

# CONVICTION

AN INNOCENT MONSTERS STORY

STELLA RAINBOW

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Mentions of verbal abuse by family.

# CONTENTS

Keep In Touch With Stella!

Dedication

Prologue

One

Two

Three

Four

Five

Six

Seven

Eight

Nine

Ten

Eleven

Twelve

Thirteen

Fourteen

Fifteen

Sixteen

Seventeen

Eighteen

Nineteen

Twenty

Twenty-One

Twenty-Two

Twenty-Three

Epilogue

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Also By Stella

About Stella

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Dedicated to:

My patron, Giacinta. Thank you so much for your support!



## PROLOGUE

He couldn't think. His mind was nothing but a buzz of the worst of his emotions. Anger. Envy. Disgust.

Usually, these emotions were directed only at himself, but something was messing with his head. He wanted to hurt, to destroy the people who'd mistreated him, mocked him, made him feel like a freak, like a monster. He wanted to be the monster they'd accused him of being.

Letting out a scream of rage, he grabbed the trunk of a tall, leafy tree and ripped it out of the ground, swinging it around like a makeshift weapon. He was going to destroy all of them. He'd show them just how monstrous he could be. He would *ruin* them.

He stalked forward, his steps thudding against the ground as his eyes scanned the woods around him. Where was his prey? Where would he find those measly humans?

Distantly, he realized that walking into a human town in this form would be a bad idea, but he couldn't seem to bring

himself to stop, as if his limbs had a mind of their own.

Two people appeared in the clearing seemingly out of nowhere, a man with white wings sprouting out of his back and a woman with a long blond ponytail that swished behind her as she whirled around to face him. Silas didn't know where they'd come from, but he knew he didn't want them here.

Shouting a war cry, he heaved the tree up and ran toward them, slamming the tree onto the man in one swoop. The man dove out of the way at the last second and took off into the air, but Silas had expected it, and he swung the tree again, knocking him out of the sky.

A sharp blade sliced at his leg, and he glanced down to see the woman with a longsword in her hands. She was maybe three feet shorter than him, and she'd hit him in the leg. Why? He'd been perfectly distracted. She could've gone for a much more damaging blow.

The moment of clarity he'd had dissipated, and anger filled his mind once again, urging him to swing, to hit, to hurt, *to let the monster out.*

ONE

## Silas

I felt like a failure for coming back home.

Fourteen months ago—or was it fifteen?—I'd left the only place I'd ever been able to call home to explore 'the real world.' I'd wanted to see the world as an adult, and for some reason, I'd thought it would've changed since I was a teenager. Well, it hadn't.

Humans were still judgmental assholes who stared at me like I was beneath them, and other supes didn't quite seem to know what to say to me.

A few months after I'd left, I'd managed to get myself infected by dark magic. I'd never been a violent person, even though half of my genetics were made of anger and aggression, but getting infected had turned me into something that still scared me. I'd hurt people—though luckily no humans—and I didn't know what could've happened if Nox and his friends hadn't cured me of the infection.

Nox and I had become friends that day, sort of, and he'd visited me a few times since then, somehow knowing exactly where I was each time he popped in for a chat.

After I was cured, I'd tried to make it in the real world. I'd gotten a shitty-ass job washing dishes at a diner, and when that hadn't worked, I'd tried my hand at stealing and discovered I was pretty good at it, even though I wasn't very unnoticeable.

I couldn't go on like this, though, from wallet to wallet with no place to call mine and not enough food. There was never enough food.

So here I was, trudging back to the one place I'd belonged with my tail between my legs. Well, my tail wasn't *actually* visible, but it was tucked right in, metaphorically speaking.

I tugged my hoodie lower, using it and the mask I always wore to hide my face from the passersby. Sticking my hands into the hoodie pockets, I bent my head low and took the last turn. I could see the building now, surrounded by dead bushes and a few broken fences. It wasn't anything to look at on the outside, but that was one of the many things that kept the inside safe.

Now that I was so close, I suddenly realized that Headmaster Morrigan could've moved. He did that every few decades so the human locals wouldn't get suspicious, and we'd been at this location for close to two decades now, if I remembered correctly. What if I couldn't find them again? I would be completely alone in the world.

Swallowing the sudden lump in my throat, I kept walking until I was at the base of the porch and staring up at the huge oak door with my heart in my throat. Taking a deep breath, I climbed up the steps.

Pulling my hands out of my pocket, I removed the ratty glove from my right hand and wrapped it around the doorknob. The tingle of magic against my bare palm filled me with relief, and I slumped slightly as I twisted the knob that

would only open for a select few people, the residents of the Sanctuary.

The corridor I stepped into was dark, but the moment the door slammed shut behind me, soft, yellow lamps lit up, filling the hallway with a golden glow. Everything was exactly as it'd been when I'd left, and I breathed a little easier as I stepped deeper into the hallway.

Each door led to a different area, and each area housed a bunch of people. The Sanctuary was home to the most unique of supes, people who just couldn't fit in in the real world. People like me.

Biting my lip, I stepped through the door that would lead me to my best friend. I knew I should go see Headmaster Morrigan first, but it'd been so long since I'd seen Khush, and I missed the jerk. I also really didn't want to see the look of disappointment on the Headmaster's face when I told him I'd failed to 'make it' in the real world.

A smile spread over my lips the moment I stepped through the doorway and into a forest. Dragging in a lungful of fresh air, I stepped out of my shoes onto the grassy ground. It was hard, and pebbles dug into the soles of my feet. It was perfect.

I'd only taken a few steps into the area before a familiar sound filled my ear. I grinned as the slithering drew close, and then a thick, scaly appendage wrapped around my considerable middle and pulled me up into the air.

"Really? You couldn't have come down instead?" I asked Khush as he gently sat me down on the branch he'd wrapped

his lower half around. I wasn't sure if it would be able to handle both our weights, but he didn't seem to be worried.

“Why would I when this is so much more fun?” he asked, and I shook my head, though I couldn't stop myself from smiling—not that he could see it with the mask on my face.

“I didn't think I'd see you again,” he said, his yellow-brown eyes softening, and I shrugged. I knew him well enough to know he wasn't mocking my failure, that he was genuinely glad to see me again, and that made me breathe a little easier.

Khush couldn't go out into the real world, at least not for a long period of time. He was a Naga, a snake shifter subspecies from the Indian subcontinent, and unlike most shifters I'd come across, Khush didn't have a fully human form. He could either shift into a massive snake, or this other form where his upper half was human and the lower half snake, which made going outside a touch difficult without some strong glamor magic that he unfortunately didn't possess.

“Well, the real world isn't all it's cracked up to be. Anyway, I'll tell you all about it later. First, give me an update. Do we have any new residents? I was gone for a while,” I said, and Khush made a face.

“Just one,” he said without offering any more details, which immediately had me on alert. Khush loved to gossip, and whenever a new resident arrived at the Sanctuary, Khush didn't waste any time spreading their life story around.

“Yeah? What are they?” I asked, and he tilted his head.

“You haven’t been to see the headmaster yet?” he asked, and I shook my head. Smirking, he shooed me off. “Go on, then. You’ll find out when you see him.”

Brows furrowed in confusion, I allowed Khush to give me a ‘lift’ to the ground since I didn’t think the branch could handle it if I shifted to hop down. Once I was on solid ground, I waved at him before my eyes flickered to the distance where I knew my hut stood. I’d go check it out later, make sure someone else hadn’t hijacked it in my absence. Though I couldn’t blame them if they had, since I hadn’t planned on returning.

“Yo, Sy!” I glanced up at Khush, and he shot me a bright grin. “I took care of your hut for you. Don’t worry!”

I smiled at him in thanks, though couldn’t help but wonder if that meant he’d expected me to fail. Shaking my head, I decided I might as well face the headmaster now. He couldn’t make me feel worse about myself than I already did.



## Touya

Have you ever had your life change so irrevocably that you wake up each day wondering if your life was real?

Until I turned eighteen, my existence had been fairly normal. Well, my parents died when I was seventeen, and I had to live with my father's brother, who wasn't the nicest man, but everything was *normal*. Then I turned eighteen, my uncle sent me on my way with a backpack full of my belongings, and everything changed.

In the ten years since, I'd admitted myself into a mental care facility twice, convinced something was wrong with my head. I'd been seeing things, things that only existed in fairy tales and folklore. I'd seen a vampire drinking from a man's wrist; I'd seen a griffin flying in the sky. Hell, I'd even seen a kitsune once. There was only one explanation, right? Something in my head was so messed up I was hallucinating things.

No medicines had helped, though, and I'd been sent on my way time and again since I wasn't 'a threat to society or myself.' I didn't know what I would've done if Headmaster Morrigan hadn't found me, but I knew it would've been something drastic.

It'd been a month since he brought me here to the Sanctuary and showed me that all the things I'd thought I'd hallucinated

were in fact real. Supernatural beings existed, and now I lived among them.

I didn't know what had prompted me to beg the headmaster to let me stay, but I had. It was easier to stay here where I knew what to expect than to be out there where I had no clue what the next turn would bring. And at least here I wasn't in danger of getting killed by a supe because I saw something I wasn't supposed to.

That was how I, a mere human, ended up becoming the headmaster's assistant. The people who lived in the Sanctuary were divided on how they felt about me. While half of them were 'fascinated' by the human among them, the other half were wary, though nobody had been downright hostile to me. Yet.

I didn't blame them for being cautious of me. Most of them lived here because they wouldn't survive in the outside world, like the naga who'd be hauled off to some lab if humans caught sight of him, or the male jorogumo who'd been 'abstaining' for a few decades and stayed far away from me to avoid temptation.

Sometimes, I felt a little bad for staying, but I couldn't bring myself to leave either. Like its name suggested, this place was safe, and after the last decade, I could do with some safety.

The headmaster said my ability was the result of magic in my bloodline, that I was a psychic. My parents had never mentioned anything of the sort, but the headmaster said sometimes magic skipped a few generations. Whatever the

reason, it'd picked me, and I still didn't know if I considered my power to be a boon or a curse.

There was a knock at the door, and I glanced into the headmaster's cabin. He had his feet crossed on his desk and was reading a book, so I called out to the person who'd knocked. "Come in."

A hoodie-clad person shuffled into the room, the lower half of their face hidden behind a black cloth that covered their face and neck—a neck gaiter, I think it was called—a white skull jaw drawn where their own jaw would be. They were my height, with shaggy black hair that hung into their equally black eyes. Their body was what I'd call 'perfectly cuddly,' and I tilted my head at them, waiting for them to speak as they shuffled on their feet before going perfectly still.

"You're human," he said, almost hissing the words, and I nodded, used to this reaction.

"I am. My name is Touya, and I'm Headmaster Morrigan's assistant. How may I help you?" I asked, and he blinked at me. He shook his head, and his hair shifted around as if the strands had a life of their own.

"Uh, where's the headmaster?" he asked after a few moments of silence, and I gestured toward his cabin. The newcomer nodded and slid past my desk.

Headmaster Morrigan looked up when he stepped into the room, and a wide smile spread across his lips. "Silas! Welcome back, kiddo! Come here," he said, standing up and

opening his arms for a hug. Not a newcomer then. Someone who'd returned.

Silas glanced back at me, brows furrowed. I was sure he was frowning under that mask as he closed the cabin door, blocking my view. I guess I could put him in the wary crowd. Shame. I'd have liked to get to know him.

I blinked at the thought, staring down at my desk. I couldn't be interested in a supe, could I? They'd made me think I was crazy for a whole decade. Well, technically it hadn't been their fault, but still. They were different. They weren't human. I wasn't supposed to find them attractive, especially not someone who clearly wasn't a fan of humans.

"But he's human!" I startled at shouted words from the cabin and bit my lip. Yep, Silas was not happy with me being here.

"You said this place was our sanctuary. For people who have been mistreated by people like him," Silas said, and he wasn't even trying to keep his voice down now.

I didn't hear the headmaster's reply, but I heard Silas's scoff loud and clear, and I'd just turned my eyes to my desk when the door slammed open. I looked up just in time to see Silas shoot me a venomous glare before he stalked out of the office, leaving the headmaster standing in his cabin with his lips turned down in a frown.

Great. Looked like I now had a supe in the 'hates me' column.

Two

## Silas

“A little birdie told me you blew up at Zephyr,” Keoni said as he trotted over to me. The centaur had been at the Sanctuary practically his whole life, and he was one of the few people who called the headmaster by his first name. The headmaster hadn’t actually forbidden us from using his first name, but I liked using the term because it felt respectful.

“You mean a little eavesdropping human birdie?” I clarified with a raised brow as I pulled out another bunch of weeds that surrounded my hut. While Khush had made sure not to let my hut go to disrepair, he didn’t exactly have a green thumb, so my garden was overrun. I was glad, honestly, because at least it gave me something to do.

“How did you know who told me? And his name is Touya,” Keoni said, and I rolled my eyes. Of course he’d befriended the human. The headmaster had brought Keoni to the Sanctuary when he was a toddler. His clan had abandoned him because he couldn’t use his back legs, because he was ‘weak,’ and, from what I’d heard, he’d been almost dead when the headmaster found him. He’d lived at the Sanctuary ever since because his damaged legs wouldn’t allow him to shift into his human form. He’d never been mistreated by humans, not like I had. He didn’t know how awful they could be.

“He was the only one there. And I don’t care what his name is. He’s not one of us,” I said, and Keoni’s brows furrowed.

“Why not?” he asked with an innocence that didn’t fit the sixteen-year-old he was. I hoped he’d never have to venture out into the real world because it would swallow him whole.

“Because he’s human,” I said, spitting the word as if it was something disgusting. “And the Sanctuary was made for people who don’t have a place in the outside.”

“Did you know he started seeing supes when he was eighteen?” Keoni asked, as if he hadn’t heard anything I’d just said.

“So?” I asked, using a bit too much force to rip out a particularly determined weed.

“So, he spent the last ten years in and out of mental hospitals because he thought he was going crazy. He doesn’t have a place on the outside either,” he said, his front hooves skittering on the ground as the wheels holding up his back half squeaked. Draven, a dwarf who’d been exiled from the Faerie realm and now lived here, had designed the aide that helped Keoni walk around. He also made most of the tools and devices we used around here.

“I don’t care. He doesn’t belong here,” I said gruffly, and Keoni huffed.

“If that’s the way you think, then you’re no better than the humans who have mistreated you because of what you are without trying to know a single thing about you,” he snapped, and I sucked in a sharp breath as he turned around and trotted off.

I stared down at the ground I'd been weeding, Keoni's words running around my head in a loop. He wasn't wrong, was he? I was being an asshole, even if I had a good reason for it.

Whoever this human was, this Touya, he hadn't done anything to earn my ire. Yet. Did I think humans could live peacefully with people who were different? Nope. Hell, half of them didn't even tolerate other *humans* who were different from them. But this human had been living at the Sanctuary for about a month now, according to Khush, and he hadn't done anything wrong yet. Maybe I could cut him some slack.

"Fuck!" I growled to myself as I dumped the last of the weeds into the bucket and stood up. Stretching my arms above my head, I groaned loudly. I wanted to shift into my true form and then take a nap, and now that I was home, I could do that.

Before that, though, I needed to check the schedule.

While Headmaster Morrigan could do anything with his magic, he didn't. He was an extremely powerful sorcerer, and he'd built the Sanctuary into a pocket realm that only he—and those of us who lived here—could access. There were a bunch of different areas that we could reach through a common hallway. The one Khush, Keoni, I, and a bunch of other supes lived in was the Forest. Apparently, the areas had had creative names in the beginning, but the newbies found them hard to remember, so now they were called the Forest, Desert, Ocean, Mountains, Ice Age—that one stuck—and so on.

Sticking my hands into my pocket, I strolled down the path to the noticeboard near the entrance. While the headmaster



could do it all with his magic, he wanted us to be ‘functioning adults,’ which was why each resident had weekly chores to complete. If you failed to finish, you didn’t get dessert for a week. If you didn’t do chores for two weeks, you lost one privilege. The only exception was if you were sick or hurt. Oh, and birthday week. Everyone had a birthday week where they got an exemption.

I’d only been back a few hours, but I was sure the chores list would’ve updated to include me. I also had a pretty good idea what my first chore would be. I’d seen quite a few roofs in dire need of repair on my walk down, and since I could shift into an eight-foot-tall troll and carry practically any weight, I always got to be the one to do it.

My steps stuttered when I spotted the human—*Touya*—standing near the noticeboard. His back was to me, and he seemed to be completely focused. I decided maybe I should apologize to him about my earlier actions. He’d clearly heard my conversation with the headmaster, and he probably thought I was an asshole. An apology might be in order.

## Touya

Headmaster Morrigan's magic was utterly fascinating. He'd explained it to me a little over the past month, and it had taken me a while to realize just how amazing his abilities were. He'd created a pocket dimension, a place that was only accessible to a few people, a safe space for all the supes who didn't fit in outside. I'd asked him once what had prompted him to create this place, and he'd merely told me it was a story for another time. I'd gotten the feeling it wasn't something he liked talking about, and I wasn't going to ask again.

A sound behind me made me turn around, and my eyes widened when I saw the man who'd stormed out of the headmaster's cabin earlier today. What was his name again? Oh yes, Silas!

He still had the mask over his face, and I wondered what he was hiding. Or did he have allergies of some kind? He ran his fingers through his shaggy black hair and stepped closer, prompting me to take a step back. The edge of the noticeboard dug into my back, but I couldn't bring myself to pull away.

His eyes widened at my reaction, and he brought his palms up in the universal sign of 'I mean no harm.' Before I could say anything, a shout reached us, and Silas and I both glanced up the path to see Keoni hurtling down, his front hooves galloping at a mad pace to keep up with the wheels that seemed to be pushing him fast down the incline. *Too* fast.

“I can’t stop!” Keoni called, and I froze as I realized he was going to crash right into me. Silas had approached from the side, so he wasn’t in the collision course, but I was. I needed to move, but my limbs were frozen solid.

A moment before Keoni crashed into me, something big and towering stepped between us, grabbing Keoni as he smacked into the bulk.

I glanced at the back of the person between us, and then my eyes slid down to the gorgeous butt that was right there in my face. I’d barely have to bend to stick my face between those cloth-covered cheeks. A long tail jutted out just above the asscheeks, with a fluffy end with dark fur that swished on the ground between us almost hypnotically.

I blinked at my wayward thoughts, shaking my head to dispel them before I carefully stepped sideways and squeezed out of the space between the huge man and the wall.

“Keoni, you okay?” the huge dude—wait, was that Silas?—asked, and Keoni grinned up at him as he shifted around on his hooves.

“Yeah, thank you for saving me, Silas. I was running, and then I tripped, and the wheels started pulling me down,” he said, tugging sheepishly at his blond curls.

“It’s okay, kiddo. Just be careful, okay? No running when you’re coming down the incline,” Silas directed him, and he nodded seriously before his eyes flickered to me.

“Touya! Are you okay? Did I hurt you?” he asked worriedly, and I smiled as I stepped closer to him.

“Not at all, Keoni. Silas saved us both,” I said, glancing over at the large man with a soft smile. While he was usually my height, now he towered over me by at least two feet. He was also bulkier, and his palms looked like they could crush my skull between them without much effort. I swallowed hard, but kept the smile on my face as I met his black eyes.

“Thank you, Silas,” I said, and he nodded, a grunt slipping past his lips.

He shifted back and turned around before I could see much of anything, and when he turned back, his mask was firmly back in place. So he could shift without losing his clothes, but had to put his mask back on every time? The lack of logic in magic really made my brain hurt sometimes.

“I need to check my schedule,” Silas said, and I blinked before stepping out of his way. His shoulders were slightly curved as he stepped up to it, and I tilted my head as I observed him. I wondered what his story was. Why was he here? Where had he been until now? Why had he left the Sanctuary?

“I’m sorry,” he said, his voice so low I almost missed it. I glanced at him to find him glaring at the noticeboard. If he hoped that pathetic-ass apology would be good enough, he was very mistaken.

“What?” I asked, as if I hadn’t heard him at all.

He shot me a disgruntled look before sighing deeply. “I said I’m sorry for the way I acted earlier. I just—I haven’t had the best experience with humans.”

“And I haven’t had the best experience with supes,” I said, remembering the time when a vampire had almost killed me when he realized his magic didn’t work on me. “But that doesn’t mean I’m going to mistreat everyone here. They never hurt me,” I said, gesturing to the woods where the other supes were, where Keoni had taken off to.

Silas nodded slowly, his eyes returning to the noticeboard. “Are you planning to stay, then?”

“Yes. Until and unless the headmaster tells me to leave, I want to. I don’t think I would survive in the outside world.” I’d be too scared of what else was out there. At least here I knew which of the supes would eat me if they were allowed to or if they lost control. Here, the headmaster’s magic kept them from hurting each other, or me.

“All right, then,” Silas said, and then turned to me. He held his hand out. “Welcome to the Sanctuary. I’m Silas.”

I bit my lower lip before taking his hand and giving it a firm shake as I marveled over the callused skin of his palm and the warmth he exuded. “Touya. Nice to meet you, Silas.”

His eyes brightened, and I got the feeling he was smiling under the mask. I didn’t want to disrupt our tenuous peace by asking him all the questions flitting through my head, so I kept my mouth shut. Maybe I’d ask Keoni later. That kid had no filter, and he was always happy to talk about the others.

“Uh...” Silas grumbled, and I realized I was still holding his hand. My cheeks flushed as I let go, and he slowly drew his hand back. He glanced at the noticeboard one more time before giving me a sharp nod and taking off up the path Keoni had taken a few minutes ago. I watched him leave, my palm still tingling from his hold. Why the hell had I reacted like this?

We may have shaken hands, but I was still human, and he was still a supe who wasn't the biggest fan of my kind. Having *thoughts* about him was not a good idea. I just needed to convince my heart of that.

THREE

## Silas

“So, we didn’t really get a chance to catch up yesterday,” Headmaster Morrigan said, and I ducked my head at the look of gentle reprimand on his face. Zephyr Morrigan was the only father figure in my life, since my own dad had died when I was too young to remember his face. All I knew was he’d been a troll, and my mom a human. They’d been fated mates, which was why I was a half-troll instead of a human. Some days, I couldn’t decide which one I’d have preferred more.

“I’m sorry about my behavior yesterday. It was uncalled for.”

Headmaster Morrigan shrugged as he gazed at me with an intensity I’d once found disconcerting but was now used to. He looked at me like he actually gave a damn about me, and very few people in my life did that.

“It’s okay. I should’ve told you about Touya myself before you found out from someone else. Anyway, I’m glad to have you back with us, Silas.”

I gave him a disbelieving look. “You mean you aren’t disappointed I couldn’t hack it out there?” I asked, just the barest tinge of bitterness coating my words.

He raised a brow at me, as if surprised by my words. Or maybe the venom behind them. Dropping his feet to the ground, he leaned forward in his chair, resting his arms on the



desk. His left arm, the metal one, looked a little different. Draven must've made some new modifications to it. Whenever he didn't have a project to tinker with, he started designing upgrades for the headmaster's prosthetic. I thought it was his way of paying him back for giving him shelter.

“Silas, even if you had, as you say, ‘hacked it’ out there, you would've always had a place at the Sanctuary. This is your home, and it will remain so,” he said in a soft voice, and I could almost hear the air quotes. He sounded so sincere, so honest that I couldn't bring myself to doubt him. “Now, will you tell me what you have been up to since you left?”

Sighing, I explained everything. I told him how I'd stumbled from odd job to odd job, living on the streets because surviving in the human realm was so damn expensive.

I admitted to all the theft I'd done, making sure to include the fact that I only stole from humans who were dressed in expensive-ass clothes and seemed to think the world revolved around them. The quip made him chuckle, which made me happy.

Just when I finished catching him up, there was a knock at his cabin door. Had the human been eavesdropping again?

“Yes?” Headmaster Morrigan called out, and Touya stuck his head inside.

“Uh, there's a... situation in the Ocean,” he said, his deep chestnut eyes sliding to me before snapping away quickly.

Yesterday, I'd been too annoyed with the presence of a human in the Sanctuary to actually take him in properly, but now that I'd relaxed a little, I could see that Touya was actually really...pretty.

He had silky brown hair that had some golden color in it and deep chestnut eyes that reminded me of tree bark. His skin looked like it would be soft to touch, and had a creamy color that got a nice shade of pink on his cheeks when he blushed. Like he was doing now. Why? Because he'd caught me staring at him like an ass.

I jerked my eyes away from him, only to meet the headmaster's knowing gaze. I scowled at him, and he smirked before turning to Touya.

"Is the situation life-threatening, Touya?"

"No, sir," Touya answered in a rough voice, and the headmaster nodded.

"Okay, then. I'll go there after I'm done talking to Silas," he said, and Touya's eyes slid to me as he nodded.

"I thought you didn't like the human," Headmaster Morrigan said the moment Touya closed the door, and I glared at him.

"I don't," I grumbled, and he rolled his eyes.

"I do have two eyes, you know," he said, wagging his brows, and I groaned.

"Shut up. You're supposed to be our father-figure-person. You can't say shit like that," I protested.

“Oh, you think a father wouldn’t tease his kid about having a crush?” he questioned, and my eyes widened in horror.

“I *do not* have a crush on the human,” I growled as I shot forward in my chair, resting my hands on the table and leaning toward him.

“But you find him attractive,” he replied without missing a beat, and I almost whined. There was no winning with this man.

“He isn’t *bad* to look at,” I ended up admitting, and he grinned like I’d confessed my undying love. Then he turned serious and placed his metal palm on top of my hand. The metal was warm in a way it couldn’t be without the dwarven magic it was created with, and familiar.

“Silas, I know you have your reasons for not trusting humans, and I understand them. But I have faith in Touya. I have no reason to believe he means harm to any of us. He just needs a place where he can feel safe, where he doesn’t feel like a pariah, like an outsider,” he said, knowing exactly the right words to convince me. I’d felt what he was talking about. I’d been the only half-troll in a family of humans after my parents died, and I’d never fit in. I’d been mocked, degraded, bullied, and I’d taken it all because the only alternative had been shifting and destroying them all, which I was *too human* to do. It sucked when you had the power to ruin whole villages and also a conscience that stopped you from doing just that.

“I know you can’t trust Touya yet,” Headmaster Morrigan said, and I forced myself to focus on him. “But trust me, okay?”

You kids will always be my first priority, and I will not let anything happen to any of you.”

“I know, Headmaster,” I said with a small smile, and he rolled his eyes.

“One of these days, I’m going to get you to call me Zephyr,” he said, and I chuckled.

“Dream on, *Headmaster Morrigan.*”

## Touya

While the headmaster dealt with ‘the situation’ in the Ocean that I hadn’t understood a lick of when Jacinta-the-cecaelia had tried to explain it to me, I was stuck here with Silas—who, I’d confirmed through trusty sources was a half-troll—who seemed unwilling to leave.

“Can I help you with anything?” I asked after I’d surreptitiously watched him hover around the room for close to a minute.

He jerked as if I’d smacked him, his hands sneaking into his hoodie pockets as he ducked his head. He wasn’t a small man by any means, but right then, it looked like he was trying to make himself appear small, which I didn’t like for some reason. The look didn’t suit him.

“Nah, nothing. I’ll leave you be,” he said, and he was almost at the door to the hallway when I called out his name with no idea what I was going to say next.

He turned to me, head still ducked low, mask covering the lower half of his face. I wondered what the rest of him looked like. Yesterday, when he’d shifted into his troll form, I’d taken a good look, and I wondered if he still had those cute little tusks in this form, if that was why he hid half his face.

“Yes?” he asked, and I realized I’d left him hanging.

“Uh,” I mumbled, eyes scanning my desk for something to say. “Can you tell me more about supes?” I blurted out and then felt my heart sink. As if he needed another reminder that I was human. Then again, he could probably smell it.

Silas narrowed his eyes at me, head tilting just slightly so his hair fell over his forehead. He didn’t push it back as he watched me, and I shifted nervously under his stare.

“Um, it’s just that I’ve seen so many of them over the last ten years, and obviously, I thought I was going crazy. But now I know they’re real, and I guess I’d like to know what some of them were,” I said, brushing my fingertip over the sketch of a wolf shifter in his human form.

Silas stepped closer to my desk, his eyes on the sketch. “Is that...did you draw that?” he asked hesitantly, and I nodded. “That’s how you see them? Us?”

I shrugged. “Usually, yes. Here, I can’t see you. I think whatever power or glitch I have only works in the human world, not pocket dimensions like these.” It was my working theory anyway, and I couldn’t exactly test it since there were no other realms to visit. That I knew of. “It’s why I like it here.”

Silas nodded slowly, eyes still on the sketch. He reached his hand out, then stopped. “May I?” he asked, and I nodded. Not much of what I’d read about trolls seemed to apply to the man before me, and I didn’t know what to think of that. The books described trolls as aggressive, territorial, not very smart, and ugly. While Silas had gotten a little angry yesterday, I didn’t

think it counted as troll-levels of aggression. And he was far from ugly.

Then again, Headmaster Morrigan had told me that much of the written text about supernaturals came from humans who'd either caught a glimpse of a supe once and made up stories about them, or been told about supes from someone else and drawn their own ideas of what they looked like. Supes themselves rarely kept records of their existence to avoid them falling into the wrong hands—with the exception of a few like witches and their grimoires—and so any recorded data we had was rarely accurate.

“You’ve...seen quite a few of them,” Silas said, breaking into my thoughts, and I realized he’d been flipping through my sketchbook while I was lost in thought.

“Uh, yeah. There’s ten years of sightings in there. Didn’t help my case at the hospital, but I needed to catalog them. Even though I thought I was crazy, a part of me believed it was real,” I said with a shrug. Even though I didn’t shy away from talking about it, the last ten years of my life had been brutal.

“This one’s a kelpie. Where did you see them? I didn’t think there were any of them still around in America,” he said, showing me the sketch of a man with a horse-like shadow. That was usually how I saw supes that had other forms: them in their human forms with a shadow of their true forms behind them.

“Kelpie? I thought he was some kind of horse shifter,” I said with a shake of my head, and he tapped at the base where the torso melted off into smoke.

“See this? That’s sort of their tail,” he explained, and I nodded.

“Thank you.”

“Why didn’t you ask one of the others?” he asked, and I shrugged.

“I asked Keoni, and he helped me with a few, but he doesn’t seem to know much either. And the others, well...” I trailed off with a shrug. While they seemed to tolerate me being around, I still got the feeling most of them would prefer me to not be here, even the ones who found me interesting. “I guess they scare me, a little bit,” I admitted when Silas kept staring at me expectantly, and his brows shot up.

“And I don’t?” he asked, voice ringing with disbelief. “Even after the way I treated you?”

I started to shrug and then remembered I’d been doing too much of that. “Well, even when you were angry with me, the worst thing you did was glare. And then later you protected me.”

“I did that for Keoni,” he said with a huff. “Didn’t want the kid to get hurt.”

Smiling, I didn’t comment. “I guess I just know what I can expect from you, and that makes me feel safer,” I said, and for a moment Silas just stared at me, his black eyes digging into



my soul. Could he see that I was kind of, sort of, attracted to him? I hoped not.

FOUR

## Silas

It'd been a week since I came back to the Sanctuary, and no one had asked me why I'd returned. It'd made me realize how stupid I'd been for thinking I had to survive out in the real world. The Sanctuary was my home. Sure, I could go out there once in a while for fun, but this was where I belonged, and that was okay. I didn't need to prove anything to anyone.

Catching up with all the friends I'd left behind had felt great, and I'd sunk back into the routine like I'd never left, with just one small difference: Touya.

The human had gotten under my skin with his soulful chestnut eyes and his 'I feel safe with you' nonsense. I wanted to dislike him, but I couldn't. Except for the fact that he didn't have any magical abilities to speak of—unless you counted the way he saw the supes in the human world—he was just like any one of us. Rejected by society and looking for a place to call home.

I stared at the mirror as I tried to style my unruly hair, the fire blazing in the living room filling my hut with a nice, cozy warmth. While trolls usually preferred to live in rocky mountain caves, I was part human, and much preferred the amenities that came with a hut with modern—albeit magical—plumbing and a gas line. Headmaster Morrigan's magic kept everything working in tip-top shape, though he still managed

to leave just enough things messed up to give us something to do.

My stomach let out a loud growl, and I glanced over at the clock, cursing when I realized I was running late. It was Jacinta's turn to cook, which meant breakfast would be ready right on time, and also disappear right on time too. Jacinta was extremely punctual, mostly because he hated being away from his little slice of sea. He was also a nonbinary fellow who didn't care what pronouns you used for him as long as you did it with respect. No one in their right mind would ever dare disrespect him anyway. He could be scary when he wanted to.

Leaving my hut, I made my way up the path toward the exit. Everyone seemed to have already left, and I slipped out of the Forest, walking down the hall toward the door labeled Dining Room.

I paused outside the door to the headmaster's office. Something I'd noticed this past week was that Touya never ate with the others. Headmaster Morrigan insisted we share three meals together every day, saying it helped with bonding and reminding us that we had a family we could count on. Shouldn't Touya eat with us then, if he planned to stay?

I knocked on the door without thinking any further, and Touya called out to tell me to come in.

"I'm sorry. The headmaster isn't here right—oh! Silas!" Touya stopped short as he spotted me, and a smile lit his face, making me freeze in my tracks. What had I done to deserve a smile like that? Sure, I'd helped him label some of his

sketches, but that was all. I'd done nothing to have this much...appreciation showered at me.

“Hey, Touya. I was actually looking for you. Why don't you join us for breakfast?” I asked, and his eyes widened.

“Uh...”

“Headmaster insists we all eat together, and if you're planning to stay, it applies to you too,” I said, and his teeth dug into his lower lip.

“I guess. I just...I guess I didn't want anyone to mistake me for their meal,” he tried to joke, but I could sense some real fear in his words. Considering we did have some residents whom you could call human-eaters, his fears weren't unfounded. But the headmaster's magic kept the residents from hurting each other, so I thought Touya would be okay.

“Don't worry about that. I'll protect you,” I offered, and his lips quirked up.

“Yeah?”

I shrugged as if it was no big deal, ignoring the way my stomach turned and twisted. It was just hunger, I told myself.

“Now, come on. Jacinta is extremely punctual, and he won't be happy if we arrive too late,” I said, and he nodded, slipping out from behind his desk.

I took a second to admire his form as he tidied up his space—also, how cute was it that he didn't want to leave his desk untidy?—and I had to admit he was a sight to behold. He and I were practically the same height, but where I had a more than

generous build, he was slim, his skin more creamy than pale. I wanted to reach out and brush my finger down his arm, to see how the light hair I could see would feel against my skin. Was it as soft and silky as it looked?

“Shall we?” he asked, breaking into my thoughts, and I jerked my eyes away from him with a nod.

Opening the office door, I led him outside and over to the dining room. He hesitated outside the door, and I shot him a reassuring look, though how much of it he could see around my mask was anyone’s guess.

“Come on,” I murmured as I opened the door, and he took in a deep breath before stepping past the threshold. I followed him in and closed the door behind us, scanning the large room. Everyone was here, some on chairs, some without depending on what kind of bodies they had.

“Silas! Touya!” Keoni called, and I followed his voice, finding him at a table with two empty chairs and Khush. He was waving at us, and I waved back before pointing at the counter, to which he gave me a thumbs up.

“Come on, let’s grab some food,” I said, and Touya quietly followed me.

Jacinta glared at me from behind the counter as he held two empty plates with two of his tentacles while placing another two on his hips in a move that screamed his annoyance.

“Sorry, J. I was trying to convince this one to come eat with us,” I said, pointing my thumb at Touya, who shot me a glower

for throwing him under the bus.

“Oh? I thought you brought him for me as an apology,” he said, flashing me a wicked grin, and I rolled my eyes.

“In your dreams, J. In your dreams. Now, feed us,” I said, a little whine slipping into my words as my hunger made itself known.

## Touya

I could feel eyes on me. I focused on my food and the people at my table. Silas sat right beside me, which made me feel a little better, and Keoni stood on my other side, holding his plate in one hand and eating with the other. His wheels squeaked every time he shifted around, and the sound was strangely comforting.

Across from me sat Khush, a naga who didn't much like me, if the cold shoulder was any indication. He hadn't said a word since I sat down five minutes ago, but I was extremely aware of his presence.

"I thought you didn't like the human," he said finally, and I glanced up to find his eyes on Silas, his head tilted at an angle.

Silas shot me a look, and I acted like my food was the most interesting thing in the world.

"His name is Touya, and I...I may have overreacted a little," he said, which made a knot loosen in my stomach. Silas really seemed to be trying to do better, and I appreciated him for that. I knew it couldn't be easy considering what he'd said about humans mistreating him.

"Oh?" Khush quirked a brow, his eyes flickering to me briefly before returning to Silas.

"Yeah. If Headmaster Morrigan says Touya belongs here, then he belongs here," he said, as if that was all the reason he



needed, and Khush nodded.

“I guess I should properly introduce myself, then,” he said, and turned his complete focus on me for the first time since I sat down at the table. Or maybe ever. He held his hand out, a calculating look on his face. “I’m Khush,” he said, stressing the ‘kh’ sound. His name might’ve been from the Hindi language, but I’d have to double-check to know for sure.

I took his hand, giving it a firm shake. “Touya.”

“Nice to finally meet you, Touya,” he said, and Keoni cheered.

“I’m so glad you’re all friends now,” he declared, and I smiled up at him. Keoni was the first person here who’d made me feel truly welcome, and it might’ve been because he was too young or he’d been here too long to know better, but I appreciated it nonetheless.

“Me too,” I agreed softly, and he shot me a smile before stuffing a big bite of scrambled eggs into his mouth.

The simple—*human*—breakfast had surprised me, but apparently, most supes enjoyed simple human meals. There were specialty foods available too: I’d spotted a tap like they had in bars labeled ‘blood,’ and there had been a stack of raw meat behind the counter that I hadn’t looked at too closely. Watching Silas eat through his mask was undoubtedly the most fascinating part of the meal, but I did my best not to stare at him much. The last thing I wanted to do was make him even more self-conscious.

“Oh, did I tell you? Draven is designing something that *might* allow me to hide my tail and pass off as a human,” Khush said a while later, and Silas leaned forward.

“Really? That’s cool. Maybe I’ll take you out on a date once it’s ready, then,” Silas said, and I almost dropped my fork. I did lose a bite, though, and the eggs plopped onto my lap. I hastily picked it up, but when I glanced up, I found Khush staring at me with a knowing look on his face.

“Oh, please,” Khush said, waving his hand. “We both know I’m not your type, but thanks for the offer. I might take you up on it. You can be my tour guide!”

Silas shook his head, though his eyes told me he was smiling. How was it that I could already read him so well?

I avoided thinking about it by stuffing the last bite of eggs into my mouth and chewing slowly, as if I’d be tested on my chewing abilities. Keoni started telling the others about something he’d done the other day with an enthusiasm I’d rarely seen in a teenager, and I found myself getting caught up in his tale.

By the time breakfast was over and we were making our way out of the dining room, I understood what the headmaster had meant. This was the first time I’d truly connected with the other residents of the Sanctuary, and I’d enjoyed the experience of eating with them, even if it had felt like I had a bunch of spotlights on me.

Silas walked me back to the office door like we’d been on a date, and the comparison made my cheeks heat. He raised a

brow at me, and I shook my head. No way in hell was I going to tell him what I'd been thinking.

“What are you up to today?” Silas asked as we stopped in front of the office door, and I wondered if he was just as reluctant to leave as I didn't want to watch him go.

“Not much,” I said with a shrug. “The headmaster didn't have an assistant until I came along, and he managed just fine. I think he just gave me the job as a reason to keep me.”

“It's only been a month, right?” he asked, and I nodded. “Just you wait. Soon enough, you'll be doing all his work, and he'll be strolling around without a care in the world,” Silas said, and my eyes widened as I spotted the headmaster behind him. When had he arrived? And where had he come from?

“Is that so?” he asked, and Silas's eyes widened as he whirled to face him.

“Oh, hey, Headmaster Morrigan!” he greeted in a cheery voice, and the headmaster rolled his eyes.

“Hello, Silas. Don't you have some chores to do?” he asked, and Silas nodded quickly. Shooting me a glance, he took off down the hallway and then through the door that led to the Forest.

“Good morning, Headmaster,” I said as I stepped aside, and he smiled at me as he walked past me into the office.

“Morning, Touya. Let's get to work, shall we?”

“Yes, sir,” I said as I followed him in, and pushed all thoughts of the adorable masked man out of my head.

# FIVE

## Silas

“Ugh,” I grumbled as I pulled off another clump of spider webs off the roof. The strands were gross as fuck and clung to my fingers no matter how much I tried to shake them off. I fucking hated spiders, though Haruto wasn’t a bad guy. He was a jorogumo, and he’d taken over the task of repairing the roofs in my absence, only his version of repairing the roofs meant covering them with cobwebs. His upper, human half kept me from freaking out when I was around him, and so did his quiet nature. He was a bit of a loner, only showing his face when it was time to eat or when he had to do his chores, but he was good people. I liked him.

“Bleh.” I gasped as a huge chunk of web snapped off the roof and wrapped around my arm, and the speed with which it happened made me jump back in surprise. I waved my arm in a futile attempt to get rid of it and somehow lost my balance, falling onto my ass on the ground. Thank fuck I hadn’t been up on a ladder or it would’ve really hurt. Then again, my troll form was pretty sturdy on a good day.

I waved my arm again, a growl slipping past my lips when the cobwebs just clung harder. My eyes widened when I spotted a spider crawling over it, and I froze, following its movement with my eyes.

“Silas? You okay?” Oh no. What was he doing here? And why did he have to come *now*?

I glanced over as Touya walked closer, a frown on his lips as he reached me. “I saw you fall. Are you hurt?”

I shook my head, and then remembered the spider. I snapped my eyes back to my arm, but it was gone. A weird, squeaky sound came out of my mouth, and I clamped it shut, sneaking a look at Touya from the corner of my eyes.

“What is it?” he asked, and I waved my hand in explanation. I didn’t really want to speak in this form in front of him. My voice was different, and I didn’t want it to freak him out. Then again, I’d spoken in front of him that day when I shifted to stop Keoni, hadn’t I?

“Oh, is it stuck? Let me help,” he said, and then he was kneeling beside me. He took my arm in his hand, his gardening gloves warm against my skin, grabbed one end of the spiderweb, and started rolling it onto itself. Slowly, he gathered the silky strands that clung to my skin into a ball, and he was almost done when I spotted the spider.

I made that embarrassing sound again, and Touya glanced at me, then followed my gaze to the small spider on my hand. He chuckled softly and then grabbed the spider like it was nothing. I watched as he got up and threw both the lump of webs and the spider into the grass a ways off, and then turned to me with a smile.

“There. Both gone,” he said, dusting his hands off as he walked back to me. “Do you need help with the rest?”

I bit my lip as I slowly got to my feet, towering over him by almost two-and-a-half feet. God, he looked so tiny. “No, I’m

okay.”

His smile brightened, and he reached out to touch my hand, now free of cobwebs, before pulling back. “You have a really cute voice,” he said, and then instantly went red in the face.

I narrowed my eyes at him as my hands curled into fists. “Are you making fun of me?” I asked because it wouldn’t be the first time. My tusks affected my voice a lot more than they did in my human form, and growing up, I’d rarely shifted because of it. My grandparents had made a point of reminding me how inconvenient and embarrassing this form was anytime I did.

“What? No!” he said quickly, his eyes going wide. Stepping forward, he grabbed my hand again, his touch firm unlike before. My hand was three times bigger than his, but he didn’t seem to care as he held on tight. “Silas, I wasn’t joking. I think you’re cute. Not just your voice, but all of you,” he admitted, and I stared at him. Could I believe him? What if I did, and then he later acted like he would never in a million years say something like that?

All right, even I knew I might be projecting a little, but it was hard to accept his words as truth, not when I had more than a decade of experience to show me that shit like this just didn’t happen to me. Humans didn’t think trolls looked *cute*. Well, except for my mom, but she’d only felt that way about my dad because they were mates. Obviously, that wasn’t the case here. Right?

When I didn't say anything for a while, Touya gave me a small smile and stepped back. "Okay. I'll let you get back to work. I'll be in my office if you need anything, all right?"

I nodded slowly, and he took off down the path. A soft breeze blew through the area, making the leaves shake and create the music I was so familiar with. It tousled Touya's hair, making the brown strands gleam gold as the sun shone over him. He looked beautiful, and it was only when he'd disappeared down the path that I could drag my gaze away, only to crash right into a silently watching Haruto.

"Oh, hey Haruto!" I greeted, and he nodded. "Uh, I'm trying to repair these roofs. Can you help me take out the spiderwebs? Good job with them, by the way."

He nodded again, though his lips tilted up in a barely there smile. I grinned as I turned to the house I'd been working on and told myself not to freak out as Haruto climbed up to the roof with his spider legs. While he had a human form, he could only shift into it for a short while, and only to seduce humans, which he didn't really want to do because he was asexual. He'd told me that one of the few times we actually had a conversation, and he'd also told me he preferred not to partake in his kind's most preferred meal, humans, which I was mighty grateful for with Touya living at the Sanctuary now.



## Touya

I dug my teeth into my lower lip as I sketched, my conversation with Silas from earlier today running on a loop in my head. He'd sounded so sure that I was mocking him, like there was no possible way I could think he was cute. I wanted to change that. I wanted to show him that he was adorable, in both his forms. I probably shouldn't, though.

I was human, and he was supernatural. The existence of supes was why I'd spent the last decade driving myself crazy, so why was I drawn to this one supe in particular? What was so special about Silas that I couldn't get him out of my thoughts?

Glancing down at the sketch I'd been drawing, I sighed as I found Silas's face staring up at me from the page. Not his masked, human face, but his troll one, with shaggy black hair falling into his face, black eyes peeking from between the strands, and his sharp-looking tusks that ended just half an inch over his upper lip. Sure, he wasn't conventionally cute, but when you paired this face with his sweet personality, there was no question about it. Silas was an adorable half-troll, and I had a troll-sized crush on him.

Shit, this wasn't good. Or maybe it was? I couldn't decide. I needed some advice.

I didn't really have many friends at the Sanctuary, and I didn't really think Keoni would be much help in this particular

instance. He was a kid himself, and not human. Then again, no one here was human.

But there was one person I could go to for advice. I mean, it was basically in his job description, right?

Dropping my sketchbook on my desk, I stood up and smoothed my palms down my pants, taking a deep breath to center myself. Giving myself a tiny little pep talk, I walked over to the headmaster's cabin door and knocked.

"Come in!" he called out, and I pushed the door open, blinking when I realized the room was completely dark. Well, except for the weird-ass symbols glowing on the headmaster's desk. I'd never actually seen him do magic like this, and while he looked mostly human, this was enough to remind me that he wasn't.

"Touya," he greeted me with a nod of his head. Then, "Can you please close the door?"

"Of course," I said, stepping fully into the room and closing the door behind me.

"Just give me a minute to wrap this up, and then I'm all yours," he said, shooting me a small smile.

"Sure," I said, leaning back into the door as I watched him work. I didn't want to interrupt in case it messed it up, but curiosity ate at me, and I shifted in place.

The headmaster chuckled, as if he could sense my curiosity. "I'm just making sure everything in the Sanctuary is functioning as it should," he said, and I nodded quickly.

Two minutes later, the symbols on his desk slowly faded away, and he sat up with a sigh. He snapped his fingers, and the room filled with light, making me squint in the sudden brightness.

Headmaster Morrigan smiled at me, showing off some barely there crow's feet around his eyes. His black hair was shot with silver, and considering the fact that most supes aged extremely slowly once they hit adulthood, I wondered just how old he was. "Take a seat, kid," he said, and I nodded, quietly sliding into a chair across from him. If he was the age he appeared, I would've bristled at being called a kid, but I knew better.

"What's troubling you?" he asked, and I sighed.

"I'm not exactly sure if I should even be talking to you about this," I said, and he quirked a brow at that, leaning forward and resting his arms on the desk, his metal arm thunking on the wood.

"Oh? Now I'm even more curious," he said, and I let out a huff. I could feel my cheeks turning a little pink, and he must've noticed it too because he grinned suddenly. "Aaaah, it's that type of discussion, huh?"

Shifting back, he reached under his desk and pulled out a bottle of whiskey. He raised a brow at me, and I nodded slowly, slightly stumped by what was happening.

He pulled out two glasses from under his desk, pouring an inch of whiskey in one and half a glass in another. I shot him a wide-eyed look, and he shrugged. "Magic burns through it too

quickly,” he explained, and I nodded, picking up my glass and taking a small sip.

The drink slid down my throat, rich, warm, and the best I’d ever had. I wasn’t a big drinker, but I could tell it was a fine whiskey. Headmaster Morrigan took a big gulp of his, and then sat forward again. “If we’re going to talk about this, I have one request.”

“What is it?”

“Call me Zephyr,” he said pointedly, and I sighed.

“Okay... Zephyr,” I said, testing out the name. He grinned in satisfaction.

“Perfect. Now, tell me what’s troubling you. What did our sweet troll do?” he asked, and I blinked, surprised.

“How did you know I wanted to talk about Silas?” I asked, and he rolled his eyes.

“Come on, I’m not stupid. He’s the only one you met recently, and he has visited my office more in the last week than he ever did before. And I may have taken a peek at your sketchbook the other day. In my defense, you left it open on your desk,” he said with a sheepish grin, and I felt my cheeks heat up even more.

Had Silas really visited the office more because of me? Did that mean I wasn’t the only one with a crush? Or was I reading too much into it?

“You think he might like me too?” I asked, and then immediately regretted it when I grasped just how juvenile I’d

sounded.

But Headmaster Morrigan—Zephyr—didn't tease me. Instead, he smiled warmly, and laid a warm hand on top of mine. "I think you should give Silas a chance. He's one of the sweetest men I've ever met, and I think you two can be good for each other."

SIX

## Silas

A shadow fell in front of me, and I glanced up, squinting against the bright sunlight as I wiped sweat off my brow. It took me a second to recognize Touya through the glare, and I smiled when I realized it was him. Then, I wiped the smile off my face. Why was I smiling at him?

“Hey, Touya,” I said, and thankfully, he sank to the ground, though the hard earth couldn’t be very comfortable on his knees and lower legs.

“Hey, Silas. Thought I’d find you here,” he said, and I shrugged.

“Well, this *is* where I live,” I said, waving at the expanse around me, and his cheeks flushed just a little. He had his sketchbook in his hand, and I nudged my chin toward it.

“Got anything you need help with?” I asked, and his eyes slid down to his art.

“Uh, yeah,” he murmured, flipping it open and sifting through the pages before holding it out to me.

“Oof,” I said, eyeing the drawing of a woman with a catlike shadow superimposed over her, much like most of Touya’s drawings of supes. “That’s a mare. We have a male one here. He’s a bit of a recluse, lives over in the Mountains.”

“A mare...as in a horse?” Touya asked slowly, and my lips quirked at the look of puzzlement on his face. He was really

cute when he got that little furrow between his brows.

Shaking my head and definitely *not* thinking about Touya's cuteness—especially after what he'd said about me the other day, which I still couldn't decide if it was a joke or not—I corrected him. “No, not a horse. Mare as in nightmare,” I explained, and his eyes widened. “Yeah. In the olden days, mares would shift into their animal forms, sit on a sleeping human's chest, give them nightmares, and then feed on their fear. They used the fear to channel their magic,” I said, and couldn't stop the shudder that shot through me at the thought of that kind of dark magic. I'd gotten a taste of what that could do to a person when I was infected, and I wouldn't wish that on anyone, not even humans.

“Oh wow. That sounds...scary. Does the mare who lives here...” He trailed off, and I shook my head.

“Nah. He's a softie, and doesn't really want much to do with magic of any kind. One thing you'll realize, Touya, is that most of us are here because we don't want to be whatever it is we were born as or turned into. Or we only want parts of it, and the outside world isn't really compatible with that,” I said, and Touya nodded slowly.

Glancing back down at the sketchbook, I started turning the pages. “Anything else you want help identifying?”

“No, that's—that's it,” he said, reaching for his sketchbook just as I turned another page and stopped short. On the page in front of me was a sketch...of me. I knew it was not some random troll because it was a scene from the other day. I stood



in front of a house in my troll form, the top of my head in line with the lower edge of the tilted roof. A full troll would've reached the top.

In the picture, I was tugging away some spiderwebs, my brows furrowed in concentration, the tip of my tongue sticking out of my mouth. The rest of me was drawn meticulously too, from my fluffy-ended tail to my bulky upper arms, and right down to my padded stomach.

Touya practically ripped the sketchbook out of my hand, closed it, and pressed it to his chest, cradling it like it was something precious. "I'll, uh, I'll see you later," he said, and then took off down the path as I watched him go, my mind stuck on a loop of 'What. The. Fuck?'

"What was that about?" I jerked in surprise, and then glanced up to see Khush hanging from the tree I sat leaning against, his tail coiled around a thick branch as his torso swung freely.

"Uh, I was just telling him about mares," I said, and he quirked a brow at me.

"Did you scare him off?" he asked, then tutted as if he wasn't the one who'd demanded why I'd suddenly 'gone soft' on the human.

"No," I said, then found myself admitting what had actually freaked him out. "He drew a sketch of me, and I saw it. I think he was embarrassed."

Khush's eyes widened, and he swung up, grabbed the branch he'd been hanging off of, and let his lower half touch the ground before dropping down, all within a few seconds. "Are you telling me the human has a crush on you?" he demanded almost giddily, and I narrowed my eyes at him.

"His name is Touya. Didn't you two shake hands the other day?" I reminded him, and he shrugged. He tickled my bare feet with the tip of his tail, and I jerked away with a growl.

"Wait a damn minute," he said suddenly, and then leaned forward, his slitted eyes narrowing at me. They were yellowish-brown with tiny specks of green, and when he looked at me like that, I got the feeling he could read every thought in my head. "Do *you* have a crush on the hu—on Touya?"

I knew my cheeks had gone beet red by the way his eyes widened, and I scrambled to my feet, dropping the toaster I'd been in the middle of repairing for Keoni. Apparently, fixing human devices was too lowly a task for Draven, so it usually fell to me.

Taking off into the woods without a destination in mind, I tried to outrun Khush, but the damned naga was too good at acrobatics for his own good. He swung and slid from tree to tree, keeping pace with me perfectly, and when he'd had enough, he reached down, wrapped his tail around my legs, and lifted me right into the air.

"Come on, Silas. You know better than to try to run from me," he said with a wide grin. Khush could lengthen his tail up

to ten feet on a good day, but he didn't need even half of that to hold himself steady on the branch while hanging me upside down in front of him. He crossed his arms on the branch and rested his chin on top, watching as I futilely tried to struggle out of his grip.

“Now,” he said, as if he expected to have a whole conversation just like this. “Tell me everything.”

## Touya

So Silas glimpsed my sketch. It wasn't a big deal. He hadn't chased after me, and by the time we saw each other again, he would've probably forgotten all about it. Right?

After my conversation with Hea—with Zephyr, I'd thought a lot about what I wanted to do. I had no idea how Silas felt about me, but I didn't think he was attracted to me or interested in me in the way I was into him. I got the feeling he only helped me out because he was still trying to make up for the way he'd acted that first day.

There was no way he'd be into a human after the way he'd reacted to my presence, right? He hated humans, and he might tolerate me, but that didn't mean he wanted to bang me. *Or* date me.

“Are you lost, human?” A soft, breathy whisper made me jerk out of my thoughts, and I glanced up at the...person standing in front of me.

“Uh, Jacinta, right?” I asked, ninety percent sure I'd gotten it right. Jacinta had made breakfast the day Silas dragged me to eat with the others for the first time. Since then, he'd shown up at my office to escort me for every meal.

“Yes, that's me. Pronouns he/she/they, whatever comes to you first, but do not call me dude or girl, or anything like

that,” she said, then mimed choking me with one of her tentacles, which I assumed was a threat.

“Got it,” I said with a nod, and she grinned.

“I like you. And I know who else does,” she said with a waggle of her brows. Her straight, platinum-blond hair brushed against my arm as she leaned closer to me until there was barely any space between us, and I held my breath as her nose brushed my neck, and then she...she sniffed me. “Hmm...you smell like him too.”

“What?” I asked, wishing my heart would stop trying to leap out of my chest. I didn’t feel like I was in danger, but the fact that I was surrounded by beings who could kill me without much effort was never far from my mind.

“Silas. The troll. *He likes you.*” She said the last part in a singsong voice as she pulled back, and I barely resisted the urge to ask her ‘Does he really?’ like we were in freaking high school.

I still couldn’t help blurting out something. I wouldn’t be me if I didn’t do something embarrassing. “I don’t think so. I’m human,” I said, and her eyes trailed up and down my body as she licked her lips.

“Oh, trust me, honey. I know. You’re a delicious little morsel too, but lucky for you, I don’t much like the taste of humans,” she said with a wink, and I tried not to tremble in fear.

“Uh...” I mumbled, unable to find any words in my brain.

She leaned forward again, her lips brushing my ear as she whispered, “If you hurt my sweet little troll, I will eat you. Understood?”

“What are you doing?” A growled demand made Jacinta jerk back, and she smirked at... Silas, who stood in the doorway of the Forest, his black eyes flinty with anger.

Jacinta ran her fingers down my chest, and I barely stopped myself from flinching back. Silas growled, grabbed her hand, and pressed it into her chest, giving her a shove back for good measure before a spark of some kind made them both jerk apart.

“What was that?” I asked, a little because I was curious, but mostly to keep Jacinta from telling Silas exactly what we’d been talking about. I had a feeling she would be only too happy to tell Silas exactly how I felt about him.

“The Headmaster’s magic,” Silas grumbled as he shook his hand out. “Keeps us from getting too... aggressive with each other.”

“Unless you like that kind of thing, of course,” Jacinta said, shooting me a wink, and Silas growled again. I wondered what he was so annoyed about. Wait. Were he and Jacinta...? But her words hadn’t implied anything of the sort. Unless she’d wanted me to tell Silas how I felt so they could laugh at the poor human who thought he had a shot with Silas?

But no. Silas wasn’t like that. He was a sweetheart. Well, usually.

“Jacinta,” he growled softly, and she raised her palms up.

“All right, all right. You’re no fun. Touya, remember what I said,” she said, shooting me a hard look, and I nodded.

Once she’d disappeared through the Ocean door, Silas turned to me. “What did she want?”

“Nothing. Just telling me to show up for food on time,” I lied, and he nodded. “Why were you so angry at her?” I asked, unable to stop myself, and Silas’s cheeks turned an adorable shade of pink.

“Uh, I thought she was scaring you, and I didn’t like that,” he said, ducking his head. I wished he’d pull his mask off so I could see all of him. I bet he had the plushiest, pinkest lips that would look perfect wrapped around my...

I shook my head, forcing myself to not think about Silas’s lips around any part of my anatomy. “She did, a little bit. But I’m okay.”

Silas nodded, and then we both just stood there awkwardly for a few moments before I pulled away from the wall I’d been pressed up against. “I, uh, I’ll see you around,” I said, and then hurried away from him like my ass was on fire.

My talk with Zephyr the other day hadn’t really helped me figure out how I could find out if Silas actually liked me. Jacinta had said so, but how would she know? Had she just assumed he liked me because he’d spent some time with me over the last week?

Maybe I should ask someone who actually knew Silas. Like Khush. Those two seemed pretty close, and while it would be embarrassing as hell to ask Silas's best friend like a middle-schooler, it would be way less humiliating than admitting my attraction to Silas and having him laugh me out of the room if it was one-sided.



# SEVEN

## Silas

I knocked on the headmaster's office door and opened the door, peeking in to spot Touya in his usual spot behind the desk. He glanced up at the knock, and smiled when he saw me.

“Hey, Silas. Is it time for lunch already?” he asked, and I hummed.

“Come on, Mr. Workaholic,” I said, opening the door wider, and he chuckled as he stood up.

Since I saw it three days ago, I hadn't been able to stop thinking about my sketch in Touya's sketchbook and what it might mean. Why had he drawn me? Could Khush be right?

I lowered my head as old voices that I wished I could get rid of grew loud in my mind, telling me how there was no way Touya—or anyone else, for that matter—could ever be interested in *me*.

“Silas? Are you okay?” I jerked my head up, meeting Touya's worried gaze, and the voices in my head went blissfully silent, at least for now.

“Yeah, I'm okay. Let's go,” I said, leading him out of the office. As we walked side by side down the hallway to the dining room, the backs of our hands brushed, and butterflies fluttered in my belly from the small contact. I wanted to shift a little closer to him so our arms would touch too, but I didn't.

The heat of Touya's soft, warm skin against mine was enough. For now.

When we reached the dining room, we quickly got our plates filled before joining Keoni and Khush at the table they were holding for us.

I took a bite of the pasta and then realized just how hungry I was. I'd spent all morning performing odd jobs around the different areas, whatever maintenance tasks that needed to be done. When I glanced up, I found Touya watching me, and my cheeks flushed.

Touya's eyes widened, and he jerked his eyes away before slowly returning his gaze to me. "Sorry, I just...your mask, it's fascinating," he said, and Khush snickered beside me.

My mask was something the headmaster had created for me after he'd realized I had no intention of removing the bandana I'd been using to cover myself when I got here, and that I'd go hungry if it meant keeping my face hidden.

When I lived with my mom's parents, they hadn't allowed me to. They'd called what I looked like a 'deformity,' and my human cousins hadn't wasted any chance to mock me for it. I wasn't ever going to give someone the chance to do that again.

So, the headmaster had spelled the mask to allow me to eat without having to remove it. I didn't know how it worked, but while the mask stayed opaque, it allowed me to stuff food inside my mouth like it was just a visual illusion and not an actual, physical barrier between my mouth and the food.

“It’s okay,” I said when I realized Touya was still giving me apologetic puppy eyes, and he exhaled softly before returning his attention to his food.

A glance to my companions showed Khush grinning like a Cheshire Cat, and I glared at him, to which he stuck his forked tongue out at me.

“And you say *I’m* the kid,” Keoni muttered from Khush’s other side, and I chuckled as Khush turned his attention to the young centaur.

“Oh, you are the kid, little one. You’re the baby of this whole place,” Khush said, waving around the room, which wasn’t exactly true. There were some residents younger than Keoni, but it was true he was the youngest one in the Forest. He was also the one everyone babied, even those younger residents. I thought it had more to do with the air of innocence that clung to him than his actual age.

“Or I’m just so broken everyone pities me and treats me like I don’t know anything,” Keoni said, his tone a little sharp, and then his eyes went wide. An ache filled my chest as he made some joke and waved the words off like he hadn’t meant them, because I knew he had. I could see it in his eyes, and I hated that he thought that way about himself. One glance at Khush’s white-knuckled grip on his fork told me he felt the same.

“You’re not broken, Keoni,” Touya said, and I glanced over at him. His eyes were warm but hard, the seriousness of what he was saying shining through them. “You’re one of the strongest people I’ve ever known,” he said, his eyes flicking to

mine before returning to Keoni, who looked too dumbfounded to say anything as Touya kept going. “When I got here, you were the first one to accept me, the first one who made me feel welcome. You have a brightness, a warmth that no one here does, and you’ve held onto it all these years, which isn’t an easy feat, trust me. No one here pities you, Keoni. They love you, *we* love you, because just spending a few minutes with you can brighten up someone’s day. If we baby you, it’s because we don’t want you to lose that spark, that warmth.”

The whole room had gone silent by the time Touya stopped speaking, and as if he’d just realized it, he ducked his head, eyes turning to his food.

“The human’s right, Keoni,” Jacinta called from the other side of the room where he sat with a bunch of Ocean people. Others chimed in their agreement from all over, and when I glanced back at Keoni, he had tears in his eyes, though he was also smiling.

Khush reached up a hand and patted Keoni’s flank, running his palm down his side, and Keoni shot him a smile.

“Thanks, everyone,” he said after a minute, his voice thick as he wiped off the few tears that had slid down his cheeks. Then, he turned to Touya. “Thanks, Touya.”

Touya shook his head, a small smile on his lips, and in that moment, I knew for sure. Touya was nothing like the humans I’d known all my life.

## Touya

Lunch today had taken a highly emotional turn I hadn't been expecting, but I hoped we'd gotten through to Keoni. I hated what he'd said about himself, and I couldn't help but wonder just how many of the residents of the Sanctuary felt similarly about themselves.

While Zephyr hadn't given me more than the basic details about the residents, I'd been here long enough to know that most of them were here because they were rejected by their own kind, or someone important in their lives, and I hated that.

I wanted to help these supes get a better life. I wanted to help Silas.

While it was true that Silas's mask fascinated me, that wasn't why I'd been staring at it as he ate. I'd been wondering what could've possibly happened for him to decide to disguise a part of himself so thoroughly. He didn't seem to have the same issue when he was in his troll form, so I couldn't help wondering why he felt the need to hide in this form.

I flipped through the pages of Zephyr's chore book to make the schedule for the residents for the next week. There were no computers in the Sanctuary, and smartphones didn't get a signal here, which made sense but was also a giant pain in the ass. It was a good thing I had no one I needed to stay in contact with in the human world, though also a little sad.

Not lingering on the thought, I checked where Silas was and sighed in relief when I saw he was all the way in the Mountains. Checking where Khush was—the Forest—I left my desk and made my way to him, wringing my hands in front of me as I debated whether I should go through with this asinine plan. What if Khush laughed me out of there? Or what if he told Silas what I'd asked him? I trusted Silas to not make fun of me if he didn't feel the same, but what if he started avoiding me because of it? It felt like we were finally friends. Was I taking an unnecessary risk by trying to pursue this?

When I arrived in the Forest, it didn't take me long to find Khush, since his thick, green tail swung from a tree not too far away. I walked over to it and craned my neck up, shielding my eyes against the sun. The weather here was as flawless as everything else, though Zephyr had told me it changed with the year too.

“Khush?” I called out, and Khush peeked out from between some branches, his brows going up when he spotted me.

“Touya,” he said, and then slithered down the tree, coming to a stop before me as his tail retracted to a more manageable size. “To what do I owe this pleasure?”

“I, uh, I wanted to ask you something,” I said, and I could feel my cheeks turning pink.

“Oh?” he asked curiously, tilting his head just so as he blinked at me. His eyes had weirded me out at first, but I was used to the yellow-brown irises and the vertical pupils now.

“It’s about Silas,” I said, and he made a humming sound, though it almost sounded like a hiss.

“You do know that I won’t break his confidence, right? If you want to learn anything, you should ask him,” he said, and I nodded quickly.

“I know. I would never ask you for that. I just...I just wanted to know if...” I said, trailing off as I realized this was a mightily stupid idea. What had I been thinking?

“Oh. Oh!” Khush said before I could make an excuse and leave. “Oh my god. Did you come here to ask me if Silas likes you?” Khush demanded, his voice brimming with glee, and my cheeks went so hot I was surprised they didn’t just burst into flames.

Khush started laughing, and I wanted the ground to open up and swallow me. Where was Jacinta and her promise to eat me when you needed her?

“I’m gonna go,” I mumbled.

“Wait, wait!” Khush gasped out as he pulled himself together. “Sorry. I wasn’t laughing at you. Just...you two are so similar it’s funny,” he said, and I frowned as I glanced at him.

“What do you mean?” I asked, and he shook his head.

“Doesn’t matter. To answer your question, you didn’t hear this from me, but yes, he’s into you. Very much. But you’re going to have to take the first step. If you haven’t noticed, Silas is a little gun-shy. With good reason.”



I nodded, and Khush blew out a breath. Then, he narrowed his eyes at me.

“If you hurt him, I’ll crush you,” he said, and I swallowed hard.

“Jacinta already promised to eat me if I hurt him,” I said with a chuckle, and Khush grinned, satisfied.

“Then I’ll crush you so she can eat you without trouble,” he said, and I laughed so the fear wouldn’t swallow me whole. Doing anything with Silas would mean having the eyes of all the supes in this place on me as they waited for me to mess up, but he was worth it.

I glanced up, my lips still tilted up in a smile, and my eyes fell on Silas, who stood just a few steps inside the entrance. My eyes widened, and our gazes met for a split second before he lowered his head, his hands balling into fists as his shoulders curved forward. Without a word, he whirled around and rushed into the woods on the opposite side of us, toward his hut.

“What...” I mumbled, turning to look at Khush, who’d seen the whole thing too. He turned his eyes to me, a frown on his lips, and shook his head.

“I have no idea what that was about,” he said, and I took a step back from him.

“I’m gonna go check on him,” I said, and then paused. When Khush didn’t insist on going after Silas himself, I turned around and rushed up the path Silas had taken as my heart

thundered in my chest. I couldn't figure out what had just happened, but I knew I needed to locate Silas, to make sure he was okay.

When I reached his hut, I realized it was empty. I whirled around, but I didn't have supernatural senses. I couldn't scent him or hear him. Then, my eyes fell on the footprints. Big, half-troll-sized footprints. He'd shifted.

I took a deep breath and started following them.

EIGHT

## Silas

I wasn't sure exactly what it was about the image of Touya and Khush laughing together that'd triggered me. Maybe it was the way Touya's eyes had widened with something that almost looked like guilt when he spotted me, but it'd made me react in a way I hadn't expected.

Rationally, I knew neither Touya nor Khush would be talking shit about me. Khush was the closest friend I had, and while I didn't expect much from humans, Touya had become the sole exception to that rule.

And yet I'd reacted this way. Why?

As if in answer, a memory popped to the forefront of my mind, and I growled softly, punching the ground at my feet.

*I was eight, maybe nine. It hadn't been long since my parents' deaths, and there was some kind of get-together at my grandparents' place. All my aunts and uncles were there, as well as all my cousins. Everyone except me was fully human and completely normal. My grandparents were the only ones who truly knew what my dad had been, and they'd hated him for as long as they'd known him.*

*I watched as Brian, my oldest cousin and worst tormentor, said something to one of the younger cousins I didn't know the name of, shooting me dark, gleeful looks every once in a while. The younger cousin laughed at whatever he'd said, then held*

*his index fingers up in front of his mouth and lolled his tongue out, clearly mocking me.*

*My hands balled into fists, and I took a deep breath to keep my anger in check. My grandparents had forbidden me from shifting, ever, but even more in front of others. I knew if I shifted now, they'd punish me by not giving me food for a week, maybe more. Since I'd just come off a three-day fast because of my last punishment, I didn't want to risk another one.*

*“Silas? Silas!”*

A warm palm touched my bare knee, and the memories dissipated like smoke as a wave of calm washed over me. I glanced up in shock, and met Touya's deep chestnut eyes. He was kneeling in front of me, and I realized this was the first time he'd touched me in my troll form.

I'd never felt calm like this before, and I wanted him to keep touching me even as I tried to figure out why he made me feel like this. Even in human form, being near him made me feel calmer, but the feeling was magnified a hundred times in this form.

An instinct I didn't understand reached out to Touya, as if trying to connect us both, and from deep in my mind—or was it my soul?—one word rang inside me: mate.

I blinked, dumbfounded, as I stared at Touya, who continued to frown worriedly at me. Mate? Touya was my mate? But he was human.

Then again, my dad's mate had been human too. And I already considered Touya to be different from most.

If this was how Mom had made Dad feel, there was no wonder he'd left everything he'd known for her.

"Silas, are you okay?" Touya asked again, and I swallowed hard before nodding.

"Sorry," I murmured, and his shoulders relaxed a little.

"What happened?" he asked, and I flushed, glancing away. I didn't want to tell him why I'd taken off, didn't want to reveal all my ugly bits just yet.

"Nothing, I just needed a moment. What were you and Khush talking about?" I asked, hoping I'd managed to keep the edge out of my voice.

Surprising me, Touya blushed. He glanced down at the space between us before taking a deep breath, as if he was stealing himself. Worry shot through me at his actions, and I wondered what he was about to say.

When we looked up, his eyes shone with determination. He pressed both his palms against my knees, and I briefly wondered if I should've shifted back, but the thought flew from my mind when Touya spoke.

"Silas, there's something I need to tell you," he said, and worry filled me as I stiffened.

"What is it?" I asked, keeping my expression carefully blank.

“I—I like you, Silas,” Touya said, and I stared at him, stunned. Whatever I’d been expecting him to say, it wasn’t that.

“What?” I asked with a shake of my head, and he nodded.

“I do. I know you don’t like humans, and if you tell me you aren’t interested in me, I’ll back off, and nothing has to change. But if you are, please give us a chance, Silas?”

I gazed at him, at the slightly pleading look in his chestnut eyes. For a human, he was pretty brave. I’d known that already, of course. How else would I explain the guts it would’ve taken him to decide to live in a pocket realm full of beings who could easily kill him?

The faint echo of the word ‘mate’ still rang in my head, and I wondered what he’d say if I told him about it, about what he meant to me. Would it freak him out?

“Silas?” Touya whispered, some of the determination fading from his features as he dug his teeth into his lower lip.

“I—” I mumbled, glancing away from him. “Are you sure? You could do far better than me.” What was I doing? He was my mate. I should’ve said yes. Why was I trying to push him away?

“You’re the only one I want to ‘do,’” he said, using his pointer and middle fingers to air quote the word. The move made me chuckle, and some of the tension hanging around us disappeared. “Silas,” he said, voice turning serious. “I like

you. I want to date you, if that's what you want too. I don't want anyone else. Just you."

I stared at him, and he met my gaze head-on, as if inviting me to read his mind. I didn't need to be a telepath to see the sincerity in his eyes, though, and I sighed.

"I like you too, Touya. I don't know how good I'll be at this whole dating thing, but... I'd like to try."

Touya smiled brighter than the sun above us, and warmth fluttered in my belly. I'd never given much thought to what I'd do when I found my mate, at least not until I met Nox. He'd introduced me to his while he was trying to save me from the effects of the black magic I'd been infected with, and he'd promised to help me find mine in exchange for my cooperation. I wondered if he had a hand in bringing Touya to me, but shook the thought off. Nox wasn't Fate. There was no way he was responsible for this, but I sent up a silent thanks anyway, to him, or Fate or whoever was liable for bringing Touya into my life.



## Touya

Since I knew how self-conscious he was about it, I glanced down at my toes when Silas shifted back into his human form, and only glanced up when he stepped forward.

The lower half of his face was hidden behind his mask once more, and I realized I really, really hated that piece of cloth. I hated whoever had made him feel like he had to hide behind the mask, and I hoped I'd be able to convince him he didn't need to.

Silas stuck his hands into his hoodie pockets and gazed at me from under his surprisingly long lashes. "So...what now?" he asked, and I laughed softly.

"Have you ever dated anyone before?" I asked, and he raised a brow at me, as if the answer should be obvious. When I didn't react, he sighed and shook his head.

"Yeah. Me neither," I said, and his brows furrowed.

"Really?" His voice was clouded with disbelief, and I nodded, my lips twisting wryly as I blew out a breath from between pursed lips.

"My parents were traditional, and I didn't know if they'd accept me if I came out. So I kept my head down and kept to myself. By the time I figured myself out, I was on my own and seeing things that couldn't possibly be real. Didn't really have

many opportunities for romance,” I said with a shrug, and Silas made a low, growling sound.

“So we’re both new at this,” he said after a moment, and I laughed awkwardly.

“Yeah, pretty much,” I said, and his eyes squinted a little, telling me he was smiling behind his mask.

The sun was close to setting, which meant it would be dinner time soon. I didn’t want to leave, but I hadn’t gotten much work done today, and I needed to catch up, especially if I wanted to spend time with Silas later.

“Would you like to spend some time with me tomorrow?” I asked, and Silas blinked at me.

“Like a date?” he asked hesitantly, and I smiled.

“Yeah. A date.”

His throat bobbed as he swallowed hard, and then he nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, I’d like that.”

I grinned, bobbing on the tips of my toes to keep my excitement in check. I didn’t want to scare Silas off by looking too eager. “Perfect.” I glanced up at the sky again and then bit my lip, meeting his gaze. “I have to take care of some work, but I’ll see you at dinner?” I asked hopefully, and Silas gave me a quick nod.

“I’ll come by the office to get you,” he said, and I smiled in relief.

When I returned to the office, Zephyr was in his cabin, legs up on his desk, book in his lap. He glanced up when I stepped into the office and quirked a brow when he got a good look at me.

“Touya,” he called, and I stopped before I could take my seat, glancing at him.

“Yeah?”

“Could you come in here for a minute, please?”

Sighing, I stepped into his cabin and walked over to his large desk, taking a chair across from him when he waved at it.

“What happened?” he asked, his eyes twinkling.

“What do you mean?” I asked, doing my best to act casual.

Zephyr raised a brow at me as he closed the book he’d been reading. With a wave of his fingers, he sent the book floating back to the bookshelf behind him, where it carefully slid into an open spot. “Now, now, don’t act coy with me. You talked to him, didn’t you?”

I sighed, throwing my head against the headrest and staring up at the ceiling to avoid his knowing gaze. I didn’t know if Zephyr had designed it that way or if one of the residents had painted it, but the ceiling was covered in art, a woodland scenery painted in greens and browns that soothed something inside, spreading a calm through me.

“Touya,” he prompted when I hadn’t said anything for a while, and I lowered my head to glance at him.

“We’re going on a date tomorrow,” I said, and his eyes widened before a smile spread across his lips. I chuckled at the delighted look on his face.

“I wonder what Silas would say if he found out how invested you are,” I mused, and he rolled his eyes. He wagged his metallic index finger at me.

“Uh-uh, don’t go spreading rumors about me. I have a reputation to maintain,” he said, and I raised a brow at him.

“Is making everyone call you Headmaster Morrigan part of that too?” I asked, and he winced.

“No, that’s all them. It seems they prefer it that way,” he said with a shrug.

“Except Keoni,” I said, remembering the time he’d mentioned Zephyr by his name. Something flashed in Zephyr’s eyes, and he shook his head.

“Keoni is...different,” he finally said, and then smiled. “Now, tell me all about it. What finally made you talk to him? I thought you’d ignored my advice.”

That was how I ended up catching Zephyr up instead of the work I’d left Silas to do. I omitted some of the details—like Silas’s freakout that I still didn’t know the reason for—but by the time I was done, Zephyr promised me he’d arrange something ‘special’ for my date with Silas tomorrow. I had no clue what he was cooking up in that head of his, and a part of me didn’t want to leave him in charge of my first date with

Silas, but in the end, I gave in because of how excited he was at the prospect . He wasn't anywhere near as excited as *I* was.

NINE

## Silas

The next morning, I woke up a ball of nerves. I hadn't slept well, and my dreams had been full of recollections from the past that I'd rather forget. Unfortunately, even Headmaster Morrigan wasn't a skilled-enough magic wielder to dabble in mind-magic, or I'd have asked him to erase all my memories, or at least the ones I'd made living with my human family.

Growling in annoyance, I sat up in bed and rubbed my palms over my face, forcing myself to not think about them. Instead, I thought about the man who'd kept me up half the night: Touya. I still couldn't believe he'd asked me out, or that I'd said yes.

After the way I'd treated him when I first came back to the Sanctuary, it was a surprise we'd managed to become friends, much less what we were going to be now. The fact that my gut told me Touya was my mate was something I was trying to avoid thinking too much about.

It wasn't that I didn't want a mate, or that I wasn't ecstatic that I got to have *Touya*, but the fact of the matter was...I wasn't much. I was a half-troll who didn't fit in anywhere except this place for misfit supes, and I didn't have many redeeming qualities. I had no formal education after the first grade—unlike my parents, my grandparents hadn't thought I needed an education, what with me being a beast and all—and my life was limited to the Sanctuary now. Would Touya be

satisfied with a life here? What if he wanted to live out in the human world someday?

Shaking my head, I slid out of bed. I was overthinking things. For fuck's sake, we hadn't even had a first date yet. I needed to stop planning our whole lives.

What I needed to figure out now was if I should tell Touya about our bond, about what we meant to each other. One of the major flaws in humans was their inability to sense their mates, which meant I would have to inform him, sooner or later. I didn't want to just yet, at least not until I knew this was what he wanted, that *I* was what he wanted. I didn't think I could handle any more rejection. For a troll, I had pretty thin skin where it counted.

Once I was ready to tackle the day dressed in an oversized hoodie—which was a feat to find for someone my size—and my favorite pair of cargo pants, I left my little hut and headed down the path to the exit. A thump and a familiar clatter later, Khush and Keoni joined me on either side, and I got the feeling I was about to be interrogated.

“So, what did you and Touya talk about?” Khush asked after a moment, proving me right.

I shot him a look before turning back to stare at the exit. It was so close, and yet not close enough.

“What did *you* and Touya talk about?” I shot back, remembering the moment that had prompted my whole conversation.



“Probably what you two talked about,” he said with a grin, and I froze to a stop. Keoni almost did a flip as he stopped abruptly because of me, catching himself at the last second.

“Touya told you he liked you?” I demanded, my insides full of an emotion I didn’t want to name.

Khush raised a brow at me and then rolled his eyes. “No, Silas. He told me he liked you,” he explained patiently, as if he was talking to a child. With the way I was acting, he might as well be.

“Oh,” I mumbled, turning my eyes to the ground as my cheeks heated.

“Aww, I’ve never seen Silas flustered. He’s so cute,” Keoni cooed, and I shot him a glare. Technically, he and I were much closer in age than Khush and I, and yet I found it much easier to talk and relate to Khush. I didn’t have the unending optimism Keoni did. Then again, his words in the dining room the other day implied he might not always feel as sunny as he tried to act.

We reached the door that led out of the Forest, and I rushed through it, slamming it shut in Khush’s face before hoofing it down the corridor and sliding into Touya and the headmaster’s office without knocking.

Touya’s head shot up, and he blinked at me as I stood with my back against the door. “Uh, hey, Silas,” he greeted with a hesitant but warm smile, and warmth filled my belly.

“Hey, Touya. Sorry about barging in like that. I needed to get away from Khush and Keoni,” I explained, and he chuckled.

“It’s okay. What did they do to annoy you this early in the morning?” he asked as he closed the book he’d been scanning through.

I shrugged. I wasn’t going to tell him they’d been asking about *him*. “Ready for breakfast?”

“Yep,” he said as he walked around his desk to join me. He smiled at me. “I thought we could go on our date after you’re done with your chores for the day.”

I swallowed hard at the reminder and nodded. “Sounds good,” I said, my voice only a little rough.

Touya smiled as I held the door open for him, and then I followed him down the hallway. We’d only taken a few steps when he took my hand in his, and my eyes snapped to our joined hands.

“Is this okay?” he asked in a low voice as he squeezed my hand, and I nodded silently. I’d never held hands with anyone before. Well, maybe with my parents, but if I had, it’d been too long ago to remember. Touya’s hand was warm against mine, only a few calluses on his fingers—probably from all the sketching he did. His hold was gentle but firm, and I wanted to know what a hug from him would feel like.

## Touya

When we walked into the dining room, I felt like we had spotlights trained on us. We had to stop holding hands to get our food, but I had a feeling quite a few people had already caught sight of our joined hands.

It was Jacinta's turn to cook again, and she smirked at us as she filled our plates, shooting me a wink as I pulled my plate back. The move had Silas growling softly, and I touched his elbow with my palm, which stopped him instantly for some reason. Were trolls possessive by nature, or was it a Silas thing? I'd need to find out.

We made our way to our usual table, where Khush and Keoni sat with mirroring smirks on their faces.

"So this is where you ran off to," Khush said as soon as we sat down, and Silas glared at him.

"Hey, Touya," Keoni greeted me pleasantly, and I smiled up at him.

"Hey, Keoni," I said, and then held out my dessert for him. It was something I'd started doing when I realized how much of a sweet tooth he had. I wasn't a fan of confections myself, so it made sense to give him my share, especially because it always made him so happy.

"Thank you!" he said as he took the perfectly decorated cupcake from me.

“So, what’s everyone’s plans for the day?” Keoni asked, and Khush grumbled about all the chores he had to do.

“Isn’t that because you’ve been putting your chores off?” Keoni pointed out, and he glared up at him.

“Shut up,” he grumbled, and I chuckled.

“I have some work today, but after that, Silas and I are going on a date,” I said, and Khush spat out his drink, spraying some of it on Silas’s face.

My eyes widened as I glanced over at Silas, realizing he might’ve wanted to tell his friend—or not tell anyone at all—himself. Silas slowly wiped his face with his palm, and I winced.

“Sorry,” I mumbled to him, and he turned to look at me.

“It’s okay. I was going to let him know. I just...had an idea how he might react,” he said, waving at Khush, who appeared to have frozen solid.

“You’re going on a date? That’s awesome! Are you heading to the human world?” Keoni demanded, and Silas stiffened beside me, which I translated to a firm no.

“No, we’ll be staying here, but yes, we are,” I said since Silas seemed to have taken a sudden vow of silence.

Khush broke out of his stupor with a shake of his head, and turned his eyes on me. “You actually asked him then,” he said with a smirk, and I nodded.

“Good,” he said with a satisfied smile, and I returned it as my chest warmed up. Having Khush’s approval as Silas’s best friend meant a lot to me, especially because I knew he hadn’t been my biggest fan when I first came here. While some of the supes were still wary or eyed me like I was the dirt beneath their feet, most of them had decided I was okay, especially after Keoni and Silas had accepted me into the fold. And now Khush too, I guessed.

Silas stayed quiet while we ate, but I didn’t mind. I’d realized that was his default mode, though I didn’t know yet if that was because he preferred to be quiet or if it was something he’d learned to be. I got the feeling Silas hadn’t had a great childhood, and while losing my parents at seventeen had shaken me, I’d had quite a few good years with them, even if I’d had to keep a part of myself hidden.

Once breakfast was over, Silas returned to the Forest and me to my office with the promise of meeting there in a few hours. Zephyr had promised me yesterday that he’d plan something special for our date, but I had yet to hear from him. He’d been missing from his office when I came in this morning, and he still wasn’t back.

For the next few hours, I pushed everything out of my mind and focused exclusively on my work. Once a week, Zephyr did magical repairs all over the pocket dimension, and it was my job to make a list of all the fixes needed. The residents dropped off notes and requests, whether it was something that had been damaged or something new they wanted. I got to be the one to decide if it was a necessary repair, a new addition

that could be good, or an extravagance that wasn't exactly necessary. At the end of the week, Zephyr would take the list I'd prepared and get to work.

By the time I was done, it'd been close to three hours. Leaving a note on my desk for Zephyr, I left my desk and opened the other door in the room. While Zephyr's rooms were accessible through his office, the door to mine lay in the main office area, though Zephyr had spelled it so only I could enter the space.

It was pretty bare, since all I'd brought with me were a few changes of clothes, toiletries, and my sketchbooks. Some of my sketches were spread out on the tiny desk in the corner, but other than that, the room could've belonged to anyone. Shaking my head, I walked through the room and into the bathroom, the lights flickering on as I stepped inside. Magic, I thought with a shake of my head as I eyed myself in the mirror.

My hair was in a disarray, and a shave might be a good idea. I didn't have all that many clothes, but I had one pale blue button-down and black dress slacks that I was hoping to wear today, though I might go on a shopping trip now that I'd gotten my first—more than generous—paycheck from Zephyr.

Blowing out a breath, I undressed and stepped under the shower, my stomach fizzing with excitement at the thought of my upcoming date. *The Powers That Be, please let everything go smoothly.*

TEN

## Silas

Four hours and ten minutes after breakfast, I stood in front of Touya's office once more, freshly showered and not dressed in a hoodie for once. I'd had to dig deep into my closet to find the full-sleeve sweater I wore, and it clung to my body in a way my hoodies never did, making me feel self-conscious in a way I hadn't in a while. The sweater fit me well, which meant it showed off all my generous curves, and while most days I didn't think much about my general body shape...I wanted Touya to find me attractive, and I knew how most humans viewed my body and size.

In trolls, the beauty standards were practically opposite. Slim meant weak to trolls, and the bigger a troll was, the more attractive they were considered to be. But since most trolls were at least 10 feet tall, I didn't pass their standards either.

Shaking my head, I took a deep breath and knocked on the door, which was ripped back almost instantly, as if Touya had been standing on the other side just waiting for me to knock.

"Hey," he greeted me, his voice a breathy whisper as he took me in. I forced myself to not stiffen as his eyes roamed over me. "You look divine," he murmured, and I almost rolled my eyes.

Instead, I took him in, admiring the way his blue button-down clung to his slim form. His hair looked like he'd applied



some product to it, and it was all shiny and styled, his cheeks pink with a slight blush.

“You don’t look so bad yourself,” I replied, and he grinned.

“Thanks,” he said, and I glanced over him to spot the headmaster, whose head stuck out of his cabin door as he watched us.

“Uh, hey there, Headmaster,” I said, scratching the back of my neck as my cheeks flushed a little.

“Hey, Silas. Have fun on your date! Touya, it’s the unmarked door,” Headmaster Morrigan said before disappearing into his cabin.

I turned to Touya, one brow raised. “What was that about?”

Touya grinned. “I have no idea, but I guess we’ll find out,” he said, holding his hand out. I took it, and he curled his fingers around mine as he stepped outside and closed the door behind him.

We walked down the hallway, and I had no idea where Touya was leading us, at least until I saw the door.

“Uh, I’m pretty sure this wasn’t here before,” I said, and Touya chuckled.

“Me too. This must be what Zephyr was talking about,” he said, and I huffed.

“You call him by his first name?” I asked, and he shrugged.

“He insisted,” he explained, and I nodded. While most of us saw Headmaster Morrigan as a parental figure or guardian, his

relationship with Touya was more similar to colleagues, so it made sense.

“All right. Ready to see what he made for us?” Touya asked, and I glanced over at him.

“Are you saying he made a whole new area for our date?”

“I don’t know what’s in there, but he did promise me something special, so yeah,” he said, and I shook my head. Since when had the headmaster taken up the job of Cupid?

Touya grabbed the door handle, and I held my breath as he opened the door, following behind as he stepped inside, his hold on my hand firm.

“Wow,” Touya said, and I had to agree.

The area Headmaster Morrigan had built for us was small, but absolutely breathtaking.

A large pond sat in the middle of the grassy clearing, and trees circled the little slice of heaven. A basket brimming with food sat near the pond, and a thick blanket was spread out beside it, two thick pillows stacked on one side.

The sound of chirping birds filled the air, and a light breeze washed across the space every few seconds, making the leaves rustle.

“He really outdid himself,” Touya murmured, and I nodded, unable to speak in the face of such beauty. Then I glanced over at Touya, at the way the sunlight made his hair gleam in a hundred shades of reds and golden, and I realized there was something even more gorgeous than the paradise in front of us.

“Come on,” Touya said, tugging me forward, and I let him pull me toward the picnic setup, sending out a silent thanks to the headmaster for arranging all of this.

We sank onto the blanket, and Touya took one of the pillows and hugged it to his chest as he smiled over at me, and I returned the smile, though I doubted he could see it.

I debated over whether I should remove my mask. Touya hadn't asked me to, but I didn't think he would ask even if he wanted me to remove it.

I reached up to my mask, but dropped my hand before my fingers brushed the soft cloth. Touya followed the movement of my hand, and his teeth sank into his lower lip.

“Would you like to remove your mask?” he asked softly, and I swallowed hard.

“Do you want me to?” I asked instead of answering his question, and he shrugged.

“I want whatever makes you feel more comfortable, Silas. If you'd prefer to keep it on, that's okay. If you want to remove it, that's okay too,” he said, and I shook my head with a smile.

\*Maybe later,” I said after a moment, and he smiled, his chestnut eyes twinkling.

“Sounds good. Do you want to see what's in the goodie basket?” he asked, and my stomach growled in answer, making him chuckle.

My cheeks went hot, and I stammered out an apology that he waved off. As a half-troll, I ate a *lot*, and I hadn't eaten

anything since breakfast because I'd been so focused on getting my work done quickly so I could get to Touya.

From the basket, Touya pulled out a large tray full of fruit and cheese slices. Some type of magic had kept all the slices right where they belonged, and Touya placed the tray on the blanket before pulling out a bottle of wine and two long-stemmed glasses.

“There’s a bunch more food in here that we can snack on later,” he commented as he closed the basket’s lid, and I sighed in relief because as delicious as the fruits and cheese appeared, they wouldn’t keep me full for long.

“So,” Touya said as he handed me a glass and started pouring the wine. “First-date conversation. Any idea where we should start?”

## Touya

Was it supposed to be this awkward?

Just being here with Silas was more than I'd imagined I'd get to have, but now that it was happening, I had no idea where to go from here. Like I'd told Silas, I didn't have any experience when it came to dating, and while I had a general idea of how things went, a lot of the "rules" didn't apply when your date was a half-troll and you were in a pocket dimension cut off from the human world.

"You know as much as I do," Silas said, a wry note in his voice, and I chuckled.

"So we're both utterly clueless then?" I asked, and it was his turn to laugh.

"Seems like it," he said with a shake of his head. "We've never had trouble keeping up a conversation before this."

"Yeah. I guess it's the expectations? I mean, dates are supposed to go a certain way, right? You get to know each other, figure out if there's a spark," I mused, and Silas nodded along with my words.

"I guess we should get to know each other, then. What's your favorite song?" Silas asked, and I laughed. It felt surreal, being here with him and talking about our favorites like it was just another date—not that I had anything to compare it to.

“I don’t really have one,” I confessed, and he quirked a brow at me.

“Really?”

“Yeah. I just put on a new playlist on my music app and let it play whatever it wants to when I’m in the mood for some tunes,” I said, and he stared at me like I was an alien. “What about you? Do you have a favorite?”

“I’ll tell you if you promise not to laugh,” Silas said, and I nodded. “I like Taylor Swift,” he admitted, eyeing me carefully.

“Ooh, I enjoy her songs whenever they come up,” I said, and his shoulders relaxed. I hadn’t even realized he’d tensed up.

“Okay, my turn. What’s the craziest thing you’ve ever done?” I asked, and Silas squinted at me.

“Hmm... that’s a tough one,” he said, and I chuckled.

“Oh?” I asked, and he nodded emphatically.

“You have no idea how much trouble Khush and I got into when we were younger,” he said with a chuckle, and I grinned as I imagined a younger Khush and Silas terrorizing poor Zephyr.

“I can imagine,” I said dryly, and he chuckled. Then, he launched into a story about the time he and Khush decided to see who could swing across more trees in a row without pausing, and how they—meaning Silas—ended up snapping the trunks of two dozen trees because they couldn’t handle his weight in his troll form.

By the time he was done with his story, I was clutching my stomach as I laughed, tears streaming down my face as I shook my head.

“I bet,” I gasped out between chuckles, “I bet Zephyr was mad.”

“He made us clean the lake with our bare hands,” Silas said with an exaggerated shudder, and I broke into another loud peal of laughter.

My breath caught in my chest, and my laughter dissipated when I saw the way Silas was watching me, his dark eyes twinkling and full of happiness, the way he was squinting slightly telling me he was smiling under that mask.

Clearing his throat, Silas stuffed a bunch of fruit slices into his mouth. “What about you? What’s the craziest thing you’ve ever done?”

“Uh, the latest would be taking a strange man up on his offer to show me a world I didn’t know existed,” I said, waving around us. “It turned out to be a good thing, luckily.”

“Yeah,” Silas murmured as he met my gaze. “It did.”

Smiling, I ducked my head and took a sip of my wine.

“I know you’ve lived at the Sanctuary for a while. Can I ask when you first came here?” I asked, and Silas nodded, though he stayed silent for a long moment before he spoke.

“I first came here when I was thirteen, almost fourteen, actually,” Silas said, his eyes going distant as he thought about

the past. “I’d run away from my grandparents’ house, and I was living on the streets.”

“That’s where Zephyr found you?” I asked, and Silas chuckled.

“Not exactly. I...nabbed his wallet,” he said, and my eyes widened.

“You did what?” I asked with a chuckle, and he nodded.

“Yep. Slid it right out of his pocket and took off. Of course, he then used his magic and tracked me down,” he said, and I shook my head as I tried to imagine a thirteen-year-old pickpocket Silas. “When I saw him again, I was sure I was in for a beatdown, but instead he told me he had a place where other kids like me lived, and I was welcome to join.”

“And you just went with him?” I asked, and even I could hear the doubt in my voice. The Silas I knew wasn’t that trusting, not by a long shot.

“Of course not,” he replied with another chuckle. “I gave him the slip, and he tracked me down again, this time with Keoni.”

“Keoni went outside?” I asked with wide eyes, and he nodded.

“He was ten, and this tiny little thing. The headmaster had to use some really strong glamor magic to keep the humans from realizing what he was, but I could see him clearly.”

“And that was what convinced you,” I surmised.



“Yep. And the rest, as they say, is history.”

# ELEVEN

## Silas

I loved working at the farm. It was another one of the areas the headmaster had built into his pocket dimension, and it supplied most of the food we ate. While the headmaster could create plants and trees with his magic, we'd learned that the crops grown naturally yielded better grains and vegetables than those grown solely with magic.

We also had a coop of chickens—that the headmaster had brought from the human world, because even his magic didn't have the ability to create living creatures bigger than a bug—that we collected eggs from daily, but milk and all other necessities were brought in from the human world.

I'd shifted to my troll form to work, and I wiped some sweat off my brow as I hefted another bundle of hay onto my shoulder. A lot of the residents preferred to live out in the nature instead of a house or hut like mine, and they would use the hay as bedding. We'd gotten quite good at creating as little waste as possible, and the Sanctuary was a well-oiled machine that worked perfectly on most days.

Dropping the bundle with the others, I decided I'd earned a break and walked over to a small clearing, settling at the base of a huge apple tree. Everything we did at the Sanctuary was volunteer work. If I decided tomorrow to get a job in the human world—not that I would—I'd be taken off the chore roster with just one request. A few of our older residents had

done just that when they'd felt ready to tackle the world, and they'd stayed here while they saved up some money, and then moved into the human world. I didn't think I'd ever be strong enough, and I wondered if Touya would be okay with that.

I sighed. How long had it been this time? Ten minutes? Ten minutes since I last thought about Touya. It had to be a new record.

I couldn't get him out of my head. Our date yesterday had been wonderful. I couldn't remember the last time I'd talked that much, and though we'd avoided discussing any heavy topics, I felt like I knew Touya much better now. I knew it would take more than just one conversation for me to fully trust him, but I also knew it wouldn't be as hard as I'd thought.

Touya was too nice, too kind for me to have any doubts about his intentions. He was nothing like the humans I'd encountered in my lifetime, and I could see that now. I wondered what my life would've been like if even one of my relatives had been kind like Touya. The idea was too painful to contemplate, and I shook it off as the sound of footsteps approaching caught my attention.

The steps were light and unhurried, and I recognized them instantly. I sat up straight as Touya appeared in the little clearing, and the smile that lit up his face had my breath catching.

"Silas! I was hoping I'd find you here," he said as he hurried forward, his usual sketchbook clutched in one hand.

“Should I shift back?” I asked hesitantly. While I had no problem shifting between forms, I wondered if Touya preferred my human form over this one. I could admit that my troll form wasn’t the prettiest, even compared to my human form. There was a reason trolls were always portrayed as the bad guys in stories. We were too ugly to be one of the good guys.

“Not unless you want to,” he said as he sat down in front of me, crossing his legs as he got comfortable on the grassy ground.

“You don’t mind?” I asked carefully, waving a hand at myself, and his eyebrows furrowed.

“Why would I mind? They’re both you, aren’t they? You can take whichever form you prefer,” he said with a shrug, as if he honestly didn’t have a preference.

I nodded slowly and then waved at his sketchbook to change the subject. “Did you have a drawing for me to look at?”

Touya’s cheeks went a little pink at my question, and my brows shot up. Interesting. “Well, not exactly,” he hedged, and I waited him out. Blowing out a breath, he looked up at me, his chestnut eyes very much resembling a puppy’s as he spoke. “I was hoping you’d let me draw you.”

“Me?” I asked, and he nodded. “Didn’t you already draw me?” I asked, remembering the sketch I’d seen the other day.

Touya ducked his head as his cheeks grew darker and then shrugged, eyes still downcast. “I did. But I wanted to draw a

real portrait this time, not a scene from my memory. It's okay if you don't want to," he added quickly, his grip tightening around his sketchbook.

Hesitantly, I reached out and placed my palm over his hand, and he dropped his white-knuckle hold on the sketchbook as he glanced at our hands. The size difference between them was comical, and Touya raised his palm up to place it against mine, a smile quirking his lips as he noticed it too.

"Your hands are so big," he said, something like awe in his voice. It was my turn to blush, and when Touya smiled up at me, I knew he could see how red my cheeks were. My skin got a grayish tinge when I was in my troll form as it turned leathery, and I didn't know what a blush looked like when my skin was this color. I hoped it wasn't too bad.

"You can draw me, if you want," I said after he'd admired our hands for a few minutes, and he shot me another brighter-than-the-sun smile. A realization smacked me right in the chest as I returned his smile. I would do *anything* to have that smile directed at me.

"Thank you!" he exclaimed, and I slowly drew my hand back as he pulled out a pouch from his pocket and placed it on the ground between us, unzipping it and pulling out a pencil.

"Do you need me to do anything?" I asked, and he shook his head.

"You don't have to put on a pose or anything. We can just chat while I draw," he said, shooting me another smile as he opened his sketchbook to a blank page, and I nodded. Despite

the fact that we'd spent hours talking just yesterday, I realized I wasn't lacking for words at all.

## Touya

Silas was killing me. With every shy smile, every duck of his head, and every pink blush, he was slowly destroying me, and the worst part was I knew he was completely clueless to the effect he had on me.

In his troll form, Silas was eight feet tall, and I had to crane my neck up to look at him properly since I'd decided to sit so close. It would've been easier if I'd sat a few paces away, but I wanted to be close to him. It was an urge I'd ignored all morning while I made myself focus on my work, but Zephyr must've noticed I was useless today because he'd shooed me off and told me to 'go find your beau.'

"You have a really beautiful nose," I said absently as I sketched, and Silas was silent for a beat before he chuckled.

"Nose? Really?" he asked, and I shot him a grin.

"I mean, the rest of you is pretty damn good looking too, but your nose is really symmetrical and well-balanced. From an artist's perspective, it's perfect," I said, sneaking a glance at him to gauge his reaction. I knew he had some...opinions about himself, and I'd realized that changing his mind, getting him to see how wrong he was, would take some creativity. Literally.

Silas's cheeks were pink again, and he ducked his head, avoiding my eyes as he tugged at the grass in front of him,



ripping a few blades out and wrapping them around his fingers. “What about...” he started hesitantly, and then fell silent.

I stopped sketching, giving him my full attention. “Yes?”

He swallowed hard, and seemed to brace himself as he voiced whatever question was circling his mind. “You said from an artist’s perspective before. What’s your opinion from a...” He seemed to be searching for the right word, but I’d already figured out what he was trying to ask.

“A personal perspective?” I suggested, and he nodded quickly, eyes returning to the grass. Placing my sketchbook to the side, I shifted closer to him and placed my palms on his bare shins. In his troll form, Silas only ever wore shorts that ended above his knees and nothing else, and my eyes roamed over his strong, thick-set body as I tried to catch his gaze.

“Personally,” I started, my eyes trained on his face as I waited for him to meet my gaze. “I think you’re the most mesmerizing being I’ve ever had the pleasure of knowing.” His eyes snapped to mine, and I hoped he could see I meant every word. I remembered the way he’d thought I was mocking him the last time I’d said something nice, and I hoped he wouldn’t think the same.

After a few moments where we seemed to be trapped in some kind of bubble of silence, Silas shook his head, his lips twisting in a wry smile. I wanted to reach out and touch his tusks, to see how they felt against my finger. Were they sharp?

Smooth? Knowing how self-conscious he was about them, I resisted. For now.

“You’re probably the only human in the world who thinks that about me,” he said, and I quirked a teasing brow at him as I leaned closer.

“Am I not enough for you, Silas?” I asked in a whisper-soft voice, and his eyes widened before darkening even more, if that was at all possible.

“I’m starting to think you might be more than I can handle,” he joked, and I chuckled as I sat back.

“Okay, okay, I want to finish this sketch today. You need to stop distracting me,” I said in an admonishing tone even as my lips quirked up.

“I wasn’t the one singing praises of my nose,” he shot back, and I couldn’t help grinning. I loved it when Silas finally relaxed, when he let go of his worries and just let himself be. He was so bright and cheerful, but he usually kept himself hidden behind his hoodies and his mask, cutting himself off from everything. I wanted to create a space for him where he felt safe enough to drop his guard, and I felt like I might be succeeding.

“Okay, okay, I admit it was probably my fault,” I said with a laugh, and he huffed.

“No ‘probably’ about it,” he grumbled, and I smiled to myself as I continued sketching, glancing up at him every few strokes.

“I should’ve asked this before, but am I interrupting your work?” I asked after a few minutes.

“Nah, I was almost done when you showed up. What about you? The headmaster didn’t need you today?”

I smiled sheepishly and kept my eyes planted firmly on my sketchbook as I answered him. “Well, I might’ve been a tad... distracted. He told me to leave because I wasn’t being very productive.”

“Oh? What were you so distracted by?” From anyone else, the question would sound like they were fishing for compliments, but Silas sounded honestly curious, like the thought that I might’ve been thinking about him hadn’t even crossed his mind.

“You, of course,” I said, and glanced up in time to see his eyes go wide. “I had a lot of fun yesterday, Silas, and I kind of can’t stop thinking about you.” Being so honest about my feelings was new for me. My parents had both been reserved people, and emotions weren’t something we’d talked about. I’d never had a close friend because I’d always kept parts of myself hidden, and I was used to holding my cards close. But with Silas, I knew I had to be the open one.

I knew Silas *wanted* to be open, wanted to offer his heart on a silver platter, because that was the kind of person he was. But someone—or maybe more than just one person—in his life had taught him that being open only led to being hurt, and if I had to be the one to put my heart on my sleeve to show him that wasn’t true, then I would do it.

I'd never had such strong feelings for anyone in my life before, but they didn't scare me, mostly because Silas deserved to have someone who put him before everyone else like I wanted to. Silas deserved the world, and I wanted to be the one to give it to him.

# TWELVE

## Silas

By the time Touya finished, it was almost dinnertime. The sun had started to set, and I had a feeling we were the only two people left in the farm, not that either of us cared.

When Touya showed me, I didn't know how to react. The person in the sketch was me, and at the same time...it wasn't. I'd never seen myself the way Touya apparently saw me, and I could see the small differences in our perceptions of me.

The Silas in his sketch looked softer somehow, devoid of shadows and burdens. His shoulders were relaxed, and he had an easy grin on his face. Had I really been smiling like that when he drew me? Was it that Touya saw me like this or that I became this person around him? I had a feeling it was the latter.

"You don't like it?" Touya asked hesitantly, and I realized I'd been staring at the sketch like an ass without saying a word.

"No," I said, and then hurried to add when Touya's face fell. "I mean, no, I don't *not* like it," I said, then groaned. "I mean I love it!" I almost shouted the words, and Touya startled before he chuckled softly.

"Okay. I'm glad you like it," he said with a grin, and I turned my eyes back to the sketch.

“Can I keep it?” I asked, and his smile brightened even more.

“Sure!” He took the sketchbook from me and carefully tore out the sketch. He held it out to me, and I took it cautiously, not wanting to damage his hours of hard work.

Touya glanced up at the sky before meeting my eyes again. “I better go check in with Zephyr before dinner. I don’t want to take advantage of his kindness.”

I nodded, and he stood up, dusting his pants off as he stooped to pick up his pencil pouch. “I’ll see you at dinner?”

“I’ll come get you,” I promised, and he smiled. Then, before I could react, he leaned forward and pressed his lips to my cheek in a warm kiss.

I sucked in a sharp breath, my whole being focused on the spot where his lips touched my skin, and when Touya pulled back, his cheeks were tinged with pink. He shot me a wink and took off before I could get my mouth to work, and I distantly wondered just how pink *my* cheeks were.

“Ugh, *so sweet*. I think I threw up in my mouth a little,” a familiar voice said, and my eyes shot up just as Khush plopped onto the ground before me, landing a little awkwardly on his tail. He still hadn’t perfected the jump, and I smiled as he hurried to gather himself.

“Were you spying on us?” I demanded once he’d stopped flailing, and he hissed at me.

“I don’t spy on people. I was just passing through, and you two caught my eye,” he said, and I raised a brow at him.

“You really think I’ll believe that?” I demanded, and he shrugged.

“No skin off my back if you don’t,” he said. Then his eyes flicked to my hand and the sheet of paper in it.

“What’s that?” he asked. So he hadn’t been watching us for long. Thank fuck.

“A sketch Touya made,” I said, and when Khush went to grab for it, I held it out of his reach and growled at him in a way I’d never done before.

Khush’s brows shot up, and he stopped short, slowly pulling his hand back and holding his palms up instead. “Okay, okay. You can keep your sketch. Is it a nude or something?” he asked with a waggle of his brows, and I rolled my eyes at him.

I didn’t know why I felt so protective, but I didn’t want anyone touching it. Touya had spent hours making it, and I wasn’t going to let anyone damage it, not even my best friend.

I got to my feet, dusting myself off with one hand. “Come on. We’ll be late for dinner.”

Khush was silent as we headed out of the farm, and I left him to his thoughts as we exited the farm. I needed to clean up, and Khush followed me into the Forest even though he looked ready for food.

“You really like him, don’t you?” he asked when my hut was in sight, and I found myself blurting out something I hadn’t



been meaning to tell anyone just yet.

“He’s my mate.”

Khush went still, his slitted eyes shooting to mine. “He’s what?” he demanded, and I shrugged.

“He’s my mate. I found out when he touched me in this form the other day,” I said, waving at myself. Khush huffed and shook his head.

“Does he know?” he asked after a beat, and I shook my head.

“I haven’t told him yet. I will. I just...not yet,” I said, struggling to get my thoughts in order.

Khush nodded as if he understood and then patted my arm. “Take your time, Silas. Humans don’t put too much stock in the whole fated mates idea anyway, so I don’t think he’ll mind if you wait a while before telling him.”

When we reached my hut, Khush told me to hurry up and get ready, and I shifted back into my human form as I slid inside.

The first thing I did was carefully place the sketch in my bedside drawer. Tomorrow, I’d get some wood and fashion a frame for it so I could put it on display, but for now, it would be safe there. Once that was done, I grabbed a quick shower and then changed into my usual outfit of a hoodie, this one a baby blue color, and dark sweatpants.

Khush was hanging upside-down from his tree—the one where he slept at night—when I stepped out of my hut, and he

slithered down the trunk to join me. My stomach let out a loud growl, and he chuckled as he smacked me with his hefty tail.

“Come on, troll boy. Let’s get your man and get some food in you before you wither away.”

## Touya

When Silas came to ‘pick me up’ for dinner, Khush was with him too. I greeted them both, and then glanced down at Silas’s hand, unsure if he would be okay holding hands with his friend so close. He hadn’t minded walking into the dining room with our hands clasped before, but this was different.

As if he’d read my mind, Silas brushed his knuckles against mine, and I glanced over at him to find his eyes already on mine, a question in his eyes.

Smiling, I quickly linked our fingers, and his eyes crinkled a little, telling me I’d been worried about nothing.

“You two are sickeningly cute,” Khush grumbled, and Silas rolled his eyes at me, making me grin.

“You’re just jealous,” Silas told him, and surprisingly, Khush didn’t deny his claim.

Once we had our food, we took our usual chairs. Keoni was already there, his plate of food resting on the raised part of the table. Most of the tables had a section whose height could be increased or decreased for its user, and I thought it was rather ingenious of Zephyr, since it meant Keoni didn’t have to sit at a different table simply because of his height.

“So are you two official then?” Keoni asked, and I shot him a glance, noticing the playful smile on his face as he eyed Silas. His friends seemed to really enjoy teasing him about

this, which made me wonder if I was the first person they'd seen him with. I knew Silas had said he hadn't dated anyone before, but had he not hooked up with anyone either?

“Oh, they are, kiddo,” Khush answered instead of Silas, shooting his friend a smirk.

“That's awesome! I'm so happy for you guys!” he said, a wide smile on his face.

“Thanks, Keoni,” I said, returning his smile, and glanced over at Silas to find the tops of his cheeks pink as he shoveled food into his mouth and ignored the conversation.

Under the table, I reached out a hand and placed it on his knee, and when he glanced over at me, I gave him a small smile. His eyes crinkled slightly, and I turned my attention back to my food, though I left my hand resting on his knee.

The rest of dinner was a quiet affair, and Keoni and Khush chit chatted while I popped in every once in a while with a comment. I still didn't know much about a lot of the residents, especially those who were wary of me and my human-ness, so listening to their conversation gave me a little insight into the lives of some of the residents of the Sanctuary.

When we were done with our meal, Silas reminded the others that it was the Forest dwellers' turn to take care of the dishes, and Khush and Keoni let out simultaneous groans as Silas turned to me.

“I'll see you tomorrow?” he asked, and I shook my head.

“I’m not leaving yet. I can help,” I offered, and his brows furrowed.

“You don’t have to,” he said, making me smile.

“I don’t mind. Honestly,” I said, meaning it. If the choice was between going back alone to my bare room or staying here with my friends, with Silas, then it wasn’t really a choice at all.

“You must really like Silas,” Keoni said with a teasing grin, “to be willing to do the dishes just to spend more time with him.”

I shrugged, smiling at the eye roll Silas shot Keoni, who completely ignored it. Even though Silas got quiet whenever the conversation turned to the topic of us, when he let his guard down, he could be as playful as them.

Something had made Silas put up these huge walls around himself, and while his friends and I were slowly chipping away at it, I wished he’d never felt the need to put them up in the first place.

Shaking my head, I joined them and a few of the other Forest residents in the kitchen area, and the amount of dishes piled in the wide sink that ran the length of one wall almost had me regretting my offer to help. The look Silas shot me said he knew exactly what I was thinking.

“Come on, Touya. You wanted to help, right?” he asked, a spark in his eyes, and I gave him a wide smile. No way was I backing down now.

He blinked at my smile, and then shook his head slightly, turning away from me and leading the way to the sinks.

The rest of them seemed to have a system in place already, with a few people taking care of washing the dishes, while others dried them, and Keoni and Khush placed them in their proper cabinets under the counter.

I joined Silas, grabbing a scrubber and starting in on the dishes as I glanced over at him. “Couldn’t Zephyr have magicked up some dishwashers? This place has electricity,” I said, eyeing the bright electric sconces that lined the wall.

“It’s part of his whole ‘teaching us to be capable adults’ gig,” Silas said, and I could almost hear the air quotes in his voice.

I chuckled, and then glanced over at Draven, the resident dwarf who’d dragged over a step stool so he could reach the sink. He looked ready to snap the dish he was scrubbing in half, but I’d been around him enough to know that was just his resting dwarf face.

“Thank you,” Silas said, his voice so low I almost didn’t hear him, and I turned to him with a raised brow.

“What for?” I tried to keep my voice low, knowing I was in a room full of supes with super hearing.

Silas shrugged, eyes firmly latched onto the dish in his hand. “For helping. For sticking around.”

Smiling, I pressed my shoulder against his, soaking in the warmth of his skin as I leaned into him for a few moments

before straightening up. “It’s my pleasure, Silas. Spending time with you is never a hardship, even when I’m elbow deep in soapy water.”

Silas’s eyes crinkled at my remark, and I smiled to myself as I continued scrubbing one dish after another.

# THIRTEEN



## Silas

It had been a few days since Touya and I had our first date. Khush and Keoni had finally stopped teasing me about it, and while we'd hung out a few more times since then, it had usually been during a meal or some chore with others around. We hadn't yet had a chance to have an official second date, and I might or might not have used the time to read up a little on human dating habits.

We didn't have internet access in the Sanctuary, though I was sure the headmaster could figure out a way to get it if he felt it was needed, but he was old school in a lot of ways, and I didn't think he would ever find it necessary.

Since the internet wasn't an option, I'd had to settle with the next best thing: the library.

The Library room was Keoni's baby. He was a clumsy mess everywhere, but in the library, he never missed a step. I knew centaurs in the olden times used to be scholars and could read the future in the stars, and Keoni possessed the love of books to prove it. I knew the headmaster had given him the 'job' of the librarian a couple of years ago because Keoni had insisted he was old enough to do his part, but he'd really settled into the role now, though I had to swear him to secrecy before I could tell him what I was looking for.

With a wide grin on his face, he'd shown me to a shelf full of romance novels written by humans, and I'd spent the last

few days poring over them after I was done with the day's work. I'd never much enjoyed reading, and I'd always felt like a bull in a china shop when I stepped into Keoni's library, but I'd found I quite enjoyed reading the romance books, at least the ones where the lead characters weren't fighting all the time.

Today, I was planning on finishing my work early once more so I could finish reading the book I'd started last night. I'd learned quite a few interesting things about human dating through the books, though I'd also learned a lot of things depended on the people who were dating. There were no set guidelines like I'd been hoping for, and most of it seemed to involve just winging it.

"Oh, hey," a familiar voice said, and I glanced up at Touya as he smiled hesitantly and stepped closer.

"Touya, hi," I said, shooting him a smile before turning back to the door I'd been working on. Someone had slammed it too hard and almost ripped it out of its hinges, so now I had to tighten up the loose screws and make sure that wouldn't happen. Then something clicked, and I glanced back at him. He had a tote bag on his shoulder, one I knew belonged to the headmaster. It was spelled to have unlimited space and be weightless, and one the headmaster used to buy groceries for the Sanctuary. "You going out?"

Touya glanced at the bag and then back at me, and nodded. "I, uh, I'm going to the human world to run some errands for Zephyr," he said, then licked his lips. His fingers were curled

into the fabric of the bag, and I frowned as I stood up and stepped closer to him.

“You okay?” I asked softly, and he nodded quickly, almost on auto-pilot.

Exhaling loudly, he met my eyes. “Would you like to come with me?”

I blinked at the question, surprised. I wasn’t the biggest fan of the human world, and Touya knew that. As if remembering that, he shook his head, and took a step back, his fingers still digging into the tote bag. “It’s okay, never mind. I know you don’t like going out there. Forget I asked.” He turned on his heels, and he was almost to the door when I finally got my head out of my ass and hurried after him.

“Touya, stop,” I said, grabbing his wrist. He turned to look at me, brows furrowed. “Give me five minutes to clean up and change?” I asked, and he blinked in surprise.

“Oh, okay. You really don’t have to,” he said, and I smiled.

“I know I don’t. I want to. I’d like to spend time with you,” I said, and his eyes widened a little. Swallowing hard, he gave me a nod, and I let go of his hand.

“Five minutes,” I promised as I went to gather up my tools. Then, I hurried into the Forest and to my cabin, ignoring everyone in my way.

After a quick shower, I pulled on a clean pair of jeans and one of my nicer hoodies, a navy-blue one I rarely wore around here because I liked it too much.

Combing my hair proved to be a fruitless effort, and I hoped the end result looked closer to ‘artfully tousled’ than bedhead.

Touya was still waiting in the hallway when I got back, his back against the wall, his fingers messing with the tote’s strap.

“I’m ready,” I declared, and he glanced up at me, a smile lighting his face the moment our eyes met.

“You look good,” he said as I stepped closer to him, and I huffed. Then, I scanned my gaze up and down his form, realizing I hadn’t taken my time to appreciate how well he cleaned up before. He was dressed in a short-sleeved dark green button-down paired with cream-colored jeans, and the clothes clung to his form perfectly.

“You don’t look so bad yourself,” I said, and he gave a pleased smile as he reached out and took my hand in his. I thought I felt his fingers tremble slightly against mine before he tightened his hold, but the smile on his face remained bright as ever, and I shook off the notion.

“Come on. We have a long list of errands to take care of,” he said, and I gave him a salute with my free hand.

“Yes, sir!”

Touya chuckled as we stepped through the door to the human world, and I smiled in satisfaction at the sound.

## Touya

I couldn't tell Silas how grateful I was to have him beside me. Since finding out the truth about what I saw, this was the first time I'd returned to the real world. Zephyr had given me the past month to 'get used to' my new reality, but when he'd asked me this morning if I could take care of a few errands, I'd said yes before I'd given it much thought, and then I'd done nothing but think and worry about it.

The fact that Silas had barely been around the last few days except during meal times also had my stomach twisting a little, so when I'd spotted him this morning, I couldn't stop myself from blurting out a request for him to join me.

"You okay?" Silas asked after the building that 'housed' the Sanctuary was out of view and we were smack-dab in the middle of the town. I still didn't understand everything about how Zephyr's magic worked, but I understood enough to know he was extremely powerful.

"I'm fine," I replied, though I felt anything but. Every time we turned a corner, I found myself bracing for a glimpse of some supe. I wouldn't admit it, but I'd been scared to come out here, scared of what I might see. I didn't know if knowing what I saw was real helped or just made things more scary, but I felt safer with Silas by my side.

Thinking about the last few days, I turned my eyes to Silas. "Are *we* okay?" I asked softly, and he glanced over at me, his

brows furrowed.

“What? What do you mean?” he asked, and I shrugged, turning my eyes away from him. While I tried to be more open with my feelings around him, I just didn’t think I could talk about this when I was looking into those deep black eyes of his.

“I don’t know...I just...you haven’t really been around for the past few days, and I thought—I thought maybe you changed your mind and just didn’t know how to tell me. If that’s the case, I—”

“It’s not.” Silas cut me off before I could finish, and now I did look at him. His cheeks were flushed, and his eyes downcast, but his grip on my hand was tighter than before. Was he angry? Because I’d doubted him? “I’m sorry I made you think otherwise.”

“It’s okay,” I said, and he shook his head, finally looking at me.

“It’s not okay, Touya. I should’ve told you something, what I was doing,” he mumbled, shaking his head.

“What *were* you doing?” I asked, curious. When I’d gotten a little desperate, I’d checked his chores list, and I knew he hadn’t had any extra ones that would’ve taken up all his time.

Surprisingly, his pink cheeks darkened even more, and he turned his gaze to his feet. “I, uh, I was doing some... research,” he said, and my brows shot up.

“Research? On what?” I asked, and he sighed gustily.

“You’ll make fun of me,” he said rather glumly, and I scowled. When would he stop thinking that I was going to up and start mocking him? Did he still think of me as one of the humans who’d made his life hell before?

“I won’t,” I promised, giving his hand a squeeze.

“I was...” he started, every word stilted like he had to drag it out of his throat, “reading...romance books. I—I wanted to know more about human dating,” he confessed, and then glanced at me from the corner of his eyes.

I kept my lips clamped shut, but couldn’t stop myself from smiling. I didn’t want to make fun of Silas, but I did want to give him a hug. How could he be so sweet? I’d never met anyone—human or supernatural—as kind as him, and I didn’t think I ever would.

“Silas,” I said, stopping in the middle of the sidewalk. He glanced at me warily as he stopped beside me, his brows bunching up together.

“Yeah?” he asked slowly, carefully, as his free hand curled and uncurled, like he had too much nervous energy in his body.

“Can I hug you?” I asked, my expression completely serious. His brows shot up at my question—he had really expressive brows, which made sense considering half his face was usually hidden—and he nodded slowly.

Smiling, I stepped closer and wrapped my arms around him. He was only an inch or so taller than me, so I put my arms

around his neck, tucking my face against the side of his, and he returned the hug by wrapping his arms around my middle. His hoodie was made of a thick material, and I hated the barrier between us, but it didn't dampen my enjoyment too much.

As I pressed closer, I realized I would very much enjoy cuddling with him. He was so warm and soft, and I was reluctant to let go, but a part of my brain remembered we were standing in the middle of a busy sidewalk, and I slowly pulled back, our eyes meeting and holding for a few precious seconds as the world around us disappeared in the background.

"Thank you," I murmured once I'd shaken myself out of the stupor and stepped away, though I made sure to take his hand in mine once more.

"It was my pleasure," he replied in a warm voice, and I grinned over at him, noting the way his cheeks reddened at his own words. One day, I was going to die from cuteness overload, and it would be his fault.

It was only once we'd started walking that I realized I'd felt his warm, completely smooth cheek pressed against mine when I hugged him. Not a piece of cloth, but his actual skin. So the mask really was more like an illusion than anything else, just like I'd thought. The possibilities that opened up—at least until I could convince Silas to trust me enough to get rid of it completely—had me daydreaming as we headed toward our first destination, the grocery store.



FOURTEEN

## Silas

Being out in the world with Touya was much different than being there alone. For one, people didn't stare at me as much, even though I hadn't bothered to put my hood up. People had stared a little at our impromptu hug in the middle of the sidewalk, but for the most part they'd left us alone, which I was glad for.

Whatever nerves had made Touya twitchy when we'd first stepped into the human world were all but gone now, and I faithfully followed him with the shopping cart as he checked his list and added things into the cart. While we grew some of our own food, we didn't have the space or manpower to produce everything we needed, especially because the headmaster refused to put us to work for more than a few hours every day, even though I knew most of us would happily work more if he asked. The Sanctuary was our home, after all, and we wanted to take the best care of it too.

Touya turned a corner, and then stopped so suddenly I almost rammed the cart into his back. "Touya?" I called, but he seemed frozen to the floor.

Letting go of the cart, I approached him, my eyes scanning our surroundings as I closed in on him. When I reached his side, I spotted what had made him freeze. One aisle over, a woman was sifting through a shelf, looking for something

specific. While the woman herself looked pretty normal, my nose told me she was a shifter.

“Touya?” I asked softly, brushing his arm with my fingers. He startled at the touch, and his eyes shot to mine.

“She’s a supe,” he said in a hushed whisper, and I nodded.

“A shifter of some kind,” I said, and he swallowed hard.

“Bear,” he said, and then dug his teeth into his lower lip. “You can sense it too.”

I nodded, and he relaxed a little. I realized then that his nerves earlier had been about stumbling across another supe, and I was glad I’d decided to come with him. While I knew logically that he’d survived so long without me, I still didn’t want to think about him facing off against a supe all alone.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, shooting me a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “I know it’s real now, but sometimes...” He trailed off with a shrug of his shoulders.

“It’s okay. Do you want to continue shopping?” I asked, and he nodded quickly. We walked past the shifter, who must’ve heard some of our conversation but had chosen to ignore us.

Touya busied himself with the list again, but I kept an ear out until the shifter was gone just in case. Most supes on the outside kept to themselves unless they knew one another, and I didn’t think she would’ve tried anything with me here with Touya, but I didn’t want to take any chances.

“After this, we should get some ice cream,” Touya said, and I smiled at him. The cart was almost full, and I debated over

the merits of getting another cart since Touya's list still had a few items left.

In the end, he managed to cram everything into the one cart, and I wheeled it out to the checkout counter as Touya double-checked his list.

"What's your favorite flavor?" I asked, and he stared at me with blank eyes before recognition sparked.

"Oh! Um, mint and chocolate," he said, and I grinned.

"Me too," I replied, and he smiled brightly.

"Perfect. I saw a really cute ice cream shop on our way here," he said, and we decided that would be our next stop.

We couldn't use the magic tote bag in front of the human cashier, so we let him fill three giant grocery bags with our purchases before hauling them outside, two in my arms and one in Touya's. Once we were out of anyone's sight, Touya pulled the tote off his shoulder and slid the grocery bags inside. Defying laws of physics—as magic had a habit of doing—the grocery bag easily slid inside the much smaller tote, and Touya shot me a grin. Returning his smile, I dumped the other two grocery bags into the tote as well.

"Is it any heavier?" I asked, and Touya shook his head.

"Not an ounce," he said, surprise clear in his voice. "And Zephyr said it would keep the food from going bad too. He said something about it being in stasis."

"Is it really that shocking of a creation from the man who created a literal pocket dimension with his magic?" I asked,

and Touya shot me a smile.

“You’re right. It shouldn’t be. I guess some things just hit different,” he said with a shrug, and while I didn’t quite understand what he meant, I nodded anyway.

“So, you wanna go get the ice cream before we do the rest of the errands?” he asked after a moment, and I smiled.

“Yes, please.”

Grinning, he slid his hand into mine, and I glanced down at our joined hands as warmth fluttered in my belly. I wondered if that feeling of newness and wonder would ever fade, and I hoped not. I wanted to feel just as pleased every time Touya touched me. Did he feel the same way I did when our skins touched? Or was it different for humans?

Touya linked his fingers through mine, and while our hands were the same size when I was in this form, his fingers were much slimmer than mine. He hadn’t commented on my size one way or the other yet, but sometimes I couldn’t help thinking about what he thought of me. He was perfect in every sense of the word, and I...wasn’t. Could he see that as clearly as I did? And if so, then what was he doing with me? *He* didn’t know we were mates, so what was it about me that he found attractive? It wasn’t like I could ask him without sounding like a shallow ass looking for compliments.

“Here we are,” Touya said, and I realized I’d spent the whole walk to the ice cream store lost in my head. Great. *Stop being an idiot, Silas*, I told myself. It didn’t matter why Touya

wanted me, just that he did, and I needed to make sure I didn't give him any more reasons to *not* want me.

## Touya

By the time we returned to the Sanctuary, I was ready to sleep for a week. I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt this exhausted, though I wouldn't change anything about today. I'd had a great deal of fun with Silas, and I hoped we'd be able to do something like this again. Maybe one of these days, I could convince him to go out for just the two of us? A date, maybe?

In true gentleman fashion, Silas helped me stock the pantry with all the newly purchased groceries before he walked me to my office, similar to walking a date to their door at the end of the night. I wondered if this was one of the things he'd discovered in his 'research,' but refrained from asking him outright. He'd been so embarrassed when he'd admitted that, and as much as I adored watching his cheeks flush, I didn't want to push him too much.

"I had fun today," I said, and Silas's eyes crinkled in a smile.

"Me too," he said, his voice making me feel all warm and gooey. Ever since our hug earlier, I hadn't been able to stop thinking about his lips and that damned mask of his. Now that we were finally home and relatively alone, I needed to test my theory.

Meeting Silas's gaze, I quickly leaned forward and pressed my lips to his for a short instant. He went still, and when I drew back a second later, his dark eyes were wide as saucers.

“It works,” I murmured with a satisfied smile, and Silas’s brows furrowed.

“Huh?” he mumbled, shaking his head as if trying to clear it.

“When we hugged earlier, I felt your skin against mine, so I wanted to see if I could kiss you without you needing to remove your mask,” I explained, and then squeezed his hand. “Not that I wouldn’t love to see you without it, but I don’t want to push you. I’m sorry if the kiss was too much,” I apologized, realizing I should’ve asked him before trying anything at all.

Silas stared at me for a long moment, eyes blinking rapidly, and then he shuffled forward until our lips were barely a breath apart, his front pressed firmly against mine as my back leaned into the door I had yet to open.

“Can we...again?” he asked, his eyes flicking to my lips, and I licked them instinctively, making Silas exhale a shaky breath.

“Yes, please,” I murmured, and when he hesitated, I was the one to close the distance between us. Like before, I could see his mask if I opened my eyes, but all I felt against my lips were his plusher ones, soft and warm, and a little wet as they brushed against mine clumsily. We’d already discussed our mutual lack of experience, but I didn’t think anything would ever be able to top this kiss. Our first kiss.

I slid my palms to his waist, holding onto Silas as he deepened the kiss, my fingers digging into the plush padding around his middle. God, I wanted to open the door behind me



and drag him to my bed, but I had a feeling that would be too much too soon for my sweet troll.

Just as I was about to pull away to catch my breath, the door behind me opened, and we almost spilled to the floor, but Silas steadied himself just as two strong hands—one flesh, one metal—grabbed my shoulders, pushing me upright.

I turned around, my cheeks flushing a deep red as I met my boss and friend's eyes. Clearly, he was in friend-mode right now because he chuckled as his eyes slid between us.

“Looks like the mask works perfectly,” he commented, and Silas's cheeks darkened further.

“You made it?” I blurted before I could stop myself, and Zephyr nodded.

“I did, yes. Of course, I added a few adjustments, and I'm glad Silas finally has a use for them,” he said, and Silas stared at the ground in front of him as even the tops of his ears turned pink. “Anyway, I need to go check in with Keoni about something. You kids have fun.”

Once he was gone, Silas still stayed where he was, his eyes firmly on the ground. Slowly, I stepped closer to him and took his hands in mine, giving them a light squeeze.

“Silas? You okay?”

Silas nodded slowly, but didn't look up. Stepping closer, I rested my forehead against the top of his head, mentally urging him to hug me. Silas held still for a long moment, but then he shifted his head and rested his chin on my shoulder, and I

removed my grip around his hands to wrap my arms around him instead.

He was heavier than me, but I rooted my feet to the ground and held him to me, letting him draw whatever support he needed from me. Silas was an antithesis of himself in many ways, big and strong on the outside but sweet and shy on the inside, and I felt this inexplicable urge to protect him and keep him safe.

Physically, I knew he didn't need my protection from anyone or anything, but emotionally? That was a whole other ballgame. Granted, I didn't have the best record when it came to emotional stability, but my problems had mostly stemmed from what I saw but couldn't believe, but now that I knew for certain what I saw was real, I felt much better. Silas on the other hand, he had trauma that I didn't know about but saw the effects of daily, and I wanted to help him heal in any way I could. I just hoped he'd allow me to and not push me away.

FIFTEEN

## Silas

Yesterday was wonderful. Well, at least until the headmaster caught us kissing. Then, it turned highly awkward, and I knew it was all my fault. I'd been so embarrassed by the headmaster's words, and it wasn't even because he'd been teasing me. I'd been embarrassed by the fact that I couldn't even bring myself to remove my mask in front of my mate, *to kiss him*. Touya had said he didn't care, but I did.

I'd wanted to pull away mid-kiss and pull my mask off, but my limbs had frozen solid at just the thought of it, of showing Touya the most inhuman, the ugliest part of my human form. Logically, I knew Touya probably had an idea of what I hid under my mask. He'd seen me in my other form, seen my tusks, but for some reason I had no problem with them in that form, but as a human? Forget it.

It probably had something to do with my grandparents and their insistence on calling my tusks a 'disfigurement,' but I didn't like thinking about them, or anyone in my human family.

I'd been so embarrassed after I'd all but thrown myself at Touya—and I had to give him credit because I wasn't a light person and he'd somehow held me up—and then I'd escaped to my room, leaving him standing in the hallway. I hadn't even gone to dinner, despite my stomach's angry growling. Keoni had shown up a little after dinner, knocking at my hut's door, but I'd ignored him too.

Now it was morning, and I had to decide if I was going to hide away here once more or go meet Touya for breakfast. I got up from my bed and washed up, changing into fresh clothes while my mind still debated between the two options. I didn't want to hurt Touya or make him think he'd done something wrong, but I also couldn't imagine meeting his eyes after the way I'd acted last evening.

A knock on my door had me freezing in my tracks, and I swallowed hard, staring down at my untied shoelaces as I debated over whether or not I should open the door. It was probably Keoni or Khush, wanting to drag me to breakfast since they both knew I hadn't had dinner last night—and how big my appetite was.

“Silas?” a voice that did not belong to either Keoni or Khush called, and my head jerked up. Touya? What was he doing here?

Before I could gather my thoughts, my feet were stumbling toward the door, and I had just enough time to get my mask in place before I ripped it open. Touya stood there with a raised fist, as if he'd been about to knock again, and a smile spread across his lips when our eyes met.

“Good morning, Silas. I thought I'd change things up a little today and come get you instead,” he said with an easy smile, as if nothing was amiss, and I swallowed hard. Were we just going to act like I hadn't completely embarrassed myself yesterday?

“Uh, give me a minute and we can go,” I said, and he nodded quickly. “You can come in,” I added when I realized he hadn’t moved, and he smiled as he stepped into my hut.

I panicked for a short moment, my eyes quickly scanning the room, but it wasn’t *too* messy, and I breathed a small sigh of relief. Settling on the couch, I reached down to do the laces on my shoes when Touya fell to his knees in front of me, his hand covering mine.

The sight of him on his knees in front of me sent my mind straight into the gutter, and my cheeks heated up. “Uh, what—what are you doing?” I asked, and hoped he didn’t hear the tremble in my voice.

Touya smiled up at me, his hands hovering over mine. “May I?” he asked, and I blinked when I realized he wanted to...tie my laces.

“I can do it,” I grumbled softly, my eyes flicking to the space between us. Had I acted like such a klutz yesterday that he thought I wasn’t even capable of doing something as simple as this?

Touya glanced up at me, a soft look in his chestnut eyes. “It’s not that I think you can’t, Silas. I just want to take care of you. Can I? Please?”

I swallowed hard. I didn’t think anyone had ever done this for me before. Well, maybe except my mom, but I didn’t have a distinct memory of her ever tying my shoelaces. My grandparents had expected me to take care of myself, and they’d definitely never touched me, much less my shoes.

Slowly, I nodded, and Touya smiled like I'd given him the best gift in the world. I pulled my hands back, and he quickly got to work, first tying the laces on my right shoe and then the left one.

"There," he said, pulling back his hands with a satisfied smile. "All done."

"Thank you," I murmured, and my cheeks heated up. My voice cracked halfway through the second word. God, someone kill me now.

"My pleasure, darling," he said as he stood up, and I stared at him. Did he just call me *darling*? His smile dimmed a little when he saw whatever look I was sporting, and he asked, "Do you not like it? I won't call you that if you don't."

"No, no!" I hurried to say, reaching out and grabbing his hand as if I was worried he'd leave. He gave my hand a squeeze, warm and comforting, and I swallowed hard. "I like it," I admitted in a small voice, so unlike mine and so embarrassing. God, would my cheeks ever go back to their normal color?

Touya smiled widely, and then bent forward to kiss my forehead. "I'm glad, because you are my darling, and I don't want you to ever forget that."

I nodded mutely as he pulled back, and he didn't say anything or point out how red my face was. Instead, he just asked, "Ready to head to breakfast?" and I answered with another nod, letting him lead me out of the hut. What the hell was he doing to me?

## Touya

I'd never put much stock in love. While my parents had been perfectly polite and civil with each other, they'd never been one for PDA of any kind. If they did love one another, I'd never seen evidence of it. Knowing that they wouldn't approve of my sexuality, I'd closed my heart off just as soon as I figured out I was gay.

After I'd started 'seeing things,' what little hope I'd had of finding someone had disappeared into smoke. Until Silas.

All the walls I'd built around my heart had come crashing down days after I met Silas. He was unlike anyone I'd ever met. He was made up of the best kind of contradictions, and I wanted to just wrap him up in my arms and shower him with love.

Since we'd started dating, I'd realized Silas was starving. Not for food, no. He had enough of that here. No, Silas was starving for love. For care and attention. For touch.

Silas loved holding my hand, though he was always hesitant about initiating it, as if he wasn't sure I'd welcome his touch. The few times we'd hugged, he'd clung to me like...like I was the first person who'd hugged him.

Even today, he'd stared at me with such awe in his eyes as I tied his shoelaces. I didn't know what had prompted me to do that, but I was glad I had. I'd gotten to see a side of Silas I



doubted anyone even knew existed, and I planned to treasure it.

“Looks like Keoni and Khush are already here,” I said as we stepped into the dining room and Keoni waved at us from our usual table. “Why don’t you join them and I’ll grab our food?” I suggested, and Silas glanced at me with furrowed brows before slowly dipping his head in a nod.

Grabbing two plates, I asked the server—a shifter I’d seen around the Sanctuary but couldn’t remember the name of—to fill one for Silas, and they nodded with a small smile. Apparently, Silas’s appetite was a well-known fact, because he filled the plate with the exact amount of food I’d seen Silas eat.

Thanking him, I carried our plates back to the table, placing Silas’s in front of him.

“There you go, darling.” Kissing his cheek, I settled into the chair beside him, and looked up to find both Keoni and Khush staring at me with their mouths hanging open.

I raised a brow at them, and they both snapped their mouths shut.

“Uh, hey, Touya. How are you doing?” Khush asked, seeming to gather himself, and I smiled.

“I’m good, thanks. What about you two?”

“We’re good,” they both said at the same time, and Silas chuckled as I tried not to smile.

Khush rolled his eyes and stuffed a whole boiled egg into his mouth, breaking my resolve to not laugh at them.

“How was your trip yesterday?” Keoni asked, and Silas answered him, sounding more relaxed than he’d been all morning. Well, until Keoni mentioned the kiss.

“Zephyr said you two kissed,” Keoni said, and Silas sputtered, spraying the water he’d been sipping onto his plate. I patted his back and shot Keoni a wide-eyed look, and he smiled apologetically.

“Sorry! Sorry! Should’ve waited before saying that,” he mumbled, and Silas groaned.

“Why is the headmaster such a gossip queen?” he demanded, and I couldn’t help but laugh.

“So he wasn’t lying, then,” Khush said, wagging his brows, and Silas shot him a glare.

“We’re not talking about this,” he grouched, and Khush rolled his eyes.

“Dude, if you think everyone doesn’t already know, you’ve underestimated Morrigan and Keoni,” Khush said, and Keoni shot him a pout.

“Hey, now. I didn’t tell anyone,” he argued, and Khush curled a brow at him.

“You told me,” he pointed out, and Keoni flushed, gave a loud huff, crossed his arms, and turned his face away.

“Can we please stop talking about this?” Silas begged, the tips of his ears a dark pink. My palm was still on his back, so I ran it up and down over his hoodie-covered back, and he slowly relaxed.

Keoni and Khush must’ve realized they were making Silas uncomfortable, because they quickly changed the subject after that, and the rest of breakfast went by comfortably.

Once we were done, I took everyone’s plates back to the counter, and then we headed out. Silas and I both had work to do, but he still walked me to my office like a gentleman.

“I’ll see you later?” I asked, reaching up and running the backs of my fingers down his cheek. He leaned into my touch like a cat looking for pets, and hummed softly.

“Lunch,” he said, the one word a promise, and I smiled as I leaned forward and pressed a soft kiss against his lips.

“Later tonight, maybe you and I can watch a movie together,” I suggested, and his brows furrowed.

“You want to go out?” he asked, and I shook my head.

“Oh no. Zephyr has a DVD player and a whole shelf full of DVDs. I figured we could borrow a movie and have a date night. If you want,” I said, and Silas nodded after a moment.

“That sounds nice,” he said, and I smiled.

“It’ll be great. Now go before Zephyr sees us again. Who would’ve known he was such a gossip?” I asked with a shake of my head, and Silas chuckled.

Then, he leaned forward and pressed a soft kiss to my cheek before taking off, and I watched him until he'd disappeared into the Forest, brushing my fingertips against my cheek. I could still feel the warmth of his lips, and I smiled to myself as I stepped into my office.

Tonight, we were going to watch a sweet rom-com, and, if Silas was up for it, make out on the small couch in my room. The image of a flushed Silas with his hair in a disarray and his so-far-unseen lips red and swollen had me working like a maniac through the day, and I managed to catch up with all the work I'd put off yesterday before it was time for lunch.

During lunch, our anticipation for tonight's date was an almost physical bubble that surrounded us, and even Khush and Keoni seemed to notice something was up, though they thankfully didn't mention it. After lunch, Silas once again walked me to my office, and I waved him goodbye with a soft peck on his lips. I couldn't wait for our date tonight.

SIXTEEN

## Silas

Why was I more nervous now than I'd been when we'd gone to the human world? Why did the thought of sitting beside Touya and watching a movie make my stomach flip out and my heart thunder all at the same time?

I was excited about the date, about being closer to Touya... and yet, I couldn't shake off the worry that I wouldn't be able to relax enough. What if I couldn't bring myself to let Touya in? He'd been patient for so long, and he deserved a partner who opened up to him, didn't he?

Hell, I hadn't even told him we were mates yet. Would he be mad I kept it from him? Or would he just accept it with his usual sunny smile?

My thoughts kept running on a loop even as I left the Forest and walked over to his office door, my hand automatically raising up to give it a short knock.

The door opened, and there he stood, beaming at me as he stepped aside to let me in. "You're just in time, darling. I've set everything up, and we have some great movie choices to decide from."

"That's great," I said as he closed the door behind me, and then he took my hand and led me through another door and into his living quarters.

I glanced around the space, biting back a frown at how... bare it was. There were no personal items, no knickknacks. As if Touya was just passing through and didn't plan to stay long enough to make this place home.

I sucked in a breath as the thought lodged itself in my throat. Was he planning to leave? We'd never really talked about it, and now all I could think about was waking up one day and finding out Touya had left because he didn't want to stay at the Sanctuary anymore, because he didn't want *me* anymore.

"Silas? Are you okay?" Touya asked, and I realized he was standing in front of me, his chestnut eyes full of worry.

I shouldn't ask him. We were here for a date, and I shouldn't dampen the mood. And yet, when I opened my mouth to assure him I was fine, what came out was, "Are you going to leave?"

Touya's brows scrunched up, wrinkles forming above his cute nose, and he asked, "Leave? Why would I leave?"

Swallowing hard, I gestured around the room. "It's just... everything is so...bare. Like you're not planning to stay long," I explained, and his face fell.

"Oh," he murmured as he scanned the room, as if seeing it for the first time. "I guess it might seem like that to you. Truth is, I don't really have that much stuff. Between the hospital trips and moving from city to city because of my...visions, I never really had much to call mine except my clothes and sketchbooks." He gave a forlorn shrug, and now I felt like a piece of shit for making him self-conscious about this.

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled, staring at the floor between us, and he was silent for a moment before he took my hand in his.

“No need to apologize, darling. I’d rather you tell me what was worrying you than let it fester in your mind, okay? It’s not healthy to keep things bottled up,” he said, and when I glanced at him, he had his usual bright smile on his face. How did someone who’d been through everything he’d been through stay so positive, so cheerful all the time? I wanted to be more like Touya.

“So, what are our options?” I asked, gesturing to the small stack of DVDs that sat on a tiny table in front of a small couch we’d have to squeeze ourselves into. The thought of being all pressed up against Touya had butterflies taking flight in my belly. Yikes. I was acting like a lovesick teenager. Sure, technically I was still a teenager, but I was nineteen, not thirteen. I needed to get a grip.

“Well, I thought something romantic would be nice, but also something funny, so we have romcoms!” Touya said with a “Ta-da!” as he picked up the DVDs and showed them to me.

“I...uh, I don’t know any of them,” I said with a shrug. “You pick.”

Touya blinked, but then smiled again. “Oooh, how about *When Harry Met Sally?*” he asked, and I nodded. I’d honestly never had the chance to watch movies before. My parents had been forest lovers—probably how my mom met my dad, considering trolls didn’t usually live in the cities—and they hadn’t owned many electronics, and my grandparents never let



me anywhere close to a TV. I'd watched a couple movies with Keoni, but I guess our tastes didn't match because all the explosions and chases in his favorite movies only ever managed to make my heart thunder with a low hum of panic.

Touya slid the DVD into the player, and I took a seat on the couch as he grabbed the remote and joined me. Like I'd guessed, it was a tight fit, but he didn't seem to mind. Touya pressed a few buttons on the remote and then the movie started playing. Sitting back, he leaned closer and rested his temple against mine before turning his head just a little so I could see his smile.

"I'm not going anywhere, Silas," he said softly, and I blinked mutely before realizing he was talking about our earlier conversation.

"I'm glad," I said after a moment, and he didn't mention the thickness of my voice. I cleared my throat as I turned my attention back to the movie even as the pressure on my chest increased.

Touya was so warm and wonderful, so sweet and caring, and just so good, and I was still keeping such a big secret from him. Why hadn't I told him already? What was I afraid of? He'd just promised me he wasn't going to leave, and surely he'd be even more inclined to stay if he knew?

I now knew without a doubt that Touya's feelings for me were real, so what was stopping me?

In a moment between dialogues, I turned to Touya with my heart in my throat. "Touya, there's something I need to tell

you.”

## Touya

The look on Silas's face was serious, and I grabbed the remote and paused the movie before giving him my full attention. "What is it?"

Silas swallowed hard, and his eyes flitted across the room before returning to me, his black eyes appearing darker than usual. "There's something I didn't tell you. I should've told you a while ago," he said with a shake of his head. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," I murmured softly, placing a hand on his knee. His leg had been bobbing restlessly as he spoke, but it calmed down once I was touching him.

"I, uh, well, you're—you're my mate," Silas confessed finally, and for a moment, all I could do was stare at him. Mate?

I knew what mates were, of course. Zephyr had told me all about them, how all sentient beings had mates, and how only supes had the ability to sense theirs. Silas and I were mates.

"How long have you known?" I asked softly, and he ducked his head.

"Since...since the day you first touched me in my other form," he said, the words tumbling out of his mouth. That... that had been a while ago.

As I tried to gather my thoughts, Silas curled in on himself, as much as he could manage on the small couch. His shoulders curved, and his eyes stayed lowered to his lap, his hands curling into fists. “I’m sorry,” he murmured in a small voice, and I couldn’t stop myself from rubbing his leg soothingly.

“Why didn’t you tell me before?” I asked, doing my best to keep my emotions out of my voice. I wasn’t angry at him for not telling me, but I was a little hurt.

Silas curled in on himself even more, if that was possible. “I...I was worried it would be too much for you. And...well, you could do so much better than me, and I didn’t want you to think you were s-stuck with me.”

I blinked at his words, stunned. Whatever I’d expected, it hadn’t been that. I’d thought he’d say something about needing to make sure I was really a good person—considering his earlier hangups with my humanity. I’d thought he’d kept it a secret because *I* was lacking, not him!

“Silas... that is...” I trailed off with a shake of my head. Slowly, I removed my hand from his leg, and he sucked in a sharp breath. Before he could panic, I placed my hand on his shoulder and squeezed. “Can you look at me?” I asked, but he didn’t move. “Please, darling?” I asked again, my voice infinitely softer this time, and his head snapped up, fear-filled dark eyes meeting mine.

“I’m sorry,” he said again, and I decided we were too far away. Getting off the couch, I stood in front of him before straddling him, my thighs pressing against his as I settled on

top of him. Silas's eyes widened, but then his hands were on my hips, his grip tight as if he was afraid to let me go lest I leave.

I took his face into my palms, his cheeks warm against my skin, and met his wide gaze. "Silas, you need to listen to me, okay?" I asked, and he swallowed hard.

"Okay," he murmured in a barely there voice, and I hummed.

"First of all, thank you for telling me," I said, leaning forward and pressing a soft kiss on his forehead. "I would gladly be stuck with you for the rest of my life, darling."

Silas blinked at me, his face a picture of disbelief. "Well, you'll live a lot longer than a human does," he said, and I smiled.

"I know. Zephyr told me. I'd get to live as long as you, right?" I asked, and he nodded.

"Then I'll be with you every day from now until then," I assured him, and he glanced away as if he couldn't bring himself to believe me. I knew just saying the words wouldn't be enough, but I planned on showing him I meant every word, and I didn't care how long it took, I would make him see he was worthy of all the good things in the world.

"I ruined our date, didn't I?" he asked after a moment, and I shook my head.

"Are you kidding? You just told me we were made for each other. That kind of news can't ruin anything," I said, and his eyes crinkled a little in a smile that I was desperate to see.

Returning his smile, I rubbed my thumb over his chin, tracing his jaw before sliding it up until it pressed against his lower lip. Silas breathed in slowly but didn't tell me to stop, and I slowly ran my thumb over his lip from one side to the other, stopping when it pressed against something hard. His tusk?

Silas went completely still under me, his eyes wide as they stared into mine. "Trust me," I murmured softly, and he blinked at me before giving the smallest hint of a nod.

Slowly, I ran my thumb over the tusk, examining it through touch alone. It was thick like a pen, but only an inch or so long, ending in a point that wasn't sharp enough to pierce my skin, but still pointed enough.

"Don't be afraid, darling," I said softly, my thumb still rubbing up and down his tusk before returning to his lower lip. Silas watched me for a long moment, and I could almost see the struggle going on in his head.

I almost told him that it was okay, that he didn't need to do anything he didn't want to. But then he took a deep breath and reached for his mask, his fingers shaking just a little as I pulled my hand back to give him space.

With trembling fingers, he gripped the edge of his mask and tugged it down.

# SEVENTEEN

## Silas

I couldn't breathe. My lungs forgot what they were supposed to do as I waited for Touya's reaction. I trusted him to not show his dislike outright, but I still couldn't bring myself to look into his eyes as I revealed myself to him. What was he thinking? Did he regret asking me to remove my mask?

A sound of surprise slipped past my lips when Touya returned his hands to my cheeks, and when I dared to meet his gaze, he was smiling with that warm twinkle in his eyes. "There you are."

I blinked at him, too stupefied to say anything as he smiled at me, his thumb once again rubbing my lower lip. "Can I kiss you?" he asked after a moment, and I made a sound that was somewhere between a whimper and a groan. Cheeks flushing with embarrassment, I nodded.

"That blush looks as pretty as I imagined it would," Touya said, and as my cheeks heated even more, he leaned forward and pressed his lips to mine.

Even though we'd kissed before, and even though my mask hadn't been an actual, physical barrier between us, this kiss felt different, more...real. Touya's lips were warm and a little wet, and they brushed against mine with the utmost care.

My tusks were small and slim enough that they didn't press against Touya's skin, and I was grateful for that. His reaction



to them had been unexpected, to say the least, but I couldn't bring myself to accept it. Maybe once he'd had a moment to think, he would realize I *wasn't* pretty to look at.

Touya pulled back and rested his forehead against mine, his breaths fanning across my lips as he caught his breath. Then, he leaned forward and kissed the edge of my mouth, his lips pressing against my skin and my tusk. My breath caught in my chest, and I jerked away in surprise.

He sat upright, a light flush coloring his cheeks as he pushed his hair back. "Sorry. I should've asked before kissing you."

I shook my head, trying to get my brain in working order again. Did he really not think my tusks were horrible?

His eyes were still on me, his gaze warm and patient, and my fingers itched to pull my mask back on, but I resisted. Barely.

Swallowing hard, I waved at my face. "They...they don't bother you?" I asked, my voice so soft he had to lean forward to hear it. Some troll I was.

Touya's eyes went wide at my question, and then hardened, something like anger filling them. Sitting forward, he cupped my face again and pressed his thumbs right up against my tusks.

"Listen to me, darling. You are beautiful. I don't know who made you think otherwise, but they were wrong. You're the most breathtaking person I've ever met, and there is nothing about you that's ugly. *Nothing*," he repeated, his eyes flashing

as he stared into mine, as if he could change what I thought if he simply gazed at me long enough.

I didn't know what to do with his words. I wished I could accept them, *believe* them, but it was hard. I'd spent years letting my family tell me how hideous and inhuman I was, and now here was this human whose life had been haunted by supes like me, and he was telling me I was beautiful. What was I supposed to do with that?

"Um, thanks. I guess," I mumbled, wishing I could look away, but he still had a grip on my face, so I was trapped in his gaze.

Touya smiled, a small, almost sad smile, and pulled his hand away. My eyes immediately slid to the flat screen where the movie was paused, and I exhaled in relief.

"Let's finish the movie, yeah?" Touya asked, and I nodded. He slid off my lap and settled beside me, though he stayed close and our sides pressed together. I reached for my mask, and while he didn't protest, I ended up just holding onto it without actually putting it on, like a weird sort of security blanket.

Touya wrapped an arm around my middle and rested his cheek on my shoulder with a soft sigh, and I carefully placed my palm over his arm. We watched the rest of the movie that way, and by the time it ended, I'd relaxed completely. For the first time in years I'd been without my mask in front of someone else and hadn't felt the need to pull it up again.

Touya sat up with a happy little sigh, shooting me a smile as he stretched his arms above his head. “So, what did you think?”

It took me a long, dragged-out moment to realize he was talking about the movie, and I smiled, hoping my cheeks hadn't gone red again. “It was great.”

“Oh,” Touya murmured softly, and I swallowed. What now? Had he finally realized he'd been wrong? That I was— “I can finally see your smile,” he said before my thoughts could spiral any more, and I blinked at the unexpected words.

“Uh?” I mumbled unintelligibly, and he smiled softly.

“I knew your smile would be beautiful from the way it always crinkles your eyes. I was right,” he said, voice full of satisfaction, and I shook my head because it was the only thing I could think to do. What was I going to do with this amazing, wonderful, crazy human who seemed to like me for some reason? Well, I guessed the fact that we were mates was reason enough, but still.

“I have a very important question to ask you, Silas,” Touya said, breaking into my thoughts, and my eyes shot to his. What could he possibly want to ask me? Maybe he had some questions about the mate thing? Maybe he wanted to know about my past? I didn't know which question I was more worried about being asked, so before I could panic, I nodded at him to continue.

“Can I kiss you again?”

## Touya

Silas's eyes had always been extremely expressive, and now I was realizing his whole face reflected his emotions like the clear lake reflected moonlight over in the River area. His mask hid more than just his tusks, and I was so glad I finally got to see the rest of his face.

As I watched, his eyes flicked to my lips, and then returned to mine. "Yeah," he answered, his voice rough as the fingers of his free hand curled into the couch cushions.

Smiling, I sat up on my knees and leaned forward, deciding not to straddle him this time. Instead, I cupped his cheek with one hand, and he let me turn his face and press my lips to his.

I didn't think my lips had ever touched anything as soft as his plush lips, and I could happily stay just like this for hours. Silas made a soft, breathy sound against my mouth as I trailed the tip of my tongue over his lower lips, and I smiled. The fingers of my other hand slid into his messy black hair, and I held onto him with both hands as I deepened the kiss.

Silas opened up for me, and I slid my tongue inside, his instantly tangling with mine. Our tongues danced together for a bit, the kiss turning just a little messy, and I loved it.

By the time I had to pull away because of my burning lungs, I'd decided that kissing Silas was *the* best thing in the world. I panted loudly as I rested my forehead against his, and he let

me lean on him as I caught my breath, his palm running up and down my back in gentle strokes.

“Wow,” I murmured when I could speak without gasping, and Silas chuckled softly. I leaned back so I could see him better, and as I’d suspected, his cheeks were flushed and the prettiest shade of pink, his dark eyes glittering with a mix of desire and happiness.

I didn’t know if taking things further tonight would be a good idea, and I felt like Silas was waiting for me to decide. While my dick was very much onboard with the idea of doing anything and everything with Silas, my mind told me to proceed cautiously. Silas was skittish in a lot of ways, and I didn’t know if this was one of them. He’d admitted that he was as inexperienced as me, but I didn’t know if that meant he wanted to take things slow—or rather slower—or if he was as eager to take the next step.

“Everything okay?” Silas asked, and I realized I’d been quiet for some time.

Sitting back on my heels, I shrugged. “I was just thinking,” I said, and Silas turned on the couch so he was facing me properly.

“About?” he asked with a raised brow.

“Would you like to take things slow? Or do you want to speed things up a little?” I asked, and he blinked, as if he hadn’t expected the questions. I guessed from his perspective they were a bit out of the blue.

“Um, what do you want?” he asked instead, and I shook my head.

“Oh no, we’re not doing that. You need to tell me what *you’re* okay with,” I said, because I had a feeling Silas would push forward whether he wanted to or not if he knew that was what I wanted.

“I, uh...” He slid his gaze to his lap, where his fingers curled and uncurled. I wanted to reach over and take his hands in mine, to squeeze them comfortingly, but I resisted. Instead, I waited patiently as he gathered his thoughts. “I’d like to do... more, but I’m not ready for...for everything,” he said, hesitation lacing each word.

I smiled, and this time I didn’t stop myself from reaching for his hand. It was almost comical how much smaller my hands were compared to his, especially since we were the same height, but a part of me also loved it. Silas might be bigger and stronger than me, but inside he was all soft squishy innocence that needed to be protected at all costs.

“That sounds good to me, darling. For tonight, how about one more kiss before we go to bed?” I asked, and then at his wide eyes, quickly added, “Separately.”

He nodded, and I pulled him into another kiss with a smile, knowing I was all but addicted to his lips, to the breathy little moans he gave every once in a while. I was addicted to more than that, though. I was hooked on his smile, on the way his eyes crinkled with joy, and especially on that pretty blush of

his, and I was going to spend my days making sure Silas had at least one of those on his face as much as possible.

Pulling away to catch my breath, I dropped kisses down his jaw, over his throat, sneaking my tongue out to taste his skin, before shifting back up to press my lips to the corner of his mouth, to his tusk.

“Thank you,” I murmured as I pulled back, and he gave me a puzzled look.

“What for?”

“For trusting me,” I said, running my thumb over his lower lip. “For being yourself with me.”

Silas’s eyelids fluttered as he glanced away from me before taking a deep breath and returning his gaze to me. “Then I guess I should thank you too. For not making me feel like an abomination.”

I blinked at the word, and I was tempted to demand who’d ever dared to call him that so I could hunt them down and punish them for hurting this sweet, sweet man, but I bit the angry words back. Instead, I stared right into his eyes and repeated my sentiment from earlier, determined to tell him as many times as it took to get him to believe me. “You’re not an abomination, darling. You’re beautiful, adorable, and the sweetest man I’ve ever had the pleasure of knowing. Whoever called you that clearly didn’t know you at all, but I do. I know you, Silas, and *I adore you.*”

Silas nodded slowly, and then swallowed hard. “I feel like I keep making you say nice things about me. I swear it’s not intentional.”

Rolling my eyes, I tapped him on the nose just because I could, and smiled. “Trust me, I know. And I have no problem telling you just how cute you are, darling. In fact, I think I’m going to tell you every day from now on,” I said with a determined nod, and his eyes widened.

“What? You don’t have to do that!” he exclaimed, and I waved him off.

“I know I don’t have to. Doesn’t mean I don’t want to,” I said, and he shook his head.

By the time he finally left, we’d shared a few more kisses, and it was past midnight. I walked him to the main office door, and then watched until he stepped into the Forest before returning to my room, my lips still tingling from our last kiss, and my chest warm and full of an emotion I wasn’t ready to name just yet.



EIGHTEEN

## Silas

The next time Touya and I hung out, this time in my room, Touya with his sketchbook and me with a book I'd been reading, I was on edge, expecting Touya to ask me to remove my mask at any moment. But he never did. He didn't expect that because I'd taken it off last time, I would do so again, and he had no idea how grateful I was to him.

My mask wasn't just about hiding my tusks, though that was its main function. It was also a shield, for want of a better word. Leaving my face bare always made me feel vulnerable, and while I trusted Touya, the facts that we were dating and that he was my mate, were overwhelming enough on their own, and adding the vulnerability that came with removing my mask to them...yeah, that was hard.

Before he went back to his room, Touya pulled me into a kiss, his hand at my hips and his tongue sliding against mine. I was tempted to ask him to stay, to keep kissing me, to maybe do more, but my nerves got the best of me, and I ended up walking him to the door to the hallway, our fingers linked together and a comfortable silence cloaking us.

We had a few more dates after that, and I even managed to remove my mask again a few times when I was feeling especially relaxed. I'd never thought I would get to have someone like Touya in my life, and I cherished every moment we spent together.

“What happened to these?” I asked, stopping him from flipping to the next page. We were in my hut, cuddled up together on my bed since there really wasn’t any other place for the both of us to sit together. I’d only just managed to stop obsessing over the fact that we were in the same bed—just like I did every time Touya came over—and now Touya was showing me sketches of the various supes he’d come across since he turned eighteen, and the stories about when he saw them.

“Oh, that’s nothing,” he said in a voice that clearly implied there was something.

“Touya,” I nudged, giving his hip a little squeeze. Sighing, he flipped to another page that had also once been torn from the middle and then meticulously put back together with scotch tape.

“It was just some assholes I met in the city before Zephyr found me,” he said dismissively, though the slight tremor in his voice told me it’d affected him more than he was letting on.

“Oh, I’m sorry they did that,” I murmured, unsure what else to say.

“It’s no big deal. It wasn’t the first time,” Touya said with a wave of his hand, and I wished that wasn’t true. I wished he’d never had to get used to something like that.

Putting his sketchbook on the floor, Touya turned around to face me, his palm warm and firm against my chest as he slid up on the bed so we were face-to-face. “I want to kiss you,” he

said in a low voice, and I wasn't sure if it was a distraction tactic or if he really just wanted to kiss me.

Either way, I was incapable of saying no to him, so I closed the distance between us and brushed my lips against his. My mask sat discarded on the nightstand, and when Touya placed his palm on my cheek, the heat and softness of it sank into my skin, lighting me up from the inside.

Our kiss started slow and sweet, but then Touya's teeth dug into my lower lip, and a moan slipped out of my mouth. He didn't waste a moment sliding his tongue into my mouth, and our tongues tangled as he slowly pushed me onto my back and climbed on top of me.

Pulling back for just a second, he gave me a firm look. "Tell me if you want to stop, if it's too much. Okay?"

"Okay," I replied softly, and then he was kissing me again, his tongue sliding back into my mouth like it belonged there. His hand stayed cupped against my cheek while the fingers of his other hand slid into my hair, tugging almost painfully as he tilted my head to deepen the kiss.

I was hard, and after days of kissing Touya and being kissed by him, of stopping myself just before things could go south—literally—I was done. I was ready to take the next step. Hell, I might even die if I didn't come today.

Experimentally, I pushed up into Touya, and he gasped into my mouth when our erections pressed together. His legs were between mine, and I pressed my thighs against his, keeping him trapped there as I rocked into him again.

“Oh, Silas,” he murmured against my lips before pulling back so he could look into my eyes.

“Do you—do you want me to stop?” I asked, and he shook his head, a smile quirking his lips.

“Not at all, darling. But I do want to see you,” he said, sitting back on his heels and reaching for the hem of my hoodie. “May I?”

I had a short moment of mind-numbing panic as all the reasons Touya might find me ugly or unlikeable filled my head, but then I pushed those thoughts to the back of my mind, strengthened by the look of pure adoration on Touya’s face. Surely, if he felt like that, he wouldn’t be put off by my body. We’d cuddled quite a few times over the last few days, and I was sure he already had a good idea of what I liked like under my clothes.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to,” Touya murmured. “Just know that you don’t have to be afraid of anything. I adore every part of you, Silas.”

I stared up at him, and I couldn’t find it in myself to doubt his sincerity. So, I took a deep breath and said, “Keep going, please.”

## Touya

Once we'd taken his hoodie off, for a moment, I just stared at Silas. I was aware that if I took too long, he'd start freaking out, but I had to take a moment to absorb just how...how magnificent he was. There wasn't a word—at least not in my vocabulary—that described just how beautiful Silas was.

He was big, which I'd known before, of course, but now I could see all that pale skin laid out on display for me, and he was better than anything I'd imagined every night I went to bed after spending hours with him making out like teenagers.

“Beautiful,” I murmured, and Silas's eyes widened before he glanced away from me, and for the first time, I got to watch the way his blush colored not only his cheeks, but also his chest. I wanted to bury my face in the plush skin, to let the faint hair on his chest tickle my cheeks.

There was just so much of him, so much to kiss, lick, bite, to hold. To love.

I blinked at my thoughts, not sure if I was ready to tackle the L-word yet. Shaking my head, I reached out and ran my palm down his chest, loving the way my fingers sank into his plush skin. I rubbed my thumb over his nipple, and he gasped softly, his eyes flitting back to mine.

“There you are,” I murmured when our eyes met. “You can tell me to stop at any time,” I reminded him, and he nodded

slowly. I didn't want to overwhelm him too much our first time, so after one more caress of his nipples, I pulled my hands away to remove my own shirt.

I almost preened as his eyes roamed over my exposed torso, and I stayed still as he reached out a hand to grip my waist before running his palm up my stomach to my chest, his big palms feeling wonderful against my hot skin.

“And you called *me* beautiful,” he murmured in something akin to disbelief, and I rolled my eyes.

“It's not an either or situation, darling,” I admonished him, and his eyes met mine. “We are both beautiful.”

“Eyes of the beholder, huh?” he said with a smirk, and I shook my head. I didn't want to argue with him—though it was my mission in life to show him just how beautiful he was—so I took his hand from my chest, pressed a kiss to his knuckle, and then placed his hand on the mattress before reaching for his pants with a raised brow. He nodded after a moment, and with some maneuvering, I got his pants and underwear off.

“Fuck, Silas,” I groaned as I took in his leaking cock, and he flushed red, his eyes almost fluttering shut.

“I know I'm not very big,” he mumbled in a low voice I had to strain to hear, and I bit back a growl. Sure, he was a little smaller than average in length, but fuck, he more than made up for it with his thickness. Not that he still wouldn't be the sexiest man alive if he wasn't as thick, but fucking hell, just imagining him inside me had me close to a climax.

“You are more than enough, darling,” I murmured as I wrapped my palm around him. A shiver washed over me when my hand failed to curl all the way around him, though only his head peeked out. I gave him an experimental rub, and he groaned loudly as he pushed up into my hand.

“So pretty,” I murmured softly, and he made a sound that was somewhere between a laugh and a sob.

“You don’t need to keep doing that,” he said in a whisper, and I raised a brow at him as I reached for my own pants. His eyes instantly flicked to my lower half, and I bit back a grin as I slowly started to pull my pants off.

“Keep doing what?” I asked, and felt a wave of satisfaction when Silas struggled to pull his attention back to me.

“Uh,” he said, blinking at me a few times before he seemed to remember what we’d been talking about. “Just...praising me. Saying nice things.”

“I like doing that,” I said, reaching out to squeeze his knee before returning to my pants. Why had I thought wearing skinny jeans would be a good idea?

Silas looked like he wanted to argue more, but I finally managed to get my pants—and underwear—off my hips, and his eyes darkened as my hard cock smacked up into my stomach, a drop of precum splashing onto Silas’s thigh. Faster than I thought he could move, Silas ran the tip of his index finger over the spot before sticking his finger into his mouth, and his cheeks flushed as my eyes followed his hand, as if he hadn’t meant to do it.



“Do I taste good?” I asked him as I threw my pants somewhere behind me, and he mumbled unintelligibly as his cheeks darkened even more. Chuckling softly, I shifted back a little before leaning forward and running my tongue over the head of his cock. I sat up instantly since I hadn’t meant to take things further than frotting tonight, especially since Silas looked like he was barely hanging on by a thread. Tasting the cum on my tongue, I hummed softly. “I know you do.”

“I, uh, yeah,” Silas said after a moment of struggling and I smiled as I covered his body with mine, my legs between his with our cocks pressed together.

“I want to make you come just like this,” I told him, and he gave a breathy laugh.

“I don’t think it’ll take much.”

Sure enough, it didn’t take long to turn Silas into a moaning, begging mess, but I wasn’t faring much better either. His arms were wrapped tightly around me, our chests pressed as close as physically possible as I moved my hips in jerky little motions, rubbing our pre-cum-slick lengths together.

A loud, smacking sound scared the shit out of me, and I jerked back as Silas’s arms loosened around me, my eyes wide.

Silas looked like he wanted to sink into the mattress, his whole face redder than I’d ever seen it. Before I could ask what the fuck was happening, a familiar voice called from somewhere above us, followed by another smacking sound.

“Some of us are trying to sleep, you jackasses!” Khush hissed, his voice loud enough to reach us, and Silas squeezed his eyes shut.

“Shit,” I murmured with a laugh, and he peeked at me from slitted eyes, his cheeks appearing in danger of bursting into flames.

“Sorry, Khush!” I called out after a moment, doing my best to keep the amusement out of my voice.

“I’m going to get Zeph to put a silencing charm on Silas’s hut tomorrow,” another familiar voice spoke, and this time even I blushed. Keoni was way too young to have been subjected to our...performance.

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry, Keoni!” I called out, and Silas groaned under me, arm thrown over his face as his hand scrambled on the mattress. I knew exactly what he was looking for, and I leaned forward to press a comforting kiss on his forehead. He didn’t need to hide, not from me.

“I didn’t hear anything! Khush wrapped his tail around my head,” Keoni called back, his voice dripping in annoyance, and I slumped in relief.

“We’ll be quiet, I promise,” I called back, dropping another kiss on Silas’s chin.

“You better,” Khush said, and with another smack of his tail on the side of the hut, I heard the sound of him slithering away.

“Well, that was eventful,” I said, and Silas gave a choked-off laugh under me. I glanced down between us, not too surprised to see we were still very much turned on. How could I not be when I was all pressed up against Silas and he was blushing so prettily? Still, just because he was hard...

“Do you want to stop?” I asked softly, running my fingers through his hair, and he finally met my eyes as he exhaled slowly.

“Not if you don’t want to,” he replied, sounding calmer than he looked.

And so I started rocking against him once more, and it wasn’t long before he was spilling between us, his head thrown back and teeth digging into his lower lip to keep from moaning out loud. I found I wanted to hear him, and I made a mental note to discuss that silencing charm with Zephyr tomorrow.

I wasn’t far behind him, and within minutes, we both lay panting as our hearts thundered almost in unison, Silas on his back with me on top of him. Once I’d caught my breath, I grabbed my shirt from the floor and wiped us down before meeting Silas’s sleepy gaze. “Do you want me to leave?” I asked, and his eyes cleared a little as he shook his head and reached a hand out.

“Stay, please,” he asked in a soft voice, and I smiled in relief.

“Of course. Can you turn on your side?” I asked, and he did so instantly. Smiling, I lay down behind him, wrapping my

arm around his middle and shifting up a little so his head was tucked under my chin. “There.”

“I get to be the little spoon?” he asked sleepily, and I smiled as I kissed the top of his head.

“Of course, darling. Now sleep,” I murmured, and he sighed happily as he rested his hand on my arm and pressed harder into my chest before slowly going lax.

“Sweet dreams,” I whispered before reaching over to turn off the lamp and then wrapping my arm around him once again. Before I knew it, I’d followed him into sleep.

NINETEEN

## Silas

Facing Khush and Keoni the next morning at breakfast was absolutely mortifying, and I kept brushing my fingers over my mask to reassure myself that it was there. They weren't *too* mean, and after a few teasing remarks, they changed the topic, much to my relief. Touya's grip on my knee under the table helped, and I soaked in the warmth as we ate, glad to have him with me.

My feelings for Touya had developed at an alarming rate, and I wasn't sure if that was because of our mate bond, or because Touya was just that lovable. I had a feeling it was a bit of both, but I had no idea if he felt anything close to the way I did. Humans couldn't feel the mate bond, let alone how strong it'd grown. I didn't want to pressure Touya, or make him say something he didn't mean because he didn't want to hurt me, so I planned on keeping things close to my chest until he said something.

After breakfast, Touya and I went our separate ways with plans to meet back up for lunch and then in the evening. Since we started dating, we'd spent practically every evening together, though last night was the first time Touya slept over. I hoped that happened again, because I'd loved waking up in Touya's arms. I'd also loved it when he'd left dressed in one of my hoodies that swallowed him whole—and surrounded him with my scent—because he'd used his shirt to clean us up last

night. He'd told me in no uncertain terms that he planned on keeping the hoodie, and I had no problem with that.

Even as I worked, my thoughts were full of Touya, and I hoped it was just a new-relationship thing, because I didn't think I would be a very productive worker if this kept on indefinitely.

"Aww, look at you all daydreamy," Khush snarked, and I rolled my eyes as he slithered down the tree, dropping the shears he'd been using to trim the trees. I turned to him, mostly because I'd learned early on in our friendship that if I didn't give Khush the attention he demanded, he would annoy me until he had it.

"Hey, Khush," I said, giving him a wave before going back to my work. I'd decided my hut needed some more furniture, so I'd gotten some of the wood from the shed to make a nightstand. I was nowhere near as skilled as Draven when it came to making things, but I was fairly decent.

"Sounded like you had a fun night," he said, and I almost slammed the hammer onto my own thumb and finger instead of the nail I was holding between them.

"Can we please not talk about that?" I begged as I gave him my full attention, if only to avoid hurting myself.

Khush chuckled, but then he sobered and placed his arm on my shoulder. "Just tell me if you're happy, and I'll back off."

"With Touya?" I asked, and he nodded. An unbidden smile spread across my lips, and even with my mask in place, I knew

Khush could see it in my eyes because his own lit up. “I’ve never been happier,” I confessed, and my fingers pressed tightly against the wood somewhat superstitiously.

Khush smiled widely, showing off his wicked snake fangs for a moment, and pulled me into a hug. “I’m glad, kiddo.”

I hugged him back, and then he pulled away, scratching the back of his head as if he was embarrassed at his actions. Smiling softly, I gestured at the trees. “If you’re done with them, I could use some help.”

Khush’s face brightened, and he clapped his hand, his tail shifting around as he examined the area. “What do you need?”

And so we both got to work, and the afternoon passed quickly. While Khush would never admit it, he was just as big of a gossip as Keoni. He was just better at hiding it, and while we worked, he told me all the latest details about our fellow Sanctuary-dwellers that I’d missed while stuck in my ‘mate-bubble’ as Khush called it.

Before I knew it, the sun had set, and the solar lamps hung from the trees were the only source of light. We cleaned up since it would be time for dinner soon, and then I took off to my hut for a quick shower, ever grateful to Zephyr and Draven for making modern plumbing possible.

Once I was cleaned up and dressed in fresh clothes, Khush and I headed down the path. Keoni joined us halfway to the door, and then they left me in front of Touya’s office, telling me they’d be at our usual table.



I'd barely knocked when the door flew open and Touya smiled at me, a wide, happy smile that instantly knocked the breath out of me.

"Hey, darling," he murmured as he stepped outside, and I made some kind of nonsense sound, making his smile widen.

Leaning forward, he pressed his lips to mine in a chaste kiss, but just as he started to pull away, I wrapped my arms around him and tugged him back in, holding him to me as I deepened the kiss. Touya hummed against my mouth, his fingers sliding into my hair as he pressed closer, and I never wanted to let go. If I could just do this for the rest of our lives, I'd die a happy troll.

"Oh, look! It's the loverboys," someone said, and I pulled back, gasping softly as I tried to catch my breath. Jacinta stood across from us, a smirk on his face, his tentacles as poised under him as ever. While they weren't made to walk on ground, Jacinta didn't let that stop him.

"Hello, Jacinta," I said as I put some distance between Touya and me, though I left my hands on his hips.

"You two really do look cute together. You did cost me a week of chores, though," he said, and I raised a brow at him to elaborate.

Rolling his eyes, Jacinta flicked his finger between us. "We had a bet going about how long it would take this one to get you into bed," he explained, and I turned beet red. I wasn't sure if I was more mortified or angry. What the hell?

“The K2s didn’t participate,” he assured me as if he could read my thoughts. Sometimes, I truly wondered if he could. K2 was the nickname Keoni and Khush had earned since they were practically always together outside the Forest. At one point, I’d wondered if Khush had a little crush on the centaur, but now I knew he just felt a brotherly protectiveness toward him, something I could understand. Keoni made most people feel that way. “They did tell us when it happened, though,” he added, and I growled.

Touya squeezed my hand where it still rested on my hips, and I glanced at him. He gave me a soft smile, and then leaned forward to kiss my chin. “It’s okay, darling. I don’t think they meant anything bad with the bet. They were just having some fun. Right?” he asked Jacinta, his voice firm and brooking no argument.

Jacinta nodded quickly, and gave me an actual smile for probably the first time ever. “We are all happy for you, Silas. It was all in good fun, I promise.”

I nodded, and he grinned at me before slowly walking away, his tentacles making soft plop-plop-plop noises with every step.

## Touya

By the time we stepped into the dining room, Silas seemed to have recovered from his embarrassment over the bet. I was a little flustered about it too, at the thought that our sex life was something people had been betting on, but I'd managed to keep my reaction hidden a lot better. Honestly, one of the things I adored about Silas was his inability to hide how he felt. I didn't know if it was a troll-thing or a Silas-thing, but I loved it either way.

Dinner itself was a quiet affair, but afterward we did a weird dance in the hallway as we tried to figure out—in our own minds, without talking to each other, because we were smart like that—if we would be going into our separate rooms, or hanging out together, and if so in which room.

In the end, I shook my head and said, “How about you join me for a movie and then we can decide what we want to do?” I suggested, and he got a relieved look on his face as he nodded.

So that was what we did. I ended up putting on the first movie in a long fantasy series, and Silas spent the whole movie pointing out things that were wrong, or impossible, or “That's not how a dwarf's power works!” I loved every minute of it. I loved the animation in his eyes. I loved the offense he took at the wrong depiction of some of his friends' species. I loved him. I still wasn't ready to say the words out loud, but I could admit it to myself now: I was in love with Silas.

I ran my fingers through his hair as I ran my palm up and down his side. We were both on my couch, with Silas's head resting on my chest and his arms wrapped around my waist. The position surely couldn't be comfortable for him, but he hadn't complained. In fact, he was completely relaxed against me, his body a plush, comfortable weight against my side. I realized I could fall asleep like this, and during the last fifteen minutes of the movie, I almost did.

When the movie ended, I let out a loud yawn and turned to Silas, intending to tell him that we should head to bed, probably separately since I felt too tired to actually do something. Instead, I found him asleep, his lips parted just a little, his face completely lax in slumber. He'd removed his mask earlier, and I couldn't resist the temptation to reach out and run my fingers over his chubby cheeks. He didn't so much as stir as my fingers trailed over his face, and I debated over what to do next.

As much as I would've loved to, I couldn't carry him to bed. I also didn't want to leave him on the tiny couch because he'd surely wake up with an aching body if he slept there.

Sighing, I slowly removed his arm from around my waist, placing it on his own body before slowly standing up. Then, sitting on the edge of the couch, I ran my fingers through his hair and tried to wake him up.

"Silas? Love, you need to wake up," I murmured softly, glad he was asleep when I realized what I'd called him. Sheesh. I

needed to be more careful. The last thing I wanted to do was freak him out.

“Darling?” I murmured, giving his shoulder a slow shake.

“Mmph,” Silas mumbled, squinting up at me as he smacked his lips. Smiling, I tugged at his shoulder.

“Come on, gotta get you into bed,” I said, and he followed me willingly, half-asleep the whole time as he let me lead him to my bed. Settling him on the edge of the bed, I pulled his hoodie off, leaving him in a plain white undershirt, then pushed him back into bed and pulled his jeans off.

Silas was almost asleep by the time I got him situated, and I covered him with the blankets. Standing up, I couldn’t help but smile at the sight of him all cozy in my bed. I was tempted to grab my sketchbook and draw him, but I didn’t feel right doing it without his permission, especially when he trusted me enough to remove his mask.

Instead, I changed into my own sleep clothes, turned off the lights, and slid in beside him. As if he could sense me, he rolled over immediately, wrapping an arm and a leg around me and pinning me to the bed. If it was anybody else, I would’ve felt trapped, but with Silas, all I felt was...safe. Protected. Like he would stand between me and any danger.

Smiling, I placed my palm on his back, the heat of his skin pleasant even through the barrier of his undershirt.

For so long, I’d roamed from city to city, running away from the ‘monsters,’ searching for some place I could feel safe, feel

like I wasn't going crazy. If someone had told me ten years ago that I'd find that place in the middle of very similar 'monsters,' much less in the arms of one, I would've laughed them off. Or had a panic attack.

It was a strange twist of Fate, me ending up here, but then Silas had said that it was Fate who had decided we were a perfect match, so maybe she was the one who'd brought me here, who'd made my path cross with Zephyr's so he could bring me here. Home.

I'd never imagined finding someone like Silas, someone who was so sweet and gentle when he absolutely didn't need to be, when his past experiences could've erased those qualities from him if he'd let them. Silas was strong, braver than anyone I'd known, and the sweetest, loveliest man in the world. He also gave the best cuddles, and I was looking forward to a lifetime of them.

TWENTY

## Silas

“So, uh, the Headmaster put a silencing charm on the hut yesterday,” I said once we were inside, my cheeks heating up at the implication. Two nights ago, I’d fallen asleep in Touya’s room after our movie, and he’d put me to bed. Waking up wrapped around Touya would never get old, and while I wanted to do the same again, I wanted something else before.

“Is that so?” Touya asked with a little smile, and I nodded, swallowing hard. Even though I wanted to do everything with Touya, I found it hard to...to initiate anything. A part of me was always worried he wouldn’t be up for it, and I didn’t know if I could handle a rejection, which was why I didn’t ask. I would be happy to do whatever he wanted. All I truly wanted was to be with him.

“Would you like to test it?” Touya asked, placing his palm on my chest. I was sure he could feel the mad gallop of my heart, but he didn’t comment on it as he watched me expectantly.

I nodded, and he smiled widely before stepping closer. He slid his palm to my hip and pressed closer until there was no space left between us. His lips against mine felt like pure bliss, and I sank into the kiss, reaching out to hold him to me as he deepened the kiss. His mouth tasted faintly of chocolate from dessert, and I licked into it, humming at the sweet taste.



We stood there and kissed for lord knows how long, but soon enough my lungs were burning, and we had to pull apart. As we caught our breaths, Touya took my hand and tugged me to the bed.

Dropping my hand, he started undressing, and instead of following suit, I stood and watched him, my cock hardening more and more as he dropped each piece of clothing.

“Let me see you, darling,” he murmured when he was in his underwear, and I quickly shrugged out of my clothes until I was completely bare, my fingers itching to touch him. I still felt like I was nothing compared to him, but the way his eyes heated up assured me he didn’t feel the same. He licked his lips as his eyes roamed over my body, and my cheeks heated up at the desire in his gaze.

His eyes lingered on my face, and I realized I’d forgotten to remove my mask. I pulled it off too, and he smiled softly as I dropped it to the ground with the rest of my clothes. Walking closer, he placed his hands on my hips and pushed me backward, the backs of my legs hitting the bed and buckling, sending us both tumbling onto the bed with Touya on top of me.

He laughed breathlessly as he straddled me, his legs stretched wide to accommodate my size, His cock was hard, leaking, and right there, and I couldn’t resist reaching out and running my finger over the tip. I stuck my finger into my mouth, humming at the taste, and Touya moaned softly.

“Fuck, darling. Is that what you want? You want to taste me?” he asked, and I nodded quickly. I’d never given a blowjob before, but the idea of having him inside my mouth had my cock hardening even more. I would’ve enjoyed having him inside me elsewhere too—I think—but right then, I wanted nothing more to taste him, to lick and suck until he was spilling in my mouth.

“All right,” he said, then leaned down and gave me a quick and dirty kiss. Sitting up, he shifted off my body and patted my hip. “Turn on your side,” he said, and I followed his order, albeit with some confusion. Once I was on my side, he made me shift a little lower on the bed before humming in satisfaction. Then, he flipped around, and it was only when his cock was in front of my face that I realized what he was up to.

We were going to sixty-nine.

“This okay?” Touya asked, leaning up to look at me, and I nodded slowly. *At least this way he wouldn’t be able to compliment me every thirty seconds*, I thought to myself, and then wondered why I didn’t feel happier about it. It had been embarrassing, hadn’t it? Hearing him say nice things about all my features that had only ever received insults and criticism?

Smirking, Touya settled back down, and all thoughts faded from my mind at the first brush of his tongue against my overheated skin. Biting back a moan, I turned my attention to the hard, leaking dick in front of me.

Touya was a little longer than average—and much longer than me—and slim, like the rest of him. I wrapped my palm

around him, rubbing him from head to base before leaning forward and running my tongue over his head.

He moaned around the head of my cock, and the vibration made me gasp. I licked him again before shifting my hand backward and taking some of his length into my mouth, my lips wrapped tightly around him.

I wasn't sure if I'd be able to take him all the way in, but I wanted to make him feel good, so I kept licking and sucking as I took him deeper centimeter by centimeter.

Then, suddenly, my cock was enveloped in heat and I almost blacked out at the sudden rush of pleasure. Pulling away, I had to look down, and the sight of Touya's lips spread wide around me almost made me spill into his mouth. Holy shit. I didn't think I'd ever seen anything as sexy as this.

Turning my attention back to Touya's cock, I doubled my efforts, determined to make him lose his mind the way he was making me lose mine. I took him as deep as I could, teasing his slit with the tip of my tongue as I continued jacking him off. I could feel my orgasm rushing close, but I wanted to make him come, wanted to know I'd satisfied him before I let myself come.

## Touya

My body felt like it would burst into flames at any moment, and Silas's mouth around me would be where the fire started. I couldn't believe this was his first time giving a blowjob, because he was doing amazing.

I felt like a bit of a slobbery mess, but it was a given considering how widely my lips were spread to accommodate his thickness, not that I minded. He felt heavenly in my mouth, and just the thought of what he would feel like in my ass had me close to climaxing.

I ran my palm over his ass, squeezing and massaging the flesh as I bobbed my head over his length. He felt so good everywhere, and the only downside of this position was that I couldn't run my hands all over him like I wanted to.

My orgasm raced closer as Silas stuck the tip of his tongue into my slit, driving me crazy as his hand continued jerking me off, and before I knew it, I was coming.

I had to pull away from his length for fear of hurting him as I came, loud moans slipping past my lips as I spilled into Silas's mouth. I'd assumed he would pull away once I came, but he drank me down instead, his throat working as he swallowed every drop I had.

As soon as I'd caught my breath, I jumped back in, determined to make him feel the same bliss. It didn't take

long, and I realized he'd been forcing himself not to come as he spilled down my throat only a few seconds later, his cum warm and salty as it slid down my throat. The thought that he'd wanted to please me before coming himself made me heat up all over, and I licked his cock, wiping off every drop of cum.

Then, I crawled up the bed until we were face to face, smiling at the half-lidded gaze Silas watched me with, his chest rising up and down as he panted softly.

“Hey, beautiful,” I murmured, and the blush was instantaneous. I'd realized my dear mate may have a praise kink, and I was only too happy to indulge in it. In my opinion, he deserved all the praise in the world, and no one was more worthy of it than him.

“Hi,” he replied almost shyly, and I smiled before leaning down and pressing a kiss right over his heart. It was still beating a little faster than usual, and as I gazed down at him, taking in his flushed cheeks, his twitchy fingers, his soft, beautiful body...I realized I didn't want to wait. Silas deserved to know how I felt about him, deserved to know how much he was loved.

Leaning down again, I pressed my lips to his, just a soft brush against his warm, slightly sticky lips, before pulling back and gazing into his dark eyes. “I love you,” I said, my voice hushed as if it was some big secret I was imparting, which in a way, it was.

Silas's eyes widened, and he blinked up at me, his lips parting slightly. His fingers trembled as he reached for me, and then his palm was on my cheek. I pressed into his touch, realizing with a start that it was usually the other way around. Silas rarely initiated, though he was always ready to jump in when I suggested something, but now he was. He was taking the first step.

"Do you mean it?" he asked, his voice trembling just a little, and I nodded.

"I do, darling. I love you, no conditions, no qualifications, nothing. I love everything about you and all that you are," I murmured, and his lower lip wobbled before he slid his hand to my neck and tugged me close, wrapping me in a tight hug.

I hugged him back as best I could with me practically on top of him, wrapping my arms over his shoulder blades, my fingers digging into the tops of his shoulders as he buried his face in the crook of my neck.

"I love you too," he mumbled against my skin, and I felt like he'd branded the words into my skin. I held him tighter, murmuring softly about how much I loved him and how wonderful he was.

Lord knew how long we held each other, but after a while Silas's hold slowly relaxed around me, and I pulled back so I could look into his eyes. "Hey, there," I said, and his lips quirked up as he met my eyes.

"Hi," he replied a little bashfully, and I hoped he'd never change. I wanted him to be comfortable with me, but I would

also never get tired of seeing his cheeks go pink.

“What do you say we get a little hydration, clean up, and then sleep? I don’t know about you, but I’m worn out,” I said, and his flush darkened.

“Yes, please,” he answered, and I grinned as I slowly slid out of his arms and headed to the bathroom, grabbing my discarded t-shirt as I went. Wetting my t-shirt—no, I didn’t use it just so I’d have an excuse to steal another of Silas’s hoodies, how dare you—I wiped Silas’s face and my own, dipping down to my neck because I was pretty sure I’d drooled some, before grabbing a few bottles of water from his tiny fridge.

Once we’d quenched our thirsts, we slid into bed, and I wrapped Silas up in my arms, turning him into the little spoon once again.

“Hey, Silas?” I mumbled, already half-asleep.

“Mm?” he asked, not sounding much more awake.

“Can we spend tomorrow together? And maybe you could be in your other form?” I asked, and he froze under my arms. “Only if you want to,” I added, and it took him a moment before he nodded.

“I’d like that,” he said in a soft voice, and I smiled before pressing a kiss to his unruly hair.

“Perfect. Now sleep, darling. Dream happy dreams,” I said, and he smiled as I reached over and turned off the lights.

“You too.”

With him in my arms? There was no way I wouldn't.



TWENTY-ONE

## Silas

Touya loved me. He *loved* me. My mate freaking loved me.

I didn't think the idea had sunk in yet. It'd been hours since we exchanged the three big words, and Touya had said them to me a few more times since, as if he knew I'd been worried he'd said it in the heat of the moment. I couldn't think that now, but I still found it hard to believe. Touya loved me, and I wished I could accept it more easily.

I'd felt unlovable for so long that it was hard to change the way I thought about myself, but each kiss, each sweet word, each compliment from Touya helped a little bit.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Touya asked, and I blinked, flushing when I realized I'd completely tuned out of whatever he'd been saying. *Way to show how much you love him, jerk.*

"Sorry!" Touya waved me off, his chestnut eyes staring right into my soul, or so it felt like.

"You can talk to me, you know," he said, his voice going soft. He placed his hand over mine, and I turned my hand palm up so I could hold it. I loved touching him, even innocent touches like this. And with me in my troll form, his hand was so much smaller, something precious for me to treasure.

"I was thinking about my family," I admitted, realizing maybe I did want to tell Touya about them. I hadn't talked to anyone about them, not even Khush and Keoni. Only

Headmaster Morrigan knew, and that was because I'd had to tell him why I couldn't go back when he found me.

"Oh?" Touya prompted, his thumb rubbing the edge of my hand in a slow, comforting gesture.

Family was the one topic we'd avoided talking about since we started dating, as if both of us instinctively knew it was a sore topic for the other. But now, seated together on a blanket under the open skies—so Khush couldn't sneak up on us, obviously—I felt like it was time, at least for me.

"My parents were fated mates too," I said, a smile tilting my lips up when I thought of them. My memories of them faded as time passed, but I'd never forget the warmth and love that'd filled our home. Before I came to the Sanctuary, that house with my parents was the only place that'd ever felt like home to me.

"Oh, that's wonderful," Touya said softly, and I nodded.

"They were like us. Well, my dad was a full troll, but my mom was human. They got married without the approval of my mom's family. My dad's family knew better than to come between mates, but they weren't exactly happy about it either," I said, then realized I was starting to go off on a tangent. "Anyway, after my parents died," I didn't want to think about their deaths, and I hoped Touya wouldn't ask me about it, "my dad's side refused to take me in, and my mom's side only did it because their 'values' wouldn't allow them to abandon me."

Touya's eyes narrowed, and he shuffled a little closer to me. "Did they hurt you, darling?" he asked, his voice low.

I shrugged. “Not really. They didn’t care too much about me. They fed me, kept me clothed, and to pass me off in the human world, they said I was born disfigured,” I said, waving at my face in explanation. In this form, my tusks were more than visible. Touya’s gaze hardened, and he reached for me with his other hand, placing it on my chest.

“You are not disfigured, Silas. Shame on them for saying that,” he almost growled, and I felt something loosen in my chest. I knew Touya didn’t think I was, that he liked the way I looked, but hearing that my grandparents had been wrong to say so soothed something in me.

“I lived with my grandparents until I was thirteen, and then I ran away. I quickly learned that keeping my face covered up would keep me safe and help me stay hidden, so that was what I did, until the headmaster found me.”

“If I ever meet your family, I’m going to give them a piece of my mind,” Touya said, and happiness bubbled in my chest at the anger on his face. The fact that he was so angry on my behalf...I didn’t know why, but I loved it. Maybe it was a troll thing.

“They weren’t that bad,” I found myself saying. “And I’m here now. They don’t matter.”

Touya smiled softly, though the look on his face said he didn’t quite believe me. Still, he stood up, which made him just a little taller than me. Stepping closer, he cupped my face in his hands. “I love everything about you, Silas. Everything,”

he said in a hushed whisper before leaning forward and pressing his lips to mine.

I gasped in surprise, not having expected that, but then I caught myself and started kissing him back. I reached up, and one of my hands was big enough to cup his waist. Tugging him closer, I held him to me as he deepened the kiss, his tongue running over my lower lip until I opened for him.

Kissing Touya always felt wonderful, but all my senses were heightened in this form, including touch and taste. I could feel every brush of his skin against mine, soft against rough, and taste every inch of his mouth, every inch of him. I was half-tempted to ask him to get naked so I could taste him all over, but the thought of Keoni walking in on something like that stopped me cold.

Touya pulled away with a gasp, resting his forehead against mine as he caught his breath. “Is it weird that I find you attractive in this form too?” he asked, and I swallowed hard.

“Do you think it’s weird? I can shift back if—”

“No!” He cut me off, leaning back so he could meet my eyes. “No, I don’t want you to shift back, and I don’t think it’s weird.” He leaned forward and pressed a soft kiss to one of my tusks before pulling back.

“Like I said, I love everything about you, and every inch of you is sexy as fuck, in both forms,” he said, no doubt in his voice anymore, and my cheeks heated up.

“Oh fuck, your blush looks even prettier in this form,” Touya said, and I blushed even harder. Fucking hell.

## Touya

After we'd settled back on the blanket, I told Silas a little about my own family drama. It was nowhere near as complicated—or hurtful—as his, but he was still a sweetheart about it, and I loved him for it.

Silas's stomach growled, interrupting whatever he'd been about to say, and he flushed pink as I chuckled softly.

“Lunch time?” I asked, and he huffed softly before nodding. I dragged the picnic basket close, pulling out the various sandwiches, cans of cider, and the Tupperware with the dessert. Alcohol wasn't a big thing here since most supes would need gallons of the stuff to actually get drunk, and I'd gotten used to it. Zephyr had a cabinet full of the good stuff he hoarded, but he'd shared it with me a few times.

I unwrapped a sandwich and offered it to Silas, and he finished it before I'd unwrapped a second one. Chuckling, I handed it to him as well.

“You should eat it,” he tried to protest, but I shook him off.

“There's more. Don't worry. Now, eat,” I said, holding the sandwich out. Grumbling, he took it, and bit into it, taking minuscule bites as he waited for me to unwrap the next one. Rolling my eyes, I did so and then took a bite of mine, widening my eyes at him in a ‘See?’ motion. Only then did he

gobble up the rest of his sandwich. I was used to his large appetite, though, and I'd packed accordingly.

Silas burped as he ate the last bite of his dessert, and I smiled as I sipped my cider. "Full?" I asked, and he nodded, and then patted his belly, flushing slightly.

"I should probably eat less, I know," he mumbled, and I blinked at him.

"No, you shouldn't," I said, and he glanced at me askew.

"But I'm..." He trailed off, waving his hand at his stomach as if in explanation.

"Perfect?" I offered, since he couldn't seem to find the correct word. "Cuddly? A sweet teddy bear who doesn't need to change a thing about himself?"

Silas grumbled, but I knew the flush on his cheeks this time was from pleasure. Putting my can on the ground, I shifted closer to him, then crawled over his crossed legs because I couldn't get close enough. Wrapping my arms—or at least, trying to—around his torso, I pressed my lips to the center of his chest. I ran my palms over his soft middle, digging my fingers into the padding and humming. "My sweet, perfect, lovable teddy bear. Teddy-troll?" I mused, and he made a scoffing sound.

Leaning back, I met his eyes, and spoke with all the sincerity I could muster up. "I mean it, Silas. You're perfect just the way you are."

"Nobody's perfect," he replied, and I relented.



“Sure, that’s true. I guess I should say you’re perfect for me. If you want to change for you, because you think it’ll make you happier, then I’m all for it, and I’ll support you in any way I can. But if you think you need to change for anyone else, or for me, you’re wrong.”

Silas stared at me for a long moment before nodding slowly. “I don’t—I don’t mind being like this. This,” he waved at himself, “is who I am.”

Smiling, I placed another kiss on his chest. “Then you have your answer.”

“I love you,” Silas said, and I smiled widely. Placing a hand on my back to keep me from tumbling, Silas leaned forward. A moment later, he handed me my half-finished cider, and I took it with a grin, realizing he wanted me to stay in his lap.

We chatted for hours about everything and nothing in particular, and I sat in Silas’s lap the whole time, his hand on my back a warm and firm support. By the time we decided we should probably pack up, the sun had started setting. Silas shifted back to help me pack up, and I found I missed his other form. Telling myself I’d see it soon enough, I followed Silas to his hut, where we fell onto the couch in an intense makeout session that ended only when Khush knocked at the door to call us for dinner.

As we ate, I stayed mostly silent and watched Silas chat and laugh with Khush and Keoni. Just being in this moment filled me with contentment, and I couldn’t wait to do this every day, to sit beside the man I loved and the friends I’d made, to have

meals with them and talk about all things big and small. To finally, finally have a family that accepted me and all my quirks.

After dinner, I took a moment to sneak away and thank Jacinta for helping me with the picnic food. I'd realized after a few conversations that she was sweeter than she acted, and I wanted to get to know her better. Maybe now that I was more settled into life at the Sanctuary, I could actively try to befriend some of the other residents.

Silas and I ended up in his hut with no discussion about it, and once we were in bed, the rest of the world disappeared as the sweet, sexy as fuck half-troll became the sole focus of my universe. As I slowly, carefully undressed him, I thanked my lucky stars—and Fate and whoever was involved—for bringing us together. Life with Silas was surely going to be an adventure, and I couldn't wait to see what came next.

TWENTY-TWO

## Silas

I stared at Touya, sure I'd heard him wrong.

“A carnival?” I repeated, and Touya nodded quickly, showing me the pamphlet again.

“Yes! It's only in town for two more days. I thought we could check it out,” he said, as if he hadn't already said it once.

“Uh...” I mumbled, nervously tugging at my mask. Carnivals meant people, lots and lots of them. I could handle a few humans at a time, but being surrounded by hoards of them, constantly worried they'd see me, didn't sound like a fun date night to me.

Touya, seeing my hesitation, slumped, but then shook it off. “It's okay,” he said with an understanding smile, crumpling up the pamphlet and sending it soaring through the air right into the trash on the other side of the room. “We don't have to,” he murmured, leaning closer and pressing his lips to mine in a chaste kiss. I swallowed hard, knowing I'd disappointed him, and then watched him leave the room.

My eyes flitted back to the trash can, and I grumbled to myself as I walked over and picked up the stupid ball of paper. Stupid carnival and my stupid fears disappointing my mate. No way was I going to let this stupid thing stop me from

making Touya happy. Ugh, I needed to stop saying—thinking? —stupid.

I smoothed out the leaflet and read through the details before dumping it again. There were a few hours before we'd need to leave, so I needed to get started stat. First, I needed to find one of the supes who had a garden. I needed some flowers, nice ones that didn't just look pretty but smelled good too.

Two hours later, I was dressed for the outside world and had a bouquet of lilies in my hand. Taking a deep breath, I knocked on Touya's office door.

"Come in!" he called out a moment later, and I stepped into the room. He looked up, and his face lit up when he spotted me, his eyes brightening when he saw the flowers in my hand. He walked around the desk as I closed the distance between us, and I held the bouquet out to him.

He took it with a wide smile, then pressed his nose to the flowers. "These are beautiful, Silas. Thank you," he said, and I shrugged.

His eyes roamed over me, and he quirked a brow. "Are we going somewhere?" he asked, and I stuck my hands into my hoodie pockets.

"There's this carnival in town..." I started, and Touya's eyes widened.

"Really? We can go?" he asked, excitement filling his voice, and I nodded, glad I'd decided to do this. I would do anything to make Touya smile like that.

Touya gave a shriek and threw his arms around me, and I returned the hug before he hopped back. “Oh, I need to get ready! Give me ten minutes!”

He disappeared into his quarters before I could say anything and I shook my head with a chuckle.

“Going out?” I jumped, whirling around to see Headmaster Morrigan, who’d stuck his head out of his cabin and was watching me expectantly.

I nodded quickly. “We’re heading to the carnival,” I said, and he smiled.

“Sounds exciting. Have fun! Do you need money?” he asked, and I blinked. I hadn’t even thought about that. I couldn’t exactly steal someone’s wallet with Touya there. I was seriously out of practice with acting as a human.

“Here,” Headmaster Morrigan said, throwing something at me, and I caught it, realizing it was a wallet. I peeked inside to find a few dollar bills, some tens, some twenties, and even a few fifties. More than enough for an evening at the carnival, or at least I thought so.

“Thank you,” I said, sticking the wallet in my back pocket, and he smiled at me the way I’d wished my grandparents would when I was still young enough to wish for such things.

“No problem at all, Silas. Have fun, and be safe. All right? And you know you can call on me if you need help,” he said pointedly, and I flushed. I knew he still hadn’t forgiven me

completely for not asking for his help when I'd been infected by dark magic, but I knew better now.

"I will, I promise," I assured him, and he smiled, gave me a nod, and disappeared inside his cabin.

I sent up a silent thank you to anyone who might be listening for making my path cross with the headmaster's. I didn't know what my life would be like if he hadn't brought me to the Sanctuary, but I knew it wouldn't have been anywhere as good as it was now.

Touya reappeared a minute later, dressed in a dark brown t-shirt, faded jeans, sneakers, and a sports jacket, his hair perfectly tousled and his eyes sparkling happily. He held out his hand, and I slid mine into it, tangling our fingers before leading him out of the office and then through the door into the human world.

The carnival was at the edge of town, so we hailed a cab to take us there, and Touya's hand in mine helped keep the nerves at bay. As long as we were together, I could ignore the humans and just focus on him.

"Will you be okay?" I asked, and Touya turned to me with a raised brow. I snuck a glance at the driver before lowering my voice and continuing, "There may be some supes there," I reminded, and he smiled, squeezing my hand.

"I can handle it now, I think. It gets easier every time now that I know I'm not hallucinating. And you'll be there with me, won't you?" he asked, though I knew he didn't expect an answer.

When we got there, Touya's eyes lit up like it was Christmas, and he dragged me inside after I'd paid for our tickets. While the humans were a bit much, I could feel myself getting excited as I took in the rides and my stomach grumbled happily at all the scents that permeated the air.

“Shall we try the games first?” Touya asked, and I nodded, letting him lead me from booth to booth. We discovered I was a very bad shot, but Touya was good at it, though we both sucked at ring toss. There was a machine you had to hit with a hammer, and Touya made me give it a shot. I added a bit of a troll-oomph to it, and the thing dinged loudly.

“Which one do you want?” I asked, gesturing at the stuffed toys.

Touya bit his lower lip before picking a light pink teddy bear with a bright blue flu mask. “Reminds of someone,” he said, side-eyeing me with a small grin, and warmth bubbled in my chest.

“Okay, I need to use the washroom, but after that, let's get a snack and then check out the haunted house,” Touya said.

“Sounds good.” I was glad I'd changed my mind. I'd barely noticed the humans, all my attention focused on Touya and on making sure he had a good time.



## Touya

I hummed under my breath as I washed my hands, eager to get back to Silas and continue our date. While I'd worried in the beginning that he'd only wanted to go because he didn't want to disappoint me and that he wouldn't have a good time, it was clear I'd been wrong. We were both having fun, and I was glad Silas had changed his mind.

"Have we met?" a voice asked beside me, and my brows furrowed as I finished washing up. The voice sounded a little familiar, but I couldn't place it.

Before I could turn and see who it was, the person grabbed my shoulder and turned me around, almost tripping me over my own feet. Oh. Him.

"Oh, look! It's Crazy T," Flint said, and I bit back a flinch at the title. I'd been called worse before, but somehow it still hurt.

"Flint," I said with a nod, trying to get away from him. His fingers dug into my shoulder, stopping me in my tracks.

"Oh no, where are you off to? We haven't even had a chance to catch up. Seen any new monsters recently?" he mocked, and I swallowed hard. I needed to get out of here and back to Silas. What was Flint even doing here? His usual haunts were on the other side of town, where I used to live before Zephyr found me.

The bathroom door opened before I could answer, and my eyes slid to the newcomer and widened immediately. Silas glanced around the room before spotting me, and his eyes narrowed at the hand on my shoulder. Closing the distance between us, he wrapped his hand around Flint's wrist, his eyes hard as he glared at him.

"Get your hands off him," he growled, and Flint's trailed up and down his form.

"What you gonna do about it, fatso?" he mocked, and heat rushed up my cheeks as anger filled me. How dare he...

Silas pulled his arm off me, and then bodily threw him against the wall, pressing him there with his palm flat against the asshole's chest.

"Do you know how crazy your little boyfriend is?" Flint asked with a raised brow. "He has a little notebook full of drawings of creatures he sees," he said with a roll of his eyes, and I winced, unable to do anything but stand there. "He's fucking crazy, that's what he is."

"Don't call him that," Silas growled, and my eyes widened when I heard the way his voice had deepened. He wasn't going to shift, was he?

"Why not? What else would I call him? *He's crazy.*"

"I said," Silas said, and his voice had goosebumps rising on my arms. I wasn't afraid of him, I could never be afraid of Silas, but I could feel how dangerous he was. I probably shouldn't find it as exciting as I did. "Don't. Call. Him. That!"

My eyes widened as Silas shifted, and I hurried over to the door to make sure no one else came in and saw my giant, slightly-overprotective troll.

Flint's eyes went wide with fear, his mouth dropping open. The scent of urine filled the air—or rather, thickened. Huh. He should've used the urinals before he decided to bother me.

Silas dropped his grip on the asshole, and he slid to the ground. I wrinkled my nose at him before turning to Silas and offering him my hand. “Wanna get out of here?”

He shifted back, slowly sliding his mask up his neck, and then glanced back at Flint, who sat staring at the stall across from him, completely shell shocked.

“What about him? What if he tells someone?” Silas asked worriedly, and I took his hand, giving it a little squeeze.

“Trust me, no one will believe him,” I assured him, and his face fell before he nodded. Leaning up, I pressed my lips to his before pulling back. “Thank you. It was very sweet of you to protect me like that.”

The tops of his cheeks flushed, and he rolled his eyes before leading the way outside. We quickly disappeared into the crowd, and while I made sure we got a bunch of snacks—Silas always got hungry, or rather hungrier, when he shifted between forms—we decided to go home early. The carnival would be there for another day, so we could come back tomorrow for the rides if we really wanted to try them.

That night in Silas's bed, I made sure to show him exactly how much I'd appreciated the way he'd leapt to my defense. I took my time with him as I showered him with praise and worshipped each and every inch of him. I didn't want the moment to end, and luckily for me, I had a whole lot of Silas to worship. By the time he came, I was almost sure he could've come without me even touching his dick if I'd tried. Something to remember for next time.

After we were done, Silas curled up around me as the big spoon, and I sank into his hold, feeling safe and protected in a way I rarely had in my life before I came to the Sanctuary.

"I love you," I mumbled right before I drifted off, and Silas pressed a kiss to the top of my head.

"Love you too."

TWENTY-THREE

## Silas

“So you really shifted? Out there?” Keoni asked, his eyes alight with excitement. He didn’t go out into the human world much, only when Headmaster Morrigan needed to convince an especially bullheaded supe—like me—that the Sanctuary was the best place for them, and he enjoyed hearing about our time out there, especially when something out of the ordinary happened.

I nodded. Now that we were back home and safe, I was a little embarrassed about the way I’d acted. I didn’t regret defending Touya, but I could’ve done it without shifting. The last time I’d lost control like that, I’d been under the influence of dark magic, and I didn’t like that.

“He was amazing,” Touya said, and some of my ire at myself disappeared. Touya had taken the whole thing well, all things considered, and I was glad. The last thing I ever wanted to do was make him fear me, and I’d been worried that was exactly what I’d done.

“Aww, this is so cute. You went all white knight for your mate,” Khush teased, and I rolled my eyes at him as Keoni giggled.

When he went to say something more, I shot him a glare. “How about we talk about the person you’re crushing on?” I said, and he clamped his mouth shut as Keoni’s eyes shot to me.

“Wait, what? Khush has a crush on someone? Why haven’t I heard about this?” he demanded, and Khush hissed at me.

“I don’t have a goddamned crush on anyone,” he growled, and I smirked as Keoni dragged him into an interrogation.

“You threw him under the bus,” Touya said, his lips quirked up in an amused smile, and I shrugged.

“He was getting on my nerves.”

Laughing, Touya leaned over and pressed his lips to my cheek, making me blush. “God, I love you so much.”

Ducking my head, I shot him a glance. “Love you too.”

“Oh, I forgot. Touya, it’s my birthday next month. Will you help me organize a party?” Keoni asked, and Touya turned to him with a smile.

“Of course! You’ll be seventeen, right?”

Keoni nodded, almost vibrating with excitement. “I’ll be an adult!”

Touya looked confused, so I cleared my throat and got to explaining. “We don’t follow the human laws, remember? Most supes reach maturity by their seventeenth year.”

“Huh. I didn’t know that,” Touya said, and then nodded. “I guess then we’ll need to plan the best birthday bash ever.”

“Yes!” Keoni exclaimed, a wide grin on his face as his blond curls bounced around. He skittered on his hooves like he was too excited to stand still, and I just knew he was going to be an

unholy pain in the ass until his party. It was okay, though, because he was family.

They spent the rest of breakfast talking about the party, while Khush peppered in some sarcastic remarks with his trademark smirk, an eyetooth peeking out of the corner of his mouth.

I, on the other hand, just sat back and watched the people I cared about with the realization that I would get to do this every day for a long, long time.

When I turned eighteen, I'd left this place to make something of myself, never realizing that I already had everything I needed. Well, *almost everything*, I amended as I watched Touya laugh at something Khush had said.

The Sanctuary had been my home for a long time, and I finally understood that this was where I belonged. I didn't need to try to fit into the human world, didn't need to contort myself to their standards to be happy. All I needed was the people around this table—and in this pocket dimension, to be honest. Say what you will about Jacinta, he was a damn good cook—and I had all the happiness in the world.

Touya glanced over at me and smiled brightly at whatever he saw on my face, and I returned it, knowing he'd recognize it despite the mask that covered half of my face. Maybe someday I would be ready to remove it, to let myself just *be*, but until then, I knew Touya would see me anyway.



## Touya

“He’s not going to be in trouble because of it, is he? Because he did it to protect me,” I said, sitting across the desk from Zephyr. I hadn’t told Zephyr about the incident at the carnival, but of course he’d found out anyway, so now I needed to do damage control.

“To protect you?” Zephyr asked, his prosthetic arm making an ominous thunk against the desk as he leaned forward.

I nodded quickly. “The man, he was someone who tormented me before you found me, when I lived on the streets,” I explained. I wasn’t ashamed of the fact that I’d lived on the streets, though I hadn’t explicitly told Silas about it. It was hard to find a steady job when you had a tendency of... seeing things, and I’d only been in town for a few weeks when Zephyr found me.

Zephyr made a humming sound, his metal fingers tapping a rhythm on the desk that just ratcheted up my nerves.

“Okay,” he said, lounging back into his chair, which honestly looked more like a throne than an office chair.

“Okay?” I asked with a blink, and he shrugged.

“You’re sure no one will believe this human, right?” he asked, and I nodded.

“Hell, I’m sure even he won’t believe it. He’ll probably tell himself he’d been drunk and imagined it all,” I said, sure of

the fact. Of course, that was because it was what I'd done the first few times I saw a supe. There were only so many times you could use that excuse, though. Hopefully, Flint wouldn't have any more encounters with supernaturals.

"Perfect. There's no issue then," Zephyr said, and I exhaled loudly.

"So Silas isn't in trouble?" I asked, and he nodded.

"I will talk to him about it, but no, he isn't in trouble. He reacted because his instincts told him to protect his mate, and for a troll that was actually pretty good self-control. He didn't hurt the human at all, which I still find quite surprising," he said, and I frowned.

"Silas isn't a violent man," I said, and he smiled.

"I know, Touya. But when it comes to mates, trolls tend to be a little... aggressive," Zephyr said, and I had a feeling it was an understatement. "Anyway, I'm glad everything worked out, and I'm happy for the two of you."

"Thanks, boss," I said, and he rolled his eyes before waving me off.

"Go do some actual work, Touya. I don't pay you to chat with me," he teased, and I shot to my feet, giving him a bow.

"As you say, my lord." I left the room before he could say anything else, and when I met up with Silas for lunch, I pulled him into a kiss just because I could. Because I was glad to have such a sweet, gentle troll as my mate.

I was glad Zephyr had found me that day, that he'd brought me to the Sanctuary. My life had been bleak before I got here, colorless.

Now? Now, I had a steady job. I had a home. I had friends. And most importantly, I had a soulmate. I loved Silas with all my heart, and I was grateful to whatever being had decided we were the perfect match for each other, because they were right.

"What are you thinking about?" Silas asked as we walked the short distance from my office to the dining room, our fingers tangled between us.

"A certain half-troll who changed my life in ways I'd never imagined and made me the happiest I've ever been," I said, and Silas's eyes widened as his cheeks turned that familiar pink color. Fuck, I'd never get tired of seeing that.

"You—" he sputtered, shaking his head. Then he cleared his throat and stared straight ahead as he said, "You've made me happier than I've ever been too."

Smiling, I leaned closer and kissed his red cheek, making him roll his eyes.

"I love you, darling," I said just because I could, and he gave a put-upon sigh as he pushed the door of the dining room open. Then, he glanced sideways at me, and his eyes crinkled with a smile.

"I love you too."

# EPILOGUE

## **A Few Weeks Later**

### **Silas**

Touya trailed kisses down my throat, and I arched my neck, baring it to him. It was a vulnerable position, and not something I would usually do, even when it was just the two of us. But I trusted Touya, and right now, I needed him.

Over the last few weeks, we'd explored each other in numerous ways, and for two people who had barely any experience before we met, we'd realized quickly that we loved sex. A lot.

I loved feeling close to Touya, loved having his skin pressed against mine, his breaths in my ear, his heart beating under my palm. I loved knowing he was right here, and that he wasn't going anywhere. I loved watching him come, and I loved the way he touched me, the way he kissed me, the way he worshiped me, as if every part of me was worthy of it.

"Touya, I," I moaned as he bit into my skin softly, losing my train of thought. His wet tongue licked over the spot soothingly, and my eyes fluttered shut as I sank into the soft, floaty feeling that always surrounded me when Touya started exploring my body. He was thorough every time, as if he was discovering me for the first time all over again.

The touch disappeared suddenly, and I blinked my eyes open. Touya smiled at me when our eyes met, and placed his palm on my cheek. His hand was so warm. All of him was so warm.

“What were you trying to say, darling?”

It took a second for my hazy mind to find that thread of conversation, and my cheeks heated up as I remembered what I'd been about to ask. Swallowing hard, I took a deep breath and told him exactly what I wanted.

“I want you inside me.” Touya blinked at me, and then smiled widely. Leaning forward, he smacked a kiss onto my lips, before sitting back.

“I'll only ask you this once, I promise. Are you sure?”

“I am,” I answered with as much confidence as I could muster up, and Touya smiled. I was sure, and while I was just a little nervous, I knew Touya would take good care of me.

And he did. He prepped me carefully, taking his time and driving me so crazy I was at the risk of coming before he even slid inside me. One finger turned to two, and then to three, and all the while he peppered me with kisses, licking and biting and turning me into a moaning, groaning mess.

“Come on, Touya! I'm ready,” I begged when he just kept going, and he leaned up to press a kiss to my lips that quickly turned intense. When he pulled away, his lips were red and his chestnut eyes dark as he panted softly.

Slowly, he pulled his fingers out of me before sitting up and pouring more lube onto his palm. I moaned as he slowly rubbed himself, and he smirked at me before finally, finally pressing the head of his cock against my entrance.

Then, he started sliding in, and I growled at his sedate pace, raising my hips to speed things up. Touya raised a brow at me and placed a stopping hand on my hip...and I did. I could've easily ignored him and kept pushing on, but I didn't. I wanted to be good for him, and I wanted to follow his orders, even if I didn't need to. Especially because I didn't need to. It was freeing in some way, choosing to do what he told me to.

Touya slowly slid into me until his thighs pressed against mine and I was full. Full of him, his length and hardness reaching so deep inside me. I never wanted the feeling to end, which I knew was crazy because of course it would end. All I could do was enjoy every moment of it.

“Fuck, you're so tight, darling,” Touya murmured, his fingers digging into my thighs as he constricted his hold and slowly started moving.

I threw my head back with a moan as he moved, the pressure and feel of him inside me like nothing I'd ever felt. It lit me up from the inside, and it was all I could do to not push back into his thrusts. “Fuck!” I gasped out when he changed the angle and hit my prostate dead-on. Stars twinkled behind my closed eyelids, and I panted softly as he kept pressing against that exact spot again and again. If he kept going, I was going to spill without even needing to touch myself.

As if reading my thoughts, Touya increased his pace, groaning softly. “What do you think? Can I make you come without touching your cock?” he asked, and I nodded quickly, my teeth digging into my lower lip.

Touya chuckled softly, and then his fingers tightened around my thighs and he increased his pace even more. I was glad for the silencing charm because the way the bed was knocking against the wall would’ve woken the whole Forest.

My eyes felt heavy and hazy, and yet I couldn’t bring myself to let them fall shut. The sight of Touya above me, his beautiful hair sticking to his forehead, his body covered in a layer of sweat and his face all flushed was too good a sight, and I wanted to keep watching him.

“Fuck, Silas. I could do this all day. I love the way your body moves,” he said, pushing into me with another hard thrust, and I blushed when I realized what he meant. Every time he moved, my belly and chest jiggled with the motion, and if it was anyone but Touya, I would’ve felt humiliated by the observation, but I could see Touya meant it, that he really found it, found *me* sexy. I’d never truly disliked the way I looked, just the way people saw me, but Touya was different, and I was finally accepting that.



## Touya

Silas was the sexiest man—troll—in the world. He looked so beautiful all spread out under me, and I was half tempted to slow down just so I could drag it out. But I needed to come, and if Silas's red, leaking cock was anything to go by, so did he.

“Shit, shit, shit,” Silas mumbled under his breath, and I dug my fingers into his supple skin as I moved faster.

“I'm close, darling,” I murmured, and he just nodded, throwing his hair into even more of a disarray. Fuck, I wanted to lean over and kiss him, but I also needed to keep going.

Pressing a kiss to his knee instead, I continued thrusting as familiar sparks raced up my spine. I slammed into Silas before doing it again, and again, and then Silas was coming, his hole squeezing around me as his cock spilled between us, and between the look on his face as he came and the way he squeezed around me, my climax slammed into me as well, and I filled him with my cum—supes didn't need condoms; how cool was that?—as I fell on top of him, my body more relaxed than it'd ever felt.

Silas hummed happily even as his cum squelched between us, and I pressed my lips to his shoulder as I caught my breath. Once I felt like I could move, I started pulling back, but Silas made a sound of protest, stopping me in my tracks.

I looked up and met his dark gaze. “I was just going to clean us up,” I said, and his cheeks flushed darker even before he found his voice.

“I, uh, can we stay like this for a while? Just a little bit?” he asked, and I smiled. Did that mean he wanted me to stay inside him too?

“Of course,” I assured him, snuggling back into him. His hole tightened around me, as if he was assuring himself I was still there, and I smiled against his skin, my mind filling with ideas about the way we could explore that little kink of his.

After a while, Silas finally let me pull away, and then I convinced him to shower with me since his cum had dried onto our skin.

As we stood under the shower, I pulled him into a kiss before pulling back and meeting his eyes. Wrapping my arms around him, I smiled as I gazed at him, his black hair flat on his head from the water, his cute tusks fully on display, and his dark eyes all soft and hazy. He looked beautiful and precious and he was all mine.

“I think I should move in with you,” I said, and then blinked when I realized what I’d said. Telling him what to do while we were having sex was one thing, but this? I didn’t want to rush him. The last thing I wanted to do was scare him away.

Silas stared at me, eyes wide as he licked his lips. “I think you should,” he said finally.

“What?” I asked, surprised, and he chuckled.

“You should move in with me, Touya. We spend all our free time together anyway, and you sleep here most nights,” he said with a shrug, and all I could do was pull him into another kiss.

“I love you, Silas,” I murmured when I pulled back, and he smiled brightly, his eyes crinkling happily.

“Love you too, Touya.”

Fuck, I couldn't wait to move in with my sweet troll and spend the rest of my life showering him with love and all the care he deserved.



## A Few Weeks Earlier

“How did you even get these two together? You haven’t seen Silas in a while,” Harlan asked Nox as they strolled through the empty carnival. The rides and stalls were still here, but the humans were all in bed for the night, and Harlan and Nox were in their incorporeal form, so no one would bother them.

Nox glanced over at his mate, a grin on his face. “It wasn’t that hard. Silas told me about the Sanctuary when we met, and I had Mia keep tabs on Silas and his mate. With some well-placed ideas, I directed Touya to the city the Sanctuary is based in, and then I alerted the sorcerer who runs the place about the presence of a lost supe in the city.”

Harlan pursed his lips as he thought it over. “And you were sure Silas was going to go back there?”

“Hell yeah,” he said, nimble fingers reaching out and grabbing a stuffed toy from a stall. “When he talked about it, he sounded the way you sound when you talk about Mistvale.”

Harlan blinked, surprised at that. He hadn’t realized he had a particular tone when he talked about his old home, but it made sense.

“You’re my home now,” he said, just in case Nox was worried, and his mate shot him a wink.

“I know.”

Shaking his head, Harlan looped his arm through his mate's.  
“So who's next? Alaric or Eben?”

Nox hummed as he stared up at the sky. “Eben has been patient for a while. I think he can wait a little while longer. Alaric needs our help first. From what I got to know of him, he probably still feels guilty about what he did.”

“Alaric it is, then.”



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kelpie x human monster romance!***



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Newsletter and read a monstrously smutty bonus scene!***

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Love,

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# **PARANORMAL ROMANCE**

## *Set in Mistvale*

### **Mages of Mistvale:**

Set in the fictional town of Mistvale (and previously known as Mages of Ravenshire), Mages of Mistvale is a series filled with magic, laughs and love. Low on angst and high on sweetness, Mages of Mistvale will leave you with a smile on your face. Come meet Neya, Pads, April, and all the other fur-babies and their humans, vampires and mages. *If you're new to the town of Mistvale, this is where you start!*

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**Sleep of Eternity.** (Cassian x Gus)

**Angel of Death.** (Aeron x Niall)

### **Boxset.**



### **Misfits of Mistvale:**

With side-characters from Mages of Ravenshire, this series features shifters, half-mermen, werewolves, and many more supernaturals. With the usual dose of fur-babies, found family, and all the Mistvale feels, this series features standalones with a different couple in each book.

**Claws.** (Devon x Oliver)

**Tails.** (Jules x Firey)

**Bonds.** (Joy x Quill x Tate)

**Boxset.**



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**My Elf Mate.** (Noel x Caleb)

**My Dragon Mate.** (Raiden x William)

**My Elf Daddy.** (Daddy/little, Westley x Birch)

**My Fae Mate.** (Genderfluid MC, Celeste x Hector)

**Make A Wish.** (Free read, Kezan x Ezra)

**Christmas In Mistvale.** (Revisit ALL your favorite Mistvale couples and see how they're doing!)

**The Mistvale Spin-off Collection** (Includes My Elf Mate, My Dragon Mate, My Elf Daddy, and My Fae Mate.)



### **Mystics of Mistvale:**

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**The Elusive Griffin.**

**The Vulnerable Human.**

**The Reclusive Dryad.**



## *Set in Otherworld*

### **Fate's Gambit Trilogy:**

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They're joined by annoyingly awesome side-characters including a sweet hedgehog, a sassy talking snake, and a guardian in the form of a cat-man. This trilogy features the same triad: **Damien, Reece, & Artemus**, and needs to be read in order.

**First Play.** (Free Prequel.)

**Devil's Gamble.**

**Pet's Ploy.**

**Master's Design.**

**Boxset.**



**Lords of Otherworld:**



Following the events of Fate's Gambit, Lords of Otherworld delves deeper into the workings of Otherworld, with new characters, new romance, and new adventures. With found family vibes, danger and romance, each book in this series follows a different couple, with an overarching storyline. It is recommended to read the books in order.

**Maximus**

**Zane.**

**Nox.**

**Lionel.**

**Others:**

**Healing Holiday (A Holiday Romance Novella)**



## *Set in The Human Realm*

### **Innocent Monsters:**

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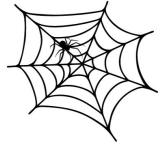
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# *Standalones*

**Summoning Chaos** (A demon x human novella.)

**He Set Me Free** (A newsletter serial.)



# CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE

## Voice Out

**Weathering The Storm** (Roommates to lovers, hurt/comfort.)

**Watching The Sunrise** (Friends to lovers, genderfluid MC.)

**Weaving The Stars** (Roommates to lovers, age gap, drag performer MC.)



# **AUDIOBOOKS**

(Available in multiple audiobook stores!)

## **Lords of Otherworld**

**Maximus**

**Zane.**

**Nox.**

**Lionel.**

## ABOUT STELLA

Stella Rainbow lives in a small town in India with her family and her five-year-old cat, Harry, who is her number one supporter, cuddle buddy, and writing buddy all rolled into one. Living with a chronic illness, Stella grew up with books as her best friends, and now she writes in the hopes of giving others like her a reprieve from the real world.

Stella's books are low on the angst, high on the sweetness, with a doze of found family, and some absolutely adorable fur—and sometimes scale—babies.

You can join her [mailing list](#) to receive updates about her books and free content. You can also read more about Stella, her books, and the universe she writes in on her website, [www.authorstellarainbow.com](http://www.authorstellarainbow.com).

If you'd like to hang out with her, you can also join her Facebook group, **[Stella's Mistvalers](#)**.

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