive age when I was still trying to understand life and how it worked.

Things like that scarred you. Things like that affected who you became later.

At thirty-one, some days I still felt like that little girl who lost her first tooth at seven.

"You put it under your pillow and then you'll get a nice little gift," my father informed me with a conspiratorial smile.

"Why? What happens when I put it under my pillow?"

"The tooth faerie takes it and gives you money," he deadpanned.

"Why? Why do they want my tooth?" My suspicion and paranoia intensified.

My father looked at me baffled as if he never expected the question. Who wouldn't wonder why some strange little flying creature would want your... bones and give you money for it. Because, that's literally what it was, right?

"Dad, that's just creepy." I deadpanned back.

He thought about it for a few moments and after his laughter died, his face turned into a look of contemplation. "You're

right. It is.”

I missed the days where we had simple conversations like that.

Walking into our cabin, I put down my basket and shook my cloak to free it from the debris that had accumulated from my walk through the woods and threw it over the recliner in the corner. “Dad, I’m home! I’ll start on the soup.”

A ragged cough could be heard from the upper floor and it made me wince with sympathy. It’s progressed to producing blood lately and I don’t know what else to do.

My dad and I moved from town when it seemed every corner reminded us of her, every conversation anyone ever had was about her—as if they refused to let her spirit die. I’m all for sorries and condolences, but sometimes I just wanted room to breathe and tackle the day without breaking down into a complete mess.

Though our home had migrated, Dad could only transfer his job to a different location. He had to still venture back and forth to the city to perform his duties. The saw mill worked him hard. I had heard some of the bigger metropolis began incorporating more machinery in order to increase their production rates. The company my dad worked for tried their best to stick with the old ways in order to prevent layoffs. They were good to him. And he was good to them, dedicating at least forty years of his life to his work.

It took a lot of convincing but I was able to get him to retire.

It wasn’t soon enough.

“Dad!” I called out again.

I placed my basket on the ground and walked to the back room. Our cabin was small. My dad built it with his bare hands. He said he had wanted to do it while Mom was alive so

that she could be one with nature, a favorite destination of hers. Mom was from the far off lands of Scotland. My face always lit up when he told me stories about how a simple black man from the Bronx was able to sweep a mysterious red headed maiden off her feet after he accidentally ran into her while grocery shopping in the city.

They made a life together in Maine, where we stayed.

“Dad?”

A cry pierced the silence and it felt an out of body experience. It took me a moment to realize the cries were mine. My father’s lips were blue and my mind went into a weird haze as if something else was controlling it.

I didn’t know how I made it to his truck.

I didn’t know how I made it to town and I didn’t know how my fingers dialed the emergency number or how they found me staring through the front windshield as if I was living in an alternate reality.

Because surely, one person couldn’t have this much bad luck.



FENELLA

AFTER RECEIVING MY FATHER'S INHERITANCE, I COULDN'T convince myself to stay where so many bad memories plagued me.

My dad was raised by a single mother who had passed away before he met my mother and all of his living relatives lived in varying locations in the states. I couldn't do it anymore. I reached out to my great aunt on my mother's side looking for the farthest escape and found one. Her name was written in the back of one of my old baby pictures and always stuck in my mind when I found it during my teenage years.

She welcomed me with open arms and told me she would prepare a room for me when I arrived. That was all I needed. To start again somewhere fresh.

It took three months for me to work up the courage and iron out the details. I kept my father's cabin, unable to let go of that

last link just yet. But I asked my uncle Jerome to keep an eye on it for me until I returned. He didn't ask any questions, only looked at me and told me to take care of myself.

Wiping the tears from my eyes, I got out of the taxi and turned to pay him his fare. The driver was a gentle looking man with a paperboy hat and a white mustache. He had the rosiest cheeks that could rival old Saint Nick.

“Welcome to Scotland, lass. I hope you enjoy your stay.”

“Thank you very much. I'm sure I will.”

He waved and slowly pulled his taxi away. I stared for a few moments, taking everything in. Inverness was a very modern looking place housing some old brick architecture here and there in the city. I felt like I was whisked away by the faeries and taken into a storybook. It was beautiful and took my breath away.

Or that could be the chill from this gloomy day. My breaths came out in white puffs the moment I got off the plane. I'm glad I had packed all of my coats and sweaters for this trip. Main was cold, but there was just something different here that I couldn't put my finger on.

I pulled out my phone and checked the local map on my screen to make sure which home on this street belonged to my great aunt Ainsley. I didn't have to wonder long as an older woman with silver streaked brown hair, bundled in a very warm winter coat came down one of the driveways.

“Fenella? Is that you, sweetie?” came an older feminine voice.

My name spoken in its entirety had been constant these days throughout all the legal paperwork. I missed my nickname and now there was no one around to say it anymore.

Shaking off my morose thoughts, I tried for a happier expression even though I felt anything but on the inside.

“Great Aunty Ainsley?”

She gave me a bright smile that warmed my heart. Her eyes shimmered with life as she closed the distance and wrapped me in a loving embrace. The tears I thought were dried up, opened like the floodgates and I bursted into a sob on her shoulder. She was a tiny thing, standing to my armpit but her presence in my life at this moment was monumental.

Stooped over, I hugged her back tightly. The fluff of her coat made her feel like a warm marshmallow of goodness. She smelled like Christmas and mint.

“There, there. Ya have a good greet. Let it all oot.” She patted my back and I tried my best to make my tears stop falling by taking in deep, slow breaths. “Come inside and I can make you some hot tea to warm up your bones. How was your trip? Everything went okay?”

She spoke to me as if she had known me all my life and it was a bit startling but also needed. It eased my fears of any awkwardness I may have had between us.

I gave her a genuine small smile. “It was alright. I’ve never been on such a long journey before. It’s my first overseas trip,” I admitted.

Her face crinkled into a larger smile if that was possible. She boomed with bubbly confidence. “Then you’ve chosen the perfect place. Inverness is beautiful and the capital of the highlands.” She waved her hand around as if she was the spokesperson for her town. “It’s so rich in history, there are plenty of places we can visit to keep ya busy.”

I sniffled and held back a small laugh as we walked up her dirt driveway and crossed the threshold of her humble home.

There was a cute little purple hatchback car parked on the side.
“Thank you, Great—”

“Oh hush dear. Just call me Aunt Ainsley. That ‘great’ makes me feel like an old hag lost in the woods after becoming a spinster.”

I bursted out laughing at the visual through the residual tears. She joined in as she ushered me to her couch before flitting through her little kitchen.

Her home was adorned with warm earthy tones. Pictures of herself and a very fat cat sat on the mantle over her fireplace. I looked around but didn’t see a cat anywhere and wondered if he was gone or if he was just hiding.

“Your mother spoke a lot about ya but her descriptions didn’t do ya any justice,” her voice floated from behind the separating wall.

Her couch was comfortable and covered with a large crochet blanket. Maybe that was something I could pick up while I was out here. I still wasn’t sure how long I was visiting. Poor Uncle Jerome. He probably had other obligations he needed to tend to beside the extra one I gave him.

“What? I didn’t know you two kept in contact. She never called anyone but some of the women in town from what I remember,” I told her.

Her head popped out from the kitchen followed by a tray with two cups and a teapot. “She wrote to me during her more memorable times. When she met your father—” She placed the tray in front of us on a coffee table. “—when she became pregnant, and when she had you. I still have some of your baby pictures somewhere.”

I took off my jacket and laid it beside me on the arm of the couch. “She did?”

The woman let out a snorting laugh and I quirked an eyebrow, wondering what inside joke I was missing. “Ah, and I remember how tickled I was to know she named you Fenella.”

My face flushed and I groaned. I was born with the skin condition vitiligo. A light patch sat on my right shoulder without pigmentation. The loose collar of the knitted sweater I had on hung over my shoulder and I quickly tried to pull it to cover it back up. My mother had a strange sense of humor naming me ‘white shoulder’. As much as it annoyed me at the moment, I would do anything to have her back—to have both of them back.

Aunt Ainsley leaned over and stopped me with her hand. “Gonnae no dae that, there is nothing to be embarrassed about Fenella. You are beautiful the way God made you.”

My face heated up again but this time I listened. I let my sweater fall back to where it was. I had always covered myself up when I was younger after some of the kids made fun of me. I recently went on a small online shopping spree after grieving, hoping it would cheer me up. This sweater looked so beautiful on the model who had the biggest grin. I was hoping it would make me smile as well.

“Thank you, Aunty.” Her personality was magnetic. You couldn’t help but want to be around her to soak up whatever energy she was putting out.

“There, now. That’s the kind of smile I wanted to see. Your curls are magnificent, sweetie. Seems like your mother gave ya a lot of her beauty, ya remind me so much of her.”

I chuckled as I grabbed one of the steaming cups and brought it to my lap. “My mother was white as a ghost. I’m far from that.”

“Yes, well,” she quipped as I took in a hot sip of my tea. I felt it travel all the way down to my empty stomach. “I suppose there is some of your father in you here and there.”

I laughed at her antics. My skin was as brown as my father’s with red undertones instead of his cool ones. There was no mistaking me for anyone *but* Deion Johnson’s daughter.

“If you’re not too tired, we can get a bite to eat in the city and check out some sights to take your mind off things. Does that sound good to ya?”

My stomach growled at that very moment and she laughed.

I was tired of people but I appreciated what she was trying to do for me. As much as my introverted mind wanted to say no, I also didn’t want to let her down. “Of course.”



FEN

THE CATHEDRAL OF ST. ANDREW WAS IMPRESSIVE AND beautiful. From its tall pointed ceilings, large wooden colored arches and intricately carved railings, the dull color of the outside of the building did not do justice to what it held inside. I wasn't a religious person by any means but I found myself praying for my parents' souls hoping their reunion was joyous. Mom and Dad could finally be together again and that was the happy thought I held onto when bouts of sadness hit me over their loss.

There was a hole in my soul but I needed to keep living, for them. It was what they would have wanted.

"We can go try some Haggis!" My aunt exclaimed as we exited the church.

Flashbacks of her driving made my body tense. For a nice little old lady, she drove like an utter maniac.

“Oh, it’s just up this road. We’ll be there in no time.” Auntie Ainsley could barely see over the steering wheel and that should have been my first clue.

She takes a dramatic right turn and I thought the car was going to flip on its wheels. I grabbed onto the handle and screeched as the car did the same turning the other way. People around us honked and some of the other drivers leaned out their windows to yell at my aunty, but all she did was flip them off and told them to have a lovely day.

I sent a silent prayer to a higher being that my little trip wasn’t a mistake and that I wouldn’t end up on the next movie about one’s final destination.

She pats my arm with a bright look as she leads me back to her little death trap of a car.

When we made it to the restaurant, I couldn’t get out of the car fast enough. It was a little less than a mile but it was all I could handle for the moment. Taking a deep breath of fresh air, I thanked my parents who were probably looking down at me laughing by now. I was sure mother was shaking her head thinking to herself that she would have warned me about Aunty if she knew this was my plan.

The restaurant opened at noon so we were one of the first customers there. The haggis came with mashed potatoes and mashed turnips. The flavors were delightful and I found myself famished after using all my energy to survive Aunty Ainsley’s driving.

“Isn’t it wonderful? Best dishes in the area. We can come by again tomorrow if you’d like.” She only wanted me to have a good time. How could anyone stay mad at her for long?

I chuckled. "I may have to walk off some of this food because I think I might order a second plate."

"Ah, a woman with a good appetite!" She turned to hail down the waiter and we took our time catching up about my childhood and life back home.

It didn't hurt as much talking to a stranger. There was no judgment or condemnation. No accusation in her eyes. Just sheer curiosity and wonder about the life of her great niece whom she slowly lost contact with.

After about two hours at a wonderful lunch, I suffered through another trip that took us to the Cairngorm mountains.

Aunty excitedly began talking about the history of the highlands as we tried to decide which hiking trail we should take to walk off our lunches. "We can take the Loch an Eilein loop so that you can get the scenic view of the Loch."

I shrugged my shoulders, letting her lead as I had been all morning. "It sounds good."

My introverted heart was happy over the quietness a hike would provide. There didn't seem to be a lot of people out here today and the weather wasn't as nippy as the day prior.

A beautifully haunting looking ruined castle sat in the middle of the lake. As the hike went on, more and more tourists joined us much to my dismay. About an hour into the walk my bladder began screaming at me.

"Aunty, is there an outhouse or bathroom around here?"

She looked at me in bafflement. "No, you will have to go relieve yourself in the woods, my dear."

I stared at her in disbelief. How could this be a tourist area without a restroom in sight? This didn't make any sense.

Searching through my pockets and bag, I came up with nothing to wipe myself with.

When I lifted my head, there was a napkin in my face.

“I occasionally save some napkins from the restaurant. A bad habit, really, but perfect for this moment.” She laughed as she waved it around until I took it from her with embarrassment.

“I’ll be right here when you’re done. Dinnae go too far.”

I nodded my head as I turned and walked past the trees. I kept my feet moving until I could no longer hear the sounds of tourists. Sighing, I looked around and found an area that was mostly covered.

I removed my pants and squatted down to do my business. Aunty Ainsley’s wad of napkins was enough for two good wipes. Feeling awkward for leaving trash around, I tossed it away from me at the bottom of a nearby bush before I straightened to refasten my pants.

I looked up and took in the sights around me. It reminded me so much of my cabin back home in Maine. I wondered if Uncle Jermone took advantage of the place as a small vacation spot.

Suddenly, I heard a whisper and whipped my face around in startlement. No one was there, making me nervous, and I quickly left my area to make my way back.

I gasped when a faint blue glow appeared before me, flying around my head. Light laughter from afar floated in the air but the voice sounded small and otherworldly.

A whisper came again and I could have sworn I heard my name. I shook my head, my nervousness growing. *Was I losing my mind?* Walking away from the area, my heart stopped when I heard my name being called in my father’s voice.

I didn't know what came over me but I turned and ran toward the sound, wanting to believe in the lie. I knew he wasn't there, but *what if he was?* What if I could see my father one last time? If it was my mind going insane, then I wanted to thank it for giving me this last gift that I desperately needed—closure.

The light blue glow flickered in and out, appearing at sporadic times with no particular pattern. The cool wind in my face felt like cold slices against my cheek as I followed the hushed voices until I came to an abrupt stop. Before me were dried bones scattered on the ground.

Fear took over. *Did these woods house bears or some other creature?* I didn't want to be caught near its den if that was the case. Turning around, I trekked back but suddenly, all of the paths and trees looked different.

“How can this be possible?”

I wasn't a novice around trails and tracking my way back on one. These trees and that rock was *not* here before.

The flying glow zipped quickly around me and I turned to try and swat it away. It giggled and laughed and my eyes widened. *Were these...faeries?*

Shaking my head in disbelief, I chose a path and began walking. I knew my sense of direction was pretty good and went on faith that I would find my way back to my aunt who was probably worried by now.

Crossing a fallen log, the sound of a crunch froze me. I slowed my breathing, hoping it was just a random creature in the forest that broke a twig on its walk but I was sorely mistaken when the sound of a loud crunch came again.

“Please don’t let me get eaten on this trip. Please don’t let me get eaten,” I whispered under my breath.

Slowly, I looked over my shoulder. There was nothing there. My heart began to race in fear of the unknown. The little glow now had a companion as it came around again.

“We’ll lead you back home.”

“Yes! Follow us!”

I was stuck between the lesser of two evils because whatever was making that loud crunch was much larger than these two little gnats around my head.

I chose to follow them. They flew so quickly, I had to run to catch up. Jumping over rocks and weaving around trees, I felt like they were taking me in circles until finally, I stopped and let them disappear.

There was no way this was the path back. I softly growled in frustration over the fact that I trusted something I shouldn’t have. Their laughter faded in and out and it churned my gut that they were taking advantage of me.

Crossing my arms to keep my body warm, I slowly walked around the large tree beside me and came to a dead stop in my tracks at the sight before me.

A blood trail laid on the ground right at my feet. My breath stuttered. It looked fresh. When I lifted my head to follow the crimson line, a stooped figure began to distort and stretch, each movement gave way to the crunching of bones as it morphed into a tall humanoid figure that stood up from the top of a mound.



FEN

MY BREATH CAUGHT IN MY THROAT AS I RAN AND HELD IN MY screams. I didn't want it to hear me and where I was going. I needed to get out of these woods!

Twisting through the trees, I tried to throw some random rocks in a different direction to distract the thing that was chasing behind me. I left off my trail a few times, but soon enough it was right behind me again on all fours. The sound of broken twigs and rustling of leaves made my feet move faster for fear of my life.

But that wasn't the only sound that spurred me forth.

Bones clacking against bones with each of its movements sent a chill down my spine because this time, it wasn't a sound from within but on the outside like armor.

In a streak of ghastly white it leaped at me but I dodged it with a scream, falling to my hands and knees. Scrambling to get back up, I ran again, my heart beating out of my chest.

The ground began ascending uphill, slowing me down but my adrenaline kept me moving despite the pain in my muscles.

A scream lodged in my throat when it landed on top of me, pinning me to the ground on my stomach. I trembled in terror, not wanting to make a sound. The irrational belief that I wouldn't smell good crossed my mind, hoping it would leave me alone—and alive.

I shut my eyes and silently prayed until something touched my face. When I snapped my lids open, what I saw baffled me. White braids hung before my eyes, fastened by some sort of earthly twine.

The beast growled and began rooting his nose in my curls.

“Your scent hasn't changed.” The voice came out as if from the deep recesses of an empty barrel. The vibration from the bass ran through my body like a living thing.

Oh God, it talks!

Was it only my imagination that made him out to be a beast?

But he ran on all fours.

He sniffed me again and my fear amped up. How did he know me? How does he know my scent? It was my first time on this side of the world.

“H-how do you know me? It isn't possible,” I squeaked out. I tried to keep my hands to the ground beneath my chest, in case I needed to push up from the ground for a quick escape once an opportunity arose.

He let his weight down some more, further trapping me beneath him and against the grass and twigs. A whimper slipped out of my lips and I chastised myself. I couldn't show this much fear in front of a predator. What if it gets excited?

"The little beasties thought they could hide you from me with their trickery." The more he spoke, the more his voice seeped into my skin. "But they were wrong."

"I-I don't know what you're talking about," I admitted. I Just needed to get him off me enough for me to run. The scattering of leaves beneath me might make me slip, but I think I could make it.

He leaned into my ear and my eyes widened with his next words. "They thought they could keep away what was mine, but I've waited too long, come too far, *Fenella*."

I gasped at his mention of my name. *Who was this beast?* I yelped when his hands grabbed me and forced my body onto my back with his arms still caging me in on either side, giving me a full view of the hunter that caught me.

Two segmented horns protruded out of his head extending to the middle. It swept upward in deadly grace to pointed ends. His skin was as white as bones left out in the sun to be bleached. Beneath a heavy brow sat two eyes clouded over as if he were blind, but his actions indicated that he wasn't. Not from the way he was scanning my face the same way I was scanning his. A large but straight nose sat in the middle of his face—a face that had skin distorted and thinned around the jaw to the opening of what would have been a normal human mouth. His fangs and rows of sharp teeth were anything but human. Braids sat atop his head, swinging down to his shoulders and onto mine.

We both stared at each other in a few moments of silence. The spinal cord of some sort of creature wound around his shoulders, traveling down his torso, disappearing out of my sight from where I laid.

Without a word, he stood up and grabbed me. I screamed but he growled and snapped his jaws in my direction, successfully shutting me up. I squealed in fear when he lifted me bridal style and forced me to wind my arm around his neck, right beside his doubled strapped bladed weapon around his back. The hilt of the swords were also made of what looked like human bones making me shiver.

I didn't know if I should kick him and make him drop me or what. He walked us both back in the direction of the trail of blood and I audibly gulped. *This was where he was going to eat me, wasn't it?* I stepped into his trap like willing prey, with my arms wrapped around him like Death's lover.

The fairies appeared out of nowhere, flying around us, tittering and laughing.

My captor growled and snapped his jaws in the air once more. The glowing lights screamed and disappeared.

I wasn't sure what to make of it.

"What are you?" I wanted to at least know who held my death in their hands.

Past the pile of bones on the ground, the mouth of a small cave appeared that wasn't there before. My body stiffened, unsure if I was willing to die this easily. I loosened my arms to let him go and tried to get out of his grasp but he only held onto me tighter.

"Do not," he warned.

“Let me go! I do not want to die! I have people waiting for me!” I was getting hysterical at this point. I didn’t grieve the loss of my family just for me to die in my mother’s homeland. I kicked and fought, but he only blocked my blows and grabbed onto my wrists as my feet hit the ground, stopping my struggles with his superior strength.

“The fae folk will not be kind to you out there. Haven’t they tricked you enough, Fenella? They thought to bring you to your death only to find that they brought me exactly what I was waiting for,” he snarled.

I shook my head, not understanding a thing he was talking about. “I don’t know you. How could you be waiting for me when I’ve only just made the decision to go overseas? You’re talking nonsense!”

“Nonsense? Nonsense!” He shook me in anger and it felt like my brain rattled in my skull with the echo of his voice bouncing around against the cave walls. “Nonsense is when humans teach their children to give away their bones to faeries that do nothing but barter them for their own selfish greed.”

What? I stepped back at this turn of events.

He took a step forward and closed the distance between us.

“Nonsense is when I must destroy any fae that dares covet what rightfully belongs to *me*. One by one, I hunted...one by one I battled them all to get what was mine.”

My eyes widened. *What exactly was he saying? Hunted? The same way he hunted me?*

“One by one they learned to stay away. But the remaining few who dared to cross me *will* be the last.”

Was this a threat? A warning? Why was he telling me all this?

“I-I don’t understand.” Fear gave way to curiosity. Was he fae? I thought they were only legends. But here I was standing in front of a creature that even my nightmares couldn’t fathom or create on its own.

We both began walking, him forward and me backward, until my back hit the cavern wall. He towered over me by a good two feet to my five-feet-six inch height. When he leaned in, I shut my eyes and bit my lip, readying myself for whatever he had in store for me.

What I wasn’t ready for was the way his warm breath caressed my cheek toward my ear, sending a different kind of shiver down my spine.

“Make no mistake, Fenella, you were mine the moment I obtained the first piece of you.”

What?!

He shifted and my heart sped up, sure again it was the final move before my death. Instead, I felt the tip of his cold nose softly grazing across my skin. I let out a stuttering breath, one I didn’t know I was holding.

“It still calls to me,” he voice lowered.

“What?” It was the only word that constantly ran through my mind in a loop.

“Your scent.”

“I need to get back. Someone is waiting for me. I can’t worry —”

He slammed his fist into the wall beside my head and I screamed, covering my face with my hands.

“I will hunt him down and leave his entrails back to his residence to warn the others never to look for you again.”

Him? This guy was crazy.

“My aunt is waiting for me, you lunatic!”

He slowly peeled my fingers away and brought his face close to mine. “And what of me? I’ve waited for you for decades and you wish to leave me the moment I’ve only found you?”

He tilted his head in curiosity, his eyes scanning my face again. I felt myself flush from his perusal and his nostrils flared in response.

He brought up his hand to trace my ear and pull one of my curls onto his finger. He was feral, barbaric, otherworldly. How does one escape the grasp of something that wasn’t supposed to exist?

The laughter of faeries floated at the mouth of the cave, taunting me.

“They will live, for now.” He was talking in circles, never addressing the situation at hand.

“I need to go. I’ve been gone too long.”

“You’ve been away from me much longer. Your kin will survive a day without you.”

I looked at him aghast. Was he serious?

“You can’t keep me here.” My confidence was returning. He hadn’t killed me by now, meaning he probably never planned to. That was what I told myself.

“I already am.”

“No.”

He stopped playing with my hair and stared into my eyes. At least, I thought he was. He didn’t have any pupils. “You wish to strike a bargain for your freedom, Fenella?”

It was the branch I needed. This was it. This was how I was going to escape.



MOREL

SHE WAS GULLIBLE. THAT WAS WHY SHE NEEDED A PROTECTOR, a male to claim her. Didn't she know she should never bargain with the fae?

I waited with bated breath for the terms of her barter. I could use this moment to my advantage in so many ways, make the price of this bargain high but I wouldn't.

I had waited lifetimes for her to come to me. The seer from my youth, while I was still a will-o'-the-wisp, a mere spark of fire, spoke of a dark female who would be my downfall. It was said she would put an end to my carnage. They were all lies. Little did they know that it was because of her, the moment I was trapped by her scent, my destruction grew as well as my form with each bone I devoured of my enemies.

The old seer didn't foresee my obsession leading to the massacres of fae that dared to hoard what was mine.

And now, my dark mistress stood before me in all her glory, glowing with nothing but life against the soulless.

Her mind was in contemplation. I gave her time to think this through, choosing to take in her features and burn it into my memory. The green of her eyes reminded me of mother nature and everything she gave birth to after the rain.

My irritation began to grow with each passing moment she did not answer me. I was never a patient creature. I questioned her again. “You wish to strike a bargain for your freedom, Fenella? I will only give this one chance. Choose your words wisely.”

She took in a sharp inhale and my eyes refocused on her chest. My hand crept up to my own as I placed one on hers. She slapped it away and I growled, placing my hand there again.

I stood for a few moments, savoring the way her heart beat rapidly against my palm.

Such life.

To be paired with such destruction.

Her voice came out shaky in false bravado. “I won’t tell anyone about you. That is my trade.”

I let out a booming laugh, startling her where she stood. Surely, she jests. “Any man that knows about me will meet his end. That is not a bargain, but a promise. Try again, Fenella.”

She shook her head, her eyes clouding over with defeat. I bumped her chin with my knuckle and stared, prompting her to try again. Her eyes steeled over and her shoulders squared right before she crossed her arms in a human attempt to protect herself.

Doesn't she know it was me who had always been protecting her? It was me who annihilated any fae brave enough to play tricks in her life and bring evil intent. I quickly came to understand that it took a stronger fae to bring them down, it took a more evil one to devour them.

She tried her false bravado once more. "You tell me what you want for trade, then."

My face broke into a menacing smile. Surely, she did not just place herself perfectly in my grasp once again. I leaned in to look at her closely. "Do you truly want me to answer that question?"

"I need to get back. Now."

The sharpness in her voice was music to my ears. It excited the predator I had grown to be. "I will bargain three nights with you, Fenella, where you will completely be mine. If you agree to these terms, I will give you your freedom today back to your kinfolk. And I will be the one to escort you back for the fae seem to have a curiosity for you."

Her hands dropped to her sides. "T-three days?"

My hand traced her arm upward for a few leisurely moments. I enjoyed watching her squirm in my silent pause.

She bit her lip and I stared at it. They were full and glistening from the wetness of her tongue. Like the Loch, it shone and called one to awe in its magnificence.

"I need to get back," she murmured.

"Yes, you've said that already."

She bit her lip again and I brought my finger up to free it from her teeth. Her mouth remained parted and I couldn't help

myself but trace the wetness and bring her taste into my own mouth.

Her pupils dilated and I stepped back, wanting to control my urges until she was willing to take up my offer.

“I-How-in what—*fine*. Three days. I make no other promises. Take me back. Now.”

The organ inside of my chest pounded against my ribs.

Without a word, I firmly grabbed her hand and led her down the right path through the trees. The wisps followed us at a safe distance, threatened by my reach. They will get their punishment once I safely saw her back into the world of men.

Too soon, I stopped where she marked the ground not long ago. It burned me to know she was calling for others when she already had me. I would have to correct this once I made her realize that every part of her belonged to me.

“Take your journey back to your kin and savor your moments with her. I will come to collect you.”

She looked over her shoulder, most of her curls hiding her face. “I don’t even know your name and yet you know mine.”

Good. Her curiosity was the first step. She would soon learn to accept what cannot be changed. “Morel. Now go and do not follow any more faeries you do not recognize.”

“I didn’t recognize you.”

My nostrils flared. “You will learn, soon enough, to know nothing but me.”

I watched as she ran toward the end of the tree line. I could hear the sound of feminine screeches as her kin called her name. The voices of nearby males made my body tense but the

bargain was made and soon, Fenella would crave me with the same hunger I had for her.



FEN

DAYS PASSED AND THE CHAOS SURROUNDING MY SHORT disappearance faded into the background. Aunty Ainsley told me we could continue our trips after I got some rest.

I couldn't stop thinking about him, Morel. He never did specify a time frame for me to fulfill my side of the bargain.

I wasn't sure if I wanted to see him again but he had successfully taken my mind off grieving and shifted it toward this weird anticipation.

The day rolled by quietly. Aunty Ainsley went grocery shopping and the rest of my early evening was filled with helping her put it away and learning to make Scottish mince and tatties.

"Rest up dear, maybe tomorrow we can go sightseeing again, get ya oot of this house." She patted my shoulder after clearing

the table.

“I can do the dishes, go rest Aunty.”

“You’re such a nice girl, Fen.” She smiled and replaced the kitchen cloth back on the counter. “I’m going to catch up on some crocheting in my room. If ya need me, I’m just a knock away.”

“Thank you, Auntie. You’ve been nothing but kind to me. Go rest. I got it from here.”

I stood in the kitchen alone as she took herself back to her room. After washing the last dish, I grabbed the towel to dry my hands, staring outside the little window over the sink.

I wondered what I would have been doing if I was back home in the states. It was nice having another person around me even if we didn’t do much.

With a calm sigh, I made my way to my own sleeping quarters and changed for bed, making sure to secure my hair with a silk wrap. It was still early, around seven, but I didn’t think I was going to leave my room for the rest of the night.

Once I situated my clothes and washed up, I laid myself down on the soft pillow and stared out the bedroom window. The moon was bright in the sky casting enough illumination to make it feel like a soft lamp’s glow against the walls.

“I hope you guys are enjoying your time together,” I spoke to the air.

After a few moments of staring at the night sky, I turned over and willed myself to sleep. It came quickly, full of images floating in my mind until what *felt* like my body landed in the middle of a dark forest.

The trees around me swayed in the wind though it shouldn't have been possible with how thick their trunks were.

"Beware Ignis Fatuus. Beware the bone faerie," came a small, low voice in the breeze.

"He destroys everything in his path, including the living."

"Who's there? Who's speaking?" I called out, turning where I stood. I wasn't going to get lost. Not again.

Lights, millions of them, appeared swirling around me until the forest was lost and all I saw were the glows of blues and greens threatening to drown me in something I couldn't see.

And just as abruptly as they came, the lights burst into splatters of blood, raining down around me in a circle, trapping me in place.

Something touched me from behind and I screamed myself awake, jerking on my bed, some of my curls having slipped out of my headcap.

A cold hand covered my mouth and a deep timber filled every fiber of my being as I came back down to earth from dreamscape.

It was Morel. His braids swung as he looked me over as if searching for wounds. "They came to trick you, do not believe their lies."

I didn't know what I wanted to believe. They spoke of destruction yet he hasn't harmed a hair on my head. No, all he did was lean in and take in my scent as if it was the most decadent smell in the world. Still groggy from the dream, I gasped as Morel surprisingly began to kiss down my neck and toward my cleavage.

“What are you doing?” My voice was breathy, not at all what I was trying to portray.

“Collecting part of my payment,” he growled against my skin.

I wasn't a virgin by any means but I had never had any trysts with strangers and Morel was the epitome of one.

“What? Now? Here?” *What if my aunt woke up?*

He lifted his head from the top of my breast, his horns dangerously swooping close to my face. “Then I suggest you swallow your cries down and keep quiet, Fenella.”

He jerked the top of my short nightdress down and grazed the tip of my nipple with his teeth before sliding his tongue out and swallowing it into his mouth. I took a sharp inhale of surprise when his fangs didn't pierce my skin.

His hands roamed up my thighs, pushing the fabric over my curvy hips, exposing me to the cool night air, sending goosebumps across my skin.

He trailed kisses down my body and over the fabric until he got close to the apex of my legs. I tried to close them but couldn't. His grip on my thighs was too strong.

Without warning, his tongue dove against my panties and he groaned against my lower lips. I covered my mouth with my hands and threw my head back in wonderment. I couldn't believe this was happening but I couldn't say or do anything without the threat of waking my aunt up. *How would I explain all this?*

I silently yelped and jerked when his claws snatched my panties aside so hard the elastic snapped against my skin.

He growled again and when his tongue invaded my entrance, my eyes almost rolled to the back of my head.

With each sweep of his tongue, I was lost though I was finally fully awake from my initial grogginess. Every time he made my legs tremble, I tried to close it around his head but he threw my legs over his shoulder instead. His wicked tongue was good at convincing my hand to travel to the back of his head, guiding him where I needed him to go.

He didn't disappoint. His tongue laved and worshiped my pussy as if it was his last meal on earth.

If this was the payment he wanted from me, I was willing to give it again and again.

"Oh my God." My pleasure climbed to unexplainable heights as his hands began to massage my hips while his tongue continued its torturous lash between my legs.

I grabbed the pillow from beneath my head and held it over my face as I cried out in ecstasy, my hips undulated against his face. He groaned and lapped up everything I had to offer, prolonging my pleasure to the point of pain.

I bent my knee and planted my foot on his shoulder, the flesh of the bottom of my feet hitting something spiky. I tried to kick him off but all he did was growl, grab my ankle and licked it up to my calf.

The clouds covered the moonlit sky and through the darkness, I saw Morel in a new light. Who was this bone faerie the others were so afraid of—warning me of? Because it was not the creature that was gently kissing my stomach right now.

When he made his way back up, he jerked the pillow out of my hand, tossed it aside and caged me in. "You've marked me in the best of ways, Fenella. Now it's time I've claimed you and put an end to my suffering."

His what?

I didn't get a chance to mull over what he said when suddenly something very hard and hot prodded against my pussy.

My eyes widened in fear, unsure if I was ready to commit to whatever he was talking about. I opened my mouth to say something along those lines but was cut off by him slamming his mouth on me and diving his tongue against mine.

It was so erotic, tasting myself on him. I whimpered against his mouth as he pushed the head of his cock against me, easily slipping in from all the wetness that had accumulated from his earlier ministrations.

I gripped his shoulders, unsure if I should push him away or pull him closer. Lost in his aggressive kiss, I gasped for breaths when he thrust himself further into me.

He was large, too much for me to stretch around and I mewled in response. He nipped my lip and licked the side of my jaw. "All these years imagining what you would feel like is nothing compared to reality. I need to bury myself in you more than I need air to breathe. Open up for me, Fenella. Save me from the darkness that has threatened to consume my very being by being away from you."

What did one say to that kind of declaration? I was so confused. Still unsure of it all. But my body had other plans, the traitorous thing wrapped my arms around him and pulled him into me further, greedy for the pleasure he was giving me.

"What are you doing to me? Morel, it feels so good," I whispered against him. I was lost in the haze of lust he induced in me from my first orgasm.

Watching the way my tanned skin glided across his white one gave me shivers. It was such a stark contrast. His muscles

flexed beneath my hands as he thrusted forth again, stretching me to the max.

I moaned against his shoulder and he hummed in praise. “The thought of claiming you is the only thing keeping me sane at the moment, the only thing keeping them alive. I would burn the world down to keep you, Fenella. Do you feel how hard you make me? It tortures me that I want to take it slow for you, the way humans are said to enjoy.”

Good grief!

He pushed further and it seemed as if the base of his cock widened. All of a sudden, a different texture tickled my pussy lips when he finally buried himself to the hilt.

I moaned in both pain and pleasure, trying to let my body adjust to his size.

Morel grabbed my right arm and kissed the inside of it all the way up to my wrist where he then pinned it over my head.

“Be a good girl and keep quiet while I make you forget everything you’ve known before me.”

I gasped when he began pounding into me with no slow introduction at all. It seems foreplay was the only time he allowed himself to hold back because right now, he was deliciously fucking me like he was punishing me for the suffering he mentioned earlier.

My body bounced on the mattress and the bed began to creak. My face flamed with the thought of my aunt lying there awake listening to what was happening in my room right now.

The clouds covered the moon and the entire room fell into darkness, eliminating one of my senses and heightening the others.

Morel was voracious, his body slapping against mine as he nipped against the skin of my shoulder. His other hand squeezed my breast and pulled at my nipples while my body, not yet dying down from my last orgasm, began to rapidly rise to another tide.

The moment a shrill sound escaped my lips, he covered it with his, kissing me with a fiery passion that could light this whole bed into flames and leave me in ashes.

Both of his hands traveled down to grab my hips and tilt me up as his thrusts became erratic right before he buried himself deep in my womb, spilling inside of me in pulses.

My pussy spasmed around him, my cries swallowed into his mouth as we both slowly came down from our high.

My body began to relax, tired from our tryst. My vision began to fade in and out as Morel continued to slowly thrust into me, kissing my skin until I fell back into dreamscape.



FEN

“FEN, ARE YOU LISTENING TO ME?”

“Huh? I’m sorry. Can you say that again, Aunty?”

“You’ve had your head in the clouds these past few days. Is everything alright?” she questioned.

My face flamed. *She couldn’t read my thoughts could she?*
That night, I woke up to find Morel still inside of me, still fucking me, our bodies squelching with each thrust. My hunger only grew alongside my obsession as Morel took me to new heights right before sunrise. I must have fallen asleep after all of our activities because when the sun’s rays streamed into my bedroom, I awoke to find myself the only one there in the room.

I was still trying to figure out if that encounter counted as a whole day or only half when my aunt clicked her tongue to get

my attention again.

“I’m so sorry Auntie! I just have a lot on my mind.”

She looked at me seriously, not saying a word and I inwardly chastised myself for acting like an awkward teenager around her. Because that was what it felt like, like I was a horny teenage girl with her first crush... with an inhuman male who fucked her like no man ever had.

I still didn’t know what his cock looked like. The dirty part of me wanted to explore and get to know the organ that has taken over my mind.

It’s not his dick you’re only obsessed about.

My inner voice was right. It was everything he said to me during the act that attracted me to his mystery more and more.

“Did someone in town catch your eye? Ya have a face like a well skelped arse, dear.”

I burst out laughing. “What?”

“Your face, girl. It’s redder than a skelped arse. Only a man could put that kind of color on ya.”

My hands automatically went up to hide it.

She laughed and nudged me conspiratorially with her shoulder and winked. “It’s good ya found someone else to think about, eh? You deserve some happiness.”

I stifled a laugh and shook my head in denial. “What else are we doing today, Auntie?”

“Well, ya seem to love the forest so much that I thought we could visit Craig Phadrig,” she said cheerily.

As much as I dreaded another drive, my heart raced for other reasons. Would I be able to stumble upon Morel there? But I

found him near the mountains last time.

“You’ve got a look of excitement on ya. I picked a good location. Ya mentioned that ya used to live in a cabin, right”

My thoughts sobered with images of my late father. “Yes, yes we did. Back in Maine.”

“Oh, dinnae let those bad memories take over. Today we’ll make new ones. Happy ones.” She patted my hand as we exited the house and walked to the car and buckled up.

Her driving was successful in chasing all logical thoughts from my mind. I didn’t know how she survived this long with a license. We parked at the car park and I let out a relieved breath.

“Ride with me long enough and you’ll live a long life from your heart working overtime.”

I cackled at her antics and exited the car.

“It’d dreich the day. Overcast. Do ya still want to try one of the trails?”

My mouth responded quicker than my mind could. “Yes, of course.”

She gave me a funny look, then shrugged her shoulders before leading me away from the carpark. We ended up choosing the Craig Phadrig Trail.

The path was fairly smooth though uneven with some muddy sections. My eyes wandered to the trees and my thoughts were elsewhere as we continued leisurely forward. The trip was uneventful, sadly, and my mood dissipated like the sun in the sky.

When we made it home, we ate some leftovers then we both retired to our rooms.

I sighed as I stood before my window, managing my curls into a loose braid.

“Will you come to me tonight, Morel?” I wondered aloud. It was bold of me. Maybe I wanted to call it into existence.

I turned to grab my silk cap, about to put it on, when something tapped my window. Curious, I looked over my shoulder to find the small glow of a faerie. Frowning, I put the cap back down and walked over to the window.

The glow was gone.

I rubbed my eyes, wondering if I was more tired than I thought from the day’s events. When I opened them again, there was nothing.

“You need some sleep, Fen.”

I shook my head slowly and turned, only to hear a light tinkling tap against my window once more.

Growling in annoyance, I turned to open the window and stuck my head out, looking left and right. My aunt’s house was single level. There were houses on either side of us and the only sounds I could hear from this position were the sounds of insects.

“Would you just leave me alone?” I whispered yelled into the night air.

Soft titters and laughter responded and I frowned. What were these little guys up to and what did they want from me?

Giving up on caring, I leaned back into the room, turned and yelped in surprise, covering my mouth to stifle the noise.

Morel stood there, towering in front of me with what looked like the bones of dragon wings behind him. He was covered in a strange looking fabric from the waist down. The dual bone

swords were behind him again, strapped across his back. A skull and spinal cord were wrapped around his front, down to his midsection.

He was a sight to be beheld and looked like a man who was about to go on a deadly mission.

“What are you doing here?” I shrieked softly, looking around him to make sure the bedroom door was still closed.

“I came to save you from yourself. The fae folk have been following you, trying to lure you into their tricks.”

“And you didn’t?” I sassed.

His smile became wicked as he leaned down toward my face, making me lean back for some personal space.

“It was *you* who wanted to barter with *me*, Fenella. Or did you forget? You willingly gave part of your payment beautifully just the other night or do I need to remind you once more?”

My heart raced. I wanted that very much and I couldn’t deny it. In fact, I was a little annoyed that he didn’t come find me today when I was walking along the trail.

He chuckled at my expression and lifted his hand to caress my face with the back of his knuckle. I hated how affected I was by his presence. How did it go from fearing for my life to craving his next touch like my next breath?

“And if I told you that I needed reminding? what would you do Morel?” I was baiting, prodding. I wanted him to take me. I scissored my legs as I leaned my arms back on my windowsill, jutting my chest out for his viewing pleasure.

He stepped forward, eliminating any separation we once had.

“Are you offering your payment tonight, Fenella? Do you

wish for me to pleasure you until you cry out my name, begging for me to stop?”

My breath came out in pants, my nipples were sensitive and straining against my short nightdress. I knew my next words would change everything between us. It slipped out boldly anyway. “And if I didn’t want you to stop?”

He leaned in and brought his nose to mine, the swoop of his horns almost hitting the top edge of the window. “All you have to do is ask, Fenella and I am yours. I crave your every waking hour though my travels only allot me your presence in the shadows. The scent of your arousal makes my bloodlust rise. You cannot fathom the decimation I’ve left in my wake since our separation. You torture me with every moment you keep yourself away from me. It was only on this night, you called for me by name.”

My eyes fluttered at his confession. Was that what he was waiting for? For me to call him to my bed? This whole time, I thought it was *he* who came to collect from *me*.

“I am very much tied to you as much as you are to me, though I required no bargain to worship and claim you.” He ran his mouth against my cheek and I found myself breathing harder. “But now that you are mine, I impatiently waited for my mistress to call me to my knees so that she may drown me in her scent again and again, showing the world she owns me.”

My breath stuttered. Everything that came out of his mouth was too good to be true, beyond this world’s comprehension, beyond mine.

“Why? Why would you tie yourself to me? You’ve only just met me.” I couldn’t help my self doubt at the moment. Who was I among all the other humans in the world to this magnificent creature before me?

His clawed hands cradled my face, tipping it up toward his. His eyes reflected the light of the moon, they were ghostly white, boring into my soul as if trying to pull the answers to my own questions from deep within me.

He bent down to kiss the white patch on my shoulder and I closed my eyes and sighed.

“You’ve always been mine, Fenella. See the truth in front of you.”

What was he saying? Was he talking about my Vitiligo?

“You’ve held a piece of me long before I held a piece of you.”

I opened my lids and truly took him in. Morel was terrifying and alluring all at once. As if reality bent solely for him and his existence alone. Was I ready to be tied to such a creature?

You already are, my inner voice told me. Surprisingly, the thought didn’t scare me as much as I thought it would. It was actually consoling. The hole my parents left inside of me was slowly being filled with something else, something overflowing and I didn’t even realize it until now.

I gently clasped my hands around his wrist and placed one of his hands over his chest and the other on mine like he did the first time we met.

I could barely feel a heartbeat. If there was one it was inhumanly slow. My own was racing against my ribs, demanding to be released. Maybe it wasn’t my heart, but *me*. Had my grief casted an armor around me I didn’t see?

I didn’t want to be a prisoner to it. I wanted to live. I wanted to be happy like Aunty said. I had too much of myself left to give to the world.

“Morel,” I whispered.

He brought my hand up to his mouth for a kiss.

“Take me away from here for the night.”

“As you wish, my dark mistress.”



FEN

THE TRAVEL BETWEEN REALMS WAS BIZARRE AND DREAMLIKE. It was as if I was wading through my own dreamscape only to find myself in the middle of woods I didn't recognize again.

Morel stepped up behind me, snapping twigs in his wake and I turned to stare at him. The gaps between the boned wings filled with black smoke that faded at the ends as if it never truly existed—as if it was held together by magic alone.

He closed them and the smoke disappeared into a dark cloud leaving only the solid bones behind.

“Where are we?” It looked like somewhere here in Scotland but yet not.

“Where I wait for you.”

That didn't answer anything. “Are we still on earth?”

“Somewhat. We're in the unseelie realm.”

“And what will we do here?” I watched as he swaggered toward me, divesting himself of his weapons and tossing them to the ground. His chest was ravaged with raised scars and I couldn’t help but stare at each and everyone of them.

“They deserved their end. They thought to keep your pieces from me but I’ve collected them all.”

The only pieces I could think about were the teeth I lost growing up. But my father got rid of those the moment I didn’t believe in the tooth faerie anymore.

“What do you do with them?” I was morbidly curious, not sure if I really wanted to know but couldn’t stop the question from escaping my lips anyway.

He smiled as he took off his pants, his hard length springing forth and pointing at me. I was entranced. At the base of his cock flowered what look like fleshy leaves. They wriggled and writhed as if they had a life of their own, the base of his shaft was thick and veiny tapering to a large mushroom head that made my pussy weep at the sight.

When he closed the distance, he gently took my hand and traced my fingers between his horns right above his brow. There were blunt ridges that connected the horns down to the side of his temples.

“I buried them beneath my skin the same way your scent had refused to leave me. I needed to be a part of you until the prophecy of the seer finally brought you to me.”

I jerked back my hand. *Was he serious?*

“You cut your face and planted my teeth under your skin?”

His smile grew wide as if in pride and I couldn’t bear to tear down his ego and tell him how insane he was.

“And yet, you claimed me. A soulless bone faerie that has known nothing but wrath and finally... longing.”

He cradled my face and I looked at him through misty eyes. He suffered, for me... while I suffered alone in far off lands.

It was a bittersweet sobering thought. We were more alike than we realized.

He dropped to his knees before me and I looked down at him in surprise. “I could get drunk off your scent and let a thousand fae take me down if it meant I got to spend another day between your legs worshiping you.”

“No, don’t do that. There will be no more dying,” I said nervously.

He chuckled as he pushed up my nightdress to find that I was pantiless. Groaning, he threw my leg over his shoulder and I was forced to lean onto his shoulder for balance as his tongue invaded my pussy without any preamble.

I cried out my pleasure as his tongue danced and surged forth between my lips, invading my center as if he owned it.

Morel feasted on me until I moaned and called out his name to stop. He didn’t. I tried to wriggle away and lost my balance. Morel caught my descent and slowly lowered me to the ground, flipping me onto my front and lifting my ass into the air.

“Instinct calls me to claim you in the ways of old. I want you to scream my name into these woods letting every being here know who you belong to, Fenella.”

He was a demanding bastard when my pussy was still sadly clenching around nothingness.

“I need you to stick your cock in me, Morel. I can’t stand it. I need you to fill me.” I was wanton and I needed him now!

He chuckled as his claws scored the skin of my shoulders right before he grasped onto them and plunged his hard length inside of me in one swoop. I slid forward on the dead leaves, my own hands clawing on the ground to grab onto anything I could as he began to pound into me like a beast with the sole purpose of satisfying his carnal desires.

Quicker than I thought possible, another climax rolled into me like a thunderstorm, taking over my senses. I screamed and pleaded though I didn’t know what I was begging for.

My fingers dug into the earth beneath me, trying to hold on as he slapped his hips against my ass until he spilled himself inside of me, leaking down my inner thighs. When his body covered mine, I couldn’t hold his weight and fell onto the ground with a groan.

His hips continued to thrust slowly as his arms wrapped around me from behind, pulling us both to our sides. His face nuzzled against the crook of my neck, kissing me.

The red glow of fae appeared and disappeared around us, as if they were afraid to get too close to Morel. From all he had told me, I didn’t blame them.

Here on the ground, his hands gently caressed my breast and I wondered how such tenderness could deal out death so easily.

Sadly, I had to remind him. “I can’t stay, Morel. I need to go back.”

“You don’t need to go back, you *choose* to. All you have to do is choose Morel and I will be everything you ever needed.”

I softly laughed. He was very convincing with his sweet words. He still hadn’t pulled himself out of me. Instead, he

pulled me closer, crossing his strong legs over mine as if it would convince me to stay.

I reached back with my hand, caressing his scalp and running them along his braids. “Morel. You know I can’t.”

He growled in irritation and buried his face in my hair.

“Stay with me until the sun threatens to burn the sky and I will take you back.”

It was a compromise, one I was willing to accept.

We both laid there as Morel told me stories of his battles and triumph, as well as his dark days before my arrival. They were tales that tore at my very being prompting me to turn in his arms once his cock slipped out and pulled him into a tight embrace.

He hummed against my bosom and I closed my eyes and sighed. How easily would it be to get lost in his world? I didn’t have any plans on returning back to the states and my great aunt had a life before I arrived.

Would it be so bad to leave it all behind? It was a hard question that garnered no answers today.

I rubbed his head and hummed a tune my mother used to when troubled thoughts kept me awake as a child.

Morel grumbled against me, pouting about his suffering and I humored him with gentle pats.

Too soon, the hours passed and Morel helped me up from the ground, dusting the leaves off my nightdress and hair.

He restrapped his blades across his chest and I wondered what kind of trouble he got up to while he was away from me.

The boned wings expanded to its full glory of smoke and magic right before he wrapped his arms around me and purred against my ear.

“Hold on tight, *mo chridhe*.”



FEN

“YOU ARE ABSOLUTELY GLOWING TODAY. YESTERDAY TOO.”

I placed my hands on my cheeks in embarrassment. “Am I?”

“Do ya think I came up the Clyde in a banana boat yesterday, girl?” My aunt exclaimed loudly.

I had no idea what that meant whatsoever so I stared at her in confusion.

“I wasn’t born yesterday, something has changed. It has to be a man,” she slapped the table, rattling the teacups. “There’s no doubt about it!”

She let out a loud boisterous laugh and with wide eyes, I took another sip of my tea.

“And what if it was? Aunty, I’m a grown woman—”

“I know that, lass! You are misinterpreting what I’m saying.” Her fat cat chose that very moment to let out a loud yowl by his empty bowl. “You’ll have to wait a minute, Bonnie Bean.”

She leaned in and took a sip of her own tea, contemplating who knows what as she stared into the walls behind me.

“Love is hard to come by, sweetie. Ya must embrace it while ya can as it comes. Ya never know where life leads or how short it can be. Well, ya know what I mean.” She gave me a sheepish look as she took another sip.

“I feel like there’s a story here I don’t know about. You have some secret admirers, Aunty Ainsley?” I teased.

Her jovial smile fell slowly as she turned to look at me with a serious expression. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told ya.”

I was taken aback. *She had no idea.* “Try me. I’m more open minded than you think.”

She took another slow sip and I did too. The pregnant pause between us was awkward, at least on my part.

“Our family tales say our great grandmother was a selkie.”

This was not what I was expecting. At. All.

“They were mermaids?”

“No, lass, listen closely. A selkie!”

I blinked a few times and nodded my head. I’ll have to ask Morel about that later.

“The point being, we’ve always been surrounded by a little bit of mystery and legend. Your mother, bless her soul, had a wandering spirit. She couldn’t be held down to Scotland. Something in her soul pulled her over the waters and she followed her heart.”

Woah. This was not the tale I thought I would hear but now I was invested.

“I suspected it was the distance from her origins, Scotland, that made her sick but I didn’t put too much thought into it. Because truly it couldn’t be that simple.”

“She died of cancer,” I said matter-of-fact. I had time to grieve for her. It didn’t hurt as much to talk about it anymore.

Aunty Ainsley gave me a doubtful look over her teacup.

“That’s what the doctors say, yes.”

She left the conversation at that and I was dumbfounded. What were the odds that my mother’s sickness was because she left Scotland, and it was her death as well as my father’s that led me back?

“I can sense some things, even in my old age, Fen. The man that has captured your heart is not one I would have expected but didn’t come to me as a surprise.”

My eyes widened in shock and I sat back, unsure of how much I should let her in on. Unsure if letting her know would put her in danger. I know Morel would never harm me, but would he harm her?

“Dinnae worry about me. I’ve lived my whole life here in Inverness. I’ve loved and lost and that is more than I could ask for when some folks never love at all.” She leaned in, placed her cup on the table and patted my hand. “Take it from an old woman who wished she could go back and change some things. Live your life, Fen. Don’t let doubts hold you back. Even if it doesn’t work out, at least ya know ya took the chance. And love...Love is always worth the risk.”

My eyes burned from tears and my face felt hot. She left the table before I could, giving me the privacy I needed to reel in

my emotions.

She was right. What did I have to lose? The cabin was taken care of by Uncle Jerome back in the states and here? Here I had no attachments if what I'm interpreting from my aunt was correct. She was giving me permission to go. She didn't have to know who to or where. She trusted my judgment and wanted me to fly free, to find my happiness.

After cleaning up the teapot and cups, I went to my bedroom and looked around. The old shabby chic decor was comforting, reminding me of my aunt in every way. The soft peach walls were serene as I stood there and stared at the window, watching the birds fly in the sky, reflecting over everything that had happened in my life up until now.

Did I believe in fate and kismet meetings? Perhaps. It was a nice hopeless romantic dream. I wasn't sure what was real and what wasn't, but one thing I *was* sure of was my growing attachment to Morel, the bone faerie.

It was more than an obsession. He took over my every happy thought and gave me a renewed sense of excitement and anticipation for the days that came. The past held nothing for me but sadness and loss. The future—with Morel—held mysterious and intrigue.

Aunty Ainsley was right. I was going to take life by the horns and choose a path. I came to Scotland to make new memories and found so much more.

I went to my small table in the corner of the room and searched for stationary to write on.

I drafted a nice note that would give my Aunt closure upon my disappearance and folded it neatly, placing it in the middle of the table with her name facing up.

I would spend the rest of the day with her, sharing joy and laughter so that we would always have something to look back on in remembrance. Just like the trip here, I didn't know if I was going to come back from where I was going.

I took in a deep breath and let out a relieved sigh. It felt good making a solid decision with no regrets or worries.

I turned and walked out my room, calling for my Auntie to take us into town in her little death trap one last time for a nice dinner at a restaurant.



MOREL

ALL MY GREEDY DECISIONS LED ME TO THESE TORTUOUS moments. With each taste I stole, my hunger for her only grew and burned.

Each second felt like hours as I sat in this cave, scratching my skin until I bled just to feel something. But none of it could ever compare to the way she caressed me or sighed my name in pleasure.

I roared and slammed my fist into the wall, in denial that she only had one more night of payment before she could decide to leave me forever. After all, that was what our initial bargain entailed.

I could demand her submission and force her to stay with me but I wouldn't. I couldn't. I couldn't bear to face her looking at me with distrust or disgust. I craved her laughter, her smiles... her joy like an addiction.

The sun chose this very day to take its time to disappear beyond the horizon. I needed time to go faster and I needed time to stand still once I had her in my arms again.

Unexpectedly, I heard her call for me through the realms. Just a whisper but clear as a sharpened blade ready to cut down its enemies.

Like the pathetic creature I was, I answered only to find myself tricked by the wisps that laughed and taunted me in the woods beyond my cave dwelling. I roared and shot out my hand, swiping the culprit down, squeezing her in my fist until blood spurt forth.

I was disgusted with my actions, with my pining. I needed to go to her now! Demand her to acknowledge her ties to me, demand her to face the truth—that we couldn't live without each other, not now, not ever.

I stomped down through the woods until I heard a twig snap. My body tensed and I fell onto all fours, ready to take on the next victim that chose the wrong moment to come near me.

Right as I was about to pounce, a soft, familiar, feminine voice called my name, stopping the beating organ inside of my chest.

“Morel?”

I ran until she came into view, her curls cascading around her like a beautiful crown. I leaped and wrapped my arms around her, taking us both into the ground and through the realms until we landed back where we started the other night—in the unseelie realm.

“Fenella, I forbid you to leave me ever again!” I commanded.

I shouldn't put my vulnerabilities before her in such a raw way, but she needed to understand. I couldn't go back to the

darkness before her, not when she had given me a taste of her light. I was no longer just the maddened Ignis Fatuus. I was Morel.

“Morel. Look at me,” she demanded and I followed.

She cradled my face and I nuzzled her neck, making her giggle. *Good*. The more I made her happy, the easier it would be to coerce to stay.

“Morel, would you stop for a minute.”

I shook my head and kept my horns away from her. “I can’t. I can never stop when it comes to you.”

“Morel,” she sighed and a shiver went down my spine.

Was this it? Was this where she told me she came to make her final payment and say her goodbyes?

“Morel, look at me,” she pleaded.

I stared into her soul, willing her to hear my own silent pleas.

She placed her forehead gently against mine and my heart stopped.

“Morel, I will stay if you would have me. Though by this point, you won’t be able to get rid of me because I am utterly obsessed with you beyond reason.”

It took a minute for my heart to restart, for enough air to reach my brain to comprehend exactly what she was saying.

“Say something, Morel. Don’t make this awkward,” she chuckled nervously.

“Fenella,” I croaked out. “You’ve owned me from the very beginning. I wasn’t going to let you go.”

She let out a beautiful laugh that was laced with bittersweet tears. “Good, because I wasn’t going to let you go either and

now you're stuck with me.”

I gave her a human kiss on the mouth, dueling my tongue with hers as my hands quickly ripped through her coverings.

She giggled with pleasure and my cock hardened to insufferable lengths behind my britches.

“I say we seal the end of this deal with my cock inside of you,” I panted against her lips

“Is that right?” she asks as she pulls her top over her head revealing her bountiful breasts for my view.

“Unless you wish to make another deal, it is the only way,” I tried to convince her, my cock seeking entrance to its home, wetting the inside of her thighs.

She gasped exquisitely when I pushed her panties aside and thrust inside of her, pinning her to the ground.

“We’ll have to work on your negotiation skills when we’re done, Morel. They’re atrocious.”

“That’s fine by me, since you’ll have a lifetime to think of your new terms,” I breathed heavily against her breast, licking her skin.

I rammed her into the ground, grinding my cock deep inside of her, wanting our union to combine our souls into one.

“Stop talking and fuck me, Morel.”

“Yes, my dark mistress. This I can do.”

When he fingers traveled up and caressed the hidden part of her on my forehead, I groaned and turned us onto my back. She easily took over control as if it was something she was always meant to do, rocking her hips against me in the most torturous of ways. I watched her, bewitched, my eyes locked

on her breast and the way they swayed with her as she grinded against me.

I slammed my horns into the ground with submission when she leaned into my body with her little hands on my chest for leverage.

“Morel, what’s a selkie?”

I growled at her mention of the sea folk and flipped her onto her stomach.

“The only fae you should be thinking about is me while I fill your womb with my seed, *mo chridhe*, not the sea folk.” I bit her shoulder in punishment and thrust into her depths until she chanted my name.

She squealed as she squeezed my cock deliciously in her climax and then shattered me into a thousand pieces with her next words. “I love you, Morel, every broken part of you.”

I groaned and whined as I spilled into her, burying my face into her mane, unable to give her the human romance she required but was still too greedy to let her go.

“I am unable to breathe without you, Fenella, *mo chridhe*. I exist for you only you.”

She forced my cock out of her, splattering some of my seed onto the ground, and turned onto her back to look at me. I was unworthy of such a gift but it didn’t change anything. She leaned up to place a kiss on the face of an executioner and my breath stuttered. Who was I fooling but myself? I would answer any of the questions she had, give her anything she wanted to know as long as she willingly remained by my side.

Her soft hands cradled my face tenderly and I closed my eyes in surrender. “Then breathe *with* me, Morel, you’ll never have to be without me again.”



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If you get your kicks in a magical manner, order toys from websites like bad dragon, and prefer your monsters *in* your bed instead of *under* them, then Y.D. is your girl.

Writing everything from spicy dark fantasy to fluffier-than-a-cool-marshmallow romance, Y.D. La Mar has her fingers in all sorts of man-meat pie, and the sky is the limit. Somehow, this magical mistress manages to balance her spicy author life with her responsibilities as a mom, a wife, and a resident of Sin City—*oh, irony, you've felled me.*

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“SHAYLA’S COMING BACK,” XELRIM SAID, IN HIS TYPICALLY phlegmatic fashion at breakfast.

I’d just come in from working the fields I attempted to practice my magic in, and my head perked up and swiveled towards him of its own accord like an attentive dog, my body understanding what he was saying before my mind had had a chance to catch up with it.

“Go down to the road and meet her—there’ll be a carriage dropping her off shortly, and she’ll need help with her things,” he went on, ignoring me otherwise like he often did, which was good, because I was standing there, stricken. “And if you let her disturb your studies, I will twist your very head off of your shoulders,” he threatened.

“I—I wouldn’t dream of it,” I stammered.

I hadn’t seen Shayla since she’d run away from our home four years ago, without so much as a note or a goodbye. The girl

I'd learned to read beside, that I'd played tag with, who I'd grown up with after I'd entered Xelrim's mentorship—who'd celebrated my accomplishments and understood my limitations—she'd just disappeared when we were fifteen, and she'd taken my heart with her.

"Well?" Xelrim prompted, without looking up. "Go!"

"Yes, sir!" I said, practically running out of the room, all thoughts of my own breakfast forgotten.

THE ONLY THING THAT STOPPED ME FROM RUNNING ALL THE way down to the road was the thought of the sight I'd be if I did. It was several miles away, and I hardly wanted Shayla's first impression of me to be hot and sweaty. It was bad enough that my hands were covered in dirt—but the road was the opposite direction of the river, so I didn't have a way to wash them. I dusted them off on my breeches furiously . . . which probably didn't help those either.

All in all, this would've gone better for me had I time to prepare, but I guess her springing back into my life made sense, seeing as that was exactly how she'd left it.

I . . . just . . .

I stuttered to a stop in a field, trying to make sense of it all.

I'd been so hurt when she'd went away. At first, I was angry, but then all I could think was that I must've done something wrong. If I had, though, I hadn't ever figured out what it was, which meant that I might do it again. And I didn't know what I'd do if she came back into my life and disappeared a second time.

I swallowed, swaying, trying to contain my emotions. As a mage, I was intimately accustomed to failure. Every day I

went into the fields surrounding Xelrim's home and tried my magics out, urging plants to grow, one blade of grass, one leaf, one strawberry at a time, with few successes.

That could be allowed to stand. Yes, it was humiliating—especially since some ancient friend of Xelrim's had once sniffed me like a loaf of fresh bread and deemed me “great”—but it was familiar. I had the entire rest of my life to figure magic out, as mages could seemingly live forever.

But it felt like if I didn't do the right thing when I saw Shayla next, she might step back into the carriage and vanish, and there was no way I could stomach that.

I had no idea how best to act, or to be, if I should beg for forgiveness, or pretend to be aloof—I just knew I didn't want to do the wrong thing with all my heart and soul.

So I tried to do the only thing I could. I knelt down and reached for a scrubby plant that was out of season and willed it to grow.

“Just—fucking—please,” I cursed at it, with my hand out, urging my magic at it, trying to force it to do *anything* for me.

I felt it hear my plea and decide to be stubborn—all plants were stubborn, I was learning, and they did their own things in their own times, and they weren't ever very interested in listening—then it chose to give me one small purple bloom, barely the size of a thumbnail.

I groaned and plucked it anyhow and kept walking on the rough trail to the road.

I PROTECTED THE FLOWER CAREFULLY, GUARDING ITS FRAGILE petals from the wind with one hand so that I would have a gift to give her, as I finished making my way to the road that

abutted Xelrim's property. I rose up on my toes as I heard a thundering carriage come through the distant kaorak trees.

Sometime in the past mile I'd realized I was lucky Xelrim had bothered to send me. Shayla had always been so self-sufficient—even when we were younger, she'd been better at everything than me but magery—so I couldn't imagine her needing my help with anything at all.

And whatever fears I'd had about our situation evaporated the second the horses slowed, because all I could think about was how excited I was to see her again. Of course I'd dreamed of meeting her someday—and of course in those dreams I'd already managed to become powerful, the kind of mage who would be able to stride up to her as fresh grass rose out of the ground to meet my feet, and for whom boughs of trees would graciously sweep aside . . . rather than still being just me, Wyrval—a cumbersome name, given to me by my mother after some long-dead relative, and one I only heard when Xelrim was yelling for me.

But none of that mattered, because in moments I was going to see her face again and hear her call me Val.

The door to the carriage burst open, framing her inside it, and I knew it was her, she had the same cheerful face and the same bright blue eyes, even if they were a little lined with exhaustion. But so much had changed with her body—the gentle curves she'd left with had somehow become rolling hills, and she was even more beautiful to me.

“Shayla!” I exclaimed, without thought, and she beamed.

“Val!” she shouted back, and suddenly the four years without her may as well just been a day. She was managing a large bag and a basket as she stepped out. I reached to take the bag from

her at once—which freed her arm up to loop around my neck, wrapping me in a hug. “You got so tall!”

I laughed and briefly held her, breathing in her scent, which had slightly changed in her absence. Having seen her safely off, the door to the carriage snapped closed behind her and it continued, leaving her there with me.

“Are you staying?” I helplessly asked her, driven by the need to know. The bloom I’d made for her was crumpled and lost, just like I would be if she left again.

She took a deep inhale and gave me a tight smile. “For as long as I can.”

I briefly wished she were a kind of plant, something my magic could touch, and force to root to the ground. “I missed you,” I confessed.

“I missed you, too,” she said, and rose up on her toes to brush my cheek with a kiss.

I suddenly felt too much.

Every piece of clothing I was wearing was too hot and scratchy, my heart was too much for my ribcage—my very marrow was too much for my bones.

She didn’t notice any of that as she set her basket down to start fussing with something inside of it.

“There were three other people traveling with me,” she shared, shaking her head. “I didn’t want them to gawk, but poor little Frenel must be starving.”

And then she started slipping the right shoulder of her dress off.

It was a moment I had spent too many idle nights in bed considering with my root in my hand, stroking myself until I

spilled sticky green, and now here it was at last and happening by daylight: the top half of her heavy breast exposed like a waxing moon—then I heard the sound of a child.

I whipped my head away, turning my body too, so she wouldn't see how my imagination had tormented me. I felt more foolish than I had in months.

I heard her lightly laugh. "I take it Xel didn't tell you?"

"Not a thing," I said, shaking my head, turning red while facing the direction of the trees.

"That's entirely like him, I suppose."

Once again, I didn't know what the right thing was to do around her, and so many other questions were riding on my tongue. Luckily I managed to only voice the most important one: "Shall we go home?"

"I'd like that."



I SOMEHOW MANAGED TO PICK UP THE BASKET AND WALK slightly ahead of her, slowly enough for her to keep up, but where it was impossible for me to see anything inappropriate.

“You can go ahead and ask, you know,” she said, after my tenth silent step.

“Who is his father?” I wasn’t jealous of the man—all mages were sterile, everyone knew it—I just needed to know why he wasn’t here, because who on earth would let Shayla go?

“That’s the only thing I can’t tell you,” she said.

I waited another ten steps before deciding to ask the other most pressing thing on my mind, and I was glad to have a reason for not looking at her, in case the answer was painful.

“Why did you leave?”

She made a demurring sound before speaking. “I can’t tell you that, either.”

It wasn't a useful answer, but better than discovering she'd found me lacking in some fashion. "That's two things then," I said, twisting back just a little, so she would know I was teasing. She snorted, and I heard her rearranging fabric until she clucked.

"I won't affront your eyes anymore," she said, and I turned around. She had the baby wrapped up in a contraption bound around her ample curves, keeping him against her chest. He was so tiny, tucked against her, and I waited for her to catch up so I could peer down at the both of them. Her long hair was the same golden brown I remembered, catching the early afternoon light, but his sparse hair was almost black, and I couldn't tell the color of his eyes because they were closed.

"You could never affront me." I knew as I said it that it was true. "He's so small," I said, in a quiet voice, befitting his size.

"He is," she agreed. "That's why I have to feed him often. And you should've seen him when he was newly born." She pat his back with a gentle hand. "The birthing maids weren't sure that he would make it. He came out too soon—but somehow he managed." She smiled down at him, and I could feel the passage of love between them, almost the same as when I felt my magic. "We managed."

I realized the baby was the source of the sweetly yeasty smell upon her. "How old is he?"

"Three months."

I considered the timeline. "Did his father die in the war?" I knew there'd been some new fighting at the borders this past fall, and death would explain the man's absence.

"Val," she tsked, and I tsked back.

"Mages are curious," I said, defending myself.

“Mages are annoying,” she rebutted.

“Which is why you’ve come back to live with two of them?” I challenged her with a grin.

“Yes. Being annoyed by the two of you will be great practice for being a mother,” she said, with an entirely straight face, before falling into peals of laughter which hit me like warm rain.

I couldn’t even explain to her how much I’d missed her—there were no words.

“Can I hold him?” I asked, making a gesture towards the baby.

“With those hands?” she said at seeing the dirt on them, her tone going arch, like I was a child myself, before she laughed again—and every time she did it healed some long-wounded part of me. “Once you’ve washed them later, yes.”

But that didn’t stop her from taking one of them in her own, to hold—so I could help her on the trail, no doubt, now that she was carrying precious cargo—but at no point in time would I take our contact or her current presence for granted. I held her smaller pale hand in my darker one, carefully but not too tightly, the same as I longed to hold her, just to make sure she stayed nearby.

THE REST OF OUR WALK BACK SHE TOLD ME ABOUT WHERE she’d been—just a few towns over, a place I’d heard of but never visited—and how she’d worked for a leather smith there, making intricately decorated pieces for high-born types. We paused once, so she could feed Frenel again, I quietly bemoaned my lack of commonsense that meant I hadn’t brought her any food or water in my rush, and after that she mostly wanted gossip from the towns we traded with. I was

unable to tell her anything—I didn't pay much attention to things like that, even when I went to them with Xelrim.

"You're useless," she teased, after she'd asked about the fifth person I didn't know or barely remembered.

"I'm busy," I protested.

"With your plants?" she asked, fluttering her fingers in the air to indicate my magic.

"Some." I shrugged. "I'm not good at it yet though."

She stopped and looked at me. "But you were so studious!"

"I still am," I said. "It's just . . ." I sighed and looked around for something that might obey me in this critical moment, and blessedly spotted the white flowers of a wild strawberry at the side of the trail. I let go of her hand with reluctance, and knelt on my heels as if I were going to whisper to the thing, pressing it with my will.

Strawberries were kinder than other plants for some reason, unlike the stiff and unforgiving kaorak trees, which moved so slowly and had so little concerns for the world they never listened.

Even so, the plant only shed petals on one flower, and felt sluggish to respond.

Don't embarrass me in my time of need, I begged it. I knew plants didn't understand my thoughts, but sometimes they did feel my intensity—and occasionally it seemed like they were able to be flattered.

There is someone here as beautiful as you are, I told it, and felt it perk up. *She is ripe and luscious and she wants to share your sweetness with her child.* The tendril responded to that, budding a firm green tip, which expanded and resolved into a

perfect tiny strawberry. It was a small plant, so I knew it didn't have much more to give.

I promise your gift to me will not be forgotten, I told it as I plucked it, then offered it over to her on my palm.

She appeared more pleased than I felt. "You couldn't do that when I left, Val—all you could do was make the reeds bend toward you."

"One strawberry won't even make a jam, much less feed an army," I said, looking down. "So it's not much to show for four years of effort."

"I'll be the judge of that," she said, picking it up and popping it into her mouth whole, little leaves and all. She chewed it once, her eyes widened, and she gasped. "Oh my gosh," she said, holding up a polite hand to talk around. "It's amazing. This is the best strawberry I've ever tasted."

I felt a flush run up my spine, turning me as red as my creation, even underneath my darker skin. "Thank you."

"It's so good," she said, with emphasis.

"That's because it's yours," I said, then realized how strange that sounded. "I mean—when I was making it—I thought of you."

"That's how you think of me? Sweet and juicy?" Her lively eyes flickered with amusement. "Edible?" she pressed.

I stared at her for a moment, replaying everything that'd happened since she'd gotten off the carriage: her hug, her kiss, her holding my hand, and now her clearly flirting with me here. I wanted to welcome it but I didn't dare—I might have been naïve, but I wasn't foolish, and until she told me otherwise, she was taken besides.

“More like confusing,” I said, correcting her stiffly, then saw her look of disappointment. “Forgive me,” I went on, and then offered her a still-gallant, but-not-quite-as-personal-elbow to take for her safety, as we continued home.



XELRIM THE TWISTED'S ABODE WAS SET FAR BACK IN THE crotch of a river that he'd once twisted away from its banks—we'd weathered several floods there, but he'd always been able to use his magic to turn back the tides. That was where his skill lay, in twisting. He used the reeds on the river's bank to create all sorts of imaginative objects, bags and baskets, hats and mats, weaving them with his powers without seemingly a second thought, and these things he sold to the traders in nearby towns. I had no idea what the price of his magic was, and I knew he wouldn't tell me, so I never asked.

But I'd seen him calm a storm once by twisting the clouds in the sky the opposite direction, and I'd witnessed him twist a man who'd dared to touch Shayla's arm up like it was a curl of bark being stripped from a sapling, breaking it in so many places there was no way it'd ever set right, so his gift was not a casual one, nor were his occasional threats of violence against me.

Shayla was his great-great-grandniece, and he'd lived here for generations of her family—when she was younger both her parents had died, so he'd taken her under his wing.

He was excited to see her, in his own elderly way, and he was surprisingly gentle with the child, which we all took turns holding once our hands were clean under Shayla's watchful eyes, until she was convinced both of us could do it properly.

"I've held more children than the years you've been alive," Xelrim muttered as she corrected him.

"Yes, but this is the first time you've held *mine*," she said, grinning at her very distant relative.

He harumphed. "Well, I've cleaned out your old room for you. I expect you'll be tired after your travels—"

Shayla audibly inhaled. "A room of my own? I can't believe the luxury."

I expected her to be teasing, but I saw she wasn't, and wanted to know more of what'd befallen her during all our years apart.

"Yes—we'll go and nap now. Thank you so much," she said, hugging Xelrim with her free arm, before giving me a wave and taking Frenel up the stairs.

"I could—" I began, making up a reason to go after her, before Xelrim cut me off, looming in my path.

"Go. Study," he said, and it was not a suggestion.

I SPENT THE REST OF MY AFTERNOON IN XELRIM'S BARN, where all of my attempted experiments were in progress as I tried to figure out my powers. I did have a green thumb, so to speak, without my magic, and we were in a temperate clime, so I was able to keep all sorts of things alive there without

much effort. I had pots of assorted vegetables and solo specimens of different crops, fruits, and flowers, because I still had no idea how my magic truly worked. Was it based on the plant? Or time of year? Or only on plants that only had blue blooms at midnight? Using magic was oftentimes ridiculous, and just because some mage had once deemed me “great” did not actually make it so. By now, I had learned that there was no curse quite so heavy as being told that you have promise, many times over.

When I returned that evening though, Shayla and Frenel joined us at our table, and things felt natural. It was almost as if nothing had ever changed. Xelrim was able to answer all her questions about the townspeople, she was happy, and I was . . . discontent.

Plus, I noticed Xelrim didn’t ask her a thing—I realized she must have written to him, for him to know when her carriage was coming, and judging by her belongings, I didn’t think she’d have been able to pay for it herself, so he must’ve also booked her way. If he had, though, why hadn’t he just portaled himself to retrieve her? Had he forced her to travel the long way just to trick me?

I helped to clear the table, mimicking happiness until she and her baby went off to bed, then I confronted him. “Did you know where she was this whole time?”

His hoary eyebrows raised and lowered. “Yes,” he intoned.

“And you didn’t tell me?”

“You were studying,” he said simply, which made my anger boil.

“Didn’t you think I would want to know?”

“I didn’t want you to be distracted.”

“Shouldn’t you have left that up to me?”

He let the moment between us hang, then said, “Judging by how you’re acting now, no. And if you so much as touch her, Wyrval, I will twist you into pieces.”

“Bah,” I complained, but finished all my chores.

THAT EVENING I TOOK THE STAIRS UP TO MY ROOM, WHICH WAS above hers, pausing at her door. I wanted to knock on it and demand answers, full of frustration—but then, as if sensing my mood, I heard Frenel fuss, and her having to soothe him. At the thought of requiring her to soothe me, too, I gathered my pride and made it to my own door.

Then Frenel didn’t stop. I lay down on my bed, and heard her trying to keep him quiet for several hours, listening to her shuffling and whispered singing, before I got up and went down to knock on her door for a different reason entirely.

When she opened it, her hair was tangled, and there were bags beneath her eyes. “I’m so sorry—”

“Did you need help?” I asked, cutting her off.

She looked hopeful, and then sighed, shrinking in on herself as Frenel made unhappy noises. “No—”

“You seem tired, and I’m perfectly capable of walking around in circles while humming, too,” I told her, and she snorted.

“Am I that loud?”

“Only because I’m listening,” I said, reaching to take the baby from her. “But don’t worry, Xelrim’s going deaf as a post.”

She relinquished the child over to me, and rearranged the top of her dress, as Frenel kept up his tiny cries. “I am very,” she

started, then changed direction. “It’s been—”

“A while since you’d had a full night’s sleep?” I finished for her, and she closed her eyes and nodded. “I imagine I can get you a few hours, then.”

“Thank you,” she said, wearily sighing. “But if he starts rooting around on your chest, bring him to me; it means he’s hungry.”

“Understood,” I said, and then turned my attention to the child. “But in the meantime, let’s go visit the barn,” I told the baby, and I shifted my body from side to side like I’d seen her do earlier in the day while holding him. Rocking him felt natural, and I liked the way he fit into the crook of my arm.

“It’s cold outside!” she protested.

“Then it’s a good thing I have a coat,” I told the baby, before taking him downstairs.

IT WAS ODD, CARRYING ANOTHER LIVING THING THIS CLOSE TO myself. Rather like holding a puppy or kitten, only it was an entire tiny human—related to Shayla, no less.

I kept him tucked against my chest, inside my thickest fur, all the way into the barn, rocking him gently until we were inside and the doors were closed. He’d calmed down some, and I used my magic to shine a gentle light, the same one I used on my plants during winter to keep them alive in the cold dark, moving from plant to plant, inspecting them again since I was there.

These were my children, and it was like I knew them by name—I knew all of their linages, because I’d been the one to pollinate all their flowers and set them to seed for generations.

“Who is your father, little one?” I peeked into my fur to ask the baby, where he’d quickly gone to sleep. I could only hope that Shayla trusted me enough to do the same.

I couldn’t image Shayla leaving a good man—so either Frenel’s father wasn’t good, or he was dead. The latter seemed more likely, what with there always being some sort of war on.

“Will you look like him, when you grow up? Or will you look like her? Or maybe, just maybe, will my magic rub off on you?” I reached in to stroke his tiny nose with my forefinger and woke him up enough to smack his lips, before he settled back to snoring. “Today I will make a strawberry just for you. It will be tiny, tart, and sweet. Maybe I will make you two or three of them, hmm? Would you like that? I would like that.”

“Don’t teach him magic,” I heard from behind me—and found a disheveled Shayla there, standing just inside the door, coat-less herself despite the chill.

“I couldn’t, even if I wanted to,” I assured her, then frowned. “Did you not trust me?”

Something haunted crossed her face, but then she quickly became presentable again—as if she were putting on a mask. “It’s not that,” she claimed. “I’ve just never been away from him before,” she said, but I knew she was lying.

I wanted to call her on it—to call her on *everything*—but what if me asking questions was the thing that made her leave again? I couldn’t risk it.

“Then I will treat this like the honor that it is,” I told her solemnly.

Her shoulders slowly sank as some nervous energy she had passed, and she sighed. “Thank you, Val.”

“It is no matter,” I said, turning myself and the child back toward my plants, lying as well, because keeping her close was a very great matter indeed.



WE STAYED IN THE BARN, PACING AROUND THE PLANTS, ME murmuring nonsense to the child, until the moon began to set, and Frenel started looking for a teat.

“Is it time to go back?” I said, sniffing him as he passed gas. “Where was there room for all of that inside you?” I teased, and crept back into Xelrim’s home, taking the stairs as quietly as possible, so that Shayla could drink the dregs of her sleep before taking him.

She’d left her door open for me, as if to help me do so—which meant that I was in her room, watching her by the moonlight streaming in through her window. Her hair was streaked out on her pillow, and her chest quietly rose and fell with each of her soft breaths.

I’d walked in here so many times while she was gone, always hoping to somehow catch her when I opened up the door.

Now she *was* back—only everything had changed.

She wasn't the same girl she was when she'd left me. She was far more shapely, there was Frenel, and all that had happened to her when she was alone.

The Shayla I once knew would never return.

I could either pout over the past like a boy, or step up to the moment like a man.

I pressed a kiss to Frenel's head, and knelt to nestle him against her. Her eyelids fluttered open and she gave me a sleepy smile that was worth waiting four years for.

"See? He didn't even get cold," I said, as she curled him into one arm. "But he did get smelly. Are all babies stinky?"

She giggled softly, pulling him to her breast. "Yes. Just like all men. Go and get some sleep before breakfast."

AFTER THAT, AND FOR THE NEXT MONTH, I QUESTIONED nothing. I took my turn with Frenel most days and nights, and the exhaustion and worry that'd lined Shayla's eyes lessened. Whatever she'd been scared of seem to have been pushed back.

She didn't touch me again, though.

There were times when she was handing him over to me that our hands brushed, but it was never intentional, which I took to mean that what she wanted was my company and nothing more. And while it would've been a lie to pretend that I didn't ache for her, I managed to keep my feelings to myself, only watching her when she wasn't looking, and always leaving the room when she fed her child.

Together, the four of us fell into an easy rhythm, taking care of our small household and enjoying one another's company.

Xelrim would've never admitted to being charmed by the child, but soon Shayla's room was festooned by creations from the nearby reeds of anything that could've been twisted into use, baskets and cribs, all made solidly.

Whereas I tried using my own magic for a gift, and when that failed, fell to tools, finishing it on the eve of the same day that Xelrim announced he was going into town to trade.

He overburdened himself with objects he'd created, eyed me warily, saying "Remember my warning," then opened a portal and disappeared through it.

"What warning?" Shayla asked me.

I shook my head. "Come to the barn and bring Frenel."

Her eyes scanned my face, like she was trying to read me, then she went to get Frenel's basket.

THE BARN WAS A GOOD QUARTER MILE FROM THE HOUSE WE all lived in, equidistant between the river and the trees, surrounded by fields that had gone wild, and bisected by the rough road we were walking down.

"What's in the barn?" Shayla asked, as I took the basket from her hand.

"A surprise."

"For me?"

I stopped and turned to look at her. "Not . . . really?"

Her eyebrows rose. "For Frenel?" she guessed and laughed.

"Then surely you can tell *me* what it is."

"Wait until we get there."

"You do realize he can't speak yet?" she teased.

“You talk enough for the both of you,” I said, and she groaned, but kept an easy pace by my side.

When we arrived, I gave her the basket back to pull the barn doors open with a flourish. Early morning sun poured in through them, putting a spotlight on my newest creation. It was a knee-high rocking horse, carved from one solid piece of kaorak wood that I’d dragged into the barn by the dead of night.

I’d tried using my magic on it at first, but then gave up for expediency, working on it sometimes with Frenel lashed to my back, the way Shayla wore him on her front, as I shaped and sanded it into perfection.

“Val,” Shayla gasped. “You made this?” Her jaw slowly dropped as she set his basket down and bent to inspect it.

“With Frenel’s help even sometimes. He was the brains of the operation.”

She laughed again, looking up at me warmly. “I bet,” she said, then her eyes traced over me as her smile tensed. “And you didn’t use magic?”

I shook my head quickly. “Not a drop, no.”

A complicated shadow flowed across her face. “I can’t believe it, Val,” she said when she stood next, shaking her head as she turned away from me.

It didn’t look like she was joking. “Why not? It’s right there.” It was my turn to frown, and I reached to catch her wrist without thinking, to pull her back around to face me, which she did, but she didn’t look up. “Anything else he needs, just tell me, and I’ll make that, too.”

She sighed quietly. “You’re so literal sometimes. Of course I believe you.” I waited for her to go on as my stomach turned

into a hive of bees. “I’ve *always* believed in you.”

I dared to let go of her wrist, taking hold of her shoulders instead. “If you did, then why did you—” I started asking, but as the words left my mouth, I realized the truth. “You left because of me.” She’d disappeared a few weeks after I’d been deemed “great,” which I so far, most assuredly, had not become. “Shayla—”

“I either shouldn’t have left, or I shouldn’t have come back here,” she said, her eyes brimming, stepping out of my grasp.

“Why? Because I was cursed by a lie?” My voice rose without meaning to. “That old mage didn’t know anything, Shay”—least of all my heart—but I did—“I’m madly in love with you.”

The words jumped out of my throat and squatted between us like an ugly toad, and as I watched her hear them, I wished with all my being that I could somehow scoop them up and swallow them down.

“I know, Val,” she whispered, then reached up and put a gentle hand against the scruff of the morning beard I hadn’t shaved off.

My jaw tensed beneath her palm. Everything in me was flushed and burning. Humiliation warred with defeat, mixed with a certain elated satisfaction that at least I’d finally *said something*, even if it was a terrific error, rather than just letting the knowledge of how I felt about her slowly crush me to a pulp.

“And I love you too,” she said.

I stared at her, suddenly bolted to the ground. “I—I don’t understand,” I finally stammered out.

“I know.” The corners of her lips rose in a sorrowful smile.

“That’s why I didn’t want to tell you.”

“Why wouldn’t you—” I started to ask, but she stepped forward and rocked up on her toes, till her lips brushed mine.

I’d thought about the quick kiss she’d given me after leaving the carriage a thousand times—I wrapped my arms around her to keep her there, quickly, same as I should’ve then, same as I would have four years ago, if only I’d known.

She didn’t fight me—not that I wanted her to—but I was so used to thinking I needed to trap her, I was surprised by her acquiescence.

But a moment later one of my hands was in her hair, and my fears of Xelrim and whatever shield of honor I’d been wielding in Frenel’s father’s defense disappeared as her tongue slipped past mine.

I didn’t know what I was doing, but I was filled with an unholy urge to do it.

I tilted my mouth to more easily fit hers, and held her so close there was no way she couldn’t feel my heat against her, and for her part, she melted against me, leaning into me like a cat, running her arms around my neck, as her mouth kept drinking mine.

Nothing about the moment made sense—but I wasn’t about to let it go. I lifted my head up only the smallest amount to breathe words across her lips. “Is this what you want?”

“Yes,” she whispered back, and I picked her up without thinking, walking the both of us to the nearest table. I set her on the edge, swept an arm behind her, knocking over all sorts of potted plants with a crash, and then came for her mouth again, as her legs wound behind my back.

We stood there for a long time, swaying, each of us taking turns tasting the other, equal in our passion, and then her hands reached for the laces of my pants. I moaned into her mouth as she pushed her fingers into the loosened fabric and met my hungry root there.

It was her turn to pull back, and she did so flushed: her freckled cheeks were red, and her pink lips lightly swollen. “Val,” she said, like it was a curse.

“What?” Both of my hands were at her hips, one to each side.

I watched her turn redder still, like the fruit of one of the strawberry plants I’d just knocked over. “It’s just—you’re—”

“What?” I pressed, looming over her because I needed to know. Then I felt her wrap her hand around my shaft and growled without thinking.

Her eyes widened slightly at that, then she decided on answering, “Big.”

“Is . . . that a problem?” I asked, sincerely. “I’ve never done this before.”

I watched her quickly swallow. “I just haven’t had anyone in me in a while is all.”

“Since you gave birth?” I teased, and if I’d thought her red before, I was wrong.

She hit my shoulder with her free hand, then shook it like the action had hurt her. “When did you get all muscley?” she complained with a laugh.

“The same time when you got all curves,” I said in a low tone.

Shayla gave a soft gasp, then let go of me, which killed me for a moment—until I saw her reach for her voluminous skirts with both hands, to start wildly pulling them up.

“Just—” she asked, taking me in hand again once she’d done so.

“Anything,” I swore, readily stepping forward as she lined me up. I pulled her plush hips to the edge of the table and she wrapped her other arm around my neck, and together we both watched as I pushed in.

It was hard to see, honestly, her skirts were still in the way, but I could feel . . . everything. Her heat, her lubrication as it eased my path—I let go and let my body do what it wanted, sinking slowly into her, careful stroke after careful stroke until she quietly moaned.

Nothing I had ever done had ever felt so right. “Shayla,” I whispered, right before I took my fill and was buried inside her.

“Keep going,” she said, nodding quickly, before leaning back to give more of her hips over to me. “You feel good.”

“As do you,” I breathed, leaning forward to rock in and up.

I was rewarded with a groan. “Right there.”

I made sure to do exactly as I was told and heard her purr. Her thighs tightened, squeezing me closer, as I started to shift her with each of my thrusts. “Like that?” I asked her, watching the minute changes of her expression on her face: the way her cheeks pinked, her pupils widened, and her jaw dropped, along with the helplessly innocent look she was giving me, like I was showing her something she’d never seen.

“I love you,” I told her. If it was okay to tell her now, I wanted to say it again and again, while I proved it to her with my body.

She made a gentle sound at that. “More.”

“I love you,” I gladly repeated. “More than anything.”

She rocked back onto her elbows in the scattered dirt behind her, and I picked her thighs up without thought, hoisting them up and pushing her skirt back so I could finally see the beautiful, glistening entrance where she took me. She wriggled on the table, pulling her loose top down, like she might’ve were she to feed Frenel, but this time her breasts were just for me as she cradled them, pushing them together and presenting them. And at the thought of someday suckling them myself when she was done feeding her child—I bent over her, driving even deeper into her, roughly kissing their soft upper curves.

She moaned at that and started to ride me back, raising her hips up to meet me by squeezing the muscles in her ass. I hissed in satisfaction as our bodies started rocking in the same time. I imagined myself filling her, finding all of the spots inside her that made her want to move with me, rubbing all of her magical places at once, all at the same time.

She whimpered and her eyes flew open. “Val,” she panted. “How are you doing that?”

I realized the piece of me I’d run into her had changed, somehow, flowing with my desires—and hers. I couldn’t have pulled myself out of her now if I’d wanted to—not that I ever would.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “Do you like it?”

She nodded quickly. “Yes. Very much.” She ran a hand down to her stomach to press against her belly, making it meet me harder inside. “Right—there—”

I felt myself curve inside her, hastening to obey, feeling the give of her soft walls as they stretched. “Val—Val—Val—” she said, as her breath caught.

I leaned over her with my whole body, a hand wrapped beneath her head, my hips mating with her of their own accord, all of my root swollen and hard, ready to bathe her in my seed. “I’m here,” I told her. “And you may never leave again.”

Rather than answer me, I felt her tighten up, muscles cinching inside and out, all of her grasping down on me. “Val—” she whispered, and then cried out, undulating beneath me like the waves in the river.

“Yes,” I growled, shoving myself forward, making her wrap me as my own sensations crested. “Yes!” I grunted as I thrust, feeling the first hot spurt of my cum flow into her. “Yes—yes—yes!” I practically bayed my triumph as each burst sprayed out, feeling her body sway as it accepted them, until I reached the end and my balls were empty.

I fell over her then, pinning her to the table, nestling my face against her glorious breasts, breathing hard. “I can’t believe children also come out of that same place,” I murmured, mostly to myself, and felt her laugh beneath me, as she ran a gentle hand through my hair.

“If I’d known you could make me feel like that, I never would’ve left.”

“Don’t say that, Shay.” But I felt the same. If I’d known even of a fraction of this pleasure with her, I would’ve hunted her down mercilessly, leaving all thoughts of magic behind.

“I mean it, Val. With the exception of Frenel—I wish I’d stayed here with you.”

“I would’ve never been able to give you a child.” I pushed up, and pulled back. Whatever magic had possessed me passed, and my root was just a root again, heavy, but it slid out of her

easily, and as I stood I could see where I'd been, her soft soaked petals now dripping with my green.

When she'd left my cum was still milky—still human.

Not that I wasn't human anymore, but I was human plus something else besides, carrying my magic around like she'd carried Frenel, perhaps, nestled inside of myself, making it grow.

But before she'd left . . . there'd been . . . a chance.

That I could've had all of this with her.

She smiled up at me, not knowing a thing about my thoughts. "Maybe we could've just stolen one from town?" she teased, and I swallowed.

I'd never felt the cost of my magic before that very moment. Up until now it'd been a coin I'd willingly spent, knowing no better—but if I had known that there could be a path to something like this, here, now, with Shayla and her beautiful child—would I have truly given up my life, to be a man who could only make a single flower bloom?

"Magic is my mistress," I said, forcing myself to sound flippant, despite how I felt.

"Hmm," she said, as the corners of her lips pulled up. "A mistress implies that you have a wife." Before I could respond to that, however, she rose up on her elbows and her eyes went wide.

"Val—" she said quietly, pushing herself up to her hands next. "Val—*look!*" she commanded and I did, turning to follow her gaze around the barn and—

Plant after plant was in bloom. From simple grasses all the way up through orchids I'd stolen from the riverbank months

ago, their thick green stalks bobbing with skads of silky, pendulous flowers.

“How?” I asked aloud.

“You!” she exclaimed, and when I kept staring at her, mute, she went on. “Well, it wasn’t me, and it wasn’t Frenel!” She laughed.

“Me?” I was still bewildered. But the flowers *were* there, and I *was* the only mage around. “I didn’t even know that I was doing anything!”

She made a joyously affronted noise. “Pretend that you thought that I was as pretty as a flower! Or that you bloomed all these to give them to me!” She laughed even harder and started shoving her skirt down.

I caught it with my hand to stop her. “Oh, they were absolutely for you,” I told her.

Her eyes tracked up from my hand over the rest of my body, and it didn’t matter that I’d already set seed in her once—I knew I could swell in but a moment, to do it again.

The rosy tip of her tongue darted out, licking across her lips—then Frenel cried out, hungry. I stepped out of her way and she hopped off the table.

“Give me a bit to settle him,” she said, holding onto the top of her dress without pulling it up, casting a look over her shoulder at me that set me aflame. “And then you may make things bloom again.”



I SET MYSELF BACK INTO MY PANTS AND LACED THEM LOOSELY. This time, I finally felt free to watch her pace with the child. Feeding Frenel and standing with the wild fields behind her, just outside the barn door, she looked incredibly fecund, like she was one with the world all around her. I felt like my magic had turned me into some sort of forgotten tributary, and I longed to rejoin her larger flow.

“Maybe there’s a way for me to give it all back,” I said. Before her arrival I would have done any amount of crazy things to secure my magic—anything Xelrim could’ve told me to. Stand in the river for three days naked, set my hand in the fire, whatever it would’ve taken I’d have done.

But now I would’ve traded all of it in in a heartbeat to live the rest of a normal life out with her.

Shayla looked up and over at me, rolling her eyes. “You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“I do.”

She asked. “This is why I left, Val. To protect you, from yourself.”

“And what if I would’ve liked that other version of myself better?” I asked her, striding up. Frenel was done suckling now, so I put my hands out for him, and she handed him over, so I could rest him against my shoulder to burp. “What if this was what I wanted all along, I just didn’t know it?”

She waited until I was done before taking him back, positioning him into his basket with care. “Do you really think you’d be happy here?” she asked when she was through.

I weighed my heart against the look in her eyes, and swallowed. “Yes.”

“You’re a liar,” she said, without cruelty.

I frowned at her, regardless. “It doesn’t matter. I guess now we’ll never know.”

She shrugged in mockery, before giving me a sly look.

“Maybe you should just be less mad at me and hurry. Xel won’t be gone for forever, and after this, who knows when you’ll get to touch me next?”

I hadn’t even managed to think about how I’d make it through this afternoon, much less tomorrow, or the day after, without plowing into her again. And sensing the sudden change in my mood made her grin wickedly.

“Do great plant mages need to fuck? Or do they just get all their nutrients from the ground?”

“Shayla,” I warned, my voice low as I stepped toward her. “I am not great.”

“You will be someday,” she said, challenging me. “And some parts of you already are.”

Her eyebrows arched high with amusement. She looked around the barn, then danced over to the rocking horse I’d made Frenel, kneeling down, bundling up her skirts along the way, so that all of their fabric was protecting her hips from the smooth wood as she bent over it, showing everything to me, her tightly puckered asshole, her petaled pussy, and my green staining her thick pale thighs.

Despite being a mage of plants, I was on her like an animal. My root was straining to breach my pants even before I met her, desperate to work its way deep. I fumbled for a second with my laces before freeing it, and then took myself in hand, dragging myself up and down her center, watching her part, before aiming in and thrusting.

She moaned as I got stuck—I was dry even if she was not—and I was forced to slow and paint myself with her, as if asking her juicy cunt for entrance with each stroke, until I was solidly inside her with a groan.

This was a whole new experience. I was jutting up, where her walls were pushing down, and I liked the feeling that I was taking her deeply.

“Don’t break it, Val—” she said as I sped up, pounding her into the child’s plaything.

“I’ll make him a new one,” I swore darkly. “But do what you did earlier—again.” I held her pillowy ass up with my hands and parted it, so that I could get a few more hairsbreadths of my shaft in. “Tell me how to make you cry out.”

She cast a lost look over her shoulder at me. “You’re already halfway there—just—keep going—” And then she cast her

whole body down and let her hips rise higher up. “Plunge into me like a galloping horse.”

I did as I was told immediately, feeling her hot, slick channel wrapped around me. I liked the feeling I was fighting it, trying to make it give me room, readying it to take me.

And this time—I wanted to control what was going on. I focused my will intently.

I ignored all the other plants in the room. *Grow*, I willed myself—and my root answered.

Shayla cried out at once. “Oh—*fuck*—Val—” She braced against the ground in front of her with one hand, and I saw it claw into the ground like a cat’s paw.

“Do you want more?” I asked her, still pounding.

“No,” she panted, then groaned. “But—yes—oh—*fuck*—I can’t think!” She cast another look back, her face red and flushed, her expression balanced on the edge between ecstasy and despair.

As wide as I was now, her cunt held me like a hand, and I’d never been so hard in my life, ready to give myself to her all over again.

“I can’t take anymore!” she said with a whine. “But—I still *need* it—”

“Then let me give it to you,” I commanded.

She took me at my word and practically collapsed—but I had her by her waist, my strong hands wrapped around it, holding her hips in the precise right spot for me.

And then she gasped and started bucking, her body working in opposition to mine. “*Fuck!*” she cried out, and then shouted my name, drawing out the last syllable like it was a cry too,

each of my thudding thrusts making her stutter, sounding almost like she was in pain, but I knew that was not the truth because her pussy was squeezing me like a vise, in strong, pulsating waves and—

This was magic.

It had to be.

Her coming back into my life and letting me take her like this—there was no other explanation.

I groaned, shoving myself forward, feeling my body answer hers, wanting to paint the womb I should've claimed with my sticky green seed. I shuddered and grunted, the first wave passing through my body and into hers.

“Val,” she panted.

“I’m not done yet,” I got out through gritted teeth.

“I love you,” she said, and it was like I came uncorked.

“Shay—” I shouted as I thrust and it was like I felt everything that was important and true and good in me was flowing directly into her. “Oh—Shay—Shay—”

“Mmhmm,” she agreed as my hips rocked her to my completion, and when I was done I grabbed her in my arms and pulled us both down to the ground.

“I don’t want to leave you,” I said, while I was still plugged inside her.

We lay there, catching our breaths for a very long while, and then her hand drifted up to stroke my face above her shoulder. “You don’t have to—as least not until I’m very old,” she said then. “Once I am, and you are still the same, I suppose you can find a new pretty girl.”

I growled at that, to refute her—but then I realized she'd also run away for her own well-being.

Because loving a mage could only break your heart.

“Shay,” I said, determined to somehow be different from all the other mages that had ever come before.

Then Frenel made a sound, and the same hand that'd been petting me reached out to rock his basket, so I kept my thoughts to myself.

I was exhausted. Physically, from mounting her, and emotionally because the last four years of my life had been empty, and now I was filled to overflowing. I took a look around the room and marveled at what I'd done while I'd been inside her. Broccoli plants had set to flower, wildly out of season, and tomatoes that'd only been small and green before were now lush and wide-hipped.

They'd all needed something I hadn't been able to give them, until just a little bit ago.

Maybe just like my plants needed sun, and dirt—maybe my magic had just needed her this whole time?

But what was its cost? I couldn't claim to know, as I kept stroking her from shoulder to hip, in the same rhythm as she kept rocking the basket.

“We should probably go back,” she whispered, not wanting to wake him. I made a denigrating sound at that, and she chuckled. “I'm going to have to launder this dress, and comb my hair—and what will Xelrim do to you if he catches us?”

“Probably pop my head off like a tick,” I said with a groan, rising to an elbow. I felt a slight tear where my skin had been pressed against the earth, and looked at it strangely, before offering her a hand. “It'll have been worth it.”

She shook her head and wrinkled her nose. “I don’t know if I can be in love with a headless man,” she said, making me smile.

“Then we won’t tempt fate today,” I promised. “But . . . maybe tonight? His hearing is going, I swear it, he regularly sleeps through thunderstorms.” And the man had never once woken up when Frenel was crying that I could tell.

“Yes. If we can,” she said, giving me a delighted look.

I leaned down to kiss her—and something was wrong.

I felt a rising horror in my gut—was this the price of my magic? Had its pendulum swung?

Then Shayla gasped too. “I smell smoke,” she said, looking out the barn doors with wide eyes, before whirling on me.

“Did you leave anything on fire this morning?” she asked.

“Think hard.”

I shook my head. I always had my same routine—there would’ve been no reason for the ember I used to heat our morning kettle to have jumped out of its safe metal pan.

Then I caught sight of her sheer terror as she jumped up and hastily reassembled her clothing.

“We have to go, Val—now. This is what I was afraid of,” she said, quickly sweeping Frenel from his basket, and installing him in his wraps against her chest.

“Why—and to where?” The ominous sense of wrongness I had was only getting stronger—like nerves I’d never listened to before were responding, making unused parts of my brain light up.

The grasses outside—*they were afraid of the fire.*

Then we both heard a distant shout: “Find them!”

I grabbed Shayla's hand and we ran for the trees.



“YOU WERE RIGHT ABOUT FRENEL’S FATHER,” SHAYLA PANTED out. “He’s not a good man.”

She couldn’t run as fast as I could—and I would’ve taken the baby from her, only the time it took to do so would’ve slowed us both down.

“Not now,” I told her. We needed to get to the tree line, and the cover they’d provide.

“No, you need to know. So you can tell him.”

That made my head whip around. She’d already gotten Frenel loose from his wraps and was handing him over to me, presumably to sacrifice herself somehow behind us.

I took him in one arm, but I grabbed her wrist with my free hand, just as solidly. “I did not just get you back only to lose you again. Run with me!” I shouted, and she did.

We stumbled into the kaorak forest together, not on a trail, which was good, because it'd make us harder to find—but it was rough going, me sweeping branches out of our way with my free hand, without bending them enough to give away our path.

“He was highborn,” Shayla went on, clambering over a fallen tree trunk. “He met me at the leather smith, and he was nice at first.”

I gritted my teeth, listening to her tell me the story of how she came to be with child.

“I'd feel his eyes on me any time I went to the town square, looking down from the window of his home . . . I can't say I didn't want it, because I did—but the second I started to show, he changed on me, and then when I birthed a boy, he wanted us gone. So I wrote to Xelrim,” she said, now gasping out the words, totally out of breath.

I turned around and handed her Frenel. She took him without question, then squeaked as I picked them both up. I was going to carry them to safety if it killed me.

“Xelrim bought off the other passengers in the carriage, and the carriage man too, so they'd all say I was dropped off further along its trail,” she said, curling into my chest. “To hide us.”

All of that explained why she hadn't gone into town yet, to catch up with her old friends. “It doesn't matter right now,” I told her, because it was true. I could hear the men behind us baying to one another like hounds, and feel them, on some strange level, sluicing through the field after us—the stems they broke, the blooms they tossed, and the encroaching fire, that all of the surrounding greenery was terrified of. “I'll keep you safe.”

She had the kindness not to ask me how, as I kept moving us forward, as fast as I could—but I knew it wasn't fast enough.

The men gave one last shout—presumably when they reached the tree line—and then after that, were quiet.

“They're coming, Val,” she whispered. “They only want me and Frenel. Go. Save yourself.”

“Is that who you think I am?” I looked down at her and asked.

“No,” she said, her eyes brimming with tears. “I just wanted one of us to get out.”

I leaned forward and briefly set my forehead to hers. I wanted to send her onward, but I knew the men coming behind us were surely more agile, and we might already be surrounded—in fact, I knew we were—I could feel another strange wave of movement sweeping through the ferns beneath the kaorak trunks, coming up from ahead.

So the best place for her to be was here, with me, even if the three of us were to die shortly.

I set her down, placing her back against a kaorak's rough bark. “Keep directly behind me, and stay so close I can feel your breath on my neck. Do not give them a clear shot at you or the baby.”

“All right,” she swore and nodded frantically, while silently crying.

And that was when Frenel finally lost his composure—having been jostled as we ran, probably hungry again and needing to be changed.

His noises made the men surrounding us cry out too, crowing that their success was at hand. I could feel all of them circling, their positions translated to me by the vibrations through the

dirt that touched roots as they strode, and I knew they were coming closer.

I turned to face her, willing to shield her and the baby with my back, planting my hands on either side of her shoulders against the kaorak wood, and I did the only thing I could.

Please, I begged it. Listen.

And instead of speaking to it as a man, with words, I opened my heart up to it instead. I let how I felt about Shayla and Frenel pour out, and also the danger we were in, and how closely it was circling.

Help me, I pleaded. Save them.

For a long moment I felt nothing in return from the slow, thick wood. Frenel was still howling, unsoothable, and it seemed all was lost.

But then I felt a shiver, and a crack. Branches shook, leaves dropped, and there was a sound like a falling axe as somehow, behind Shayla, a split opened up on the stoic tree's trunk, like a giant woman holding her skirts open, revealing a hollow place inside for them to hide.

She gawked from the newly made space to me. "Will we be safe in there?" But she got into it without waiting for my answer, hunkering down slightly.

"Remember, I have always loved you," I told her.

She placed her fingers atop my lips, and I could feel their terrified tremble, even as she teased, "Don't let your mistress hear."

The kaorak sealed back shut without me even asking it to, which was good, because there were men in the grove now, as

I turned around. Each of them was wearing thick armored leathers and carrying blades.

“Who are you?” one of them demanded.

“Wyrval the Green.” Naming myself a mage, even though I hadn’t yet Ascended, was the only ploy I had that might make them turn.

“No, you’re not. If you were, you would’ve portaled, rather than let us chase you.” The same man snorted and spit on the ground. “Where’s the girl? Where’s the baby?”

If Frenel was still crying inside the kaorak, I could not hear him. “I portaled them away from here.”

“More lies,” he said, shaking his head in savage disapproval. “I don’t have anything against you or your master. That said, however, I don’t have any problems with killing you, either.” He waved one of his men forward, to do so, as another of the men started howling, far louder than Frenel could.

He was howling because his neighbor had had his head twisted off.

“Did you think I was only good for making baskets?” Xelrim shouted, coming into the grove, eyeing the situation at once.

Another one of the fighters’ heads popped right off as Xelrim’s gaze passed over him, flying up into the air in an easy arc, hitting the low bough of a tree, and then falling to the ground to stare blankly at everyone as the body it’d belonged to crumpled and fell to its knees, blood pouring out of its neck hole.

A different fighter screamed at this, and started running— Xelrim felled him, too, then whipped his attention back.

“I only need one of you to take your highborn lord a message—who should it be?” he asked, then killed the next two tallest men without waiting for their answer.

“I’ll do it! I’ll do it!” the last living fighter swore as Xelrim grunted.

“Well, go on, then,” he said, and when the man didn’t move fast enough, he shouted, “Get!”

The fighter ran off like a frightened dog, as Xelrim finally faced me. “Where are they?” he demanded, still ridden by his anger.

“Safe!” I swore. *I hope!* I added mentally, setting my hands to the kaorak’s trunk. *Give the ones I love back, please,* I asked, more nicely than I had for anything in my life. The trunk parted slowly, shedding splinters as it cracked, and my little family was revealed.

Shayla ducked out into the circle of my arms, beneath the forest’s dappled sun. She was streaked with golden kaorak sap and covered in the downy dry material that comprised its innermost core. Whatever had needed laundering or combing before could now be safely blamed on the situation, and as she looked at me—

“You saved us, Val,” she said in quiet awe—but I couldn’t easily move my hands to hold her.

They’d become pressed to the bark, as things that were plant-like began to weave through me. I could feel the tree and myself exchanging essences—the price of my plant magic clearly being me, merging with one.

I yanked myself back, feeling small intrusive tendrils tear my palms, but I didn’t let anything show, other than the end of my fear and my highly reasonable deep exhaustion.

“You are great, boy.” I felt the unexpected touch of Xelrim’s hand on my shoulder, his fingers firmly clasping me with a shake. “See?”

But all I saw were Shayla’s eyes, and in their reflection, the final death of the man I’d never become.



THE FIRE HADN'T INJURED OUR HOME ALL THAT MUCH, BUT it'd taken out a wide swath of the fields and much of the barn, and it took us days to set things right and scrub out all the smoke. No one came for the bodies of the fighters, so we'd just left them in the grove—the forest floor would claim them all in time.

Xelrim was omnipresent, understandably, hovering, concerned that so much had befallen us on his first time away—and he was doubly hard about my studying now, chasing me off to green places every chance he got—which meant I had precious little alone time with Shayla.

At least I knew this fact pained her, too—I could tell from the longing looks she gave me, and how close she came any brief time he wasn't around.

Things came to a head while Xelrim was cooking one evening. "I need you to fill me. Tonight," Shayla said beneath her

breath, sounding stern, coming close as she set the table, while holding Frenel.

I'd felt better about Xelrim's poor hearing before I'd witnessed him murder five fighters. But I needed her just as badly, too. "Tonight," I agreed, my voice hoarse at the thought. "Every time I think of you I start to swell."

A forgiving smile crossed her lips, turning them impudent. "Good."

So I spent all of dinner considering my options.

We couldn't go to the barn; I wasn't done rebuilding it, and it was too cold to just take Frenel outside and leave him away from the heat of our bodies, but we couldn't risk leaving him inside on his own.

Which meant that we were going to have to somehow join beneath Xelrim's very roof without him knowing. There was no way it wouldn't be risky, but while I liked my head attached to my neck very much, my root liked Shayla's cunt more.

She went upstairs when dinner was over, giving me a steamy look, and I finished the last of my chores like nothing was afoot, and went upstairs, too, walking past her door.

She'd left it open for me.

It was all I could do to not detour in right now, but I already had a plan . . . and I'd inadvertently been practicing.

I waited that night until I could hear Xelrim's snores, and then I got out of my bed and crept down to her floor, letting myself in. I heard her breathing change the moment she spotted me by moonlight, as I stepped up to her bedside—she'd been waiting up for me.

“I need you,” she whispered, running a telling hand against her nightdress, to squeeze between her thighs.

“I need you, too—but I’m not allowed to touch you. Xelrim’s been very clear.”

She made a quiet sound, letting me know what she thought about that and I softly chuckled. “I will be over here, equidistant between you and the baby,” I explained quietly, standing between her and the crib at the side of the bed, near one of the corners. “So I can say I heard him crying and came down to help, if we get caught.”

Her full lips fell into a pout that I heard in her voice. “And what about helping me, Val?”

“Don’t worry. Just take off your dress and lie down.”

I watched her deliciously wriggle to do as she’d been told, while I waited nearby, and when she was through, she turned to me expectantly.

“Shhhh,” I counseled, putting a finger in front of my lips, then warned “Don’t scream” as I reached for her bedpost.

I’d spent some of my studies since I’d last touched her figuring out just how it was my magic worked—how much of myself I could give away before I had to steal it back.

And the answer was very much indeed.

Shayla’s bed was made of wood that’d been long dead, but it was nothing for me now to bring it back to life, especially as brimming with it as I was at the thought of being in her. I felt it answer me, taking the essence of myself as I channeled it into flourishing and growing—as parts of me were, now—until the gently rounded finial at the end of the bedpost rose up, and I willed it to snake towards her.

Shayla's eyes were wide in the moonlight, and she was already breathing hard, watching me . . . and for my part, I was glorying in my power.

I put my other hand to her bed's lowest railing, channeling more of my energy through, until all of her bedposts had turned into vines that were angling for her body.

"Val," she mouthed quietly, as the nearest one wrapped around her ankle and began winding its way up her leg.

I longed to follow the trail it made with my kisses, but until I could, I would obey the letter of Xelrim's law, if not the spirit—and it reported back to me everything it experienced on its path. The smoothness of her skin, the light salt of her day upon it, the way her flesh gave and rippled as it squeezed—I realized when it was halfway up her leg how I was about to experience her and started to breathe deeply.

Before, in the barn, I'd been confined to whatever of her I could touch, what my mouth could taste, what my body could know.

But now . . . I could almost envelope her whole.

One of the vines grasped for her arm like a tendril to hold it over her head, another bound her waist, and the fourth sought for the perfection that lay between her legs.

She bravely opened herself up for me, feeling the rounded finial nudge her with a gasp.

I let go of the bedpost and grasped hold of the railing, knowing I was going to need it to hold myself up soon. "Let me enter you," I whispered at her.

"Please," she said, letting her knees fall open and exposing herself to me.

I wanted to climb over the railing and bury my face in her taste, but what was happening now was the next best thing—I felt the finial press in in my stead.

It pushed her walls open, starting to rub inside, and reported everything back to me.

Her heat, her tension, her lubrication's viscosity, every fingersbreadth of space it gained—while all the while other pieces of me were still twining with her, tasting her, feeling her struggle and then give. The weight of a thigh, the curve of her belly, the softness of her hair—vines sprouted vines sprouted more, until it was like I was subsuming her inside me.

I wrapped a breast and caressed it at the same time as I wound a delicately boned arm and vines made of my magic cupped her ass. I lifted her up, holding her legs wide, keeping her beautifully spread, and the part of me that fucked her with my magic was better than even my root could've been.

My root couldn't feel the subtle ridges of her walls as it compressed them like this new one that was a part of me—and then ridge itself to fit her. It couldn't taste her with each of its strokes as like my vine could.

And while I had worked some magic with my root inside her the barn, that had been mostly unconscious, unknowing, but here and now—I leaned over the railing and whispered, “Ready yourself for me.”

Shayla writhed in response, throwing an arm across her mouth to bite against my vines, as I started leaking eager green sap inside her.

I was watching her, feeling her, tasting her—and I felt myself unfurling.

I had seen all sorts of plants propagate before—spitting seeds and alluring insects—and now I knew how I would do it, too.

The finial inside her bulged, swelling, stretching, ripening, fit to burst, and I heard her give a breathy moan as she fought against me—not to get free, but losing herself entirely. I turned it lightly, spinning its blunt tip, working it this way and that, dancing it inside her, while filled her up with girthy strokes and she started kicking against me.

I wrapped her tighter still, as she gave herself over bit by bit, her hips and head flailing in her bed until I'd lifted her up entirely, cradling her just for me, using her for pleasure. One of her hands clawed around a vine, while the other'd managed to reach down and hold the part of me that was throbbing into her, stroking my length with her palm, and everything in me wanted to blow—all I needed first was her going.

I felt her twist, I felt her squeeze, I felt her heat rise, and her juices release, all of her shifting to the brink and then she relaxed with a quiet whine—the only place of her that had strength left was her perfect hot cunt as it trapped me—

But I didn't mind.

Mage or man—I belonged inside her.

The tip of my vine finally bloomed, blunt petals from the finial tugging against her walls, keeping her open as her sweet cunt fought to close, and I shot my load.

She whispered my name, thrashing, and wrapped in me like she was it was like I was holding her in the palm of my hand. “Val—Val—Val—” she hissed, naming each wave to me, as I bathed her in my green.

And for a long moment, we were a creature in perfect synchrony, me giving and her taking, as I surged and she

surged back. I may not have gotten the future I wanted, but the future I had, I'd earned, and I knew I would stay there, with her, inside her or at her side, now and forever, for as long as I was capable of making her feel loved and good.

Then her body collapsed and my magic stuttered and I knew that for tonight at least, we were out of time.

I glided her back to her bed and released her with great reluctance, slowly undoing all the things my magic had done, retracting myself from her, turning her bedposts into mere wood again, even if one of them glistened.

"Val," she whispered, when I had contained myself again, back into my mannish form. I ripped my hands away from her bed, and my feet up from her floor, disconnecting myself from the natural world, but every moment of the pain was manageable because it was entirely worthwhile.

"I love you," I whispered, because I hadn't been able to say it since our time in the forest. "You, and Frenel."

She gave me a dreamy smile by the moonlight. "I love you, too. And so does Frenel, if he knows what's good for him." I bit back a laugh, as she rose up on her elbows. "Val, what would've happened to us if you had died?"

I knew she meant when she and Frenel were trapped inside the tree trunk. "I don't know," I said honestly. "I can't claim to have thought that far."

It didn't seem to faze her. "You're still new at this. I know you'll get better."

"Better than this?" I whispered, gesturing to her bed. My sap was dark on her skin by the moonlight, and I could see light marks on her where some of my vines had rubbed.

“I’m certain,” she teased, lying back down and snuggling into her bedding.

I strode up to the head of her bed and leaned over, daring to trace the backs of my knuckles against her cheek. “How did you know it was true?” I asked her, as she caught my hand there with her own.

“What?”

“My . . . greatness?” I felt silly claiming it, although after what I’d just accomplished, it could hardly be denied.

I both felt and heard her laugh quietly, her eyes finding mine. “You look like this now, you ride me like you do, and yet there is still some part of you that is still a silly boy.”

I knelt down so I was level with her face. “A silly boy who loves you—so please give him an answer.”

She wriggled to the side of the bed, and blessed my lips with a gentle kiss. “I didn’t leave because I was afraid you were going to be great, Val,” she said when she pulled back. “I left because I knew you already were.”

It was my heart’s turn to bloom at hearing that—and then we both heard Xelrim loudly stomping in his room beneath us.

“I felt you using magic, boy! You’d better not be doing what I think you’re doing with it!” he shouted, and both of us tensed.

“Run away!” Shayla hissed and giggled, and I sprung up, ready to escape, then paused.

“Tomorrow night?” I asked her quickly, and all of her being lit up as she smiled.

“Of *course*.”



Thank you for reading A Wooden Heart! Wyrval the Green is an important side character in my Transformation Trilogy, set a few thousand years in the future, beginning with [Bend Her: A Dark Beauty and the Beast Fantasy Romance](#)—it's the story of Rhaim the All-Beast, a cruel beast mage doomed to die at the hands of the woman he must protect at all costs, and Lisane, the sheltered Princess of Tears, who has been given into his care and who needs him to teach her magic so she can be free—no matter how much it might hurt her.

And if you'd like to see art from this story, please sign up for my newsletter at <http://www.cassiealexander.com/newsletter!>



THIS TIME, IT WAS LIKE A LONG SLOW SLIDE INTO SOMETHING better between them, one of them there to give, one of them there to take.

I twisted my head to catch Jo's mouth in mine, and heard Reeve make a deep sound of approval, as he gave a heavier shove.

"She's gonna open up and take me and I'm going to come on the spot from watching you two," he complained. I saw Jo flip him off out of the corner of my eye and I laughed, and then Reeve grunted. "Oh lamb—I'm so fucking so close—fucking —yes—" he hissed as I groaned into Jo's mouth as Reeve's hips met mine and my eyes rolled back.

Jo stopped kissing me. "You okay?"

"Yeah," I gasped. "Just—*full*." There was already so much pressure built up inside me—I felt combustible.

Reeve ground his hips against mine. "Oh, lamb, lamb, lamb—when you come, it's gonna feel so good. I can already tell your

tight little cunt's gonna try to squeeze me out." He made a snarling sound and brought his knees closer to the two of us. "Kiss him more, lamb—it's like watching my own goddamned porno while I fuck."

I was incapable of doing anything else. Jo took his arm from around me and ran his fingers into my hair, to hold me still for his lips and tongue, while Reeve started to rock into me, grinding Jo's fingertips against my clit.

"I promise I'll be careful," Reeve swore, and then he started to actually thrust. I moaned, feeling nerves light up that I didn't even know I had, as the thick girth of his cock slickly pulled out and pushed into my entrance, and then the head of it, oh God, the head of it, ran up against everything *right* inside, before landing deep. I fought free from Jo to rise up so I could look down, in sex-high awe. "I've got you," he said, with a hint of triumph. "See? You're ours now."

I could feel Jo's abs, tensing beneath me—and I wondered how it felt for him, still inside my ass, if he could feel Reeve's movement too.

"I'm gonna stroke too," he warned me, and then started to thrust.

I couldn't make words; I just started moaning. Reeve would piston in, in short, fast strokes, while Jo began taking longer, delicious strokes in my ass, and his fingertips kept rubbing me, while Reeve's mouth had caught one of my breasts.

It was everything, all at once, my whole body on overload. I wanted it to last for forever, but the truth was I wouldn't make it. "I'm—I'm—gonna come," I warned them, and they both growled, pumping faster, so they could push me over.

“Fucking take us with you, lamb,” Reeve grunted, pounding into me, making both Jo and I shake with his ferocity. “I wanna feel your pussy.”

“Lizzy—Reeve—” Jo warned, from beneath us both.

“Not yet,” Reeve snarled. “Lamb comes first.”

The thing was, all of a sudden, I didn’t know if I could. I’d reached some strange high plateau of dizzy pleasure, where my blood was ringing in my ears and pulsing in my cunt. “I—” I began, trying to figure out how to explain where their attentions had taken me too, when Jo’s finger pulled at my clit like it was a tripwire, the same time as his cock thrust, and Reeve shoved—I exploded.

I started screaming, flailing between them, my nails clawing on Reeve’s shoulders, my hips thrashing, taking each of them in turns.

“Fuuuuckkk,” Jo groaned, like he was hurt.

“Fill her *up*,” Reeve commanded.

I didn’t think I could take anymore—I couldn’t even breathe. My legs were wrapped around Reeve’s hips, my heels clattering against each other while he fucked me with heavy grunts and then I felt both of us bounced by the force of Jo’s thrusts from below, and heard him groan.

“Fuck—yes—my *not*,” he gasped, his knees bent, him holding us high, as an entirely new sensation emanated from where he was taking my asshole, me stretched in all sorts of new ways, all at once. I squeaked in surprise and then moaned.

“Oh, Jo,” Reeve said. “I feel your *not* in her. *Fuck*, that feels *right*.” He made a snarling sound above us both, still thrusting. “Feels so good on my dick. I don’t want to stop.”

“If we keep her, you won’t ever have to,” Jo said.

Reeve grunted, and then moved to kiss me, arching his hips in deep. “Lamb—hang on.”

His hands bunched into the sleeping bag beneath Jo and I, as he started stroking in earnest, all of me pulled absolutely taut. I could swear I felt his dick get harder inside me, and I didn’t think I was the only one.

“Reeve,” Jo moaned. “It’s never been like this.”

“Cause we never been with her,” Reeve answered, rising up and thrusting forward. “Here I come, lamb,” he said, warning me, just like he’d warned Jo the prior night. “Here. I. Come.” He thrust and he grunted after that, and I knew he was shooting a surge of hot cum deep inside me—I could feel his thick cock jerk against my walls—and then—

“I’ve got you,” Jo said, holding me again, as Reeve panted.

“Fuck—fuck—” the bigger man hissed, ridden by the end of his orgasm. “Lamb, I’m going to knot you so full—Jo—hold her steady—*fuck!*”

It was the first time I realized what they’d been saying, as Reeve’s cock filled me up, not only with cum, but with pressure, pressing my walls out in all directions. I gasped in surprise and tried to pull back, but Jo kept me in place.

“It’s okay, it’s okay, it’s okay,” he promised, one arm holding me tight, the other soothing his hand all over my body.

“What’s happening?” I whispered, my voice going high. I was trapped on both of them, unable to get free, a cock pinned in each hole. Reeve was bent over, holding himself up with one arm still, breathing hard.

“We knotted you, Lizzy. Because you’re ours. And we don’t want you to get away.”

I started shaking my head and didn’t stop shaking it. “I don’t understand.” I wriggled my hips, but I couldn’t get free—and if I thought I’d felt full before, I’d had no idea what the word even meant till now.

“That’s why we’re here. Why we’re showing you. Are you all right?”

Was I? I was trembling all over, like my body knew something about me now that I didn’t.

“Lamb,” Reeve went on, “when we first picked you up, I didn’t even think we’d fuck you. But the way you smell . . . the way you feel, the way you react to us . . .”

Jo pushed hair out of his way and kissed my temple. “The moon sent you to me and Reeve.”

Reeve gave Jo a smile and bent down to kiss him and I felt his knot rock inside me as he did so, pulling against the entrance of my pussy, and grinding inside against Jo’s knot inside my ass. “I’m not superstitious like my mate here,” Reeve said, when he rose up. “But my body? I believe.”

“M . . . ate?”

“Yeah, lamb. We’re wolves. Most times we mate for life. But sometimes you get lucky and expand your pack.”

“And that’s how we’re going to solve your problems,” Jo said. “All you have to do is let Reeve bite you in wolf form, tomorrow night. Then you’ll feel like shit for a few days, but by the next full moon, you’ll be good as new.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing—but I also couldn’t believe that they were both still trapped inside me.

“That’s . . . it?”

“Yep. ’Cept for the part where you come live with us,” Reeve said.

“And we fuck you morning, noon, and night.” Jo chuckled.

“But maybe we can talk you into getting rid of that IUD I feel up there,” Reeve said with a smile—a true one, now that I was on the inside of his life, and I was allowed to see it.

“I want kids,” Josiah said, emphatically, and Reeve chuckled.

“And I don’t want to get a callus on the end of my dick from bumping up against the strings.”

“That’s insane,” I said, because it absolutely was.

“Yeah? Does this feel insane to you?” Reeve asked lightly, rocking his hips back and forth, and dragging me with him.

“Fuck, Reeve,” Jo breathed.

“It’s just—how am I supposed to believe all this?” I asked him, reaching up to frame his face with both my hands.

“Easy, lamb,” Reeve said, his voice the soul of kindness.

“Don’t think too hard. Just feel.”

I swallowed. Being here . . . as crazy as all this was . . . felt right.

And I was full to the brim of both of them, they weren’t normal, there was no denying it.

“And you both want me? Really?” I asked, my voice quiet and high.

“Oh, Lizzy,” Jo said in response, as Reeve nodded gravely.

“Jo here’s been looking for you for so long he’d almost given up.”

“And you?” I asked Reeve.

“I figured I’d take what I could get, if it was offered. I usually don’t hope.”

“He’s a liar. He does. He just can’t tell anyone about it,” Jo said. “But he wants you too—”

“Course I do,” Reeve said, staring down at me. “Every wolf wants to find his lamb.”

I couldn’t help it, I started crying again, and put my hands to my face to try and hide it. “That’s ridiculous. You two—this whole thing—it’s ridiculous. I can’t believe it.” But I was laughing as I said it, because for the first time in who knew how long, I was starting to feel whole.

Reeve balanced himself on both hands over me. “Stick around till tomorrow night and you will.”

I made a little show of trying to leave. “Doesn’t seem like I have much choice,” I teased, giggling, wiping away happy tears.

“The knots’ll loosen up in ten minutes or so,” Jo promised, kissing my temple again.

“What does it feel like to you?” I asked, doing my best to look between them.

Jo took a moment to think. “Coming is one thing, and it feels good—but knotting someone else—it’s special.”

“Yeah,” Reeve agreed. “Feels like you’re holding me tight. Like you want me.” He tugged gently again, making Jo and I softly rock. “Like you’re never letting go.”

I bit my lips before answering, “Because I’m not.” I knew I meant it as I said it—and I did the only thing that made sense

in the moment, I flung my arms out and up at the big man—*wolf? I guessed I'd see tomorrow!*—for a hug.

Reeve made an accommodating sound, and slowly lowered himself, pleasantly crushing both Jo and I below. “I know it, sweet lamb. I know it.”



Thanks for reading *Camping Trip*! If you liked it, you should sign up for my [newsletter](#) to see hot NSFW art of Lizzy, Reeve, and Jo in the final scene!

And if you like the heat level and are interested in more delightful perversions, you should check out my Dark Ink Tattoo series, which begins with [Blood of the Pack](#)—which is like if *Sons of Anarchy* met *True Blood*, where everyone's a vampire, a werewolf, and bi—and it's free everywhere!

About the Author

Cassie Alexander is a registered nurse and author, who loves heart, heat, and blood.

She's written numerous paranormal romances, sometimes with her friend Kara Lockharte. She lives in the Bay Area with one husband, two cats, and one million succulents. Sign up for Cassie's mailing list at cassiealexander.com/newsletter to get free books, bonus scenes, character art, and cat photos!



A WELL-KEPT SECRET

VERA VALENTINE



WELCOME TO THE KINGDOM

In Western Barrett, murmurs of magic are as plentiful as the land's famous apple orchards. Tirasande, a down-on-her-luck thief that's recently found herself alone, decides to strike out in search of a well rumored to be filled with fortune. The trouble is, that fortune is living, breathing, and rather possessive of whatever makes its way down his well. In the pages of this fanciful and lusty fairy tale you'll find familiar themes like hurt and comfort, touch her and die (or worse, depending on your feelings re: manhood), I licked it so it's mine, and a little of the ol' "I'm gonna tie you up for your own protection."

Wink wink.

For sensitive readers, a gentle caution that this story contains a woman injuring herself, threats of violence (to FMC, not by MC), implied threats of sexual violence (to FMC, not by MC), sexual assault (unwanted kissing forced on FMC, not by MC), bondage with rope, unprotected sex, magical ejaculation, an extruded dragon penis (sing it with me now - cock pocket!),

clothes being ripped/cut off, and a bit of a wish kink going on.

Oh, and a few dicks fall off right towards the end. (Don't worry, they'll grow back.)

I hereby dedicate this story to all the men out there smart enough to beguile your women with cheese.



IT WAS MIDDAY, MOSS-FANG REALIZED, CRACKING ONE SCALED eye open gingerly. The overhead slant of light had crept up the stone wall to the divot that looked like a misshapen rabbit. That meant it was time to rouse himself and feed. The small pile of worn, patina-caked coins in the corner of his circular home was, however, growing pitifully small. While his draconic half rejoiced at the gleaming mound of gold just beside the dwindling pile, his djinn side felt only dread as the bounty of freshly-cleaned discs grew.

Reverently plucking one of the dirty, green-grey coated coins up from the smaller pile, he swiped a talon-tipped thumb through the moist grime, a glint of gold shimmering up through the scratch. Like the sigh of a breeze, a horse found its way into the stables of a desperately-struggling landholder. Or, at least, what had been a desperately-struggling landowner's stable at some point. For all Moss-fang knew, the man that had pressed his wish into the precious coin was buried centuries

ago, his children's-children's-children prosperous enough to be puzzled by the appearance of an unexpected horse.

The djinn gave way to the dragon in Moss-fang's heart as the wish was granted, relief settling in from the tip of his horns to the curl of his finned tail. He greedily took up the cloth and brush he kept - both tattered with age and use - to restore the coin to its former glory, polishing it until it shone as brightly as the others. Balancing it on a curled thumb, he grinned softly as he flicked it end-over-end, greedily admiring the golden glint of wan sunlight as it joined the others with a soft metallic ring. *His hoard.*

The well had been *home* for more years than he cared to count, and while his tail had grown longer, the space was still more than comfortable enough for his needs. In here, it was dark and quiet, save for the bird song that gently echoed off the walls, and the melodic drip of water and rain. Out *there* were endless collections of dangers and difficulties: baying hounds on the hunt, murderous "collectors" of creatures like himself, eager to take his skin to create priceless magical accessories. Hybrids in particular were highly sought after, his fathers had always warned him, particularly those with djinn blood, as that same blood was mistakenly rumored to grant immortality when mixed with wine. While those whispers happened mainly across distant oceans, their threat always seemed to loom.

With that warning ringing in his ears, Moss-fang retreated to the well many ages ago. So long as he watched the bucket in the extremely rare cases it was lowered, he stayed hidden and safe, an idea of myth rather than something to be culled as magical fodder. For now, his hunger sated, he curled up into a coiled pile in his favorite corner to rest again. The less time he was active, the longer it would be before he needed another coin to sustain him.

Overhead, the rambunctious caws and rustling of a raven flock echoed down to him ominously in the dim. He didn't want to dwell on what would happen when he needed to take up the last coin, when his magic was weak enough that he might not even be able to appear properly human anymore.

To say nothing of needing to go...out there.

Moss-fang shuddered at the thought, closing his eyes against the rising panic in his softly-scaled belly and willing himself back to sleep.



TIRA'S LUNGS HURT ALMOST AS MUCH AS HER BODY DID. THE strain of fording the wildly-overgrown forest path was reflected in every slash, scrape, and bruise earned from wrestling in this far. This was a stupid flight of fancy on her part, chasing down a whispered legend to burn off her frustrations.

They'd done a job *without her*. It was bad enough Brenna with her stupid golden curls and giggly voice had enchanted Ardin, but Tira had made her peace with that when she found them together last harvest season. He'd chosen and it wasn't Tira - sure, it stung, and yes, she'd cried privately, but they were all adults. Well, mostly anyway, a scant few years outside of their teenage years. Regardless, Tira had gotten over it, at least enough for resentment not to show.

But theft? They were supposed to be a *team*. They didn't have many rules - no killing, no stealing from anyone but nobles -

but one of the biggest unspoken ones was that they did what they did *together*. At least Ardin had the decency to look sheepish; Brenna had looked downright haughty when she admitted that Tira had been crowded out on their last job. Not only was it galling, it was stupid: three sets of eyes made it that much less likely they'd be ambushed, that the job would go sideways.

Tira's mistake had been getting into her cups and telling both of them exactly *how* stupid she thought it was, out loud. She'd woken up alone and hungover in their erstwhile tavern room after that, Brenna and Ardin's rucksacks and belongings gone. Worse, the flip-knife she'd given Ardin last Yule was left carefully in the center of the table, clearly being returned to her. Three years of running jobs together, traveling together, living in dingy tavern room after dingy tavern room together, gone in an instant. Not even a letter to say goodbye. The energy of their trio had shifted when Brenna and Ardin made their pairing official, but Tira hadn't realized how much until it was too late.

The innkeeper had given Tira a sympathetic look when she asked after her traveling companions, explaining that they'd left together before sunrise. The man of the pair had come back a few moments later and slipped a coin onto the counter to pay out the week on their room, the innkeeper offered, an act that made Tira feel marginally better. At least Ardin had tried to do right by her in some small way, though she was sure Brenna was entirely unaware of his altruism.

The town they'd abandoned her in couldn't have been a worse staging ground for solo redistribution of wealth. The landholders and dukes of the region didn't live this far inland, and she heard murmurings in the tavern that even they weren't exactly prosperous to begin with. When Tira had discreetly

inquired about work with a few rough-looking brigands, she'd gotten boozy guffaws for her trouble, along with sneering encouragement to go 'petition the well.' Tira gathered by context that this was the realm's charming colloquialism for fornicating with oneself. Seeing her irritation, the sympathetic innkeeper had quietly shared the local legend by way of consolation. A wishing well, he explained, was supposedly hidden deep in the nearby forest. A place where ancient kings and princes had made offerings long ago, lost to the ages and rumored to be filled with both treasure and a fearsome otherworldly guardian.

Less enticed by the prospect of making a magical wish than the pile of gold the superstitious royal idiots had likely hurled down there, Tira made a choice. She'd pour her frustrations into a hunt for this alleged well, rather than chasing fruitlessly after her disloyal companions. And it was that decision that led to her current predicament, wrestling with unruly vines trying to take liberties any tavern girl would charge at least two coppers for.

The problem was, Tira had already been searching for hours. Not only had she failed to find anything remotely resembling a clearing in name or description, she was also hopelessly lost. She didn't know the wilds in this region, if their night beasts were of the reasonably-harmless winged variety or if wolves lurked at the edges of the twilight. Without a structure to huddle up in, Tira had only her small rucksack and cloak, the latter a bit too thin to turn away heavy rain or persistent chill.

She was not the sort of woman given to hopelessness, but trying times sometimes called for deviation. The crying had started as an unbidden whine, breaking like a dropped egg into full-on sobbing that blurred the trees and vines around her. It was almost like the forest was trying to suffocate and swallow

her whole, and even her self-made path seemed to be obscuring itself and turning her around.

“I wish this fucking well was easier to find!” Tira screeched with evaporated patience, snapping a few vines with an aggressive swipe of her arm. As if those slender green stems had been acting as curtain-stays, the forest fell away to either side of her with a *whump* of crackling leaves and broken twigs, revealing a pristine deer-run of a path. Narrow, yes, but so clear it looked as if a farmer had dug out an irrigation trench only an hour ago.

Tira hugged herself under her cloak, sniffing and raising a brow at the unexpected appearance of good fortune. Years as a thief had taught her how to take advantage of luck as quickly as possible, but several close calls had honed her skepticism like a flip-blade in the process. Straining her ears and eyes, she picked up nothing around her that was out of place - a few fat squirrels, a raucous cawing of ravens that indicated no predators were nearby. Adjusting her rucksack, she trudged down the narrow path, gaze flicking upwards to the lofty canopy of the forest as she moved, waiting for the other boot-sole to drop.



DEEP IN THE DARK, A *FEELING* STIRRED IN MOSS-FANG'S chest. It was very similar to the *feeling* of holding one of the still-wished coins, but it seemed alive somehow, moving and stretching and growing, just at the edges of his perception. The weak satiation of his hunger snuffed out like a blown candle, the ache in his chest more powerful than ever before, eager to find the source.

As he'd slept, the afternoon light had fallen far below the rabbit-shaped divot and was now creeping across the well floor, leaving Moss-fang disoriented. He never woke after a morning feed, and the smell of the air told him it was still the same day. Panic reared up again, along with an insatiable hunger that made the small pile of still-wished coins look like little more than a morsel, even collectively. A low growl rumbled in his throat, the long-dormant aggression of his dragon nature asserting itself in response to heightened emotion.

As Moss-fang was attempting to sort out the *feeling* that swelled in his chest, a loud rustling and a few colorful curses floated down his well walls. He couldn't make out much aside from a feminine tone of irritation, but one word rang through him like a struck bell: *wish*.

How long had it been since the humans had last dropped his beloved coins down the echoing stone walls? The clearing above had grown snarled and tangled with vegetation, the peaked wooden roof of his well crumbled and dry-rotted half away. Years, surely. Decades, more likely - perhaps even several generations. Moss-fang didn't keep a record of the passage of time as his lineage and reclusive nature made it largely unnecessary.

Coiling his tail beneath him, Moss-fang glanced upwards, squinting through the late afternoon sunlight at the bucket he'd tied up earlier. There wasn't much housekeeping to be done when you lived in a well, but he did try to keep things tidy in his home, and that meant occasionally scouring the bucket with rainwater and making sure the rope was strong and whole. Like the pile of still-wished coins, his supply of clean, dry rope had dwindled one splice or replacement at a time over the years. Nearly gone now, at least the rope currently laced through the sturdy pulley overhead was fresh and new.

A soft gasp broke the murmur of the forest at the mouth of the well, and Moss-fang stared wide-eyed at the illuminated circle overhead, his heart tripping over itself as his silky-scaled palms glittered with anxious magic. Moments later, a shadow - the first one larger than a raccoon in countless years - broke the perfect window of light. Moss-fang's heartbeat pounded as he slammed his back against the damp stone wall, tugging his tail along the curved edge, desperate to stay out of sight. The long-ago princes and kings, they'd shown reverence: they

never bent over the edge of the well, never let their curiosity override their good sense of superstition.

He was a *dragon*, for God's sakes. Something to be feared, to be approached with dreaded reverence, never gazed on directly, spoken of in whispers. That was the way of things in his fathers' time, as it had been throughout Moss-fang's.

Until now.

When the rope swayed and the pulley creaked, Moss-fang relaxed, preparing himself to fill the bucket with water. This was familiar, this was safe, and this was something he could do without leaving the well. When the coins eventually stopped tumbling down, poor travelers and beggars would still occasionally come to his well for its original purpose: a clean drink of water. While the last visitor had been so long ago he could barely recall the man's tuneless humming, those humans had at least kept their focus on the bucket alone. No prying, no questions, no searching eyes or lowered lanterns, just grateful acceptance that the well still provided.

The rope's slack suddenly let out, sending the bucket plummeting downwards with a distressed squeaking of the pulley. It was swinging too far wide, and if nothing stopped it it would smash to bits on the edge of the pool below. Without thinking, Moss-fang dove forward as it cleared the lower edge, propelled by a push off his powerful coiled tail, pushing the bucket slightly inward before it dashed to pieces on the ground, sending it splashing roughly into the water instead. Shortly after, a noise he'd never heard the pulley make echoed overhead, the light of the well-mouth dimming just before another sharp, inventive curse floated down. It took him a long moment of glancing at the curious way the rope swung, slow and heavy, side to side, to realize what was going on.

Someone was coming down into his well.

The wet bucket slid from his hands with a soft thunk, and Moss-fang's muscles heaved as he pushed himself back into the wall, heart hammering, breath catching, eyes locked to the swaying rope. The dim of his home faded as anxious magic prickled along his lightly-scaled arms, miniscule golden-glowing droplets that pushed the darkness away. The childhood warnings of magical bounty hunters echoed in his skull, sending his tail fins flaring in distress.

No no no no no.



FORTUNE EVIDENTLY FAVORED TIRA TODAY. SHE WAS PLEASED, if puzzled, to find a new, sturdy rope woven through the pulley above the disused well. Nothing else in the clearing appeared to have been touched; at least not until her frustrated arm-swipe had caused the tangled greenery to collapse like a sword-slashed drape. Ducking under the crumbling roof-edge, she peered down into the well, optimistically hoping for a glint of gold to greet her. She snorted at her own hope, reasoning that whoever had replaced the rope recently had likely already made off with anything of value. Squinting, Tira attempted to assess the depth of the ancient stone cistern, but the slanting afternoon light obscured the bottom.

Frowning at the puzzle before her, she swallowed against a painfully dry throat as she planned her next move. Inspiration sparked as she contemplated the wooden bucket, perched peacefully on the edge of the well with a slope of rope trailing from the handle. Pushing it in, she listened carefully for the splash of water, hoping to gauge the depth she'd be rappelling

down, if she could screw up the courage to descend. In her former trio, Ardin was the one that would be responsible for these daring acrobatics, while she and Brenna would handle things like transport and information-gathering as needed.

It wasn't that Tira was afraid of heights, moreso that she was afraid of experiencing them at high velocity in the opposite direction.

Stomach dropping with nausea, she carefully slid onto the well's edge, letting her booted feet dangle down into the dark. Knowing that she'd talk herself out of it if she hesitated, Tira lunged forward, grabbed the rope, and reflexively twined her leg around the slack beneath her to slow her descent.

Her mistake had been checking the strength and thickness of the rope itself, rather than considering the ancient pulley holding it aloft. When the rope-threaded wheel moved smoothly, the rotted wood it was attached to did as well. With a deafening *crack* and an answering scream, Tira was sent hurtling down into the darkness, the back of her head colliding with a slick stone wall along the way.

Every muscle in her body tensed on the way down, waiting for the frigid cushion of water to soak her through and hopefully ease the fresh, throbbing pain in her skull. That sick, dizzy feeling was back, radiating from the solid hit she'd taken as she plummeted downwards. Tira hazily realized she'd stopped falling and wasn't wet at all, and it took far too long to piece together that she'd be dead if the well were somehow dry. Perhaps she *was* dead. Death shouldn't have headaches like this though, that seemed patently unfair in the grand scheme of things. She groaned and clapped a palm to the back of her head, moving one of her feet to find it was hovering midair.

Was she flying? Why hadn't she hit the ground?

A steady grip curved around the side of her arm as she was shuffled lightly. As the mental fog cleared, Tira realized she was being carried by someone *strong* and there was a strange whispery sort of sound in the darkness.

Was that water? Then why hadn't...?

The dimming, blurry circle of the well-mouth swayed overhead as whoever was holding Tira moved, sending nausea to interrupt her disjointed thoughts. She groaned again, closing her eyes against the tilting, swirling darkness and drifting into blessedly headache-free unconsciousness.



THE BUCKET HAD BEEN IMPORTANT.

Even neglected as Moss-fang's well had become, it was a reminder of a *time before*, a physical token of the outside world. He had no wish to leave - well, that wasn't strictly true, it was more that the idea made him sick to his stomach - but he liked imagining he *could* if he really wanted to. The bucket was a reminder the option was available to him, should he ever care to take it. Losing it would have been crushing

While some of his actions after had been reflexive - unthinking, as pushing the bucket had been - not all of them were. The *feeling* from before seemed to fill his entire living space, growing and expanding as the woman fell towards certain death at the well bottom. The deep hole that held the well's water was smaller than her petite form, and the way she fell virtually guaranteed she'd meet rocky ground at all the wrong angles.

And so Moss-fang had caught her. He'd pushed beyond his deafening dread, the sickening twist in his stomach at the thought of *outside*, and caught her easily. Once she'd settled heavily into his arms, the pulley crashing and clattering after her, he'd stood frozen, waiting for her to move, to scream.

The smell of copper - that same metallic tang that clung to some of his coins - infused the air around him. He had not held another living thing in an incredibly long time, but this one - this little human that seemed to be the source of the *feeling* - was far too still. Something was wrong.

He moved slowly towards his sleeping pallet and she stirred, sluggishly, her hand clumsily patting at her head. Her foot twitched and then she hung across his arms even heavier than before, as if she'd fallen fast asleep. Her head lolled against his chest as he sank down, carefully sliding her onto the pile of fine silks and draperies he'd fashioned into a nest-like bed.

Panic choked his throat at the change of *her* in his place of sanctuary, his solitude scattered like so many cawing birds in the forest above. His hands shook - some mighty dragon he was. So long secluded that his hoard had seen more of the world, of the sun, than he had in many years prior. Even the most well-traveled of his coins was aged now, a relic like himself, a spot of unnatural beauty in the ruins of what-once-was.

Straightening after setting the woman down, Moss-fang startled at the streak of crimson painting his chest and bicep, sparkling in the light of his own anxious magic. It was so prolific, he worried he'd been injured until he spotted a snarled, dampened patch of the woman's hair below him. No, *she* was wounded. The smell of coins was the long-forgotten scent of human blood, he realized belatedly - too much, too

fast. The fear of change and the unknown ebbed in favor of grief for the injured human in his nest. He'd seen a fair share of creatures fade - birds and squirrels that had fallen into the well as he slumbered - but never a human. In fact, there had been a few that he'd likely spared by ensuring water filled the bucket, currently tipped on its side and trailing frayed rope beside him.

He bit his full lower lip until it stung, indecision racing through him as he paced before his nest, his eyes locked on the placid face of the unconscious human. He could save her, but not with anything in here, and that meant - *out there*. He hesitantly bargained with himself, mentally counting the steps that would be required to reach the daggerleaf at the far edge of the clearing. It wasn't so far, was it? He wouldn't be *so* exposed, would he? He swallowed a painful lump in his throat, setting a shaking hand to the bottom edge of the well-wall, flexing talons against the stone.

With a sharp intake of breath and a push from his powerful tail, Moss-fang lifted his body up the well, gripping the damp edges of the rough-hewn blocks. Squinting against what remained of the sun as he hoisted himself up on the well edge, easily picking out the path through the clearing. Strange how open it seemed now that he'd emerged - as if some vines and trees had fallen away when he wasn't watching. He hustled to his destination and wasn't exceptionally careful with the palmful of daggerleaf he grabbed, eager to return to the safety of his home. No sooner had a sharp cut sliced across his palm then it was ironically soothed by the clear, sticky sap of the torn branches. The healing herb was a contradiction, like him: a gentle heart wrapped in the skin of a fearsome warrior.

Diving back headfirst into the well, he let his tail anchor him, draping it over the edge until he could brace his hands on the

walls on the descent. The relief of familiar surroundings washed over him like donning a cloak, and the tightness in his chest eased to manageable levels. The daggerleaf became even more smashed in the process of climbing down, but that was necessary for potency anyway.

Grabbing and frowning at the dirty cloth he used for coins, he dropped it in favor of tearing a strip from the softest fabric in the nest, dipping it into the clean well water. Crouching by the woman's body, he gingerly parted her sleek black hair with a talon, pressing the damp cloth against the wound. He was startled by her rough beauty - no princess, surely, but her delicate features radiated strength and determination even while relaxed in sleep. He wondered at the color of her eyes, and what her smile might look like. The wear of her boot soles and suntanned skin hinted at many days spent outdoors, potentially not for leisure's sake - perhaps she fit into the world no better than he did.

Shaking off his reverie, he smashed the daggerleaf with a thumb and pressed it to the wound, ensuring it left plenty of sap behind. She'd need time to recover, but the daggerleaf would prevent the wasting sickness as she did, and help the skin to knit. The last Moss-fang had overheard, the humans in the world above had become enamored of leeches, and had entirely forgotten the virtues of herbs like daggerleaf. No wonder humans were such fragile creatures - arrogance was a fatal disease.

Leeches. Honestly.

The little human would need food when she woke, he realized with a frown. He should have found some berries during his nerve-riddled excursion beyond the well, but he'd been too

anxious to get back. *Coward*, Moss-fang chided himself, feeling suddenly weak.

A shudder slid down his spine, making his tail tip lash with discomfort, his limbs feeling heavy now that the distraction of *new* had worn off. This was far more activity than he was used to, his days typically spent re-reading his modest library from the comfort of his nest.

Before he could really put higher thought to it, he'd grabbed another still-wished coin from the nearby stash and absorbed it. A good one, this wish put a sparkling necklace on the throat of some pampered foreign duchess, or at least someone in her lineage. Moss-fang sighed with satisfaction as strength returned to his limbs, curling up beside his nest and resting his head on the edge of the fabrics. He reasoned it was for comfort's sake, not to be closer to the little human that smelled of sun-warmed sage and a thankfully-fading note of copper.



TIRA FELT LIKE SHE'D BEEN RUN OVER BY A CARRIAGE. AND mauled by wolves. And possibly involved in a tavern brawl she'd somehow forgotten about.

What the hell happened?

The ache in her head throbbed, dull but persistent, and the pieces came slowly back to her - the strike against the wall, the broken rope, the *fall*. Icy fear skittered through her chest - she was stuck in a well no one had been able to find, her only way out snapped, and potentially in no condition to free-climb.

How long had she been down here? She flexed her feet, extraordinarily relieved but puzzled to find that nothing seemed to be broken. A hazy glance up at the well column left her even more confused - at that height, she ought to be dead.

Even more curious, the stone tube of the well didn't plunge into a pool of water, or even the ground, as she'd anticipated from above. Instead, it appeared to stop mid-air, ending at about the height of her brow, were she standing beside it. She

struggled to sit up to get a better look, fingers tightening curiously in the softness beneath her. It was dim, but even in the low light she could feel how fine these velvets and silks were: things that should definitely not be at the bottom of a disused well.

Squinting, she looked for whatever inconstant lantern was struggling to illuminate the dark, circular space around her. She could just barely make out the edges of shelves carved into the walls, set with small pottery jars, glittering gems that made her thieving little mouth water, and books with elegant leather spines.

Shuffling her legs under her ass, she pressed a hand blindly behind her, intending to rise. Rather than more cloth, her palm found something cool and firm, broader than her palm's span, a faint texture perceptible under her fingertips. Reflexively, Tira turned to look and swallowed a yelp of alarm: she wasn't alone.

The young man sprawled beside her on the generously-wide pallet was stunning - and the soft glow was emanating from him, somehow. Shirtless and asleep, his skin was a light brown tone that reminded her of pale autumn leaves, adorned with drops of golden illumination scattered like tiny constellations. The man's soft eyelashes were long and black against well-hewn cheekbones, his full lips softly parted in the center of a well-kept mustache and goatee the color of his lashes. Her eyes caught on the pointed, ridged shell of his ear, pierced with a few slender golden hoops, before traveling to the pair of short patina-green horns cresting his tousled black hair. Though partially obscured by a length of coppery satin, the serpent-like tail his torso narrowed into shocked her into silence. He - her evident savior - was a *beast*. A *monster*. The thick, scaled column of his lower half was adorned with

diaphanous fins along the edges, its tapered end curled companionably against her ankle.

Every muscle tensed, Tira tamped down the urge to scream and skitter away from the monster beside her. There had been rumors, fairy tales of otherworldly beings everywhere she'd traveled, but usually the only ones to vouch for the legends were tavern drunkards and doddering elders. She had no idea what manner of man - beast - whatever he was - currently had his tail looped over her ankle, but she had kept her head this long by avoiding anything *strange*.

Holding her breath as her heart hammered wildly, Tira eased off the pallet, moving her ankle by minute degrees until the finned tail coiled as if stretching, sloughing off her leg to the cloth below. She stared at the sleeping figure as she extricated herself, watching for the slightest twitch. Truthfully, it was also because she was fascinated by - and perhaps even attracted to - the strange, serpent-like features of him. Lightly touching her head to find the wound she remembered, a cool gel slicked between her fingertips, clear, with only the faintest pink of blood. Had she been treated? *Healed* by the strange man-creature? To what end?

Carefully ducking under the lip of the well's opening, Tira looked up to find a bright moon shining through a hole in the rotted wooden well roof. With a glance over her shoulder at the still-sleeping creature, Tira narrowed her focus to search for tools to help her escape. The rope had snapped - the broken pulley rested on the ground nearby.

Ah, there!

Across the circular room, a small bundle of rope sat, neatly hanked atop a few worn crates. Grabbing the broken pulley from the ground, Tira used the well's bottom edge to force the

metal covering open, bending it into a curve that could latch onto the upper well wall. Unraveling the rope and lashing one end to her makeshift hook, she peered up the well shaft, closing her eyes when a wave of dizziness made the moonlight swim. She wasn't in great shape, but she'd sooner take her chances with the potential dangers of a dark forest than the obvious, very present ones laying seductively across the room right now. Holding her breath again, she spun her haphazard tool in a few tight circles before letting it fly upwards, the rope gliding through her hands as she braced for the sound.

The distant *clink* of metal on stone was followed by the scrape and dig of purchase, just loud enough to make Tira wince, her grip on the rope shaking slightly. When no sound came from behind her, she relaxed a fraction, tugging the rope hard a few times to test the hold and prepare to haul herself up. A gleam in the darkness caught her eye, and she inhaled sharply at the sight of a sizable mound of coins she'd missed in her earlier perusal. A trove of gold sovereigns sparkled at her, studded with a few copper and silver discs here and there. The sheer display of wealth caught in her throat as she realized what awaited her only an arms' length away. She'd only seen a handful of gold sovereigns in her lifetime, and the pile was easily ten times that.

The ache of hunger in her belly wrestled the guilt of stealing from her apparent rescuer, so she balanced the warring emotions by only taking one shining disc. Surely the beast wouldn't miss a single coin, a theft so small it could scarcely be called ingratitude. For Tira, though, it would mean a month of room and board at the inn, and new clothes besides, all of which would give her time to redefine her solo life.

Tucking the coin inside her bodice, Tira gave the sleeping pallet one last regretful glance and a silent apology for her

theft. Technically, the well's guardian had the riches of a noble, but wasn't: taking from him broke the loose code she'd embraced as a thief. Frowning, rope in hand and feet braced, she started the difficult climb up the well shaft, resolutely ignoring the throbbing protest of her aching head and guilty heart.

By the time Tira had crested the well, her vision swam, her feet unsteady beneath her. Falling to all fours in front of a nearby bush, she gave a few weak, dry heaves of nausea as she clutched the gel-slick lump on her head. Gods, she was in no shape for this, and still had hours to go before she'd be back at the Inn. To say nothing of the tangled, shadowed mass of the forest around her, unfamiliar and threatening. The narrow path that led to the clearing was easy to see, at least. Hopefully some of the trampled leaves and broken twigs she'd left in her wake could guide her back to the inn.

Pressing a palm to the ground to rise, subtle, rhythmic vibration thudded under her fingers, so slight she'd nearly missed it. Had the beast woken? Hopefully, whatever creature she'd left behind in the well struggled to see in the dark. Giving her head a sharp shake to clear it and immediately regretting the gesture as pain bloomed, she grabbed her rucksack and took off down the path as fast as she was able to.



A FEW MINUTES LATER, SOME SORT OF NOCTURNAL BIRD nearly frightened Tira to death, rustling and flapping in the underbrush. Clutching a hand to her chest, she stumbled backwards with a relieved laugh, watching the dark shape take flight against the full moon. Turning back to the path with a little more spring in her step, she yelped in shock as a massive black horse seemed to slip out of the shadows directly in front of her, giving a gusty snort.

“Wondered where you got off ta, girl. Kent seen you light off after Old Barnaby filled yer head with nonsense, nary a lantern in hand. So tell us then, ye find *the well*?” The man above her on horseback leered as he snapped the question off, eyes roaming hungrily over her chest. She recognized the rough accent as belonging to one of the brigands from the inn.

Suddenly Tira became deeply aware of the two men staring her down like a wounded doe in the dark. What hints the

moonlight offered of their features revealed rough, unkind attributes ready to do her harm. The man on horseback slid from the saddle, the *snik* of a flip-knife cutting through the chilly quiet.

“Believe Sam asked you a question, girl. Rude not to answer ‘im.” The deeper voice of the one Sam had called Kent growled from the horse’s far flank, stepping around the impressive beast and lightly swinging something from one hand into the opposite palm.

She could flee. By the time Sam realized and remounted, there was a chance she could lose them both in the underbrush. As she frantically weighed her options, Tira realized with a sinking feeling she’d let Kent get too close. In her current state, there was no way she could outpace the men. The forest was dense on both sides, with thick undergrowth barring every way but straight back to the clearing - and the beast. She was *doomed*. This was precisely why she always traveled and did jobs in a trio - Brenna or Ardin probably would have spotted these pricks an hour ago and already found a way around them.

Kent reached for her rucksack, moving to tear it off her shoulder. She threw both hands up, cringing as she imagined the cudgel slamming into her already-aching head. “Wait! Wait, don’t hurt me. I *did* find the well. I’ll take you straight to it, Gods’ honor.”

The two men shared a long look, apparently unprepared for her response. After an uncomfortably long silence punctuated by dramatic facial gestures at one another, Sam cleared his throat with irritation. “Let’s go. If it’s there, maybe we won’t leave your body here for the wolves to feed on.”

Kent sneered his agreement, ripping her rucksack away and rifling through it casually as he shoved her back down the path. He made an excited noise of discovery as he found Ardin's flip-knife, passing it to Sam with a dark grin. Tira gritted her teeth as her only weapon ended up in the hands of her adversaries, taking some small comfort she'd at least tucked the coin in her bodice.

Her muddled plan took on a sense of urgency as she led them to the clearing. In addition to the persistent headache, she now had to deal with the occasional sharp point between her shoulder blades, a reminder that Sam had a knife trained on her. Trying to make a plan on the fly was much more difficult on her own, let alone with a head wound, and she wished Ardin - or even Brenna - were here to help.

As the edge of the clearing came into view, she reasoned that the creature in the well must have some motivation for keeping her alive, else he wouldn't have treated her wounds, or tucked her into his sleeping pallet so carefully. Would he defend her, if he felt she was in danger, or would he rend her flesh as punishment for her escape? Surely a beast like that had fangs and claws. Maybe even venom, like a serpent? She shivered, as much from the furious turning of her own imagination as the night's chill and her body's ache. She'd have to get the beast's attention, if this truly insane mess of a plan had any chance of working long enough for her escape. The idiot brigands would be occupied with the beast, the beast would be occupied with the idiots, she'd slip away in the scuffle. Simple. It could work.

Minutes later, the well came into view, and a sharp intake of breath sounded behind Tira - it seemed neither man had really believed she was telling the truth. Taking advantage of their momentary distraction, she pulled in a deep breath, getting

ready to scream. Before she could make a sound, Sam's free hand, reeking of meat-grease and sour ale, clapped over her mouth firmly and the knife reasserted itself at her lower back. "Hold your tongue, wench. Legend says the well guardian doesn't like noise."

Kent snorted from atop the horse, which he'd been riding in their wake, Tira's stolen rucksack wedged behind him. "Superstitious wretch. Get a pair o' bollocks Sam, ain't nothin down there but dirty water, mark my word. Fool's errand, this."

Sam growled and drew a hand down through the air, indicating for Kent to lower his voice, answering in a quiet tone as oily as his unkempt hair. "Well the well's here, ain't it? Dirty little thief found in a day what none 'a our crew managed in Gods' know how long."

Sam clucked his tongue irritably, shoving Tira towards the well as if to punctuate his declaration, the wall hitting her squarely in the stomach and forcing her to curl over the top edge. His voice was a cautious hiss. "Now get your ass down there, tart. We'll make off with the treasure while the guardian's gnawing your birdy little bones."

Tira spun, shooting Sam a look of irritation in the moonlight, and Kent snapped from atop the horse, leaning over the saddle and squinting. "Eh! Sammy boy - girl's got something in her bobbies. Look."

Kent stabbed a finger down towards Tira's bodice, eliciting a frustrated groan from her - the top edge of the coin now winked in the moonlight like a greedy beacon, forced up by her stumble. Furious that she'd be forced to *hopefully* flee without even that small treasure, she yanked it out and flashed the coin peevishly, giving her voice a breathy, tavern-girl tone

of mockery. “Oh *this* little thing? Well *I wish* the well guardian would...”

Tira yelped in alarm, cutting off as Sam’s eyes lit up with greed and Kent scurried down from the saddle, both lunging at the prize in her fingertips. Rapidly deciding on a salted earth policy in terms of her treasure, she flipped more money than she’d ever held in her life over her shoulder, down into the well. After a moment’s hesitation, she also shoved the makeshift grappling hook - the only way back down - off the ledge behind her for good measure. There. Now *no one* could climb down into the well, and hopefully the noise would wake the beast.

The raucous clank and crash of the pulley was followed by the gentle *tink* and *plunk* of the coin into the shallow pool far below, both sounds echoing off the stone and filling the clearing. A rushing sort of sound, like a bag of clothes being dragged across wet cobblestones, came shortly after.

Then came a growl that reverberated in Tira’s arms and chest, tightening her nipples under her bodice with shock, awe, and an imminent sense of danger. *The well guardian was awake.*

Taloned, lightly-scaled fingers crested the well-wall beside her faster than she’d thought possible, followed by the handsome visage of the half-serpent man she’d escaped earlier. His turquoise gaze glowed alongside little specks of freckled gold, scattered like stars across his skin in the moonlight. His eyes were blue, she thought numbly.

Death had come for her with beautiful blue eyes.

“Fuck *me*,” she breathed, terror setting her heart racing faster than a rabbit’s.

A rumbling growl sounded again, and the white flash of fangs glittered where the strange man parted his plush lips. Was he...*smiling*?

Tira sucked in a breath, fingers digging into the well edge, frozen in fear like the two idiots behind her. The horse, being the only sensible creature in the clearing, reared up and bolted at the sight of a man emerging from the well, dumping Tira's rucksack into a patch of moss as his hooves thundered a hasty retreat. Sam and Kent grasped at each other's filthy sleeves, gaping at the creature that had emerged from the well in front of them, stuttering in shock.

"As you command." The creature's deep voice purred the response, tinged with the warmth of humor. His words echoed off the walls of the well as he swiftly wrapped a muscled arm around Tira's waist, dragging her backwards over the edge and down into the well without hesitation.



MOSS-FANG HAD WOKEN GROGGILY, ENTIRELY UNUSED TO having his post-wish slumber disturbed. He'd had two coins in short order, after all, which meant he should have been completely sated and deeply asleep for many days. The *feeling*, however, had pulled him from the depths of dreams into the cocoon of his subterranean home.

He grumbled with irritation, settling his head down against a pillow, determined to get back to sleep. Sounds rang out before he could even try - an unfamiliar cacophony of clanging metal, followed by a familiar noise that made his heart lift with happiness. A *coin*. A *wish*. It was in the water, but that was alright, he'd retrieve it and add it to the pile to extend his meager stores. The *feeling* bloomed like a bonfire springing to life, but it felt...wrong. Unfinished, somehow, even with the coin already in the water.

Then, like a blacksmith hammering an errant chain link into place, everything snapped to rightness. The *feeling* pulled him irresistibly up the well cistern to face the woman who'd escaped, finishing a *most unusual* wish with a stunned expression as their eyes met. And to think, she hadn't even seen what she'd just asked for - well, that is, unless she'd peered under the covers of his pallet while he'd been asleep, the daring little thing. He was suitably impressed she'd managed to escape the well without waking him, as he was a notoriously light sleeper. His uncharacteristic coin-glut - two, in a day! - likely had something to do with that, though.

As he waved a hand to light the torches ringing around his home, Moss-fang pushed aside the visceral displeasure of knowing two other humans were in *his* clearing, their presence uncomfortable and weighty. An illogical pang of betrayal undercut it all, knowing the woman he'd saved must have led them here. He had no right to expect loyalty from the little human, but it still stung to have his kindness repaid thusly. It further soured his mood when, reaching the bottom of his well, he spotted one of his own coins winking up through the water. She'd stolen from him, too?

Before his anger could bloom further, the wish itched at him, tightening his bracers and demanding he fulfill his destiny, shoving out all other considerations. As he set the struggling woman down on the wide, dry ring of his well's floor, faint scuttling and rustling sounded overhead. The two men were thrashing their way out of the clearing, likely in pursuit of their more intelligent steed, and that made Moss-fang's shoulders drop in relief. He didn't like company, or change. Not usually, anyway.

But the pretty human had spoken a wish he'd never heard before, a novel desire he found himself extremely eager to fulfill. While he wasn't the most fearsome of dragons, nor the most intimidating of djinn, Moss-fang was still a monster by the standards in the world above. His eyes were rimmed in tiny scales, his fangs visible when he spoke and smiled. Small, blunt talons crested each fingertip, his hands lined with a faint pattern of scales like a textured veil. His lower half, a combination of dragon tail and djinn-smoke, curled and moved like a massive serpent, edged in translucent, fluttering fins. He had a terrible sort of beauty, he knew, but it was not one that had ever, as far as he knew, turned the head of a human.

Beneath the wrap-like swath of fabric he kept fastened at his hips, Moss-fang was fashioned as a man might be, albeit with a bit more sword in his scabbard than a non-magical creature would have. The little human would discover that soon enough, he thought with a frisson of satisfaction.

The quarry in question stumbled back away from him, catching her boot-sole in the edge of the linens that lined his nest and sitting down hard, her eyes never leaving him. Moss-fang frowned at the dark, damp patch at the edge of her hair, his earlier ministrations apparently no longer stemming the slow bleeding. He plucked a gleaming coin from his pile of cleansed discs and crossed the space to her, grasping her wrist and pressing the golden round into her palm.

She turned wide eyes on him, stammering, her gaze darting from his face, to his scaled hand, to his tail and back again. "I-I-forgive me, guardian. You are angry at my theft, and I deserve your ire, but please don't devour me - I-I can serve as your handmaiden, or bring you tribute, though I grant it will not be as fine as-" Her fingers closed and opened reflexively around the coin in her palm as she gave it a guilty glance.

Moss-fang laughed loudly, his voice echoing off the walls. “Little sovereign, I will not devour you unless you *wish* me to. Right now, however, I need you to wish for healing. I am a brute only in strength, not manner - my fathers did not raise me as a beast. I will not fulfill your first wish unless I’m certain you have a clear mind and determined...heart.”

She gasped as he offered human speech, and Moss-fang pushed down a snap of annoyance. Yes, he had monstrous features, but the all-too-common human assumption that he was some sort of rampaging, murderous demon was insulting. When Tira hesitated, seemingly confused at his simple demand, Moss-fang smiled with glinting fangs, reaching out and cupping her hand in his own. Giving her an encouraging nod, he closed her fingers over the disc in her palm, guiding her like a child.

He didn’t think it was possible for the woman’s eyes to get any wider, but they certainly did at his touch. Her voice caught in her throat, barely a whisper, but she did as she was bidden, touching her wounded head gingerly with her free hand. “I-wish for...healing?”

If the *feeling* had been bliss from the simple tumble of the coin down his well, this - being in contact with the wisher, looking her in the eyes - this was *ecstasy*. A pleased groan rumbled through Moss-fang’s throat, his hand tightening over the woman’s own as his power rose to meet her desires. The wish was broad enough that he took liberties, the wound vanishing around hair made newly clean and soft, an old ache in her shoulder evaporating, along with a long, jagged scar along the side of her knee that he sensed pulled uncomfortably when she crouched.

Two blunt-taloned fingers slipped into the clasp of her palm, retrieving the now-wished coin and tossing it lightly into the small pile behind them. “Excellent. How do you feel? More clear-headed?”

The woman nodded, staring at him in awe as she worked her shoulder experimentally. “I-I’m in your debt, guardian. This is far more than a wretched thief deserves. I should not have taken your treasure, nor led those brutes back here, but they were like to leave your hard work bleeding out on the forest floor. I meant no harm, I’d swear an oath to it.” She frowned, fingertips ghosting over where her head wound had been.

Moss-fang hummed softly in consideration. “You are forgiven, pretty thief. It would not do to have lovers cross with one another, yes? Perhaps you can make it up to me as we sport, though I must insist you find your pleasure first - it might not have been the wording of the wish, but it’s a point of pride, hm?” Moss-fang turned her palm over, pressing a kiss where the coin had been sitting, flicking a serpentine tongue-tip across the sensitive flesh to taste the residue of magic.



TIRA SHIVERED WITH PLEASURE AT THE FEEL OF THE BEAST'S tongue, her brow knitting with confusion as her hand curled against his jaw. "Lovers? I don't know what you-"

The beast's eyes lifted to her own, a smile curving his mouth, the hint of fangs dimpling the edges of his plush lower lip. "Your wish, little sovereign. You called for me and spoke it aloud, very clearly."

The beast crowded her, his bare chest brushing the edge of her bodice, forcing her back on her elbows on the soft pallet. He loomed over her, that thick coil of serpentine tail resting heavily across her shins. The weight of it, felt through her breeches, was an unexpected intimacy, as was the gentle talon he used to tuck an errant wisp of hair behind her ear as he continued. "I *wish* the well guardian would...."

Tira's eyes widened in shock, an electric jolt of realization skittering through her stomach - and lower - as the hazy

confrontation at the well-mouth replayed in her mind. She blurted out the rest, as much in disbelief as memory. “Fuck *me.*”

The beast’s eyes creased at the corners in approval as he gave a soft nod. “Exactly. See, you recall now. I’m grateful that my care sorted that head injury so well. I was a little concerned you’d be addled for awhile, even with the daggerleaf.”

She shook her head, crawling backwards and gently sliding her legs out from under the coil of his tail. “Oh! No, there’s been a mistake, guardian, I - it was an - a curse from surprise, from shock, not a *wish.*”

He rolled his graceful shoulders in a shrug and smiled indulgently. “But spoken the correct way, in the correct place, mistake or not. Magic is not as forgiving as I am, I fear. You’ve compelled my djinn blood, and your wish will draw us together as surely as my dragon blood is drawn to treasure.” He made a careless gesture at the pile of gold behind him, which gave Tira an uncomfortable twinge of guilt.

“No- I, here, here, wait. I’ll make another.” Before his reaching hand could close on Tira’s shoulder to stop her, she extricated herself and slipped the beast’s grasp. Hurrying over to his pile of treasure, she plucked another shiny golden coin up, clasping it tightly in her palm as she ducked under the bottom edge of the well cistern and speaking up into the echoing stones. “I wish no human could ever find this clearing again!”

The coin, tossed upwards, glimmered in the moonlight as it fell end-over-end, plopping into the shallow pool beside the first coin she’d cast down earlier.

She dusted off her palms on her breeches and turned back to the beast, currently staring at her with a head tilted in question.

“Interesting, that you’d so readily surrender yourself to my captivity after working so hard to escape it.”

“Your...what? No, I- see, I made a new wish, I made sure those brutes couldn’t come back here to menace you. That way, when I leave, you’ll be left in peace. I figure it was the least I could do, considering they followed me here in the first place. That wish will replace my last one.”

He gave her a bemused look, toying with one the small golden hoops adorning his ear. “Ah, I see. And who exactly told you that’s how wish magic works?”

She blinked, wondering if she *had* addled her brain. “I just assumed-”

He moved to her, his great snakelike tail undulating in hypnotic waves across the stone floor. His fingertips on her chin startled her out of her staring, those beautiful turquoise eyes once more meeting hers. “A wish is not a drawing made in the sand for the ocean to lap away. Besides, you are assuming that it is my djinn nature holding you here, not my draconic urges. Unfortunately for you, we’re quite fond of virgins.”

Tira scoffed, despite feeling incredibly unbalanced by the entire situation. “A *virgin*, me? Honestly. Some magic you’ve got there. I’ve bedded several men, thank you very much. It may have been awhile ago now, but I was there. It definitely happened.”

His fangs glittered again, smile edging towards predatory. “I didn’t specify what *kind* of virgin, now, did I? There’s a few things you haven’t done with a single soul.” The talons of his free hand just barely brushed the top of her ass, one scaled brow raising pointedly.

Tira coughed with shock as she caught his meaning, pushing lightly against his chest and stepping over the coil of his tail to pace, needing space from his strangely-tempting proximity. “Not that it’s *any* business of yours, but I don’t *fancy* that sort of thing and have no interest in *that*, so you can just-” She gestured irritably at his body in a shooing motion, as if he were a particularly annoying horse fly and not an otherworldly creature nearly two feet taller.

That damnable smile never dimmed, even at her chastising. “Nor do I. A dragon does not save something only to despoil it, in any case. It is an old custom from long ago, when we were protectors of virtue, an ally to women hoping to evade lecherous dukes and brutish knights.” He rolled his shoulders in another gentle shrug, that fascinating tail languidly curling around him on the floor. Tira’s treacherous eyes followed it, unable to look away from the glittering undulation of scales, or the place where they disappeared under the guardian’s flowing sarong-like garment.

She straightened and gave a centering little huff of breath. “Well, that’s...good. I’m glad you don’t intend to, uhm, despoil me.”

Tira’s eyes fell to the waist of his sarong again and she reluctantly admitted that *glad* might be a little too enthusiastic of a word. Months of unrequited pining after Ardin had left her ego a bit rough around the edges, and she rather liked being flirted with by someone sober for a change.

“Sooo.” Dragging her eyes from the fascinating enticement of his unique body, she focused on the second-sexiest thing in the strange, circular room: the pile of coins. “Can I just - borrow another coin? Wish myself out of here so I won’t bother you anymore?”

His eyes gleamed with dark mischief as he moved again, pointedly situating himself between her and the winking pile of gold. “Unfortunately, little sovereign, the one thing no Djinn on earth can compel or resist is a dragon. That is how I came to be made, after all, when my fathers fell in love. And my dragon? He’s claimed you.” His tail slid in a slow, lazy circle around the edges of her boots, brushing her ankles here and there. Tira idly wondered how it would feel to be squeezed in those coils, immediately chastising herself at the unbidden thought.

He held up his wrists, each bracketed in a bracer of gleaming gold, turning them lightly in the torchlight. “And besides, I feel like severing your host’s hands would be a bit rude, considering.”

Tira reached out, gliding her fingertips hesitantly across one of the bands of gold as he offered it to her touch, frowning in confusion. “I wouldn’t hurt you, I swear it. I don’t even have my flip-knife anymore, even if I was inclined to violence. Which I’m not.”

The guardian flexed his fingers into a fist with a sigh, reclaiming his wrist from her examining fingers. “You looked me in the eyes as you finished your wish - that is a magically-binding intimacy I’ve always avoided by remaining hidden here.” He gestured at the well-walls around them. “If I do not quickly fulfill a wish made in that fashion, my bracers will tighten until they close in on themselves. It is an old custom, older than the sands, made to keep djinn focused on our destiny.”

Tira swallowed thickly. “So, if we don’t - uh, grant *that* wish, you’re telling me that your hands will be severed?”

He answered her horrified question with a simple nod.



THE BRACERS WERE ALREADY BORDERING ON UNCOMFORTABLE, but this lovely creature before him was more skittish than a frightened mouse. It wouldn't do to force the issue, which meant he had to place his hopes in a terrified human woman's willingness to fuck a monster.

Moss-fang, realizing all too well that he was essentially half serpent, wondered how well he'd get along without hands.

He wouldn't be able to climb out of the well, nor find food, nor hold coins, so he'd likely die. After all these years, it seemed an anti-climactic end to the last of a magical line, and a morose wave of grief swept through him. He'd never see his fathers again.

The human's warm little hand closed over his own, her brows knit with a concern that pushed the grief back with ease.

"Guardian, I- " she shook her head, staring sightlessly at the wall over his shoulder for a moment. "-I won't let you be

maimed on my behalf. You likely saved my life and I was nothing more than a thief breaking into your home, uninvited, to steal from you.”

She bit at her lips nervously, her skittish gaze darting into his as she made up her mind. “I only ask that you please don’t... hurt me. I have not laid with a dragon, nor a djinn, and while I am no virgin, I-”

He reached his hands up to cradle her face, resting his brow on hers with a soft, pleased sigh. “Moss-fang. My name is Moss-fang, little sovereign. You have my word that I will treat you as the treasure you are, and no harm will come to you. What may I call you?”

Her soft hands bracketed his own as she tilted her face up, her lips mere inches from his, cheeks lightly flushed. “I’m Tirasande. My friends call - well, called - me Tira.”

The pressure at his wrists, as well as the growing pressure below his waist, drove him to close the distance between them. Her lips were soft and warm, meeting his with only a moment of hesitation, opening willingly when his tongue brushed against their plush seam. When he drew back for a breath, he was pleased to see her body sway slightly toward his, as if chasing his kiss. The bracers did not relent, precisely, but they did stop tightening further, sensing him moving towards his appointed task.

“So lovely. Know that I desire you for reasons well beyond my own survival. Will you accept me, Tira?” Moss-fang murmured as his hand skimmed down Tira’s side to cup her hip. He growled his praise, testing the boundaries of their fledgling intimacy. When she offered a soft hum of pleasure and didn’t move away, a fierce possession warmed his limbs as his dragon nature roared with satisfaction in his mind. *His.*

She gasped, palms meeting his chest to steady herself as his short talons curled around her ass, dimpling her breeches as he pulled their hips together roughly.

He dropped his head to nuzzle between her neck and shoulder, tongue flicking out to taste the salt of her skin, deliciously warmed by exertion. He dragged his fangs gently - so, so gently - along her collar bone, tracing their reined-in path with a long lick of his slender forked tongue. "I need to see all of you, little sovereign. Reveal yourself to me."

He eased back a fraction, though it was the last thing he truly wanted to do, the end of his tail snapping up to steady her lower back as she nearly tripped backwards over his tail-coil. Her eyes darted to the obstacle at her boots, swallowing thickly as she was reminded exactly what manner of not-man she was preparing to bed.

"Shy, are we? Shall I reveal myself to you first, then?" He smirked, fingers plucking teasingly at the knot of his sarong as he fixed her with a sultry glance. "Perhaps if you ask nicely."

Her fingers froze at her chest, where they'd been slowly tugging at her own bodice laces, her gaze drifting inexorably to his waist like the heavy sink of a coin in water. Her voice cracked lightly, and it took her two tries, but she managed to comply. "Y- yes, please. Please show me, Moss?"

He liked the way she whispered his name so cautiously, like he was some sort of deity she needed to show deference to, or offer herself up to for sacrifice. He also liked the way she'd shortened his name, in the way companion-humans often did with one another. *Moss*. He decided he liked the intimate simplicity. His dragon preened, even as his bracers gave a warning vibration to move things along.

Tongue braced on a fang, he worked the knot loose, letting the priceless brocaded silk slither down his hips to pile on the floor. He smiled indulgently at her puzzled expression, following it to the smooth, pale plane of flesh that edged seamlessly below his hips into the taper of his tail. Parting his fingers, he pressed his palm to the barely-visible slit in the center, just below where a human's naval would be.

The sharp, shocked intake of breath from his captive-yet-erstwhile-master made his shaft pulse with anticipation, easing the reveal. His flesh parted painlessly beneath his fingers to allow the thick shaft of his cock to tumble out and down, shining with tendrils of aroused lubrication. He sighed happily, closing his fingers around his girth and giving it a few rough strokes just for the pleasure of it.

Tira stumbled backwards, sitting down heavily in his nest, staring openly at his cock as he languidly slid a fist over it.

“Can't you make it, you know...smaller?” Her voice was a tiny whisper, her still-clothed thighs tightening against each other as if they could prevent the inevitable. She swallowed hard, her eyes darting to his face, the stone walls, his nest, virtually *anywhere* but the object of her trepidation.

Moss was a creature of pure magic, possibly the last of his kind, and powerful in ways the mortal mind couldn't begin to fathom unaided. Of *course* he could make himself smaller.

“No, I cannot.”

A surge of arousal sparked through him with the easy lie, a snap of light popping at the end of his finned tail like the crack of a whip. The thought of the little human struggling to take him, clutching at his shoulders with a whimper, her face a mix of determination and the slight panic he already saw there -

gods yes. He wanted that, more than gold, more than wishes,
more than *air*.

His fathers had not raised a beast, but wicked things flourished
in the dark.



SOMETHING WILD AND TERRIFYING FLASHED IN MOSS' EYES, twisting Tira's belly. It was the look of a friendly hound at the hearth suddenly deciding if it would take your leftover haunch of boar or your hand along with it. Moss may have spoken with an elegance to rival the finest bard, but it was all too clear what the well guardian was when he wasn't minding himself: a monster.

Giving his head a soft, hard shake, he turned from her abruptly and plunged his hand in the pile of glittering coins, thrusting yet another into her palm. He stooped inwards, the warm, wet press of his substantial cockhead smearing on her arm as he murmured in her ear. His voice had gone deeper, rougher, less of man and more of...something else. "You are a rare treat I intend to *fully* enjoy, Tira. Hold fast to that coin and wish me to stop if you must, because my restraint hangs on a fraying thread. These cuffs are tight, little sovereign, but I know you'll be even tighter for me."

With a satisfied snarl, he slithered backwards, grasping the jumble of rope in the corner and swinging a hand aloft, the torches all around them guttering to darkness at the gesture. Tira sucked in a breath, whirling, eyes searching wildly in what little dim moonlight came down the well shaft and reflected off the water. A large, dark shape scattered the meager light, the sound of something scraping on stone and scattering water ringing around her.

AFTER LONG, FRUITLESS MOMENTS TRYING TO MAKE OUT THE shapes of things, warmth gusted at the back of her neck. She whimpered and spun at the sensation, finding only emptiness where her reaching hands grasped at darkness. Again, the gust of warmth - *his breath* - brushed at the side of her neck, sending the flesh of her arms prickling before it, too, vanished. His dark chuckle made her feel even smaller than she already was, her stomach flipping with the same nerves she used to wrestle before a big heist. Curiously, however, she was actually looking forward to being caught, rather than avoiding it at all costs.

As she mused, Moss' tail roiled through the dark, lightning bolts of subtle luminescence crackling through his fins as he moved. He began to skillfully wrap that thick tail around her, loops that flexed and squeezed her ankles, her shins, and finally her thighs. In mere moments, her legs were held together so tightly, she'd fall if not for the constricting support around them. He used the strange hold to tilt her helplessly toward him, angling her face inches from his own.

Another kiss claimed her mouth, this one much more thorough than the first, whatever rusty vestiges of courtly manner remained falling away from Moss as Tira surrendered to him.

Fear still lingered in her limbs like a bee sting, but she ignored it for the delicious rush of exhilaration that raced through her, tightening in her throat.

Gods, she was really going to do this, wasn't she?

Moss' talons slid over her hips, cupping her ass again before digging in and up, piercing through the leather but only pressing firmly against the skin beneath. Tira struggled in anger, protesting the destruction of her clothes, but Moss only growled softly, luminescent blue eyes squinting as if daring her to continue.

“You can wish them whole when I'm done with you.” His cock bobbed menacingly in a shaft of reflected moonlight between them at the word *wish*, and Tira was starting to suspect it was more than a magical duty to Moss, that fulfillment. Talons cleaved the restraint of belt and leather away, coils shifting to brusquely peel her out of pants and boots like so much corn at the harvest. A quick talon swipe down the bodice laces at her chest left her gasping despite the sudden freedom to breathe more deeply, only the airy kiss of her sweat-damp shift covering her now. She tugged self-consciously on the bottom hem, a sudden bolt of shyness racing through her and colliding with the adrenaline already there.

Moss gathered her against his chest, the impossibly-thick girth of his cock shoving against the bottom of her shift, pressing against her entrance through the thin cloth as he moved. Her thighs widened automatically, body bending towards the delicious friction before she blushed again, squirming to put a little space between them. She'd never been this eager with a lover before, but something about Moss made her a little

wanton - his strength, his care for her while she was helpless, or perhaps even his unusual nature.

Fear pricked at her again as something new brushed her skin - the slightly-rough surface of rope against her arm. She raised a hand to push a carefully-placed strand off her shoulder and Moss huffed with warning as he replaced it. "You can't seem to conquer your hesitation, and that could be harmful when we...progress. I promised not to hurt you, and I am a creature of my word. Hold still."

She let out a squeak of alarm as the rope, practically a serpent itself, was threaded under and through her thighs, cinched tight off her skin with masterful knots *very* close to some *very* intimate places. "Moss, I can remain still, please - this isn't necessary, I'll stop-"

MOSS PRESSED A GENTLE FINGER TO HER LIPS, STOPPING THE tumble of words. Satisfied she'd fallen silent, he guided her under the well shaft, sending her stumbling into the knee-deep water, clinging to his hand to keep her footing. After ensuring she could stand on her own, he leaned back, grasping at something, and Tira let out a thready cry as she suddenly found herself hoisted, bare feet kicking at air.

The ropes Moss had threaded and knotted around her thighs held tight to her hips, supporting her as if she was sitting on the swing in the town square's oak. Only here, there was no plank of wood beneath her ass, just slings of rope around each thigh that held them apart as her hands grasped the ropes trailing upwards for balance. The rhythmic plunks of water drops, tickling their way off her shins and heels to tumble into the water below, broke the silence. "Moss! What are you-"

The old stone blocks around her lit up with a soft, unearthly blue as Moss ducked under the well mouth to join her, the glow emanating from his tail and eyes. Her stomach, now level with his eyes, quivered as he stepped close again, turning his head and pressing his lips to one of her bound thighs in a lover's caress. He punctuated his murmur with a teasing flick of his tongue. "I told you. I'm keeping you safe."

Her damp toes curled in alarm as his head tilted, dangerously close to what the edge of her shift didn't even really cover anymore, rucked up as it was by the ropes. What little she wore in the way of undergarments was now in a damp heap somewhere on the floor of the well, shredded with the rest of her clothes. She certainly didn't feel *safe*, particularly when Moss splayed his warm, wide palms on her suspended thighs, parting them further and plucking her shift up with taloned thumbs.

In the moment, Tira felt a feverish spark of gratitude for her earlier wish; if there'd been anyone remotely near the clearing, they would have been summoned by the loud, startled noise she made when Moss' mouth dove eagerly between her legs. Her hands immediately flew to his head to steady herself, settling his horns in the curve of her thumbs, fingertips burying in his silky hair. Relinquishing the steadying ropes caused her hips to tilt upwards, rocking her against his seeking tongue with the movement. The soft scrape of the coin in her palm against his horn gave her some measure of courage in this strange, pleasurable adventure.

None of Tira's handful of prior, ultimately forgettable interludes had included *this* act, and more was the pity for that, because it was *glorious*. Tira's heart beat wildly, particularly when the silky-scaled edges of Moss' cheek brushed her inner thigh, reminding her that this pleasure was doled out on the

tongue - and talons - of something inhuman. Even with that unsubtle reminder pressed against her skin, Moss' skilled tongue proceeded to obliterate protests, worries, and a very long dry spell with every blissful twist.

Tira rocked wantonly in the ropes, and Moss slid his hands to her ass in response, gripping it and keeping her pressed tight to his tireless mouth. If her earlier noise had been enough to startle the owls and night-creatures in the clearing above, the cry of pleasure at her unexpected climax would have sent them to the skies. Without thinking, her hands gripped Moss' horns like the front of a saddle, riding her hips against his obliging tongue as pleasure swelled and crested at her core.

Her strange new lover might have been monstrous in some ways, but he was certainly no fool. He buried his mouth against her as hard as he could, exactly when she needed him to, his talons surely leaving marks for how tightly they gripped her below. She didn't mind, Tira thought deliriously - let the men of the tavern see how well a beast could do what they could not.



IT WAS WITH GREAT RELUCTANCE THAT MOSS EVENTUALLY drew back, leaving a tender kiss on the silk-soft skin of Tira's thigh. Tira's body had begun to twitch and curve away from his tongue, delicious little bird-like cries spilling from her lips with every touch. He still had work to do, and he was determined to bring her more pleasure, not inattentive discomfort. He'd need her willing indulgence, at any rate, if he was going to see this through and keep his hands.

He pulled his lower lip softly between his fangs, tasting her musk as he dropped a hand to his shaft for a rough stroke. He didn't need it, having her like this was more than enough to have him completely ready, but he needed his little human to see what she was in for. That predator's fantasy roared back to life, the desire to see her eyes widen and breath quicken.

He was instantly rewarded with both.

Delaying too long would give Tira's worries about carnal architecture time to surface through the pleasure he'd just

wrung from her. At least, that's what Moss told himself as he stepped forward and aligned himself at the sweet center he'd just devoured to completion. In reality, he didn't want to wait a second longer to sink into her, and if he was being honest, it had nothing to do with his bracers.

Her breathless noise of surprise - but not refusal - at the touch of his cockhead to her cunt dissolved the last of his already-thin restraint. With one hand, he reached for the ropes on her right hip, curving the other hand into her hair while carefully avoiding her wound. She felt so small like this, so helpless, and the thought made his cock kick as he surged forward, a little mindless now.

Trapped between his grasping hands and firm talons against her skin, Tira whimpered softly in apprehension, but parted her thighs as best as she could in the ropes.

"That's it. . . .good girl. . ." Moss purred the approval through tightened fangs, needing to work his girth into her by slow, patient inches. When her hands and nails scrabbled at his shoulders, just like he'd hoped, he got a little rougher despite himself, determined to hilt himself in his pliant human now.

"Moss!" Tira's voice trembled between caution and acceptance, her arms looping around his neck as she sought support from the very lover currently ruining her. Sharp intakes of her breath at his ear accompanied every nudge of his hips until finally - *finally* - he bottomed out in her tight, glorious warmth.

"Shh, there. There, Tira. You've done it. You've taken me so well, little sovereign. Doesn't that feel good?" Moss cooed reassuringly as moved his hips, tightening his hold on Tira's hip-ropes to start a rhythm between them. Tira buried her face against his neck in response, nodding tightly and holding on,

letting Moss set the pace as she adjusted to him. She couldn't do much else, trussed as she was, and Moss' dragon preened that his ropes had worked so well.

He really tried to be gentle, but as her body softened against him and the glide became easier, he began to chase his own pleasure when his concentration slipped. Tira leaned back, holding onto his shoulders for balance more than comfort now, tentatively rolling her own hips to match his. Her features still tightened on some of his faster thrusts, but still she always met him in the center, both of them crashing and grinding into the other now with increasingly-wild abandon.

Moss relinquished his careful hold on her head to grab the ropes at her other hip, holding her body tight to him as he began short, hard thrusts up into her cunt. He knew he'd come in moments, and was seized by a need to bring her with him over that exquisite edge. Tira's eyes were glassy with pleasure as she eagerly took what he offered, tilting her hips to chase the friction they shared.

Finally, the muscles of his tail burning from the effort of thoroughly fucking his beautiful charge, Moss growled a soft warning that was lost in the joyful cry of Tira's second climax. He dropped his head to her shoulder with a low groan as he buried himself in her, filling her to overflowing with jets of hot, glowing spend as she clutched around him.

The act certainly hadn't taken as long as he'd liked, but the feel of her - the way she moved, sounded, and smelled - it had undone him down to his scales. Even now, he should withdraw, help her clean the mess he'd made between her thighs, but he couldn't bring himself to do anything but hold her panting, sweating form against his chest. They spent long, quiet moments holding onto one another in the faint

luminescence, his talons stroking gently through her hair as he breathed against her uninjured temple. Her own breathing slowed gradually as she drowsed, making a small, contented noise under his neck, still sheathed around him.

Tilting back to rest her weight on his chest, Moss loosened an anchor-knot in the ropes above them, releasing her into his arms and withdrawing his cock into his body in the same movement. Gently tugging the ropes away from her legs, he tamped down the fierce satisfaction of the glowing smear reflected in the water below - his seed on the inside of her thighs. But he'd had his moment of brutality in the throes of their passion, now he'd play the gentleman again. Soon, Tira would undoubtedly flee, debt repaid, leaving him once more to his solitude.

Why did the idea that solitude feel so empty, now?

He had no sooner laid her in the heart of his nest, cleansing her legs and core with a soft cloth, when she stirred. Sleepily propping herself up on her hands, she yawned and rubbed an eye. "The- um - bracelets. Mm. Good now?"

It took Moss a moment to understand what she was asking, but he nodded as he turned his wrist experimentally. "Yes. Back to normal, and thank you." Moss smiled softly as he pulled his heaviest blanket over her to keep her warm. It wasn't much, as he didn't need them the way humans did, but it was better than nothing in the damp chill of his well.

Laying down beside her, he tried not to read too much into the way she curled her body against his. He had added many treasures to his well-hoard over the years, but hope was seldom one of them.



TIRA WOKE GROGGILY, NEEDING TO SCRUB THE SLEEP FROM her eyes and blink a few times before everything came rushing back to her. An experimental peek beside her showed that Moss was *not*, in fact, a figment crafted by too much ale. A hand slid between her thighs came up with cool daggerleaf gel on her fingertips - a thoughtful explanation as to why her feminine wiles didn't feel like a carriage had run through them. Had Moss really cleaned her up and treated her after giving her that much pleasure?

Perhaps human men were overrated.

Looking around the rest of the well to find Moss had somehow magicked both a small indoor privy and a wooden table with fruit and cheese while she slept, it was decided.

Human men were *definitely* overrated.

Taking her time in the luxury of an indoor privy - she'd only ever spied one on jobs, and never gotten to use one - Tira

finished her morning routine. Cleaning herself up a bit, she wrapped herself in one of the soft swaths of linen at the edge of the nest, eating an apple as she waited for Moss to wake.

He eventually did at the sound of her teeth snapping through the skin of the crisp fruit - sweeter even than Western Barrett's finest. His subdued smile only showed a hint of fang. "Good morrow, Tira. I'm pleased to see you here, still."

"What, I should slip away in the night like a tavern girl? Take your gold with me?" She laughed as she took another bite, sobering as she caught a strange look on Moss' face. *Oh gods, he really did think she'd be gone.*

"Oh! I'm - I'm sorry, Moss. I didn't realize I'd overstayed my- if you could just, you know, just-" She gestured at her pile of damp, ruined clothing, trying to ignore the strange, dejected pang in her heart.

He rose sinuously from the nest, his powerful tail glistening like jewels in the daylight coming down the well as he joined her at the table. "You mistake me, Tira. I'm pleasantly surprised. You're welcome to stay as long as you like."

He used a talon to carve off a bite-sized piece of a wheel of cheese, holding it to her lips with a soft expression, the edges of his eyes crinkling with pleasure when she took it. She was becoming fond of that expression. "I like you here. With me. And you'll need to formally wish your clothing back together, else I'd have done it already. I can use my magic for potentially-helpful things, but for anything personal, I'll need the words."

Tira's eyes nearly rolled back at the delicious bite of cheese he'd fed her, leagues finer than any molded hunk she'd had in a tavern dinner. Tira stifled a laugh as she chewed, clocking the heat in Moss' gaze at her expression. She'd probably

looked much the same last night while they were together, but she wasn't about to apologize for loving cheese.

“Moss-” She swallowed, immediately resolving to have more of that cheese once she was dressed. “I wish for my clothes to be whole again. Oh! And - clean? Can I wish that?”

He laughed, tilting his head nonchalantly, the linen around her dissolving as her clothes appeared back on her body, neat, clean, and smelling freshly of lavender soap. The old tears and stitching she'd had to apply over the years were gone, her favorite traveling clothes now fitting like she'd ordered them from the king's tailor.

“You certainly may. How's that?” Moss brushed off her shoulder lightly, his touch lingering on her arm.

Tira lifted her hand and laid it over his, squeezing gently, thumb pad tracing one of his talons as she met his eyes.

“Perfect. But- what if I tear my shirt, now, after I leave?”

A flash of pain darted through his beautiful blue eyes before he blinked it away. Moss rolled his shoulders in a shrug, but tension lingered at the edges of his eyes. “Then you can simply come back and make another wish, little sovereign.”

“DIRECT ME TO THE NEAREST FIELD OF THORNS, THEN.” HER quiet, earnest response caused his pupils to flare, a smile sliding back to his face as he let fragile formality fall away and gathered her into his arms again.

“Tira.” He breathed her name reverently, gratefully. A quick, joyful nuzzle against her neck caused her to giggle and squirm at the way it tickled.

“But before I ruin your work, will you help me up, Moss? I just want to get my bag from the clearing in case it rains.” She

noded towards the well opening. "I'm...a bit sore to be climbing, still. But once my bag's safe, if it's alright with you, I'd like some more of that cheese."

He chuckled, draping her across his arms again, just as he had when she was injured, her hands lacing together behind his neck. "Anything you desire. Now hold tight, little sovereign."

She gripped him a little tighter than she probably should have, but the travel up the well chute was surprisingly fast and smooth. Tira marveled at the way his powerful hands gripped this stone, or that one, with practiced ease. How long had he been down here, alone, in this well?

Her eyes drifted to his tail, sunlight glittering off the damp, iridescent surfaces of it as he made his way up with her. He'd cause a panic in town - one outcast to another, she'd adjusted to it rather quickly despite herself, but townsfolk were small-minded. Lords would want to keep him like a prize canary too, no doubt. Tira frowned with worry as they crested the well's edge together. They needed to talk about how to keep *him* safe, as much as her, if they were going to be keeping company.

The worn brown corner of her pack was far across the clearing, slumped into what was hopefully dry grass. Tira quickly kissed Moss' cheek in thanks before climbing over the well wall and making a beeline for her discarded belongings. As her fingers closed on the strap, she looked back to find a smiling Moss, elbows folded over the well edge, fingertips touching his cheek where she'd kissed.

"Found it!" She held the bag aloft triumphantly before crouching and shoving her meager few possessions back into its sueded confines. Grateful the cap hadn't gone missing from her flask in all of last night's furor, she squinted at the ground dejectedly. Those assholes had probably fled with her recently

reacquired flip-knife, and that had been a very tidy - and expensive - bit of weaponry.

As she turned, a glint of silver caught her eye, far up the path, almost beyond sight. Could she really be that fortunate? The two of them hadn't sounded like they'd made a slow - or graceful - exit from the clearing, so perhaps Sam had dropped it after all.

She cupped her hands over her mouth and called back to Moss, still watching from the well. "I think I see my flip-knife! I'm going to grab it, I'll be right back!"

He answered with a wave and a smile and she sprinted out to where she'd seen the flash, eager to return to Moss. And cheese. But mostly him.

A strange wave of warmth washed over Tira's limbs as she got closer to her destination, the green of the trees and brush blurring all around her. Confused, she turned, the roof of the well smudged, as if she was looking at it from the bottom of a lake. Moss' voice rang out in an anguished cry of her name before silence crashed down, bringing with it a wall of greenery on all sides.

Tira spun, panicked, seeing nothing but the forest and the faint edge of the main road just behind it. She frantically surged in all directions, flailing her arms and bag to knock branches aside, calling loudly to Moss, but it was no use.

It was all gone. Moss, the well, the clearing - gone.

With a cry of anguish, realization descended. Her hasty, unbidden attempt at making amends last night had come back to haunt her.

I wish no human could ever find this clearing again.



MOSS HADN'T FELT THE PLUCKED STRING OF HIS OWN MAGIC until it was too late. Tira had been a distraction, a sensation of *happiness*, more than Moss had experienced in countless years and it left him inattentive. Wishes had also never involved him before - his clearing, his well. The persistent rumors that skittered around the nobility, the ones that painted him a bloodthirsty monster short on patience, heavily advised against getting personal with the well guardian. All that had suited him just fine, until now.

He'd told Tira the truth, that one wish didn't necessarily cancel out another. Sometimes another wish could *mitigate* the worst of a badly-worded wish, but wishes offered correctly all needed to come true in some fashion. Tira was a human, and she'd crossed the border of the clearing to retrieve her knife, which meant she would never find her way back to him. Accidental, yes, but magic was unforgiving, Moss thought grimly as he stared at his bracers.

He slid down the well defeatedly, damp bricks gliding under his palms and a shockingly unfamiliar burn of tears at the edges of his eyes. He didn't *despair*, for Gods' sakes, he was a djinn-dragon. He wasn't some whimpering mortal shrinking from the harshness of the world. He was a creature of magic, made to live on through the ages, infused with power that made kings fall to their knees. A single night with a human woman wasn't about to undo him, was it?

He stubbornly clenched his fangs and huffed an irritated breath through his nostrils, setting about putting his home to rights to give his hands something to do.

A week later, his home immaculate, Moss' fragile self-assurance that Tira was a passing fancy had eroded like sand in the running river. He slept fitfully with his head cradled where hers had rested in his nest, her faint musk fading like an uprooted flower in the sun. His loneliness felt like a great river once held back, rushing into his life the moment he'd first caught the little thief tumbling down his well.

A small, impossible thing had wriggled into his mind as he mourned the loss of her. A dangerous thought, one that had him eyeing his pile of still-wished coins and counting carefully. With the four Tira had contributed to his hoard, it could work, if only he could find the bravery to do it. He could go....out there. He could find her, bring her back.

Would she want to come back with him? Would she welcome him, even in the guise of a man? He'd been a little rough with her as a lover, but surely she wouldn't have waved at him, called back to him, if she didn't really intend to return, would she?

Moss paced the circle of the well floor, rounding the cistern over and over as he wrestled with doubts and unfamiliar fears.

He knew he'd have to leave eventually, or die down here once the coins were used, but now it all seemed so *close*.

Would he even remember how to speak, how to comport himself? Tira and her unwanted followers had shown his understanding of the common tongue still worked, but perhaps the culture had changed. He was a damned fool to have stayed hidden away so long - hadn't he known this day was coming, if only for survival? Now he'd be not only out of his home, but out of his element. He also didn't even know where to begin looking for Tira. Fear slithered cold through his belly.

Moss left off his anxious circuits and sat heavily on the edge of his nest, turning one of Tira's wished coins over and over in his talons. Every time he tried to give himself permission to wait, to hold off on venturing beyond his home until he *had* to, he realized the day had arrived unbidden. He might not have been out of coins, but he was out of patience, and the ache in his chest to see Tira again wasn't going away. Despite the transactional nature of their first meeting, he couldn't stop thinking about the bold little human.

His dragon was also restless. His treasure had been taken, and the need to reclaim it was riding Moss hard. He let out a growl of frustration, clutching Tira's coin in his palm and grunting as his body responded to his unspoken demand, a brief flash of pain as his tail divided and his cock extruded to hang, vulnerable, between his new legs. He scratched at his cheek with blunt fingernails, frowning at the inefficient gesture. Moss was starting to remember why he disliked walking among the humans - they were so...unimaginatively designed.

He shook the dust and lichen off a fine silk bag and loaded it to the brim with his still-wished coins, magicking some clothes and boots he hoped were appropriate and reasonably in

fashion. Securing the bag to his belt, he headed towards the well mouth before he could change his mind again, hauling himself up the last of the rope, freshly threaded through the repaired pulley overhead.

It took him long, uncertain moments at the well edge, his booted soles hanging over the edge, to actually slide down a few inches to the ground. Even when he managed it, his chest felt tight and his hands snapped behind him to brace on the brick, uselessly-blunt nails digging at masonry.

There. There, he'd done it.

It took a few more moments of goading himself to get through the clearing, a few promises made of how he'd express his affection for Tira, what pleasurable delights he'd offer her once they reunited. For her, he could cross the road. For her, he could walk farther than he imagined, until his strange, separated legs felt sore and aching, dust caking nearly every inch of his conjured finery.

And for her, he could corner a drunk in an alley, menacing the confused, addled man with a glinting gold coin like a weapon.

“Beggin’ your pardon, sir! I ain’t done no harm to no one, I swears it on me ma’s grave!” The man squinted up at him with one bleary eye, crouched against the side of the town’s most disreputable inn. His vision kept flicking between the unimaginable wealth being thrust at him and the snarl Moss couldn’t seem to keep off his face. The townsfolk gave him, and his oddly-dated clothing, a wide and wary berth, which made his increasingly-frantic questioning difficult.

With a growl, Moss abandoned subtlety and grabbed the man’s shaking hand, slapping the cleansed coin into it. “It’s a nice gold sovereign, isn’t it? Think of all the ale it could buy. It’s

yours, all you have to do is wish we were both in front of the last woman to touch it.”

Choosing an extremely inopportune moment to question his good fortune, the man raised his free hand, shaking visibly, and made the sign of warding against evil while trying to shake his head in refusal.

Moss pulled the man’s captive hand in tight to himself, letting his fangs slip out beneath the human glamour. “Do it or I will *eat* you, stubborn bastard.”

The drunk paled and stammered his way through what was, more or less, what Moss had just told him to say. Yes, it was technically a small violation of his sacred duty, this bit of physical menace, but he could put up with the tingling itching from his bracers for a while, if there was any magical lashback. It was worth it to find her.

The world tilted and spun in a dizzying way, and when it righted itself, the newly-rich drunk man unceremoniously vomited in the corner of an unfamiliar tavern. The scrape and clunk of wooden chairs sounded as people scurried to put distance between themselves and the pair of strangers that had just manifested in the middle of the floor.

Moss’ heart leapt into his throat as he spied a flash of silky black hair at the bar, the pants and boots unmistakably Tira’s. It plummeted back to earth as he realized she was in the arms of another man, their mouths smashed together as the man pinned her back against the bar.

He’d been a fool.

Moss’ dragon roared in agony to be denied a treasure he’d claimed, the heat and steam of angry fire roiling at the base of his throat. Moss needed to leave before he burnt the tavern

down, he needed to go home, to the welcoming coolness and solitude of his well.

Stumbling back a step, he turned and looked wildly for the door. Out, he needed to get *out* and not look at the bar, or Tira again. His heart felt like ash, and *you fool you fool you fool* repeated in his head like the song of the mockingbird in his clearing.

His hand gripped the doorframe, ready to hasten his exit at the door when a sound stopped him cold. A distressed, angry noise, high and feminine, thick with a choked sob of fury.

“Fuck you! Fuck you both! Leave me alone! I told you to *leave me alone!*”

When Moss turned again, he saw what his injured heart hadn't at first - the man was kissing Tira, but Tira wasn't kissing *him*. Her hands batted and punched at his chest, ineffectually trying to squirm out of his grip.

“Ain't got no well now, do ya? No knight in shining armor now, little tidbit. Ain't got our treasure from the well so's I say you owe us a good time, and that nice little flip-knife, eh Sam? Especially seein' you made us chase you out of town.”

The man leered and Moss crossed the distance to him in seconds, sending him flying by the front of his shirt over the bar. Moss snarled at him, baring his fangs at the man's companion, the other imbecile from the clearing. “You do not *look* at her!”

Tira blinked, startled, looking at the man - Kent - sprawled amid broken bottles behind the bar before turning her curious gaze to Moss again. She squinted, unseeing for a long beat, finally taking in the color of his eyes and clapping a hand to her mouth.

“...Moss? Moss! Oh, thank the *Gods*.”

She flung herself at him, wrapping her arms around the back of his neck with a happy keen of joy, kissing him over and over while babbling. “I thought - I’m so sorry, I’m so, so sorry. I didn’t want to leave you, I swear I didn’t, I wouldn’t- I even tried to find a wizard to-”

Moss returned every kiss ardently, holding her tightly. He buried his face against her neck and indulged himself with a long, slow inhale of her scent, instantly calming his frayed nerves. “No, Tira, I know, I know. Everything’s alright. I’m here, and so are you.” He smiled against her skin, his heart dancing at the warmth in her embrace. She had *missed* him.

She whispered softly, brushing her cheek against his. “Can we go h-back to your well now? I hate it here.” She threw a baleful glance at Sam, who seemed to have retained some bravado in the face of Moss’ less-intimidating human form and looked to be advancing towards them.

Tira abruptly spun out of Moss’ arms, slapping a hand down on a dull silver coin on the sticky bartop and pinching it between two fingers before Moss. He raised an eyebrow, smirking despite himself when she leaned in and quietly made her wish.

Sam had reached them, his hand aloft to grab for Tira’s arm, when his furious expression suddenly shifted into blind panic, a wet smack echoing from the floor by his feet. A disembodied, bloodless penis flopped like a dead fish out of Sam’s pant leg, caught by its balls at the cuff of his boot. Sam screamed, albeit in a much higher pitch than usual. An answering scream, full of the same high-pitched alarm, sounded up from behind the bar as Moss and Tira turned and walked nonchalantly out of the tavern.

Moss held his arm out for Tira to thread hers through as they left the now-chaotic tavern in their wake. “You know because you wished on silver, not gold, the enchantment will only hold a few days before they’ll grow back. Hopefully they’ll learn something in the interim. Now, would you like to wish for a carriage, little sovereign?”

Tira just smiled and shook her head, the lines around her eyes easing with contentment. “No, it’s a lovely day, Moss, and the company’s fine. There’ll be time enough for it later. Let’s take our time and work up an appetite on the way back, shall we?”

Moss chuckled, laying his hand over hers as they strolled towards the road leading back to the forest. “Ahh. Hungry for more cheese, then?”

“No. But maybe after.” Tira answered with a mischievous grin, picking up the pace.



The End



Thank you so much for reading *A Well-Kept Secret*! If you enjoyed this little tale, be sure to head over to [my website](http://mywebsite.com) (ValentineVerse.com) and sign up for my newsletter - you’ll find info on my other books there, too. And hey - enjoy the

rest of the anthology - my writer buddies really hit it out of the park in this one!



Fancy a bit more fantasy with plenty of spice? You'll find a few nods to Western Barrett in my MMF series-starting novel Stowaway and Silent Song, available on Kindle and Kindle Unlimited! It stars a ship's captain FMC that calls *all* the shots, a silver-tongued selkie exile, and a voiceless virgin siren wonderfully eager to learn.

About the Author

An unapologetic book-huffer and devourer-of-stories, Vera Valentine has carried on a torrid love affair with the written word for nearly all of her 40 years. Grown in the diner-laden wilds of the New Jersey Pine Barrens and transplanted to North Carolina, she lives with her husband, eight cats, and two dogs, most of whom are house trained. An avid fan of the Paranormal Why Choose genre, she tossed her author hat into the ring in September of 2021 and never looked back.

A self-professed chaotic copybara, Vera can usually be found spending too much time on social media, chilling with fellow authors, or scribbling down ever-expanding plot bunny ideas in her trusty paper sidekick, the Bad Idea Book™.

If you'd like to stay up-to-date on Vera's latest projects and preorders, stop by her website - ValentineVerse.com for information, links, newsletter signups, ARC opportunities, and more!



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IN THEIR WEB

ASHLEY BENNETT

A BRIAR GLENN SHORT STORY



Spencer grew up hearing stories about Briar Glenn's Moth Madam.

She should have been afraid to go into the woods by herself, but like a moth to a flame, there was something about them she couldn't resist.

After a chance encounter with the Moth Madam and her pet, she finds herself caught in their web—with no desire to escape.

This story has:

Spider man/insect monsters, primal play, pre-agreed upon drugging with venom, biting, dom/sub dynamics, 'rope' play, mentions of sub-drop, collaring.



SPENCER

I STARED AT THE CLOCK, HOPING THE LAST FEW MINUTES OF MY shift at The Briar Glenn Bookshop passed without another customer walking through the door. Tonight, I had a very important appointment and any tardiness would not be tolerated.

The clock ticked on until there were three minutes left, but just when I thought I was in the clear, *Brian* strolled through the front door.

“Man, I’m so glad I caught you. I was worried you’d be closed.” He gave me a sincere smile and walked right up to where I was standing behind the checkout counter. “Did you get my texts?”

Brian Davis was the owner and head barista at The Busy Bean, Briar Glenn’s only coffee shop. He was also the epitome of conventional attractiveness. Perfectly straight teeth, piercing

blue eyes, and curly brown hair that had that effortlessly styled look. Folks flocked to the guy, but as hard as he tried, *he just wasn't my type.*

I closed my eyes and let out a deep breath, forcing myself to maintain some sort of professionalism for what would likely be an uncomfortable conversation. “Hey, Brian. I got them. I just uh—” I raked my teeth over my lower lip, plagued with indecision over the best way to land the killing blow. “*Listen*, you’re a really nice guy, but I’m just not interested in pursuing anything serious right now.”

Or ever, for that matter.

“I see.” He shoved his hands in his coat pockets, nodding his head in understanding while those freaking puppy dog eyes of his stared into the empty depths of my soul.

“I’m sorry, Brian.” I let my shoulders sag for emphasis, forcing my resting bitch face to look as sympathetic as I could. “Truly, I am. I just don’t think we’re a good match.”

Not to mention the sex was terrible.

He nodded again, and I swore he looked like he was going to cry. “Message received. I’ll see you around.” He gave me one of those awkward two-finger waves, like something you’d expect from the rejected guy in a romance movie.

Before I could slip in another half-assed apology, he’d already turned and walked out the door.

“Shit,” I hissed under my breath. I crossed from behind the counter and glanced out the window, watching as Brian sulked down Main Street with his head hanging low.

Rejection was probably a new experience for him.

Poor guy.

I felt bad for him. I truly did—but this was for the best.

My phone vibrated.

I wrestled it out of the pocket of my too-tight mini-skirt to find that I had a text message.

Unknown: You better be on time, Spencer. Don't make me wait.

“Shit. Shit. Shit,” I hissed as I took note of the time. My little encounter with Brian had held me up a bit, but if I sped—I just might be able to make it.

I flipped the ‘open’ sign in the front window to ‘closed’, locked the front door, grabbed my bag, and darted out the back door.

My mother, Marcie, was the owner and head bitch in charge of The Briar Glenn Bookshop. By default, my unemployed ass filled in whenever she needed coverage. This last-minute shift interfered with a prior engagement, but there was no way I could tell the woman who financially supported me no.

The number on the speedometer of my old Volvo climbed as I left the Briar Glenn city limits behind me. The picturesque image of the sleepy little town bathed in the orange glow of the setting sun began to fade, turning instead to the dark woods that surrounded it.

I pulled onto a dirt back road, my phone vibrating the moment I put my car in park and cut the engine.

Unknown: You're late.

According to the timestamp on the message, I was well and truly late.

And there would be hell to pay.

I stepped out of the car and clutched my bag to my chest, my head on a swivel as my eyes struggled to adjust to the darkness.

“H-hello?” I called out.

This was our usual rendezvous spot. It was strange that they weren't there.

“Hello?” My voice rang out through the trees, but there was no answer.

Again, my phone vibrated.

Unknown: The woods. Walk into them.

“Fuck,” I cursed under my breath, surveying my surroundings again.

They were watching me.

Which meant I only had one option.

I turned on my phone's flashlight, hiked my bag over my shoulder, and walked into the woods.



BURKE

I BLINKED ALL EIGHT OF MY EYES, ASSESSING HER AND THAT gods damned flashlight she needed to find her way through the forest. If she had been a good girl and made it to our appointment on time, I would have happily escorted her to the cottage.

But oh no, no, no. There was no chance of that now.

She'd be punished for her disobedience.

I waited until she passed by me before carefully climbing down from the tree. My eight legs allowed me to skitter down the trunk without making a sound, and from the shadows, I followed along behind her.

Being in her presence made the hair along my abdomen bristle. I could feel her unease, sense the thump of her beating

heart in the delicate tips of my feet. Her fear was exquisite, and I wanted to gorge myself on it.

While I lost myself to need, a twig cracked beneath me.

She whipped around, the strands of her perfectly trimmed black bob whirling around her head with the motion. “H-hello?” Her raspy voice wavered slightly, hinting at her trepidation.

Now it was time to have some fun.

“What do we have here?” I purred. “A little moth in my woods all by her lonesome?”

“W-who are you? Show yourself!” she commanded, flailing her flashlight back and forth, but missing me completely.

I smiled a wide, toothy smile, delighted by the increase in her heart rate and her breathing. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. After all, most people are afraid of spiders.”

At that moment, I burst out of the shadows, lurching toward her as fast as my legs would carry me. The beam of her flashlight lit up my grotesque body and a bloodcurdling scream cracked the air.

She ran, bolting through the trees, attempting to distance herself from me as much as she could.

Little did she know, *she was running right into my trap.*

“Now that’s no way to treat the itsy bitsy spider,” I said with a maniacal laugh as I pursued her.

The forest grew thick around us and just as she tried to pass between two trees, she was snagged by the translucent strands of my web.

“Motherfucker!” she hissed, flailing her body against the fibers.

She could fight all she wanted, but there was no escaping me.

I climbed beside her on the thin strings and she continued to struggle, her movements growing more erratic the closer I got.

“Calm down, little moth,” I said and stroked the side of her face with my hand. “I’m not going to eat you.” I dropped my voice to a sensual whisper. “At least not yet.”

“Fuck you!” she screamed and spit in my face.

My tongue darted out, licking the droplets of saliva from my lips. “Such a naughty little thing,” I tsked. “Why can’t you just behave, hmm?” I moved closer to her, close enough to see her pulse pounding in her neck. “This’ll only hurt for a minute.”

I rubbed my pedipalps together, then sank my fangs into the thin skin right where her neck met her collarbone.

Again she shrieked, but as my venom coursed through her body, it ended just as quickly as it began.

I pulled away and examined her limp body. “Fucking brats,” I huffed.

Using my spinnerets, I wrapped her in a thick cocoon of web, leaving only that beautiful face of hers exposed.

“Off we go,” I said and plucked her off of the web with my humanoid arms and threw her over my shoulder. “We don’t want to keep her waiting.”

I hummed a little tune as I carried her through the forest.

How long had we been playing out here in the woods?

How long had we made her wait?

If it was too long, we’d both be in trouble.

I guess that's the price I'd have to pay for playing with my food.

I laughed to myself and readjusted her body just as the decrepit Victorian mansion we called home came into view. The dull yellow glow of candlelight illuminated the front window and a slender black figure paced back and forth across the parlor.

"Shit," I hissed to the passed-out human in my cocoon.
"You've really done it now. Hopefully, she goes easy on us."

The old front porch creaked underneath my feet and the movement of the figure in the window ceased as I neared the front door. Without warning, the front door flew open and the figure bolted out to join us on the porch.

"Burke!" She yelled in her shrill voice. "You're late!"

The sound reverberated through me, irritating my sensitive nervous system and causing me to almost drop the bundle I was carrying.

I crouched down and laid the sedated woman at her feet. "I'm sorry, Madam. She was up for a game of chase and I—"

"Silence!" Again, she shouted, her bright red eyes narrowed in anger. "I don't have time for your excuses. Bring her inside."

"Yes, Madam. As you wish."

With that, I scooped the cocoon into my arms and carried her inside.



MOTH MADAM

I WATCHED AS BURKE CARRIED SPENCER INTO THE SITTING room and placed her lifeless body on the settee.

“Did you have to use your venom?” I asked with an edge of irritation in my voice.

If he got the dosage wrong, she could be asleep for hours.

Hells, he could even kill her.

But from the slow beat of her heart, I could tell that wasn't the case.

Burke shrugged and blinked all eight of his eyes, doing his best to garner my sympathy. “You know how much she likes it. She says it's the best rest she gets.”

I rolled my eyes.

He was so far gone for her it wasn't even funny.

Yes, Spencer enjoyed a *lot* of things, but that didn't make it okay to break rules—to be late for previously agreed-upon appointments.

“She'll have the bite marks for weeks.” I sat down next to Spencer's body, admiring her face as I tucked a few perfect strands of black hair behind her ear. “But the real question is, do we set her free or do we leave her tied up and make her beg to get out?” I flashed him a mischievous smile and my feathery antennae swept back and forth above my head playfully.

“Well—” he started to say, but was interrupted by a deep groan from Spencer.

I looked down to find that the color had returned to her face and that her eyes fluttered back and forth behind closed lids.

Burke moved closer, leaning in to get a better look at her.

“Little moth,” he whispered, his thin lips pulling back to reveal a sharp-toothed grin. “Little moth, nap time is over. It's time to play.”

Time to play.

The very thought made my pussy throb.

“Spencer. Wake up. You've been a very naughty girl,” I snapped. “When we make arrangements, I expect you to show up on time. Good girls show up on time, good girls get rewarded.” I leaned over to whisper in her ear. “And I like it when my girls are good.”

She opened her blue-green eyes and blinked them a few times.

“I'm sorry, Madam. It—it won't happen again. That idiot Brian caught me right as I was about to leave.”

“Fucking Brian,” Burke hissed.

“If he continues to give you trouble, we might just need to pay him a visit.” I gazed up at Burke. “Right, pet? No one else plays with our toys.”

He nodded in agreement and stroked Spencer’s hair.

“No, that’s not nec—” she started, but I brought a thin finger up to her lips to silence her.

“Shh. Quiet,” I purred. “That’s enough talk about boring Brian. Now...” I trailed my finger over the fibers that kept her restrained. “Beg Burke to release you, my disobedient little moth.”

Spencer focused on Burke, putting in overtime and pouting her full lips. “Please release me, Burke. I promise I’ll be a good girl.”

It was doubtful.

But that was part of the fun.

“May I, Madam?” Burke asked.

I could tell he was chomping at the bit to have his way with her, and for now, I’d let him have some control.

“Yes, pet. Go ahead and cut her free.”

I picked at my nails, feigning disinterest as Burke used the sharp tip of his claw to cut through the web.

“Thank you, Burke,” Spencer said as she wriggled free.

The little minx looked irresistible tonight. As usual, she was dressed from head to toe in black. A sheer black long-sleeve covered her dainty black bralette. A too-short leather miniskirt barely covered her ass, and gauzy polka-dot tights clung tight to her thin legs.

And, *as usual*, she was wearing her coveted Doc Martens.

Sure, they looked cool, but they were a real bitch for her to put on and take off...

“Madam.” Spencer stood in front of me and tugged at the hem of her skirt.

“Spencer. Are you ready to play now?” I asked, formally initiating the scene.

She nodded—knowing full well I needed verbal confirmation—and I rolled my eyes with a sigh.

“Words, little moth,” Burke said. I could see he was eager, his cock already bulging inside of his slit.

Spencer looked down and bashfully twirled the toe of her boot against the floor. “Yes, Madam.”

“And what is your safe word?” I asked.

Her safety and her comfort came before anything else.

She glanced up at me, fluttering her lashes. “Vanilla.”

“Good girl. Now, undress for us.” I leaned back on the couch, beckoning Burke closer as Spencer strut into the middle of the room.

She bent over to start with her boots—

“Wait,” Burke said. “Leave them on.”

I glared at him, reminding him who was in charge here.

“Sorry, Madam,” he whispered, and trailed one of his furry feet over my leg.

“Continue, Spencer.”

She slowly undid the buttons of her shirt, dropping it to the floor before moving to her skirt. Wiggling her hips, she worked it down over her thighs, then kicked it at Burke. She

stood there in her bralette, her tights, and a pair of lace, high-waisted underwear, waiting for her next command.

“Pet,” I purred and ran my hand along Burke’s jaw. “Tie her up for me, would you?”

It was time to have a little fun.



SPENCER

TIE HER UP FOR ME.

Those five little words held so much weight, so much promise.

It was why someone like Brian would never be enough for me.

Three months ago, I'd stumbled upon Madam and Burke playing in the woods. I'd watched from the shadows as the giant spider monster struggled against the web, his arms and legs bound to the fibers with rope. A fluffy taupe-colored moth stood on the forest floor just below him, her gossamer wings pressed tight to her sides while she used the soft length of her proboscis to work his cock from where it emerged from his slit.

She teased him, demeaned him, wringing every ounce of pleasure she could from his body until he was a panting, euphoric mess.

And when she was finished, she'd marched right over to where I was hiding and asked me if I'd enjoyed the show.

I grew up hearing the rumors of Briar Glenn's Moth Madam. I should have been afraid of her, and Burke too, for that matter.

But I wasn't. At least, not in the traditional sense.

They were monsters through and through. These morally gray, flawed beings that existed on the fringe of society. Their lives were a far cry from what I experienced in my own picture-perfect life, growing up in a picture-perfect town.

I became enamored with them; *drawn to the pair like a moth to a flame.*

We met frequently after that, with the two of them slowly introducing me to primal play, bondage, and the world of kink.

It just clicked. Some intrinsic part of me was awakened by the dynamic we shared, and there was no going back.

There was no way I'd ever walk away from this—no way I'd ever walk away from *them*.

"Spencer, are you ready?" Madam's honeyed voice drew me out of my thoughts, and I nodded enthusiastically.

Burke gave me a menacing smile, one that would scare a regular human, but it brought me nothing but excitement. He skittered over to where I stood, his body morphing into a blur of bright orange fur that moved faster than my eyes could keep up.

"Spread 'em, little moth," he said from behind me. I could already hear him wrapping his silk around his hands.

Moth Madam's eyes were on me as I spread my legs ever so slightly but kept my arms tucked against my body.

“Spencer.” She narrowed her red eyes and tapped the slender tip of her toe against the floor, awaiting my compliance.

I grinned wickedly, making her wait a few beats before I threw out my arms and pushed out my chest. Being a brat was my newfound purpose in life, and I delighted seeing just how far I could push the Madam.

Burke chuckled, always entertained by my theatrics, and began tying me up with his silk. He started with a basic harness, crossing thick strands of web over my chest. With each pass, soothing vibrations broke out over my skin, lulling me into a submissive state.

He secured my arms behind my back, then scampered up the wall and onto the ceiling, running the makeshift rope through anchors attached to one of the home’s exposed beams.

“Ready, little moth?” he asked, peering down at me with the web clenched tight in his human hands.

“Yes,” I breathed.

The moment the word left my mouth, Burke tugged at the ropes, gently hoisting me up until the tips of my boots just barely scuffed the floor. My breath hitched, the knots pressing into my skin. I felt a heady rush of pleasure, my body buzzing with delight.

I closed my eyes, throwing my head back with a hum, giving myself time to adjust to the rush of sensations.

“Come here, pet.” I heard Madam call for Burke along with the familiar scuttling sound he made, but I didn’t care to open my eyes.

“She looks so pretty when she’s tied up like that, doesn’t she pet?” she asked him.

“Yes, Madam. She’s as pretty as a present.”

Madam tsked. “It’s a shame she was late today. She’ll have to be punished for her disobedience.”

One of my eyes squinted open, watching the two of them from where they were cuddled on the settee.

“Well, what did you have in mind, Madam?” Burke asked.

“Hmm.” She caressed his fuzzy pedipalp with the thin tips of her fingers. “Why don’t you eat my pussy while our little moth here watches?”

That bitch.

My eyes flicked open and I scrambled along the floor—but I didn’t dare utter a complaint.

Madam gave me a devious smile and parted her legs, allowing Burke to settle in between them.

“Enjoy the show, little moth,” he said with a wink before burying his face between her thighs.

Thick swaths of fur covered her hips, making it difficult to see exactly what Burke was doing with his tongue, but from her breathy sighs and the soft sway of her antennae, it was obvious it felt divine.

Fuck.

I bucked against the ropes, thrusting my hips just slightly, begging to be touched.

Madam locked eyes with me, her fingers digging into the blaze of Burke’s hair as she rode his face. “Is this what you want, Spencer? One of us eating your sweet, sweet pussy?”

Before I could answer, she closed her eyes and moaned Burke’s name.

My nipples were hard points beneath my bralette, rubbing against the rope with each sway of my body. I could feel just how wet I was, my panties damp and warm over my pussy.

“Please,” I whined. “I promise I won’t be late again. I mean it.”

She smiled, peering at me from behind heavy lids. I knew her well enough to know this wasn’t about her getting off, this was about her exerting control.

“Pet.” Madam tugged at Burke’s hair, forcing him to pull back from her cunt.

“Yes, Madam?” he asked, staring at her with a slick sheen covering his mouth and his pedipalps.

She slid her hand over her chest and down her stomach, plunging two fingers inside of her pussy before presenting them to Burke. He sucked them into his mouth with a moan, swirling his tongue around the digits until they were clean.

“That’s my good boy. Why don’t you tend to our little moth for me? I think she’s feeling a bit left out.”

Burke turned and flashed me a feral grin. “It would be my pleasure.”



BURKE

RATHER THAN RUSHING RIGHT OVER TO SPENCER, I LET HER squirm for a moment, taking the time to admire how pretty she looked, all trussed up for me and the Madam to enjoy.

I really did nice work.

“Burke,” she panted, batting her full lashes at me like I’d forgotten about her.

I looked next to me, where Madam was teasing her pussy with slow strokes, her eyes glued to Spencer.

“Go on, pet. She’s earned it,” she assured me.

I scurried across the floor, coming to a stop right in front of Spencer.

“Such a pretty little moth,” I hummed and ran my tongue over her neck. Spencer groaned, struggling against her ties and leaning into me as much as she could. “My needy little girl.”

I grabbed her thighs, hoisting her up and spreading her legs as wide. My cock bulged inside my slit, and I dry-humped her, pressing the swell of my erection against her pussy in slow, circular motions.

“Fuck,” Spencer breathed, looking down at where my burgeoning cock teased her.

“Is that what you’d like, Spencer?” Moth Madam chimed in from over my shoulder. “For Burke to fuck you with that interesting spider cock of his?”

Ah, my truncus.

It was certainly interesting. Or maybe the word most humans would use to describe it was *terrifying*.

My truncus was hidden inside a slit below my waist, right where you’d expect to find a cock on a human male. It emerged when I willed it to, wet and ready with a fine sheen of my own lubricant. The shaft was a glossy, ebony color, long and rigid, with a bulbous, bright orange tip.

For most, it was nightmare fuel.

But I fondly remembered the first time Spencer had joined us in play, rather than indulging her voyeuristic tendencies. She’d examined my truncus for only a moment before eagerly slipping it inside of her mouth—taking me in all of my monstrous glory with zero hesitation.

In all of my life, it was the most normal I’d ever felt. The most wanted. Sure, Madam made me feel wanted and loved, but with Spencer, it was different. She was a young, beautiful human. One that craved us just as we were, embracing the dark, unsightly parts of ourselves we kept hidden from the light.

We belonged together.

“Please,” Spencer begged, bucking her hips against me. Even with her tights and her panties, I could feel how wet she was, how eager she was to take me.

With a careful drag of my claws, I sheared off Spencer’s tights, forcing a small gasp out of her. I ran my fingers over the soft skin of her thighs before coming to a stop at the waistband of her panties. Hooking my index fingers into the elastic, I slowly peeled them down her thighs and over her boots, exposing her freshly waxed pussy.

“Such a pretty little cunt,” I purred. “All smooth and ready for us.” I trailed the back of my hand along her pussy before giving it a little slap with my fingers, being careful of my claws.

Spencer made a noise, something between a squeak and a moan, and I grinned.

“Pet,” Madam said, shifting my gaze over to her.

She sat on the settee, her legs spread wide, those delicate fingers of hers still teasing the slick folds of her pussy.

“Yes, Madam?” I asked.

“Get your cock out.” Her normally shrill voice was lower. Breathy. *Needy*.

“Yes, Madam.” I dropped Spencer’s legs, letting her feet drag along the floor, and turned to face Madam.

I figured I’d give my queen a little show.

My cock slowly bloomed from my slit, a lustrous bead of lubricant already gathered on the bulb. I stared at Madam. Our gazes locked as I ran my fingers along the sensitive edges of my slit, shuddering at my own touch.

Mimicking my movements, Madam dipped her fingers inside her pussy, her lips parting with a moan the moment I gripped my cock. I gave it several slow strokes, coating my hand with lube and imagining all the ways I'd fuck her.

All the ways I'd fuck them.

All the ways I'd let Madam fuck me.

“Madam,” Spencer whined. It appeared our disobedient little sub was growing impatient.

“Burke,” Madam said. “Turn our little moth so I can watch you fuck her.”

I scurried over to where Spencer was suspended from the ceiling. She bit her lip, staring up at me while I hiked her legs over my waist.

“Ready for me to take you, little moth?” I asked, running my cock along her pussy, feeling just how wet she was. “I know how much you love it when I leave you dripping with my cum.”

“Fuck, ple—” The word ‘please’ was cut off with a gasp as I pushed the bulbous head of my cock inside of her, using the gentle momentum of the ropes to drive myself deep.

Her tight cunt gripped my cock and I sucked in a breath, forcing myself to keep my thrusts slow and even, rather than slamming into her again and again.

Spencer closed her eyes, moaning and baring her neck, inviting me to kiss her there. It was always her neck, her body, but never on the lips. There was something about the sensation she found off-putting, and I was happy to work around it.

I lapped at her bite wound with my tongue, my fuzzy pedipalps caressing the column of her neck.

“This is what you get when you’re a good girl,” I whispered between each slow lash of my tongue and each languid thrust of my hips. “Every inch of my fucking cock.”

Digging my fingers into the soft skin of her waist, I fucked her harder, using the momentum from the ropes to spear her on my cock again and again.

The room was filled with the slapping sounds of our bodies as they made contact, the deep breaths and heavy pants of me, Spencer, and the Madam as we drove ourselves towards orgasm.

“Madam,” I rasped when I felt Spencer tightening around me. “I think our little fuck toy wants to come.”

Moth Madam rose to her feet and I slowed my movements, awaiting her instruction.

“No! Come on!” Spencer protested and tried to thrust into me, but I held her hips steady with a firm grip.

Madam strolled up beside us, her velvety wings dragging across the floor and her antennae swaying in perfect synchrony with her hips.

“Little moth,” she said. “I thought the three of us were playing together. Don’t you want my tongue suctioned to your clit while Burke fucks you?”

Spencer nodded, earning her a smug smile from Madam.

“That’s what I thought,” Madam said. She snaked her hand up the back of Spencer’s neck, grabbing a fistful of her raven hair, forcing our little moth to meet her gaze. “And what did you promise us earlier?”

Spencer swallowed hard, her throat bobbing. “That I’ll never be late again.”

Madam released her hair and stroked her cheek. “That’s our good girl.” She glanced down at where my cock was still buried deep inside of Spencer. “Burke, pull out and take her from behind.”



MOTH MADAM

I WATCHED HIM SLIP OUT OF SPENCER'S PUSSY, A THIN STRAND of lubricant attaching the two of them together before breaking off mid-air.

Her cunt looked so pretty like this, bright pink and swollen from the increased blood flow.

Glistening.

Just begging for a taste.

Growing impatient, I tapped my foot against the floor, watching as Burke sidled up behind her.

He gripped her hips, yanking her up to allow her torso to dip forward against the ropes, then drove himself deep with a hard thrust.

Spencer let out a strangled moan, her face contorting with pleasure.

I loved watching the two of them like this, seeing Spencer come undone in the throes of passion. To most, she was a bratty little bitch, but to Burke and me, she was the submissive of our dreams.

I tilted Spencer's chin up, brushing her hair away from her face. "Does it feel good, little moth? Burke's cock just pounding against your cervix like that?" From firsthand experience, I knew that the wide, bulb-shaped tip of Burke's cock was perfect for intense, full-body cervical orgasms.

"Yes, Madam," she panted, her eyes barely open. "So good."

I smiled, lowering to my knees, watching Burke's cock pulse in and out of her cunt.

My proboscis, the unnaturally long tube that served as my tongue, unfurled from my mouth. I ran it along Spencer's pussy, teasing and tasting where she and Burke were joined with sluggish licks.

Her musky-sweet flavor mixed with Burke's tart acidity, drawing a hum out of me that vibrated my tongue and left the two of them shuddering with pleasure.

But it wasn't enough.

I wouldn't be satisfied until they lost themselves to me completely.

Wrapping my proboscis around the base of Burke's cock, I squeezed it tight and suctioned the fluted tip to Spencer's clit.

"Fuck," Spencer gasped when I started to vibrate my tongue once again.

"Fuck is right, little moth," Burke huffed. "Between your tight cunt and Madam's tongue, I'm not gonna last long."

Although I couldn't see Burke from where I was on the floor, I could recall from memory just what he looked like. His wispy hair slipping loose from his bun with each thrust. The way his pedipalps clenched tight when he was about to come.

He was a work of art, a thing of beauty, and I didn't tell him that nearly enough.

Desperate for them to come, I sucked harder, increasing the intensity of my vibrations to a buzz that bordered on uncomfortable.

"Yes. Yes!" Spencer screamed, ready to surrender herself to us.

"That's a good little fuck toy. Come for us. Come on this fucking cock," Burke growled, burying himself deep.

Spencer arched her back, her body growing tense as she cried out. A warm gush of fluid dripped from her pussy, down my tongue, and into my mouth. Burke jolted with a groan, filling her with his cum.

I sucked my tongue back into my mouth, savoring their combined release with a smile.

For me, the fact that I could reduce them both to this was better than any orgasm I'd ever had.

I rose on shaky legs, supporting Spencer's weight so Burke could pull out of her.

There was a slight popping sound as he broke the suction, his cock already slinking back into his body.

"I'll grab some robes and some towels," Burke said before scuttering off toward the bathroom.

I looked at Spencer, admiring the contented expression on her face before trailing a finger through her soaked pussy. "You

did so well. You were such a good girl for us.” I wrapped my tongue around my finger, licking it clean with a delighted hum.

“Thank you,” Spencer mumbled sleepily.

Burke returned with a stack of fluffy towels and a robe for Spencer. He sat them on the settee, then untied her with a swipe of his claws.

There were red imprints on her body from the ropes, her skin already breaking out in goosebumps from the chill in the air.

“There we go,” Burke said as he worked her into the robe and cradled her in his arms.

While he held her, I unlaced her boots, letting them drop to the floor with a heavy thud.

“Shall we head to bed?” I asked as I toweled off.

Spencer nodded.

We were silent as we padded down the hall to our room. Burke placed her in the middle of our giant four-poster bed and I climbed in beside her, pulling the satin sheets up over us.

“I’ll fetch us some tea,” he said before skittering out of the room.

Spencer snuggled closer, settling into the crook of my arm and burying her face in the ruff of hair around my neck.

It wouldn’t be long before the sub-drop set in, but we’d be there to give her all the aftercare she needed.

Burke returned with a tea tray full of snacks, humming to himself as he joined us on the bed.

“Pet, can you please grab the box from the nightstand?” I asked him.

We'd talked about this in length, and with Brian sniffing around, I couldn't think of a better time to do it.

Burke passed me a tiny black box, cuddling close as I presented it to Spencer. "This is for you."

She sat up slightly, her breath hitching when she opened it. Inside was a thin, black leather collar, decorated with a shiny silver lock.

"Really?" she asked, trailing her fingers over the soft leather.

"Really. Burke and I talked about it for quite some time, and we think you've earned it."

He smiled, his fangs on full display. "You're ours to keep, little moth."

"If you accept, that is," I quickly added. I didn't want her to feel pressured.

"Of course I accept," she said, fiddling with the lock. "Put it on me."

I pulled a little silver key from the box. Unlocking the collar, I placed it around Spencer's neck and locked it again.

While I was close, I whispered in her ear, "Never forget whose cunt this is. Never forget how good only we can make you feel, little moth."

I kissed her temple and Burke snuggled closer, draping several of his legs over the two of us and hugging tight. We'd been waiting for what felt like lifetimes for someone like Spencer, and now that we had her, *I hoped we'd never have to let her go.*

About the Author

Ashley loves to write spicy-sweet monster romances. You can expect fluffy vibes and all the feels from her characters and stories. She enjoys brown sugar oatmilk iced lattes, stockpiling candles, the perfection of fall weather, thrifting mid-century modern furniture, and a good nonhuman romance. She also loves to commission NSFW art.

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THE APPLETHORPE GARDEN

C.M. NASCOSTA



Author Note:

Some of you may have read an older version of this little short back on my blog — I hope you don't mind it being refurbished a bit for publication here, but Alder is one of those Cambric Creek characters that WILL show up again, so bringing him into the published realm is a necessity! Sign up for my newsletter to receive another small short of Alder and Ellie (and another familiar face!)

Content Warnings:

It's a slice of life fluff, that's it. The SOFTEST dom, he's seriously the sweetest.



ELLIE LOVED THE SOUND OF RAIN.

The steady white noise, the green smell of petrichor and ozone that accompanied it, the cozy gloom that made her want to do nothing more than curl up in the corner with a book... *Walking* in a downpour, however, she loved considerably less, particularly when said rain was coming straight down in a non-stop curtain.

Peering through the windshield, she eyed the manor house, wincing at the rhythmic squeak of the wipers as the rain fell steadily, with no sign of letting up. *You could wait it out, wait for a break in the clouds...* but there was no break in the clouds overhead, only a solid wall of dark nimbostratus and besides, she was already going to be late as it was. *It's not like you're not going to get soaked anyways...* She knew without question that Alder would send her out to check on the wildflower patch, which he'd deemed *hers* months earlier after she'd

mentioned her journal project to the handsome, green-skinned fae.

The thought of Alder squared her resolve. *It's water, it's not going to hurt you. Every minute you sit here waffling is a minute you're not inside with him.* It was good motivation, even if she predicted he'd send her out into the rain once more. He was thrilled with her interest in the wild flowers, and his enthusiasm and support had been just the motivation she'd needed to continue working on her journal project. Every time he gave the order to check on *her* flowers, Ellie felt a fresh thrill of belonging... That he was a charming dork and extremely easy on the eyes only added to the fervor of butterflies she felt each day she worked at the greenhouse.

The front door to the manor house was temptingly close: the stately, ivy-covered facade was only a quick run from the car, and the peaked portico would provide shelter as she shook off. Employees of the arboretum and greenhouse weren't strictly supposed to be entering through the main house, but, Ellie rationalized, she wasn't *technically* an employee. The parking lot was empty, so it wasn't as if she'd come in sloshing past paying guests. Darting from her car, Ellie raced the short distance, breathing in relief once she was under cover... only to realise the giant oaken door was locked, that there were no tours that day, and that she still needed to trudge around the building to the greenhouse entrance. She was a soggy, dripping mess by the time she pulled open the greenhouse's door, but Alder took no notice.

"Hey, glad you made it in! It's a wet one out there today!"

The ghillie dhu's voice was cheerful as ever as he raised a mossy hand to wave in greeting. The table before him was covered in an array of short branches and as she approached,

he expertly fit two of the pieces together, taping them deftly before returning them to water.

“I think it’s just the two of us with this weather, but just romaine calm...”

Ellie’s smile twitched. They had discovered a mutual propensity for dad jokes early on, as well as a love of puns.

“...because we’re going to pot it like it’s hot.”

“That was *terrible*,” she laughed, shaking her head at how pleased he looked over his ridiculously corny joke. *No Randolph today...just the two of us!* “By all means, lettuce carry on.”

His golden eyes flashed, smile stretching as she reached for an apron. “Why don’t you go check on your kids first and see if they’re getting too waterlogged,” he predictably suggested, before slapping a long-fingered hand on the counter, making her jump. “Wait a minute! Updates! I haven’t seen you in almost a week...is she starting to bud out?”

She’d already pulled up the pictures on he phone, laughing again at his grabby hands motion. The little lemon tree was her pride and joy and had been for years, until it had been stricken with a creeping fungus several months earlier. When Ellie had mentioned it in passing to Alder, he had insisted that she bring the small tree to him for care. It had taken weeks of meticulous pruning and cleaning, grafting healthy limbs onto those that had been sacrificed, but she’d been able to bring her lovely little tree home as good as new. Since then, every time she worked he would ask for updates and pictures, proudly crowing about how well the tree was doing.

“She’s flowering and it smells incredible.”

“You’ll have fruit this year! I’m so glad she healed up well.”

Ellie felt herself melt under the weight of his beaming smile. For all she'd been worried about working with Alder at first, it was embarrassing to admit now how much of her free time was spent daydreaming about his bright smile and long, dexterous fingers.

She'd never had any bad encounters with the fair folk as an adult, but there had been a house brownie at her grandparent's house when she was young, and while they helped with chores, particularly in the kitchen, small Ellie had quickly discovered it had sticky fingers, filching her toys when her back was turned, and making off with the sweet treats her grandmother would leave on a small plate on the kitchen table. By the time she would give up searching for her missing doll or game piece, going to the kitchen for her well-deserved consolation snack, there would be nothing left but crumbs—bits of cookie on the chair, and a slosh of milk upon the tabletop. She'd heard sufficient enough stories from classmates and co-workers over the years to have been wary of the ghillie dhu, but her fears had gone unfounded.

Unlike the brownie from her childhood, Alder was lithe and graceful, with sage green skin and sparkling eyes the color of the butterweed that grew on the banks of the pond beyond the wildflowers. There was nothing mischievous or malicious in his smile, only bright friendliness, and she loved working with him. The fact that he happened to also be incredibly handsome, with high cheekbones and broad shoulders, well... Ellie was positive that had nothing to do with her crush.

“On second thought,” he mused, peering out the greenhouse glass as she pocketed her phone, “maybe you should hold off on checking your patch. I don't want you to get too wet!”

Glancing down, Ellie took in her dripping raincoat and squeaking wellies. Dark red hair plastered itself to her cheek and rivulets of water ran down her neck, into her shirt. *It's fine, he looks like a forest god come to life and he apparently thinks you always look like a drowned rat. No worries, totally cool.* When she raised her head again, she found Alder's widened eyes taking her in as if for the first time.

“Oh, it-it looks like you already got a bit, um...damp.” His expression brightened and a small, white flower bloomed at his temple as his eyes snapped back to hers. “Well, that's good then! You can go out and check your flowers, see how they're doing before you dry off! I'm sure they'd appreciate the encourage-mint.”

He snipped the end off a potted spearmint to his left with a flourish, and she laughed, praying that her feet wouldn't choose that moment to make her stumble as she turned back to the door. Despite the fact that it meant going back out in the deluge, she couldn't find fault with his reasoning. Flipping her hood back up, Ellie turned to the door and braced herself for the rain. He was right, after all. The heat of his smile would warm her up in no time.



WORKING WITH PLANTS WAS HER HAPPY PLACE.

Several summers had been spent volunteering at the local botanical garden for years, until it had been purchased by the history museum and turned into a living exhibit. The grounds were tended by professionals, her volunteer services no longer needed, and Ellie mourned the time she got to spend in the green space doing her favorite hobby each week.

It had been during that time at the botanical garden when she'd first started the journal. It was a lark at first, just some doodles in one of the many pretty little journals she had a proclivity for purchasing, but it soon evolved into more. Descriptions of the flowers she drew, their growing patterns and soil preferences, pressed petals and leaves...the thought of no longer having a green space to call her own outside of a small windowsill of herbs, left her feeling bereft.

It was then that she'd seen the advertisement. Applethorpe Manor, she'd learned, claims to be the oldest and grandest home in Cambric Creek, a small suburb just outside the city. The manor house had been preserved, donated to the town's historic society, and was seeking volunteers to conduct the interior tours...and to work in the expansive greenhouses. Over a hundred acres of rare trees, fruit orchards, pollinator gardens and a manicured hedge maze, in addition to the half a dozen greenhouses. She'd received a call a few short hours after filling out the online interest form, and by the end of the week she was donning an apron and being introduced to the chief horticulturist.

Having crushes on coworkers was nothing new. A fellow barista at the coffee shop where she'd worked for several months after moving into her apartment had been the object of her imaginary affection. Then it was the charismatic guy from the office who always asked after everyone's weekend plans, not that she'd ever been brave enough to attempt to include him in hers, and then it was Avrille, another volunteer at the botanical garden. The barista had gone back to school and her infatuation with the guy at work had eventually waned once she'd spent enough time listening to his conversations with others, deeming their interests too opposite to be consequential. Avrille had become a friend, and even though Ellie was still regularly entranced by the curvaceous mothwoman's confidence and snark and beautiful, sunset-colored wings, the attraction had mellowed into an affectionate friendship, one that she wouldn't change for any reason.

Alder was different. He cracked terrible dad jokes and hummed to himself as he cared for the orchids, talked to the trees, and was unfailingly kind to the critters who ventured out of the bordering woods to nibble on the vegetation. It had been

months since she'd started working at Applethorpe, normally the amount of time it took for a crush to wane, but her feelings for the ghillie dhu had not dissipated. He occupied her thoughts constantly, and there was no sense in denying the obvious— she was completely smitten.

“You really just need to ask him out.”

The voice was close to her ear, jolting Ellie from her reverie. She scowled at the curvy moth, but Avrille had already turned towards the rows of kalanchoe, giving them a liberal misting with the sprayer she wielded. Her friend had migrated from the defunct botanical garden to Applethorpe with her, and while Ellie was happy for the camaraderie, having her former crush be a witness to her new crush was mortifying.

“That would be unprofessional,” she grumbled, feeling her neck heat. She could see Alder through the glass greenhouse walls, carrying on a conversation with a brilliantly colored completely non-sentient bougainvillea, and smiled with a sigh, in spite of herself. The mossy tunic he wore was a few shades deeper than his skin and draped around his shoulders like a cape, swinging with his movements as he worked. Ellie knew how soft it was from having brushed past him in the tighter greenhouse aisles, and wondered if it grew directly from his skin, as she suspected.

“Besides, I don't think he'd be interested in me. He flirts with Randolph.” She tried to sound flip, but her voice was strained, even to her own ears. After all, she'd witnessed said flirting earlier that same day as Randolph, a volunteer from inside the manor house, came out to collect the topiaries and flowering dish gardens Avrille had put together under Alder's instruction. Ellie had taken note of the way Alder's golden eyes had sparkled and his cheeky grin as he chatted with

Randolph. Her insides had twisted, escaping the greenhouse and the sight of his smiling *that* smile at someone else.

“He does, a bit,” Avrille agreed, twisting her guts further. “But he flirts with you too. And why would it be unprofessional? He’s not our boss, Bess is.”

It was true, Ellie was forced to admit. Alder was in charge of the plants, but he wasn’t technically in charge of the volunteers. Bess was a dour-faced lizardperson with the long snout of a crocodile and a steel grey bob, who had never once smiled in the time they’d been volunteering at the manor house.

“And besides, he’d never get involved with someone like Randolph, Randolph is a snob! He doesn’t like getting his hands dirty, he wears *sweater vests*. He only deigns to step his designer loafers out the door because Alder is a cutie.”

Ellie grunted in agreement. Randolph *was* a snob.

“You need to just make a move. I promise he’ll be interested, I’ve watched the way he looks at you, the way he smiles at you. Don’t be a dummy, okay? I’ve watched the way *you* look at him. He gets a pass for being a little clueless, he talks to plants twenty-four hours a day, you don’t. You guys have a lot in common, you have the same dorky sense of humor...it would be a crime not to get together!”

Through the glass, she watched him unpotting a flowering shrub with trailing vines, packing the roots in burlap, to be replanted in the fields. He’s sweet and funny and you like him. Avrille was right, she decided.



“ARE YOU TAKING A BREAK SOON?” IT HAD BEEN A FEW DAYS after Avrille’s pep talk. *She’s right. You like him. What’s the harm?*

“You don’t need to ask permission,” he’d waved her off good-naturedly. “You’ve been working hard since you got here!”

Ellie paused. Normally she would have swallowed down her disappointment and taken her break alone, but Avrille was right about this too. *He gets a pass for being clueless, he talks to plants twenty-four hours a day. You don’t.* “Actually,” she went on, hoping the heat moving up her neck wasn’t making her look like a tomato, “I thought we could take a break together? You’ve been here a lot longer than I have! Gotta hydrate.”

He looked up in surprise from the bucket of peat before him, eyebrows shooting up. For an interminable amount of time, silence hung between them, and Ellie wondered if she would be lucky enough for a freak earthquake to rock the greenhouse, splitting the dirt floor beneath her feet and swallowing her up.

“Oh!” he exclaimed, as if the thought of taking a break had never occurred to him, his brilliant smile making the leaves of the nearby ficus rustle. “That’s a good idea! Let me grab my bottle. Hey, what did the empty bottle say to the water fountain?”

“I can already tell this one is going to be *so* bad.”

“Well, well, well,” he plowed on, triumphant in his terrible corny joke.

She giggled in spite of herself, moreso at his pleased expression than the joke itself, moving through the greenhouse doorway as he held it open. When she glanced swiftly back, it was to see another one of those small white flowers at his temple.

The curved stone benches in the butterfly garden quickly became their favorite place to break together over the next few weeks. After that first afternoon of inviting him to stop with her, refilling their water bottles and sitting together for fifteen minutes that felt like three, he seemed eager to join her, sometimes seeking her out to stop whatever it was she was working on to announce his leaves were crisping from a lack of hydration.

“So what do you plan to do with your field journal once it’s done?”

Ellie almost choked on the water she’d just sipped at the question. He was leaning forward on his elbows, the small stone cafe table between them seeming simultaneously like an ocean and close enough that she was practically in his lap. “I-I’m not sure I’ll do anything with it, to be honest,” she admitted after swallowing. “It’s hardly professional. And even if it were, there’s probably not much interest in something like that for most people.”

“It is so,” he countered. “I would buy it. I’ll bet the local coven would be interested in it as well, especially as a learning tool for their younger members. I would buy ten copies just to have on my shelf, and I’d let everyone I know my favorite amateur floriculturist wrote it.”

“That’s only because I’m probably the only amateur floriculturist you know. And I’m not sure that’s even a real thing.”

Alder sniffed. “Smartest. Prettiest. Most enthusiastic. It’s definitely a word, and I’ll have you know plenty of volunteers have come through the doors here expecting to teach me a thing or two. Everyone in Cambric Creek has an opinion on this place.”

Her face was on fire and her lungs had somehow forgotten how to inflate on their own. *Did he just call you pretty?!*

“Have you lived here long? In Cambric Creek, I mean. Or are you from here?”

“I’m not. I came here for the job, didn’t expect to wind up loving it. Plus they offered lodging, so it was really too good of an opportunity to turn my nose up on.”

“Do you live in the manor?!” Her incredulous exclamation attracted the attention of the volunteer who was dragging a hose caddy down the pathway, and Ellie ducked her head.

“That would be the life! I don’t, sadly. But I do have an adorable little fairy tale cabin right here onsite.” Alder pushed up from the table, the break seeming to have lasted only a few seconds. The spray of white flowers at his ear was like a miniature bouquet as he turned his glance down to her, golden eyes gleaming. “You’ll have to come by sometime, see for yourself. You won’t be leaf how nice it is.”



“EVERY PART OF HER IS POISONOUS, BUT THE EARLIEST settlers would soak the blossoms in vinegar and mix it with fermented berries to treat malaria.”

Alder’s voice was a murmur at her ear, close enough to feel the heat of his breath, heat that seemed to travel all the way to her core, and her stomach quivered. Soft moss tickled the arm closest to him, and from the corner of her eye, Ellie could see a lock of his dark hair had fallen across his forehead. He made no move to right the wayward hair, however—they were both standing stock still, watching a fat bumblebee make work of the fragrant, trumpet-shaped blooms of the wild jessamine.

“It won’t hurt the bee, right?”

“No,” he whispered. “Maybe if this was the only source of its diet, but we have thousands of other options for the pollinators.”

She had snapped more than a dozen pictures on her phone at that point, first of the vibrant yellow flowers and their tendrilling vines for a drawing reference later, then of the roly-poly bee. She would do her best to remember Alder’s recitation later, secure in the knowledge he would be only too happy to help. He was the only one to whom she had shown the completed field journal entries thus far, and his enthusiasm was a huge boost.

“I’m excited to see how this one turns out.”

She’d been standing on the low stone wall that enclosed this section of the garden, with Alder close behind. When she’d lifted her phone to snap photos, his long hand landed on her waist, and he’d not removed it. When the bee finally bumbled off, Ellie twisted to face him, the weight of his hand sinking into her as deeply as his breath had done. The small bit of height from the stones she stood on put her equal with his

height, with his blinding smile, *that* smile, and before she could second guess her actions, she reached out her hand, pushing it through his silky, raven-colored hair, smoothing back the lock over his forehead. He had a sprinkling of forest green freckles across his nose that she'd never noticed before, and as she breathed in his warmth, his lips mere inches from her, another of the small, white flowers blossomed into existence at his temple.

She'd only partially taken Avrille's advice, perhaps, still not brave enough to ask him out and unwilling to face the awkwardness if she did so and he declined, but Ellie *had* started paying attention. She'd watched the way Alder acted around the other volunteers: friendly instruction and his always-cheerful smile, barely slowing down as he moved through the endless rows ...but he interacted with them very little.

He was friendlier with Randolph, it was true, she'd noted through gritted teeth, although...still different. Randolph was the one who came into the greenhouse, stepping around puddles with a grimace, seeking Alder out whenever there was a request from the manor, but it was never the other way around. He would smile and laugh, the same sharper-edged, mischievous smile he gave her, but she had noticed one significant-seeming difference: he never sprouted those delicate little flowers when he flirted with Randolph.

Ellie couldn't be sure who moved in to close the distance, bringing their lips together in a soft kiss, but it didn't matter. One kiss then two and then he was pulling back, and her stomach tightened, worried that he'd changed his mind. Her fears proved to be misplaced when he tilted her chin and leaned in again, his long fingers threading through her loose curls to cup the back of her head. When the kiss finally broke

off, she felt as if she might float away, the weight of his hand at her head the only thing keeping her earth-bound.

“I’ve wanted to do that for a while now,” he murmured, reaching out to stroke the bright yellow trumpets of the jessamine. When he held his palm out, one of the sweet-smelling flowers replicated, one after another on a coiling vine, which he quickly fashioned into a crown. “All of the beauty, none of the poison,” he pronounced with a smile, placing the crown upon her dark red hair. “I-I hope that wasn’t too inappropriate. I mean, it was, but I hope—”

“It was perfect,” she blurted, wanting nothing more than to lean in and repeat the experience.

Alder sagged, visibly relieved. “Oh, phew. Okay, great. I’d really like to do it again, but I guess we should head back... here,” he tapped his cheek, tilting to you. ”*Plant* one on me.”

“Oh, that was *awful*.”

He smiled *that* smile as she laughed as she leaned in, more than happy to oblige his request.



IT HAD BEEN SUNNY WHEN SHE ARRIVED THAT DAY. THE SKY had been an endless expanse of blue as she headed out to check the wildflowers, weeding around the patch. Back in the greenhouse, Ellie was put on watering duty, a daily, never-ending job that kept her well-occupied for several hours.

As she worked though, the sky overhead darkened, casting long shadows through the rows of plants, and a roll of thunder shook the glass walls. By the time she was finished for the afternoon, it was a downpour once more.

Randolph stood at the edge of the center greenhouse, scowling at another volunteer as she approached.

“It needs to be brought around through the front, we can’t have all that—” he cut off, gesturing to the cart the petite goblin had loaded with two giant pots of mother-in-law’s tongue— “mess coming through the house! They need to be brought around!”

“You can’t pull the cart through the house,” Ellie explained to the wide-eyed goblin, a newer volunteer. “It might scuff the floors. We’ll make sure someone brings it around to the front in the morning.”

“You need to bring it around now.”

Ellie lifted her head, raising an eyebrow. Randolph was handsome, and he knew it. He was elvish, with long, pointed ears, high cheekbones, and a perpetual sneer on his chiseled features. He was handsome, but his attitude made him ugly, Ellie decided, making a show of looking at the glassed-in roof above her head, where the water was still pelting down. She was always kind to people, both here and at her day job, but that didn’t mean she was a pushover.

“It’s storming, Randolph. I doubt you need it right this second.”

“It’s the greenhouse’s job to provide the plants for the manor.”

Her smile hardened, uncowed by his glare. “And we’ve provided them. Here you go! You work in the house, not us... *you* bring them around.”

“What’s the problem, Randolph?” Alder’s calm voice interrupted the obnoxious elf’s rebuttal; calm with a slight hint of irritation. “I can bring these around once this storm lets up.”

“But the guests will—”

“I just came in from the fields and the parking lot is empty, so there are no guests right now. Besides, unloading giant pots at the front door during business hours is the *opposite* of what guests want to see. Not unless you want Bess on your case, and I promise, it will be *your* case. Not mine.” His voice was still mild, but brokered no argument.

“We’ll get these to the side for you,” she added out sweetly, tugging the goblin’s sleeve for help. “Hey, Alder, why did the cactus not get called for a second date?”

“Oh no!” he cried delightedly, gold eyes flashing. “Why ever not?”

“Because,” Ellie smiled angelically back at Randolph, “he was an arrogant prick.”



“ARE YOU FINISHED FOR THE DAY?”

She’d been standing in the doorway, staring out at the torrent of rain when he’d come up behind her. Since that day amongst the jessamine, they’d twice gone to a small cafe not far from the manor grounds, sharing pots of floral tisane in between endless conversation. He had

kissed her again amongst the climbing roses earlier that week, with a searing heat that curled her toes and settled low in her belly, and when she’d pulled back, a sprinkling of white blossoms curled around his ear.

“Come back to my place, wait out the storm,” Alder suggested casually. “This will be a mess to drive in.”

He kept her dry on the journey across the grounds by tucking her close to his side and raising his arm, tenting her in a soft, mossy blanket until they were beneath the shelter of the treeline. The small caretaker’s cottage did look like something from a fairytale, all tidy brick and arched windows. *Maybe he just wants to show you his plants. This is a business meeting,*

and you're only going to embarrass yourself thinking anything else. She wondered if showing *you his plants* might be construed as a dirty euphemism, all things considered, as he tugged her through the front door...directly into his arms.

His kiss possessed a heated intensity that made all the little overtures they'd already shared seem chaste in comparison. He had small fangs, she realized, breath catching when they tugged her lips, and his tongue was a plush glide against her own.

"I enjoy spending time with you, Ellie," he murmured, "a lot. The last few weeks have been really nice." Down the side of her neck, kissing back up the column of her throat until he'd reached her lips once more.

"I-yes, it has been. I enjoy you too. I-I mean..."

His smile was wicked as he pulled her through the house to the back door. The patio was covered by a pergola, tightly woven with moss and vines, dripping with lush, purple wisteria. The bed, in the center of the flagstones, beckoned.

"Enjoying each other seems like a perfect end to the day, doesn't it? I mean...I'm very frond of you." She groaned at the pun as his teeth nipped her throat once more. "We don't need to do anything you don't want to."

"I *do* want to."

It was all the permission he needed.

Her clothes were peeled back like the petals of a flower, and Alder's mouth moved across her slowly exposed skin just as the storm clouds had pushed across the sky. His lips traced the curve of her breast, circling the stiffened peak repeatedly until it was sucked into the hot cavern of his mouth, sucking greedily. When her wrists were encircled with tiny vines and

held gently above her head, Ellie gasped in shock, but gladly allowed it. The gesture was one of gentle control, much like his protective embrace through the rain-soaked fields had been.

The warm trail of his mouth had her whimpering as he kissed over her stomach and hips and the tops of her thighs, fresh vines tendrilling around her ankles and tugging them open. Lightning split the sky, and the resulting roll of thunder swallowed her cry when his tongue found her slick center, undulating in a way that made her toes curl. Long licks, pressing into her before dragging the moisture to her clit, his thin lips closing over it and sucking as greedily as he had on her nipple.

“The sweetest nectar,” he groaned. “Do you like the way I lick you?”

She hadn't expected that he would make her answer. His protective cover, the vines restraining her...gentle control, but there was a note of domination in his voice, and she remembered that he *was* fae.

“Yes,” she wheezed, whimpering when he resumed licking her clit, his tongue flickering over the bud of nerves with the speed of a hummingbird.

“I want you to come on my tongue, Ellie. Let me drink up every drop.”

A delicious pressure began to build behind her navel with every lash of his tongue. Fresh vines had wrapped around her knees, a firmer restraint that pulled them toward her shoulders, tilting her hips, and the slight adjustment to her position sent her over the edge.

Her gasp of pleasure was lost to the rain as she arched against his narrow face, ripples that shook her legs and quivered up her spine before she sagged boneless to the bed. The speed with which he moved was a blur. Alder was braced above her, kissing her collar, her throat, her lips, and Ellie moaned again, able to taste herself on his tongue. He was long and lithe, and as her hands moved over his lean musculature, he practically purred, arching his spine. His cock jutted out, rigid and ridged, slightly darker than his sage-colored skin, steadily dripping a clear, sap-like precum.

“Do you want me to fuck you, Ellie?”

He rubbed his cockhead against her still-sensitive clit until she cried out, desperate to be filled, desperate to be fucked, arms flailing in their vined restraints.

“Yes, please.”

When he finally slid into her, Ellie’s high-pitched wheeze was backed by his throaty groan. Slow pumps, dragging his ridged shaft against that spot inside that made her keen, the vines around her wrists and knees tightening as he sped the movement of his hips. The steady rhythm increased to something wild, his hips pumping, rutting into her without abandon. *Fucked by the fae*. Despite his cheerful charm and easy-going mannerism, he was born of something wild, as wild as the storm that lashed down above their heads, as wild as the forest surrounding them and the unmanicured patch of flowers she loved so much.

“I’m going to cum,” he groaned against her hair, the back drag of his cock sliding out of her making her eyes roll back, the first hot spurt of his semen coating her belly. He was beautiful as he came, she decided — eyes closed, dark hair tumbling

into his face, mouth open as his cock throbbed and his hips jerked.

Thunder shook the earth again, and Ellie found herself being covered by a soft blanket of moss as Alder snuggled against her side once he'd cleaned her off, pressing his lips to her cheek.

“This was a good day,” she whispered, almost to herself. *You needed to hug Avril*. If her friend hadn't boosted her confidence, he'd still be talking to the bougainvillea, and she'd still be pining.

“It was,” Alder yawned, pressing his cheek to her shoulder. “A very nice day. The fruit trees have got to be loving all this rain...and I'm glad you came over. Maybe...maybe we can talk about turning cacti into cactus. Or you know, going out a few more times to make sure you don't hate me.”

He groaned when her shaking shoulders dislodged him, resnuggling to her side. *It was a very good day*. “You're a huge dork...but I think that sounds perfect.”



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